

The Bear that Stands



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April 2011. I'm in my kitchen, standing at the edge of my Malaysian-made farm table. My Brother sewing machine, a Mother's Day gift from an ex-husband, teeters on the edge while brocades, satins, and chiffons slide from the edge of my fine, flat table and onto a floor spattered with muddy dog prints. Everything has been pushed aside except for my open weapons bag and a couple boxes of shells. Once a Marine, always a Marine. Some people don't understand the word *no*. He had entered my home in my absence, and skulked around the outside at three in the morning until I let my wolf dog out. But that wasn't the crazy stuff. Previously he had let the air out of my tires, made endless prank phone calls, cyber stalked me, and unchained my dog then neatly wound the cable up and placed it on the porch where I would step.

My partner of eight years, a Vietnam combat vet, had died three years prior, and at the prompting of friends, I decided to get back into the dating scene. Mistake. The result was, as the report reads, "an unwelcomed sexual encounter" by an individual who stalked me and invaded my home.

You get a feeling when you drive into the yard when the air has been disturbed. I entered my house, a single wide, listening to the

back door slam shut but not latch. This time he got too close. The dog and I loaded into the 4x4 and caught him hiding in his borrowed red truck behind the tree line. And we chased him from my Wonderland of seclusion, and self-imposed reclusive mountain lifestyle. I knew where he lived. Still worked up after the chase, I went home, stormed through the trailer, and dove into the back of the spare bedroom closet where my hands found the familiar.

A tingling, an unexpected steadiness, a clarity of action, a defined discipline of fingertips, a unified moment, all in my hands.

Kinesthetic. Tactile. Warm wood, cold steel. Exhaustion, exhilaration, profound focus. I don't know why this happens. Of course, that's a lie. What I'm really saying is that I know exactly why this happens and where this thought could lead me. There are dark places that I have done my best to cap over with tombstones. Places that I simply don't want to visit anymore. Or places that I thought had been thoroughly buried and mulched. Then something happens, catches me off guard. Me, off guard!

It is contrary, according to many social inferences, for women to focus on taking life when we are to bring life. It is complicated for the life-bearing women of my Native American culture to hold something as Sacred as a child, or in Ceremony, and then expect our hands to fondle the stalk of a weapon, count metal jackets like buttons. There I stood, loading magazines with a steady hand and slow heart rate. The brass was cool and smooth, and I heard the snow melt dripping off the short eaves on the south side of the house. The water pump strained in the fountain on the floor near the backside of the wood stove. The smell of gun oil caused a slight flare of my nostrils.

There are only so many casket flags a person can receive before closing the heart to the various vulnerabilities of daily living some folks call “normal.” I thought I had removed myself from the arduous exposures of emotional contact with others. I was wrong and this lil’ Alice was slipping down the rabbit hole right quick.

This invading stalker awoke something in me that I thought I had laid to rest with two of our Nation’s flags, funeral services, and taps. I have a right to defend and protect my family, my home, and myself. I have that right. I was overwhelmed in that moment when the capstone of my past rolled away.

Down in Hades, souls are made to drink from the River Lethe to forget everything they had known before. I could not drink enough to forget. There was always that sobering recollection of some distant, reminiscent, lurking shadow of a shape, the-cool-breeze-around-the-ankles shiver that I didn’t dare talk about to anyone, absolutely no one. Rage has nothing to do with anger.

My first love was my first loss. I still have every letter that he sent to me from Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, S.C. Let’s call him Williams, Terry, E. DOB 24 April 1958. A simple farm boy who excelled in integrity, brute strength, work ethic, and tenacity. Nicknamed “Skidder.” A state wrestling champ, Terry excelled in basic training. Pugil stick fighting was a favorite. He had caught the eye of Navy football coaches who offered him “opportunities of a lifetime.” Terry made it clear that he wasn’t there to play. He was a Marine.

His duty station was Beaufort Naval Air Station, S.C. - VMFA-451, "ViniVici." I was supposed to visit Beaufort over Thanksgiving. I hadn't traveled much being a rural mountain gal. Terry's roommate was this short Mexican guy, Cornelius Martinez. One night they were messing around and this guy mentioned that he read tarot. Of course Terry wanted a reading. The guy laid the cards out then got real somber and closed up the deck, refusing to speak. Through various intimidation tactics, Terry managed to get the info. "Someone would die," Cornelius said. My trip was canceled. Terry traveled home instead.

