

“Sky Scorpion (an excerpt)” by Sofia Escobar ’24

*The words I found
made other words
their interlocutors.*

—Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Surge: Drafts 96–114*

I.

You never forget.

Whether you are the you,
I am the you, we are the you, you never forget.
What is it to be a *you*? Perhaps a collective
you, the joined consciousness of remembrance
and an archive of the mind.

You never forget.

II.

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

TO ALFRED CARMINE BONANNO
(first) (middle) (last)

ORDER NO. 1257

HAVING SUBMITTED YOURSELF TO A LOCAL
BOARD COMPOSED OF YOUR NEIGHBORS FOR
THE PURPOSE OF DETERMINING YOUR AVAILABILITY
FOR TRAINING AND SERVICE IN THE ARMED FORCES
OF THE UNITED STATES, YOU ARE HERBY NOTIFIED
THAT YOU HAVE NOW BEEN SELECTED FOR TRAINING
IN THE ARMY.

III.

I’m sent to San Diego, California on the morning of
August 19, 1942, with rosary beads in the back left
pocket of my pants and the future of America on my
shoulders. Mae’s still on my lips, along with the words:

“If I make it back in one piece, I’ll marry you.”

I’m supposed to be a journalist. My dream of Columbia
University waits patiently in a crease of my brain, hoping
when I get back, *if* I get back, I’ll be the writer I know I

can be. Until then, the leatherbound journal in my bag accompanied by a dull Ticonderoga will do.

A man sitting next to me on the plane ride there says he can't wait to *visit* San Diego, the utopian dreamscape that promises clear skies and calm waters. I'm not sure how to tell him this isn't the California we're entering anymore. The Japanese attacked Goleta earlier in the year and the coast of Santa Barbara was left intact, but the beaches are now sanded with fear and a tsunami of enemy invasion is stirring in the ocean.

Air Force Plant 19 waits for our incoming flock of men in training. Sawtooth roofs protect the lined-up buildings and the site covers 2,850 square feet. Dead, brown grass squares off the corners and dry soil brushes into the air as we step on it. The dust and pebbles lodge themselves into the soles of our shoes, which leave modest footprints on the ground. Basic training looks like high-school educated

boys dressed in slate-blue uniforms bringing Army figures to life. A gold wing sits on our visors accompanied by a silver propeller. The garrison cap is centered on my head, pointed North, and can fold peacefully in half, flat on my bedside table along with an Army-green Kodak 35.

The B-24 Liberator stretches a wingspan of 110 feet, our Goliath home for the war in the Eighth Air Force. There's up to ten seats in our plane, sometimes filled with only eight men, as we model a scorpion. We've become the arachnids of the sky, our pincers the ball turrets.

After seventeen weeks of preparation, an Eisenhower jacket drapes over me, custom made by my uncle, commissioned by the Air Force. A bronze wing pin is clipped to the lapel. The beginning of the long war starts on December 24. We depart to Hethel, England, the 389th Bomb Group suited for combat at Station 114.

I wish last Christmas was here, but this isn't the same holiday anymore. The white snow has been replaced with crimson tears, and we're expecting a few inches. Half of our bomber crew are gunners, and I've become one of the few who chokes on bravery as I defend the mission. It's in my throat, sits right below my Adam's apple, and stops me from saying,

"I'm proud to be here."

I'm assigned the top turret and Adelbert Earl Dorsett has become a roly poly of a man in the ball turret. The

dome encapsulating me just skims the leather hat over my ears and the goggles make me bug-eyed. I begin to wonder how my new brothers are doing, where they

were placed, whether they're still alive.

Jack Flynn is in Aircraft #43-38725, a B-17 top-turret gunner, just like me. A young man, more courageous than I, he's here by choice, a continuation of his father's legacy in the First World War: a Silver Star of a man, awarded with the Croix de Guerre, the French way of saying *thank you*.

We first met at Plant 19, but his presence feels like a phantom of the burrows. As a native of the Bronx, he too recalls City Island and the Long Island Sound. The smell of sea salt still lingers every now and then. It's at breakfast where the biscuits have gone cold, and the beans have turned bad. It's the sugar in my bitter sip of

coffee when I fantasize too long about home, drop my hand, and the coffee spills onto my lap, the heat jolting me back to reality.

Our meal concludes with a priest bestowing his blessing on us.

Take this, all of you, and eat it. Take this, all of you, and drink from it.

