

New Fiction by Matthew J. Hefti: “Jean, not Jean”



Illustration by Matthew J. Hefti

Jean, not Jean

by Matthew J. Hefti

When I look in the mirror, I think I look stupid. Otherwise, I don't even think of how I look. But when I do look in the mirror, it's like I can't look away. Also when I do, I pick a lot. Today is especially bad.

My mom said once that it's anxiety from stress.

My dad said, he's thirteen. What's he got to be stressed about?

I'm pretty torqued on the way to school. I don't really know why. I think it's because I missed the bus. I missed the bus because I couldn't stop picking at myself, and I think it's because I can feel everything—like how tight my socks are and how my feet are already a little moist and my socks aren't doing anything about it, and my shirt's a little tight in the armpits and it's pulling at my armpit hairs, and one of the hairs in my eyebrows is curled or something and it's really annoying me, and I think maybe I have a hair growing in my ear. I'm not sure.

My mom asks what she can do to put me in a better mood.

I tell her that she doesn't have to do anything.

She says my happiness is important.

It's important to you, I tell her.

Jean isn't at school today. He's probably my best friend. He had an allergic reaction yesterday. He's allergic to pretty much everything.

Mr. Rogers is subbing again because Mrs. Neumann is sick. Mr. Rogers hates when we call him that and tells us to call him anything but that. We called him all kinds of things for a while, like Mr. Fluffy Head and Poo Poo Bear, but it got boring because he really meant what he said about being able to call him anything. He didn't care.

You wouldn't guess it by his name, but Mr. Rogers is this tough looking dude that used to be in the military. He still has a flat top.

Mr. Rogers calls Jean's name three times, pausing for infinity each time as if it's not completely obvious there's an empty desk and no one is responding. But he says it like Jean, like something you wear or like he's a girl, but his name is Jean, like Victor Hugo's hero. It rhymes with Shawn. You'd think he'd know that by now.

I've never read anything by Victor Hugo, but that's what Jean's mother always says when someone says it wrong: It's Jean, she says. Like the greatest hero in western literature, drawn in full by Victor Hugo. Except she says litra-ture. And then if people say, who's that, she won't answer. She just snorts a little like they're stupid.

I asked his mom once if I could see the picture of the Jean in

the book. She said, What do you mean? I said, the one drawn by Victor Hugo. She snorted. I guess she thinks I'm stupid.

Jean told me that his mom named him that because the Jean in the book is like a kind of Christ.

I asked him what that was supposed to mean since there's only one God.

He said, he's not Christ. He's a type of Christ.

I said, you can't be a type of something if there's only one of that thing.

He said he asked his dad about it once and his dad said that the only thing he's the hero of is the miserable ones.

Who? I said. Jean or Christ?

Jean shrugged. Both I guess.

I used to call him Jean too. Even though it's Jean, not Jean. Everyone did. He's small and kind of nerdy looking. Plus he's sick a lot, and saying Jean made us feel stuck up. But now most of us have gotten used to it. It's just his name.

I didn't call him Jean because he was nerdy. I called him that because he was my arch nemesis. He stole my job as milk monitor last year, when we were in sixth grade. Each of us had a class duty, and I had the best one.

It wasn't the best because counting the orders and getting the milks at lunch was so great or anything. But the milk monitor for the fifth and sixth grade classroom had to go with the milk monitor for the seventh and eighth grade classroom. And

Heather Saint James was the milk monitor for the seventh and eighth graders. Heather Saint James didn't have the prettiest face—that was Jennifer Gohrman—but she did have the biggest boobs in the school.

The way it worked was, the older kid would bring the milk crate and wait by our door. That was like the signal to Mrs. Neumann that she needed to wrap it up. Then she'd say, raise your hand if you want chocolate. Then, raise your hand if you want white. You'd count the hands and then go to the gym closet with the older kid to get the milks, and then you'd bring them back.

Heather Saint James would put the milk crate on the ground to slide open the big fridge door to get the milks and put them into the crate.

I could see right down her shirt where those big heavy things were hanging. While she waited for me to stammer the count for our class, she would stay bent over like that with her hand on the bottom shelf. Like she didn't even realize they were there.

To get to the gym closet, you had to walk through the whole school and then finally the principal's office. You could go through the gym instead of the principal's office, but we weren't allowed to go that way.

When I was in fifth grade and David Pfeiffer was the milk monitor, I thought they made them go through the office because they were afraid the milk monitors would start playing in the gym on the way there. That was before Jean even went to our school.

But then when I got older, I realized that didn't make any

sense because all the balls and toys and stuff were stored in the gym closet, which is where you had to go to get the milks anyway.

After I had spent some time as the milk monitor myself, I realized they made you go through the principal's office because they were probably afraid that if you went through the gym, you'd probably goof off in other ways. I never did though.

Jean says I chickened out and had plenty of chances, but that's not what happened. What happened is that he stole my job.

One day while I was doing the sweater stare—it was fall by then—I had forgotten the count when Heather Saint James asked me the numbers. I thought fast and gave her two numbers that added up to eleven. That's how many students we had in our class after all.

But Jean doesn't drink milk. He's allergic. According to his mom, deathly allergic. So the real number was supposed to add up to ten.

I should have guessed that anyway because that's how many kids had been in my class my whole life until Jean showed up. But I remembered the new kid made us eleven.

It wasn't the first time I had gotten the numbers wrong. It wasn't even the first time I made the mistake of bringing back eleven milks. But the first time I did it doesn't count. I just did it that time because I thought that Mrs. Neumann would let me have the extra chocolate instead of taking it back.

She didn't like that.

I told her I couldn't take it back because Heather Saint James already went back to her classroom.

She told me that she was sure I would find my way. She was always saying that, even when it didn't make sense in context.

The time I forgot the numbers on accident, she asked why I brought back the wrong number of chocolate milks again.

I told her it was because I forgot Jean was allergic to milk.

She said, you know who won't forget that Jean is allergic to milk?

No, I told her.

Jean. That's who.

So she made Jean the milk monitor.

When I told my dad what happened, he laughed and said, Well, there's dramatic irony for you.

