New Fiction from Andria Williams: “The Attachment Division”

1. The Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety

They were the survivors, they should have been happy, they should have been fucking thrilled (the President accidentally blurted that on a hot mic few years back, everyone quoted it until it was not even that funny anymore, but that’s what she’d said, throwing up her hands: “I don’t get it. They should all be fucking thrilled”), but three decades of daily existential dread had taken its toll. The evidence was everywhere: fish in the rivers poisoned not by dioxin runoff now, but by Prozac, Zoloft, marijuana, ketamine. There were drugs in the groundwater and the creeks and the corn. Birds were constantly getting high, flying into windshields, Lyfts, barbeque grills, outdoor umbrellas, the sides of port-a-potties. The different types of thunks their bodies made, depending on the material they struck, were the subject of late-night talk show jokes.

As for humans, the pills weren’t enough, the online therapy, in-person therapy, shock therapy, exposure therapy, clown therapy, none of it. The suicide rate hit twenty percent.

It was Dr. Anton Gorgias—still alive, now, at one hundred eight, and very active on Twitter—who initially proposed, and eventually headed, the Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety. The leaders of fifty-six nations came together to declare a worldwide mental-health crisis. Ironic, really, because the climate problem had been mostly been solved (the U.S being third-to-last to sign on to the Disaster Accords, just before Saudi Arabia and Equatorial Guinea. Thank God we even did, Steph sometimes marveled. She was twenty-seven;

people just ten or twenty years older than she was would often tell her she was lucky to have missed the very first years of the Wars; she'd think, yes, it had all been a real joy, thank you). Nothing could be reversed, but they could buy themselves some time, maybe even a few hundred years. That was in Sweden—of course it was Sweden—and so Minnesota was the first U.S. state to grab the ball and run with it, copying its spiritual motherland with only a smidge less efficiency.

Twelve states had Bureaus now, with more in the queue. But those states all looked to Minnesota, where the successes were measurable: suicide down by seven to nine points, depending on the study; people rating their daily satisfaction at a respectable 6 out of 10. It had once been two. Remember that, Stephanie's local director had told them in training. We brought it up to six. It used to be two.

Using combinations of genomic scanning, lifestyle analysis, and psychological evaluation, people could pinpoint their main source of anxiety and apply for its corresponding relief branch. The only hitch, at this point, was that each person could apply to only one branch. It was a budget and personnel thing, Steph explained when asked; the Bureau had its limits like anything else. People did not like being told they had to choose, but their complaints made Steph feel a little defensive. What more could people ask of a government agency? "At least we allow you to be informed," she'd pointed out to her parents, her sister, Alex, anyone who took issue. She was cribbing from the Bureau's original slogan, "It's the Most Informed Decision You'll Ever Make."

"Yeah," quipped Alex, in the recent last days before their breakup, when he claimed Steph was getting too sensitive, too cranky, too obsessively hung up on the death of her dad. "We should all be fucking thrilled."

People complained about other aspects, too: registration was a bitch, the waiting period took at least two years and there

was mandatory yearlong counseling, but, again—the numbers didn't lie. "It Used to Be Two" was now printed on the sides of bus stops, above the seats on the light rail.

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2. Never Laugh in the Presence of the Pre-Deceased

Steph worked for a small subset of Mortality Informance called the Attachment Division. The Attachment Division was tailored to people with anxiety caused by the prospect of loss: that their significant other might pass away before they did. This was what kept them up at night, what woke them with gasping nightmares. They wanted to know that they would die first, because the opposite horrified them. They could choose to be informed—if indeed they would be first to go—either six months or three months before their partner.

True, plenty of people registered for the program as newlyweds and then rescinded their applications a few years later, submitted them elsewhere. But Stephanie still liked this niche, this branch of the Bureau, for its slightly less self-involved feel, its unabashed sentimentality, the gamble its applicants were willing to make for love. A person had to put aside a bit of their pride to work for the Attachment Division. It was not considered one of the sexy branches. It was the Bureau's equivalent of an oversized, well-worn cardigan sweater.

I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. Each day I do my job with compassion and, above all, professionalism. I am on time, clean, and comforting, but never resort to intimacy. I remember that a sympathetic nod goes a long way. I do not judge or discriminate based on a Pre-Mortal's appearance, race, creed, economic status, or any other factor. I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason. I remember always that I, too, will die.

She recalled her classmate Devin, the first day of training, raising his hand and asking how the Attachment Division defined “intimacy.” Steph tried to get his attention, jabbing her finger silently at its definition on page four of their brand-new handbooks to spare him the embarrassment of asking something obvious, but he asked anyway. It turned out that “intimacy,” for a Mortality Informant, encompassed almost everything, other than 1) helping someone if they collapsed, and 2) the required shoulder squeeze upon first releasing information. They’d practiced The Shoulder Squeeze in the same Estudiante A/Estudiante B setup she remembered from high school Spanish, reaching out a straightened arm, aiming for “the meat of the shoulder.” “One, two,” the instructor had called, briskly clapping her hands. “One, two. Fingers should already be prepared to release on the two.”

“You could probably squeeze a little harder,” said Devin, diligent in his constructive criticism. “But that could just be me. I like a lot of pressure.” They practiced with classmates taller, shorter, and the same heights as themselves.

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3. Nils Gunderson, Neighbor

Steph settled onto a green metal bench across the street from the address she’d been given, swiped her phone, and logged into her Bureau account to access the file, waiting as it loaded. A long page of text came up. Mortality Informants like herself were required to read their cases’ backgrounds first, before viewing the image, to help prevent involuntary first impressions (which, it turned out, were unpreventable).

She jiggled her foot as she scanned, her flat shoes slapping lightly against her heel. Even a year and a half into the job, she was always nervous, right before. She'd been assigned to tell whoever came up on her screen —as professionally as she could, and because this was what they had requested, they had signed up for the program themselves — that in three months they would be dead.

The top line read, in bold, NAME: NILS GUNDERSON.

"Shit," she muttered. It wasn't that this name made anything worse, necessarily, but that it represented, to Steph, something particular. A man named "Nils Gunderson" would be what she thought of as one of the Old Minnesotans. A lot of them had moved out of the Cities the last few decades, but she — perhaps because she was not one, or only partially one (on her mom's side), her late father having been relocated to Minnesota from Thailand as one of thousands of the state's climate refugees — had a soft spot for the ones who'd braved the rapid change and stayed, the folks who loved their city and weren't freaked out by the people from all over the world who'd come, out of necessity, and often reluctantly, to live in it. She scrolled down: Nils Gunderson was forty-four years old, married to Claire, worked a desk job for the utilities company. Mother, Edna, still alive; father, Gary, dead of a heart attack at fifty. Four sisters, alive also. An adopted brother from Ghana, interesting. Thirteen cousins around the state. A large family, the traditional sort that believed in upward mobility, that had reproduced with diligence, steadily,

starting in Sweden or wherever five generations back, and then came here and just kept it up, moving through the world as if it all made sense, as if the world were bound to incrementally improve simply because they believed or had been told it would, naming their children things like Nils Gunderson. (Although it was worth noting that Nils Gunderson, himself, did not have children.)

She tapped “Open Photo.” But when she saw his face she gave a small jump, not because of anything alarming about the image itself, but because, surprisingly, she recognized him. He was the man who walked his cat past her apartment every night. He was someone she, casually but genuinely, liked.

The Bureau tried to prevent matching caseworkers with anyone they knew. Each time a name came in it was scanned against the lists Steph had provided: her mom and brother, extended family, ex-boyfriend Alex (newest name on her list), former bosses. But she hadn’t known this man’s name, and couldn’t list him. And so while it hadn’t happened until now, here she was, confronted with the face of a familiar person. Her phone buzzed with the drone update: he was ten minutes out, headed home from work now.

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So now she knew that the man who walked his cat past her apartment in the evenings had three months left to live. It would have been a sad piece of information even if she did not have to deliver it herself.

“Walking the cat” was an energetic phrase for her neighbor’s nightly routine. He and the cat strolled, really, in no hurry, stopping often, Nils Gunderson smoking, following the gray tabby which wore a red halter and leash. Stephanie had seen him just the night before, in fact, as she’d hip-nudged shut the door of her car, a cloth bag of groceries in each arm. He was shy and polite, middle-aged, always slightly rumpled-

looking, dressed in the way of a person who was not entirely proud of his body and embarrassed to have to select clothing for it. He wore, usually, an oversized gray t-shirt with the writing worn to nothing, baggy cargo shorts; his white legs slabbed into sandals that were themselves slabs. He had a way of answering her “hello” with a head motion that was both a nod and a duck, replying “How’s it going” so quietly she could hardly hear him—as if he were almost-silently, in a disappearing voice, reading the disappearing words on his shirt— then glancing fondly down at his halter-wearing cat as if glad for the distraction of it. He didn’t carry a phone, which was unusual. Maybe along with the cat and the cigarette that would have been too much. The cat’s name was Thor. Stephanie knew because she’d hear him try to chuck it up like a horse sometimes, a click of his tongue and a little jiggle of the leash: “Let’s go, Thor.”

Thor, who matched his owner with a slight chubbiness, did not go. Thor moved along the sidewalk with excruciating distraction, sniffing every crack in the pavement as he came to it as if solving a delicate mystery, inspecting each tuft of grass or weedkiller-warning flag (“No, no,” the man said with gentle concern, tugging it away, though he must have realized the flag was a joke, pesticides had been banned for two decades). It must take a world’s worth of patience to walk that cat three blocks, Stephanie thought. Or maybe this was the only opportunity the man had to smoke, and he was relieved not to hurry. Smoking was illegal indoors now, even in your own home, and you needed a license— one pack a week, but of course people still got cigarettes other places.

She hadn’t, all this time, known Nils’s name. But because she saw him almost daily she also saw him on the worst day of her life: the evening, six months before, when she’d gotten the phone call, at work, that her father had died. Frantic, numb, she’d only just texted Alex to tell him, and she pulled up in front of the apartment and couldn’t park her car. The space

was too small. In and out and in and out she tried, yanking the wheel, blind with tears, and the man with the cat, walking by, seeing her struggle, paused to direct her into the space. She remembered him in her rearview mirror, waggling his fingers encouragingly, holding up his hand, *Good, Stop*. His supportive, pleased thumbs-up when she finally got the car passably straight. And then she whirled out of the car and rushed toward her apartment, toward the blurry form of Alex who had come out to take her in his arms with the gorgeous, genuine sympathy of some kind of knight – Alex had held her and cried; he had loved her father, too – and she'd almost collided with the man-with-the-cat, who noticed, suddenly, her stricken, tear-streaked face, and said, quietly: *Oh.*

Just "oh." With a slight step back, and so much empathy in his voice, sorrow at having misjudged the apparent triumph of their situation. There was an apology in the *oh*, and she had felt bad later that she hadn't been able to reply, to say something stupid like No worries or even just thank him; she'd jogged forward in her haze of grief, her heart still revving helplessly, her stomach sick, while the man quietly tugged the cat's leash and walked away.

In winter, of course, she saw Nils and his cat far less. The cat would not have wanted to stroll in a driving January rain. But after she got back from her dad's funeral, and started to readjust to life, slowly, and notice the things she had noticed before, she liked spotting them. There was something endearing about the pair, the cat's refusal to move quickly or in a straight line, the man's attendant humility, his lack of embarrassment (in a neighborhood of joggers, spandexed cyclists, Crossfitters) at being an unathletic forty-something male out walking a cat.

Of course, the smoking, the lack of fitness might have contributed to Nils Gunderson's situation. Because there he was, looking back at her out of his profile photo with an almost hopeful expression, as if he were waiting for her to

speak so he could politely respond. She'd never had the opportunity to study him the way she now could, in the picture: gray-blue eyes, a slightly hooked nose, the gentle roll of a whiskered double chin cradled by what looked like the collar of a flannel shirt, a fisherman-style sweater over that. She flicked to her badge screen and held it loosely on her lap, closed her eyes a moment, preparing herself with the first line of the creed on a loop in her mind, because it was the most soothing to her. *I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not*— Her phone buzzed and she opened her eyes, glanced down, saw the newest drone update that he was two miles away, expected home in four minutes. He was driving a gray Honda Civic, and would be alone. *Please activate recording device,* the message concluded, *and Good Luck.*

The capitalized "Good Luck" always struck her as slightly odd, as if she were about to blast into space. But, glancing back down at Nils Gunderson on her phone screen, imagining him coming home to his wife—Claire, she read, was a librarian, Jesus; *it is not sad*—and his cat, she did feel a sudden drop in her stomach that could have been described as gravitational, or maybe it was just the gravity and density of the information she held, about to pass through poor Nils's unshielded, unprepared rib cage like molecules of uranium, changing him almost as much as his real death would. His death, according to her notes, would occur on September 8th, three months from today.

She pressed her recording button ("for quality control") and took a deep breath. She would be compassionate and professional and punctual and clean and non-intimate. It was the best she could do.

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That morning, not for the first time, she had typed a

resignation letter, then deleted it. She'd just had to tell a nineteen-year-old that her fiancée would die of a sudden, aggressive leukemia; that an 80-year old woman would lose her husband of 57 years. (Parents were exempted from the program until their children were at least 18, or else the whole world would have gone into chaos.)

"We're not all suited to the job," her friend Erica had said over the phone. "You know all the lifers are on drugs." Erica had quit the main Mortality Informance branch (not the Attachment Division) after eight years; now she had her Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and worked for a chocolate company, writing inspirational quotes for the inner foil wrappers. "Everything is for the best!" she'd write. "Kathy N., Lincoln, NE." Or, "Don't forget to giggle! – Lisa P., Detroit, MI." One night Steph and a very tipsy Erica had amused themselves by brainstorming the least inspirational quotes they could come up with. "Imagine opening your chocolate to find: 'Shut up.' – Jenny, Topeka, KS," Erica had laughed, wiping her eyes. "Or: 'Yes, it's probably infected.' – Marsha, Portland, ME."

"There are jobs out there," Erica had promised her, "that are so easy, you could cry. You don't have to make life so hard on yourself."

And here was his car now.

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Nils Gunderson parallel-parked, smoothly, a quarter of a block away, fumbled with something in the passenger seat for a long time—a backpack, Stephanie saw as he stepped from the car, hoisting it over one shoulder—and finally made his way in her direction up the sidewalk. He was slightly duck-footed; maybe this was more pronounced in his work khakis and brown shoes. There were light creases of sweat across the top of each khakied thigh.

Stephanie stood, patted her dark bun, smoothed her skirt, gathered her small shoulder bag and phone. She wore a butter-yellow shirt because she thought it a comforting color. The skirt, pale brown and A-line, was “sexy as a paper bag,” Alex had said: joking, she knew, but screw him anyway, she wasn’t supposed to look sexy at her job. He acted as if she should go out the door in a black leather miniskirt and stilettos, like some dominatrix angel of death.

Halfway across the street she was interrupted by a group of college-age kids, sprinting, shouting a breathless “Move!” and waving her out of the way. She knew what they were doing, playing a new game everyone was obsessed with, where they scanned their locations into their phones at surprise moments, and then their friends had ten minutes to get there and catch them. She heard people talking about it everywhere she went. They’d win virtual cash which they spent on an imaginary planet that they’d build, meticulously, from the first atom up. People spent months on their planets and were devastated when they lost; a guy had been shot over it in Brainerd the week before, and the game itself was causing traffic problems, accidental hit-and-runs, a lady’s small dog had been clipped right off the end of its leash by a speeding Segway. Steph jumped back as the three men plowed forward, one, at least, calling “Sorry” over his shoulder. “Hope your imaginary planet is awesome,” she snipped. Alex had been getting into this game; sometimes his phone went off at three a.m. and he’d dash out the door almost desperately. He had started to sleep fully dressed, even wearing his shoes. If she slowed him down by talking as he made for the door, he’d get crabby, in this weird, saccharine tone where she could tell he was trying to moderate his voice because he knew it was, at heart, an absurd thing to get irritable over. He was aware of that at least. So she’d started pretending to stay asleep. Then, once he left, she’d toss and turn angrily, obscurely resentful of this idiotic game. She was glad all that was over now, Alex and his dumb game, even though he had named his planet after her,

which was sweet. And last night she'd been tossing and turning anyway, but because he *wasn't* there, and she'd ended up fishing his basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves out of the back of her closet and wearing it to sleep— sweet Jesus. Was there no middle ground?

She had to catch up to Nils Gunderson. He was almost at the front door. "Mr. Gunderson," she called, trotting the last few steps in her flat, unsexy shoes. He turned, a quizzical smile crossing his face—not one of recognition, in the first instant, but because she was a small, non-threatening female person calling after him—and then growing slightly more puzzled as he placed her.

"Mr. Gunderson, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"I — sure," he said. "Wait. You — you live a few blocks that way." He pointed.

"I do. Please come over here, if you would." She gestured to the grassy strip alongside his building, wishing there were a bench closer by. It was good to have a place where people could sit down, but she didn't want to lead him all the way back across the street.

