

*Marcia Phillips McGowan*

**“A Nearer Approach to  
the Truth”: Mary Borden’s  
*Journey Down a Blind Alley***

**A**s Nosheen Khan notes, at present, “The First World War is regarded as having transformed women’s conventional role of mere spectator of a male event into one of active participant, at various levels, in the war machine” (2). When Mary Borden joined the war effort, however, women’s services at the front were frowned upon. Feminist literary critics and historians often allude to an all too characteristic remark by the surgeon and director of the British Red Cross, Sir Frederick Treves, that there was “no work fitted for women in the sphere of war” (qtd. in Marlow 5). Courageous women like Borden violated the traditional boundary between home front and battle front. In fact, Margaret Higgonet notes in *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* that “[. . .] in France by 1916, fifty women had received the Croix de Guerre” (xx). As Sayre P. Sheldon has remarked, though war literature was once limited to combat and hence claimed by men as ‘their subject,’ it can be no longer, as “modern war reaches everywhere. There is less demarcation between where war is and is not taking place and where it begins and ends” (x). Many recent studies have recognized that such a division was indeed spurious in World War I, so it is surprising that besides selected stories reprinted from *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), most recently in Higgonet’s *Nurses at the Front*, Mary Borden’s opus is still so little known.

Little has been written about Borden’s work, despite her having written twenty novels, as well as stories, poems and essays, and having formed and administered front-line hospital units during two world wars. The daughter of American millionaire William Borden, Mary spent most of her life abroad. She graduated from Vassar, was a pre-war suffragette, met and married her first husband George Douglas Turner in India in 1908, had three daughters with him and began publishing fiction in England under the pseudonym Bridget MacLagan. Nosheen Khan notes that Borden was “prominent on the literary scene in the pre-war days,” that Wyndham Lewis first met Shaw at her house, and that Lewis and Ford Madox Ford were staying with the Turners when the war broke out (120). Borden met Captain Edward Spears during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, married him in Paris in 1918, and had a son with him (Marlow 403-4; Higgonet, *Lines*

363-64). Though she had funded a hospital unit in The Great War, the Wall Street crash forced Borden to seek external funding for a multi-national hospital unit in the Second World War.

Outside of introductory notes in various anthologies and Margaret Higgonet's *Nurses at the Front*, which includes stories from *The Forbidden Zone*, little critical analysis has been devoted to Borden. However, an essay by D.A. Boxwell, analyzing the rhetorical elements of stories in *The Forbidden Zone*, recognizes the collection as "One of the greatest autobiographical-fictional works about the Great War to emerge in that annus mirabilis, 1929," the year which saw Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Graves' *Goodbye to All That*, Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, among other literary hallmarks (275).

Borden's memoir of her involvement in World War I has, however, been entirely overlooked. This memoir, first published in 1946, has, unaccountably, yet to be reprinted. Except for the first few chapters, which reminisce about Borden's "forbidden zone" experiences in World War I, *Journey Down A Blind Alley*, which records her administration of the Hadfield-Spears multi-national surgical unit, funded by Sir Robert and Lady Hadfield, is an embittered recounting of Borden's experiences not only on the Western Front, but in Northern Africa, where the unit was ultimately stationed, miles from the two embassies in Damascus and Beirut where Borden's husband served as British Minister to the Levant. The Hadfield-Spears Unit started in Malo-les-Bains in a typhoid hospital, then moved to the frontline, following battles along the Franco-Swiss border. The orderlies and nurses of the unit, serving under General Joffre, Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies, were a multi-national group, selected by Borden. They were ultimately stationed in Syria, Libya, and Egypt.

Initially, Borden seems impelled to write her memoir because of the similarity of her extraordinary service, if not her attitude, in both world wars:

And now that both wars are over they tend to blend into one. Soon if I am not careful, I shall confuse their events, mistake the road I followed in 1916 on my way down from Flanders to the Somme, for one I took in 1940 from Paris to Lorraine, or transpose frail Miss Warner with her eye-glasses and gray hair who came to Dunkirk from Philadelphia in 1915 as my head nurse, and put her down on her slender feet in one of the wards at St. Jean de Bassel behind the Maginot Line. What more natural? Miss Warner, if she still lives, is old, but the valiant women who answer the call of pain, disease and death are all like her [...]. (7)

Soon, however, Borden begins to recount what she perceives to be the political and social differences between the two wars, and her tone alters from nostalgia to bitterness. Yet her admiration of the women who join her unit is evident throughout her memoir, and there is no doubt that the effect of its publication is, as Nicola Beauman remarks of *The Forbidden Zone*, an insistence that women in wartime “can be as staunch and heroic as any man” (34). Also evident, however, is Borden’s self-doubt about her ability to lead these women:

As I looked at the circle of expectant faces, I had another of my moments of doubt and dismay. What did I mean by daring to assume responsibility for taking these girls overseas? Impossible to tell what lay in store for us. Impossible to say how this one or that would behave in an emergency. Could I be certain that I myself would not lose my head in a crisis? No. I couldn’t. (17)

Such moments of “insecurity” and self-doubt are typical of women’s autobiography, as Nancy Walker (278), among others, have noted. However, in Borden’s memoir, they are momentary, and she concludes, “No turning back now if I wanted to” (17). It is this attitude which won Borden the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honour, but perhaps more important to her was the ultimate benefit:

So many hospitals and all of them essentially the same. A convent in Lorraine, another at Deraa in Syria, a great broken building in Tobruk, our tents at Bir Hakim, Sidi Bouali, Lake Bolsena, the battered walls or flapping canvas made no difference, there had been only one ‘Ambulance Hatfield-Spears.’ A place of refuge, a resting place, but dramatic, at a crossroads between life and death, a place of suffering and laughter that defied it, of torn bodies and trusting eyes, of death defeated by unwavering vigilance, a happy place where men felt safe. (285)

This is the reward for Borden, and in two world wars, it suffices to put to rest all insecurities.