Why do males always play dead? Is it to test the "females" to see how we will get on with our lives without them? Is this some archetypal intrigue that frees the soul to leave? Or to stay? Or to determine self-worth, adequacy, sacrificial justification? Lying in between the bleachers in the gymnasium on his last visit home, arms crossed, eyes closed, legs tight, Terry had played dead. "What would you do," his eyes snapped open, "if I died?"

Terry had been plagued with a recurring dream, which he told me about the last time I saw him, the last night we were together, when he woke up screaming. He was cold, clammy, and drenched in sweat. Since he was a young boy, he had dreamed about getting off a bus, with a car barreling toward him. On this night the car hit him. He was gripped by this premonition. His father and I took him to the airport that morning. He turned back, smiled with incredibly strong white teeth, and boarded the jet that took off into a wall of fog that swallowed sound and sight with the finality of an exclamation point.

The bus stopped across from the front gate of Beaufort Naval Air Station on a large multi-lane highway. It was late. I bet he thought he had made it. Defied the gods, perhaps. A 17-year-old drunk driver with a wealthy daddy from Greensboro, N.C., killed him instantly, broke his neck, as he stepped off the bus. Terry's death was the third of six in a brutal eight-week stretch that included a car accident, my retired Naval officer cousin who was beaten in a laundromat while washing her newborn's clothing, and finishing with my grandfather on Christmas morning.

My response: Join the Corps, ride Harleys, stay drunk, and *fuck you* to the world.

The discipline of training mandates focus. I need focus. I love training. I was assigned to an 81 mm mortar platoon as a photojournalist. I was going out in the field long before it was "authorized." I carried my own gear, full A.L.I.C.E., pre-Kevlar flak jacket plus all my pre-digital camera equipment. I could change a roll of film running backwards. I was not treated poorly nor was I pampered. I kept my mouth shut, legs crossed, and never whined. I was a strong, hard worker. I was given a shelter half and buddied up with one of the guys. Maybe I just got lucky or maybe a touch of crazy worked wonders or maybe word had gotten out that I always carried a knife.

I learned early that I needed to protect myself.

There had been a waiting list for the Defense Information School, DINFOS, but I was fortunate to get in. I was naturally strack. No matter what. Ft. Benjamin Harrison (Uncle Ben's Rest Home) was an open base serving all branches of the military as well as a variety of countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Korea, Vietnam, Egypt, and more. The school was located outside Indianapolis, amidst corn fields, hog farms, and tornados. I saw my first tornado from the air on my flight to Ft. Benjamin Harrison. Each barracks, WWII left overs, was its own fallout shelter with pool tables and beer machines.

I was always a bit of a loner and kept my socialization close to fellow Marines, students, and barracks mates. Racial fights still occurred regularly at the enlisted man's club. MPs and drug dogs were in abundance.

Somewhere toward the end of the training, a small group of us went to a local carnival. There were plenty of rides, games, and beer tents. Lots of beer tents. Everything was out of control. People had paired up and dispersed. Maybe some in the group offered to take me back to the barracks. I don't know. I wasn't stumbling or falling down, but they didn't want to leave me alone.

There is a long and lengthy blank space between my friends and me parting at the carnival and the next scene.

I don't know if I was screaming and yelling. No idea. I was told that I was. Thunderous pounding, the kind that threatens to bust bulging doors at the hinges like Saturday cartoons pulled me back into a barely conscious state. There was a tornado in my head and a man on top of me. His pockmarked face so close I remember the large

pores and oily skin that smelt like rancid fry-o-lators. His narrow, bony hips pumped a frenetic rhythm and pressure. Pressure from his pelvis, pressure from his abdomen, chest, and shoulders, pressure from his mouth on my face, on my mouth, a thick slobbering tongue in my mouth that dragged across my face as my head flailed side to side. I was mumbling, and pushing with my forearms at his throat.

It was a Navy guy. I'd seen him before. Always late for formations, squirrely hands when he smoked, and duck-footed when he walked. A skinny, thin-hipped man with poor posture; I can still see him walking across the lawn behind the barracks, shoulders rounded like a Dowager's hump in his summer whites with his cover crunched under his arm, lighting a cigarette. His lips always looked pursed.

