

Editorial Note +

Frances Richey & The Warrior

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Some Forum readers may remember the article on poetry and healing in the 2005 issue in which I had a dialogue with poets, Rita Gabis and Frances Richey. *The Warrior (A Mother's Story of a Son at War)*, Richey's newest collection of poems, was published by Viking Press to much acclaim in April, 2008. As the book jacket so aptly states, "*The Warrior* speaks to the world of those who wait while their loved ones are in combat or perilous situations. It is also concerned with the love and pain that constitute close relationships. These heart-wrenching and beautifully composed poems are born of necessity; they are for Richey a way of bridging the distance between herself and her son, bearing witness to the act of waiting and to the life that her son was living with all of its dangers and mysteries."

Richey's poems helped her cope with her son, Ben's deployment and ultimately healed the breach between them that began when Ben opted to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point and join the Special Forces. Her national readings and appearances with Ben have also touched the hearts of many soldiers and their loved ones. As a result, Richey and her poems were featured in *Oprah* magazine as well as on Channel 13's *The Newshour*.

This book complements any therapeutic work done with war vets and/or their families. The simple yet profound language gives form and thought to the dilemmas that war presents for the soldier, civilian and family. I am grateful to Frances Richey and Viking Press for allowing me to include some of her poems in this issue.

One Week Before Deployment *Frances Richey*

1 - Packing

There was something about
the helmet, in a pile
of gear by the fireplace. Once
another soldier's, now my son's,
it called to me the way the dying do
when they can no longer speak;
an irresistible pull, like gravity
or love.

I wanted to touch it.

*

Two pairs of desert camo boots
stood beside the black recliner.
They shouldn't have been
beautiful, shimmering
like suede, light weight
for easy movement, never worn.
A man can't wear another man's boots.
They mold to his feet,
carry his scent, his sweat
absorbed in the hide.
They take on the shape
of his bunions, his burdens,
the soles worn down

with his rhythms,
his weight when he walks.

*

I've seen pictures of those
makeshift totems in the desert.
They call the name out three times;
three times, the silence,
a pair of boots
beside a rifle, its nose in the sand,
the barrel standing
for the soft ribs of a body.

2 - To The Helmet

Ghost
of a moon half draped
in the folds of his rain poncho,
how many have died
because you weren't enough?
Because you couldn't be everywhere?
I wanted to put you on,
but you weren't mine, your only
country that remnant
of the fontanel I felt once
while he slept
before the bones closed over it.

Frances Richey & The Warrior

5 – I Had Promised Not To Cry

He had his mission to think about,
his men.

I asked him
to go through the blue folder with me,
his vaccinations,
ID cards, Hazardous Duty Orders...
I told myself this would bring us closer.
That was a lie.

It gave me distance,
like the scientist
who examines every detail
through a lens.

6- Inventory

2 pairs desert camo boots
sleeping bag
salt pack: Nods, ammo, night vision goggles
wind stopper gloves

These don't belong to me.

camelback backpack for water
Kevlar helmet
mich helmet
grenade pouches
magazine pouches

I have no place here. This is not my life.

green laser
equipment vest
9 millimeter holster
same old ruck

*He can't bear my worry. Like the rucksack he carries on his
back, it
seems to suck the life out of him.*

socks...green/black
PT's – shorts, shirts for workout
Spears silk underwear for cold weather
Spears body armor...ergonomically correct
barracks bag for laundry
rain poncho and liner
black wool cap

*I was always asking if he was warm enough.
Put a sweater on, I'd say. Your jacket...*

duffle bag
entrenching tool
knee pads
elbow pads
uniforms
Nuclear, Biological, Chemical suit

I can't protect him.

Vaccinations:
anthrax
hepatitis
flu shot
meningitis
tetanus
typhoid
smallpox
TD

*No one could explain his nosebleeds. They always seemed to
come when I was packing for business trips: Pittsburgh,
Chicago, Detroit...*

CDs: Springsteen, Sara MacLachlan, U2...
DVDs: *In The Name Of The Father*, *Boondock Saints*,
Elf...
Marlboros
Chewing tobacco

Tissues fell from him like crumpled doves.