Borden’s memoir is a curious autobiography which, in a longer paper, would suggest detailed comparison with her husband, Major General Edward Spears’, memoir of the same time period. In *Fulfillment of a Mission: The Spears Mission to Syria and Lebanon 1941-1944* (1977), though Spears infrequently mentions

Borden, he claims that “in two wars, her beneficent and always courageous initiatives have not only proved to be the cause of much pride to me but of very great anxiety as well” (87). He frequently conflates incidents related at length by Borden and relates his disgust at the Vichy French treatment of the Free French, particularly in his wife’s hospital in Damascus. The one incident described by Spears in great detail is de Gaulle’s snub of the Hadfield-Spears unit during the final victory parade in Paris and the General’s success in ultimately dissolving the unit, despite its having treated twenty-one thousand Free French soldiers in the war in the desert. Having been responsible for the introduction and advocacy of de Gaulle to the English high command at the beginning of the war, Spears finds this snub of his wife unconscionable.

Unlike Spears’ *Fulfillment of a Mission*, Borden’s memoir guards the privacy of those involved in Borden’s personal life in the Levant by referring to them—and to her husband—by initial, rather than name. Whereas Spears names all principles and refers to Borden as “my wife” or “my American wife,” Borden refers to him as “B.” and to his close relatives and places of residence in France by initial as well. Borden’s memoir, published in 1946, is closer in time to the war than her husband’s, and though it precedes the settlement of the Jewish state in 1948, it makes clear her husband’s pro-Palestinian sentiments. Her decision to protect his identity may also be attributable to the controversy over his opinions, about which she later relates that though he was often at odds with Duff Cooper and other highly placed individuals in the British government, he was supported by his friend Winston Churchill. Borden clearly tries to keep her private and public lives separate: “I have said little about the Caseys and almost nothing about our very brief visits to Cairo. Their friendship is a private thing, and this narrative is not meant to deal with my private life” (237).

Yet recent feminist theory would suggest that this memoir is actually remarkably transgressive in its merging of a political, authoritative voice with personal perspectives on those with whom Borden served in her endangered unit. In *Journey Down a Blind Alley*, there is, as Susan Cahill suggests there should be in women’s autobiography, a “connectedness of self and story, of contemplation and action” (xi). The memoir is a hybrid, a curious admixture of private and public, with public service nevertheless emphasized above all else. The upper class Borden’s identification with the *poilus*, the medical workers in her unit, and the women of the Levant leads to a connectedness Cahill alludes to as a “writer’s acceptance of political responsibility and the priority of social justice over individual aggrandizement” (xi). Borden’s ultimate denunciation of Charles de Gaulle is an astonishing assertion of her right to question authority, to deny greatness to a man she believes betrayed his allies and the French colonies in the Mid-East during World War II.

Borden’s sense of injustice is strong, and much of this injustice is laid at the

door of de Gaulle. She remembers at their first meeting “the curious discomfort I felt when he stalked into the room. It was almost like fear. It was certainly mingled with a painfully strong feeling of aversion [. . .] It was as if when I looked full at him I saw nothing, nothing but a lifeless figure, wrapped in a palpable coldness that hid him as a damp cloth hides a sculptor’s clay” (112). Borden’s novelistic analysis of de Gaulle’s character is scathing:

I believe pride is the basis of his character. I think he felt the dishonour of France as few men can feel anything, and that he had literally taken on himself the national dishonour, as Christ [. . .] took on himself the sins of the world. I think he was like a man [. . .] who had been skinned alive, and that the slightest contact with friendly, well-meaning people got him on the raw to such an extent that he wanted to bite, as a dog that has been run over will bite in its agony any would-be friend that comes to its rescue. The discomfort I felt in his presence was due, I am certain, to the boiling misery and hatred inside him. His one relief, in fact his one pleasure, was to hate. And he hated all the world, but most especially those who tried to be his friends.” (113-14)

Borden’s personal aversion to de Gaulle is played out against a larger canvas of politics and war.

In fact, this memoir is remarkable because in it, gender is somewhat de-centered, as it is in many contemporary women’s autobiographies, and Borden’s experience as a woman at the front is enacted as part of a much larger, more complex history. Borden’s modernist concern is to tell the “truth” about her own experience: “I like the truth. I like to get at it and I like to tell it. I have stuck to it in this narrative and I mean to tell it now in so far as I am able” (226). The post-modern question of whether there can be a stable subject that can be revealed by language, when, in fact, the self is the object of interrogation is complicated in this autobiography by the gendered attempt to present self in relation to others—the nurses, orderlies, surgeons, commanding officers in Borden’s unit; the North African officials, as well as de Gaulle and her husband. The immediacy and enormity of the experience, the attempt to meld past and present, are reinforced by the Vera Brittain-like insertion of diary entries in the present tense into a past-tense narrative. Like Jane Addams and Ida B. Wells, Borden “submerges the personal” into a larger purpose in order to convey “a message about history” (Culley 15-16).