He followed her a few steps, as she asked him to verify his name, address, date of birth. He answered so trustingly, his grayish-blue eyes patient, politely curious, that she could hardly stand to see (as she flashed her badge) the dim knowledge gathering around their edges and then intensifying. She told him, in the plain language she'd practiced hundreds of times, that she was a Mortality Informant, reminding him gently that he had signed up for this program, had requested notification three months before his death, that he would pass away long before his wife, and that was why an Informant had been sent. No, she could not tell him when his wife would die, but it was far into the future. He paled before her eyes, she could see it happen, his mortality crashing in on him like the

YMCA wave pool he'd later tell her he'd loved as a child, arms outstretched, staggering backwards, chlorine, briefly, in his nose and throat—the exhilaration of having cheated death, which he was not cheating now. Steph placed one hand on his thick shoulder and gave it a squeeze, one, two. She was prepared for him to cry, to ask why so soon, so young, even his dad had made it to fifty; to tell her in shock to go away, fuck her, fuck the program, he wished he'd never heard of it: some people got very upset. They wanted this information in the abstract, but not the real, or they didn't want the moment of receiving it. Several mortality informants had been punched or kicked. Devin had once been chased three blocks. Now they had an emergency button on their phones that could call for backup.

But he surprised her. "Thank God," he said, his voice choked, overwhelmed. "Oh, thank God, thank God."

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It was close to eleven p.m. when she heard him. Windows cracked, crickets singing through the warm St. Paul night, and then suddenly a wail from street-level that sounded agonized, almost otherworldly. Somehow Steph suspected it was him even before she went to peek. From her second-story brick apartment she saw Nils Gunderson's large figure hunched on the bench below, the cat sniffing thoughtfully at a crushed cup.

I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason.

The wail was followed by distinct, repetitive sobs; someone cycling down the street glanced over, pedaled on.

I remember always that I, too, will die.

"Fuck," she muttered. She yanked off Alex's old basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves and threw it onto the couch. Strode out the door and down the wooden stairs in her

baggy, checked pajama pants and ribbed tank top.

When she stood next to him, he looked up, his face swollen, tear-streaked, awful.

“You can’t do this,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest, self-conscious of her braless state. “I’m not supposed to talk to you.”

“I’m not doing *any*thing,” he said. “I come to this bench every night.” She glared at him and he added, automatically, “I’m sorry.”

For a moment they both stood, staring at the black, puddled street. There’d been a late afternoon rain. Four young men raced by on bikes, whooping, phones in their hands, the thin tires splitting the puddles in two like bird-wings.

“That is the dumbest game,” Nils Gunderson said, and before she could stop herself Stephanie let out a dry chuckle. He looked at her gratefully. Tapped his shirt pocket. “Smoke?”

She hesitated. The first week of training they’d had to swear off cigarettes, alcohol, weed, opiates, anything that might dull or heighten their sensitivity to other people. The database bounced them from liquor stores and dispensaries. Their mornings began with fifteen minutes of guided meditation on their phones, setting their intentions for the day. Their intentions, it turned out, were always to be compassionate, professional, punctual, clean, and non-intimate. Meditation annoyed her. She recalled Alex coming out of the shower one morning, a towel around his waist, and spotting her meditating (she’d cracked one eye just a sliver when she heard the door); grinning, tackling her, teasing her until she turned the phone face-down and just let it drone on. That had been a fun morning.

Nils held out a cigarette.

“Yes, please,” she said.

He scooted over and she sat down beside him. He lit her cigarette. The nicotine wrapped her brain in the most welcome hug, tight, tighter, like a snail in a shell. God, now she craved a drink.

Nils talked. He was worried about his wife. The librarian, Claire. “She’ll be so lonely,” he said.

“When you signed up for this program,” Steph said, rallying her work-voice though she felt worn out, “there was an unselfishness to your act. Remember that.”

“Okay,” he said. “That makes me feel better. Talk about that a little more. I mean, if you don’t mind.”

Steph took a drag, exhaled. If she could just smoke all the time her job would be a lot easier. “We’ll have a team of grief counselors, a doctor, and after-care staff at your home within minutes of your passing. Claire won’t be left alone until her family can get there. The best thing you can do when you feel it happening is to quietly go lie down. It’s less upsetting for everyone.” Steph looked at him, his bleak expression heavying his face. She could see him imagining his own, undignified death, gurgling facedown in a cereal bowl, slumped in the shower while water coursed over his beached form. She repeated, “Remember that, just go to the bedroom and lie down.”

“She has a sister in Sheboygan,” Nils began.

“We know. We have it all on file.”

“Will you be one of the people there with her?” He’d suddenly developed the ability to cry silently and abundantly, like a beautiful woman in a film. Tears ran down his cheeks. He picked at his bitten thumbnails, weeping.

Steph shook her head. “It’s a separate team. My job was only

to inform you.”

“I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

“I can put in a request for something to help you sleep, but only for the next few nights. We don’t want you sleeping away the last three months of your life. Try to enjoy yourself, Nils. Go on a vacation. Sit outside. Re-watch your favorite movies, go to restaurants.” She thought of her friend Erica and her chocolate-wrapper slogans. “Remember to giggle. Watch the sunrise. Have a lot of sex.” That was not from a chocolate wrapper; that was what happened when she winged it. She should never wing it. “If you can. I mean, maybe not tonight. Give it a week or so.”

He glanced at her, tear-streaked. “Have sex with Claire, you mean.”

“Well, of course. That’s what I meant.”

“Just checking. I don’t know what kind of advice you guys give. You’re all so smug,” he added after a moment, but in a sad voice, almost to himself, and it would turn out this was as insulting as he got.

“We’re really not,” Steph said.

“Should I tell her?”

“I can’t make that decision for you.”

They sat for a while; Steph accepted another cigarette. The cat rubbed against her pajama pants, his back arched, tail upright and quivering. She reached down to pet him. His fur was slick and soft as a seal’s.

“That one time I helped you park,” Nils began.

Steph looked at him.

“You were crying,” he said. “I felt terrible. I didn’t even

notice until after you got out of the car.”

“It’s not your fault. I mean, I was in a car. You probably couldn’t see my face clearly. You were being nice by helping me out.”

“I just remember giving you this really stupid thumbs-up, and I was still holding it when you almost ran into me. Just grinning with my thumbs up, like a fucking idiot.”

“It was a really tight parking spot.”

“What were you crying about?”

Now her own eyes were stinging. “My dad,” she said after a minute. “I’d just found out he died.”

“Oh.” There it was again, Nils Gunderson’s *oh*. Steph’s vision swarmed. Nils said, “I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah,” said Steph, an edge of bitterness to her voice. “Car accident. Can’t really be prepared for something like that.”

“He wasn’t in – in the program? Like I am?”

She smiled bleakly. “He didn’t believe in it.”

Nils nodded, looked out at the street again. “I’m wondering if it was a mistake. For me, I mean.”

Steph hesitated. “Everything always works out for the best,” she said, and then stopped. “No, that’s bullshit. It’s total bullshit. Sometimes things just don’t work out at all. Sometimes people die and it’s just fucking sad.” His mouth dropped slightly and she sped up: “But I don’t think that’s the case with you and Claire. I mean, that any part of this is bullshit. I think – I think you’ve had a wonderful life together and you’ve done right by her. And that signing up for this program was the right thing to do.” She rallied: “It was the most informed decision you could have made. I believe

that. I do, Nils.”

“Thank you.” He wiped his face on both arms. Droplets glittered on the hair. “That was really nice of you to say. Will you meet me here tomorrow night?”

She tossed her cigarette onto the pavement – also illegal, she didn’t care right now – and Nils ground it out with his shoe. “I can’t,” she said.

As she got up, scuffing back toward her apartment in flip-flops, he called: “What department did you sign up for, anyway? For yourself?”

She was honest: “I didn’t sign up for any.”

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4. The Confession

But he was back out by the bench the next evening, a large, forlorn form in the dark, this time standing and looking directly up at her building. He was holding something in his hands. Steph waited him out, tried to do the crossword puzzle in the Strib, made a cup of tea, dumped it in the sink. If this kept up, she would certainly lose her job before she could make any decisions herself about it. “Jesus fuck,” she said finally, flip-flopping downstairs.

He immediately apologized in a voice so hoarse she could barely hear him. “I’m sorry, but I need your help. I made something. I was wondering if you would listen to it for me, tell me if it’s okay.” He added ominously, “It’s the most important thing I’ve ever made.” He thrust the package toward her. It was wrapped in newspaper and he had triangled the corners, taped them. If he’d had a bow he probably would have put one on. “What are you *wearing*?” he blurted. “Do you play basketball?”

Steph’s cheeks flared as she fingered the edge of the

sweatshirt, which went down to her knees. “Oh. It was my boyfriend’s. Ex-boyfriend’s. I shouldn’t be – I shouldn’t be wearing it.”

Nils’s eyes widened, wet. “Did he die?”

“God, no. It’s not like I – *make* people die,” Steph said, and then she started to laugh, an odd, cathartic laugh, one hand over her eyes. She realized she hadn’t laughed all day. She wheezed until she half-bent over, holding her waist with the other arm. The thought of herself as some cursed being, walking around while people dropped away like playing cards – it was too much. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, waving her hand, getting control of herself. She was not supposed to laugh in the presence of the pre-deceased.

But he was chuckling, too, tears blinking on the edges of his eyelids. He was laughing simply because she was laughing, out of some empathetic impulse. For a split second she wanted to hug him. She could probably get away with a shoulder squeeze. Lord knew she was royally fucking this up already. Instead she pinched her nose, took a deep breath, looked down at the item as he handed it to her. “What is it?” she asked.

“It’s just – things I wanted to tell Claire. Things I want her to know about me. I feel like, after all this time, she should know everything about me. Before we’re parted forever.”

“Maybe not forever,” Steph tried, regretting it the moment it came out.

He brightened. “You think so?” Whispered: “Do they teach you something in school the rest of us don’t know?”

“No,” Steph said. “I’m sorry. Why are you asking me for advice on your – your recording? I’m not, like, a writer or artist or anything.”

“But you’re honest. I can tell. And I want you to be honest

with me, tell me if you think it’s any good. Promise me you’ll listen to it,” he said.

“There’s a chance people shouldn’t know everything about somebody else,” she cautioned.

He shook his head. It was the most emphatic thing she’d seen him do. “That’s not true,” he said, nearly defiant. “This is me and Claire we’re talking about here.”

*

Back upstairs, she tugged open the newspaper to reveal a memory stick tucked up against a pack of Marlboro Reds. She smiled in spite of herself, cracked the window.

The file was enormous. He had talked for twelve hours straight: indoors, perhaps while Claire was at work; outside, voices in the background, cars swishing past. Initially, he was quite poetic. He must have been a reader, Steph thought, to marry a librarian.

He talked with a low urgency, but slowly, clearly, his voice growing drier by the hour. Steph, sitting with a notepad and pen, initially tried to jot helpful notes.

“My first memory,” Nils was saying, his voice strong at this point, “is of my own foot. I must have been six or seven months old. I remember looking at it in my crib, grabbing it, marveling. I think I found my foot beautiful. The toes were lined up in descending order like small pearls, the nails pink as areolas.”

Steph frowned. “Shifting point of view,” she scribbled. “A baby wouldn’t be able to make these comparisons.” Then she crossed it out. “Which foot?” she wrote. She crossed that out, too.

Nils roamed on, through his toddler years, a dog bite, falling off a tall piece of playground equipment, the disappointment

of the local pool shutting down for water conservation (Steph didn't even remember public pools – a startling idea, to have your body in the same water as a bunch of strangers'), accidentally wetting his pants in first grade, his first memorable, puzzling erection a year or so later, and how his mom had spanked him afterward. He didn't think the two were related, but he couldn't be sure. "Maybe more positive memories," Steph suggested.

"Dad used to tell me I was a quitter," Nils was saying, two hours later. "I quit four jobs in high school. I quit the football team because half the guys were assholes. I quit lunchtime Spanish club. There are forty-six books in our house I've never read, Claire. Forty-six. You've read all of them. I didn't make it to Grandma Clark's funeral. I'm a failure in so many ways. I feel like I've never stuck with anything except you, Claire. You're the only thing worth sticking by."

Steph noted the time and wrote, "Sweet."

"And Thor," Nils amended. "I've stuck by Thor." He went on a brief tangent of memories about the cat, charming particularities of its behavior. "Good!" wrote Steph. Smiley-face.

"But," the recording went on, "I'm still ashamed. If I'm being really honest, Claire, I'm ashamed. Because I've had so many secret thoughts in my head. Do you ever wish we could know each other's thoughts, Claire? What would happen to the world if we could all be inside each other's heads?"

Steph yawned, a cigarette dangling from her left hand. It was the middle of the night but she couldn't seem to stop listening. Outside, crickets sang.

"The thing is, Claire," Nils went on, "you're so good. I've realized I'm not as good and I wish I could find a way to make it up to you. I know you don't sit there at the library checking out every guy who walks in but I look at girls all

the time. I mean like all kinds of girls and women. I can't help it. Teenage girls, older women. I can't help but notice their bodies in their clothes. Sometimes I think about them later. And I know that's so hypocritical because I'm no Ricardo Lee myself [an action-movie star]. I've never even taken very good care of my feet. I should have made my feet look better for you. I should have lost weight for you, Claire. Sometimes I thought about it but I could only stick to a diet for, like, three hours. I have no self-control."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Steph wrote.

"Sometimes, when we'd make love, Claire, I'd picture someone else. Rhonda Jones [a prominent Black actress]. Remember that movie where she had sex with Ricardo Lee? I would think about that a lot when we'd make love. Just the way her breasts bounced. I would picture them and it would help me, you know, get there." Steph felt her nose crinkle. "And sometimes I would picture your sister. Not Marla: Kate. When we went on that beach vacation to Ocean City I felt terrible because that was some of the best sex of our lives and I was picturing Kate in her orange bikini most of the time. You were always so self-conscious about your small chest but it never really bothered me. The only thing I really should have been feeling, every day with you, was gratitude. You know?" Nils was crying now and Steph, at a loss, had turned to doodling swirls in the margins of her notepad. "That's the part that just kills me. Why did I waste any of you, Claire? You're precious to me. The only thing I ever should have felt was gratitude."

Steph clicked on the screen: there were still five hours remaining. She closed the computer. It was nearly time for her to go to work. She was going to be a mess. She had only four cigarettes left and she felt too sick even for coffee. She turned the shower as hot as she could, briefly pondered her own smallish breasts, washed her hair three times to get the smoke out, braided it down her back, changed into fresh clothes, and drove to work.

*

5. Feedback

Nils waited two evenings, respectfully, before returning to the bench. “I didn’t want to rush you,” he said. He was composed, even a little eager, but slightly puffy through the face. He had freshly showered and shaved and was wearing a polo shirt, and the overall impression was that he had been sort of scraped, steamed, and stuffed. It made him look both less tired and more so at the same time. “I’m trying to look better for Claire,” he explained. “I even brushed Thor.” The cat did look sleek.

“Have you told her yet?” Steph asked.

“No. I’m waiting a little longer.”

“That must be hard,” she said, as if it were the only hard thing about the situation. When his eyes began to water she changed the subject. “Your recording,” she said.

He brightened. “What did you think? I decided to call it The Confession. Because that’s what it is. The truest thing I’ve ever told anyone.”

“Yeah,” said Steph. “I think—I think you should definitely not give it to Claire.”

Nils’s face changed utterly with confusion. “What?”

“It’s just – I think you want to leave her with the best possible memories of you. With – with this,” she said, indicating his hair, his shirt. “These are the last memories of you she’s going to have for her entire life. I think you want them to be positive, you know?”

“But it’s the truth,” he said.

Steph made a small irritated sound. “Lots of things are the

truth," she said. "Think about Claire—"

"All I ever think about is Claire."

"Apparently not," said Steph, and then apologized. "You shouldn't give someone a confession they can't respond to. It's – unethical. She'd be stuck with just your words here, and who knows exactly how she'd interpret them? Which ones she'd focus on? What if she doesn't hear all the times you're telling her you love her, and just thinks endlessly about the other stuff? Why do you need to confess, anyway? I hate to break it to you, but nothing on this recording is that bad. It's just – it's just kind of inappropriate. You know?"

"But it's the truth."

"Yes, you keep saying that, but this is your marriage and your life, Nils. Do you really want it to be some kind of social experiment, or do you want it to be warm and loving and meaningful? Don't shoot yourself in the foot here. You want – you want Claire to feel like she made a good decision with her own life," Steph blurted helplessly. "That she made the best possible decision."

Nils stood quietly a moment, seeming to shrink slightly into himself. "And you think she didn't," he said.

Steph felt a wash of shame. "That's not what I meant to say."

"No, I understand," he said, not accusingly, but as if reeling with the thought. He spoke slowly, almost as if in wonder. "When I expressed my truth, it became clear to you that I was not Claire's best decision."

How many ways, Steph wondered, am I going to be forced to hurt this man? "I think giving her this recording is not the best decision," she said. "I think *you* were probably a great decision."

He nodded to himself, his eyes brimming again. "Well, thank

you for listening to it," he said. "And for your time. I know I took a lot of your time and energy. I feel bad about that. I took a lot of your emotional energy."

"Don't feel bad," said Steph, exhausted.

"It was really helpful to talk to you," Nils said. He began to shuffle down the street, looking defeated. Thor, gleaming like a tiny streetlight, followed. Then Thor stopped, and Nils stood two feet from Steph making encouraging kissy sounds, and the cat started up again. And then stopped. And then started, and then stopped. Nils tried to gaze up at a tree. I am going to actually die right now, Steph thought.