I have no recollection of how I got to his room in the men's barracks as he was not part of our group that went to the festival. He did not hang out with us or anyone in particular for that matter. I have no recollection if I was dressed or not or if he was or not. I do remember pushing him back to create space between us. I remember his bony ribs, and being locked into his squeeze, his eyes clamped shut. I remember his face, black eyebrows too close together, his bony-ass rabbit-pumping pelvis, smells, and the pounding on the door that made him stop.

When the door opened, there were two Marine brothers. One mucked a hold of the scumbag and the other grabbed me. I have no idea what happened to the Navy guy. I am told that this extraction occurred around 0300 hrs. At 0600 hours I was in formation, dress greens, not a hair out of place. I remember First Sergeant walking slowly, heel-toe, in his heat-seeking, old-school, high-shined leather

oxfords that evenly crushed the regulation-length grass: a scuttlebutt was afoot. He took his time walking through the ranks. He stopped square in front of me, and in an almost inaudible voice said, “I don’t know how you do it. Good Marine.”

It is clear who saved my ass. It is clear that we take care of our own. A rape kit was not done. Despite the fact that the base was open, there were clear regs pertaining to females being in male barracks and vice versa. I would have been the one punished regardless.

But what kind of man gets a hard-on when forcing himself upon someone who is unconscious and incapable of self-defense or consent? What kind of man targets a weaker human? What kind of man can have sex only with someone who has no say in the matter? What kind of man gets his rocks off while assaulting one of his own kind who is struggling and saying “no”? Is this the kind of man you want in the rack beside you? Is this the kind of man that makes you proud to be a man?

The following weekend one of the Brothers who saved my butt suggested that I attend (shall we say) an off-base party where, of course, there would be no alcohol and certainly no drugs. This was not a date. Ft. Benjamin Harrison was this sergeant’s permanent duty station. He was responsible for us while at DINFOS. He was also well ranked in Taekwondo, and competed in both national and international competitions. This off-base gathering was predominantly Navy. Perhaps it was his idea of entering the enemy camp, a show of solidarity, a warning. No secrets. No victims. Equals disempower the perp. He commanded the living room area with a nunchuck demonstration, called me front and center, handed them to

me, and ordered, “You do it,” which I did for the next two hours. Marines do not back down. Action is a clear message.

The harassment began slowly.

A new Captain came in as part of our re-designation to a rifle company. How he acquired his position of command was discussed quietly in motor pool, or in supply around the back stacks of A.L.I.C.E. packs, field jackets, and Mickey Mouse boots. The men did not respect him. They did not trust him. He was a strategic menace to his troops, putting his own needs of self-gratification above the safety and welfare of his men. He had been a corporate lawyer, working for a large oil company. His wife was eight months pregnant and either wasn't putting out or was simply not to his liking. My enlistment was getting short. I spent enormous amounts of time in the recon photo lab at the Brunswick NAS. The Captain wanted to get laid, and I told him to hit the streets and pay for it like everyone else. I suppose this wasn't the most diplomatic response.

I was accused of stealing a flak jacket, and other ridiculous miscellany. I was accused of not doing my job. Of course, being a photojournalist I had ample proof to counter that. The Captain would insist that I accompany him on unnecessary tasks during field operations. When these tactics failed, he began the ritual of calling me into his office every day to scream venomously, frothing at the mouth, for hours, literally. These vocalizations were not those of a loving D.I. but of a frustrated man with excessive amounts of arrogance, and self-

importance. When I exited, Gunny would always be there to ask if I was okay. He would report to the First Sergeant. Everyone knew this man was “not correct.” I don’t know what incited his rage more, me declining his sexual advances or the fact that I never broke down.

My pro and cons were always outstanding until this Captain came on board and then they plummeted, not because I wasn’t performing above standards as usual, but simply because these were the marks this Captain made sure I received. Fortunately I followed my mother’s advice and always kept my originals. A “friendly” slipped me a proposal document showing that the Captain had claimed my work as his own right down to the smallest detail on a weekend family day, one of our regular public relations events. The “friendly” also informed me that the Captain reported that he had to do the work as I had failed to do my duty.