One example is Borden’s account of an incident at the President’s residence

in Beirut, in which several people who were peacefully demonstrating for Levantine independence from France were killed on the steps and troops were shooting into the windows. Independence was at this point favored by both the American and English high command, and de Gaulle was furious at the demonstration. Borden was called by the President's wife, and Spears relates that the "long flight of steps outside the President's residence were running with blood when my wife arrived. Madame Khoury implored to be given a British guard, but as this was impossible I offered her and her children the hospitality of my house" [...] (232). Borden's role is reduced by Spears to that of visitor. However, Borden's detailed account in a diary entry grants her and the participants greater agency and subjectivity. She had heard of the shooting and that the "outside stairs were streaming with blood" and "thought I'd better go and see if it was true" (229):

A large crowd had gathered since my morning visit, not violent, rather scared. There were shouts of 'Vive l'Angleterre,' 'Vive le Général Spears,' as I went in, and much applause. Very embarrassing. Madame Bechara was evidently frightened. Emile Eddé had passed with his armed escort, and the troops in the lorry had fired on the crowd. Then the Senegalese on the roof of the barracks overlooking the house had joined in and begun firing at the front door and windows [. . .] As the Lebanese gendarmerie have all been disarmed Madame Bechara cannot appeal to them for protection. The French are the only people who could give protection, and it is the French who are doing the shooting.

I asked her if she would like a British guard for the night or would she prefer to come to us. She said she would do whatever the General thought best. Went to the office to consult B., who said a British guard was impossible but by all means take her and the children home for the night. So I went back and brought them here. (229-30)

Borden had, before this incident, already been to the President's palace three times that day. The fact that she went there on a day fraught with danger to comfort the frightened family is nowhere evident in Spears' memoir. Borden reports on the next day that four children have been shot on their way to school by Senegalese, that the French have denied involvement, that telephone service and classes at the American University have been suspended, that the following

day French troops fired on a deputation of students and wounded six outside the Spears mission—"B. was out when it happened"—that the President's wife has gone home, and that Borden continues to visit her (230). She also reports that French troops continue to fire on the crowd as she visits Madame Read Sohl and that the Syrians have swarmed her car, which is carrying the British flag, for protection. Borden decides to leave the residence at this point, thinking that her presence is drawing French opposition and defies a French order to drive a different route back (231). Not only is her motivation clear and her description of the days' events more detailed than that of her husband, it grants subjectivity to the women and children she visited, who were terrified at the form French opposition to independence in North Africa was taking.

Borden's insight is often presented as fact. Not only is her own aversion to de Gaulle made plain, but the point of view of de Gaulle himself is bared for the reader, as novelistic license with character is taken. The use of metaphor and metonymy, familiar to readers of *The Forbidden Zone*, heightens the sense of fear and loathing of de Gaulle which pervades the narrative. The voice that speaks of de Gaulle is always bold and assertive. There is no sense of the divided, fragmented, or fissured self which has been said in the past to characterize female autobiography. We do observe, however, throughout *Journey*, a sense of what Susan Stanford Friedman calls "relational identity" (35). For it is not only Borden's relationship with de Gaulle which is subject to analysis, but her husband's as well. It is as if the fate of nations is consonant with that of this curious triad. Borden's use of figures of speech makes clear the conflation of personal and political:

De Gaulle was France; literally in his own eyes, he was his nation [. . .] He was setting himself up [. . .] as the living proof that France was not conquered and had a right to be proud.

B. loved France as a man loves an adored woman who has disgraced herself. He too felt, though inevitably to a lesser degree, the shame and the hurt [. . .] Two men bound by a common disappointment, a common sense of outrage, two men forced to drink from a single bitter cup; it was a curious bond. They might quarrel, get on each other's nerves, long to be rid of one another, they couldn't get free. They were in bondage to France. (114)

Though she can delineate *their* relationship so clearly, she has more difficulty with her own:

[. . .] it isn't easy to remember de Gaulle, and that is another queer thing about him. I cannot see him at those dinner tables as I see the others [. . .] It is as if his chair were empty. There is only his voice. Now, as I think of him, he fades out, becomes a ghost. I see his photographs plastered on a hundred boardings, framed in a thousand windows, but I cannot see him.

It wasn't his irascible temper nor the raw state of his nerves that puzzled me in the end. I understood all that. It was, finally, the sense of something wanting in him, the lack of a vital element, needed to the make-up of a human being. (115)

Borden goes on to say that only one event keeps her from thinking of de Gaulle as "quite inhuman" (115)—his spending the holiday with them and their son Michael at their farmhouse on Christmas Day. The French general talked sympathetically about Oxford with Michael who, to Borden's astonishment, told her, "I would like to serve under General de Gaulle" (115). In Borden's memoir, de Gaulle, the public figure, is woven into the web of family life, as he is not in Spears' autobiography.