But she wasn't. Or, at least she didn't think she was.

*

6. The Game

For the next few weeks, Steph was careful not to encounter Nils. She grocery-shopped on Saturday mornings, instead of after work, and she did not go outside during his walking hours. It helped that there were weeks of heavy rain, shining in intermittent sunlight, the gutters constantly steaming as if they breathed. It was not ideal weather for Thor to stroll in.

When her termination notice came, she was not surprised. She wondered, briefly, if Nils might have reported her, but her supervisor produced drone images: she and Nils smoking on the bench. There had been a brief investigation, agents sent to Nils's apartment. Loyally, unaware of the photos, Nils claimed that Steph had refused to speak to him outside of work and never had; Steph smirked at his sporadic attachment to truth. Her supervisor, noting her smirk, reminded her that there was nothing funny about being a Mortality Informant, and that was why it was necessary that she now seek another career.

“Maybe there’s sometimes something funny about it,” Steph said.

Her supervisor told her to pack up her desk.

*

September 8th nagged at Steph on her wall calendar; her eye flicked to it again and again. When the morning came, hot and bright, she found herself unable to sit still. She circled want ads in the paper – low-paying jobs working with the disabled, or small children – and finally went for a run. She passed Nils’s street but could discern nothing out of the ordinary; cars lined both sides, as always, and there didn’t seem to be any more or less than usual. She found herself running faster and faster, the steamy air filling her lungs, her heart pounding frantically and ecstatically until it seemed to fill her whole chest and body and vision and mind. She reached a bench at a park half a mile away and bent over, gripping its metal back, nearly hyperventilating. Her mind was filled with an enormous, pulsing red. It bloomed and bloomed as if trying to push her eyeballs out. Steph dropped to her knees. The ground was muddy and gritty beneath them, pungent, slightly cool. The tiny rocks in it hurt. She tried to spit on the ground, but hit her own thigh.

“Miss?” an unfamiliar male voice asked. “Are you alright?”

She looked up.

“Are you part of The Game?” he asked. “Are you looking for John?”

It took her a moment to parse this. “No,” she said. “I’m not. I was just jogging. Just a little out of shape.” She added, with manufactured effort to pass the nausea, “Good luck with your Game!”

She wasn’t really out of shape, but the man took her word for

it and politely moved on. Besides, he was looking for John. When Steph’s vision had cleared, she walked slowly toward home, hand on her cramping ribcage, small spots still dancing around the corner of her eyes. Just go lie down, Nils, she thought, as if she could send him a message with her mind. Just go lie down.

When she got home, she staggered, exhausted, into her tiny bedroom, laid on her back the bed, and balled her fists into her eyes. She was soaked with sweat, small pebbles spattering her knees like buckshot. She no longer had access to her work files, of course, but she imagined the notification that would have popped up: CASE CLOSED. Her chest tightened again and she rolled onto her side, reaching back to yank hard on her ponytail, a habit she had in moments of grief. It was almost enough to shock her out of any emotion, that pull, hard and fast.

She must have fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes again the sunlight was slanted, descending. She sat up, clammy, rubbed the pebbles from her knees. Wiped her eyes. She would find a new job, buy groceries, call her mom. When she stood, she let out a small sigh, which sounded like *oh*.

Book Review: Lauren Hough’s

‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’ and Sari Fordham’s ‘Wait for God to Notice’

“I was like an inept spy pretending to be American based on movies I’d watched and books I’d read.”

— Lauren Hough, ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’

“In 1984, we would arrive in Texas, and we might as well have been aliens.”

— Sari Fordham, ‘Wait for God to Notice’

*

In Lauren Hough and Sari Fordham’s recent memoirs, human life reads like a series of parallel universes. Both authors’ families moved, globally, for religious motivations, many times when they were young: Hough grew up in seven countries, while Fordham lived in Uganda as a child, then Texas, Georgia, and, later, South Korea. The religions here are not exactly the connection (though in each author’s case, religion is arguably their first culture, their first universe). Hough grew up in an abusive cult called The Family (Children of God), while Fordham’s Adventist family was close-knit, loving, and devout.

Rather, the connection is Hough and Fordham’s attunement to the many different worlds of their lives, which they navigate from very young ages: observing, skirting the edges, shifting their behavior when necessary. Hough and Fordham both describe the shock and dance of trying to match these as they are moved from place to place, culture to culture.

Their memoirs beg the question: Are we the same people we are now as when we were young? Are we the same people when we have

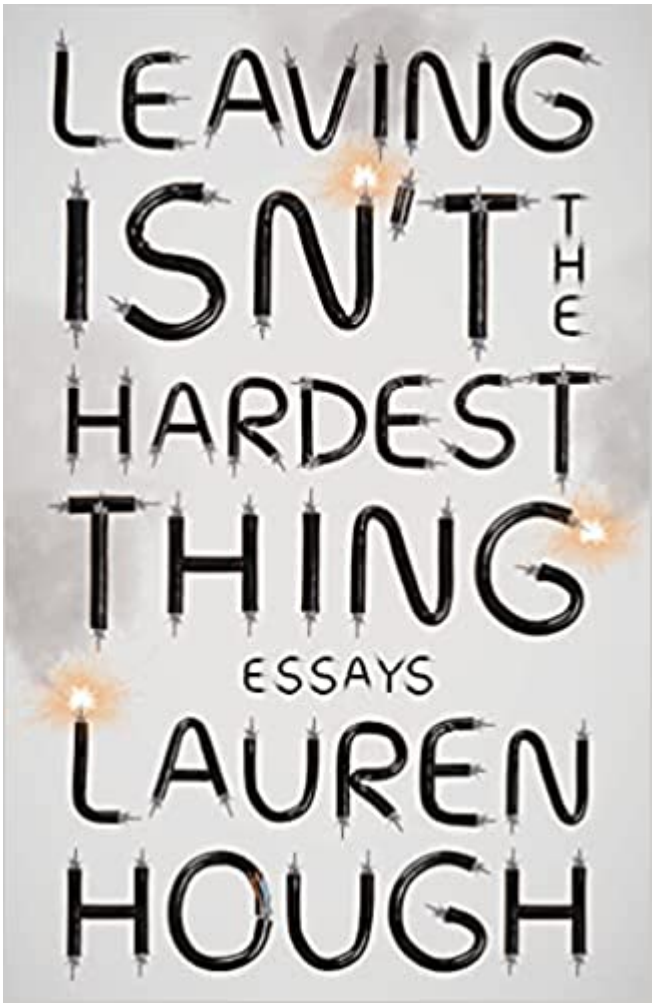
changed lifestyles, allegiances, mannerisms, attitudes? How much choice do we have in how we become who we are?

Both Hough and Fordham have a complex understanding of what it means to be sometimes lonely or left out, peripheral, wondering; excluded or bound by place or newness or religion, by politics or sexuality or ethnicity, or by whatever power structure is currently in place; to be thrown at the world in various ways that are sometimes neither fair nor wholly deterministic. These two beautiful memoirs are deeply moving, funny and observant and sometimes very serious, but always attuned, and always stunningly, openly, thrown.

1. **“Where Are You From?”:** Lauren Hough’s ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’

Lauren Hough opens her memoir with a lie. Or, rather, with the lies she tells other people when they ask where she is from. They can’t place her accent, her manners.

If you ask me where I’m from, I’ll lie to you. I’ll tell you my parents were missionaries. I’ll tell you I’m from Boston. I’ll tell you I’m from Texas. Those lies, people believe.



Where Hough is “from,” at least in one sense, is an Apocalyptic cult called The Family (formerly Children of God), where the Antichrist was a constant imagined presence and children were passed around for sexual “sharing nights” with adults. For Hough, who never fit in with the expectations of the cult (gender and otherwise), this was a source of shame, fear, and resentment. She was once badly beaten for not smiling. These are some of the milder details, and many are very sad.

This – the cult – is an important fact about her. But it is not the only fact.

She’s also empathetic and funny as hell. (“Sometimes all you can do is fucking laugh.”) She is a champion of the underdog. Her attention to the ties that bind people – spiritual belief, escaped religion, the military, terrible jobs, homelessness, family, love – runs throughout the book. When Hough finds a

novel in Barnes & Noble which lists in the author bio, “raised in the Children of God”:

You’d have thought I was a closet case buying lesbian erotica the way I carried that book…I had to buy three other books just so it wouldn’t stand out.

Upon escaping the cult, Hough joins the Air Force. The thing is, she is a self-admitted “closet case” in more ways than one, and this is under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (which, in retrospect, sounds like it could have been a name for her cult). Eventually, after “Die Dyke” is written on her car and then her car is set on fire, *she* is the one expelled under Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.

It’s grossly unfair. It’s also not entirely surprising to anyone associated with military culture.

I thought I’d find something in the military. I’d wear the same uniform as everyone else. They’d have to accept me because I was one of them. I’d find what every book I read, every movie I watched, told me I’d find friends and maybe even a sort of family, a place where I belonged.

But all I’d done was join another cult. And they didn’t want me any more than the last one had.

*

After leaving the Air Force, Hough is temporarily homeless, sleeping in her car. Her caring and fiery passages in defense of the working poor and the unhoused, replete with her trademark lush cursing, are refreshing to read.

She eventually finds an apartment with her friend, Jay [also military discharged for “homosexual admission”]. It has only one bed, which they must share, and the gallows humor is off the charts:

All I cared about was that we had a door and a roof, a

bathroom….I had a home. It was hard at first to focus on anything but that relief. But you can't share a twin bed past the age of ten unless you're related or fucking. Jay's an aggressive cuddler. I'm an unrepentant snorer. There wasn't even room to build a pillow wall between us. So after a few sleepless nights of his telling me to roll over and my trying to shove him just hard enough to get him away from me without throwing him onto the floor because I thought the hair on his legs was a mosquito, we headed to Walmart. The cheapest air mattress was $19.99. But in a stroke of genius, we found a five-dollar inflatable pool raft in the clearance section of sporting goods. It's probably a good thing we bought it. Anyone hoping to stay afloat in a pool would have drowned.

Jay, whose shift at the bar ends earlier, claims the bed. Hough gets the raft.

*

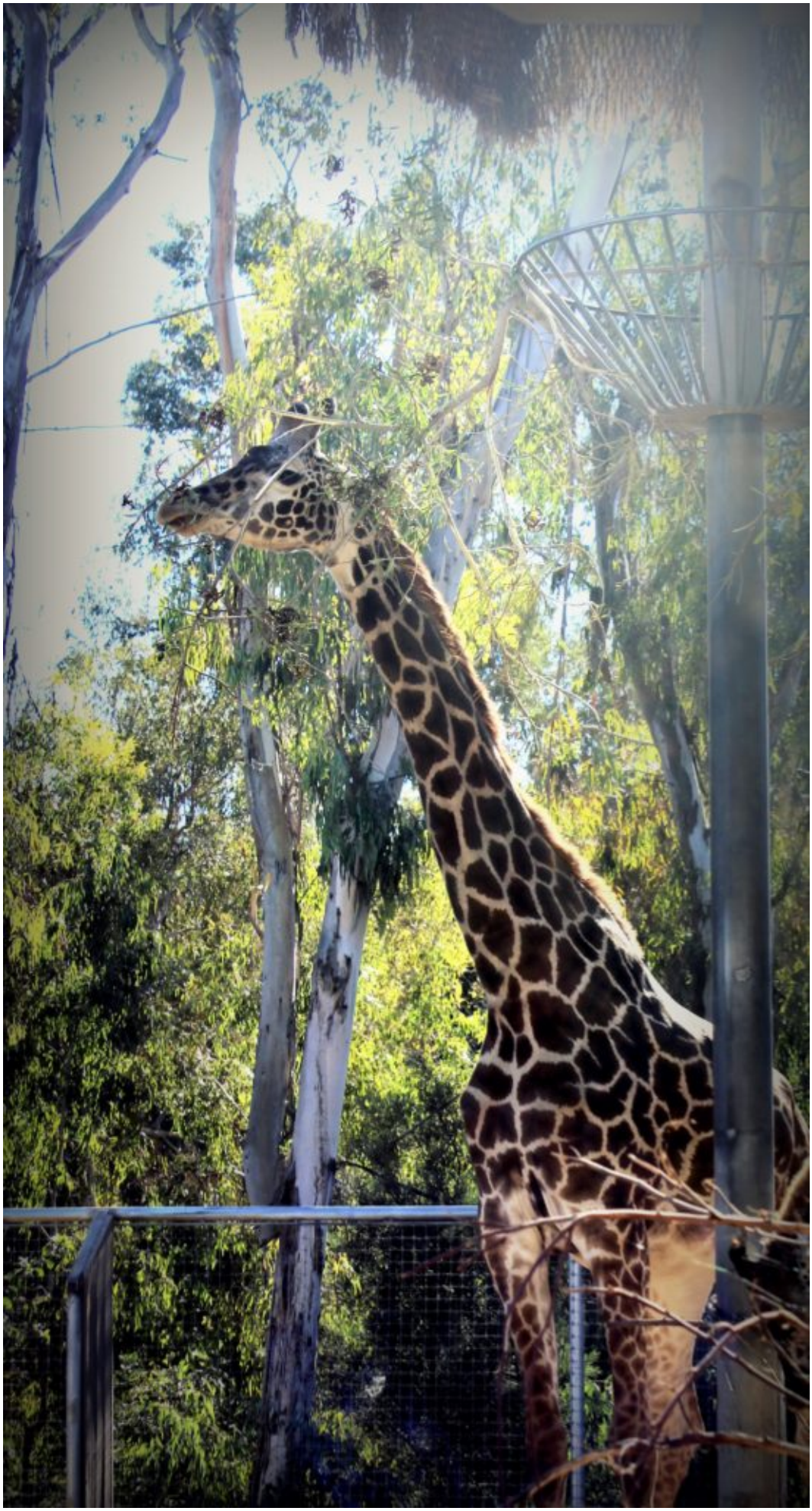
'Leaving' made me wonder, then: What does it mean to be "defiant?" Hough has experienced defiance in every form: early on, defiance of herself; defiance of authority; defiance on behalf of other people who need it. This may be one of the most cohesive threads running through her personality as presented in 'Leaving': a keen attention, almost an instinct, for the way people are forced to duck and hide, reveal themselves, band together, survive. She's had experiences with power structures most of us would not want.

"I was going to be normal," Hough vows, once she's on her feet, with a steady job as a bouncer and a home of her own. She is out of the cult. She has joined the world of what The Family had called the "Systemites."

But one day, traveling through Texas and suddenly curious, she decides to go back to the Texas site of the original cult. It's an incredibly lovely, lonely scene.

If anything remained of the old buildings, I couldn't tell

from the fence line….[But] the fence was all wrong. …[It was] black steel and eight feet tall. I was busy staring at it when a family of ibexes with their twisted antlers bolted out of a mesquite clutch. That's not a sentence found in nature. Then I looked up. Towering above us all stood a single fucking giraffe, probably wondering why the trees wouldn't grow tall enough to chew. You're not supposed to identify with a fenced-in giraffe that doesn't belong in Texas. I rolled to a stop and stared at the poor animal, awkward, lonely, and completely fucking lost.



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I don’t want to spoil the very last scene of the book, which is so gorgeous I teared up typing it out to a friend. It’s set back in Hough’s cult days and involves a wonderful, visually beautiful act of youthful defiance among a group of children. You cannot help but cheer them on: *Defy* it!

Lauren Hough’s ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’ is a glorious, raucous, fuck-you to anyone who has abused their power, and a love letter to those who have endured it. That is where she is from.

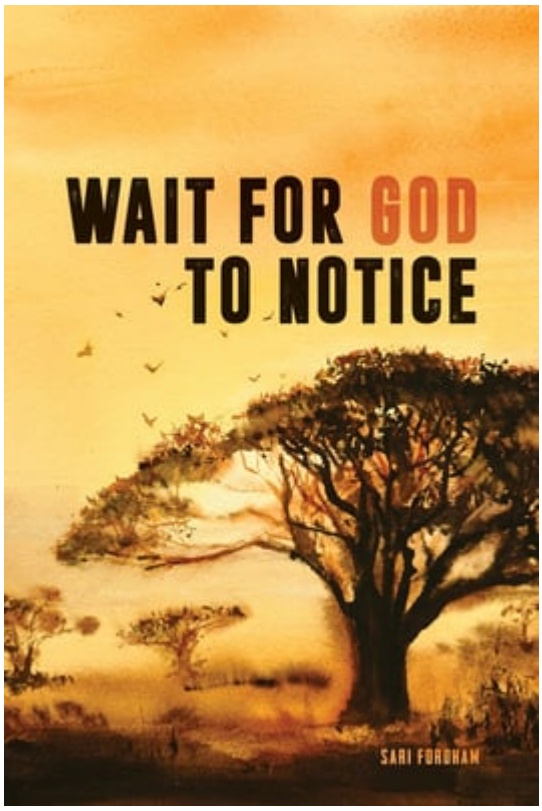
***

2. **“What are you doing here?”: Sari Fordham’s ‘Wait for God to Notice’**

In South Korea, where I had once lived and where Sonja [my sister] still lived and worked, we were known as ‘You Fordham sisters.’….Sonja’s husband added to the mantra. On long trips in the car, he would sigh, ‘You Fordham sisters and your stories,’ and we would realize we had spent long hours passing familiar narratives back and forth. The stories began like this:

1. *Wouldn’t Mom have liked this?*
2. *Remember that time in Africa?*
3. *We were such outcasts in the States, such nerds.*

The last was the most developed narrative. It was the one that started us laughing. It is not difficult to spot a missionary – there is something about the hair, the dress, the earnest eyes. We had all that and more. We were the kind of missionary children that other missionary children found uncool. When we stepped into our respective American classrooms, we never had a chance.