I had to make a decision. I started going up the Chain of Command. I spoke with Gunny and First Sergeant, both of whom served multiple tours in Vietnam, about the processes, charges, choices. I requested Mast. Everyone knew what was going on. They knew that I never dated anyone I worked with. I kept my job separate from my personal life. I was most always the designated driver, ironically. And I kept my mouth shut. Re-enlistment would have to be sacrificed. My time was short and the Captain was bucking for Major. When people realized I was serious about pursuing the legal process, I had an internal meeting with my higher ups. I produced my original copies of various events, three years of outstanding pro and con marks, and reports of harassment. Although the Captain made Major, he retired within weeks of receiving the promotion. I don’t think of

this as a win. I was forced to leave something I felt a great love for because a sick bastard abused his power. This Captain treated the men, not just me, with contempt. He was hated by the men and everyone was glad to see him “retire.” I was the sacrifice. Semper Fi.

Leaving the Corps was another significant death. My response: Drink harder.

Even as a child all the other kids would bring their dead or dying creatures to me because I would either bring them back to life or they would die quietly and in peace. Freaky I know, but us mountain kids were poor and “playing funeral,” as macabre as it sounds, passed the time. My best friend, Kathy Mosher, was the best damn wailer around. The procession for Alex the Eel was an exceptional event. We decked out the Red Flyer in an old tablecloth and filled the bed with every last flower petal from my mother’s fine country gardens. Kathy was appropriately dressed in a black chiffon mourning gown, gloves, and a hat with just the right amount of tulle asymmetrically placed on the short brim. Passages were read, Kathy wailed, and the wagon rolled Alex to his final resting.

Maybe the things we play as kids, when we are completely free of inflated expectations from others, are a premonition type of theatre, a preparation. We played war too. I made bows, arrows, and spears. My mother showed me how to remove the string and corks from the air guns and use rock salt and pebbles, something of “substance” she’d say, something to really “sting their ass.” She gave me my first knife. I

was always the defender, the gatekeeper, and found myself in adult life as a client advocate and hospice caregiver.

I was with my mother throughout her deathing: a very slow and painful cancer. Her dignity through her transition became an act of beauty. She was not alone.

I had this dream a year or two after she passed in 1997: My mother arrived naked and asked me to walk with her into the back yard of the home where I lived at the time. It was spring. My mother was without pain and glowed brightly. I was on my third husband, and my two sons were close to graduating from high school. She pointed to the still brown but slightly greening grass where lay two dead birds. One was a small, brown house wren and the other a hummingbird. She said choose one. I chose the hummingbird and when I did it came back to life and flew. My mother was pleased and smiled, saying, “The hummingbird never dies.”

In December of 1999 I met Jaime, a Vietnam vet, 101st Airborne, combat wounded. He always said, “If you didn’t have a drug problem before you went through Phang Rang hospital, you did when you left.”

We were both pretty damaged goods. After I was raped, in the same way the female “forgets” the pain of childbirth, the memory and permission of sexual pleasure was packed away and rendered non-existent. In the same way one can technically be “alive” but not living, one can have sex without passion. I had become distant and further disconnected. This was readily masked by my being a performer,

which gave me the perfect view of everyone, everything. Situational awareness, perhaps. I was a singer and songwriter, dancer and poet: A child of the sixties, and like the wind I touched down where I chose, or so I thought. Before leaving Ft. Benjamin Harrison, I bought my 12 string, which I still have. Everyone knows me by that guitar. As women, we have two sets of lips, two throats, two hearts: as above, so below. When I disconnected from the waist down, I opened from the waist up and singing became a significant part of my survival. I wailed in a way that would make Kathy Mosher proud.

My guess is that Jaime's and my equally functional dysfunctionality, love for the military, his Boricua pride, our shared love of Latin music, and passion for fighting arts is what quelled our uneasy spirits, and that it was these factors that made for an intense, unconventional relationship that served us both well. Along with the horrific flashbacks that any normal man who had fought in Vietnam as a 17 year old would have, there was also the constant hypervigilance and sensitivity to smells. Sometimes he could be touched, other times not, and he showed an obsessive-compulsive type of behavior where nothing could be moved or repositioned. Everything was strategically placed.

But I understood. I understood that by placing things in designated spots, one could determine if anyone had "been there." I understood that the smell of my skin changed accordingly with my monthly cycle and that this alone could make him vomit. I understood it was not because of me but a smell in his memory that held conflicting emotions and images. His dreams would often wake us both on those nights he could tolerate another body sleeping next to

him. And he recognized things in me that I did not know existed and vice versa. My boots were always polished to a jump boot shine. “Old school,” he’d say.