The post-structuralist question of whether there can be a stable subject that can be revealed by language when the self is the *object* of interrogation is not only complicated, as mentioned above, by the gendered attempt to present self in relation to others. It is further compounded, as Shari Benstock remarks, by "the double referent for the first person narrative (the present 'I' and the past 'I') [. . .]" ("Authorizing" 19). Benstock notes that often in women's autobiography "the self that would reside at the center of the text is decentered" ("Authorizing" 2). In *Journey Down a Blind Alley*, one does not feel such decentering as a jolt, but as a seamless transition from the more deeply centered episodes involving Borden with her unit because of her concentration within these episodes on crediting others—the c. o., the drivers, the nurses—with much of the unit's success. Here, for instance, is her recounting of receiving six hundred surgical cases in three weeks in Deraa after the battle for Demascus:

The hospital throbbed. Night and day the fight went on, our special fight to save men's lives. Everyone was engaged in the battle, most of all perhaps the sisters [nurses] in the small hot crowded wards. With caps awry and stained aprons limp, and the sweat streaming down their faces, they fought for their patients tirelessly, quietly; quick and vigilant they were and faultlessly efficient,

and the men in their steaming beds knew, and complete understanding existed between them and their nurses, and all the while the ambulances kept rolling in at the gate and the tempo of the battle increased, until there came a day when we were bombed, and the patients we were to send down to Nazareth by train were killed in the railroad station, and the ammunition dump near the church went up, and the church bell began to ring its alarm. (136-37)

What a change in tone between the breathlessly long, desperately recalled sentences and the bitter descriptions of de Gaulle, with their clipped, analytical pronouncements! One senses not only a “connectedness of self and story” (Cahill xi), but the feeling that “self and others are experienced as part of a single web of life” (Cahill xi)—and death.

The immediacy and enormity of the experience, the attempt to weld past and present, are reinforced by the inclusion in the present tense of the diary entries. Borden relates in an entry dated October 15<sup>th</sup>, being called to London because of bombing damage to her home in Strathearn Place: “The two houses next to ours in Hyde Park Square are gone. Big bits of them crashed on us. All our windows are blown out by a blast, the ceiling in my bedroom has fallen on my bed. There seems to be a biggish hole in the roof. Very dirty and dismal with the rain coming in, rivulets of mud running down the stairs” (122). But even in the diary, the present is subject to analysis and reminiscence:

But there was a kind of poetry about the desolation, the eloquence of trivial objects, contents of cupboards strewn about, whitish dust inches deep over everything, like ashes, and the view from the stair landing is like the last days of Pompeii. I remember dinner with B. in the dining room, lighted candles on the table. The plates in the pantry cupboard came from Strasbourg. Many are broken. They were made in the factory we visited at Sarreguemines. Now they are bombed in London. (122)

Borden’s sense of irony, noted by critics such as Margaret Higgonet and D. B. Hoxley in regard to *The Forbidden Zone*, surfaces in her memoir as well. Even the diary entries—meant to recapture the events of the time—are suffused with feeling, with relational importance. There is little separation between Borden’s public and private lives.

If autobiography as genre traditionally demands such separation, those

demands are overridden by gender. As Nancy Walker notes of women's autobiographical writing, it is "[. . .] the immediacy of the [. . .] journal entry that engages us; we feel closer to the humanity of the writer as she or he records the minutiae of life, and are better able to surmise the influences on more formal and public utterances" (275). Walker asserts that journals of male public figures have often been intended as "records of 'great lives,' and their autobiographies have served as guides or cautionary tales" (277), whereas female autobiographies are both "more diffident and more intimate: insecurities [. . .] are part of the record, as are, usually, the details of domestic life—the private arena in which so much of women's lives has played out" (278). She finds in women's autobiographical writing a "variety of roles or poses [. . .] in an apparent effort to find one that fits both the self and the public" (278). These poses no doubt account for the frequent shifts in tone and blurred genre boundaries between Borden's diary and memoir.

Another major component in Borden's memoir is what Margot Culley calls "the appeal to the utility of one's life story," which is "the most persistent of the conventions of autobiography" (14). Culley notes that often female writers "submerge the personal in some 'larger' purpose" [. . .] (15-16). One senses such a purpose in Borden's memoir, particularly as she ends it by reproducing de Gaulle's letter to her after her protest of his sudden dissolution of the Hadfield-Spears unit, "not on my own behalf or that of the British volunteers, but on behalf of our French officers, who took the sudden closing of the hospital as a punishment and were actually being punished for having collaborated loyally with me for many arduous months [. . .]" (295). De Gaulle alleges himself "astonished that you could have attributed it to a discourtesy on my part" and cites his "lively gratitude to the personnel which, under your orders, has gained the most solid title to the friendship of the French army" (296). Borden adds briefly, "My answer closes this story" (296). Though her answer is too long to reproduce in its entirety, Borden tells de Gaulle that she has heard that the reason for his displeasure was his accusation that her unit had unfurled the Union Jack as it passed de Gaulle's stand in the victory parade and shouted "'Vive Spears, vive les Anglais'" (296). Borden replies,

We unfurled no British flag. We passed before you in silence. The shout 'Vive Spears' came from a group of our old patients who had arranged to come on their crutches from their Paris hospital to see the parade. It was a spontaneous expression of the gratitude and devotion to their English nurses, for it is by the name of Spears that the unit is known and loved in the Division.

I would add finally that the gratitude of the

Division and the affection of 20,000 patients is a sufficient recompense to us for the service we were able to render to your troops.

From you I have had no recognition since February, 1941, when you inspected the unit on its departure for the Middle East, until today, but I know that I am speaking for my entire British staff when I say that our four years with the 1<sup>st</sup> Free French Division have bound us to the officers and men of that Division with bonds that can never be broken. (296)

These are Borden's final words in *Journey Down a Blind Alley*.