When she is very young, Sari Fordham's family moves to Uganda, where her father will serve as an Adventist minister. Her Finnish mother, Kaarina, packs up the two girls – Sari and her older sister, Sonja – and they fly halfway across the world to meet him.

As missionary kids it is, obviously, a religious childhood (Fordham's young friends, bored on the Sabbath because games aren't allowed, sneakily devise a game of Bible Freeze Tag, in which, unfreezing each other, they recite a Bible verse: "'Jesus wept,' we shouted. 'Rejoice in the Lord always,' we shouted"). But it is by all accounts a loving one, within a close-knit family, in which her parents are genuinely concerned for the people they serve.

First arriving in Uganda, however, the Fordham sisters feel their visual difference acutely:

The children darted forward in ones and twos, laughing. How could anyone be as drained of pigment as we were? They touched our skin and held tentative fingers toward our hair….The children stared at us, and Sonja and I stared back.

Soon, being children, they settle in. They play with the other kids. Fordham chronicles the lush, often fun, and occasionally terrifying moments of her Ugandan childhood, where snakes drop from the trees, fire ants climb over her sleeping infant body until her parents follow the trail and notice; and where in an airport, guided by her mother's careful calm masking enormous fear, they have to shake hands with Idi Amin.

One of my favorite passages (indulge me) is an example of Fordham's riveting and lyrical writing – as well as a lovely insight into memory, and how we claim our own life events – when her mother, who has been reading *Animals of East Africa*, takes them to see the hippos:

The water stirred with hippos…Adult hippos can't swim. They walked along the river's floor, occasionally propelling themselves to the surface…Those on the bank seemed to hitch up their trousers and haul themselves up. In the distance, there was snorting and flashing of teeth. The river boiled around two or three angry hippos – it was hard to know – and then the water and the vegetation settles as they resolved their differences. The hippos moved up the bank, a hippopotamus migration, and they stood, majestic, on the shore.

This is how you would remember: you took a picture. You would later have something concrete to hold onto. That hippo would be yours. You could make as many copies as you liked, and you could show people. See, this really happened. You would have tangible proof. And you would own something magnificent.

*

After Idi Amin's violent rise to power ("soothing" widows of the disappeared on the radio by telling them their husbands are not dead, they must have just run off with another woman), missionary families are forced to leave the country. And so the Fordhams head home.

But where is home?

At first, it is Texas. “Boys fidgeted in their jean jackets, their legs draped across the aisle. *We are Texas men*, their posture said. *Who are you? And what do you want*?”

Fordham’s account of her sister Sonja’s first day of seventh grade is so tender it is almost hard to read:

She was wearing an outfit our mother had bought in Finland, an outfit too sweet to wear without irony. Sonja looked as if she had just stepped off a Swiss Miss box.

…She stood in the doorframe for just a moment, but it was enough for her to have an epiphany: Everything about her and her Care Bear lunch pail was terribly, terribly wrong.

…She was so silent that as the day progressed, her classmates began to believe she was mute. They would ask her questions (Can you talk? Do you understand English? Are you retarded? Do you think Steve is cute?) *And she would look away. During Texas history, her teacher forced her to read aloud from the textbook, and when she rhymed* Waco *with* taco*, she could hear the whispers…She ate lunch in a bathroom stall.*

Siblings, sometimes, claim one another’s stories as their own. Or at least feel for them. Perhaps memory is permeable, and definitely shareable. You can make as many copies as you like. *Remember that time in Africa?*

“We were like a family of polar bears plodding across the savannah,” Fordham writes, in an interesting corollary to Hough’s giraffe story. “We didn’t belong. We didn’t belong in Texas.”

*

The Fordham sisters persevere, first in Texas and then in Atlanta, where the family settles.

Much later, in college and strolling across the spring campus, Fordham is thrilled to be mistaken for a non-missionary kid:

A man known as ‘the preacher’ appeared. ‘Don’t be an Eve,’ he said as I declined a pamphlet. He walked beside me, ‘Jezebel, Jezebel.’ I quickened my stride, my mouth a scowl, but inside, I felt pleased. He hadn’t seen the earnestness that Adventism and my missionary childhood had drawn onto my features. I, Sari Fordham, was fitting into a public university. ‘You’re traveling to hell, missy,’ the preacher shouted at my back.

*

Much of ‘Wait for God to Notice’ is devoted to Fordham’s mother, who died far too soon from cancer; a fascinating woman both resilient and fearful, who traversed continents but would not drive at night, could not keep a secret, was fascinated by the weather. The ultimate belonging is within our families, though we may resist it. “You’re just like me,” Fordham’s mother tells her, to her occasional teenage disgust, and it’s a double-edged comment, both a compliment and a rebuke, or maybe a caution. But it is also a powerful sharedness, and one can’t help respecting the fact that, through all of this, Fordham’s mother must have felt like an outsider, too. She had also lived many lives.

*

Perhaps what Hough’s and Fordham’s memoirs make most meaningful is that there doesn’t need to be a strict divide between our past and present lives, or our relations to the people around us. These will never touch up completely anyway. There is only so close we can get to that, “you’re just like me.”

“We knew her best of all,” Fordham says after her mother’s passing. And maybe that is the important thing, impossible but not entirely sad: to try to know other people as well as ourselves, not in the false divisions of difference but in the joy of it. It might be that when it comes to who we are, the only choice lies in this trying.

* *

Hough, Lauren. Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing. Penguin Random House, April 2021.

Fordham, Sari. Wait for God to Notice. Etruscan Press, May 2021.

Uncrossable Borders: A Review of Patrick Hicks's New Novel, 'In the Shadow of Dora'

As Patrick Hicks's novel *In the Shadow of Dora* opens, it is July 1969 in bright-and-sunny Cape Canaveral, Florida. In just a few days the United States will send astronauts to the moon for the first time, hopefully with success, and, because of this, Dr. Wernher Von Braun is all over American television. Dr. Von Braun has been a familiar face, to some extent, for years – on a popular Walt Disney space series, for example, in which he held up model rockets and enthusiastically explained them to children between lively cartoon segments; and, now, on an evening talk show, filling in the fawning host on the big upcoming event. Von Braun is all winning smile, salt-and-pepper hair, double-breasted suit. He has become a celebrity, the "Columbus of Space": explorer, educator, friendly tour guide to the majestic world of the stars.

At least one viewer, however, is not buying it. Watching from his couch after a day of work is NASA engineer Eli Hessel, nursing a beer and a sore back and considering the man on the screen. He has known this man, or known of him, for decades, longer than have most Americans. Von Braun was not always an

American science celebrity. In Germany he had been chief developer of the V-2 rockets – precursors of the ones powering Apollo 11 – built secretly underground, using concentration-camp labor, at the site called Dora-Mittelbau.

Von Braun's V-2 design was a last-ditch attempt at victory for an already slowing Third Reich, but its development injected the Nazis with new, if short-lived, energy. If it did turn out to be the game changer they hoped, V-2s might soon rain down on New York, Chicago, and more.

Eli knows all of this very well because, long before his NASA engineering career, he survived Auschwitz and later the tunnels of Dora-Mittelbau, where he was forced to work on Von Braun's V-2 rockets. When he could, he sabotaged them. Most of the time he just tried to stay alive. And now here's Von Braun himself, all over the television; the next day he and some of his former cohort will show up at Eli's workplace where he will be forced to see them, like startling visions from the past, made Technicolor.

The very sight of them makes Eli's blood run cold. But, of course, they'd never remember Eli.

Why hasn't someone shot one of them? One of us survivors? he wonders, thinking of his own gun in the hallway closet, which he has purchased – when? Why? Perhaps be owns it out of some persistent inner fear. He is not a violent man, but suddenly he can hardly believe the simple fact that no one has tried it. Those criminals are out in the open, just walking around! If someone were to assassinate a big name like Von Braun, Americans would have to wonder *why*, and the media might investigate, and then maybe the truth about him would finally wash out from beneath this absurd scrubbed-clean façade. Some former prisoner like me, he thinks – why haven't they just *done* it already? It seems, suddenly, like a question that requires an answer.

In the Shadow of Dora

A novel of the Holocaust and the Apollo Program

"A HARROWING JOURNEY OF SURVIVAL..."

—BRIAN TURNER

Patrick Hicks

“Whoever was tortured, stays tortured,” writes Jean Améry in his superb essay collection, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*. Améry examines what happens when the human intellect is placed against such unthinkable entities as death camps, de-humanization, torture. “The intellect nullified itself,” he writes, of his time in Auschwitz, “when at every step it ran into uncrossable borders. The axes of its traditional frames of reference then shattered.” What do we do when our former frames of reference no longer work? How can we make sense of the fact that the Third Reich lasted twelve years, that millions of people were active participants or quiet bystanders in mass extermination?

And on a smaller scale, how can we transmit, or translate, unthinkable personal experiences to a listener, even a sympathetic one? An experience like Auschwitz, like torture, can be described, Améry says, but never clarified: “All the attempts at clarification, most of which stressed a single cause, failed ridiculously.” Eli has a similar thought when he recalls being asked by an American what “lessons” he might have learned from surviving Auschwitz and Dora. Lessons? he thinks, blankly. How could there have been lessons? How does one take a lesson from sadism?

For that’s what it was, according to Jean Améry: sadism. “National Socialism in its totality,” he writes, “was stamped less with the seal of a hardly definable ‘totalitarianism’ than with that of sadism…[which is, according to Georges Bataille] the radical negation of the other.” He goes on:

A world in which torture, destruction and death triumph obviously cannot exist. But the sadist does not care about the continued existence of the world. On the contrary: he wants to nullify this world, and by negating his fellow man, who also in an entirely specific sense is ‘hell’ for him, he wants to realize his own total sovereignty.

The act of being tortured, Améry says, is to have the human social contract breached in every way, so that the victim feels themselves negated by the other. Améry calls it an "astonishment" – "astonishment at the existence of the other, as he boundlessly asserts himself through torture…That one's fellow man was experienced as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as an accumulated horror…

Torture becomes the total inversion of the social world, in which we [normally] can live only if we grant our fellow man life, ease his suffering, bridle the desire of our ego to expand. But in the world of torture man exists only by ruining the other person who stands before him. A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other – along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and The World as Will and Representation – into a shrill piglet squealing at slaughter.

This "horrible and perverted togetherness" between torturer and tortured is what follows Eli in the decades after his "liberation," all the way to Kennedy Space Center when he sees his former tormentors strutting along metal walkways. Hicks takes the psychological links described in Améry and, in a smart novelistic twist, makes them physical.

"It is impossible for me to accept," Améry writes, "a parallelism that would have my path run beside that of the fellows who flogged me with a horsewhip." But, when Von Braun and his cohorts show up in Eli's very place of work, that is exactly what is happening to him.

Would we expect Eli not to think about his past? The people around him seem to either suggest that he ruminate on "lessons," or forget his torment entirely. In fact, he has done very well for himself, considering. He has a wife, a grown daughter at Berkeley, a job to be proud of. In the evenings he assembles jigsaw puzzles of classic paintings (he's on Vermeer now). All is well, he tells himself. All is

well. Still, when he looks in the mirror, he is startled by how quickly he's aged. "One ages badly in exile," Jean Améry notes.

Améry might say that Eli is suffering from resentment – suffering *in* resentment, perhaps, because he describes it as a state, one which he both apologizes for and defends. Resentment is "an unnatural but also a logically inconsistent condition. It nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone. Resentment blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future."

The burden of resentment seems, in this way, nearly as cruel as the original harm itself. Like torture, Eli did not choose it, but here it is. How could he *not* want "the event" to be undone? Eli Hessel endured the complete negation of his own humanity as the price of enlarging another's, and here those others are now, still, somehow, enlarging themselves. (Hicks painfully, but effectively, re-creates this complete negation, often through the SS guards' dialogue at Dora, where the novel opens. "You pieces of SHIT!" one guard screams – in fact, the prisoners are called "pieces of shit" at least three times in the opening pages – while another refers to them as "my assholes." An unnamed guard beats a prisoner with a pipe – possibly to death – for dropping one of the materials, all the while bellowing at him, "Be gentle with that! Gentle! Gentle! Gentle!" The bodies of the dead prisoners are referred to as "rags.")

The Second World War is all around Eli in commemorative magazines and TV shows – *Hogan's Heroes, The Great Escape* – but represented in a triumphant manner he can hardly recognize. After all, we won! The Third Reich lasted "just" twelve years (Eli would not have had Wikipedia, but that's what today's entry says). The cultural amnesia that both Améry and Hicks point out in modern society can feel staggeringly glib (for Hicks's writing definitely points fingers, subtly,

at disturbing current trends). Are we collectively glad that a despot was allowed to rise to power, slaughter millions, incite a world war, and continue to inspire copycats with perhaps rising influence even today, because Hitler was killed after "just" twelve years?

(When I look at my son, I think: twelve years has been his whole lifetime.)

In any case, Eli is the one with the conscience, not his tormentors. Their actions occurred out of the context of any morality, turning them into (Améry): "facts within a physical system, not deeds within a moral system." "The monster…who is not chained by conscience to his deed sees it from his viewpoint only as an objectification of his will, not as a moral event."

It is a deep unfairness that Eli's conscience, his role as victim in a massive cultural and personal crime, continues to mark him with guilt throughout his life. When CIA agents descend on Kennedy Space Center in a Communist witch-hunt (how the Soviets would love to sabotage Apollo!, they think), they single Eli out immediately. Was he with political prisoners at Auschwitz and Dora? Communists? Maybe they gave him ideas? What happened to him there, anyway? Maybe he's not trustworthy. He makes some other people uncomfortable. He is not "clear"; he is an insoluble dilemma. Eli is thrown into a surreal second tunnel where the victim has become the blamed. "He embodied something…dangerous," he realizes, with a new, dawning grief, "something that needed to be buried."

"*I* am burdened with collective guilt," Jean Améry writes. "The world, which forgives and forgets, has sentenced me, not those who murdered or allowed the murder to occur."

The question, for Hicks as a novelist, is now what Eli will do with his resentment.

It's true that much of Hicks's *In the Shadow of Dora* is a

literary account of crimes against body and memory, and that they are hard to read. They are things that happened. They are not the only things. Hicks is very careful to hold Eli apart from the sort of feel-good, "wow-this-guy-really-overcame!" narrative that lines bookshelves, probably because you can tell that he cares so much about the character he's created. The morality of Hicks's novel is a carefully considered one: realistic, fundamentally opposed to cruelty and to use of force, and dedicated to exposing these but not letting them block out all light.

As far as the book itself, it manages admirably to balance the dark and the light. His use of language is cinematic and rich. Hicks's description throughout – perhaps keeping in mind that when something is beyond the intellect, all we can do is describe – keeps the reading riveting: the SS guards hold their rifles "lazily at their sides, like baguettes." An air raid is "blossoms of fire" and "a steeple [sinking] sideways into the ground." Then there's this apocalyptic image: "An SS guard stood on top of a truck and fired a machine gun at the approaching bombs. Huge orange asterisks erupted from the end of his weapon."

The novel is exquisitely researched; Hicks has visited ten concentration camps including the tunnels at Dora, which he detailed in an earlier Wrath-Bearing Tree interview. Those who are fascinated by WWII and Cold War history will find much to learn. As for period details, Hicks could probably tell you the ratio of metals in the rocket pipe, and the brand of TV dinner Eli's eating in 1969. Television shows (and only three TV channels!), clothing, even smells (of course the work area smells like hairspray and pomade – all the ladies were wearing beehives!) add texture without showing off or overwhelming the heart of the book, which is its story: Eli's life.

Initially, when he arrives at Dora, any scrap of mental energy Eli may have left is devoted to food: imagining the look, the smell, the taste of lamb chops, green beans, bread. Later,

small snippets of his family show through. These are too hurtful to dwell on, but he can't keep them all away. They are wedded inexplicably to his sense of self, of potential. (He is only twenty-one years old: sometimes that is hard to remember.) In one brief, pleasant memory, Eli recalls doing calculus at his parents' table. "He thought about his hand unspooling an equation of stars. Yes. His little life did have meaning."

Somehow, amazingly, in 1949 his daughter is born. He will hold her, and later his granddaughter, so that they cover the blue tattoo on his forearm. "We are who we love," he whispers into his daughter's newborn ear. "Do you hear me, little one? We are who we love."

And, last, the moon. In "Secrets," one of the most unique chapters in Hicks' novel (or partial-chapters, more accurately), the author decides to tell the history of the moon. I have never in my life read a book that included a chapter on the history of the moon, and I found the notion delightful and the chapter itself charming. It opens in 1969, and Eli is out looking at the night sky, as he often does. The moon is perhaps the one thing that's been with him throughout all of his trials – in Dora, it often seemed to reflect his state of mind – and now here he is, part of the engineering team that's sending the first astronaut to walk it.