I was pretty mean to Jean for a while. Then one day he asked why I cared about being milk monitor so much, and I told him it was obvious.

He said it wasn't obvious to him.

I mentioned Heather Saint James.

He said, that's it? Then he claimed he didn't care about that because he could look at all the boobs he wanted because they had the internet at home. I think he just wanted me to like him.

He offered to stick his finger in one of the milk cartons so I could get the job back. I think he wanted to be liked so badly

that he would have really done it, but I told him not to because they might give the job to anyone. And if someone else got the job, he'd just be risking his life for nothing.

It made me feel bad that he was so obsessed with being liked that he would risk his life to get a friend and also give up the chance to sneak peeks down the shirt of Heather Saint James.

So I said sorry for being so mean and that I wouldn't view him as my arch nemesis anymore.

After me and Jean became friends, I asked him why he came to our school.

Jean said the public school told him he missed too many days. He didn't want to be stuck in fifth grade.

So I asked him why he could be in sixth grade in our school when everyone said it was harder than the public school.

He said the state couldn't tell our school what to do. Then he said our school was just as easy as public school. But going to any school is a waste of time, he said.

He had a point there.

When I asked him why he didn't just get home schooled, he said his mom told him that all home school kids are weird.

He had a point there too.

But why our school? I asked. You're not even Christian.

Yes I am, he said.

But you don't go to our church, I pointed out.

Are you stupid or just brainwashed? he asked.

I told him he could use some milk of human kindness.

We both had a good laugh at that one.

It was milk that gave Jean the reaction yesterday, but it could have been anything considering practically half the normal foods in the world are like phosgene or mustard gas to him. I learned about phosgene and mustard gas yesterday in history class, not from Mr. Rogers, but from Jean.

When history class started, Mr. Rogers asked what we were learning about from Mrs. Neumann.

Jean told him World War One.

Tabby Gardner raised her hand and said, why do we always have to learn about wars in history class?

Mr. Rogers told her it was because wars were like the epicenter of an earthquake in a country's timeline with seismic waves moving out in every direction. If you wanted to, he said, you could pick any given war and study the whole country's history just by studying that war. You could ask yourself what led to the war and then what were the consequences of the war. By asking what led to the war, you could go as far back into history as you wanted. By asking what the consequences of the war were, you could study all the history from the war until the present and then as far into the future as infinity if you wanted.

Tabby Gardner told him we'd already been studying World War One for infinity.

I have to admit, I was pretty bored myself.

Well, Mr. Rogers said, if a war is like an earthquake in a country's timeline, then wouldn't a World War be like an earthquake in the entire world's timeline? So doesn't it make

sense to spend time studying it?

Okay, Tabby Gardner said, but we already know everything about it.

Then tell me what you know about the war, Mr. Rogers said.

Jean raised his hand, like always.

Mr. Rogers said, I want to hear from Tabby. But then she didn't say anything for a long time, and Mr. Rogers called on Jean, like always.

Did you know, Jean said, that in World War One, they used phosgene and mustard gasses? Also, did you know that the Germans would hit troops with gasses that could get through the gas masks? It would hurt their eyes and nose and stuff so bad that they would take off their masks, even though that could kill them. Then after taking off their masks, they'd inhale the phosgene and mustard and stuff like that. Their lungs would start to blister and their eyes would bleed or they'd start coughing so bad they could puke up their stomachs and all sorts of stuff.

Tabby Gardner raised her hand.

Mr. Rogers called on her.

Real prissy she said, can we please not talk about blistered lungs and puked up stomachs?

You could tell Mr. Rogers was thinking about it because he didn't say anything for a while.

Then he said, so like I was saying before about the earthquakes, I actually know a guy who got messed up really bad—big red oozing blisters all over his body—after he put a mustard round in his truck thinking it was a regular old projo.

Then he told us all about IEDs made with chlorine tanks, stock piles of mustard rounds, troops that got gassed that couldn't get benefits once they got home, and how the whole reason we were there was because some General convinced the UN that there were WMDs there.

Jean ate it up. He loved that kind of stuff.

But what happened with the milk yesterday was, after history class we had lunch. I was reading the joke on my milk carton, and I said, I don't get it.

The jokes were like numbered in a series. Everyone with a number five, for example, would have the same stupid joke. An example would be, Why was the cow jumping up and down? Because it wanted a milkshake. But that wasn't the actual joke yesterday.

Mr. Rogers was at his desk eating his lunch and drinking his milks—he always ordered two chocolates. He asked me what number I had.

Twelve, I told him.

Me too, he said. It's a pun.

But I don't get it, I told him.

He said, you know back when I was in school, milk cartons didn't have jokes. They had pictures of missing kids.

But these have jokes, and I don't get this one.

Instead of jokes, we'd have to look at pictures of these kids who were abducted, he said.

Jean asked what the joke was.

Mr. Rogers said, it's not a joke. It's a pun.

Then Jean said, well then read me the pun.

Mr. Rogers said, you wouldn't get a pun like this if I told it to you. You have to read it.

I can't read it myself, Jean said. I'm allergic to milk.

When I was a kid, Mr. Rogers said, we didn't have all these allergies either. All this helicopter parenting. Kids are too sheltered these days. Protected from everything so they can't handle anything.

I think Jean didn't want to look weak in front of Mr. Rogers. He grabbed my milk carton to look at it for himself. And I guess a little spilled on him or something because it wasn't long before he started turning red and wheezing and everything.

It's a good thing Mr. Rogers was subbing that day, because Mrs. Neumann probably would have freaked out. She's the nervous type, but Mr. Rogers has all that war training.

Mr. Rogers acted all calm like it was no big deal. He asked Jean if he had an EpiPen and where it was. It was in his desk, so Mr. Rogers grabbed it in no time and gave him the shot. Then he pointed at someone and said, you, go down the hall and have the secretary call 911. Then he pointed at me and said, you, go in the top pocket of my backpack by the right side of my desk. There's an EpiPen in there. Bring it to me.

In pretty much no time, the ambulance had come to take Jean to the hospital.

Mr. Rogers said it was just a precaution.

