Prompt #1: Stranger than Fiction

“War is too strange to be processed alone.”
--Phil Klay, National Book Award winner 2014

It’s often said that the truth is “stranger than fiction,” and writer Phil Klay (a former U.S. Marine) recently drew on that idea in his response to winning the National Book Award for his book of short stories, *Redeployment.*

In an editorial Klay published last February, he spoke out about the need for veterans to come forward and tell their stories (however strange), and for civilians to listen with great imagination, even when listening proves to be an experience of deep discomfort.

This prompt invites you to respond to Klay’s quote, and suggests a few possible ways of doing so:

Write about one of your strangest experiences of war or military service, a moment of dissonance, discord, or uneasiness, or an experience of the bizarre or surreal. Try not to tone down or edit out the strangeness. Don’t worry about trying to make the experience coherent or palatable for your reader, but just write from your memory, even if your memory is spotty.

Write about a time when you needed to talk about an experience of war or military service that you couldn’t process alone. Try to create a scene that recreates this conversation for the reader. Alternatively, think about a time when you tried to be there for someone else to help them process their strange experience.

Prompt #2: Pockets

Think about what you put in the pockets of your uniform or things you carried in your time in the military. Describe those items and any associations you have with them. How do they differ from what goes in the pockets of your street clothes? What has gotten saved from the artifacts that made their way into your pockets? (see also the excerpt by Goodell about “personal effects” for another angle on what is carried in pockets)

Jess Goodell excerpt from chapter “Personal Effects” from her book *Shade It Black: Death and After in Iraq.*

I was sitting in the chow hall with a couple of MA (Mortuary Affairs) Marines, not really eating, just observing Marines at the other tables. I noticed a man dab his chin with a napkin as he was leaving. I could see a spot of ketchup left on the napkin,
which he then scrunched up and put in his pocket. Then I imagined having to process his remains and catalog his personal effects. "One scrunched up paper napkin containing a red stain," I would jot down. It would be sent home to his family where his mother might devote the better part of a decade trying to make sense of it.

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This awareness became habitual. I couldn’t see another person put anything into his or her pockets without imagining processing them and their belongings and sending them home that would only add to the family’s pain. I felt like I would be adding to the pain.

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I began paying attention to what was in my own pockets, what personal effects would be sent home with me when my time came. I got rid of everything I didn’t want my parents to see and I was conscious of every single thing that I put into my pockets. After awhile I put nothing in them; they were almost always completely empty except for my rules of engagement card in my left breast pocket. What was in my wallet was exactly what I wanted there, what I would want my parents to see and to remember me by. Everything in my tent was always organized and folded and cleaned or it was thrown out. I wanted to be easy to process and I wanted to have everything squared away for my mother and father.

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And from there I began to obsess about what I was putting to me, the type of person I was, and I felt an urgent need to square that away too, to square away me. Am I a good Marine? A good human being? And I reflected upon the type of person I was once, before joining the Corps....

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I could see Marines putting things into their pockets that had no business being there. When I’d see such carelessness, I’d imagine them getting shot down or blown up, and I would visualize what would happen to their bodies, and then I would mentally shade what was missing black. I would see that Marine in the chow line, the tall one, without a left arm and I would shade that limb black. That guy there playing soccer, a boy really, is missing his head, so I’d shade it lack. This woman, in front of me at the PX, has nothing below the waist, so I’d shade it black.


About Jess Goodell: Goodell served in the US Marines Corps, beginning her enlistment in 2001 right out of high school. In 2004 she volunteered for the USMCs
first officially declared Mortuary Affairs unit in Iraq. Her platoon was tasked with recovering and processing the remains of fallen soldiers.

**Next meeting date:** Saturday, December 13 is the next SVWG meeting