New Fiction by Michael Carson: The Childhood of Barabbas

My first memories are of the hills outside Judea. A small lizard, with a black stripe and black eyes, staring at me and I at it.

New Review: Michael Carson on Kevin Honold’s Our Lady of Good Voyage

CROATOAN: A Review of Kevin Honold’s *Our Lady of Good Voyage* (Orison Books, 2024).

Kevin Honold’s *Our Lady of Good Voyage* begins in an unnamed Ohio town populated with German ghosts. The Germans, the children and grandchildren of once prosperous immigrants, all elderly now, move through the streets incuriously, “lacking the imagination to move on.” Joe, the novel’s reluctant protagonist, pulls his squad car over and tries to help one of these living ghosts but ends up giving her two dollars and advice to buy some lozenges. As he drives off, he realizes that despite “a common language,” he once again “failed to trade a single piece of worthwhile information.” “I may as well be a god damn ghost,” he thinks.

Joe’s childhood friend does not have time to be a ghost. Kenny believes that Mary, the mother of God, comes to him in dreams with a crown of stars and the moon beneath her feet and wants Kenny to visit her in what the Aztecs called the center of the moon, and what we, today, call Mexico. He believes that the devil is a miracle that has created the illusion of our self-centered world (“lovelier than a thousand Sistine Chapels”) and only the act of a journey, a pilgrimage, can save us from this first miracle with a second. He believes that the voyages of Captain Cook and Intuit hunting practices are as real and as present as the toilet pipes he and Joe repair after high school. He knows that all is sacred, all always alive, and that we, unlike ghosts, have a choice to see this or not.

But Kenny is gone, and has been for ten years. He haunts the edges of Joe’s muted days, appearing shoeless in crowded city streets, preaching his vision to empty train cars, leaving the final message of the vanished Roanoke settlers (CROATOAN) graffitied in drainage ditches. Joe circles the flickers of this ebbing fire in his squad car, these hints, only sure of one thing: that Kenny, his best friend, failed at everything, but that failure itself somehow legitimized the undertaking. “Anything else was not worth the time.”

The novel’s other chapters take place on the road, in memory. Joe and Kenny make their way down from Ohio toward Mexico. They drink with a man with his head caved in on a bus, hitchhike with a suicidal veteran, violate the Missouri law of being poor (and from Ohio), escape an apocalypse-obsessed family cult in Louisiana, and hop trains with immigrants across Texas. The immigrants smile but nod off at Kenny’s story. They are too exhausted to hear the end, how he and Joe will find Mary outside Mexico City and beg her to reveal the truth, and this truth, her love for them, and their love for her, will make it impossible to deny the sacredness of every living thing. Border Control disappears the immigrants. VA

hospitals and jails disappear the drunks. Churches and homes warm the faithful and the righteous and those who never leave home. It is difficult to say who the ghosts are here. Kenny tells us the devil most certainly is not one. We should love the devil, he confides to his fellow inmates in a Missouri prison, for “if we don’t love him too, the work will forever remain unfinished…I see him every day.”

Joe smashes a scorpion during his tour of duty in Somalia that follows their pilgrimage. He uses an oil barrel three times to crush it, and it does nothing spectacular, just stops moving. “Damn, killer,” says another soldier. Joe does not believe in God or that this world can mean anything more than it is. He sees only the humiliated and the humiliation. He signs up for the military because in a world that is all ghost, deployments and war become un-ghostly, a quickening, bloody heart in a waste of gray. They have been raised by exhausted and unhappy men with repressed memories of brutal World War 2 campaigns. But the pride of that rare past, of being someone else once, keeps their uncles and fathers alive to themselves in a world that has moved on. Joe sees this. He is smart enough to know that it is nice to have done something, to go somewhere, to be someone, at least once. And the military pays for school now, they say.

We all have a bit of Joe in us. It’s all sad. It’s all a loop, nonsense, a slow fading away. Don’t be too curious. Don’t look too far outside the electric light. Suck it up. You don’t know what’s out there. Keep your head down by pretending to hold it up. The is is the is. Stay alive. And we do. We survive for so long. Thousands of years. Whole eternities. Look at us! Examine our cities, our “brief golden clusters suspended in the night” and the armies of creatures crossing silently through the fields and trainyards around and within them. “The dead never hurt anybody,” Kenny tells Joe during a training exercise with the moon above them like a spider’s egg in the naked, winter branches. “It’s the other ones we have to worry

about."

Then Kenny almost despairs. He says he can hardly remember Her anymore. He warns Joe that "forgetting is the only death…Evil is everything that dims and obscures and wears away the gift for remembering." Joe says, no, "Evil is time itself. Time is what takes everything away." Kenny's eyes go bright (brighter) with tears and hugs his friend. "You have been listening. Now I know. Thank you." Joe does listen. We do listen. Even if we pretend that we don't. Some say that's all ghosts can really do. Some say that only ghosts believe in time because they are trapped in the idea of it. Others—like me—say that novels as true and wise and joyful as *Our Lady of Good Voyage* prove Kenny wrong. There will *always* be people among us who remember, ergo nothing ever dies, and there is no evil, despite the best attempts of the righteous and incurious to make us believe otherwise.

But enough with the ghosts. In the book's final pages Joe, a child again, runs away from a snapping turtle that a group of boys have stomped to death, back to Kenny, off the path, somewhere in the woods. They spend hours "contriving little ships from bark and twigs, binding the planks and timbers with long green grasses." They make a fort out of some old logs and beg for food from the local bakery. They work like devils to create a home that is not a home thanks to Kenny's mom, who provides them somewhere safe to come back to, to return to after their long difficult pilgrimages, in Ohio, and Mexico, and Africa, searching for the mother of God the world over. They complete their project. They look out from their fort with immense human satisfaction. "Neither deadlines nor schedules concerned them, not the world's troubles, and the long days led away, in gratuitous succession, to the very vanishing point of time, which was inexhaustible as air, and warranted as little concern."

You can buy *Our Lady of Good Voyage* at Orison Books.

New Poetry by Michael Carson: “Politics”

BLAME OUR BRUISES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Politics

Every 20 years or so boys dress up
And kill each other for fun.
It’s the way of the wrack of the world
The wind of our imagination and our love.
To blame our costumes for our beauty
Is like to blame our bruises for our blood.
The chime is what drives us, what ticks
Our tock forward to the next spree.
The foreshortened humiliation,
The immaculate imprecation,
Is neither what we fear or what we covet.
Man is. Rats are. Take what you can
While the day is rough
Move lengthwise into the past
And blame god for never enough.

New Review: Mike Carson on

Kevin Honold's "The Rock Cycle: Essays"

Kevin Honold's new essay collection, *The Rock Cycle,* begins in the Arabian Desert. It is 1991. U.S. forces have just invaded Kuwait to push Saddam Hussein's armies back into Iraq. Honold's unit is lost. They stumble upon a Bedouin camp. His Lieutenant asks the Bedouins if they have seen other soldiers, tugging at his uniform, then pointing at Honold and the others in Honold's unit. The Bedouins do not help them. The U.S. soldiers drive on. Honold says the Lieutenant was a decent man. He didn't want any trouble.

A little later in the same essay, Honold talks about Euripides' play, *The Bacchae.* He calls it a strange tale. In it, the unbeliever as well as the believer are horribly punished. I find that confusing, he says. I don't. I have long found *The Bacchae* to be relatively straightforward. What I find confusing is Honold's *Rock Cycle*. There is much punishment, but no punishing. It is a painstaking record of human failure that is also an improbable document of human freedom. It's about integrity and decency and generosity in a world where believer and unbeliever alike are horribly punished.

I know. It's insane. Batshit crazy.

But that's the point.

In "Light Discipline," Honold's second essay, the author tells us that in the desert, "notions of order and disorder are irrelevant."

He then quotes Benedicta Ward's translation of *The Desert Fathers*:

“Macarius the Great said to the brothers in Scetis after a service in church, ‘Flee, my brothers.’ One of the brothers said to him, ‘Abba, where can we flee when we are already in the desert?’ He put his finger upon his lips and said: ‘I tell you, you must flee this.’ Then he went into his cell, shut the door, and remained alone.”

You just went into your room, Abba.

There’s nothing in there, Abba.

Abba?

But I tell you, Honold insists (you reading this, you who thinks that you know, you who thinks that you are sad and wise, you who think you are not sad and wise, you who thinks you are anything at all), you must flee *this*.

Flee what?

After Honold’s Army unit leaves the Bedouin camp, they find the enemy. American planes and tanks then destroy the enemy. The enemy is no more. They are dispatched. Disappeared. Smashed. Smushed. They have been burned and shot and exploded. The Berlin Wall has fallen. The Iraqis are history. We are history. History is history.

Honold tells us he hid in his tent while the other U.S. soldiers cleaned up the bodies. He read Herman Hesse. Like all young boys do when we hide in our tents.

In the same essay he reflects that “there must be few things more shameful than to be held cheap by the dead.”

This will strike some people as silly. They were the bad guys, Kevin. You didn’t even kill them, Kevin. The war in Iraq started in 2003. People die all the time. And so on.

But this emotional cheapness, to Honold, is precisely the problem. This book is filled with the deliberations of

thinkers who refused to be held cheap and hold cheap. Their imagination took them over the edge of History into something else, something that is history and is not history, where fidelity to the givenness of things does not become an idolatry of the necessary. And Honold (somehow) weaves these ancient imaginations into preternatural essays of his own, strange alchemies of syntactical discipline, reckless curiosity, and impetuous generosity.

He admires thinkers who give without reason. Who hold nothing cheap, neither the dead or the living or the birds that watch over both. He also admires the worldview of entire peoples, like the Huron of the Ohio Valley, who believed stinginess the one unforgivable sin.

In "A Brief History of the Huron," Honold tells of how the Huron welcomed the Jesuits when they arrived in their forests, armed with nothing but a fanatical eloquence and memories of their own martyrdom. The Hurons admired the Jesuits' courage. Still, being un-stingy people, they wanted nothing to do with their heaven, that desperate either/or, this maniacal righteousness. It must have struck them as unimaginative. A little sad even. All this wealth and technology and History and this is the best you can do?

Some death bed scenes:

"Which will you choose,' demanded the priest to a dying woman, 'Heaven or Hell?'" 'Hell if my children are there,' returned the mother."

