

These Ghosts We Carry

by Sarah Lyons

The questions zipped past him like bullets pinging windshields and pocking the helicopter's fuselage and tail: How often have you been bothered by any of the following: Little interest or pleasure in doing things? Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless? Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much? Thoughts that you would be better off dead? Select one: Not at all – Several days – More than half the days – Nearly every day—How to answer... He was all raw nerves and chewed lips lately, once naïve and so sure of himself when he was green in judgment yet raw with war and blind to what it would cost—what he would lose. He wouldn't understand the weight of his charge until the first time the floorboards were covered in blood and the headsets hushed and the panels lowered. How thunderous, the chop of the rotors. Still, he was better off—still better off—there were some with traumatic brain injuries whose emotions swung wide, disturbingly different, and some who couldn't find themselves in mirrors as lifeless, hollow shells stared back. Some carried notebooks since their minds turned to sieves, unable to access their short-term memories, and some awoke in tears, their hands on the throats of their enemies—spouses mistaken for villains—or shotguns leveled on their sleeping children for reasons they couldn't define. He wasn't like them—no, he wasn't like them—but his experience wasn't unlike others in the trenches who returned to their lives with their ghosts from the field, hearing klaxons in the radiators, distress calls in the void, tinnitus-ripping static that obliged the mind to wander—yes, their brains had adapted to reconstruct realities of chaos and tested the mind's plasticity—like gelatinous splatter from sticky bombs and soft pudgies turned into pink mist with hair, teeth, and eyeballs and friends in the crossfire with a body shorn of face, all a ribbon of red save a hovering jaw... And yes, it was harder to focus or sleep, so scar-tissue tender to the overwhelm around him, to look at the shadow staring back from the mirror—but he was different. He had to be different.