Jean loves Mr. Rogers. Every time he subs, Jean spends all recess talking to him, and Mr. Rogers doesn't seem to mind.

But today at morning recess, Mr. Rogers just stands at the corner of the soccer field with his hands in his pockets. He swings his foot back and forth like he's kicking apart an ant hill or something, but he does it the whole time. He never looks up at the kids to make sure we're not fighting or anything.

Mr. Rogers looks pretty lonely without Jean there. But before recess is over, the principal comes out and says something to him. Mr. Rogers doesn't say anything back. He just goes inside early and the principal follows after him.

I asked Jean once why he wanted to waste all his recess time talking to the teacher about boring stuff like history.

He said we had to study history because those who don't study history will be doomed to repeat it.

Sounds like the opposite would make more sense. If you don't know about it, it would be pretty random to repeat it, which makes repeating it seem pretty unlikely.

I told him so, and he said we should ask Mr. Rogers what he thought.

I told Jean I'd just take his word for it.

But I guess Mr. Rogers is pretty lousy at the whole not repeating history thing. What I mean by that is, Mr. Rogers isn't in the classroom when we get back inside from recess. While we're all just waiting around, I hear Paisley Schmitt say they fired him because he was talking about bleeding eyeballs and coughed up stomachs during history class yesterday.

That makes sense coming from her.

I say that because the first time Mr. Rogers subbed for us, he told us not to ask if he killed anyone unless we wanted him to kill us. Then the principal made him apologize to the whole class after Paisley Schmidt narced on him to her mom.

And it's doubly believable because Mrs. Neumann shows back up, even though she still looks sick and sounds like she's going to cough up her stomach.

I don't think Mr. Rogers is as great as Jean does, but I think he's okay. He says bad words sometimes when he's telling stories, and you don't often get to hear a teacher say swear words. It's easy to distract him and his stories are pretty good. Better than Mrs. Neumann's anyway.

But that's kind of just how he is. He'll talk to you like you're on the same level.

Like when he started his apology speech after Paisley Schmitt narced on him. He said, apparently, you're not supposed to talk about killing with middle schoolers. You could tell he thought the whole thing was stupid by the way he said apparently.

Me and Jean had a good laugh at that too.

Punk! Last Week This Week:

9/11 Music Edition

On 9/11—Punk, Protest, and Witness: WBT Editors Choose Their Jams

There was a chance, in 1991, for the US to take a responsible role in leading the world into the 21st century. Rather than do this, we worked instead to profit from former enemies' weakness. In doing so, in prioritizing our own interests over those of others, we lost an unusual opportunity to build a peaceful world based on trust and collaboration. Ten years later, with America atop an increasingly conspicuous global pyramid scheme, we breathed a collective sigh of relief when we were granted a reprieve from judgment. Rather than face the consequences of our behavior, we doubled down—and, on 9/11/2001, decided to assign blame outside our national borders.

On this, the fifteenth anniversary of our collective moral cowardice, a national giving in to neurotic fear of cultural or individual weakness unbecoming of exponentially the most powerful nation on earth, we recommend listening to the following songs and albums. On your way to work, during lunch, returning home from a profitable (or unprofitable) day at the grind.

Don't worry, an admission of guilt isn't weakness—it's evidence of strength. Like your 2nd grade teacher said, correctly, and many adults seem to have forgotten.

Adrian Bonenberger's Selections

Before 9/11—We saw it coming: Bad Religion [Recipe for Hate](#) (1993)

After 9/11: Green Day [American Idiot](#) (2004)

Matthew Hefti's Selections

The last solid album release before a generation of teens all lost our innocence still takes me right back to that summer before 9/11, those few carefree months between high school and college. They changed the album and song name after 9/11, but it seems almost prescient: Jimmy Eat World [Bleed American](#) (2001)

Whether it be the wars, our apathy towards our nation's poor, or our xenophobia toward refugees, Rise Against is post-9/11 protest punk that comes closest to perfection. Rise Against [Appeal to Reason](#) (2008)

Drew Pham's Selections:

After 9/11, Sage Francis lamented the bigotry of our newfound nationalism, and presaged the longest war in American history: [Makeshift Patriot](#) (2002)

Himanshu Kumar Suri, otherwise known as Heems, was a student at Stuyvesant High School on 9/11. In [Patriot Act](#) (2015), he recounts that day, and the racially charged days that followed.

Mike Carson's Selections:


James McMurty's 2005 ["We Can't Make it Here"](#) pretty much sums up the anger of much of middle America over the last fifteen years and does much to explain our current election.

And, though this might be cheating, I always think of David Bowie's 1997 "[I'm Afraid of Americans](#)" and Warren Zevon's 1978 "[Lawyers, Guns and Money](#)" this time of year.

<https://youtu.be/u7APmRkatEU>

<https://youtu.be/lP5Xv7QqXiM>

Bernie Sanders Wins in Iowa!

Photo Credit: J. David 
Ake, AP. Senator Bernie Sanders and his wife, Jane.

Regardless of what the official results might say, Bernie Sanders won the night in Iowa. The margin reported by most media outlets shows Hillary Clinton at 49.8% and Sanders at 49.6%, but there have been enough reports of [shenanigans](#), [voter fraud](#), and [missing results](#) from various precincts to call into question the value of the caucus process in showing the people's choice for the Democratic nominee. What is abundantly clear, however, is that Bernie Sanders is no fringe candidate. The showing by the Sanders campaign in Iowa could be exactly what Bernie Sanders needs to [shake and bake](#) right past Hillary Clinton in the race to be the Democratic Party's nominee.

So without further ado, here are the top three reasons why

Bernie Sanders was the real winner in the Iowa Caucus.

Bernie Sanders Has All the Momentum

Clinton gained nothing of value, and Sanders won the surprise of pundits and coverage from the mainstream media machine. Bernie Sanders was expected to lose, but his campaign is [energized](#) and Clinton's campaign is [scared](#). She may have won by 0.02% according to most mainstream reports, but Hillary Clinton won a [Pyrrhic](#) victory, and it's one she will not easily recover from.