"'Heaven is a good place for Frenchmen,' said another, 'but the French will give me nothing to eat when I get there.'"

It saddens Honold too. Not just the death-bed Jesuits, but all of us basically decent people who think the way out of the desert involves condemning others to tepid moralisms. He seldom gets angry, Honold, and then only at the fact that we, Jesuits and Hurons both, are not alive to how good we actually

are, how good we want to be, and how this goodness is never, ever transactional and mercenary.

Here he is in a much later essay, as he cycles the Mojave in 2013 and is tended to by stranger after stranger in the fantastical and impossible union of disparate peoples that is the U.S.A:

“It’s a fact that most people are on the lookout for someone to be kind to. This might be in answer to some unconscious suspicion that existence is justified, in some small ways, by acts of selflessness. But much faith is required to accept the proposition that goodness is instinctive. The world belies that notion every day, in a million ways, and mocks it endlessly. To confess that sort of faith is to invite derision; to act on it is seditious, if not plain batty. Still, the fact remains.”

Plain batty. You said it, Kevin.

At the end of the “Brief History of the Huron,” Honold tells us the Jesuits strung fireflies to the trees when nuns arrived in Quebec. This too is a fact. Just like the women and men who reach out to Honold on his bicycle are facts. Just like the hysterical laughter of young Honold staring into the Persian Gulf is a fact. The book is filled with many facts: batty, seditious, insane facts. Reading this book is much like arriving at the end of the trail in Zanskar, India, stumbling, as Honold does, upon “a sheer flight of stone where the sky had been,” so close you “can smell the melting ice that streamed from its face at a hundred points.”

Still, the original question. The problem at hand. We are in our tents in middle of the desert. Bodies are piling up outside and have been piling up for 4 billion years and we are listening to a pop song. Reading Hesse and playing cards. Yet we are the killers. We are the ones doing the killing. We are the killers and the forgetters. But we are also the

rememberers. We are the ones on the lookout for someone to be kind to. We are also the ones reading Honold's book.

It doesn't make any sense. We don't make any sense.

In "A Natural History of New Mexico," Honold discusses how Western education has taught us to mistrust our imagination. He tells us that he has spent his whole life unlearning this, learning instead that "one event can bear multiple truths."

Here's a multiple truth: Yes, remembering everything would, as Honold points out, annihilate the world in an instant. Thank god for the fact we do forget. We live in a semi-comatose oblivion and this allows us to survive, to wake up in the morning, to move forward from unnecessary wars and failed relationships and the things we didn't say and the things we did. But then there's the opposite truth, as Honold says, "if we fail to bring the past with us into the future, we will arrive less than human. A rootless and death-forgetting people have no one to forgive them and nothing to forgive. They have no need of atonement, and therefore seek no absolution. For such a people, blameless in their own eyes, compassion and mercy become difficult."

This is true too. We have two truths. Here's a third truth, perhaps even harder than the other two (but no less true):

"But this forgiveness, for oneself and for the world, must proceed from a broken heart; a broken heart is the alembic in which compassion is quickened. That is why, in the old story, a man of sorrows came looking for other men and women of sorrows, and forgave precisely those who love too much. Brokenheartedness is a discipline learned in shame, in failure, and in years. Forgiveness is, in a sense, a homely art, self taught for the most part. It has a power to destroy power, and to make free. Human freedom is precipitated by this strange alchemy. I've read about it in books, I've seen it practiced. This is the truth that sets free. But the truth is

beyond me, every day."

The power to destroy power. What an idea! How wonderful! Actual freedom! Not the pretense of the thing, not the posture of it, but a memory of the past that is not a forgetting of the past. A way to have integrity without having to take away another's integrity. To cast them into hell. To damn them with stinginess. But isn't this morbid? Brokenheartedness? How can you be forgiving and morbid at the same time?

Our imagination often fails us. Another fact. Not the last fact, but a fact nonetheless.

In "The Rock Cycle," the essay that gives the collection its title, Honold comments on how early modern thinkers tried to explain away the fish fossils on mountain tops by calling them sports of nature, *lusus naturae*, God's jokes. Nature's comedy. Figure this one out, scientists, they laughed.

They did figure it out. Scientists are an imaginative and patient bunch. The most famous of them, James Hutton, watched the Scottish earth for twenty-five years. He concluded: "solid parts of the present land appear in general, to have been composed of the productions of the sea."

Rocks move. They go up and down like blood pumping through geological arteries.

Deep Time. We live in deep time. Wait long enough and nothing stays still. Not even mountains. ("What you look hard at seems to look hard at you," says Gerard Manley Hopkins in Honold's first essay.)

But Deep Time only points the problem with a giant clown finger. *Nothing* stays still. An inferno of corpses is heaped outside our tent while we feverishly read and play and sing. We have not buried a single one of them. We don't know where to begin. Our imagination flails. It strains and bucks and begs for mercy or calcifies into ignorance and pride and

History.

Honold doesn't have an answer. All he has are these essays. Essays are truer than answers, and more difficult, more dangerous. Instead of punishing because we have been punished, they give because we have been given. They flee the timid transactions of selfhood and self-aggrandizement for the terrifying dislocations of our innate selflessness. They are—if we are being perfectly honest—insane. You should never sit alone in the desert, finger to your lips, listening to the rocks move and people forgive. Who knows what Deep Time might say to you? Who knows what our history might become?

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Kevin Honold's *The Rock Cycle: Essays* was the winner of the 2019 River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Book Prize. [You can purchase it here.]

New Review from Michael Carson: "Cherry" by Nico Walker

Early on in Nico Walker's *Cherry*, the narrator, working a dead-end shoe store job to pay for drugs while his parents pay for his college, says that he has a well cultivated sense of shame. This is true. He does. Many people do not. Many people are shameless. They do not care how they degrade themselves as long as society says it's okay to degrade themselves in this way. Or they are full of shame in an uncultivated way. It just

spills out here and there, at rare moments, when they let their guard down. It makes you wonder if they even care about their shame. If they too are shameless as those that are shameless.

That would make everyone shameless except for Nico Walker. I think this might very well be true. I think only Nico Walker feels shame. He is the only writer from the recent wars that I've read who has taken his shame and cultivated it to such a degree that it is impossible not to be ashamed of the Iraq War (or whatever the journalists and historians are calling it now).

He makes you ashamed of your country. He makes you ashamed of yourself. He makes you ashamed of being alive.

It's glorious. *Cherry* is an absolute delight. I have not had this much fun reading a book in a very long time.

Maybe it's because Nico Walker robbed a bunch of banks. Maybe it's because Nico Walker was a bad soldier. Maybe it is because Walker had a "bad" war (whatever that means). Maybe it is because Walker was a junkie. Maybe it is because Walker is actually funny. Maybe it is because Walker can write. Or maybe it's all these bound into one. Maybe the urge to make it about one or another is to miss the point. It shows a terribly uncoordinated sense of shame. It is maybe, even, a little shameless.

So I kind of love this book. Walker's narrator doesn't play fuck fuck games (as they used to say in Ranger school, one of those schools that train us to kill better, to play roles better, to take pride in shamelessness). He gets straight to the point. He knows the ending. Death, indignity, compromise. The ending, as he says, is fucked.

Here he is talking about Emily, the woman that provides a strange and mysterious through-line in the novel, which feels, at times, to be more of a fantasy than anything else, the idea

of a woman we might imagine for ourselves but also, miraculously, a woman who insists on being herself:

“The day I met her we went for a walk after class and we ended up in her dorm room. We talked for a while there and then for whatever reason I got to crying, like really bawling-my-fucking-eyes-out crying. I’d already seen everything that was going to happen and it was a nightmare. Something like that. And she was really sweet to me. I don’t think there was ever anyone who felt more compassion for weak motherfuckers.”

Whoever Emily is, whatever her fictional or physical reality, I love her too. I love this compassion. I love the fact that she disappears and then reappears mysteriously under sewer grates. That she follows the narrator through the war and then into drugs and his life of crime and that she puts ice on his crotch before his final robbery that sends him (and Nico himself) to eight years in jail. That she is always cursing. That she is fucked up, that she sees that it is fucked up, all of it, yet somehow, she still has compassion for a man who says (idiotically, perversely, criminally), “I take all the beautiful things to heart and they fuck my heart until I about die from it.”

She is an ending that is not an ending. She is the possibility of a person. He tries to be good for her. Not jerk off to anyone but her. Not sleep around. Keep her high. He tries to be decent in a world that is not, that cannot be, that does not care about beauty, that does not want to die from beauty so dies all the time, forever and ever.

Mid-deployment, between one succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders and the next succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders, the narrator and other soldiers watch pornography and see that the “unsuspecting” woman wears a wedding ring and that the reality TV pornography is not reality TV pornography.

The narrator says:

“And we know then that life was just a murderous fuckgame and that we had been dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.”

If we don’t have compassion for the weak, for those who don’t have a choice and those who make bad choices, we have nothing.

Or not nothing. Not exactly. We still have Staff Sergeant North.

North looks like Morrisey. North is from Idaho. North is a killer. He grows to hate the narrator for being incompetent. For being, deep down, a faker. Not a soldier. North disappears from the narrative. But we are told that he survives the war unscathed, that he goes on to bigger and better things. Killers often do.

The narrator is not a killer. It kills him.

He’s a medic, though. A bad one. Here’s the narrator trying and failing to save an Iraqi that his squad accidentally murdered for leaving his own house at night.

“I should have packed the haji full of gauze, I should have kept packing the wound til I couldn’t pack it anymore, til it was packed tight. But I didn’t. I should have had him lie on the side he was wounded on. But I forgot. I said I was going to prop the haji’s feet on my helmet because he could go into shock if his feet weren’t propped up that way. And even though this was true I was only saying it just to say things because there was no exit wound and I didn’t know what to do. The haji’s eyes rolled up in his head and then came back, focused again, rolled up again. I said I was going to give him morphine to keep him from going into shock.

North said, ‘Do what you have to do, doc. You don’t have to tell us.’

I gave the haji morphine, so I could look like I was doing

something right. I stuck him on his right thigh and went back to working on a line. His arm was thin. I couldn't get a flash. Then I got a flash, but he moved and I lost it.

I said, 'Keep still, you fuck! I'm trying to help you.'