Pleas for forgiveness are murmured under every man's breath, urging God to place His ear to our mouths and listen. The Holy Water on my forehead slowly dries and seeps into my skin as we begin formation. We're only bombing cement factories,

until we aren't.

Temporarily based in Benghazi No. 10 Libya, North Africa, by late summer of 1943 we join the 98th and 376th Bomb Group to train for Ploesti. I know the hand placement for the guns now, but nothing could prepare me for the horrors I am about to witness. In the north,

we bomb the refinery at Campina, the sun shining as bright as ever; midday nightmares turn to bedtime atrocity and reconvene for round-the-clock barbarity in the morning.

Adelbert plans a visit home and asks me to trade his seat on the plane. I'm happy to see him go, an opportunity to restore his faith.

"I'll make you proud on this mission."

The news breaks three days later that his plane went down halfway through the ride. I can feel regret bubble in my stomach, anger whirl in my palms.

"It should have been me.

God, don't do this to me."

On what would become the last walk to the Liberator, I toss my rosary beads into the garbage. My God wouldn't betray me like this.

We've won Operation Tidal Wave, we're a success, but how can I call this a victory when I've taken the greatest losses along with me? We flee south, watching the lost cause planes spiral from the troposphere down to the grass fields, burnt at the tips of the blades. Others broke the water of the Mediterranean Sea, black smoke filling the air and the scent of burning bodies

pervading our nostrils. The Sandman flies over the city as explosions break out and the light from the fires burns holes in the tarred clouds. One final aircraft plummets into a women's prison below, killing one hundred innocent lives; they were all innocent, regardless. This somehow feels worse.

Black Sunday honored us with five medals and fifty-six Distinguished Service Crosses, an eagle puffing its chest at the center, FOR VALOR engraved on the rippled ribbon.

I can feel myself become a shadow of who I used to be. My hair doesn't look quite the same as it frames my face, my eyes look darker in color, and these hands don't belong to me. There's some blood on my tongue, and it tastes like home, tastes like America, tastes like freedom,

or the lack thereof.

I take some pictures as the days pass and mail them to Mae. The letters I've written over and over form a mountainous pile on the table, spilling over onto the floor. Some of the pages are wedged between sheets in my journal, and I use them as bookmarks

between each entry. Three weeks go by, and I mail them off to her. I kiss the paper each time, hoping she feels my adoration for her. I'm making it out of this war for her, for us, for our future.

Jack flies over New York City in October, preparing for a mission in Koblenz, Germany. Lieutenant Buthe circles the Statue of Liberty, offering some time of reminiscence for what we used to call home. We're not supposed to be circling, but it's the most fun we've had so far. We pictured visiting the city again once the war ended, knowing it wouldn't be anything like before. He's in the 447th Bomb Group that is sent to bomb an

oil refinery. Bullet holes puncture the right wing and the underbelly, but all the men make it out alive. He agrees that playing God above the city is threefold. It's a fine line forked in the middle with alternate routes: one toward honor, one toward fright, and the last

toward omnipotence. Sergeant Zimmerman says we're the best of the best, but I've got this badge of honor that's heavier than the bodies resting cold on the ground, and we put them there.

The new year crashes in like the high tide back home and the missions increase in intensity. I watch a man in the ball turret lose his life, his blood dripping from the sky, dissipating from the pressure of the atmosphere. Hovering over these men has brought me

lower than the ground we patrol.

Big Week starts on February 20, 1944, striking Luftwaffe fighters for the turning point of the war. France and Germany worked hand-in-hand for their aircraft supplies, so we sought out urban attacks in the night. We needed blue skies: we sat and waited for better days to come. Sunday rolled around and it

was time to strike. Airfields near Hanover were our target on Monday. The Luftwaffe changed their strategies on Tuesday, with accidental bombings in Arnhem and Nijmegen. Three days later, we finally rested after relentless fighting. Father Costa comes to bless us as we

reevaluate next steps, but I can't bear to listen to the words coming out of his mouth. He reads an Air Force prayer, palms pointed toward heaven, his heart on the floor and his stomach in a knot.

O Lord God of hosts, you [stretch out the heavens like] a curtain. Watch over and [protect, we pray, the airmen

of our country] as they fly upon their appointed tasks. Give them courage as [they face the foe, and skill in the performance of their duty. Sustain them with] your everlasting arms. May your hand [lead them, and your right-hand hold them up,] through all that is holy.

Amen.

“Amen.”

The ruins left behind were a landslide of bricks and barbed wire, pouring into the roads and crumbling into rubble. By February 25, the final day of battle was on the horizon, the

fire from destruction its beacon. Our target collides with the Fifteenth, and the bell of air superiority begins tolling in the distance.