Five billion years ago, Eli muses, we didn't have a moon at all. Then, it was created when a planetoid the size of Mars hit Earth.

The cores of these two planets were wrenched apart and the molten debris twisted around each other, caught in an unbalanced dance of gravity. Over millions of years, the cooling matter created a larger and a smaller orb. We may not think of the moon as a companion planet, but it is one. It came from us, and we came from it.

The moon is our closest neighbor at 240,000 miles away, and reaching it, Eli believes, is “the biggest adventure mankind has ever undertaken.” He plays with words, thinking about honeymoon, lunacy, moonstruck. This brief, sweet flight of fancy is a fun inroad into Eli’s mind. He is a quiet, self-protective man out of necessity, but he still has his beautiful mind. And what could be more self-contained, more silent than the moon? Lonelier than the moon? “The experience of persecution,” Améry has written, “was, at the very bottom, that of an extreme loneliness.”

As a reader, it’s odd to think of the moon having a “history” – or maybe I’m just a typical human who simply can’t imagine history without or before us – but the moon has one, or at least it has a past, if there is a difference. And this past, still, in 1969, untouched by man, must be appealing to Eli, though the moon has obviously been a touched thing. It’s full of craters and dry pools, it’s been bombarded – but not by humans. It’s been touched only by blameless things. Perhaps there is no “lesson” in that, either, but there is also no lasting pain.

And in a few days, men will land there. Eli is in awe, but not exactly jealous. Surely, though, it’s not lost on him the immense effort that’s going toward getting these three men to his favorite satellite and back again in eight quick days. The whole world is watching. Over 25 billion dollars (about 152 billion, by today’s standards) were dedicated to ensure that, no matter what, these men – the bravest men in the entire world – come home safe.

In the camp, Eli often wondered if anyone was coming to save them. Six million dead. Would anyone come for them? Here is Améry:

In almost all situations in life where there is bodily injury there is also the expectation of help; the former is compensated by the latter. But with the first blow…against

which there can be no defense and which no helping hand will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived.

The men headed out on Apollo 11 can rest assured that mountains will be moved to get them back again. No obstacle is too physical, no amount of care is too much. Hell, America knows their *vital signs*. Should one man's heart rate drop, the highest-level experts in the world will scramble. These astronauts have an expectation of help unmatched in history.

Eli doesn't begrudge them. He wants, deeply, for the mission to be a success.

Later, in 1972, Eli's one regret will be that the American moon program ended so soon. Only six manned visits? How much can we know, from that? And this may be our clue into what memory is, for Eli, as well as love: they are knowledge. Eli is a man of the mind and his knowledge is his own. Perhaps the men who hurt him thought they knew him, or knew something of him, but they didn't know anything at all. No Nazi thug who put a boot in his back will ever get to see the curl of his newborn daughter's ear. They will never have his particular view of the moon. They cannot know what his father and mother said to him as they sat around that kitchen table, joking, and while he did his homework. Love is an incalculable knowledge. And so that is why he feels just a little indignant about the idea, in 1969, that one moon landing could tell us so much.

How much can we learn from such brief contact?, he wonders. We put our boots on it once, and we think we know a thing.

*

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A Review of Rufi Thorpe's New Novel 'The Knockout Queen,' by Andria Williams

"Who deserves anything?" asks Lorrie Ann, one of the protagonists of Rufi Thorpe's first novel, *The Girls from Corona del Mar* (Knopf, 2014). She's putting the question to her stunned-into-silence friend, Mia, who has so far known Lorrie Ann only as something of a saint, a martyr of circumstance, the golden child from a perfect family ruined by terrible twists of fate—until the two women meet up suddenly after years apart. Lorrie Ann pops a baklava into her mouth—she's a junkie now, to Mia's shock; she only wants to eat sugar, she's raving a little—and she demands, "Do we deserve the spring? Does the sun come out each day because we were tidy and good? What the fuck are you thinking?"

Even when the line is delivered by a young heroin addict whose husband has been killed in Iraq and whose father was a Christian rock musician, it's an important one to Rufi Thorpe's writing. The question—"who deserves anything?"—permeates all three of her books, which also include *Dear Fang, With Love* (2016) and *The Knockout Queen* (April 2020). Her characters, sometimes taken far astray by life, puzzle over what they have done, or what has happened to them—has it made them good or bad, or is that a spectrum like anything else?— or maybe their worst fears really are true, and good and bad are terrifyingly, irrevocably definitive.

Lorrie Ann, former evangelical, junkie, cuts through all that with her blunt, manic aphorisms and her baklava-smeared fingers. She knows how the historical intersects with the personal. She's seen it herself. Still she wonders, Do we deserve the spring? What are we all thinking?

*

In Thorpe's most recent novel, *The Knockout Queen,* our narrator's name is Michael. He is (at first, briefly, before we inhabit his teenage self) eleven years old, and his mother has been sentenced to three years in prison. Michael is looking around at a world that makes no sense:

When I was eleven years old, I went to live with my aunt when my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too.

Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated! If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting.

This is the lively, engaging, youthful, and astute voice we will hear from Michael throughout the rest of the novel. As a young teenager he is already aware that perceptible deviance will assign you blame. Women fare horribly in domestic violence cases, he knows, because no one expects a woman to be

the aggressor. No mind if she has put up with years of abuse, prior—there's just something that's not right about it. (But are we *sure* that we can place any blame on President Bush?) With his mother gone, he has been taken in by his exhausted Aunt Deedee and is sharing a room with his cousin, Jason, "an effortlessly masculine and unreflective sort…who often farted in answer to questions addressed to him." Jason's also got a mean homophobic streak that only makes life harder for the closeted Michael. Finding it hard to make friends, Michael turns to a dangerous habit: meeting much older men online.

This is Orange County, California, circa 2010. Michael has the internet and a false sense of confidence, or maybe hope. He has seen how history intersects with the personal. Still, with the sun glaring outside his window, he aims for privacy in the darkness of his room. He reaches out. Maybe there's someone on the other side. His tension and longing are a tender thing, snappable. What will he find, or who will find him?

*

Across her three novels, Rufi Thorpe's characters share a common childhood in the sun-drenched, high-wash landscape of Southern California, often pre-or-mid-dot-com, when some normal people still lived in normally-priced houses. Michael, for one, does, now that he has moved in with his Aunt Deedee. But she's working two jobs—at a Starbucks and at the animal shelter—just to pay her mortgage and to provide some kind of future for that aforementioned, flatulent meathead son. Michael observes that she has a personality "almost completely eclipsed by exhaustion."

Still. Still. It's California. A reader can almost feel that legendary warm air coming off the page, the smell of hot asphalt, car grease, stucco, sea salt, chlorine, oleander on the highway medians, bougainvillea; the too-prickly, broiled grass in small front yards. I've read that Thorpe's novels have the quality of a Hockney painting-turned-prose; they do,

the brightness, the color, the concrete, the sky—the scope and scale—but there's also a nostalgia, a tenderness, and a cellular-level familiarity in her writing that's capable of delving even deeper into that locale, and which can probably only come from having had a California childhood. I could almost feel my eyes burnt by the bright white sidewalks, the way, as a kid walking home from 7-11 or Rite Aid, you'd have to look at something else for a moment, glance at the grass for relief but still see the sidewalk rectangles bouncing vertically behind your eyelids.

Our teenage narrator, Michael, muses that he can't believe anyone could live in a place with such terrific weather and not simply smile all the time. However, at this point California is already changing. "On either side, my aunt's house was flanked by mansions," Michael describes.

Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not

native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor's face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.

*

Though she lives in one of the hulking new-construction mansions next door, things are not much easier for Michael's neighbor, Bunny. Bunny is the tallest kid in their class. Soon she grows taller, to her own horror, than all of the teachers and parents as well. This is not something that she can help. When she meets Michael stealing a smoke in her side yard—not knowing he's also been swimming in their pool whenever she and her father go on vacation, though she'd hardly care—the two strike up an easy and natural friendship.

Bunny lives with her father, Ray, one of those realtors "smiling toothily" from billboards, and perhaps the most ubiquitous of them all, having risen to the highest ranks of his toothy, hustling kind – his face plastered on bus stops all over town, attached to every holiday and parade, to the point that he seems to Michael a sort of local, B-grade royalty. Off the billboards, the real Ray is a somewhat fatter, puffier iteration of his entrepreneurial visage, and he has a bit of a drinking problem as well as a fixation on his daughter's future in sports. (This last bit will become important.) He will also be, under Thorpe's skill, an intermittently hilarious, bizarre, very deeply flawed delight to read.

Complicating factors, there's cruel gossip circulating around the death of Bunny's mother in a car accident some years before.

So life is hard for Bunny, too, and her friendship with

Michael becomes a once-in-a-lifetime sort of friendship, which will be forged even stronger when Bunny does something irrevocable, sending both of their lives spiralling. This is an often sad, and not an easy book, but I can say with confidence that their rapport, due to Thorpe's seemingly-effortless skill and sparkling dialogue, is a joy to read.

*

Thorpe's novels grapple, frequently, with what it means to be "good" – for women, men, kids, parents. What happens to girls and women who aren't seen as "good," boys who are not tough enough? (What happens to the boy who cannot, in fact, fart on cue?) What happens when there are deviations from the strict masculine and feminine markers our species depends upon to send immediate signals to our poor, primitive basal ganglia? Some people – the unreflective sorts, maybe, the Tarzan wannabes like Jason, the ones who take solace in the bedrock of their own infallible outward markers—could get upset.

In Michael's case, his cerebral nature and his kindness may be nearly as dangerous, at least in high school, as his sexuality. "The people I had the most sympathy for," he thinks, "were almost never the ones everyone else had sympathy for."

Still, both Bunny and Michael want, the way most teenage kids want, to be good—to be liked, to be happy, to have positive relationships with their friends and parents; to be, in the ways that count, *pleasant*. Here's Michael:

[It] was a popular take when I was growing up, among the post—Will & Grace generation: Fine, do what you want in bed, but do you have to talk in an annoying voice? I did not want to be annoying, I did not want to be wrong, I wanted to be right. And yet I knew that something about the way my hands moved betrayed me, the way I walked, my vocabulary, my voice. I did not consciously choose my eyeliner and septum piercing

and long hair as a disguise, but in retrospect that is exactly what they were.

"As often as I was failing to pass as a straight boy during those years," he later thinks, "Bunny was failing to pass as a girl. She was built like a bull, and she was confident and happy, and people found this combination of qualities displeasing in a young woman."

Through the figure of Bunny we see, then, what qualities might instead be pleasing in a young woman. Contrast Bunny with her volleyball teammate Ann Marie, as seen through Michael's eyes:

Ann Marie was a special kind of being, small, cute, mean, glossy, what might in more literary terms be called a "nymphet," but only by a heterosexual male author, for no one who did not want to fuck Ann Marie would be charmed by her. She was extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine, a creature white-hot with lack of irony. She was not pretty, but somehow she had no inkling of this fact, and she performed prettiness so well that boys felt sure she was.

Thorpe stays impressively in Michael's voice: only a young man of his very-recent generation would speak so easily about lack of irony and "performing prettiness" in the same breath as "extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine" and "fuck." Her mention of that "heterosexual male author" with a nymphet preoccupation is also a smart nod to a later scene in which Bunny's dad, Ray, somewhat drunk (as usual) and sentimental (less usual), sits Michael down and strong-arms him into looking at an old family photo album, a socially awkward and therefore very funny situation several narrators across multiple Nabokov novels have also faced. It's equally funny in *The Knockout Queen*. But Thorpe gives the monumental authority of the male gaze a clever twist, for Michael, unlike one of Nabokov's middle-aged narrators, is not at all titillated by these photos of Bunny but instead empathetic, fascinated by his friend's life before he knew her, before her mother died,

before her whole world changed.

I wished I could go back and really look at the divide in her life: before her mother's death, and then after. When she ceased to be part of a scene that her father was documenting and began to be posed artificially, always on her own. Was I imagining the sadness I saw in her smile? Or was it an effect of the camera flash, the glossy way the photos had been printed, that made her seem trapped in those images, sealed in and suffocating behind the plastic sheeting of the photo album?

"Thank you for showing these to me," I said.

Michael marvels at the loving photos he sees of Bunny's mother, decried as a slut by the gossips in town, her death whispered "suicide." Do these images tell the truth, or do they lie as much as any other, prone to the bias of the photographer, prone to distortion? Michael feels that the tenderness he sees in them is genuine, even though he knows how easy it is for a certain angle to tell it wrong. Where he feels the distortion has occurred is on the outside of this album, this family, in the crucible of group thought. (There's a joke both in Nabokov as well as here about the distorting power of the visual: in *The Knockout Queen*, a Facebook photo of the high school volleyball team goes viral because, due to perspective, Bunny erroneously looks fully twice the size of any other member of the team. In Nabokov's *Transparent Things*, the slim and attractive Armande in an early photo is given, "in false perspective, the lovely legs of a giantess"). As with Hugh Person, in *Transparent Things*, or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, the camera and the idea of a photographic memory eventually lose some of their stability, some of their complete control—and so, through Thorpe, does the male gaze and the historical power of the speaker, or of the loudest one in the room. There are hints of knowledge, Thorpe suggests, that evade group accusation, that dodge the iron maiden of a harsh mainstream and even the seeming authority of

daguerreotypic capture: like motion, or like memory.

It would be hard to write three California novels without the specter of Joan Didion hovering overhead, so Thorpe leans into this, as well, with the addition of a grisly, community-shocking murder that seems to come right out of the *White Album*—the sort of local tragedy Didion might have learned of while floating in her Hollywood rental home's pool. With this event, too, Thorpe challenges what we think we know from the outside.

There are real problems in this paradisical California town. Racial inequality, homophobia, the fact that fewer and fewer people can afford their own homes. A salacious news story is a most excellent distraction. But Michael, young as he is, feels the sick appeal of the outside verdict and tries to resist it. Yes, everyone's talking about the murder with concerned gravity—*so* grave, *so* concerned— at every Starbucks you wait in line at, everyone whispering, *Can you believe it? It happened to someone from here? How could she have let that happen to her?* But he senses the *tsk* of judgment in their analyses. Why would anyone let violence happen to them?

We needed to pretend violence was something we could control. That if you were good and did the right things, it wouldn't happen to you. In any event, it was easier for me then to demand that Donna [the victim] *become psychic and know how to prevent her own murder than it was for me to wonder how Luke could have controlled himself. It was easier for all of us that way.*

Luke, here, the killer in question, is a sort of (pardon the comparison) George W. Bush, perplexed by his own power, almost a victim of society's forgiveness for what is already understood and comfortingly masculine and clear. (It seems intentional that the victim's name, literally, means "woman.")

Isn't it easier to cast your lot with someone who seems to

have control – even if they can barely understand it – rather than the weaker person, the one still striving?

*

Bunny and Michael decide to play at "realness." It's a term they've gleaned from the drag queen documentaries and the reality TV they love to watch—RuPaul, and *Paris is Burning*—where Michael can practice at performing and Bunny, riveted, can "deconstruct" femininity, which still eludes her even as she longs to attain it. They crack each other up to the point of tears with their impressions of people they know, at which Michael is very good and Bunny just abysmally horrible.

One of the terms we stole from RuPaul's Drag Race was the concept of "realness." They would say, "Carmen is serving some working girl realness right now," and a lot of the time it just meant passing, that you were passing for the real thing, or that's maybe what the word began as. But there were all different kinds of realness. In Paris Is Burning, which we must have watched a hundred times, a documentary about New York City drag ball culture, there were drag competitions with categories like Businessman or Soldier. Realness wasn't just about passing as a woman, it was about passing as a man, passing as a suburban mom, passing as a queen, passing as a whore. It was about being able to put your finger on all the tiny details that added up to an accurate impression, but it was also about finding within yourself the essence of that thing. It was about finding your inner woman and letting her vibrate through you. It was about finding a deeper authenticity through artifice, and in that sense it was paradoxical and therefore intoxicating to me. To tell the truth by lying. That was at the heart of realness, at least to me.

I loved this, as a fiction writer. The fun of pretending, how it can be an empathy, or a skewering. The wildness of that

ranging, creative, odd and hilarious act—trying on voices, affects, personalities, lives. Trying your hand at fiction.

To tell the truth by lying. What is "realness," then, but a mission statement on writing fiction? On invention, on possibility?

And it feels so very Californian, in a way, adding gravitas to Thorpe's chosen locale, to "[find] a deeper authenticity through artifice." Ray laughs to Michael, "No one was born in North Shore!" There are plenty of people who were born in California and live there now, but also a huge number who were not. Isn't that, in a sense, passing? What separates one kind of passing from another, makes it more or less acceptable? How could some transplanted midwesterner who adopted whole-hog the California lifestyle judge a gay kid for wearing eyeliner?

What is the line between authenticity and fiction? What do we do with what is given to us?

*

At the end of the day, Michael and Bunny are two kids whose parents have royally screwed up, probably because someone also screwed up when *they* were kids. So it goes, on and on. *Amor fati*, reads the tattoo on Lorrie Ann's slim shoulder, which, as Thorpe points out, is just another way of saying "embrace the suck," and which Nietzsche re-purposed from the Stoics.