Sanders and Clinton virtually tied, and Iowa's delegates are not awarded on a winner-take-all basis, so the tie goes to the candidate who exceeded expectations, clearly Sanders. At the Democratic National Convention, Sanders and Clinton will receive the [same number of delegates](#) from the state of Iowa, so Sanders has lost nothing. Clinton, on the other hand, has lost the air of invincibility that carried her months ago.

Bernie Sanders will now move into New Hampshire as an even stronger favorite. Sanders is out of the gate garnering nearly 50% of the vote in Iowa when just months ago Sanders was in [single digits](#) in the polls. A tie in Iowa and a win in New Hampshire just may give Sanders the momentum he needs to gain the backing of more establishment Democrats.

Bernie Sanders Showed the Nation that Hillary Clinton Can Lose

[Ruth Marcus](#) asked the perfect question when trying to decide who won the tie: "Which campaign was celebrating Monday night, and which was trying to figure out what went wrong?" Hillary Clinton has long been the presumptive nominee, and the mainstream media has viewed Bernie Sanders as nothing more than a modern-day Ross Perot. Far from being an outlier to shake up the political conversation, Bernie Sanders demonstrated his mass appeal and ability to contend.

At best, the media made it seem like Bernie Sanders was simply

pulling Hillary Clinton [further left](#), but he had no chance to actually win the nomination. In Iowa last night, Bernie Sanders showed the world that [Hillary Clinton can be beaten](#). Considering many have shied away from Bernie Sanders because they view him as unelectable, the clear fallibility Clinton exhibited in her “win” will do nothing but give reluctant Sanders supporters the push they need to really feel the Bern.

Bernie Sanders Established Himself as the Voice of the Future

In a bit of an ironic turn, the old white man gained the most votes from the younger and more progressive generation. Among the Democratic voter age groups, Sanders pulled the following [overwhelming numbers](#):

- Under 25: Sanders won 86% of the vote.
- 25-39: Sanders won 81% of the vote.
- 31-39: Sanders won 65% of the vote.

Just as the younger voters carried Barack Obama in crushing Hillary Clinton’s presidential dreams, there is no reason younger voters won’t do the same for Bernie Sanders. John Cassidy summed it up perfectly in [The New Yorker](#): “When you are so heavily reliant on support from older voters, it is tricky to project yourself as the voice of the future.”

The thing is, Sanders wants voters to have the power—as they should. As such, he’s demonstrated integrity no one in our younger generation has ever seen from a politician, refusing to take money from PACs and big businesses. His reward has manifested itself in [broken fundraising records](#) that show no sign of slowing. His fundraising has come from individual donors, which means far more voters are personally invested in Bernie Sanders than in any other candidate. Win or lose, it shows that there is hope yet for our system of democracy.

Matt Shuham wrote in [The Independent](#), “In a post-*Citizens United* era...the Sanders camp is placing a bet that rarely pays off in American politics: that absent mega-donors, PACs or the

support of a party establishment, the machinery of public opinion can run on conviction alone.” Even with a technical loss in Iowa, Sanders won the Iowa caucus. In a democratic-republic in which the voting public shows up en masse and ensures the system runs on conviction alone and not on the whims of mega-donors and media moguls, everyone wins.

Bryan Hurt: The Next Ambassador to France



Bryan Hurt, Author of *Everyone Wants to Be Ambassador to France*. Image Copyright Emma Powell

In a literary culture full of “[McPoems](#)” and [hand-wringing](#) over the homogenization of literature because of a supposed surplus of MFA programs, Bryan Hurt breaks the mold. He’s as educated as any creative writer out there, having studied under such luminaries as T.C. Boyle and Aimee Bender in the University of Southern California’s [PhD program](#) in Creative Writing. He has also done his fair share of instructing in the MFA world.

Despite—or perhaps because of—Hurt’s background in formal creative writing programs, his stories are utterly unique. The stories in [Everyone Wants to be Ambassador to France](#) hold all the quirk and hopeful humanity of George Saunders’s best work while somehow capturing the inner sadness of works by Raymond Carver, who is no stranger to young MFA students learning the form. Except in Bryan Hurt’s narrative in which a sad and lonely man puts all his belongings on the lawn priced to sell,

no one dances on that lawn for the man; instead they beat him up. Even in light of the comparisons and allusions, Hurt's stories are uniquely his own. I'm certainly not the only one who thinks so, as Hurt's collection was awarded the [Starcherone](#) Prize for Innovative Fiction.

Hurt refuses to shy away from impactful and relevant issues, but he does it with humor, aplomb, and no small amount of grace. Take the story "[Contract](#)." The story's form takes that of an actual legal contract with all its enumerated points and subpoints. The protagonist is a CEO condemned to sacrifice everyone he loves—as in, actual blood sacrifice—to appease the shareholders who make his job possible. Bryan Hurt simultaneously creates a contract with the reader through deft metafictional analyses (e.g., "9.4... [T]he story has made certain promises to its readers...10.10...There was only ever one way this story was going to end...") and eviscerates the upward-mobility-at-all-costs mindset of corporate America, all while making astute readers laugh out loud at word-play and absurdities that—coming from Hurt—don't seem so much absurd as they seem like an insightful look at what makes us all tick.

Bryan Hurt masters the [art of subtext](#) in both form and content. In the opening story, Hurt packs an entire analysis of ages-old patriarchal influence in love and marriage into fewer than four pages. "The Beast of Marriage" affirms what Jack Kerouac wrote approximately sixty years ago: "Boys and girls in America have such a sad time together..." But in Hurt's collection, it's not just boys and girls in America. It's boys and girls on their honeymoon in France. It's also a lonely boy missing a girl from his basement, where he builds his own dwarf star and mini-universe and becomes something of a god in his own right. It's also a lonely astronaut missing his father while he walks on the moon. It's also illicit lovers riding in a car that drives itself.

