

“Soul Sister”

Fort McClellan, Alabama 1990

When I opened my eyes, a mask obstructed my vision.

Oxygen, pure as life, energized me. I could breathe,

whereas last I remembered, I was gasping, and no air came.

Wanton joy filled me, but I knew not to sit up,

as then, horses' hooves would descend upon my shrunken, concave chest.

So I turned onto my side, taking tubes and face mask with me.

My roommate was IV-free. Her spine curved toward the window,

like a cast-off bit of bark. Not alive. Not oxygenated. Not human.

Except she coughed once, and the silence was not to be the same.

She was fierce in her aloneness. Walled in an invisible leaded curtain.

I knew this aloneness. I wanted to share my oxygen with her.

A female soldier on an all-male squad—no possibility of buddy checks—

the ticks embedded deep under my breasts, my bikini line,

nothing to do but to wait while medics picked out the body parts.

The ticks, fat & somnolent, but I, parts puffy & inflamed, still whole.

My roommate was no longer whole but dismembered.

A brown recluse spider had burrowed into her battle dress uniform,

leaving a hole, which had widened, *hemotoxic venom* infecting the area,

necrotic arachnidism rotting her body.

My lungs would heal, and I would go back to the rifle range in a day or two.

She would be mustered out. Her leg left behind, her life separated into

Before and After a brown recluse hunted for food in her flesh.

And she stayed silent. Unwilling to undress before men.

In this way, she remained my soul sister.