

In Their Boots:

**Poems Inspired by
Soldiers and
Their Loved Ones**

Book Two:
Family

G. Mark LaFrancis

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Soldiers and Their Loved Ones

About This Book

G. Mark LaFrancis, a veteran and an accomplished journalist and writer, has interviewed more than 100 soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and their loved ones. The interviews span more than 250 hours. They have opened their hearts and souls, offering a window into their world. Thus, a collection of poignant and enlightening poems inspired by their stories has unfolded. Some stories are funny, some uplifting, and some deeply sorrowful.

The soldiers and their families in this project have asked for anonymity, thus names have been changed, and specific circumstances altered for them.

“In Their Boots: Poems Inspired by Soldiers and Their Loved Ones” is not about the war, but about the warriors ... over there, and at home. This second volume is a tribute to the families of our soldiers. God bless them all.

For A Good Cause

Part of the proceeds of this book and all proceeds associated with this project will be donated to The Fisher House Foundation, a marvelous non-profit organization providing shelter and comfort to the families of our injured soldiers

www.fisherhouse.org

Praise for This Work

“My U. S. Army son served two deployments, Iraq and Afghanistan, and was injured in a roadside bomb. He made it safely home and I no longer jump when the phone rings, but I often think of those who do. This incredible book of poetry reveals the heart of soldiers, their families and loved ones. Within these pages I find hope, compassion and rest.”

- Richelle Putnam, author and song writer

“Reading the poems in G. Mark LaFrancis’ second volume of “In Their Boots,” is like hearing the voices of those whose voices are too seldom heard. LaFrancis listened to the stories of those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also heard what the soldiers’ families had to say. Then he wrote the poems that grace the pages of this moving, haunting, and memorable book. Iraq and Afghanistan soldiers, veterans, and their families are a silent minority. Their numbers are few - less than one percent of the U.S. population. LaFrancis’ poetry gives voice to this honorable group. His writing is a celebration.”

- Terrence McCarthy, author and veteran

“G. Mark LaFrancis is able to tell the stories of those who have served in a different way. I recommend that you read his poetry even if poetry is not your thing. Well done!”

- Donnie Verucchi, Past State Commander, Veterans of Foreign Wars

Dedication

This book could not have been accomplished without my own dear family and their support and love. This book is dedicated to them.

To my family

Eileen Mary Maher

My wife

Mark Maher LaFrancis

My son

Mary Maher LaFrancis

My daughter

Acknowledgments

This book could not have been accomplished without the many, many families who opened their doors, their hearts, their lives. They are truly the heroes of these armed conflicts...holding the home front, keeping watch, being strong. God bless you all. With special thanks to Army Sgt. Hunter Parker, his wife Jenna, daughter Ava and son Gus.

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Memory Jar

Angelina wrote
A note to you
The other day
"It's a secret," she said
With "that" look
And "that" smile
"Only for Daddy."
So we made
A memory jar
For you to open
When you return
To our home
To our arms

Caleb wanted to put in
His frogs
But settled for
That Spiderman mask
You gave him
Last Halloween

And they rushed
For other things
Marbles, stickers, candies
And the little
Things of life
That are huge
In a child's eyes

As for me
Not enough
Prayers could fit

In the jar
Not enough hope
Not enough love

So I wrote a note
On simple
Lined paper
You are my love
Ever and always
This day and all the days
Of our lives

I kissed the note
Folded it
And slipped it
Among all the other stuff
In the memory jar

And so,
On the kitchen counter
Sits the memory jar.
With so much
You have given us
And your country
It is the least
We can give
You
On your
Return

Minus frogs

At 3 a.m.

There are no sounds
Except for the
Crickets and cicadas
At 3 a.m.
As I sit on the porch
Staring into the sky
Sometimes it is foggy
Sometimes it is clear
And there are stars
And I wonder if the
Same stars
Shine over you
There in Iraq
My son
My dear son.

There are no sounds
Except for my heavy breathing
My pounding heart
My swallowing hard
All these nights
You've been gone

I'm a strong man
A proud man
A brave man
But I'm helpless
Now
At the mercy of
Other forces
Other fears
Far beyond my
Own knowledge
And comprehension

So I sit here at 3 a.m.
On the porch
Where we last hugged
Where we last embraced
Trying to stretch my
Emotions so far
Over the stars
You might feel
My love

Packing List

Mom rolled my socks
Folded my T-shirts
And cleaned
My uniforms
"I'm missing something,"
She said, wiping away a tear.

