

The Trigger

Jill Baker

U.S. Army Veteran

As a U.S. Army Veteran living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), I am not always able to tap into my feelings or cognitively understand what's happening around me. I liken this sense of displacement to a sort of temporary dyslexia; things don't make sense when *fight, flight, freeze* settles into my bones.

During these moments, I've trained myself to pick up the pen and unscramble the emotions that keep me locked up inside. The act of writing gives me clarity when my brain has short-circuited due to stressful triggers (which are physical, physiological, and emotional) that accompany PTSD.

The following poetic reflections were written during a recent difficult period in my life. They are tangled webs of messy emotions that I used to help me unravel the discord one step at a time. I am sharing them in chronological order as a way to demonstrate the process I took to help me work through months of harrowing days as a triggered veteran.

This process often helps me make wiser decisions and the words that come out of me let me know when I need to pick up the phone and call for help. If you are struggling with PTSD, I pray that this short collection of poems about my personal journey through "*freeze*" moments will help you realize that you are not alone.

September – Trigger

It starts with ammunition

In whatever shape or form it happens to come in

It hasn't penetrated my flesh

But the threat is there

Sending cold shivers along my spine

My ears perk up

My senses sharpen

And I try to dodge the bullet
That as of yet hasn't been fired

Sometimes I catch the danger signs
Early enough to heed their warning
Save myself from the damage
Of their laser focused intrusion

Other times
Someone or something
Finds its way to the handle
And pulls the trigger
Before I can safely get away

It is in those times
When the bullet has rammed its way
Into my heart
Past my defenses
That the pain and anguish come flooding in

My shadow is ripped from my body
Sending me straight into a hell of my own making

It is in those times
When I must rally within
Though I feel helpless
In my search to find such fortitude
And prepare myself to face the ravaging cycle
That plays out before I can feel whole again
Feel safe and in control again

April - Nighttime Invaders

Mostly

The monsters that invade my sleep are human

Sometimes I know them

Sometimes they are glimmers of people I feel I should know

Other times it is as if they were familiar to me in a past life

These nightmares startle me awake

In a drenching sweat

And I can't get back to sleep

For what seems like half the night

My head remains full of terrifying pictures

So much so that I can't release myself from their trappings

Monsters linger in the dark corners of the room

Causing me to pull my arms and feet in close

Like a child

Lest they stray over the bed

While I don't analyze the majority of these nightmares

I find I must face the monsters

I know in real life

Within the next few days or a week to calm me

Otherwise

Anxiety plays cruel tricks behind my back

And I'm not very fun to be around

August - Cat and Mouse

An early morning thunderstorm

Matches the roiling of tension

Threatening to soak my confidence
In a gush of tainted rain

Past wrongs come marching to the surface again
Sparked like a match lit by lightning

A boom of thunder
Akin to the pain-filled memories
Carefully and deliberately packed away
Shakes my body like a rag doll

They haunt me as I sip hot coffee
And pet my dog
Though she too is disturbed by the thunder

Confession
I have to go to work today
Walk into a mousetrap laid by a clever cat

Such circumstance is eerily familiar
And a kind of wild desperation disturbs my peace

My legs feel leaden
Blood running hot then cold
But with a tightened jaw and quivering resolve
I will see this day through
Just as I have always done
Maybe justice will serve me this time
Though I won't hold my breath
Broken dreams have only
Ever been the cause of speaking out

Wow the rain is really coming down now

August - Troubling Days

Arise oh sun!

Shine your healing light upon the earth

The trees, the flowers

My porch

Creep upward

Your oranges, pinks, and reds

To fill the limitless sky

With hope for a new day

Bring with you renewal

Mind, body, spirit

Free and cleansed

Of the darkness

Reluctant to give way to the light

Find me

Clear-minded

Open-hearted

And strong of will

Prepare me for the troubling days to come

September - Diamond in the Rough

It's difficult to understand why

Doing your best in the workplace

Can lead to job insecurity

Striving to make a difference
In the service of others
Opening your heart and mind
To those you spend your week with

On a good day
The fulfillment of a job well done
Sends me soaring like an eagle
Across the vast sky
Allowing me to alight upon
The wide boughs of a grand tree
My sharp talons holding firm

But on a bad day
One that usually involves
The tainted lust of power
Well that can bring out the darkness in some
As they lash out with tongues like whips
And wound with chains that bind

Tethering me to a tiny space
Where no light can seep in

In those moments
I become stiff and frozen
A translucent icicle clinging
To a roof line from the outside
Looking in

It certainly makes me
Ponder my own sanity

For what is wrong
With doing your best
With what you have been given
In order to lift up another

Is the need to maintain power so alluring
That even a soul which brags of divinity
Would go beyond their own preachings
To keep the light of another hidden away
Like a diamond in the rough

October - How Will You Use It

We all have something in our lives
That elicits pain and sorrow

The something might give us pause
For a day, a week, a month, a year
Then we settle

Successfully incorporating the new into the old

Then there are those experiences
That are life-changing
Causing such a monumental shift in
The gut, heart, and soul
That we are forever different
And that which we were is no more

Whether that change be for
The better or the worse
Is not for us to choose
As the something most likely

Is beyond our control or comprehension
At the time of its making

But now that the something has happened
What will you do with it

If for the better
I pray that you allow it to expand past
The confinement of your own self

If for the worse
I pray that you allow it to do good
And expand it past
The confinement of your own self

Otherwise it might slowly chip away
At your goodness
Until you are something that you hate
So I ask you
How will you use it

November - Mending The Past

The past is a tangled mess of
Bright and dull memories
All interwoven so tightly together that
To mend a tear in its fabric
Can seem irreparable and dense

A hurt from today can be caused by
A ratty thread torn loose in a second
Or it can span across space and time

To a tiny snick layered and hidden away
Within childhood memories

Seen in this regard

A skilled weaver is needed to unravel such hurt
But who of us are capable of such skill and empathy
That we can thread the needle
With the right color and length
To effectively stitch the tear tightly enough
That it will not rip again

Better to mend the past with a multitude of weavers
All skilled in their own ways
Loving and respecting the different facets of your many selves
Rather than attempt such a feat alone

A hurt need not be felt in solitude
Four hands are better than two
And eight hands are better than four
To patch and mend torn and tattered things

January - Triumph From Tragedy

Who knows your personal tragedies better than you

Though the ability to stamp out the fires of difficult times
May be buried deep beneath the suffocation of burdens
That seem overwhelming at the summit's base
I challenge you to rise like a phoenix
And build your destiny from the ashes of the past

Strengthen your soul even as
Smoke fills your nostrils and burns your lungs

Allow tragedy to become your triumph
As you sharpen your eyes to the horizon
In celebration of a life worth living

You are tragedy
You are triumph
You are the phoenix