North said, 'Be quiet, doc.'"

The narrator does not listen to North. The narrator is not a professional. He cries. He yells. He makes jokes. He commits crimes. He goes crazy. He counts his failures one by one, lovingly, like someone with a well cultivated sense of shame. Like Jerry in Edward Albee's play "The Zoo Story" (which provides the epigraph to one of Walker's sections), the narrator won't shut up, won't not fall on his own knife. He is going North from the zoo. To tell his zoo story. Our story. That life is very often a murderous fuck game and that we are almost always dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.

So. This being a fact. What do we do with this? Where do we go from here?

We might laugh at flying babies. Before deployment, the narrator is put in charge of a recruitment "rockwall" in Ohio somewhere. Parents hand him babies and the babies don't weigh enough for the pullies, so they just fly up to the top of the rockwall. The narrator doesn't know what to do but the parents keep on handing him babies. He straps them up and away they go.

We could also, perhaps, be crushed by the beauty of it all, as the narrator often is. This, remember, is what makes him a weak motherfucker in the first place.

Here is Emily and the narrator getting fake married for real extra benefits. She's wearing some kind of gas station attendant uniform and his nose is swollen from a friend's headbutt:

“And we knew at that moment we were the two most beautiful things in the world. How long it lasted, I don’t know, but it was true for at least a few minutes. Six billion people in the world and no one had it on us.”

Vonnegut once said that there are billions of people in this world and that he supposes they all want dignity.

They do. They do. And sometimes they even get it.

Vonnegut also said remember the nice moments.

Here’s a nice moment from Iraq:

“One time the prisoners all sang together and you could hear them outside the jail and it was very beautiful and it made you feel like an asshole.”

I feel like an asshole after reading this book.

It’s okay. Sometimes it is good to feel like an asshole. Sometimes we need to remember we are assholes. How else could we ever stop being one?

There’s been a lot of controversy lately about the book and the movie and instagram photos. Some say that Walker didn’t write it. Or he doesn’t deserve this after what he did or didn’t do. Blah blah blah. The internet keeps on handing us babies. Away the babies go.

The question is this: Do we want a hero? Or do you want a novelist? I for one have had enough of heroes. Bring on more Nico Walkers. If only because Nico Walker cares about how he degrades himself. He is sensitive to his degradation and the different ways that each one of us degrade ourselves on a daily basis. He lives it, understands it. I would not recommend this way of being to anyone else but Nico Walker. I wouldn’t even recommend it to Nico Walker (not all the time anyway). But I’m glad we got this book out of it. Because that war was fucked. And we should be ashamed.

Turn On, Tune Out, Drop In: Review Essay of Ben Fountain's Beautiful Country Burn Again

D.H. Lawrence once claimed that the "essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." This sounds nice, something to be proud of in a masochistic sort of way; unfortunately (or fortunately), it's not true. Americans might be hard, isolate, stoic killers at times, but what people aren't? Here is the D.H. Lawrence quote on America that matters: "The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom. Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom. The shout is the rattling of chains, always." This is a long Lawrence way of saying something rather simple: Americans are ridiculous.

Ben Fountain, the author of the 2006 short story collection *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, the 2012 novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, and the 2018 essay collection *Beautiful Country Burn Again*, has always been particularly good on this fundamental aspect of the American character. Here is the U.S. aid worker protagonist from Fountain's short story "Lion's Mouth."

"So here was the joke: she'd come to Salone determined to lead an authentic life and had instead discovered all the clichés in herself. She wanted to be stupid. She wanted to be rich. She wanted to be lazy, kept, indulged—this is where her fantasies took her lately, mental explosions of the guiltless life."

Here, in “Asian Tiger,” a former pro-golfer Texan half-wittingly enables a conspiracy between billionaire venture capitalists and Malaysia’s military junta:

“Maybe you felt the urge to scream and rage around, maybe you felt like that would be the moral thing to do, but you sucked it up and stayed cool. Because out here the critical thing was to play it straight. To go along with the joke. To concentrate, he realized with something like revulsion, on golf.”

And here are two U.S. Army grunts in *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, Fountain’s novel about an infantry squad invited to the Super Bowl Halftime Show at Cowboy Stadium while on leave from Iraq:

“At staged rallies, for instance, or appearances at malls, or whenever TV or radio is present, you are apt at some point to be lovingly mobbed by everyday Americans eager to show their gratitude, then other times it’s like you’re invisible, people see right through you, nothing registers. Billy and Mango stand there eating scalding hot pizza and their fame is not their own. Mainly it’s just another thing to laugh about, the floating hologram of context and cue that leads everyone around by their nose, Bravo included, but Bravo can laugh and feel somewhat superior because they know are being used.”

Fountain’s characters consistently confront this American “joke”—that wild disproportion between “the floating hologram of context and cue” and the fact that they are, theoretically, choice-making dignified and sovereign individual human beings. This disproportion has little to do with the individuals themselves, who are, almost without exception, nice guys and girls, but with the fact that they were born in a country with more wealth than God. Add in the comically lopsided distribution of that wealth, a military budget larger than the next 7 countries combined, and a 24/7 entertainment industry that makes money off every hour of our waking lives, and it is

difficult to be proportional. And to act without proportion—as Lawrence well understood—is to act ridiculous.

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Of course, just as one can't "indulge the mental explosions of a guiltless life" unless one periodically aspires to authenticity, one can't truly be ridiculous unless one occasionally takes oneself Very Seriously. Hence Democracy. Hence Elections. Hence the hope that despite the various horrors of our past—the slavery, the segregation, illegal wars, and ill-gotten wealth—there might be hope of renewal, straight talk, progress, and redemption. And hence the genius of the *Guardian* in commissioning Fountain to report on the 2016 U.S. elections. Who better than Fountain to document our 6-billion dollar circus of platitudes, sanctimony, cynicism, and apocalypticism? Who else could trace whatever it is in the American character that made Donald Trump not only a possibility—horrifying in itself—but president of an entire country with living people in it?

Unsurprisingly the author of *Billy Lynn* rises to the ridiculous occasion. The introduction to *Beautiful Country Burn Again*—the Robinson Jeffers-inspired title of Fountain's collected Guardian reportage—even has a relatively straightforward historian "thesis" to explain both the last election and much of American history:

Our founding fathers, Fountain argues, promised us "meaningful autonomy," but we got "profit proportionate to freedom" and "plunder correlative to subjugation" instead. In other words, the more money an American takes in this country, the more freedom an American has. Which seems pleasant enough, except for the opposite also holds true, in that the more wealth an American has taken from them, the less freedom they have. Thus, despite "all the sound and fury of the most bizarre

election in the country's history," this unhappy equation persists and belies all the talk of "meaningful autonomy," and until this equation changes, argues Fountain, "it's still a chump's game."

But Americans today, some might protest, are educated, media-savvy, aware. We have internet. Color TV. Ironic cat memes. How can we be chumps? Fountain's fictional characters often struggle in similar ways, agonizing over how they, who went into life so clear-sighted and full of good will, became like everyone else, actively aiding whatever it was they didn't want to be. How could they, they ask, who so despise chumps, become chumps? Yet the reason for their failure is blindingly obvious, and all the more painful for being so obvious.

Money.

Here is Fountain in "Iowa 2016: Riding the Roadkill Express" on Hillary Clinton receiving $675,000 in speaking fees from Goldman Sachs for three hours worth of speaking:

"The human mind wasn't built to comprehend moneys of this magnitude; we need time to behold and ponder, time for the vastness to seep into our brains like a cognitive vapor, and there remains an awesome abstraction to it all….And so the realm of political money is beyond the understanding of most of us. This many millions here, shit-tons more millions there…we numb out."

As money wears down the moral sense of characters in much of Fountain's fiction, so too Hillary Clinton. So too the Democratic Party. So too the American Middle Class. So too the American Working Class. So to you. So to me. Couple this impossible wealth with a trillion dollar entertainment industry—which Fountain christens the "Fantasy Industrial Complex"—and you and me not only numb out to morality but cease to believe in the possibility of reality.

"The old distinctions start to break down, the boundary

between reality and fantasy," Fountain says in "Two American Dreams," an essay on the 1980s, Trump's New York, and advertisement. "It becomes increasingly difficult to know what's real anymore, especially there, inside those screens where so much of our daily existence takes place."

Because how can you be moral or good if you don't see a difference between the real and the unreal? How do the words we use to weigh democratic participation and civic responsibility compete with a fantastical simulacrum that consists of color blotches and furry-Star-Wars-Guardians-of-the-Galaxy-crossover fan-fic Reddit threads? Trump, in this American Dream, becomes our Shakespeare, the playwright of a peculiarly American art form, one that does not so much privilege fantasy over reality but turns fantasy into reality, and all of us sprint drunkenly into the arms of infinite disproportion for fear of the stubbornly proportional chump game—"profit proportionate to freedom; plunder correlative to subjugation"—staring us in the face.

"Easy to despise the political phony," says Fountain of Trump's success in "The Phony in American Politics," "at least in retrospect. The harder work is plumbing the truth of an electorate that allows the phony to succeed. He didn't create the situation of fear; he merely exploited it. What is it about the American character that allows the long con of our politics to go on and on, electing crooks, racists, bullies, hate-mongering preachers, corporate bagmen, and bald-faced liars? Not always, but often. The history is damning. We must, on some level, want what they're offering."

And that right there is the really hard question. What if we, we of the oh-so-innocent and proletariat-like 99%, *want* what they are offering? What if we vote for the hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars because we ourselves are hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars? And, if so, do we gain a sort-of freedom by voting in the hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars that reflect

our hateful, corporate, and prevaricatory values? Did we, despite all our handwringing over illegal invasions, foreclosures, and student debt, find meaningful autonomy in Wal-Mart hypermarkets, Dallas Cowboy halftime shows, and Netflix binges?

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No. If you are wondering. The answer is a no. Fountain trots out an impressive array of historical evidence to prove the extent which Roosevelt's New Deal and post-WW II prosperity have been sabotaged, how the middle and working classes have been robbed, humiliated, and manipulated by Reaganomic Republicans and Third Way Democrats, and how what happened in 2016, insane as it was, makes logical sense, given the historical record. In this view Clinton and Trump are less enemies, and more two sides of the same $100 dollar Monopoly bill, one selling the soul, dollar for dollar, piece by piece, the other telling us to just be you because there's no such thing as a soul anyway.