Why tell these stories, I wondered, if nothing is ever going to change? After all, *amor fati* seems a last resort. Lorrie Ann's husband dies in Iraq. George W. Bush and Michael's dad both get off scot-free. The outsider kids will always be bullied. In Thorpe's second novel, *Dear Fang, With Love*, the narrator, a young-middle-aged college English professor named Lucas, who has been exploring both his family's Holocaust-razed past and his daughter's newly-diagnosed schizophrenia (and who sounds, here, influenced by T.S. Eliot) thinks:

Our family had been jumbled by history, by war, by falling and rising regimes, by escapes across the world, by drives through orange groves and trips to Disneyland and the slow poison of sugar flowers on supermarket cakes.

America was not safe. We would never be safe. The danger was within us and we would take it wherever we went. There was no such line between the real and the unreal. The only line was the present moment. There was nothing but this, holding my daughter's hand on an airplane in the middle of the night, not knowing what to say.

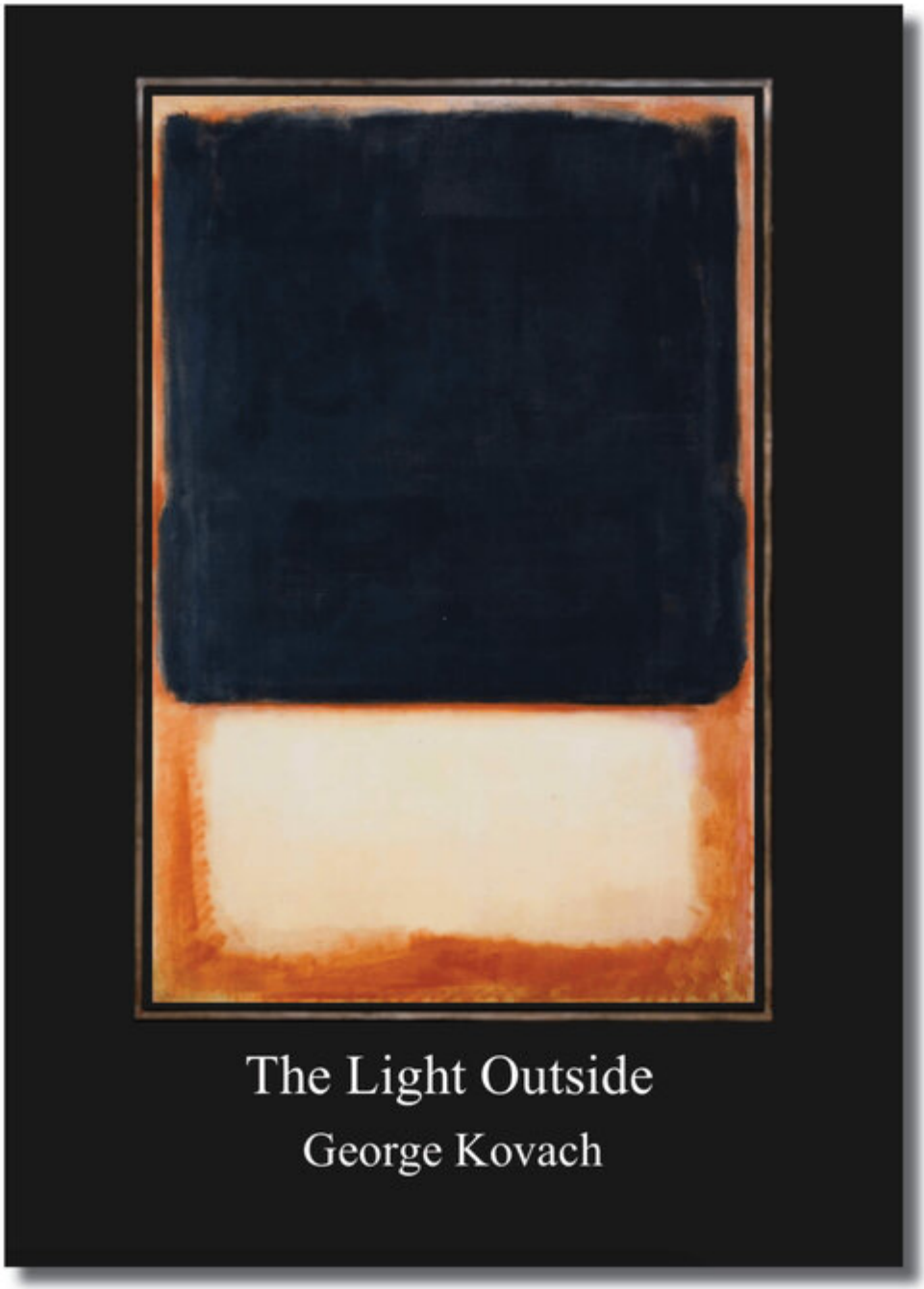
Thorpe understands the way trauma makes its way through society and through an individual life. Trauma is not always the blunt instrument; or, even if it started that way, it may not be, forever. It can be sly and nuanced. It can be both traceable and unknowable, brutal and delicate. Do we try to pass, within it, above it, until we are all okay? What if we know that not everyone will be okay, even though they try, even though they deserve to be?

There is a Bunny who exists outside the gossip against her, separate from her jarring appearance and possibly, Thorpe suggests, even separate from some of her own actions. "You don't have to be good," Michael tells Bunny. He means she doesn't have to be socially acceptable, she doesn't have to be fake-good, girly good. She already is good. They both are.

Thorpe, Rufi. The Knockout Queen. A.A. Knopf, 2020.

The Knockout Queen *is now available anywhere books are sold.*

Poetry Review: “The Light Outside” by George Kovach



George Kovach’s poetry collection, *The Light Outside*, begins with a narrator who’s stuck holding open a window.

He’s a little embarrassed about it. The window, that is. He accidentally painted over it a few years past, in a hundred-year-old house, and only just now has gotten it to budge. And

so, finally, holding it, he’s not sure that he wants to shut it again.

With the window free a burdened balance replaces
the ease the architect intended. I have to hold it open.

The situation is humorous, humble. It sets the stage for the way Kovach will approach many of his poems: curious, searching, and then decisive. The journey he is about to take the reader on is far from light, and sometimes darkness will overwhelm. But there is a unique resolve to this collection: “I have to hold it open.”

It’s a resolve befitting a poet who has chosen to try to see hard-won light, who has endured the Vietnam war and then, as an artist, worked (through his literary magazine, CONSEQUENCE, and other venues) to highlight and promote artistic voices often very different than his own: prismatic, divergent; contrasts and complements. Like the Rothko painting that graces the collection’s cover—“Dark Over Light (No.7),” in which a charcoal square threatens to overtake the apparent delicacy of a smaller, pale rectangle—or the Sugimoto photograph referenced in the poem “Picture at an Exhibition”—the strength may not be in the encroaching square but in the sliver below that, against all odds, remains open.

*

Hiroshi Sugimoto, “Boden Sea,” 1993.

Kovach’s poems often ring with the language of the sea—coves, moorings, ledges, gulls—though each word holds a far more distilled power than that of a natural world merely-observed. Here, nature observes you—the melded, overlapping nature of the populated Atlantic seaboard, where the human and the wild may have long cohabited but can’t claim to be used to one another, not quite. The gray fog and tides meet low chain-link fences, lilacs, Catholic statuary, paved patios and Coppertone in summer, echoes of Pinsky and Bishop and Lowell.

The legacy of the latter is most overt in “Covenant,” which opens with Lowell’s famous line, “The Lord survives the rainbow of His will,” borrowed from “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket.” Like “Quaker Graveyard,” it is a poem about a shipwreck. Both poems share a rhyme scheme and irregular pentameter as well as a vein of bitterness-in-loss, of grappling with what could easily seem, from the ground, an

indifferent Almighty.

Whole families

Left what failed them, but held close to their faith;
boarded the St. John in Galway,
threw sprays of white rock-cress leeward
and watched the green hills fade. October 8th

1849, hard into a gale
Within view of a sheltered cove the rigging
failed, shrouds ripped from the bleeding deck,
voices below screamed in the dark and wailed at God.

Now a statue of John the Baptist stands watch there, over a shoreline that has eroded to his bare, stone feet.

Lowell, a conscientious objector who dedicated "Quaker Graveyard" to a cousin killed at sea in the Second World War, limned that poem with a tense and devastating ask: Why would a creator let so many people perish in such cruel ways, and why do we, as humans, seem hell-bent on heaping even more suffering upon ourselves?

Kovach, contrasting Lowell as a combat veteran of a different, perhaps in some ways more culturally fraught war, uses "Covenant" to ask the same. "Covenant" is subtler and shorter than Lowell's poem, and equally compassionate, but it maintains its predecessor's edge, the sharp intelligence that won't let the reader off easy. If a rainbow must be initiated by massive loss and violence—survived, perhaps, only by the Lord with his iron-and-dew will—then it is a double-edged sword: a promise of an eternal love, and a promise that large-scale loss will happen again. Does it comfort you? In a stunning twist, Kovach's final line reaches out to another Lowell allusion, this time from "For the Union Dead," which uses a separate historical event to cast its evaluating eye on modern man. Kovach writes,

Slick cormorants skim
with cruel black wings beyond the harbor's edge.

and that judgment-by-nature, which may seem at first an easier thing to dodge than the judgment of God or man, is packed with all the horror and human-on-human hurt Lowell alludes to with his own famous final lines, *A savage servility slides by on grease.*

We are the mourners, of course; and we are the noble lost, the starving faithful. We are also the savage servility. Anyone can slide by, watching.

*

I am not surprised that "Covenant" reads to me like an anti-war poem. Kovach is founding editor of the aforementioned *Consequence* magazine (along with Catherine Parnell and a masthead of other editors), which focuses on the "culture and consequences" of war and its effects. *Consequence* is an exceptional journal, wide-reaching and brave, and it has served, for me in my last two years with *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, as a model of what a real literary, intellectual and artistic effort toward justice, true exchange of ideas, and cooperation might look like. Dedicated to the voices of all people touched by war, the magazine has published a special issue featuring Cambodian writers, and its most recent issue—its eleventh volume—features poet Brian Turner as guest curator of a selection of searing and fantastic Iraqi poetry.

Kovach's "Editor's Notes" for each issue read like beautiful small essays in themselves. "Prejudice finds soft targets among the vulnerable," he writes (Vol. 9, February 2018), making plain his opposition to the Muslim travel ban. The Editor's Note for Volume 7, three years prior, reads like a mission statement:

For me, reading these works [in the magazine] unfastens the flak jacket of my assumptions and enables me to enter a kind

of sacred space where the meaning of suffering and loss become complex, nuanced, spoken in a voice that's both strange and familiar. The cumulative effect is recognition of our shared humanity and how the experience of war is both different and the same, regardless of where it's fought.

"Unfastens the flak jacket of my assumptions": It is this humility—this willingness to make oneself a soft target, on par with everyone else—that sets a journal like *Consequence* apart, that sets the work it features apart. This is an age where it is so easy to turn away—to slide by, watching; or to dismiss the soul for the show, to over-watch, isolated, judgmental, and gaping.

I like the closing lines of Judith Baumel's poem "Sputinu in Gerace," published in *Consequence* last year. It is a poem about olives the way "Quaker Graveyard" and "Covenant" are poems about shipwrecks. The voice is one of both inclusivity and distinction. Some readers will be the voice of the colonized islander, describing the types of olives, and some will be the invaders. Perhaps this is historical and cannot be helped. Perhaps, being human, we can choose the way we proceed from here.

No. Don't say. I'll tell you. The invaders didn't call these cultivars nocellara etnea e Moresca *and* Biancolilla *as we do now but it is what kept them here, wave upon wave, until we did not know the difference between them and us.*

*

Several of the poems in the first half of THE LIGHT OUTSIDE touch on veteran experience. "The Page is Empty," about the memory of a body—interestingly, the written-down memory of something the narrator claims he cannot remember— is almost too harrowing to read.

He's uncertain, so he leaves out
the glottal stop of a lung

pulling air through the folds
of a fresh tear; leaves out the snap-
shot-silence of the others, prone
in rank water, transfixed

by a wall of patient reeds (the missing
sound's the soft sweep of reeds)

It's followed by an equally unsettling but highly visual, energetic long metaphor, "[Another prose statement on the poetry of war]":

Imagine war after a fix, gold studded and cuff-linked, prowling the wedding reception, uninvited. He fingers the tip of a rubber tube coiled in his coat pocket…He shakes hands greedily with the wedding party. They beam at his glazed eyes, sallow flesh, acetone breath. The groom's family thinks he's a friend of the bride's, the bride's family looks at each other as he slides to the maid of honor, the best man….

Each poem in the collection hands off a word, theme, or object to the one that follows it. "Soundings," for example, a poem about tourists on a whale-watch boat, passes a tour guide (in another time and place) to the curious travelers in "Basilica." "Basilica" passes a watchful eye, as well as mentions of gods and trees (wood, oak, carvings) to the wonderful three-part poem "Siegmund," a lively and humorous recounting of Richard Wagner's "The Valkyrie" from the Ring Cycle.

It's a wonderful interplay, not just between the lines of each poem but between the poems as partners and showmen, jostling slightly to tell you the story, as if they're saying, But there's more, there's more. You really didn't think that would be all, did you—that there was only one side to a thing?

I should mention, then, that the poems about war hand off to poems about family, parenthood, marriage—that they lead into poems about love.

*

There is humor in these poems, too. “It’s hard to watch immortal mid-life crisis,” the poet muses in “Siegmund,” as the Norse god Wotan throws a hissy fit. (Surely, Cosima Wagner thought the same thing about Richard a time or two.)

Another god, or demigod, arrives, in a playful rumination on Ansel Adams:

He breathed the tops of hemlocks
spectral oaks and snow above the tree line.
When the aspens silvered, he came down

From El Capitan carrying plated images
of rivers slowly splitting mountains,
his hoarfrost beard brittle in the wind.

Word play is in fine form; the poor, boat-bound tourists in “Soundings” “toggle in dramamine equilibrium between alarm and regret,” and in “Basilica,” there are “hubristic papal bees squatting between olive branches, a profligate pope’s baroque addition.”

More than anything, though, there is the joy and relief of a world filtered through this poet’s searching mind. In many poems we are reminded of what we are not seeing—reminded, gently, to look back—or forward. In “Soundings,” the tourists miss the whale after all: “But we’re looking behind, to where we thought we were.”

Frustrated, the narrator in “Basilica” observes a statue and thinks, “I can’t make out what’s in the pupil’s blurred/geometry.” Later, s/he says,

There’s no sense of scale; every perspective’s
blocked by angles, ages of angles designed
for rapture, built on boxes of bones.

*

The overwhelming mood of the book is one of a tender, intelligent hunger for illumination—to see the world for what it is and our human role in it. What is the point of us, so easily distracted, easily discarded, building our monuments? We rapture on boxes of bones. The stone god won't look us in the eye. "But why," Kovach asks, in "Lucifer's Light," "do I remember darkness better than light?"

I'd argue that he might not. After reading the collection twice, I'm still thinking of that first poem, "A Burdened Balance," where the narrator is holding open a window he's accidentally painted shut.

Years ago, careless and in a hurry to finish at the top
of a tall ladder, I painted it shut from the outside.

Now it won't budge.

And so the narrator is stuck there, having finally got the hinges to move.

I hear inside the wall the window's counterweights recoil and clang together,
bang against the wood mullion.

The brittle cord connecting them fails—they fall
and with them what I took for granted, the way things work.

Fresh air flows in, rousing a wasp which has been nesting in the attic. The wasp flies out and the narrator, still indecisive, remains, laughing slightly at himself (the window is getting heavy), but waiting for something. "I've no reason," he thinks, "to keep the hobbled window open." This admission is funny, self-deprecating, and wry. The poem is about holding a window the same way "Covenant" is about a shipwreck and "Sputino in Gerace" is about olives. We are waiting, like the narrator, stuck, laughing, humbled, to see what will come next—some bit of joy or mercy, some bit of the light still outside. There's certainly been enough of the

opposite. Why not just shut the window?

I've no reason, I suppose

To keep holding the hobbled window open. But I don't
want to let the heft of it drop, to close a way of returning.

Kovach, George. *The Light Outside*. Arrowsmith Press, 2019.