Both hilarious and heartbreaking, Bryan



Everyone Wants to
be Ambassador to
France by Bryan
Hurt

Hurt's stories ask the big questions. In "Panic Attack," Hurt's narrator muses, "What's going to be okay? Are we going to make more money? Be less stuck? Be less tired?" But with the entire collection, Hurt implicitly asks bigger questions like, will everything get better? Are we doomed? Hurt won't explicitly tell you the answer to those questions, but his narrator does tell us what kind of story he wants, which—as a gift to us—is exactly the kind of story that Bryan Hurt writes: "I want a story that answers yes to all of these questions. A story that's definitely not a real story because it tells me that things will get better."

And in an age like this—with fear and terror dominating the media—who even wants real stories anymore? Or put another way, who doesn't want stories that tell us things will get better? Plus, as Bryan Hurt writes with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek, "Berets are cute...French is cute. There's nothing more American than being cute."

Matthew J. Hefti holds a BA in English, an MFA in Creative Writing, and he is currently pursuing his JD at the University of Wisconsin Law School. He is a military veteran, having served two combat tours in Iraq and two combat tours in Afghanistan as an explosive ordnance disposal technician. Among other publications, his words have been seen in *Pennsylvania English*; *War, Literature and the Arts*; *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, and Chad Harbach's *MFA v. NYC*. His debut novel, [A Hard and Heavy Thing](#) (Tyurus / F+W) is now available where books are sold.

Matthew Hefti's A Hard and Heavy Thing



It's not a suicide note; it's a love song.

[Amazon](#) • [Barnes & Noble](#)

Facile and Frequent: Our Ignorant Social Media Debates



By [Matthew J. Hefti](#)

I can't count the number of variations I've seen on this meme on social media. It has reached the point where I feel compelled to write about it, which means the ignorance it encourages has sufficiently annoyed me.

I'm a vet, I have a lot of vet friends, and I have a fair handful of police friends. Many people in the vet and law enforcement communities are pro-gun to the extreme. I also live in Wisconsin, which is largely rural and has elected one of the most right-wing governors in the country three times;

thus, many in my state hold the general conservative position of “guns-for-everyone!” that will be prevalent in the population of any largely rural state such as mine. Many of these friends are thoughtful in explaining their position on weapons, and I enjoy the back and forth of debate with them, though we often disagree.

I also go to a progressive law school and have a lot of progressive and liberal friends, so I get plenty of insightful and pragmatic arguments for varying levels of gun control, along with a healthy dose of optimism that we could drastically reduce gun deaths in this country if we abandoned the irrational and inarticulable fear that holds power over so many of us.

One problem with social media debate on gun control.

With meme and arguments such as the one above, however, I think people always forget that we’re the United States, there are 48 contiguous states, and we have freedom of movement.

If you ban guns in Chicago, people can still—with no problem at all—drive less than an hour north to Wisconsin, load up on whatever weapons they want with no problem, and then head back down to Chicago. And in that case—when only a single locale reasonably restricts guns—sure, only criminals will have guns in that locale.

But the whole idea of saying national gun control wouldn’t help ameliorate the problem of gun deaths (to include accidental, suicide, familial, etc.) because it doesn’t work in isolation with a single locale like Chicago or California is an absolutely absurd and simplistic non sequitur.

In order for any gun control to be effective, it has to be at a national level. And to cynically believe nothing will

help—to believe that restricting semi-automatic handgun sales, conducting buybacks, restricting ammo sales, and reasonably restricting other weapons with no purpose but to kill is a fruitless exercise not worthy of consideration simply ignores the laws of human nature and economics.

If you restrict supply, fewer people will have weapons. If you restrict the supply, the price of a weapon will go up. The price of illicit weapons will go up even further. At a certain point after enforcement and restrictions begin, it stands to reason that handguns and semi-automatic, high-capacity rifles and any other weapon designed for the sole purpose to take human life will become prohibitively expensive for run of the mill criminals.

If weapons are prohibitively expensive, common sense says that access decreases, which will drastically reduce gun homicide rates. Reducing weapon access will reduce suicides, as studies have shown time and again. Reducing weapon access, creating stricter registration requirements, and requiring greater safety features will naturally reduce accidental and domestic gun injuries and deaths.

So stop saying that because gun control didn't work in Chicago or because it didn't work in California, it won't work in the United States. It's cynical, it's unhelpful, and it's based on narrow views and willful ignorance. These narrow and willfully ignorant positions exemplify the anti-intellectual ideation so prevalent in the United States, a country which actually banned federal funding for the CDC to study the problem.

Because, you know, who wants to learn more? Who would want to have more information to make better decisions? Who would actually want to rely on empirical data gathered by reputable academic agencies without bias whose only concern is gathering and compiling raw data?

Unfortunately the answer is, "Not the United States." At least

not writ large.

I want more information. I want thoughtful solutions. I want well-funded research to address *any* societal woe.


I don't want dialog or rights restricted. But I also believe every right comes with inherent tensions. Free speech isn't unlimited (unless you're a corporation or an individual at the top of the oligarchy). The right to be free from search and seizure isn't unlimited. The right to remain silent is not unlimited.

It is not unreasonable to carry on a dialog about how best to limit Second Amendment rights to strike the proper balance between liberty and societal interests. It *is* unreasonable to perpetuate ignorant memes that foreclose any meaningful and intelligent debate. So stop. Stop making facile arguments, and stop posting stupid memes that further divide us, the *United States*.

Matthew J. Hefti is the author of [*A Hard and Heavy Thing*](#) (Tyrus / F+W 2016). It's the perfect size for a stocking-stuffer. A thick, hard, and heavy stocking stuffer. Matthew has a BA in English, an MFA in Creative Writing, and he's working on his JD. After 12 years as an explosive ordnance disposal technician and 4 combat tours, he has thrown a lot of lead down range. He does not want to kick in your door to take your guns. He does, however, want you to stop posting stupid memes, whatever your political persuasion may be.

It's All So Familiar; It's

All So Heartbreaking

Today, November 24th, 2015, Jason Van Dyke was charged with  first-degree murder in the slaying of Laquan McDonald in Chicago, Illinois. We all should be charged for the same thing. I won't argue with anyone who wants to call Jason Van Dyke a bad apple, but the problem is larger than that.