April rings true as the cruelest month. Showers of turmoil wash me from innocence. In the morning, we hear the list of men who have been killed, and it sounds like losing hope. It's the roll call of those not there, those no longer there, and those who will soon not be there. A hauntology of World War II.

Neal Lenti and Duane Anthony Hall and Daniel Raymond and Earl Widen and Edward Hesseldenz and so on and so on.

May flowers into the saddest potted plant, her petals wilting and slowly dropping off the stem. Then, it was June.

On the way to Normandy, a Horsa glider is chalked with the words,

THE CHANNEL STOPPED YOU, BUT NOT US.

Our planes were painted with black and white stripes, marked so they could be identified. The clock strikes midnight on the sixth day of the month and we begin Operation Overlord, paratroopers relinquished from

the sky and landing behind enemy lines. The clouds blind us and led us low to the beach, parachutes unable to open, men dead on impact. We bomb railroads

and bridges, sometimes from just five hundred feet off the ground. The deafening sound of explosions pierce our eardrums, so loud the world falls almost silent. My

hands go numb from the rebound of shooting, ammo being

fed into the gun. The tails of planes are struck, the body taking turns from upside down to right side up. Men drop like flies on the beach, stepping and falling and running and rolling.

Germans outline the dunes while Americans hold insides that spew onto their legs, their blood on display for strangers, limbs washed along the coast. I imagine being one of those

men. I'm lucky to be alive, but how do you measure luck in this case? Who is considered lucky when the options are death or witnessing death? I've developed such a tough exterior, I'm not sure I'll ever return to softness.

We're sent to clean up the red sea, bodies stockpiled in a truck, then brought to their graves. Father Flanagan insists the men be flat in individual placements.

Those are my boys. My boys, my boys.

Later in the year, Zeitz captured Jack, a prisoner of war, the surrounding city ablaze as a vehicle plows through, like a mirage, slightly blurred and wet in sight, the fuzz covering the air and hazing over into an optical hallucination. Once they arrive to the camp, German spit lands on his eyelashes

in disgust, accompanied by the start of an interrogation. There's a bottle of urine under the bed and a loaf of bread on the table, taking and eating and taking and drinking.

I feel so alone.

There are eight thousand men here.

Three months later, he embarks on the Death March, as he's finally released. Jack makes his way across Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia by foot, the malnutrition in his bones dragging

him along. Winter is as cold as ever, women and children joining hands as they're forced across the land. The bite of the wind marks their cheeks, diseases pouring out among each other.

Gangrene and Typhus and dysentery plague them until their final hours. By May, the Long March concludes.

A total of 321 missions,
 116 missing aircrafts,
 17,548 bomb tonnage,
 and 588 missing men, killed in action
in the Eighth Air Force, and the war finally
draws to a close.

Going home has been the only desire of mine for four years. Home feels like a foreign land now. The war may be over, but I'll be fighting this experience until the day I die. It's a job I

desperately want to quit but can't work up the nerves to confront the man in charge. Freedom

is blind. I might have my life back now, but what does that truly mean? This isn't the life I asked to have, nor is it the life I meant to leave behind.

I'm only twenty-four.

I feel twice as old, yet somehow younger than when I arrived.

I pack my bag and wait for the plane to take off, Mae in the back of my mind and regret at the forefront of my life. The war follows me closer

than my shadow, making me look bigger than I am. I feel as small as the day I was born. She kept a photo album in her bedside drawer of the pictures and letters I sent her, a collection full of memories I hope to someday forget. I get the feeling this isn't

possible for me. I get the feeling I'll never be the same. I'm not the man she fell in love with anymore.

I ask Mae for her hand in 1946, our dream coming true, the first of many. We settle on Long Island, establish our beginning in Hempstead. Our family

starts with William in 1946. When he turns three, our Sweet Lorraine joins us on April 24, followed by Marilyn in 1954. The birth of my children makes me question my own birth. What did I do to deserve this? What could I have done differently? In a random lottery of men who

were called to serve, my name seemed to stand out. Was this always my destiny? I like to think in another life, my name was skipped over, some gracious hand put me back in the deck, and none

of this would have occurred. When will I not feel this way? Is it in the cards for me to forget? Some erasure of this couldn't even save me. Maybe this is forever in some lock box of a moment. The last words out of Jack's mouth before we said

our final goodbyes were,

We'll never forget.

He knows this may be over, but it's nowhere near gone.