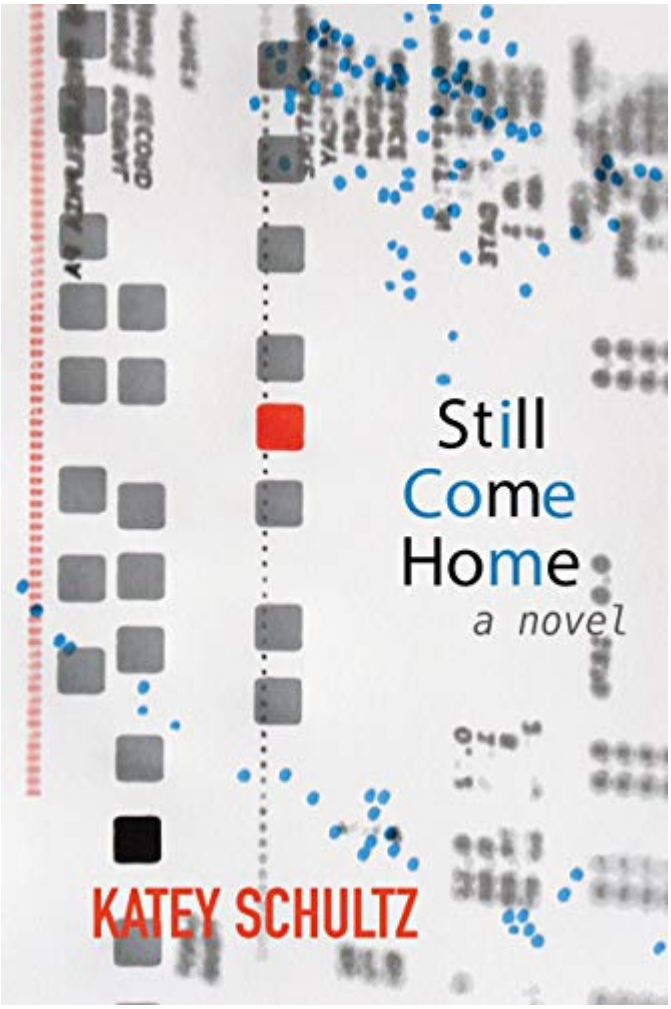
Fighting for All of Time: Katey Schultz's Novel, 'Still Come Home'

Still Come Home, the first novel from *Flashes of War* author Katey Schultz, opens in the tiny town of Imar, Afghanistan, where a young woman stands by the window, wanting an apricot. The weather is hot and the woman is hungry and thirsty, and she thinks to herself that she would like very much to walk to the market and purchase an apricot. "It would taste like candied moisture," she thinks, "like sunlight in the mouth."

This seems a simple and easily attainable desire. But in Taliban-occupied Afghanistan, without a male relation to accompany her, it's next to impossible. Seventeen-year-old Aaseya is a young woman nearly alone in a village that "insists on the wrongness of her life." Her family was killed by the Taliban, under the mistaken belief that they were American collaborators. In truth, they were only a moderately liberal family with a dangerous belief in freedom and education, including—most suspect of all—the education of girls. Now she is married to Rahim, a man twenty years her senior, whose work—which she believes is bricklaying, though

he has actually, and reluctantly, taken a recent job with the Taliban—keeps him away from home all day while she is taunted by neighbors, including her own cruel, myopic sister-in-law, and unable to fulfill even the most basic longing for a piece of fruit. The metaphor has many layers. Aaseya's sharp mind longs for the pollination of reading and books but can't get them. Her marriage has not yet produced children; all speculation as to this lack is directed at her, not at her much older husband.

Aaseya mourns the loss of the local school where she was educated and its English-speaking teacher, Mrs. Darrow, who was forced to flee three years before. She doesn't know that her husband Rahim may be at this very school building right now—it has become "quietly minted Taliban headquarters"—getting his instructions for the day's distasteful work. ("Afghans have been fighting for all of time," he reasons. "Even not fighting ends up being a kind of fight.") His employer is the gaunt, black-robed Obaidhullah who drifts through the schoolhouse overseeing a cadre of drugged, cackling foot soldiers. Rahim is an inherently nonviolent man who finds comfort in verses from the Sufi poet Hafiz ("the past is a grave, the future a rose. Think of the rose"), but his past could serve as a grave for even the strongest of people: he was taken at a young age to be a *batcha bazi*—"dancing boy"—for a corrupt general. He reflects, movingly, that "his body was like his country; it would survive and it would always be used."



Rahim is paid to dig up AKs, hidden along roadsides in advance, and use them to deter aid vehicles, along with his friend Badria, who's in with the Taliban deeper than Rahim knows. Rahim aims for the dirt, or the tires, or the rearview mirrors, and hasn't yet killed anyone. But he cannot tell Aaseya, whose family raised her with an idealistic affection for Americans and for democracy, of this arrangement. When she sees him carrying American cash, she's thrilled, but it hasn't come directly from Uncle Sam—it's come from Taliban leaders accepting payment to let certain convoys through, for a cut. Now Taliban fighters swagger through the market place showing off stacks of American dollars loaded enough with meaning to be nearly munitional in themselves.

So Aaseya spends her days alone. She will, not, in the end, be able to buy the apricot. (It's amazing how much traction a simple desire can get in a work of fiction—the reader simply

knowing their protagonist wants to buy a piece of fruit.) But this day will end up bringing a much greater gift in the form of a small, mute orphan boy named Ghazel, who'll change the structure of her family forever, even though she's just now spotted him from her open window.

*

Meanwhile, not far away on FOB Copperhead, National Guardsman Nathan Miller—a well-meaning, slightly uptight, former high school Valedictorian with a wife and young daughter at home, plus, sadly, the specter of the child they lost—is preparing his team for one final, humanitarian, mission. They will be delivering water to Imar, where Rahim and Aaseya and Ghazel live, a town watched over by its one, defunct water pump installed years before by hopeful Americans and now silently gauging the town's decline, like the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg in *Gatsby*. The dry pump and a distant well have put pressure on marooned Imar—Rahim has returned home more than once to find there's not enough water left after cooking to drink—and Lt. Miller is almost looking forward to the mission and the chance to do good. His four deployments have strained his marriage to a point he fears irreparable, and he struggles daily with the lack of clarity that descends on a life of perpetual war-fighting in a tribal environment of unknowable loyalties, connections, and deceptions. There is the constant threat of death for Miller and his men; death provides its own awful clarity, but he never knows when it's coming ("it could be now. Or now. Or now"). Working for change is even harder. One step forward, two steps back. As Aaseya does, he uses the word "impossible": "Like grabbing fistfuls of sand—that's what this war is. Like trying to hold onto the impossible." When Miller finally does get his humanitarian mission, it's a dream come true, the water bottles sparkling in the sunlight as thirsty children drink. "It feels so good," he thinks, "to do something right." By "right," he means something charitable, something unselfish, but also finally—clearly—that they have

done something *correctly*. They have not, yet, screwed up.

One can't help but think of Kerouac here, warning, "that last thing is what you can't get." But Miller gets so close.

*

Readers of Katey Schultz's critically lauded 2013 collection *Flashes of War* will recognize Aaseya, Rahim, and Lt. Miller and his wife Tenley from those pages. As with Brian Van Reet's character Sleed, whose genesis occurred in *Fire and Forget* and then grew to be a major character in *Spoils*, it's a pleasure to meet these characters for another round. It's satisfying to see them grow into not just themselves but into the preoccupations and concerns the author has provided for them. Forgiveness, shared humanity, the frustration of unfair restrictions (upon women, upon soldiers, upon children like the orphaned Ghazel and like young, exploited Rahim) come to the fore again and again in Schultz's work. For *Still Come Home* she has chosen an epigram from Yeats's poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul": "A living man is blind and drinks his drop," it begins. True enough. We're all blind. But its close urges gentleness, with oneself and others: "I am content to live it all again…measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!"

I don't know if these characters would want to live everything all over again. It might be cruel to ask them to. I do know that I gained understanding and compassion at being walked in their shoes. These are characters who ask questions and, by Schultz, are asked. (A notable number of sentences in *Still Come Home* end with a question mark, often questions the characters are posing to themselves. There are so many questions that I thought of Rahim's beloved poet Hafiz, chided gently by the Magian sage: "It's your distracted, lovelorn heart that asks these questions constantly.")

Rahim might say, echoing Hafiz: "There are always a few men like me in this world/ who are house-sitting for God."

Schultz's characters find ways to care for one another in a world that tries to claim there's no time or energy left for that, that this is the first thing we must cut out. In the end they will, despite the hard tasks they have been given, find themselves emboldened by and for love. There is the shared sense among them that all this pain will be worth it if at least something endures.

Schultz's authorial balance is realistic, tough, painstakingly researched, steeped in the knowledge that the world is unfair. Her writing style is supremely attentive, and it's this attention that may be the great gift of writing and novels: not a trick-like verisimilitude or trompe l'oeil but a careful asking of questions. What would happen now; how would this person feel now? What would they say now? I find myself wanting to ask her, as Hafiz does his friend:

"'When was this cup
That shows the world's reality

Handed to you?'"

*

An excerpt of Still Come Home *appeared in the August 2017 issue of Wrath-Bearing Tree. You can read it here and purchase the book here or here. Wrath-Bearing Tree contributor Randy Brown has a recent review of* Still Come Home*—with valuable insights—on his blog, Red Bull Rising.*

Film Review: JOKER, by Adrian

Bonenberger and Andria Williams

Andria Williams: Hey there, Adrian.

Adrian Bonenberger: Hi, Andria.

Williams: So, I heard you recently saw “Joker” in the theater, as did I. It’s gotten a lot of buzz. I’ve seen various reviews call it everything from “disappointing” to “an ace turn from Joaquin Phoenix” to “not interesting enough to argue about,” but I get the sense that you and I both liked it, and I would much rather talk about things I do like than things I don’t. So I’m glad you wanted to talk about it a little here with me.

Should we start with the styling? I’ve always enjoyed the various iterations of Gotham. In the Christopher Nolan trilogy (2005-12), for example, the sleek, crime-ridden city contains visual elements of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Chicago, and New York City. Todd Phillip’s vision seems much more an early-eighties, pre-gentrification city in the midst of a garbage strike, apparently circa 1981 (if we’re to believe the film marquee advertising *Zorro: The Gay Blade*, which played in theaters that year—an over-the-top comedy about a hero who consistently evades capture), without much of the warmth or can-do grit NYC often elicits.

https://www.ibc.org/create-and-produce/behind-the-scenes-joker/5012.article

Bonenberger: Yes, that's true; and the Gotham of the 90s Batman—Tim Burton's version—was much more stylized (no surprise there), simultaneously futuristic and antiquated, set in the America of the 1930s. Monumental, bleak, massive. I thought *Joker* did an excellent job of capturing the look and feel of the 1980s New York I remembered as a child; dirty, *on edge*, menacing at night. The parts that were beautiful, to which I was fortunate enough to have had some access, were cordoned off from the rest of the city, but even there things were dingy. If the setting for Todd Phillips' Gotham in The Joker is NYC circa the early or mid 1980s, he nailed it.

Williams: I never knew that version of New York, and I can't even claim to know the current one, so I think that's fascinating.

I did recently learn that a city of "Gotham" first entered the popular American lexicon through Washington Irving, who

described it in his early-19th-century collection *Salmagundi*. In its British iteration, it's a town King John hopes to pass through on a tour of England, but the residents, not wanting him there, decide to feign insanity so that he will take another route (and he does!). I thought that was kind of fun. Do you see any hints of this early Gotham in *Joker*?

Bonenberger: That's amazing, I had no idea… how delightful! It's an excellent and appropriate comparison… in *Joker*'s Gotham, that allegory or metaphor is inverted, though; the residents who *are* mad, or driven to mad action by impoverishment and disillusionment, do want a king. When the man who wants to be king, Thomas Wayne, is murdered, the "king" who's selected instead for adulation is The Joker, a madman himself.

Photo, TIFF. https://nypost.com/2019/09/10/toronto-film-festival-2019-gritty-joker-is-no-superhero-movie/

Williams: With all I'd heard about its bleakness, I suspected I was not going to "enjoy" the afternoon I spent watching the

film, and I was right—I didn't, not exactly. Watching someone be humiliated is physically awful, almost intolerable. The worst parts for me, for some reason, were when Arthur Fleck would be terrified and running, in his Joker suit and makeup. It was horribly sad. He has this awful potential to kill but in those moments he's fearing for his own life the way anyone would, almost the way a child would. There was something really pitiable about it and I found that harder to watch than the violence.

Arthur Fleck is a man writhing in torment for almost the entirety of the film. On more than once occasion he says, very clearly and deliberately, "I only have negative thoughts." He lost considerable weight for his Joker role, and on several occasions pulls out a loaded gun, places it under his chin, and seems to prepare or at least pretend to shoot himself. I thought of Kierkegaard's "the torment of despair is the inability to die," his claim that despair is "always the present tense," is "self-consuming." "He cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing." (It should be noted that I am bringing Kierkegaard into this discussion almost solely to make our editor Matthew Hefti roll his eyes and stare into the middle-distance, and to make another editor, Mike Carson, laugh.)

What, if anything, does an audience gain from sitting with Arthur Fleck through two hours of his torment, his self-consuming, his inability to die? Is it morbid curiosity, a failure of the "darker-is-deeper" direction of DC comics, an exercise in empathy, a joke?

photo, Warner Bros. https://www.insider.com/the-joker-movie-new-trailer-video-2019-8

Bonenberger: If we're talking about viewing *Joker* in terms of Phoenix's acting, I think his performance is suitably magnificent and compelling to argue that the movie is worth watching simply because of his presence. He does transform himself, and his body is so weird, his charisma so powerful, that simply to watch the film because of a virtuoso performance is not to lose one's money (I paid $18 for a matinee show with me and my son).

Williams: His body is very unusual, and played up to be even more so in *Joker*. He's got that congenital shoulder deformity—you can't help but notice it because in the film he's shirtless half the time with his shoulder bones jutting out—and you have to kind of admire Joaquin Phoenix for not

having it fixed, in a world where a person with enough money can pay to have anything fixed.

I read an interesting and kind of wild *Vanity Fair* interview where Joaquin Phoenix, who comes across as rather sweetly self-deprecating, relates almost proudly that the director described him as looking like "one of those birds from the Gulf of Mexico that they're rinsing the tar off." And I mean, he really does. You should read that interview, it's bananas: he has two dogs that he raises vegan, and he cooks sweet potatoes for them, and one of them can't go into direct sunlight so he had a special suit made for her. It's fascinating. I mean, sometimes I brush my dog's teeth and I feel like I deserve a medal.

But I digress. So your eighteen dollars were well-spent—it was worth it to spend two hours watching Joaquin Phoenix as Arthur Fleck?

Bonenberger: Is Arthur Fleck's struggle worth watching in and of itself—is his torment and suffering worth two hours of one's time? As someone who doesn't spend much time thinking about the disabled or discarded of society, even as caricatures (this is not a documentary, it is fiction), I thought Phoenix's quintessentially *human* performance was, in fact, worth watching; in me it inspired a deep empathy for my fellow humans, and for the difficulty of their interior lives. Again, that is not true of everyone, and a movie ought not to be taken literally, but if this is a tragedy, of sorts, then yes, I think it's worth it.

Like yourself, I've always been skeptical that darkness equaled depth; one can easily imagine superficial movies that are dark; many "jump-scare" horror movies fall into this genre, as do gorier horror or war films that end up disgusting audiences rather than bringing them into a deep emotional moment. I would say that any dramatic movie that is deep will be dark, by definition—and any comedy that is deep will flirt

with darkness only to emerge into the light. *Joker* is dark, and I also believe that it is deep.

Williams: I was struck by the primacy of Arthur Fleck's imagination in the film. He frequently envisions himself doing things which are impossible, but interestingly—other than pretending multiple times to shoot himself—none of them are violent. Instead, he visualizes various yearnings: for the approval of his idol, talk-show host Murray Franklin (Arthur imagines himself being called from the audience, his weird laugh suddenly not a freakish tic but the mode that directs Franklin's attention to him, and even brings forth a fatherly sort of love); or when he invents an entire relationship with a neighbor; or when, reading his mother's diagnostic reports from Arkham Asylum, he imagines himself in the room with her as she's questioned decades before.

It's not Arthur's imagination that leads him to commit violent crimes, it's his knee-jerk reactions to the rejection or betrayal of these fantasies.

How do you see the role of imagination in the film? Is the fantastic dangerous; can the imagination volatilize?

Bonenberger: You've hit on what I think is the key to the film's effectiveness as a human drama—the energy that makes *Joker* viable as a super-villain, the ante that makes the movie so moving. Phoenix portrays the story of a man with beautiful dreams, and we tend to think that such people are incapable of evil. That The Joker is a criminal, instead—this is a truth well-known to all—is the source of criticism that frets about The Joker inspiring copycat criminals or mass shooters or incels or any of the other dangerous real-world villains people are worried about right now.

Arthur Fleck fantasizes about a world where he's loved. He fantasizes about community, and kindness, and respect, and dignity. Alas, the world he lives in and has lived in his

entire life has been one of solitude, lies, and exploitation, adjudicated by violence. If this were a superhero movie, Fleck would discover in himself some hidden reserve of power, a la Captain America (a similar story in many respects), and learn to overcome the circumstances of his life and universe. Instead, he is ugly, and poor, and weird, and damaged, and the system does its best to target him for elimination. Rather than escape and hide, Arthur fights back.

It seems clear that in the world of the movie—a world where many poor and disaffected people view the police, the government, and the wealthy with overt hostility—Arthur's conditions are not unique, or even particularly unusual. Hence the widespread rioting and looting that takes place at the movie's end. He is simply the catalyst for change.

Because this is a super-villain origin story, not a superhero movie, the role of imagination and dreaming is a kind of joke (appropriately given the movie's title); it is a cheat, something to deceive one into inaction. In The Joker's world, violence against one's powerful oppressor is the only realistic choice, the only truth. This is what a nihilist ends up believing, this is the truth that makes fascism work (a country surrounded by enemies like Nazi Germany, beset by the potential for destruction). Secret optimism is what makes Arthur Fleck a character one cares about, and explains why anyone would follow him in the first place. Actual pessimism—nihilism, really is what makes The Joker a criminal.

