

Turtle

Seaman Recruit Robinson was a petite black woman always smiling, though few met her eyes. On first look you saw the scar, her entire face was burn—a healed swirl of pink and brown, a nose less nose than placeholder for the center of her face. But her eyes and smile—those calmed every one of us. And she did know us all, knew names and with every small conversation remembered our stories. *Hey, Goff, you get a letter from your granny in Georgia? Recruit Wortman, tell me about the desert and mountains.* And I wanted her story. It took the eight weeks to learn it, to have her tell it out; she finally did our last weekend there. We'd graduated; it was our first liberty, and she and I were some of the twenty left to stand the watch that first night. With no more inspections, no more threats of hurricanes or setbacks, we gathered in the small lounge next to the CC's office. Getting to know one another after all this time.

*I don't remember the fire, my mom
and my brothers told me, I was just a baby. We lived
in a little cabin, my daddy
was at work, and pan of grease caught up
some curtains and those fell; the cabin
burned while my mom was rescuing me.*

She smiled again, looked around at us. *Kids called me Turtle, but my grandmother said those are the strongest animals, carry their own home, live longer than the world. Tough-skinned.* She laughed,

*and I have five brothers that gave a beating
or two every year I was in school.
And that's it, joined the Navy 'cause I
want to see the world. She looked
around at us, shy again, chose a girl
who hadn't said a word in weeks:
what about you, Hall, why are you here?
Nudging my foot with hers, she whispered
slow and steady, laughed again,
leaned toward Hall, and said, why're you here?*