The problem—the problem that led to the death of Laquan McDonald—extends to Jason Van Dyke's police department, whose officers allegedly went into a Burger King and erased the surveillance video. It extends to the Mayor's office and to the State's Attorney's office, who were dilatory in bringing charges. It extends to our legislatures who have shielded our law enforcement officers with cloaks of qualified immunity, impunity, and legal invincibility. It extends to our courts, all the way up to the Supreme Court, for eviscerating the Fourth Amendment rights of the citizens.

The problem extends to each and every single one of us who wants to claim citizenship in a democratic republic.

Laquan McDonald is on all of us.

We are a society. We have a culture. We share a nation. We call ourselves the *United States* of America. We pride ourselves on our democratic ideals. We claim exceptionalism. Equal protection under the laws. A government of the people and by the people. Just as we as a nation cannot absolve ourselves for the slaughter of innocents overseas when we send our troops to war, we can't abdicate our own responsibility for the death of Laquan McDonald or any of the others unjustly harassed, abused, or murdered in our name.

All it takes to file criminal charges in this country is probable cause, a bar so low in our courts that if it were not so tragic it would be laughable. It took over a year to charge Jason Van Dyke with first-degree murder despite the fact that

clear video evidence showed far more than probable cause that he committed first-degree murder when he opened fire on a juvenile, a teenager who was moving away from him, a kid who made no threatening gestures toward Jason Van Dyke. He opened fire and he kept firing. Laquan McDonald fell to the ground and Jason Van Dyke kept firing.

It was memorialized in video. Evidence exists. Probable cause exists. As a society, we should be expected to seek justice for whomever was responsible for the death of Laquan McDonald. But we didn't. We delayed, and justice delayed is justice denied.

It took 400 days to charge Van Dyke in the shooting of Laquan McDonald.

Jason Van Dyke gunned down Laquan McDonald on October 20th, 2014. A judge, in response to a journalist's Freedom of Information Act request, ordered the video of the shooting released to the public by November 25th, 2015. 400 days.

400 days have gone by since Laquan McDonald breathed his last while he lay bleeding in the streets from sixteen bullet holes, with all the bullets being fired by one sworn to *uphold* the law and *protect* and *serve* the public.

400 days. The State's Attorney, she's an elected official. She's a politician. The video had been requested by the public for a year. When the courts finally forced the city to release the video of the slaying as unrest continued to grow, she waited until the day the video was released to press charges.

#BlackLivesMatter –Laquan McDonald's life mattered.

If Laquan McDonald had been arrested for shooting and killing someone, if the roles were reversed, he would have been put in jail and charged as soon as the courts were open for business. He would have been denied bail. He would have been assigned to an overworked public defender who could not possibly be

expected to provide effective assistance of counsel with the immorally low funding and staffing in the public defender's office. Laquan McDonald would either be coerced into pleading or he would have a mere formality of a trial before he was sent to prison or death row. No one would blink, because that is how our country operates. That is the status quo.

Instead, Jason Van Dyke is a white police officer who has a thin blue line to erase video tapes for him. He is a white police officer who has the strongest unions and political lobbies behind him. He is a white police officer who works in the executive branch of our government, hand in hand with the attorneys responsible for charging decisions and prosecutions. He is a white police officer who has 400 days to prepare a defense, to prepare his family, to practice those magic words, "I feared for my life." He is a white police officer who may have never been charged in the first place if a journalist didn't fight for that video to be released, who may have never been charged had that video not forced the hand of the State's Attorney in her own self-interested political game.

We are all complicit; we are all responsible for change.

Plenty of people will spill words indicting Jason Van Dyke, but plenty of right-wing racists will instead blame the victim and say that if Laquan McDonald weren't a "thug," if he had just followed the directions of police, if he had just not committed any crimes in the first place, he would still be alive. Their logic will rest on the idea that anything short of unflinching obedience to the State, anything short of complete purity of spirit (and skin) deserves the sentence of death with no trial.

Plenty of people will blame a police culture that encourages officers to shoot first and ask questions later, yet plenty of others will write op-eds about a non-existent war on police.

Plenty of people will march in Laquan McDonald's memory to

honor him and to protest the sad truth that our government—and thus, the majority of our citizenry—cares less for the lives of black people and other people of color than it does for the white majority, yet many will point to the red herring of black on black violence.

Plenty of people will scream out in anguish because they aren't heard when they say, "Black lives matter," but—sadly—plenty of people will scream out in anger and denial to drown them out. Plenty of people will miss the point entirely; and to protect their own fragile psyches, to continue living in denial, or to maintain their own status quo, they will cry out, "All lives matter."

It's all so familiar, and it's all so heartbreaking. So many words will be spilled about the blood we continue to spill, and most of them will be pointing the finger at someone else. So few will hold up a mirror and say, "How am I complicit?" The truth is, we are all to blame.

We live in a culture of fear in which we demonize "the other." We live in a culture of violence in which we use guns in misguided efforts to solve or prevent our problems. We live in a culture in which we are at war with each other—black lives vs. blue lives, liberals vs. conservatives, extremist evangelicals vs. everyone, and the list goes on.

We live in a culture in which we voice outrage over the blood spilled in our streets, in our movie theaters, and in our schools; yet, we do nothing about it. We live in a culture in which we are all given one vote, we are all given voices, and we continue to either not use them or we waste them to maintain the status quo. The status quo is not acceptable.

My heart absolutely breaks for Laquan McDonald and for his family. And my heart breaks for us all.

Matthew J. Hefti is the author
✘ of [*A Hard and Heavy Thing*](#) (Tyurus
/ F+W).

Letter to US #2: It's Up to You

✘

Dear NRA Members, 2nd Amendment lovers, Fraternal Order of Police members, legislators, judges, voters, prosecutors, federal agents, state agents, municipal agents, county sheriffs, veterans of foreign wars, and anyone else who gives even a scintilla of a-

Pardon me. Let me start over. This needs to be bigger than that. This needs to be more inclusive than that. This needs to look at US all as a unit, the idea being that we're all in this together. To that end-

Dear US:

I have a few things to say. First things first: This piece is not reporting. It is not an academic treatise. It is not a thoughtfully-crafted essay. It is plain and simple—a rant. I intend to do the time-consuming work that needs to be done to create a well-researched and well-crafted essay, but I feel

this cannot wait for all of that. I need to address it now. So feel free to focus on inconsequential details when tearing this apart, but I'm telling you up front I don't purport this to be anything but an angry rant by a crusty vet, written in haste in the middle of the night. I guess it's also something of a proposal or a call to action, because I do not believe we are doomed.

