

BRIAN CAMERON



# Finding Tiamat

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A Book for Broken  
Democracies

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A BOOK FOR BROKEN DEMOCRACIES

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# INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* in 1922, the year after a world war had ended and a second one had already quietly begun. He did not explain the wound. He put you inside it—voices fragmenting, images colliding, a civilization trying to speak and finding it had lost the grammar. Critics called it difficult. They meant: It refused to comfort us with conclusions we had not earned.

A century later, the wound is different. The fragmentation is different. But the mechanism is the same: A people who have stopped being able to stay in the room with one another, who have learned to prefer the other's falling to their own rising. What we are living through now is not primarily a political crisis. It is a psychological one—collective, intergenerational, and largely unexamined. We are a nation carrying what we have not yet named.

Tiamat is one of the oldest gods we have. In ancient Mesopotamian mythology, she is the primordial ocean—saltwater, chaos, the undivided source before the split. Then the younger gods rose and killed her. Cut her body in two. Made the world from the pieces. What we call civilization was built on that division. The pattern of destroying what we cannot control, then constructing our order on top of the wound—and calling it progress—is one we are still living out. In our politics. In our wars. In the way we have learned to need an enemy to feel like a nation.

Poetry has always known this territory. Not because poets are wiser than the rest—this poem will disabuse you of that notion quickly—but because the poem is one of the few forms that can hold contradictory truths without forcing them to resolve. It can say both when the culture

is screaming choose. It can ask what do you want? and refuse to fill in the silence.

*Finding Tiamat* moves through the voices of a combat veteran, a woman whose family paid for an election in broken glass, and a narrator who discovers that his hunger for someone else's fall tastes exactly like what I tasted growing up. That recognition—private, uncomfortable, and finally unavoidable—is where democracy either holds or doesn't.

This is not a poem about who is right. It is a poem about what it costs to stay in the room.

It ends mid-sentence. On purpose. The rest is up to us.



# FINDING TIAMAT

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# SALT WATER AND THE SPLIT

Salt water first. Then the split.

Tiamat dreamed this:

lung-vote, heart-vote, blood through chambers—  
no emperor.

I grew up on the Hudson, Jersey City  
where the river swallows harbor, swallows rust.

We learned early: someone else's losing  
is what greatness tastes like.

My neighborhood knew this arithmetic—  
for every luxury condo rising in Manhattan,  
someone on our side paid rent they couldn't make.  
We called it progress. We called it how things work.

January. Joggers, their screens blue against ice.

I wake at 1 A.M., reach for my phone  
like my mother reached for her rosary—

*Let him fall. Let him fall. Let him fall.*

My thumb on glass.

My small god, my small hunger  
for someone else's losing  
so I can taste what winning is.

# THE CHECKPOINT

Marcus by the window.  
Twenty-three. Two deployments.  
Won't look at me.

*This car—*

Stops. Starts.

*Speeding. April. Fallujah.*

*Three suicide bombers that week.*

*I'm screaming STOP—*

*I can see him. Young.*

*Two seconds to decide*

*if he's threat or his brakes—*

*His hands.*

Shot them both. Brothers.

The passenger was deaf.

The Army cleared him.

*So why can't I—*

What I'm learning beside him,

session after session,

his hands making fists, releasing, making fists—

He can't survive by choosing one truth.

# THE FIRST KILL

The first time, he says. Not the checkpoint.

House-to-house. Kicked in a door.

Man with a weapon.

*Easy. In the moment, easy.*

*He was enemy. I was soldier.*

Pause.

*Later—months, years—*

*I started wondering if he had kids.*

Every session: *Which one? Victim or—*

Every session: *Both.*

*I still believe*

*I was right to shoot.*

*He had a weapon.*

*But the moment I pulled—*

*some part that used to believe*

*I was different—*

Silence like a third body.

*Is that what happened to us?*

*We did what we had to*

*and now we can't remember—*

# THOSE PEOPLE

His trauma doesn't undo  
the trauma he's inflicted.  
Healing doesn't come from deciding.  
The voting booth. I cast my ballot,  
convinced I'm choosing connection.  
Outside: red hats, red signs.  
My body tenses.

*Those people.*

One of them, a woman my mother's age,  
her grandson's hand in hers.  
She believes she's voting for his future.  
Some of them are Marcus.  
Doing what they think they need to.

And some are motivated by hatred.

Racism. Fear curdled to cruelty.

I don't know how to hold both.

My friend Jamila says: *Easy for you to hold both  
when you're not the one being held down.*

She's right. Of course she's right.

Her cousin in Arizona, pulled over  
because the officer thought he looked—  
Her uncle in Detroit, store he built for thirty years,  
windows smashed, slur spraypainted,  
week after the election.

*You get to theorize about empathy,*  
she said, *because you're not the target.*

I want to argue. I want to say  
widening doesn't mean allowing—

But I hear Marcus:

*Back at the checkpoint. The car coming.  
I'm yelling STOP.*

*Through the windshield—my own face.  
Myself and my brother. Both deaf.  
Unheard.*

*The radio playing—I can hear it somehow—  
my daughter's favorite song. The one  
we sang driving to the base that morning.  
I wake knowing I'm about to shoot myself  
and also my daughter's not born yet for three more years  
and also she's already in the passenger seat—*

First time he cries.

*I don't know if I can live with that.*

*You already are.*

But Jamila doesn't get to heal her uncle's windows  
by understanding the man who threw the brick.

# JAMILA'S WINDOWS

Jamila tells me they found him.