Yet –joke of jokes–we buy what they sell. This is our "floating hologram of context and cue." These are our "mental explosions of the guiltless life." They leave us feeling like all insane pornographic fantasies do. Empty. Like chumps. Seen but not seen. Half existing. Manipulated (but ironically so!). Eating hot pizza in a giant football stadium.

So it's our fault. We are the chumps. We sold our neighbors and ourselves time and time again. We bought into the fantasy of the corporate bagmen and crooks, of the fantasy industrial complex, of the military industrial complex, of the neurotic self-doubting complex. We said there was no other way. We watch cowboy movies. Game of Thrones. Toy Story 4. Trump hugging the flag. Hard. Isolate. Killers.

But this is part of the fantasy, isn't it? The lack of choice. A Trumpian vision of callow sentimentality, ironic bombast,

and murderous power politics thrives on the idea of necessity—"sometimes you get what you need," the Rolling Stones sing at all his rallies—and the delusion succeeds because it allows us to imagine there is nothing but necessity. This is the force of his fantasy. It has all the appeal of reality. We need (or want?) to believe it is real so we don't have to be real.

It makes sense. Being real means making difficult choices. And Fountain's uncanny understanding of the American character extends not from his belief that we have no choices, and that we are doomed to make the wrong choice, but that choices matter, and that we have made the right choice before (during The Civil War and New Deal), and, therefore, that we can make the right choice again. He believes the conscience is a thing. A real thing. God forbid. And that this thing should not be given up for profit. The artfulness of his fiction attests to this. So too the eloquence of these collected essays. His prose bristles with confidence, in the belief that there was once an America that believed in the possibility of dignity for all men and women, an America where sovereignty might not depend on one's bank account, and that there can be one once again.

In the collection's final essay, "A Familiar Spirit," Fountain recounts the long depressing history of racial violence in the U.S. He shows how the codification of "whiteness" promoted and excused the murder and plunder of our fellow Americans. He shows how it's back with a vengeance in 2016, and how this shouldn't surprise us, as it never really went away. It is a tragic note to end on, and would seem to confirm Trump's "American Carnage" horror show and Lawrence's "hard, isolate, killer" bit, to prove that behind all the sanctimony, sentimentality, and sententiousness is nothing other than a moral void of blind hopeless hate and greedy violence.

But Fountain does not actually end there:

“Fantasy offers certainty, affirmation, instant gratification, a way to evade—for a while, at least—the reality right in front of our face. It’s so much easier that way, but perhaps we’re fast approaching the point where the fantasy can no longer be sustained. The evidence won’t shut up; it insists and persists…Consciousness—historical consciousness, political consciousness—has been raised to critical mass, and to suppress it, to try to stuff it back in the box along with all its necessary disruptions and agitations, will destroy the best part of America. The promise of it, the ongoing project.”

The evidence insists and persists. And the fact that it insists, that people like Fountain are still writing, thinking, and voting based on this evidence proves that the idea of meaningful choice-making autonomy, while not exactly thriving, is not exactly dead either. The joke is there, yes. But the joke is not everything. It is a testament to the genius of Fountain and the power of this collection that he is able to point out the disgusting and disturbing schizophrenia so fundamental to the American character without giving up on whatever is good and true about the American experiment.

Interview with Matt Young, Author of Eat the Apple

Matt Young is a writer, teacher, and veteran. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from Miami University and is the recipient

of fellowships from Words After War and The Carey Institute for Global Good. You can find his work in Catapult, Granta, Tin House, Word Riot, and elsewhere. He teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at Centralia College and lives in Olympia, Washington. His first book, a memoir titled *Eat the Apple*, is out now from Bloomsbury Publishing.

WBT: In Six Memos for the Next Millennium, Italo Calvino, the Italian novelist and World War Two veteran, discusses how he "gradually became aware of the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world—qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them." Calvino then relates the myth of Perseus and Medusa. Perseus, Calvino argues, not only kills Medusa with his shield's reflection, but must also carry the burden of his experiences—and Medusa's head—with him indirectly; otherwise, he will, well, turn to stone. Perseus's strength, Calvino claims, "lies in his refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden."

I have found this a useful metaphor for the problem of relating war experience. Too literal, you kill the experience. Too abstract, you don't say anything at all. It is also the first thing I thought of when I encountered Eat the Apple's humor, diagrams, cartoons, and pronouns ("you" and "we" and "Recruit" and "Young," instead of "I"). Can you talk to us about how and why you decided to recount your military experiences indirectly?

YOUNG: The change in POV started off as art imitating life. In Marine boot camp you're required to refer to yourself as "Recruit So-and-so" and it felt unnatural to write a story about boot camp using "I" so I let the third person do work there.

I struggled with the fact that most war memoirs I'd read had some kind of extreme circumstance at their center—that kind of

Special Forces narrative that inundates the media these days. My experiences by comparison seemed tame and silly. But I thought about all the grunts I'd served with who'd had similar experiences over the four years we were together and I thought about all the battalions that had replaced us in country full of similar guys who'd also had similar experiences. Those two thoughts gave rise to that communal first person plural voice—I realized it was best to lean into that idea of not having a unique experience, painted myself as no different than any other.

Lots of early pieces I wrote were 'How to' stories. Some of those made their way into the final draft, but many more changed focus later on. That highly imperative second person, felt like it confronted both military and civilian complicity in Iraq. But ultimately, the second-person perspective loses its power quickly because it often forces the audience to acknowledge they're reading a story in ways other perspectives don't so I tried to keep it to a minimum and fit it with form to make it feel more natural.

I also found that those other perspectives helped me confront my past actions in a less direct manner and helped me be more honest about who I'd been and what I'd done. They made me feel less alone, took me off the page and put me next to the reader and let me show them something I couldn't have with just "I". There's something about the removal of the "I" that let me cut a little deeper.

WBT: The essays in Eat the Apple are relatively short and incredibly poignant. I experienced each and every one like a punch to the gut. Did this economy come into your writing naturally? Or did you have to refine longer essays into the powerful vignettes they became?

YOUNG: When I started writing I set off to write flash. I wanted the essays to mimic memory, and flash felt like a natural fit. It's often how I remember moments—a smell or

image or sound recalls a tiny thing and sends it zipping through my brain for a microsecond and then it's gone, but I'm left thinking about it and reflecting on it sometimes for days.

I didn't write or journal during my time in the Marines so I had to do a lot of memory recall exercises, late-night texting of former platoon mates, and research online to find incident reports. That process itself felt fractured, which also seemed to fit what I was trying to do—piecing together four years of experience and emotion to make a narrative.

I love the lyricism that generally comes with flash essays—it felt like a fantastic way to spice up the sometimes complete banality of war. In the beauty of those lyrical descriptions the horror of what I'm writing about maybe becomes a bit easier to stomach for a reader as well—that's the hope anyway.

WBT: In a Time Magazine essay, you write the following: "I tried to fictionalize what I'd done because I wasn't quite ready to acknowledge that I never fulfilled that manly heroic expectation people have of military service." As someone who writes fiction, I found this unsettling (in a good way). Could you expand on what you meant here and maybe tell us a little about what you consider the relationship between fiction and nonfiction?

YOUNG: It happened on two levels for me. My senior Marines had fought in Fallujah. I saw them as the peak of manhood, real heroes. They'd been in firefights, cleared houses, killed people. I wanted to have done those things then. I'd been told those men were the pinnacle of maleness and I was so uncomfortable in my skin and lacked so much confidence as a young man that I was an easy sell and bought in fully. Then, when I got home after my first deployment I didn't feel like I'd measured up to them and when I went to tell my family and friends about what war was like, I felt like I didn't measure up to their expectations, either. So I made up stories to tell

them, made my experience more like my seniors'. I lied. And I kept lying for years because it made me feel good and it kept me from having to reflect about what I'd done and what had happened.

Then, by the time I got to undergrad at Oregon State and started writing I had those lies mixed up with my truth. When I tried to write stories about my experience I saw myself in the characters I created and immediately began to defend them, to make their experience mean something. I wanted them to be heroes, and so they turned into caricatures. They spent their time in my stories explaining "the real world" to civilians unironically. There was no truth in those stories, because I couldn't be truthful with myself.

It's a bit odd, maybe. You usually hear from writers that fiction is a more direct vehicle for the truth. But for me it wasn't writing fiction that got me there. It was using fiction writing techniques. Lines between fiction and nonfiction are super blurry a lot of the time. The moment an event happens and someone documents it, it's filtered through an individual's lens—that person's contextual place in the world. Are the things I recount and the stories I tell considered fact? Probably not, by most standards. Are they truth? 100%.

WBT: Toxic masculinity is a topic much in the news recently. For good reason. We spend a lot of time of WBT debating and thinking about violence and its effect on communities. But sometimes we can forget how cultures of violence eat away at men too, at how this toxicity is a two-way street. Eat the Apple bravely confronts this exact issue. For example:

"You've chosen the United States Marine Corps infantry based on one thing: You got drunk last night and crashed your car into a fire hydrant in the early morning and think—because your idea of masculinity is severely twisted and damaged by the male figures in your life and the media you surround yourself—that the only way to change is the self-flagellation

achieved by signing up for war.”

I feel Eat the Apple responds to this “idea of masculinity,” and I encourage readers interested in this subject to buy and read the whole collection through (a couple times). Did you set out to write on this idea of what it means to be a man in the U.S. today or is this simply a byproduct of describing your particular experiences in the Marines?

YOUNG:

Short answer? No.

Longer answer? I set out to write my experience as an infantry Marine and it was impossible to write that experience without writing about the antiquated ideals of masculinity and anti-feminism, which construct the ethos of both the Marine Corps and especially Marine grunts. It was delivered via Drill Instructors, School of Infantry Instructors, senior Marines, and higher-ups—a kind of disdain for everything feminine. Drop back on a hike? You’re a bitch or a pussy. Have a girlfriend back home? She’s fucking some other guy behind your back because you can’t trust Susie Rottencrotch. Women Marines—WMs—are dehumanized; called Wookies (which I never got) or walking mattresses. Those are the more overt portions of toxic masculinity I, and most, experience.