The impetus: Two "independent experts" (I'm skeptical of both their independence and their expertise) determined that Tim Loehmann—rookie cop with the twitchy trigger finger in Cleveland—and Frank Garmback—veteran cop who has seen *Ronin* one too many times—were perfectly justified in screaming to a stop mere feet from a little boy, jumping out without hesitation, and opening fire to assassinate the child before they even had time to shout out a warning.

Their excuse? They couldn't know if the gun was real. They feared for their lives.

This is not meant to pillory Tim Loehmann or Frank Garmback; I'm sure there will be plenty of words thrown around the internet doing that dirty work. I would also bet that they were trained poorly and molded and raised in a toxic culture. I have no doubt they too are products of their systems, and they likely aren't "bad apples"—unless you want to label the entire department bad apples, which might actually be defensible, but it doesn't make them outliers.

I want to address the fact that this is a systemic problem, i.e., a broken system creates the problem. And I want to go larger; like, who's in charge here, anyway? Because someone made the system. The government made the system. Well, who made the government?

The death of Tamir Rice is my fault. And it's your fault. It's the fault of all of us in the US. You see, the people make the government. We allowed it to happen, and we continue to allow

it to happen. We allowed the courts to eviscerate our Constitutional rights against unreasonable searches and seizures and our due process rights protecting our lives and property. A shooting is a seizure. And a police shooting is the State taking a life without affording the victim due process of law. Then, when our courts slowly eroded any protections we had against police power, we did nothing about it. We stood by and we failed to lobby our legislators to fix what the courts continue to get wrong. We're generally apathetic. If we're not apathetic when it comes to protecting our own rights as citizens, we're certainly not effective.

With so many people acting as stakeholders in this problem—with so many of us at fault—I could write specific questions for all of US to inquire as to what this interest group or that interest group will do to change it. But we have to start big. This can't wait. Too many young black men are dying; and with every prosecutor that fails to bring an indictment, with every jury that acquits, and with every judge bound to follow bad precedent, the police have more power and more leeway to pull the trigger whenever they fancy, without fear of consequence.

(As an aside, I don't know why any legitimately responsible police officer would be afraid to do their jobs due to the YouTube effect. We can have people saying they can't breathe, dying at the hands of police on the side of the street for selling loosies; we can have young boys, not even old enough to shave, getting blasted at the playground without warning; and we can have mentally ill person after mentally ill person call the police for help only to have the police shoot and kill him when they finally arrive—we can have all that and indictments still don't come down from the people claiming to be able to indict ham sandwiches. So I really can't understand when police claim they are scared to do their jobs because of what might happen to them if they have a violent encounter. Police have the most powerful unions and lobbyists in the

country, they have the prosecutors in their corner, and the courts have given them free reign; police have nothing to fear if they are defecating on the law they're sworn to uphold, so they certainly have nothing to fear when they do their job responsibly.)

If you slept through high school civics, let me explain that no one can stop disaster on slippery slopes created by judges except legislators. Which means no one can stop disaster on slippery slopes except voters. Except we all know that's not true, because voters have about as much power to change our course as a sailboat in outer space. The only thing that talks in this country is money, especially after *Citizens United*. And the only people that legislators will even give the time of day are wealthy lobbyists. But that too can change.

As voters we can stop anything we want to stop. We can fix anything we want to fix. We can change the entire course of the country in a single election day if we'd just set aside our apathy and cynicism for a single day. But in order for that to happen, we need a little imagination. We need to recognize that things are not OK. We need to have faith that things can improve, because without that faith nothing will.

We have a problem. We get the police we deserve, and the police we have shoot people with impunity.

So let's go there. Let me ask a serious question of US—all of us; i.e., those of us with the NRA stickers on our big trucks; the quiet and responsible families who fill their freezer with their hunted game; the loudmouth, abrasive, foolish, and willfully-ignorant open-carry demonstrators; the picketers, protestors, and pot-smokers; the hobbyists and lobbyists; both the city-dwellers and participants in the great white flight; those still stuck in urban centers and impoverished minorities in in the rural south who must make herculean efforts to cast a ballot; the gun show organizers, sellers, and attendees; the veterans who like to go to the range to blow off some steam

and remember the good ol' days; the veterans who never want to touch a gun again; the hippie liberals who want to gut the right to bear arms like a cleanly shot buck; and all the people who love to defend the modern courts' interpretation of the 2nd Amendment:

What are we going to do about it?

And not just, "What are we going to do about Tamir Rice?" But what are we going to do about Jason Harrison, James Boyd, John Crawford III, Antonio Zambrano-Montes, Walter Scott, and a multitude more whose names don't make the national headlines? What are we going to do about police officers—of any race—having the power to shoot anyone they please with impunity, simply by reciting the magic words: "I feared for my life" and then hiding behind their union and their case law written by either elected or politically appointed judges?

What are we going to do about the *systemic* problem?

Does it not scare the ever-living hell out of you that a police officer can ambush you with gunfire, killing you dead, and then walk away with nary a scratch or a reprimand, simply because he saw what he believed to be a gun?

I need everyone to focus—particularly you Second Amendment people, because you can't ignore this one. This one directly implicates your beloved practices, e.g., lawful behavior, open-carry.

I need all of US to stretch our imaginations.

These are all imperatives: White people, don't get reflexively defensive because you get uncomfortable when people point out the very real and very damaging white privilege we enjoy. Those who cry "race baiting," don't get reflexively defensive because people point out our country's sordid history of racism and apartheid. Police, conservatives, and closet racists, don't get reflexively defensive when people say that

black lives matter—because guess what; they do. They matter. Instead of getting defensive and becoming willfully-ignorant to the plight of others, I truly think we can make a difference to show that black lives matter, to show that we can't tolerate this kind of policing.