The intentions of reprinting this letter seem to be to tell the "truth," to embarrass de Gaulle, and to claim Borden's due and that of the others in the unit. It is the public, not the private, voice with which she leaves her readers, for her letter is not only to de Gaulle, but to the world. If postmodernism has rendered the essential self a fictive entity and blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction, Borden's ending her memoir with a personal statement that serves, too, as a historical document further challenges such boundaries and seems, in her mind, at least, to privilege the primacy of the public record over the private. In fact, Borden ends by accomplishing what feminist theorist Sidonie Smith posits as an autobiographical goal: "[. . .]autobiographical practice for twentieth century women would engage the autobiographer in the art of sedulous recovery and celebration of an experience erased from history, an experience wrongly hierarchized as subordinate, suspect, and specular" (370). Borden not only recovers the experience of the Hadfield-Spears Unit and the contributions of women to the war effort, but celebrates the "connectedness" or bond which she insists will remain—a "bond which can never be broken."

In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun calls May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude* a "watershed in women's autobiography" because in it Sarton "deliberately related the record of her anger. And, above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life (which inevitably means accepting some degree of power and control over other lives)" (13). Sarton's journal was published in 1973, Borden's memoir in 1946. Borden's attempt to control her anger at the Vichy, at de Gaulle, at the high cost of war to those on the battlefield, is ultimately unsuccessful because of her honesty, integrity, and deeply felt responsibility to those "other lives" to which she administered in her Division and in the field. In a genre which has traditionally demanded self-assertion and self-display, she has, through embracing herself as subject and using novelistic license in creating character, granted agency to others as well as herself.

The fact that *Journey Down a Blind Alley* has been out of print for over fifty years is a disservice not only to a fine author, but to World War II history and the place of women within that narrative. It is difficult to think of a model for a female writer in 1946 recounting a political history, one which assumes at once a voice of authority and humility. *Journey Down a Blind Alley* is such a model. A further examination of the text would lead one to marvel at Borden's seemingly conflicting duties as Division head and wife of the British Ambassador to the Levant. Indeed, the reader often witnesses Borden leaving her unit and donning fashionable dress to host important political figures at her husband's request. Though Borden seems to manage these role transitions seamlessly, she hints at the fact that they demand tremendous energy and devotion to both aspects of her life—the private and the public:

It became evident at the end of the summer ('42) that unless I gave up all connection with the Unit, I must take to the air and manage two lives separated by several thousand miles. For I was involved in two distinct spheres of activity with two centres of gravity, and the centre of gravity of the hospital was going to move further and further away from my fixed Base, the British Legation in Beirut. (188)

Borden relates that her husband supported her work in both spheres: “Neither in '42 nor at any time did he ask me to give up the Unit or object to my leaving him to rejoin it. On the contrary, he made it easy. I had duties in Syria and Lebanon and he expected me to discharge them, but he knew that I had put my heart into the making of this field hospital and he took it seriously as a creditable war effort” (188). Like Borden, Spears knew “that winning the war was what mattered most, and that the smallest individual effort toward that end was important” (188).

Despite these asseverations, Borden's service in both World Wars must have caused conflict between her profession and the demands of marriage and children. That story remains to be told, perhaps by close examination of her personal papers. But the extraordinary story of Borden's involvement in positions of authority in two World Wars should certainly be more widely known. In a journal entry of January 27<sup>th</sup>, written in Abyssinia, Borden asks herself about her involvement in this second war: “What has impelled you to let yourself in for this?” She continues, “I don't know the answer. Vanity, curiosity, sense of adventure, the will to keep you, defy time, distance, all these vague discreditable reasons come into it and muddle up the decent impulse to do what one can in this bloody war” (123).

Borden recognizes that, despite her desire to tell the “truth,” she cannot tell “the whole truth of the Lebanese crisis, for I don’t know it,” as dispatches and telegrams were kept from her (226). She acknowledges that Spears’ “truth” would be different from hers, though it is clear that she admires him for his “great determination” and championship of the Lebanese “against the French in the crisis of November ’43” (227). Borden is Spears’ defender, his advocate, believing that “he saved the French from the worst consequences of their own folly” (227). Borden’s memoir is almost as much Spears’ story as it is hers. Her discerning eye, her description of the events of the time, convinces us, however, not only of his heroism in a time of war, but of hers.

### Works Cited

- Beauman, Nicola. *A Very Great Profession*. London: Virago, 1983.
- Benstock, Shari. “Authorizing the Autobiographical.” *The Private Self*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, c. 1988.
- Borden, Mary. *Journey Down a Blind Alley*. London: Hutchinson, 1946.
- Boxwell, D. A. “Mary Borden: *The Forbidden Zone*.” *War, Literature and the Arts* 10.1 (Spring/Summer 1998): 274-83.
- Cahill, Susan. Introduction. *Writing Women’s Lives*. Ed. Susan Cahill. New York: Harper Perennial, c. 1994.
- Culley, Margo. “What a Piece of Work is ‘Woman’!: An Introduction.” *Autobiography: Feasts of Memory*. Ed. Margo Culley. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, c. 1992.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice.” *The Private Self*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, c. 1988.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Writing a Woman’s Life*. New York: Norton, c. 1988.
- Higgonet, Margaret, ed. *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*. New York: Plume, 1999.
- *Nurses at the Front*. Boston: Northeastern UP, c. 2001.
- Khan, Nosheen. *Women’s Poetry of the First World War*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, c. 1988.
- Marlow, Joyce, ed. *Virago Book of Women and the Great War*. London: Virago, 1999.
- Sheldon, Sayre P., ed. *Her War Story: Twentieth Century Women Write About War*. Carbondale. Southern Illinois UP, c. 1999.
- Smith, Sidonie. “Construing Truth in Lying Mouths: Truth-telling in Women’s Autobiography.” *Women and Autobiography*. Ed. Martine Watson Brownley and Allison B. Kimmick. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999.
- Spears, Sir Edward. *Fulfillment of a Mission: The Spears Mission to Syria and Lebanon 1941-44*. London: Archon, 1977.
- Walker, Nancy. ““Wider than the Sky”: Public Presence and Private Self in Dickinson, James, and Woolf.” *The Private Self*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, c. 1988.