Then it hits you from civilians, too. Again with their expectations—what a soldier is supposed to be, what they’re supposed to have experienced and done, and how they’re supposed to react to that experience. Usually civilians expect you to have killed someone, to be damaged irreparably by post-traumatic stress, to be that strong silent type, to be a hero.

But calling someone a hero negates their experience or their feelings about that experience. It tells them their individual feelings are wrong and replaces them with a narrative people are more comfortable with. Hero worship is part of toxic masculine culture and it’s an act of silencing. It says, Shut

up about your experience, smile when I thank you for your service so I can feel better about myself, and take the beer I just bought you. It perpetuates the tough guy military narrative—a thing I'd bought into so much I lied about my true experiences to family and friends when I returned home. I really couldn't write about anything in my life right now without confronting masculinity in our culture.

WBT: Hard question time. That quote above. Isn't this exactly what happened? Didn't the experiences recounted in this book change you in ways that you both wanted and did not want? It's okay if you just say, "read the last chapters of Eat the Apple." Readers should.

YOUNG: Unsatisfying answer time: For sure. Doesn't every experience do that? Before that quote I speculate as to what might happen if I don't join. Do I think now that becoming a Midwest caricature was the only other outcome? No. I could've joined the Peace Corps, or sucked it up and enrolled in community college, or reconciled with my parents, or hit the lottery. There are infinite futures I could've had that could've changed me and affected me in infinite ways, but at that time I thought I was a bad man on a road to even more badness. I thought the Marine Corps would give me direction and purpose. I thought it would make me a man. I'm impulsive by nature, so I went with it.

I spend most of the rest of the book examining how misinformed I was and how directionless I became. This is really the problem I had with writing fiction about my experience when I got out. I wanted it to mean something. I wanted to know the world and myself better and more fully afterward—or wanted to pretend my military service had enlightened me to those things—but everything became more convoluted. It took being out and going to college and gaining education and language that I could use to articulate my experience to help me understand my experience and myself more fully.

WBT: I teach Slaughterhouse-Five to students every year. Every year they get upset by the descriptions of masturbation, pornography, and the picture of Montana Wildhack's breasts. I ask them why they get upset by the masturbation and not all the massacres of human beings. Eat the Apple does not pull any punches when it comes to the sexual life of Marines. Can you tell us about Eat the Apple's reception? Have you had any pushback?

For the most part people have appreciated the honesty. I write a lot about masturbation in the book for a couple reasons—one because I (and most of us) did it a lot. It really is a way to stay awake on post or pass the time or make you feel like you're still somewhat human, so it becomes part of the fabric of Marine grunt experience. But also, it's super intimate—in some respect more so than sex. You're at your most vulnerable when masturbating. All your shortcomings, your kinks, your dumb facial expressions, whatever. You don't have to hide any of those things when you're jerking off by yourself. I wanted people to see that part of myself. It helped me let down that masculine guard that's always up in military memoirs. Everyone masturbates. It's a great way to build empathy.

Some people see it as crass and childish or disgusting, which says more about them as readers and people unwilling to engage with difficult topics. Most of the pushback comes from older men who don't like me scuffing up the spit polished Marine Corps veneer. They're a dying breed I think—those men and the stories they love so much. People want more. If the festering gash that is civilian/military divide is ever going to heal it's going to take acknowledgement of the breadth and depth of service experience out there.

That people clutch their pearls at sex and not violence is an issue of our puritanical and patriarchal roots. Sex is bad because it empowers women. Violence is good because it establishes dominance and power—regressive masculine traits.

WBT: A fellow WBT editor and I have an absolutely unscientific generalization about war literature. There has not been, we contend, a war book published in the last fifty years that has not mentioned dogs, dead or otherwise. We have many theories as to why, none of them particularly insightful. Your work spends a lot of time talking about dogs too. Why do Americans write so many war books about dogs?

YOUNG: Man's best friend, maybe? Relatability to the audience? Shock value? Killing a dog probably has some kind of purpose in the moment—to get them to stop eating corpses, or to get them to shut up, or out of boredom. In terms of literary merit, the killing of a dog is maybe more powerful than the killing of a human. We're so desensitized to human death. The killing of an animal, especially a dog, is much more rhetorically pathetic.

Tobias Wolff has maybe the best line ever about U.S. war writing in In Pharaoh's Army: "And isn't it just like an American boy, to want you to admire his sorrow at tearing other people's houses apart?" Of course, Wolff—being the brilliant writer he is—does not actually admire his sorrow, but interrogates it through the essay form itself—opens up the tensions implicit in recounting morally repugnant wartime experiences. I believe Eat the Apple to be one of the few memoirs since Wolff's that accomplishes something similar. I also believe there is little "sorrow" in Eat the Apple and even less patience with those who might admire it. Did you consciously reflect on the privilege of reflection when writing these essays? How did you avoid falling into the trap Wolff describes?

YOUNG: I love *In Pharaoh's Army.* One of my undergrad professors, Keith Scribner, recommended it to me when I was trying to figure out how to write about the Marines. Now that you mention that, maybe he saw me admiring my own sorrow in my fiction? Damn. My mind is kind of blown right now.

Anyway, after trying to fictionalize my experience I became very aware of the benefits and detriments of reflection. Honesty and humor kept me out of the trap. Those POV switches and different forms and styles were all working towards honesty and let me pull out the magnifying glass and pinpoint a sunspot to scorch the living hell out of my past self. Most of the humor in the book is self-deprecating—lacerating I suppose. I wanted the audience laugh at me. The humor at my own expense is naked honesty; the audience is laughing because of how horrible I am, which maybe makes the feel a bit of shame because of the rhetoric surrounding the military ("Support Our Troops!"). It creates a balance with those poignant moments and keeps me from verging into woe-is-me-I-signed-up-for-the-Marines-and-they-made-me-go-to-war-isn't-that-sad? territory.

WBT: You teach writing. What do you tell your students on the first day of class?

YOUNG: Anyone who gives you a prescriptive fix for your writing, and means it, is a cop.

WBT: What do you tell your students on the last day of class?

YOUNG: Go make art and be good.

Purchase *Eat the Apple* here.

Go Home and Dig It: A Review of Will Mackin's Bring Out

The Dog

“Crossing the River with No Name,” the eighth story in Will Mackin’s debut collection, *Bring Out the Dog,* describes the movement of a SEAL team “to intercept” Taliban coming out the Pakistan Mountains. Using night-vision equipment, the SEALs plan to light up the night-blind Taliban with sparklers that the Taliban cannot see, and then fire state-of- the-art weapons at the invisibly sparkled men, eliminating the threat before the threat can become a threat, before the threat knows that it is, in fact, threatened. They have done this, the first-person narrator explains, many times before.

A paragraph from early in the story:

“Electric rain streaked straight down in my night vision. Cold rose from the mud into my bones. It squeezed the warmth out of my heart. My heart became a more sensitive instrument as a result, and I could feel the Taliban out there, lost in the darkness. I could feel them in the distance, losing hope. This was the type of mission that earlier in the war would have been fun: us knowing and seeing, them dumb and blind. Hal, walking point, would have turned around and smiled, like, Do you believe we’re getting paid for this? And I would have shaken my head. But now Hal hardly turned around. And when he did it was only to make sure that we were all still behind him, putting one foot in front of the other, bleeding heat, our emerald hearts growing dim.”

A series of simple sentences, each spare, lithe, exquisitely precise, usually in clusters of three, each distorting the known or assumed physical world. The rain becomes part of the night vision. The mud rises up into the bones. The cold takes away warmth but provides an uncanny sensitivity to the enemy’s pain and fear. But then a pivot, a pointed reference to the

carefree juvenescence of these would-be demigods, when they couldn’t believe they were getting paid to appear in the middle of the night and massacre a platoon of clueless, effectively blind, Taliban. And yet that was then, six intercepts ago; what now? What has happened to these emerald glow-in-the-dark hearts? Where has their youth gone?

Will Mackin knows intimately. A 23-year Navy veteran, Mackin flew jets, wrote speeches for the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, and spent six years as a Joint Terminal Attack Controller with a SEAL Team before retiring in 2014. As such, his work has a unique perspective not only on the endless succession of deployments and dislocations SEALs endure, but the disproportionate vision of people and country with all the power in the world and no idea what to do with it.

The next paragraph in “Crossing”:

“We made steady progress through the rain until we came to a river. The river looked like a wide section of field that someone had broken free, that had, for unknown reasons, been set in motion. In fact, the only way to tell the river from the field was to stare at the river and sense its lugubrious vector. But to stare at the river for too long was to feel as if it were standing still and the field were moving.”

Again: paradox. How can you make steady progress through then rain and then come to concentrated water? Then a simile that claims that what has stopped them, blocked their “progress,” has itself broken free. The pivot. A slight pause, an ironic reference to fact—slippery in all of Mackin’s stories—and an appeal to concentrated vision, some determinate perspective, which is immediately undermined and inverted when the land moves and not the river.

Soon the narrator is drowning in the river. The Virgin Mary appears. She tells him she won’t be saving him. “How come?” asks the narrator. “Because saving you would require a

miracle, and you already used yours," she said, "not unkindly." The story then transitions to the States, and a teenage narrator who laughs at a sentimental loser football coach from Ocean City, NJ (what a place to be from! To live your entire life in!), sleeps with the football captain's girlfriend, and smashes the mailboxes of rich people in the neighboring town. Then the narrator gets the miracle. They win the football game. A skinny kid whose name he can't remember scores a touchdown.

Viktor Shklovsky argues that Leo Tolstoy "forgoes the conventional names of the various part of the thing, replacing them instead with the names of corresponding parts in other things." He "estranges" because he refuses, Shklovsky says, to "call a thing by its name." So too Mackin. As Peter Molin points out in his Time Now post, Mackin calls nothing by its name—the cold sensitive heart, the literally unnamed river that does not move, the skinny kid who he does not remember. In other stories, SEALs hunt for two captured American soldiers named "no-chin" and "chin," the SEALs hold an elaborate memorial service for a killer Vermont Trappist monk dog killed by a SEAL. "What do you folks want to hear?" asks a tuba (!) player on an isolated outpost in middle of Afghanistan. *Anything, nothing, go fuck yourself*, says the crowd of soldiers high on horse drugs.