For 42 years martial arts saved his life. For most of that time he ran his own Dojo: School of Aikido and Iaido. I was his only family. We never married. We had lost too many people that we loved and could not save; therefore, we never spoke of love so as not to tempt fate, much less make a commitment to something that had always been brutally taken from us. A person’s greatest strength is their greatest weakness.

I trained hard in Aikido, Aikijutsu, and Iaido, which is the art of drawing the sword, the contemplation of life and death. Jaime and I grew quite close and in a short amount of time a sense of loyalty developed. Our ability to trust was limited to trusting in the imperative of not trusting.

Both of us knew his health was deteriorating.

“What if I died?” he asked me as he lay in bed, arms on his chest, and perfectly still, with the window opened precisely three inches to let in the first melodious sounds of bright song cardinals.

“What?!” I scrunched my face.

“What if you came in and found me dead?” he calmly inquired with his steady, green eyes.

“Someday we’re all gonna die. But not this moment, not today.”

“Why do you stay with me? Why do take such good care of me? What if I’m just tired of life? What if I just decided I’d had enough? You need to find a better man.”

I stopped short, realizing what he was actually saying. “But not today.”

We both knew the truth that one-day would come to pass.

No soldier left behind. I had received orders at a time when my partner was scheduled to have open-heart surgery. I did not deploy. My duty was with my partner. As his surgery date drew near, the screaming nightmares returned. The stress triggered rage and outbursts of profound fear of loss. Coping strategies reignited: he wanted to emotionally disconnect from anything that even slightly resembled attachment or love. At the same time, he attempted to locate his only known brother and a favorite cousin.

The 14-hour surgery was not without complications. His procedure required the complete removal of his heart, which is quite literally, put on ice. The first attempt to repair a leaking valve was unsuccessful; his heart had to be removed a second time to completely remove and replace the valve along with the quadruple bypass itself. And again, he defied the odds and lived.

His insurance allowed him to stay in the hospital for two weeks, and then he was sent home. I stayed every night. He was in excessive pain from having his sternum split and splayed. Veins had been stripped from the backs of both of his legs for the bypass procedures. He wasn't sleeping. He was afraid of taking the pain meds (opioids) and suffered. Maybe this was his way of doing penance. I don't know. His lungs filled with fluid. I would rush him to the hospital, spending hours in the ER waiting for PAs and doctors to pierce his back with long, sliver-like, beveled catheters—“pungy sticks,” he mumbled. They

siphoned out quarts of fluid, only to have his lungs fill again. Four times we did this.

There were several nights he could not sleep and wanted me to listen to his war stories, from childhood and the battlefield. As a young boy, watching a woman stabbed to death. Listening from ghetto tenements to his mother's murder. And then to Vietnam, and his return to a riotous and ungracious United States; he wanted me to see the face of every life he had taken, and every life he could not save. For four nights he sat in a chair, upright, while I, the audience, the witness, viewed his confessional monologue from the bed. Remorse, guilt, and grief created more nightmares. More flashbacks. Gooks in corners, machine gun fire outside, helicopters, jets. Smells of any kind became intolerable. And children, the worst trigger. Screaming children. I flushed the Ambien that had been prescribed. Doctors and nurses insisted he continue with the antidepressants. I was the only female he had trusted his apartment key to; I never knew what I would face when I unlocked his front door.

Monday, November 19, 2007. I was in the kitchen fixing supper after teaching at the Dojo. Jaime was restless. He had not healed enough to return to the Dojo. The only man that has ever accused me of being overly domestic, he never came into the kitchen when I was cooking much less sit down at the table.

“What are you doing?” I asked suspiciously.

“I am coming in to the kitchen to talk with you while you're cooking and then we'll eat at the table so you will never be able to say that I didn't do that with you.”

Tuesday, November 20, 2007: “The surgeon has cleared me to return to the Dojo. I can get back to training.” Something was missing in the tone and pitch of his voice.

Wednesday, November 21, 2007: I finished teaching a class and Jaime called me on my cell. “If you were living in the old days and your husband died, would the community take care of you?” He was referencing traditional Native living, knowing that I was still active with my Native community.

“Yes” I said with caution. “They would take care of me.”