White people, I want you to imagine this. (People of color don't need to imagine it; it's a real fear they live with every day.) White people, I want you to really try to bring that brain of yours to the next imaginative level. Imagine this plausible scenario of a young white child, roughly the same age as Tamir Rice when he was gunned down by agents of his government. (Well, the scenario is plausible up until the end; spoiler alert: white kids don't have to fear getting shot up by the police in the neighborhood park.)

Now Visualize.

You buy your son a pellet gun for his 12th birthday. Not even into high school yet, but he's responsible, and he needs to learn how to use his weapon wisely and safely. You take him out to the woods and you two plunk away at squirrels, and it's great bonding time. One day your son asks if he can go out himself and look for some grouse or rabbits or something. You say sure, because you trust him. He's your son, and besides being a sweet kid, he's pretty mature for his age.

So he walks into the woods from the park in your town, and he goes and legally hunts some small game, and he learns the beauty of the woods. He communes with nature, just as you taught him. After an hour or two, he emerges from the tree line. He strolls across an open field, making a beeline back to your shared home, which is not far from the park and the woods.

He is carrying his weapon, which is real, unloaded, and perfectly legal. You see, in Cleveland, where you live, it is legal to open-carry weapons, even handguns.

(As a side note, that's even more proof that you Second Amendment people have real clout in our political machinery, clout which could be put to good use—good use like changing police use-of-force laws. Until the Second Amendment people wielded their clout, Cleveland *did* have an open-carry ban until 2010, but the Republican legislature—supported and lobbied by none other than the NRA—usurped the home rule authority of municipal governments and decreed that the open carrying of weapons in the middle of the city was a matter of statewide concern that warranted legislation to allow open carry in all cities. The state legislators effectively prohibited municipalities from drafting and enforcing their own ordinances banning the open carrying of deadly weapons. So for, like, the past five years or something, everyone in Cleveland, indeed everyone in Ohio, has been operating under some of the most liberal open-carry laws in the country. Now before conservatives get confused, liberal in this context means permissive. In Ohio, not only is it legal to open carry long guns, it is legal to open carry handguns, and it has been legal for five years—more like nine, but of course there was litigation—which means Loehmann and Garback should have known that. And if they didn't know that, they should have. The Cleveland Chief of Police put out a memo to his entire division just last year to make sure his police knew that they could not detain individuals for open carrying, ensuring that it was crystal clear to his police officers that open carrying a weapon—even if it caused alarm to others—was legal activity that could not even support a charge of disorderly conduct.)

Your son though—he's daydreaming. He's thinking of how basketball season is just around the corner. He can actually smell the leaves changing color, and he gets this crazy feeling in his stomach when he thinks of the rut, which will be here in no time at all.

Your son, the kid you take hunting and fishing, the kid whose games you go to, the one whose diapers you changed, the one

you want to inherit the world from you: well, he has his head so far in the clouds that he doesn't even see the cop car that peels around the corner at a rate of speed much higher than twenty-five miles per hour. Your boy is kicking rocks on the ground when he finally looks up. By now, the cop car is so close to him, he flinches because he doesn't know if this car will run him over or not. He sees his short life flash before his eyes.

But then he can breathe. He will live after all. He relaxes when the car stops in time. He exhales and is about to give a sheepish wave to the police officer stepping out of the car. But then his head cocks to the side just a little bit. The breeze catches his dirty blond hair, and the golden strands flutter. Your son suddenly feels as if he has been punched, but he doesn't know why. He doesn't even feel the second punch, because he is dead. He has been shot three times by police before he even knew that they were there for him.

I know it's hard to imagine. It's hard for me to imagine as well. It's hard for me to imagine not because I lack empathy and not because I can't appreciate the pain of others, but because I don't believe that the parents of little white boys and girls have to worry about anything like that in any city in America. But parents of black children do have to worry about that.

Forget your politics for, like, a solid minute. If you could please, *please* put your twelve-year-old self into a park in Cleveland, and look at the world through the eyes of Tamir Rice or someone *just like him*.

A beautiful autumn day, rosy cheeks after a trek in the woods, the excitement of a good hunt, the casual carry of a perfectly legal item, and your son lies on the pavement of the park, his blood running out of his body. The police don't help him. Though a child who has been shot three times and is on the ground dead or dying poses no threat, they render no aid.

Your daughter—your oldest—she sees from the corner where she was talking to a friend. She tries running to help your son. Her blond ponytail whips back and forth as she runs to help her brother. But the police grab her. They won't let her near your son, though his blood soaks into the ground.

So doesn't that terrify you? I mean the courts have spoken, but *you, you* are reasonable, right? Do you think it is reasonable that police can just run around shooting law-abiding citizens and then simply hide behind the claim that they saw a gun while chanting the sacred police mantra, *I feared for my life?*

If you don't think it's reasonable—and *I* most certainly do not think our current police use-of-force laws are anywhere near reasonable—then you must do something about it. No one can do it for US, we have to do it ourselves.

This isn't about Loehmann or Garmback. This is about an entire society, an entire society that places little value on life and even less value on black or brown life.

Focus one last time. Imagine the image of your son, head cocked, blond hair caught in the wind, embarrassed and sheepish look on his face. Imagine a split-second shift in his eyebrows. He now looks confused. Imagine his hair soaking up the blood that's pooling under his body.

Now imagine you are now yourself again, but with this new knowledge of the world that you hadn't imagined before. You can't forget this image—this image of your son dying, dead. Yet in your life that no one ever talks about in the news, you as a parent get to see expert after expert talk about the men who assassinated your son; you get to hear them prattle on about how justified those men were. You get to hear how absolutely reasonably those men were acting when they drove a two-thousand-pound car within feet of your young son before shooting him dead within two seconds. After all, they saw a

gun. They feared for their lives.

Isn't it just maddening?

I think it is. And we're the only ones who can do anything about it.

I'm out.

-MJH

P.S. You'll be hearing more from me on this. I guarantee it.

Letters to Us: #1. May All Those Who Labor Find Rest

2015.09.06, Labor Day

Dear America,

You inspire me into a coma.