This aesthetic technique is not only a delight to read, but fits Mackin's subject. His SEALs live estranged lives. They exist in multiple time zones. They travel by air from one nameless spot on the map to the next. They have the power of gods and the soft bodies of men. At the end of "Crossing the River with No Name," the narrator, rescued from the river by a fellow SEAL (thanks for nothing Virgin Mary), goes on to intercept the Taliban. The narrator talks about how their leader Hal used to invisibly sparkle the Taliban in the middle of the platoon. "That would be the man we spare," says the narrator. "And that would be the man who would drop to his

knees in a cloud of gun smoke, raise his hands in surrender. That would be the man who would tell who he was, where'd he'd come from, and why."

An act of divine mercy or human sadism? What's the difference exactly? Estrangement, undulating perspective, chip away at once obvious distinctions. Mackin's SEALs sleep with strippers, assault stripper boyfriends, take drugs, ignore training protocol, steal manpower away from other units because they can. Rules don't win wars. SEALs do. So what then are these modern-day Templars of the sky and sea and mountain top winning with all this money, all this power, all this violence, all this freedom? Are they saving Afghanistan? Afghans? Iraqis? Civilians? Hostages? The World?

Psychedelic British Classic rock mostly. Pink Floyd songs about mean teachers. Led Zeppelin LPs in reverse. Mailbox busting. Girlfriend stealing. A sense of teenage disaffection clings to the narrator, a cynical half-irony, vague entitlement in the face of endless plenty, combined with band-of-brothers militancy, a love not of the country—*dulce decorum est* and all that Horace crap—but of each other and an unwillingness not to let one another down (because, as W.H. Auden says, our sex "likes huddling in gangs and knowing the exact time").

In other words, the narrator—for all his explosions, all this violence, all those dead bodies—is not much different than any other American boy, any other American man.

How's that for the horror of war?

Barry Hannah's "Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet" provides Mackin his epigraph. "We saw victory and defeat," the epigraph says. "They were both wonderful." Elsewhere in "Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet" Hannah's narrator, a U.S. Captain in Vietnam, reflects:

"It seemed to me my life had gone from teen-age giggling to

horror. I never had time to be but two things, a giggler and a killer."

Sometimes the SEALs call Mackin's narrator "Fuckstick" (a nod to Fuckhead of Denis Johnson's *Jesus Son* perhaps, another psuedo-bystander). Sometimes the narrator throws a charnel rock for no reason and imagines and asteroid hitting the earth and aliens—little bars of blue light—finding the SEALs dead bodies and asking each other why he threw the rock. Sometimes the narrator listens to a SEAL team leader speak about the imperative of "speed and violence," about how the SEALs are on the top of the food chain for a reason, and notices how nicotine enters through the SEALs "thinnest of membrane on his upper lip."

Displacement. Disproportion. Despair. We can call down the fire of gods in the form of drone strikes, artillery shells, and invisible lasers, but can we save the people around us from dying off one by one? Can we combat the battle fatigue evident after five deployments? Can we stabilize and make sense of the endless succession of kaleidoscopic dislocations born of a war with no clear direction, no beginning, no end?

No. Not really. But we can love our men. We can love the war. We can giggle and kill.

"Fools. Fools," says Barry Hannah's Vietnam Captain. "Love it! Love the loss as well as the gain. Go home and dig it."

Go home and dig it.

Dig what? What can we fools at home dig?

"I lay back on the outcropping," says another Mackin narrator, during a training exercise in Utah, waiting for a plane to blow up a fire truck that may or may not be a real fire truck. "The stone was warm, the breeze refreshing. Drifting off to sleep, I found myself feeling thankful to the war. What else would bring me up here on such a perfect day?"

Dorothy Parker once argued that Hemingway wrote not like an angel—as his many admirers insisted—but like a man. Mackin actually writes like an angel. Like an angel that wants to go back to being a man, or, rather, like a man with the perception of an angel and the soul of a man. The cumulative effect is as astonishing as the fact our country has been fighting a war for eighteen years and might well be fighting for eighteen more years: it estranges us to the experience of ourselves, to the experience of America, the experience of history. Our eyes grow, as Mackin's says, "bright with relativity"—the war does not end; it cannot end. But we see. We fools see. Don't we?

Lady Bird's Pain

There's an odd narrative thread in Greta Gerwig's 2017 *Lady Bird*. The titular hero lives out her senior year of high school against the backdrop of the Iraq War. Characters watch the war's escalation on televisions while debating boyfriends, mothers, friends, school plays, and sex. But the war has no direct bearing on the narrative—it is static to lower-middle class economic desperation in the aughts United States; a violent echo, a joke and a punch line, like the posters around Lady Bird's school encouraging students to remember 9/11.

Except for one scene.

Lady Bird loses her virginity to a boy who reads Howard Zinn, hates Dave Matthews, and rolls his own cigarettes. All the tics of suburban aughtian "rebellion." She is under the impression that he is a virgin too. Afterwards, he lets her know this wasn't his first time. She gets upset. He can't

understand. “I just wanted it to be special,” she says. “Why?” he asks. “You’re going to have so much unspecial sex.” He then gets upset when she gets even more upset. “Do you know how many innocent civilians have been killed today?” he asks, pointing to the television and news of the Iraq invasion.

“Different things can be sad,” she says. “It’s not all war.”

War has a way of negating the particular. When used rhetorically, extreme violence shuts down conversation, or, worse, turns it into an endless series of self-justifying repetitions. It does not clarify; it excuses. Politicians point to military sacrifice as often as they can for a reason. Partisan advocates on Facebook wax hysterical about the suffering of our fighting forces for a reason. To point to mass violence distorts particular violence, makes it absurd—trivial and sentimental. Impossible.

But the particular is everything.

The boy Lady Bird sleeps with hates anything mainstream. Lady Bird also tries to separate herself from her peers and family. Not only does she take on a pretentious name, but she wants to leave California, to escape the horrors of suburban Sacramento, her given life, for something else, anything and anyone else other than the here and the now, this present.

Her boyfriend’s father is dying of cancer. Lady Bird’s father is dying of poverty. Her priest is dying of grief. The larger sweeps of history, these violent abstractions, weigh down on the details of experience. Make them silly. Banal. Sacramento rather than a sacrament.

Greek tragedians assumed pain brought wisdom or spiritual growth (*pathei mathos*). This is not necessarily true. Suffering can also make it impossible to think clearly about the relationships around us—it can pervert rationality, turn us into monsters possessed by the infinite and incapable of loving the finite. Worse, when we reference pain that is not

ours—greater pain, greater suffering, bigger wars, bigger genocides—we risk excusing the specific pain we ourselves give on a daily basis.

“O Reason not the need,” King Lear begs his daughters. “Our basest beggars

Are in the poorest thing superfluous./Allow not nature more than nature needs,

Man’s life’s as cheap as beast’s.”

Confronted by his daughters’ irrefutable logic, Shakespeare’s Lear warns that if we abandon ourselves to mathematical logic, if we insist on necessity, on reducing our experience to the quantifiable, proportion out our pain and empathy, we become blind to what we are, what makes us different than everything else that is. Deprived of particular wants, desires, and love, our human life becomes “as cheap as a beast’s.”

Lady Bird takes increasingly stupid risks to escape her life. She sabotages her mother’s love by insistently pointing out her mother and father’s failure as parents, their inability to meet the economic expectations of American “success.” As she does her name, she denies the life she has been given. But, in the end, Lady Bird discovers a mysterious opening in the curves of her hometown roads, the lives lived there, the memories living there. She stops setting up a false contrast, what the rhetoricians call an either/or fallacy. She takes her given name. She accepts the “isness” of experience. She is able to say thank you. To be grateful for existence.

“You’re going to have so much unspecial sex in your life,” her boyfriend says.

This is true, but it misses the point.

In the last few month’s allegations of sexual assault have dominated the headlines. Many in the United States are waking

up to the particular pain silently endured by many for decades. This is a positive development. But the counterassault will soon come. Propagandists and their media teams will point to the big and the broad and the violent. They will talk much of the real world, of the truth, of people suffering in the Middle East and Middle America. They will scream about the big picture, about men in positions of power making hard decisions. They will tell us many stories about War, of missile-button pushing and beaches stormed. They will teach us about History. They will preach Necessity.

They will say you don't know how good you have it.

Many of the accusers will begin to doubt the validity of their own pain. The victims will begin to wonder if they were selfish to be hurt in a world where people die in horrible ways and suffer so many horrible wrongs. How can their pain be special when there is so much pain? How can these violations mean anything in a world defined by greater violence? Greater violations?

But this misses the point. Pain is not quantifiable. And those who attempt to do so should wonder why they feel the need to do so, what they want to celebrate and what they want to excuse.

Like King Lear, Lady Bird, this confused suburban teenage girl, is a fool. She knows she is a fool and she persists in making a fool of herself because she cannot see any other way out (I was often reminded of Terrence Malick's *Badlands*, another story of American youth finding a dangerous self in a wilderness of media, poverty, and self-loathing). And she wants out. The other characters—the priests, the nuns, her mom, her father, her brother—endure great pain, great tragedy. She dances on, this fool, knowing nothing of death, of civilians dying halfway across the world, of the suicides in her midst, thinking only of herself and her pain and her escape.

But is her dance foolish? Are her trials necessarily lesser, less substantial, than those who deal out and insist on pain because they see the world as so much pain? Should her agony be measured out, meted, compared, excused and denied by the pompous ineluctability of History and War? Don't her experiences, the extremity of her definite emotions, contain the radical possibility of all that is singular and incomparable? Can different things be sad? Is it all war?

Lady Bird begins with the very last line of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—"she put her lips together and smiled mysteriously." In the novel, Rose of Sharon's baby has just died. She feeds a dying man with her breast milk. Her lips. Her breast. Her smile.

Faced with the immensity of history, the refuge of the particular is not escapism. It is the thing itself. And so too this satisfying movie. It is the thing itself. Life.

Interview with Jay Baron Nicorvo

Jay Baron Nicorvo's novel, The Standard Grand (St. Martin's Press), was picked for IndieBound's Indie Next List, *Library Journal*'s Spring 2017 Debut Novels Great First Acts, and named "New and Noteworthy" by *Poets & Writers*. He's published a poetry collection, *Deadbeat* (Four Way), and his nonfiction can be found in *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Believer*. You can find out more about Jay at www.nicorvo.net.