**Excerpts from *Journey Down a Blind Alley* reprinted by permission of Mr. Duff Hart-Davis.**

**Marcia Phillips McGowan** is Professor of English and Director of Women’s Studies at Eastern Connecticut State University. She is co-editor, with Sandra Boschetto-Sandoval, of *Claribel Alegría and Central American Literature* and has published essays on Alegría, Edith Wharton, and women’s studies pedagogy.

*Pam Ullman*

## No Safe Distance

**L**ike a mirror, the ice reflects the sky and everything in between. Pryde treads the weather-beaten faces of young boys, stomps on their narrow chests, leaves scuff marks on the Kalashnikovs that stretch their scrawny arms like well-chewed sticks of gum. Shivering in the colorless light, she takes in their clothes, their wet and wooly smell, the premature crows' feet etched in a month's worth of dirt. When she was their age, she hauled forty-pound bags of feed from the truck to the barn every afternoon after school. She mimicked her father, tossed the bag over her shoulder and folded neatly in half, her face hovering around her knees, eyes on her boots as they crunched the gravel path to the door. The soldier-boys haven't learned this trick; they stand around like baby monkeys, great bunches of black bananas rounding their narrow shoulders. The summer she turned twelve, she shot a coyote that charged her horse at the head of the Cumberland River. She knows how to shoot and shoulder a rifle, but it isn't her job to show these boys what to do. Her job is to listen.

Now that Ismail is dead, Nazeer has taken charge of the group. He is startlingly handsome, golden eyes in a still-smooth brown face, seemingly wise beyond his years. He speaks softly, compelling her to move closer, and she wonders if he does it on purpose, if she reminds him of someone left behind in the village: a sister, a girlfriend, a mother. Standing beside him she smells tobacco and something else she can't decipher, a hint of sweetness, some childhood memory long misplaced, his or hers, she can't be sure. She hangs on his words and studies his hands, still clutching the old rifle; she is charmed by the lovely half-moons of his fingernails. She is old enough to be his mother. He is young enough to be her son.

*Over there*, he says, nodding eastward toward the snow-covered peaks of the Sia Mountains. *We tracked some movement there last night*. He shifts his weight from side to side, but when he rocks on the sides of his feet, the rifle remains centered; it seems to have a life of its own. *There was a full moon, so I held my men up one kilometer from the base*. Pryde translates word for word, and becomes in that moment, something she is not and never will be: a fourteen-year old Afghan boy. Though inclined to omit the reference to *my men* (likely to draw an insulting chuckle from the American colonel), she leaves it alone. There is a fine line between interpreting and translating; she straddles the line but does

not cross it. Predictably, the American laughs out loud. Three weeks in this god-forsaken place and she knows him better than she knows her own husband.

*How far?* the colonel inquires.

*A day's journey on horseback,* replies the boy. *Provided we leave immediately. Provided the snow holds off, and the night holds no surprises.*

Pryde ducks back into her tent and rifles through the contents of her knapsack: a single change of long underwear, six pair of thick woolen socks, a toothbrush, a dozen chocolate bars, a dictionary, a map, and a leather-bound journal—a gift from her husband, all wrong and naïve, its pages even blanker than when she lifted the book from its box six weeks before. Alone in her tent, a cavern of fear in her stomach, there are no words to describe the howling dogs, the braying donkeys, the periodic clicking of the Kalashnikovs, their chambers empty as the boys take aim at one another in the darkness. Last night, as she tumbled into a bumpy sleep, she heard Nazeer speak in perfect English: *If you fail, I'll have you spread eagle on a wagon wheel. If you desert you'll be found. Tracked down and broken into bits.* It is the only English she has ever heard him speak; he has mastered every Wayne-like breath and pause. The words swagger and strut through the night air, and yet she doubts he even knows what they mean. But if she gives him the translation, John Wayne with a Pashtun accent would be far too much to bear. She doesn't know how she might react, and it isn't worth the risk of finding out.

Some nights, with the war a gentle thunder in the distance, she manages to dream. Up to her elbows in Joy, in the sink at the kitchen window, she scrubs a pot while her husband yanks carrots from the garden. She feels his eyes on her and looks up from her pot, raises the window just a little. He holds up a carrot, and says something, smiling. *Purple!* she thinks it is. His voice is the urgent voice of the colonel. *What did he say? Ask him how far. Ask him if he can take us there.* She wakes up alone in her tent, the cold ground a needle in her spine. *Purple?* she says out loud, a question mark in her heart. She tries to picture every purple thing she has seen in her life and is surprised to recall so few: a pot of chrysanthemums, her grandmother's nubby old cardigan, an eggplant at the local farmer's market. *Chrysanthemums, cardigan, eggplant,* she murmurs, running her tongue over her sticky morning-teeth, each word brand new, their images only hers to imagine. She ponders and remembers and wonders in Pashtu, the language of the Afghan soldiers. She combs her fingers through her breath, raking up the warmth, piling it up like leaves in her small tent.