My mom,
So thorough
So organized
So strong

Sun block
You'll need your sun block
You know how you burn
And insect repellent
I've heard the bugs are terrible.

And I watched
As Mom ran down her
Packing list
Socks, T-shirts, handkerchiefs,
Underwear,

And I checked off mine
Pictures ... sweet memories
For a soldier to carry to war.

And she turned to me
After the packing was done
I've forgotten something,
She said
What is it; I've forgotten
something

I grabbed Mom's hands
And looked into her eyes
Not as a boy, but as a man
And said,

You haven't forgotten a thing
All my years
You've been strong
You've been brave
The best single mom ever

I pulled Mom close
And felt her love
Not as a boy, but as her son
And we said nothing
And time stopped
And bowed in reverence
To a soldier and
His mom

Pancakes

Oh, yeah
Those pancakes
She made them
With a sprinkle of
Cinnamon
And sugar

A smile
A heart
Well, no, they
Weren't perfect

But man
So good

Butter
Honey
Syrup

A kiss
On my forehead

"Like 'em?"

Oh, boy,
Do I?

Damn
I'm getting
Teary-eyed
Talkin' about

Just pancakes
As night
Settles
After a long
And difficult
Day on patrol
And the bitter wind
Whips by our small platoon

I know I'm a simple guy
In a complex world
In a complex war

There's something
Soothing
Powerful
Wonderful
At looking back
When I was ten
At an innocent time
Of pancakes
Butter
Honey
Syrup
A kiss
On my forehead

By Mom
The one
The only
Pancake Queen

'Cuda

God's blessing
Laid in my arms
A newborn boy
As I hummed
"How Great Thou Art"
Little 'Cuda I nicknamed him
I really don't know why
But 'Cuda sounded cuter
Than Henry
So I called him 'Cuda

He slipped in slyly
That day in May
A clutch of flowers
Behind his back
A boy of nine
Happy Momma's Day
He yelled.
And I prayed and hummed
"How Great Thou Art"

And 'Cuda sat in front of
The congregation
And professed Jesus
As his friend and savior
A boy/man of thirteen
And I sang so proudly
"How Great Thou Art"
Indeed "How Great
Thou Art"

And 'Cuda slipped
Behind the wheel
A young man of sixteen
I closed my eyes
As he drove us to the Piggly Wiggly
Only after we arrived safely
Did I proclaim

"How Great Thou Art"

But when 'Cuda
Said goodbye
On his way to the Army
On his way to war
I clutched my heart
And almost lost my faith
But found the courage
To hum
"How Great Thou Art"

And the days passed,
He sent sweet letters
And he married
A beautiful young lady
And became a handsome man
A proud soldier
My 'Cuda
And I hummed
"How Great Thou Art"
Then, only faith became
The thread
Linking 'Cuda and me

But when boots shuffled outside
My door that night
And the bell rang
I crumpled; I folded;
I cried; I wailed
My 'Cuda
My 'Cuda
Was gone
War took him
Oh so violently
My 'Cuda
That boy who nestled
At my breast

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As I hummed
"How Great Thou Art"
Was gone

But he isn't
I won't let him
'Cuda's sweet voice
Still whispers to me
'Cuda's sweet smile
Still lifts my heart
'Cuda's love
Still embraces me
And hums to me

"How Great Thou Art"

And so it is in
The remembering
The cherishing
That life with 'Cuda
Remains as beautiful
As blessed
As the day
He was born
When I hummed
"How Great Thou Art"
"How Great Thou Art"

Lion King

I know you are twenty now
Broad-shouldered
Six feet, one and a half
Trained and ready
More than a man
A Marine

The other day
While cleaning your room
I find this old tape
Of "The Lion King"
The box was worn
The tape was loose

My heart leapt back
To those days
When you sat at my right side
Our bowl of popcorn
And cups of orange Kool Aid
Watching "The Lion King"

Watching Musfasa
Watching
Cheering
At the happy ending

No matter how many times
We watched, you cringed

When the little lion was near peril
And you snuggled closer

Now there you are
Somewhere in Afghanistan
I'm not supposed to know
In real peril
Without your dad
To snuggle close,
To cheer with
At the happy ending
For we don't know the ending
For you, my son

It is why I go to sleep at night
With a heavy heart
And sometimes tears

This night, though,
I slid the tape into the VCR
And watched from beginning to end
The Lion King
And felt you
Snuggling
Into my right side
As I cried tears
Of remembrance
Tears of fear

Candles

Jennifer ran to her room
I know she cried
Hard
Very hard
The day you left
Your little girl
Your angel

At only eleven
She understands
So little, but feels
So much

She came out
A candle in her hand
Her smile beaming
And she proudly pronounced

I know what we'll do
Every night we'll light
A candle
When Daddy's gone
Every night

I smiled and drew
Her to me

Hugged her
And said
Angel, that might be
A lot - a lot - of candles

She looked at me
As if to say
And ...