Interviewer:

We must first start with the sentences.

Some samples from your opening (check out more here):

“Specialist Smith gunned the gas and popped the clutch in the early Ozark morning. Her Dodge yelped, slid to one side in the blue dark, then shot fishtailing forward. The rear tires burned a loud ten meters of smoking, skunky rubber out front of the stucco ranch house on Tidal Road.”

“She sped out of the hotdamn Ozarks through the Mark Twain National Forest. She threw her ringing phone—Travy—out the window and into the parched summer. It smithereened in the rearview. She used her teeth to pull off her wedding band and engagement ring. Spat them into her hand and shoved them into the trash-crammed ashtray, mall-bought diamond solitaire be damned.”

T. Geronimo Johnson, author of *Hold It Till It Hurts* and *Welcome to Braggsville*, once argued that writers should consider the paragraph a sentence rather than limit themselves to movement between two individual periods (my rough—very rough—paraphrase). Your novel sparks from the first clause to the last, and each paragraph feels carefully crafted, as if itself a sentence. Can you give us some perspective on your syntactical choices?

Nicorvo:

Thanks, and I couldn’t agree more with you and Mr. Johnson. I’ve got zero patience for shoddy craftsmanship. The neat masonry of reading in English, left to right, row after row, is a bit like brickwork. And writing is little more than masonry. Stacking, unstacking, restacking. If the basic building block is the word, than the syllable – where we’re able to isolate the music, the meter, of each word – is my

mortar. Sounds of words reverberating off one another, that holds my sentences together. The syntactical choices I make are often musical. If a word doesn't sound right, even if it has the right meaning, it's got to go.

And it sounds fussy, but I'm not satisfied with the perfectly uniform bricks you get at the big box stores. I like a flaw. Give me those old terracotta bricks cut by hand, no two alike. They've got a warmth, a life, a history and a heft you can feel in the hand. Sure, they're more brittle and difficult to work with – they smithereen – but that's part of the satisfaction. Each sentence, like each brick, should be radiant, alive, tell a story and have its own weight. No two alike. And so, too, each paragraph. That's how you get – ultimately and after interminable years – to the place where you've built, brick by brick, not just a whole novel but a whole world. But that thing I said earlier? That writing is little more than masonry? That's some bullshit right there.

Interviewer:

Your novel is one of the first to directly connect the experience of two American wars—Vietnam and Afghanistan/Iraq—both through the lens of establishment outsiders and post-traumatic stress disorder. Not coincidentally, anxiety runs through each page and each word, and the reader is often rewarded with poignant paragraphs like the following:

"She loved being on the road, when the road wasn't going to explode beneath her. She gave it more gas. Milt leaned back as the van accelerated—slowly, surely—and reached the speed limit, 55. There she coasted. She was driving like an old lady. What's state motto was Live Free or Die? Freedom was like war that way: if it didn't make you nervous, you weren't truly engaged in it. Driving, she felt anxious, she felt

alive.”

What drew you to this subject and these points of view?

Nicorvo:

Well, I suppose I’m an outsider and I consider myself anti-establishment. I’m a civilian who wrote a war novel – though it’s really a post-war novel – so my perspective has to be farther from the frontline. This has its drawbacks. Harder for my point of view to have the immediacy – never mind the moral authority – of Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, Elliot Ackerman’s *Green on Blue*, or Matt Gallagher’s *Youngblood*. These are breathtaking novels by novelists who’ve had fingers on combat-weight triggers, and their stories are close-quarters. But every position has its disadvantages. The trick is to be aware of them, and then use that difference to possible advantage.

As an outsider, maybe I’m more inclined toward the long view, from the homeland, but also historically. I can’t help but see the invasion of Iraq – Afghanistan is different – through the warped lens of Vietnam, but through, too, as many other conflicts as I’m able. Civilians should feel obliged to read more about war, and some of them to try to write war. The author of the *Iliad* was a blind man. *The Red Badge of Courage* was written by a reporter. *A Farewell to Arms* is the work of an ambulance driver. *Tree of Smoke* was conceived by a hippy burnout. *The Sympathizer* came from an academic.

The late Tom Hayden is a bit of an easy target, a peacenik Freedom Rider and the second of Jane Fonda’s three husbands, but there’s a quote of his I think about a lot: “If you conduct a war, you shouldn’t be in charge of narrating it.” I take this to mean that those who conduct our wars should be doing the narrating, but not *all* of the narrating, and I don’t believe anyone should be in charge of who gets to tell a story. We’ve got no shortage of soldier writers. Oddly enough,

though, they're mostly dudes in my demographic: white working-class. I say oddly. One of the most beautiful things about the American military is how the institution takes in all kinds – though it likes the poor kind best – and puts them on firm but equal footing. I can't think of a more meritocratic American institution – for men, at least, though the women are securing their rightful place – and in my mind that makes it ideally American (even if the real America is about how best to subtly tip the scales in your favor).

So I'm an outsider in some ways, not in others. I'm right up there on the emotional frontlines, for one. I was diagnosed with PTSD about a month before my agent sold the damn novel. I like to joke that novel writing – and trying to publish a novel – caused my traumatic stress. But the hard truth is that I've suffered from anxiety overload (as you so perfectly put it) all throughout my adulthood, induced by my childhood sexual abuse, something I kept largely secret for 35 years. Phil Klay's got a killer essay, "After War, a Failure of the Imagination," that closes the gap between traumas. A funny thing about trauma – haha. The experience of it is absolutely singular. No two alike. You can never know my trauma. But the after-the-fact symptoms of trauma are all shared. That tourniquet chest. Those quick sipping breaths. The feeling like you've been here before and will, for fucking ever, be here again. Our emotional fallout is communal. You can't know my trauma, but you can share my anxiety, because anxiety is contagious. Once I can overcome my anxiety – which is not the same as having no anxiety – then I can tell you the story of my trauma. In my experience, that's one of the hardest things a person can learn to do, never mind do well.

Interviewer:

Irish novelist John Banville once said, "the world is not real

for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language." D.H. Lawrence famously wrote at length about the dramatic divide between the didactic and art. Yet, with a novel like yours, I feel "reality" and "language," are not necessarily mutually exclusive (or the former the product of the latter exclusively). Further, you have written powerful non-fiction about the United States Code of Military Justice, Bowe Bergdhal, Trump, and the history of democracy. Particular political wrongs and historical injustices seem to motivate your writing. What, then, are your thoughts on the relationship between politics and art?

Nicorvo:

I don't really recognize those dichotomies: reality, language; art, politics. In my fiction, I'm trying to make a recognizable reality using language. I'm doing the opposite in my nonfiction: trying to make reality recognizable using language. I'm not someone who believes all art is political, all politics is artistry. Music can be apolitical, I think. But writing, as an art form, has to be political. There's no way around it; it's guilt by association. They both traffic in the same medium: words. Novels and laws require nouns and verbs. The US Constitution isn't a piano concerto or saxophone solo.

Maybe because I grew up poor – sometimes on welfare, sometimes off – I've long thought the system was rigged. But one thing I learned pretty early was that command of language is a way to overcome some of the trappings of that system. Because our language shapes our reality. This, in part, determines the resistance to political correctness. When people try to shape our language, it quickly comes to feel like mind control. It's authoritarian. What Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief" required for immersion into a good story might more accurately be classified as a willing surrender to authority.

Reading is submission to mind control. And some people can’t take it. The reader gives up his inner self for a time – in what should be understood, in this egocentric age, as nothing short of heroism. When you read, you allow the writer, in this case me, to take up residence in your head. While you read this, your thoughts don’t exist apart from mine, as I’ve here expressed them. This is, in part, what gives the word of God, as captured in the Bible, its control. Most of us have only a tentative grasp on the extent of this power – here’s where politics comes in – but all of us feel its sway.

In my writing, what I’m aiming to do is to honor the trust you’ve given me – the leap of faith you’re willing to take – by choosing to read what I’ve written. The way I best know how to hold up my end of this bargain is by making the effort to write about our most difficult issues – the wrongs and injustices – in a way that doesn’t try to put them in a good light or a bad light but in a true light. If I do, you can tell, because the light hums.

Interviewer:

A lengthy author’s note in the back of *The Standard Grand* lists a wide variety of source material. Your epigraph includes a quote from a Josh Ritter, a contemporary country singer. You have told me that particular television shows like *Rectify* inspired moments in *The Standard Grand*. Not all artists are comfortable acknowledging the collaborative nature of an artistic project. Some would resist lumping different mediums together into fiction. Obviously, you have no anxiety of influence. How did you come to this expansive (and refreshing!) view of the art of the novel?

Nicorvo:

Failure. I’m a firm believer in failure. And debt. One of the dumbest things F. Scott Fitzgerald ever wrote, in *The Last Tycoon*, was that “there are no second acts in American lives.” That reflects the backwards thinking of someone born into excessive privilege, where there’s no where to go but down. Look no further than the White House. America, where our pariahs become president. I’ve found that there’s nothing more expansive than failure if, ultimately, it’s overcome. And a debt repaid offers significant gratification. But if you succumb to your failings, if you’re overwhelmed by your debts, well, there’s nothing more isolating and suffocating. An awful feeling, getting choked out by the world. Failure imparts humility. Hopefully, it’s balanced out by a dram or two of success now and then. Otherwise, you’re reduced to sniveling, that or the tortured thinking of the conspiracy theorist or the lone gunman. If you’re lucky and stubborn enough to meet some eventual success after multiple failures – *The Standard Grand*, my first published novel, is the fourth one I’ve finished – I think you’re instilled with an increased capacity for gratitude. Because I have a great deal of influence anxiety – maybe more than my fair share – but it’s overshadowed by my gratitude. We vastly overestimate our independence. Especially in this country. And among writers, it’s no big secret that we take a great deal, knowingly and unknowingly, from everyone and everything around us, in order to finish what me make. I wanted to go on record acknowledging that I am not owed. I owe.

In Laurent Bécue-Renard's Of Men and War War Is Not Tragic But Embarrassing

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argued that every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. There is truth to this. Some soldiers do go to war expecting an exciting adventure. Some don't expect to be killed or even think about their chances of being killed. Some don't dwell on the fact that they have guns and will have to shoot the enemy. But most do. Most are rational actors with the same evidence we all have at our disposal: namely, war involves violence. So why are they so often surprised when the war they go to turns out to be, well, violent?