Pryde reaches for her nerves, her toothbrush, and her gloves, and stumbles back into the morning. Her back is sore, the soles of her feet throb hot and cold; she can no longer tell the difference. A gentle snow falls all around her. She heads away from the camp toward a snow-covered boulder in the near distance. Behind it, she squats; her cheeks melt the ice like a flame. She stands and pulls

herself together, catches her bulky glove in the zipper's jagged teeth. She takes a travel-sized bottle of SCOPE from her pocket (admittedly, a stupid indulgence), jogs the ice with the tap of her finger, and tosses her head back to the sky. She lets her mind wander just a little, to Paris (though she's never been to Paris), to a small hôtel in St. Germain-des-Près, an eighteenth-century abbey with vaulted arches and a garden bursting with asters and zinnias. She washes her hair in a tiny porcelain sink the very pink of a baby's cheek. She bends at the waist and spits into the snow. Mint green. She marvels at the color. Everything here is gray and white.

On her way back to the camp, she meets the colonel. His eyes skim her face before settling on her boots. *How are your feet? Do you need fresh socks or bandages?* His sole concern is her feet; without them, he cannot do his job.

*I'm fine*, she says, though the blister on the ball of one foot is on the brink of a stunning rupture. Like a puddle, its center nudges the edges into a lopsided circle. If she is lucky, the second half-mile will numb the sting. For the rest of the journey, her feet will move, but she will not feel them. She will push the pain to some idle corner of her brain, and bury it there with words: *Lookout, fire, ridge-line, surprise, dead*. As deliberately as possible, she meets the colonel's eyes, as gray as the sky behind him. *I'm fine*, she says again, too tired to care if he believes her, not sure if she believes it herself.

The colonel looks up at the mountains, his nostrils twitching like a housecat sniffing at the autumn's first frost. The hairs in his nose are crusted with ice. He stuffs his gloves under an armpit and takes a cigarette from the inside chest pocket of his Army-issue parka. Pryde watches as he rolls it between his palms, flattening the swell of his fear. The cigarette is as thin as the haricot vert her mother served with the Thanksgiving turkey, green beans smothered in a pungent mushroom sauce. She remembers how the afternoon sun lit up her place at the table, how the meat fell silently from her father's carving knife, a tap dance of shadows on the white linen tablecloth. She squeezes her eyes and sandwiches the scene between last night's horror, and what might happen today.

Above the colonel's shoulder, the sun rises with a scream. It echoes off the mountain and hammers at the center of her chest, white hot. It is quiet enough to hear the colonel breathing beside her; she is aware of their opposite rhythms, see-sawing back and forth like the bow of a violin. She holds her breath, tries to time her exhale with his, seeks comfort in the sameness. It doesn't work. They have little in common, her breathing comes shallow and fast. She is twenty years younger, her boots are too tight, she will never grow accustomed to the altitude.

How she came to this place is a mystery; there is little in her past to explain it. Shooting the coyote was a fluke; she put it behind her, she has never been brave, she has never had the urge to do brave things. To the contrary, really. The

spring she turned thirteen, a thick miasma of doubt crept into her life like a cataract, and what had once been very clear turned blurry: her hopes, her plans, her impractical dreams. She had wanted to travel the world, to live among strange tribes like Margaret Mead and her adolescent Manu girls. At night, when she should have been asleep, she took a flashlight to bed, and lost herself in a slippery pile of magazines—*National Geographic*s and *Smithsonians* mostly—bewitched by photographs of lush-leafed jungles and big-breasted women who stretched their lips over what looked to her like ping-pong paddles. She dreamed of paddling down the Amazon in a hollowed-out tree trunk, painted faces peeking out at her from the bush, a camera around her neck like Bourke-White, a notebook in her lap like Mead, savoring the danger, communicating in a curious language, earning the trust of strangers. She hoped to discover some lost tribe of supra-pygmyies who would adopt her as one of their own; she would love them the way that Camilla Wedgwood is said to have loved the tribes of New Guinea. PBS would commission Sir Richard Attenborough to make a documentary of her extraordinary life. Jane Goodall, Dian Fosse, Pryde MacAllister.

But then something happened. Overnight, she grew irrationally timid. Ordinary things seemed inordinately threatening and intimidating. Example: She defected from the Girl Scouts to avoid a camping trip to Lake Shantituck because she feared that the lake might break the dam and flood the camp. Though she'd trailed her mother through the Army-Navy store, helping her assemble the endless punch-list of required equipment—the metal plates and utensils, the sleeping bag, the giant flashlight—she knew that she would never use them. She felt no connection to them. Their strangeness jangled her nerves.

In her room that same night, Pryde shut the door and sat cross-legged on her bed. She spread her flowered flannel sleeping bag out in front of her and dumped her camping gear on top. She fingered the lip of a battered tin cup until a marshmallow floated on a cloud of hot chocolate, and when she closed her eyes, wisps of steam tickled her nose and warmed her face as she and the other girls gathered silently around a campfire. In the middle of the night, she flicked on the flashlight and cut a path through the woods to the latrine. And when the boogey-man jumped out from behind a rock, she blinded him with the light, then crept back to her tent and slept, triumphant.