Pause.

“I was in the shower and I let the water cleanse me starting at the top of my head. I have made a decision. I know what I’m going to do.”

“It must be the right decision because your voice sounds like the man I met eight years ago,” I said. “Your voice is strong and clear.”

Thursday, Thanksgiving, November 22, 2007: The dog, still a pup, needed to go out early. Jaime had an extremely rough night. I suspect, by the sounds of his breathing, that he had taken sleeping pills. I cannot keep everything from him.

I needed to prepare the turkey so being up early was a good thing. I brought the dog back in and he stayed downstairs in the kitchen with me. Two hours later, everything was in the oven. I took the dog out again, and when we came back inside, the dog refused to go upstairs to find Jaime. “Never go where a dog won’t,” Jaime had always advised.

Upstairs, the air was thick with death and the soul that lingers. It’s a feeling one doesn’t forget. I sat on the edge of the bed. I tried to wake

Jaime with talk. I held his hand. I felt him leave. He had broken the phone. I could not call 911.

Casket flag number two.

Jaime had his roots in Cuba, and the Santeria religion. When I visited the island I danced a Santeria ceremony as Oya, the keeper of the cemetery and the ancestors, and the mistress of Shango, the warrior chief she accompanied into battle bearing her own lightning. Oya, who ensured safe passage of souls and life everlasting. Oya, the decider of life or death, who wielded sword and black horse tail, tornado of change. Oya, the one to whom hunters and warriors make offerings to for protection, placation, and quick kills. Oya, the wearer of the mask, not to hide behind, but to protect the innocent from the ferocity of her spirit and the rage of battle horror on her face.

It was Oya who found Shango hanging from the Iroko Tree. She cut him down and with the wailing wind and lightning proclaimed: “Oba ko so!” *The King is not dead.*

I had to do things that made me feel alive, even though I knew there were lies in this. I transmuted explicit grief into kiais, sweat, muscle tone and control. Control. I had to keep going because that was how I was born and had been trained. Maintain. There was something in me that had to keep fighting and when there was no one else around I fought with myself or the shadows, or the alcohol or the grief.

Anything. Three divorces later, I reconsidered this strategy. Perhaps too late.

As females we will fight to the death when our young or families are threatened. We sacrifice blood and body. It is an innate behavior found in cultures throughout time: the giving of body and blood for the people. Women do this every month whether we like it or not. The female decides who lives or dies and the future of a species. The taking of life is never taken lightly, nor is the losing of life. I still carry guilt over the deaths of Terry and Jaime, and that is more difficult to endure than the grief.

It is difficult for some folks to understand the hedonism of survival, suffering, and surviving the suffering. There is an internal pressure that never goes away in some of us. And for me it has been a lifetime of accepting that this is who I am. The Corps cultivated what was already natural. No drug or alcohol can change who I am, then or now. I have grief and sorrow and challenges. Perhaps my mission is to survive.

My first husband, who I married the year I left the Corps, beat me daily. One day he jacked me up to the point of unconsciousness and, believing I was dead, turned to walk away. I was pregnant with my first. I stood up. The expression on his face was worth it. It was the last time he touched me.

So, there I was standing at my Malaysian farm table in April 2011 loading magazines while creating a solid plan. He thought he had found a victim, easy prey, but had woken a sleeping bear. The rage, indignation, memories, flooded my mind.

Magazine in, round chambered, one step from the door and my world shifted like Code Red alarms, flashing lights: OUT OF CONTEXT!!! OUT OF CONTEXT!!! I stopped. What was I doing?!

And here I am now, at the same table, February 2013, because I realized I needed help. I realized something was “not correct” and I had to ask people to help me, people young enough to be my grandkids for Christ’s sake. The next generation. I began writing again, connected with other female vets, participated in Art Reach: Project America, attended expressive arts experiential retreats and Military Experience and the Arts conferences. And I began to remember. I chose people and groups wisely, people who understood the harsh dichotomies of military and civilian cultures. I chose the military, where someone always had my six, where I was safe to share without the infamous and political “therapeutic repercussions.”

I refuse to forget. I refuse to drink the waters of Lethe because my survival is proof of existence. Atrocities happened, horror happened, and it is my duty to speak, to defend and protect, my family, my home, myself. Warriors have not died in vain. “Oba ko so!”