Though concerned with what happens to soldiers after war, the question of imagined experience versus actual experience haunts Laurent Bécue-Renard's powerful documentary *Of Men and War*. Following several veterans at the Pathway Home, a California facility established to help traumatized veterans find meaning in trauma, Bécue-Renard reveals that the men fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan did not find the experience worse than expected, not exactly—they found it more humiliating than expected.

According to the documented counseling sessions, many of the veterans at the Pathway Home participated in firefights, staunched the bleeding of ruptured bodies, and helped collect dead bodies. That they did these things should surprise no one. I would be hard-pressed to imagine anybody who did not know these things happen when you bring rifles and bombs to a place with a bunch of rifles and bombs. And, not surprisingly, the Pathway veterans tell very few of these traditional

wartime stories. Only a few seem particularly upset by the fact that they had to kill an enemy, or lost a battle buddy or even their own combat injuries. This is not to say that these things did not upset them, only that they do not explain why they are at Pathway Home.

The veterans do, though, tell a whole lot of accident stories. One tells the story of how he kicked in a door and broke the neck of a little boy who was about to open the door. One tells about getting a lifelong disability because he jumped from a helicopter five or six feet to the ground and landed wrong. One tells about watching a tanker pull a gun out of the turret and how the tanker blew his own head off. Another tells about leaning into a fridge to get his best friend a Monster energy drink and pulling his M-4 trigger and killing his best friend.

After the release of *American Sniper*, Americans had a national conversation about PTSD (or what passes for a national conversation in America). In the movie version, American Sniper Chris Kyle's decision to kill a child and save American soldiers haunts him. But most soldiers would not be haunted by this. This is a straightforward exchange, a decision that involved conscious volition and a commitment to save fellow soldiers. It is the same logic with which we drone bomb and carpet bomb and drop nuclear bombs on cities—horrible, morally suspect, but (for many) a necessary utilitarian sacrifice that comes with war. Moments like this do not haunt the soldiers at the Pathway Home. In the Pathway Home version, the sniper would have tried shooting the boy and shot an American soldier or shot the wrong boy or failed to make the shot and all the soldiers died. That's what haunts. Accidents haunt.

Kicking in a door and breaking a child's neck cannot be rationalized. The soldier who did this in *Of Men and War*—an obviously decent and empathetic man—tries to blame it on bad Iraqi parenting. He tries to blame the boy. He tries to blame it on himself. But it can't be explained. It can't be reduced

to any schema. It is just stupid and horrible and unfair. The boy is dead and you didn't mean to kill him. That's it. It is a stupid accident. It is humiliating. It sucks. It is impossible to lend meaning to such a moment and such a story because embarrassments like that don't deserve meaning—they resist explication not through their horror but their arbitrary horror.

In "The Chaff," a short story by Brian Van Reet, the narrator describes how what troubles veterans is seldom what most would consider traumatic. Instead, the narrator finds himself overwhelmed in civilian life by a trivial moment, an action and event not especially traumatic. The narrator of Matthew Hefti's novel, *A Hard and Heavy Thing*, obsesses for years over a practical joke involving a pebble—"the stupid, galling, rebarbative, pestilent, abrasive carking rock"—rather than the actual violence the pebble supposedly caused. The opening line of Phil Klay's National Book Award winning *Redeployment*, "We shot dogs," has similar implications. Soldiers go to war to kill humans. Soldiers (and civilians) do not expect to kill dogs. Soldiers remember the dead dogs, not the person of whatever age or gender they had to kill to save friends or because some Captain told them to (the ending of Klay's story suggests the multiple moral ironies inherent in such logic).

From different angles, Van Reet, Hefti, Klay and Bécue-Renard approach the idiosyncratic nature of PTSD—not its horror, not its thousand-yard stare, how war was so much worse than expected, but its very ridiculousness, the awkward and absurd and pathetically embarrassing nature of war. There is nothing dignified about the denizens of Pathway Home. These veterans do not stare into the abyss. They do not see any heart of darkness. They have no access to some existential truth. They have not returned sadder and wiser men. They are simply lost men stuck on what might not have been, how something as silly as forgetting to un-chamber a round or buckle a seatbelt

killed their best friend.

Young men and women do not join the military thinking that it will all be a walk in the park and that war's violence won't affect them. They are not imbeciles. What soldiers do miss is that the violence they will face is often desperately pedestrian, something that could have happened to them back home, which has no meaning other than the fact that it happened. Wrestling with sheer happenstance is not an easy thing to do for civilians. It is even harder to do with several thousand years of war mythology and sentimentalizing telling you that an accident has a larger meaning when it clearly does not. By immersing us in the experience of the men at Pathway Home, Bécue-Renard's provocative documentary wrestles with this disconnect. Let us hope the people who send these young men and women to war start wrestling with it too.

David Rieff's In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies

In *At The Mind's Limits*, a series of essays reflecting on his time spent in the Nazi concentration camps, Jean Améry predicted that in one hundred years the murder of millions, carried out by "a highly civilized people," will be lumped with countless other 20th century horrors and submerged in a general "Century of Barbarism." Victims like Améry "will appear as the truly incorrigible, irreconcilable ones, as the anti-historical reactionaries in the exact sense of the word." And history will be, perversely, the prime agent of this (and

his) erasure.

Améry was not wrong. As David Rieff points out in his illuminating study, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies*, by 2045 the last survivors of Nazi atrocities will be dead. Whatever moral or intellectual satisfaction Améry might have obtained from remembrance of his atrocity will pass on to people who were not victims, people who, no matter how well-intentioned, manipulate Améry's memories and experiences to their own social, political and cultural ends (like me, right now). "The verb to remember," Rieff argues, "simply cannot be conjugated in the plural except when in reference to those who lived through what they communicate."

Despite this, the collective memory industry is booming. From Washington DC to Saudi Arabia groups of concerned citizens and respectable thinkers recreate the past in their own image, projecting grievances and "the memory of wounds" into the future out of a mistaken belief in memory's ability to prevent future crimes (take, for example, the ongoing 1916 Irish centenary or Russia's 70th Victory Day anniversary military chest-thumping). Relying heavily on "highly questionable notions of collective consciousness," Rieff contends, these groups have turned memory into a "moral and social imperative," an imperative that has become one of the "more unassailable pieties of our age." Rieff finds this notion justifiably—and demonstrably—absurd.

And yet, even if he is right, very few would find it anything less than irresponsible to contemplate the obvious, if terrifying, alternative—forgetting. Rieff just does that. Rieff's *In Praise of Forgetting* covers a remarkable amount of ground in less than 150 pages—from Australia's Anzac Day ceremonies and First World War Gallipoli campaign to W.B. Yeats and Ireland's Troubles to the 9/11 Memorial and Al Qaeda—while glossing an even more remarkable number of scholars and poets for evidence of the ways in which memory is

used and abused. Is it time, he wonders, that we dispense with Santayana's famous adage about remembering the past for Nietzsche's "active forgetting"?

Important to this counterintuitive argument is Rieff's notion of progress. Very much like the English philosopher John Gray—who appears often in *In Praise of Forgetting*—Rieff does not really believe in progress, at least not in the traditional sense. Where many governments today consciously and unconsciously assume teleological and Whiggish constructions of the historical record—that we are the culmination of history rather than its contingent byproduct—Rieff's understanding of history is less palatable perhaps but infinitely more pragmatic and productive. In this version, when progress is made, it comes through ugly compromise, what John Gray describes as a "modus vivendi among civilizations," necessary in a world where particular cultural values are, unfortunately, incommensurable.

According to Rieff, nothing impedes this type of progress more than paeans to collective memories that cannot logically exist, and which idealize a perfect rationality that humans clearly do not possess. Rieff adroitly interrogates the overreaching claims of historians like Avishai Marglit who call for some kind "of shared moral memory for humankind" to combat the "biased silences" in the historical record. Rieff compares such thinking to that of those who in the human rights communities "insist that there can be no lasting peace without justice." Not true. History, Rieff asserts, "is replete with outcomes that provided the first while denying the second." To Rieff, the memory community could stand to grow up a little in this respect— giving up on utopian dreams of perfectly remembered pasts for the rough and tumble politics of strategic forgetting.

But the target of Rieff's argument is less professional historians like Marglit, who often qualify their arguments, acknowledging the dangers of memory obsessions (e.g..,

Confederate memorials or Bin Laden's "crusader armies"), and more the memory industry, whose uncritical interpretations have turned experiences like Améry's into self-validating tourist kitsch and perpetuated violence in places like Ireland for seventy years. Rieff's book takes for granted what academics have long been wary of acknowledging—that the majority of human beings have little use for the subtleties of critical history. What they do have use for is the banalities of historical platitudes and the mysticisms of collective memory. Cases in point: Joan of Arc's current incarnation as the enemy of immigrants in France, Mel Gibson as Scotland's national hero and any promise to make "America Great Again."

Memory for memory's sake should not be laughed at (at least not always). Rieff witnessed firsthand in the Balkans how each side used often-valid historical grievances to justify the continuation of violence. My own time working with Iraqis from 2006 to 2007 in Mosul taught me something similar. And in an U.S. election cycle dominated by grievance, it is perhaps time we start taking forgetting seriously, and not simply its consequences but also its inevitability and practicability. The alternative, the continued privileging of memory, of starry-eyed assumptions about the redemptive possibilities and inherent morality of remembrance, carries with it its own dangers, dangers we would be foolish to dismiss as third-world barbarisms.

Of course, such talk of forgetting will have its critics. Anyone who has studied race in America well knows how silence and amnesia can perpetuate violence too. And movies like the sublime *Son of Saul* prove that there are ways to remember the Shoah and other atrocities that don't descend into kitsch. Yet, after watching *Son of Saul* on my computer, advertisements proliferated in my web browser. They all asked the same thing: that this Passover, I think about investing in Israel Bonds. This surprised me. After reading Rieff's *In Praise of Forgetting*, it shouldn't have. Memory is not sacred. It is not

above the present. It is not above the politics of the now. Whatever your thoughts on forgetting, it would be criminal to exchange one self-satisfied piety for another—to forget that the victims of history can be and often are persecuted by those who consider themselves the most competent and thorough of historians.