Pin light
Case for Christ
Onward Muslim Soldier
Salem's Lot
Catcher in the Rye
Laminated four leaf clover

*He tilted his head back, pinched his nose between thumb
and index finger: "Don't worry, I know what to do."*

Officer Record Brief
Hazardous Duty Orders
Zero Your Weapon

*He's given me his dog-eared copy of Komunyakaa's
Neon Vernacular, underlined:
"We can transplant broken hearts/
but can we put goodness back into them?"*

Life Insurance: To be split between Mom and Dad
Emergency Records... Who gets called
Battalion wants to know what to read
at your funeral, what songs to play

*He looks up from the paperwork
hard into my eyes:
"You said you wanted to know."*

Frances Richey & The Warrior

The Barn Swallows

Frances Richey

My son is always leaving.
Sometimes he looks back
and waves good-bye. Sometimes
he just disappears.
Where is he now? In the air,
returning from Poland?
On the ground, training at Fort Bragg?
The day he graduated from West Point,
the sun was so bright I couldn't see
the secretary of defense, a dark speck
under the white awning
on a makeshift stage, saying something
about the world, about danger,
a different kind of war.
No one else seemed to notice
the barn swallows swoop in
like a swarm of enormous black butterflies,
their throats bloodied,
marring the brilliance of the sky.
They arrived out of nowhere,
the way my son was suddenly a man.
As each new lieutenant shook
the secretary's hand, the swallows dipped
and keened over the field, the barracks,
those gray castles of learning,
the dead generals bronzed on pedestals.
What had drawn them to this moment,
the red sash and the saber?
What had drawn my son to this life?
Where had it come from,
his certainty of purpose?
When I was my son's age, I had no faith.
Now I believe in the prescience of wings,
each bird, the presentation of colors,
bearing the messages w pray will never come.
Looking down through borrowed binoculars
into the perfect rows,
I searched for his face.

Collisions

to my son in Iraq

Frances Richey

There's a new space show
at the Rose Center.
It's all about collisions,
how one little particle, or
cosmic rock thrown
off course, can make
a moon, or tilt a planet
into life. And though
I felt comforted among

the stars you love,
I'm beginning to accept
we're never safe,
the universe always
in motion, even when
we sleep, particles
making and remaking
our bodies, the world
between us a fire
that burns away
the planks of the heart.
I don't know how
they calibrated those
holographic comets and
asteroids with the
thunder of impact,
each explosion just
bearable. I tensed up
anyway, as I do
when cars and trucks
blow up on the news.
I almost closed my eyes,
but I could feel you
in the empty seat
beside me, shake
your head and say,
You're too timid,
the way you did when
you were twelve
and I was afraid to open
the door I'd forgotten
to lock. You
went in ahead of me.

Kill School

Frances Richey

That was the summer he rappelled
down mountains on rope

that from a distance looked thin
as the dragline of a spider,

barely visible, the tension
he descended

into the made-up
state of Pineland

with soldiers from his class.
They started with a rabbit,

and since my son was the only one
who'd never hunted,

he went first. He described it:

Frances Richey & The Warrior

moonlight, the softness

of fur, another pulse
against his chest.

The trainer showed him
how to rock the rabbit

like a baby in his arms,
faster and faster,

until every sinew surrendered
and he smashed its head into a tree.

They make a little squeaking sound,
he said. *They cry.*

He drove as he told me:
You said you wanted to know.

I didn't ask how he felt.
Maybe I should have,

but I was biting
off the skin from my lips,

looking out
beyond the glittering line

of traffic flying
past us in the dark.

Letters

Frances Richey

1

Before he left for combat,
he took care of everything:
someone to plow the driveway,
cut the grass.
And the letter he wrote me,
just in case, sealed,
somewhere, in a drawer;
can't be opened,
must be opened
if he doesn't return.
I feel for my keys,
hear his voice:
Less is better. Late
for work, still,
I linger
at the window of the Century
Florist, a bowl of peonies,
my face among the tulips.

2

Last Mother's Day, when
he was incommunicado,
nothing came.
Three days later, a message
in my box; a package,
the mail room closed.
I went out into the lobby,
banged my fist against
the desk. When they
gave it to me, I clutched it
to my chest, sobbing
like an animal.
I spoke to no one,
did not apologize.
I didn't care about the gift.
It was the note I wanted,
the salt from his hand,
the words.