The one who smashed her uncle's windows.

Nineteen. Works at the AutoZone  
two blocks from her uncle's store.

*Did he say why?*

*Said my uncle was replacing them. Taking their jobs.*

*My uncle's been there thirty years. Hired half the neighborhood.*

Pause.

*The kid's not sorry. His lawyer says he was drunk.*

*But in the holding cell*

*he told the officer my uncle deserved it.*

I think of Marcus. His nightmares. His apologies  
to the dead who can't hear them.

*What do you want to happen to him?*

*I want him gone. I want him to hurt  
the way my uncle hurts.*

She stops.

*And I want to understand why.*

*I want to know what happened to him  
that made him think—*

She shakes her head.

*Both. I want both.*

*And I hate that I want both.*

Later, I look up the kid's name. Local news.

His mother: *He's not like this. He's not—*

Marcus learned to live split open.

The kid at AutoZone sleeps fine,  
his certainty intact.

Which is the greater violence?

# THE THERAPIST'S CONFESSION

I hold other people's contradictions  
for fifty minutes at a time.  
I'm trained for this—  
to sit with ambivalence, to make space  
for incompatible truths.  
Maybe that's why I can write this poem.  
Because I do this work professionally.  
Because I've learned to be comfortable  
in the space where nothing resolves.  
Jamila doesn't have that training.  
She just has the broken windows.  
She has to navigate the daily calculation:  
Which battles? When? At what cost?  
She doesn't get to practice empathy.  
She has to survive the need for it.  
Marcus pays me to help him hold the split.  
I go home after and make dinner,  
feed the cat, scroll my phone.  
What violence am I doing  
by making his split into theory?



# WHAT DO YOU WANT

At 1 A.M., I refresh.  
Trial. Acquittal. Rally.  
My thumb scrolling.  
No longer prayer. Now patrol.  
I'm choosing to look. I'm choosing  
this particular rage.  
I want him to fall.  
I want them to suffer.

*What do you want?*

Marcus asked me this, once.  
Turned the session back.  
Justice? Revenge?  
For them to admit—  
For the country to be what I thought—

*What do you want?*

To go back to before.  
Before the checkpoint.  
Before I learned I carry the same splitting,  
the same desire to make the world simple  
by making someone else the chaos.  
Before I knew that my desire for his fall  
tastes exactly like what I tasted growing up—  
someone else's losing  
so I can feel like winning.  
But I also want them stopped.  
I want the children uncaged.  
I want the officer who pulled over Jamila's cousin  
to face something. Consequences. Law.  
I want the brick-thrower named.  
These wants don't reconcile.  
I'm learning to let them coexist,  
bad weather in the same sky.

# THE STONES AND THE RIPPLES

I walk the Hudson at dusk.  
Ice breaking apart in sunlight.  
I toss a stone. Ripples widen,  
ripples doubling over ripples.  
Some days I believe it.  
Some days I think it's bullshit,  
that evil is only evil,  
that some people are meant to be stopped,  
not understood,  
that this poem is privilege  
for people who've never had to pull a trigger  
or watch their children caged.  
That widening is a luxury  
Jamila's uncle can't afford  
sweeping glass.

    Marcus learned to live with both thoughts  
    in the same breath.

But I'm not Marcus.  
I didn't kill anyone.  
I just voted and walked home  
and woke at 1 A.M. and scrolled.  
Maybe that's the problem—  
I get to write poems about paradox  
while other people live the consequences.  
The grandmother in Nebraska  
who voted for him twice  
volunteers at the refugee center now.  
I read this and want it to mean something.  
Redemption. Proof that people can—  
But Jamila's uncle's windows are still broken.

The spraypaint still there under new paint.  
Marcus holding the door for another veteran,  
hands trembling.  
Me, walking this river,  
holding my rage and my understanding—  
my desire for justice  
and my knowledge that punishment  
will not heal—  
    holding them both  
        like two stones in the same pocket.  
            Their weight teaching me a balance  
                I did not want to learn  
                    and maybe have no right to.  
Some days I almost convince myself  
that I'm wrong. That understanding is cowardice.  
That some people are exactly what they do  
and nothing more.  
That Marcus is different because he's sorry.  
That the people outside the polling place  
deserve no such widening.  
Some days that feels true.  
Some days.  
Marcus texted yesterday:  
    *Still having the dreams.*  
    *But now sometimes I wake*  
    *and the car stops.*  
    *And I see their faces.*  
    *And I say I'm sorry.*  
    *And they're still dead.*  
    *But at least I'm not pretending*  
    *I'm not the one who killed them.*  
        *Is that progress?*  
I don't text back right away.  
I don't know what to say.

The ice is breaking.  
The river remembers.  
My thumb still reaches for my phone at 1 A.M.,  
but now I notice the reaching.  
Now I sometimes choose to stop scrolling.  
Not always. Not even usually.  
But sometimes.  
    I'm learning to hold that wanting  
        alongside the knowing  
            that his falling won't make me whole.  
Only widening will—  
    Will what?  
        Save us?  
            Solve this?  
Only—

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Cameron grew up in Jersey City, New Jersey. He attended the United States Military Academy in 1999 but resigned, inspired by the life of Edgar Allan Poe, a former cadet there. After surviving the 9/11 attacks in New York City, he rejoined the military and later became an Army and Air Force veteran. An alumnus of Fordham University, he is a therapist in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he runs Lykos Counseling, providing mental health and executive coaching services. Brian is also an executive producer of goth music events and sponsors local artists in his community.