So, the next day
We bought boxes
And boxes of candles
Hoping that
In the lighting
Of them
You feel our love
As Angel said,
When Daddy looks up
He'll see the stars
And our candles

And I said softly
He'll also feel the warmth
Of our love

Casserole

I carried the casserole,
My wife's best
Tuna casserole,
To the house
Two doors down
To the house
With the U.S. flag
Flying
To the house
Where soldiers
In full dress
Just two nights before
Arrived
With "that" news
About Jeremy
Who mowed our lawn
Who babysat our kids
Who came to my door
The day my husband died
After a struggle with cancer
And, tears in his eyes,
Brought a casserole
From his mom

The same Jeremy
Who returned from Basic
A taut, proud young man
Who "friended" me on Facebook

Oh, Jeremy
You were like
The son I never had
The son I wish
For everyone
As I carry the tuna casserole
My husband's specialty
Your favorite
To your Mom and Dad
And family
As they
As we
Mourn

The loss
Of one of the
Best damn
Young men
God ever
Placed on Earth

I stood
Outside your door
Casserole
In hand
As my
Heart
Crumbled

Christmas Lights

“Damn!”
I hollered, shaking the lights
Those spaghetti strands
Of wire-thin webs
That refused to separate
As I sat on the front lawn
Angry and frustrated
Because... well, because
Unlike Dad
I couldn't do this

And Mom yelled out the front door
“Son, don't cuss; they're only
lights.”

“Ha!” Only lights
They're Christmas lights
The lights Dad put up
Perfectly
Since I was, what, six?
And Mom wanted to take a photo
And send it to him
Over in Afghanistan
To show him that we were keeping
His Christmas lights alive
And bright
And shining

My temper was hot
My hands were cold

But I shook the lights
Untwisted them
And managed to line the roof
And even spread some on the
bushes

Mom got the camera
I plugged the lights in
And wow, most even worked
“Quick, shoot, before they blow
out!”

And so on its way
Is a photo
Of me, mouth wide open
Below the crooked strand
Of Christmas lights
Some working
Some not

And Dad,
We left the others
In the box
Waiting for
More skillful hands
To untwist and untangle
And bring them to life
And warm our hearts
Again

Show and Tell

Jessica had just presented
Her father
A fireman

He showed us
His Air Pac
His suit
His boots
His axe
Or "chopper"
As Jessica
Called it
Applause
Oooh
Ahhh
For
Jessica's
Dad.
Even I
Was impressed

And Adam's dad
A cartoonist
Drew funny people
Before our
Very eyes

Jan's mom
A singer.
Applause
Even mine

Then,
It was my turn
For
Show and tell

I slid slowly
From my seat
To the front of
The room
And looked at
Mrs. Colbert
She nodded back

And there on the screen
Behind me
Was my dad
A Marine
A soldier
In Iraq
"Hey, kids," he said
Smiling
In his uniform
I beamed
My dad
Was there
For Show and Tell
For me
Across thousands
Of miles

And they sat
In a trance
As my Dad
Spoke

"Hey, kids
Hope y'all are having
A good time
At Show and Tell."

"Over here in Iraq

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It's really hot
This is my bunk;
Not very fancy
And my pack
Here's my rifle"

There were ooohs

"Over here is the wall
Where we put up all
The cards and drawings
You sent
We love 'em
Please send more"

They all were
Riveted to his words
To his voice
As was I

"You may hear and see a lot
You may not like the war
You may wish bad things
Didn't happen."

"But we are here

Protecting you
We are here
Caring for you
So only good things
Happen to you"

The signal slipped away
Into grayness
We sat
At our desks
Left to us
To absorb
To feel
To know
What the men
And women
Live through
Over there
Far from
Us
Far from
Home
Far from
Show and
Tell