

Battlefield

BY JACOB BUTLETT

“We encourage you to submit work to our journal in the future.” –note from an editor

The black flags of her words whisper in her voice as I read her author’s bio: born in Miami, earned an MFA in Creative Writing, received a Pushcart Prize nomination for her creative nonfiction, wrote four poetry chapbooks, three horror novels, two *New York Times* articles, one off-Broadway play—all in fifteen years, if you count the time she was a student at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, during which she managed to get published seven poems, five short stories, three novellas. / The words pierce my brain like bayonets, forcing me to wonder how she, a twenty-five-year-old, could have so many accomplishments while I, a twenty-three-year-old, have achieved little, the words in my bio like the remaining leaves on a maple tree: born in Boise, earned a GED, got third place in a regional writing competition, wrote only two published works—prose poems with ampersands & slashes. / I glance at her bio with hesitation, as though blinded by the explosion of her achievements—each syllable, each punctuation mark in her bio a glaring bullet in the red autumn dusk. / Then I notice them piled on the page, hidden in the white trenches between her words: corpses of rejection letters, like soldiers soaked in pallid ink, mangled from helmet to boots, from address to signature. So many battles lost, so many battles forgotten, like gunfire smoke, like missing limbs, like human lives. / How can I succeed if parts of me—the wandering cadets & the stomping admirals of my verse—will be torn down again, again, again? / I look at her bio again, this time at the accompanying picture—a woman on a sunny pier—& notice the invisible stab wounds across her cheeks, the bullet holes in her eyes. How is she still alive? How many battles can she win next? How many can she afford to lose before she gives up forever? / Do I have skin tough enough to survive the shrapnel of rejection? Some of my submissions will fall, some will rise—beaten but not defeated. So how will I look when the war resumes? How deep will the stab wounds go? How deep the bullet holes?