She opened her eyes, stashed her gear in a cardboard box, and pushed it to the back of her closet, behind a pair of go-go boots that she hadn't worn since the second grade. She rolled up her sleeping bag, flattened it down, and slid it under the bed where it would soon gather dust as thick as cotton balls. On the morning of the trip to Camp Shantituck, she faked an earache so convincingly that she actually ran a fever; the mercury hovered near the danger mark while she conjured up floods, deer ticks, the call of an owl, poison oak, snakes and

spiders crawling around in her sleeping bag. By the next week, Saturday morning cartoons frightened her, and cobwebs blanketed her orange Schwinn Varsity three-speed. She even quit the softball team after Jody Maxwell (accidentally) banged a line drive straight into her chest beside third base.

Pryde kept her distance and surrendered her dreams. She catalogued her *National Geographics* for future reference. Someday she might teach social studies in the local high school.

If her parents noticed the change in their eldest, they did not seem particularly disturbed. Pryde (strong-willed and opinionated, bordering on impertinent) grew quiet and polite, respectful of her elders and shy around her peers, rarely leaving the farm except for school. She spent a great deal of time in the barn, palming apples to her father's horses, hanging out with the trainers on the track, a bandana at her throat, a stopwatch tickling her palm like a moth. Like Jemma Parker, who woke up one day in the seventh grade, awfully and perfectly blind, Pryde adjusted. She accepted the change without question, and, like Jemma's sudden blindness, its cause seemed destined to remain a mystery. She forgot about Margaret Mead and the Samoans. In the afternoons when she finished her chores, she lay on the grass behind the barn, elbows cradling her head, and swallowed huge cumulous clouds, letting them puff up inside her. With very little practice, she learned to float. She moved sideways through life, buffeted by winds she had no urge to control.

Until her senior year in high school, when her father's sizeable contribution to the Committee-to-Elect-the-President was rewarded with an ambassadorship. The family (excepting Pryde, who had no intention of going anywhere) pinned its hopes on London, Paris, Rome, or Sydney—and waited for official word. Kabul was not even on their radar. Getting the news was like being told to pack for Mars. The most diligent of the four children, Pryde was dispatched to the University library, and told to bring home whatever “educational material” she could find. At the dinner table, she picked at her brussel sprouts and read aloud from her notes. Her reports had the distinctly cautionary flavor of a State Department Travel Alert: *The country faces daunting challenges. American citizens must be vigilant for child abduction, banditry, land mines, and armed rivalry among political and tribal groups. Basic services are rudimentary or do not exist. These factors may contribute to crime and lawlessness.* One night, when her mother had had enough of such pessimistic talk, she said simply: *Pryde, dear, this isn't Camp Shantituck.*

And reluctantly, Pryde surrendered.

They arrived at the end of March. The ground was still frozen, and snow draped the mountains from Kabul to the Khyber Pass; a bitter wind blew south from Kazakhstan. The narrow windows on their crumbling brick residence were

crisscrossed with steel bars, and for one long year, they lived as hostages to their own foolishness, cowering in the basement whenever the city came under fire. Bombs exploded in the street and cracked the concrete foundation of the house, tickling the soles of their feet the way that a subway train shudders deep inside a sidewalk. And still, they flattened their hands against their ears and strained for the all-clear, then buried their fears until the next time.

They lived in practical isolation. At first, a moon-faced Pashtun girl with a long, elegant neck and the lipid brown eyes of a giraffe was the family's only regular visitor. Her name was Spogmay. In the afternoons, Spogmay prepared their dinner in the enormous kitchen that faced onto a courtyard full of armed men. The girl smelled of basil and chutney; her golden skin shimmered like olive oil beneath the gauzy veil of her *tshaaderi*. She had a habit of talking to herself, of whispering the names of the items that she removed from her straw basket and set upon the knife-scarred butcher-block counter. Her voice had the seductive timber of an alto clarinet. Her words were like a reed, bitten more than spoken. She barely moved her lips.

Near the end of that summer, Spogmay brought her eldest brother to the house. Ismail—sienna-skinned and green-eyed—was as mischievous as Spogmay was tractable. While Spogmay kept her eyes on the floor, tiptoeing round the kitchen on her bare feet, Ismail was dangerous, vaulting onto the counter, snatching apples and pears from the silver bowl that Pryde's mother had dragged halfway across the globe. Watching him chomp on an apple one day (baring chunky white teeth, licking his lips, even relishing the seeds) she was reminded of Pooh Bear—the pony she'd lost in a stable fire the December that there hadn't been a Christmas. Ismail was a flirt. He liked to sit on the counter and braid her hair; she would back into the space between his legs and close her eyes and when his fingers glanced her skin, gathering hair at the nape of her neck, she felt a stirring between her own legs. He flirted in silence, and in Pashtu, and she fell in lust, and then in love, as much with the language as with him. For a while, Ismail made Pryde forget who she was. And then he was gone (a dream-like kiss in the shadows of the courtyard), and she was left with only Spogmay and the strangely beautiful language that kept him close.

Like a magnet, Pryde gravitated toward the enigmatic Pashtun girl, the stone floor cold beneath her own bare feet; daily, her hips jutted forward to greet her. At first, she merely listened; soon enough she let the strange new words roll off her tongue. Her first nouns were eggplant, chutney, and mutton; her first verbs were *sauté*, *toss*, and *cube*. At night, she memorized recipes like flash cards of multiplication tables. While she slept, silvery skeins of grammar threaded their way through her subconscious, connecting words to form full sentences: *Sauté the eggplant in a half-inch of olive oil. Toss in a tablespoon of chutney. Cube the mutton and shred the onions. Stir.* Eventually, she dreamed in Pashtu, and