Williams: I think you're really right that Arthur's disaffection is not unique in the film. He's only the most fantastic iteration of it.

That brings me back to the big, scary "copycat question." In his *Critique of Violence*, Walter Benjamin notes that "the figure of the 'great' criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, [can arouse] the secret admiration of the public." And in *Joker*, it's definitely not secret: Arthur Fleck's

actions spark not just the imaginations of hundreds or thousands of Gotham city residents, but their imitation, as they don his clown mask and gang up on a pair of cops in a subway. How do you read their enthusiasm for the killer of three young, male Wayne Industries employees (the leader of whom, my husband [who, for the record, found *Joker* slightly boring] noted, looks like Eric Trump, although it's hard to imagine Eric Trump being a leader of anything)? If Slavoj Zizek sees Bane as a modern-day Che Guevara fighting "structural injustice," how do you think Arthur Fleck compares to or continues that role?

Bonenberger: I had always wondered why people followed The Joker. In the original Batman series, where The Joker is a costumed criminal who tries to steal jewels and defeat Batman (who is attempting to prevent the taking of jewels), the motive is clear: greed. In more recent films and comics, though, The Joker ends up being a figure of anarchy and mischief, violence directed against the powerful. With the recent Jokers in mind, and in this movie in particular, one discovers that people follow The Joker because he is a deeply sympathetic character in which many exploited and downtrodden individuals perceive deliverance from their own injustices. Then, it turns out, as in the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* when Heath Ledger's character sets a pile of money ablaze, that The Joker is crazy, and not really interested in "justice" at all; he's interested in destruction and violence for its own sake. This movie explains The Joker's fascination with The Batman, and the Wayne family, and also demonstrates that his schemes and plans attract people because he lives in a world that produces many people capable of being attracted by someone like The Joker.

To get back to the last question briefly, the world of Fleck's fantasies, in which people think he's funny, and he's loved, and treated respectfully—kids actually seem to respond very positively to him in reality, he is child-like—there are no

Joker riots, there are no savage beat-downs in alleys. The movie requires that viewers decide, then, if the utopia of Arthur Fleck's drug-induced reveries is more ridiculous and implausible than the reality, where The Joker somehow inspires unfathomable violence, murder, and unrest. As with most great art, what one believes is true depends on the viewer. Some will think that The Joker is the problem, and if he is removed, Gotham's problems will go away. Others will think that the system is the problem, and that destroying the wealthy and powerful will lead to a better world. Others still will see in Fleck's dream a call to build a world based on love and respect, in which violence is unnecessary save as a last resort.

Williams: In your Facebook post about the film, which first gave me the idea for this chat, you mentioned the "pathos and bathos" that *Joker* provides. I, personally, loved its increasing outrageousness in its final minutes, the grisly humor of Arthur Fleck leaving bloody footprints down the hallway and then, in the final frames, being chased back and forth, back and forth by hospital orderlies. It seemed like the film was announcing its transition from origin story to comic-book piece. It felt, to me, like it was saying, "Relax a little. This is a comic now."

How did you read the ending?

Bonenberger: Same, exactly. We've gone entirely into The Joker's world, now, and it's a world of whimsical jokes, murder, and chaos. Perfect ending to the movie. We're all in the madhouse now.

Williams: So, you can only choose one or the other: DC or Marvel?

Bonenberger: If we're talking about movies: DC. If we're talking about comic books, Marvel.

Williams: Who's your favorite DC villain?

Bonenberger: At this point, The Joker.

Williams: Mine's not really a villain: It's Anne Hathway's Selina Kyle in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Bonenberger: Yeah, you're cheating there.

Williams: I know! But what's not to love? She's like six feet tall (jealous!), she's smart, she's got a relatively articulate working-class consciousness. She's feminine (the pearls!). She plays on female stereotypes to get what she wants. Although I'll admit that the way she rides that Big Wheel thing is utterly ridiculous and actually a little embarrassing.

She's also got some good one-liners. My favorite is when one of her dweeby male-bureaucrat-victims sees her four-inch pleather heels and asks, "Don't those make it hard to walk?" And she gives him a sharp kick and says, breezily, "I don't know….do they?"

Bonenberger: That is an amazing one-liner; I suppose it's hard for me to see anyone but Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman after she dispatched Christopher Walken's villainous character by kissing him to death. Powerful.

Williams: I guess there are worse ways to go out.

Bonenberger: My favorite villain is actually from Marvel, from the comic books; it's Dr. Doom. He will do anything for supreme power—he is in his own way an excellent archetype of greed. I love his boasts. I love how he embodies his persona so naturally, and is so comprehensively incapable of overcoming his weaknesses and flaws…he is a tragic character. Doom is nearly heroic—he has his moments—but his great flaw overwhelms his capacity for good. Isn't that what separates the bad from the good?

Williams: That sounds like a very Wrath-Bearing Tree kind of

question to
end on.

New Nonfiction from Andria Williams: Reading Joan Didion in August 2019

In the summer of 1968, while starting several of the essays that would comprise her collection *The White Album*, Joan Didion began to suffer from a series of unexplained physical and emotional ailments. After an attack of "vertigo and nausea," she underwent a battery of tests at the outpatient psychiatric clinic at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, CA. In *The White Album*'s title essay, she shares some of the professionals' feedback:

Patient's [results]… emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitable to conflict and failure…

A month later, Didion was named a *Los Angeles Times* "Woman of the Year." It did not seem to matter to her much. Instead, what she remembers of that year:

I watched Robert Kennedy's funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai [in which more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, were murdered by American soldiers]. I reread

all of George Orwell…[and also] the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child…[rescued twelve hours later] reported that she had run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for "a long time." Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew.

She adds, a few pages later: "By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968."

*

Julian Wasser/Netflix

Hyper-awareness has always been both Joan Didion’s secret weapon and her *hamartia*. Circa 1968, being seemingly everywhere at once, observing and recording at an unforgiving pace, there is no way the world could not have felt kaleidoscopic, splintered. In THE WHITE ALBUM, she attends The Doors’ recording sessions (but not for long), visits Huey Newton in jail and Eldridge Cleaver under house arrest. She analyzes the California Governor’s mansion, and the Getty Museum (which she sees as an artistic flub, “a palpable contract between the very rich and the people who distrust

them least”); she rhapsodizes about water. The Manson murders, happening just down the street to people like her and the subject of her rumination in the title essay, seem a symptom of this summer of dread.

*

That summer, Didion also, improbably, starts watching biker films, a habit she continues over the next two years. “A successful bike movie,” she declares, “is a perfect Rorschach of its audience.”

I saw nine of them recently, saw the first one almost by accident and the rest of them with a notebook. I saw Hell’s Angels on Wheels *and* Hell’s Angels ’69*. I saw* Run Angel Run *and* The Glory Stompers *and* The Losers*. I saw* The Wild Angels*, I saw* Violent Angels*, I saw* The Savage Seven *and I saw* The Cycle Savages*. I was not even sure why I kept going.*

But she does know why she keeps going, and despite the humor of this absurd list and the thought of Joan Didion investing the time to consume it all (did she ever remove her sunglasses?), she begins to wonder what these storylines are giving their audience. “The senseless insouciance of all the characters in a world of routine stompings and casual death takes on a logic better left unplumbed,” she muses.

But then, of course, she plumbs it, and what she observes, given the current political climate, feels almost prescient.

I suppose I kept going to these movies because there on the screen was some news I was not getting from the New York Times*. I began to think I was seeing ideograms of the future…to apprehend the extent to which the toleration of small irritations is no longer a trait much admired in America, the extent to which a nonexistent frustration threshold is not seen as psychopathic but a ‘right.’*

I begin to imagine if the heroes of these bike movies had had

Twitter. I decide to stop imagining that. They are people, Didion writes in closing, “whose whole lives are an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made. [These people] are, increasingly, everywhere, and their style is that of an entire generation.”

*

Throughout all these mental rovings runs Didion’s usual vein of skepticism and aloofness. Danger, for her, is personal, never institutional. It’s the threatening man on the street or the hippie at the door with a knife. She’s not a revolutionary, not exactly a liberal (though she was one of the first to, in a 17,000-word essay for the *New York Review of Books*, advocate for the innocence of the falsely-accused Central Park Five). Visiting Huey Newton in jail, she mentions that “the small room was hot and the fluorescent light hurt my eyes.” A reader can’t help but think, at least for an instant, Suck it up, Joan! But mere pages later she’s on the campus of San Francisco State, which has been temporarily shut down by race riots, and her shrewd eye sees the truth: “Here at San Francisco State only the black militants could be construed as serious…Meanwhile the white radicals could see themselves, on an investment of virtually nothing, as urban guerrillas.”

*

Here in the summer of 2019, I can, in at least some minor ways, relate to the dread Joan Didion felt in the summer of ‘68. Today, it is August 10th. On the third of this month, 20 people were killed and 26 others injured by a gunman who walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas at ten-thirty in the morning and began firing with a semi-automatic Kalashnikov-style rifle, aiming at anyone he suspected to be Hispanic. Hours later, nine more people were killed and 27 injured in a mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio. The Proud Boys are marching in Portland and the President of the United States has denounced only those who’ve come out to oppose them. (It should be noted

that these are grown men who call themselves “boys,” and that is the least alarming thing about them.) A little over a week ago I watched Private First Class Glendon Oakley, a US soldier who had saved several children during the El Paso shooting and wept openly about not having been able to save more, stand at parade rest while the President pointed at him on live television and said, “The whole world knows who you are now, right? So you’ll be a movie star, the way you look. That’ll be next, right?”

Oakley looked stricken. “Yes, sir,” he said.

*

Now it’s August 13th and there is a rally at the police station in downtown Colorado Springs. Ten days prior—the same day as El Paso—nineteen-year-old De’Von Bailey was shot seven times in the back while fleeing Colorado Springs police. I watch the unbearable video, circulating on the local news outlets, taken from an apartment security camera across the street. De’Von Bailey, young, short-haired, skinny as my son, runs across a sweep of pavement just like any you’d see in any suburban town. He doesn’t pull a weapon or even turn back to look over his shoulder. Two armed cops enter the frame not far behind him. Then, he falls, skidding in a seated position, staying briefly upright. For a moment, from this distance, in a still image, he could be merely relaxing, sitting with one arm propped behind him. Then he crumples forward and the police close in, cuffing his hands behind his back before rendering aid. In the hospital, De’Von Bailey dies.

Today, the attorneys for De’Von Bailey’s parents are holding a press conference outside the police station downtown. The Pike’s Peak Justice and Peace Committee has put out a call for citizens to show their support for the Baileys and their demand for an unbiased investigation. I like the Justice and Peace Committee, a group of tenacious old-timers who sometimes, at unpredictable intervals, convene to hold a giant

sign in front of the Air Force Academy that reads, “WHAT ABOUT THE PEACE ACADEMY?” They mostly get yelled at from car windows. They have used the same sign for years; the phone number at the bottom has been whited over and repainted several times; it is canvas, more than five feet tall and probably ten feet long, printed with perfect spacing and propped by two wooden posts, so as to be quickly unrolled and then rolled back together for a quick exit as necessary. I joined them in a protest once, this past April, when Donald Trump spoke at the Air Force Academy commencement. I held one end of their sign. I was the only military spouse there, though there were a couple of long-haired Vietnam-era veterans. A man offered me eight hundred dollars to help pay our rent if my husband would divest from the military. “Just until he can find other work,” he said. He said he was helping another service member get out now, a chaplain. This man was incredibly earnest, thin, gray-haired, in jeans and a flannel shirt, with no pains taken over shaving or hygiene; I believed him. I thanked him, knowing full well my husband, an officer, is comfortable in his job and does not want to leave, knowing this man would be disappointed in what that says about us; and he shook my hand and said to call him, the church would help get us out when we were ready. I did not know what church he meant, but I am sure its people are good.

So if the Justice and Peace Committee wants me to show up for De’Von Bailey’s family, I will. I scrawl a hasty sign on a piece of foam core I bought at King Soopers: “NO POLICE BRUTALITY.” On an investment of virtually nothing, I drive downtown to the corner of Nevada and Rio Grande to see the street blocked off with traffic cones and police cars, a crowd visible already in front of the brick police station. Parking on a side street, I take my sign and head there on foot, along sidewalks with cracked concrete and sun-bleached grass growing up between the paving. I try to face the words on the sign away from scrutinizing traffic. I pass the bail bonds shop from which Dustin and Justin Brooks, 33-year-old twins, set

forth a week prior, wearing bulletproof vests and brandishing their handguns, to confront these same protestors. (Dustin and Justin Brooks are what Joan Didion might call men with an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.) That was three days after De'Von Bailey's murder. The brothers intimidated the predominantly black gathering until finally being arrested, shouting "All lives matter!" as their hands were pulled behind their backs. Seventeen riot police were dispatched in the skirmish, standing behind plexiglass shields. Hopefully the irony was not lost on anyone that a black boy had been killed for running from police unarmed and two white men could walk around waving handguns and shouting in a crowded area and simply be arrested, off to live another day. If the Dustin-Justin brothers hadn't been shouting, they may not even have been arrested. Colorado is an open-carry state. Who feels safe in an open-carry state varies widely depending upon circumstance. On November 27, 2015, shortly after we moved here, an armed, agitated older white man was seen pacing around outside the CO Springs Planned Parenthood building at 11:30 a.m. Concerned employees and passers-by called the police, but were told there was nothing they could do. "It's an open-carry state," police said. Eight minutes later, the man, 57-year-old Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., burst into the building, shooting three people dead and wounding nine others. One of the employees killed was a Filipina-born Navy wife, who had enjoyed her new job in the Springs, her husband's duty station. The Planned Parenthood location here has been changed at least three times, and the address is not advertised on their web site.

All this crosses my mind as I walk toward the police station. I do not feel at all in danger, and I know that statistically, I am very safe – far safer in virtually any situation than the other protestors, mostly people of color, gathered on the sloping space of lawn. Still, because of men like Dustin and Justin Brooks and Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., I have left my children at home.

*

The rally is peaceful, and sad. Greg Bailey and Delisha Searcy speak about the loss of their son. Their lawyers reiterate a demand for an independent investigation. Young boys hold signs: “Please Let Me Live Past 19.” “Hands Up Don’t Shoot.” Several signs say, “Imagine If It Were Your Son.” The black families console one another, embracing. Three black reverends are there. Their mood is markedly sadder than that of the “allies” like myself who have shown up and for whom the event, though attended with the best of intentions, could be described as almost recreational.

JUSTICE
DEVON

Rally for De’Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

A prominent local Unitarian clergywoman – lean, energetic – is there in street clothes and her rainbow stole, wearing sunglasses, her short gray hair spiked. If not for the stole she might be some fitness celebrity, or a badass chef. There’s a contingent from Colorado College. A tall, thin young white man holds a sign that says, “JAIL ALL KILLER POLICE.” The Justice and Peace Committee is scattered around (I don’t see my military-liberator friend from back in April), but they have (appropriately) left their “Peace Academy” sign at home.

After half an hour or so, as the press conference seems to be wrapping up, the crowd is less quiet, some people whispering to one another. I strain to hear the voice of an obviously distraught black woman who’s questioning the Baileys’ white attorneys. “How do we know,” the woman is asking, “that any investigation will be impartial? How can it possibly be fair?”

(Next to me, three of the “Moms Demand” moms ask a bystander to take their picture. They turn, their blond ponytails swinging, to beam at the camera with the crowd behind them. I feel, almost desperately, that this is not the right time.)

DO JUSTICE
LOVE MERC
WALK HUME
NOW.
R.I.P
JEFFREY

Rally for De’Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

“How will we know it’s fair,” the woman calls over the crowd, “if the committee is made up of all white men?…” Suddenly her voice catches, and a pause hangs in the air for just an instant. “…White *women*?”

She sounds so hopeless, so angry, so deservedly frustrated and hurt. I can feel the sharp point of tears gathering in my throat. I report this not so anyone will feel sorry for me but because it happened. I can’t hear what response the woman is given. People begin to drift away. It was the last question.

For the rest of the afternoon, I cannot get that moment out of my mind, the way the woman’s voice caught, her split second of hesitation before she said “women.” Before she said “white women.” What was it that gave her pause; was it some vestige of sisterhood-loyalty that she realized no longer applied? I’d been hoping to briefly throw white men under the bus, let them take the fall. I wanted to huddle in my sense of at-least-some-shared-experience. It would have eased my discomfort. My discomfort does not need easing. My discomfort is no one else’s problem to solve. Anywhere from 47 to 53 percent of white women, depending on whose poll you believe, voted for the current president. 95% of black women did not. When she let the word “women” out, when she let the words “white women” out, it was the tiny slap-in-the-face of realizing the intersectionality you champion may not want you back. I am glad she said it. And for a moment— and I think it’s okay to say things we are ashamed of — I’d been hoping, so badly, that she wouldn’t.

*

That night I chat with my husband about Joan Didion and the late sixties and ask him if he thinks the upheaval we’re feeling now is anything like what people must have felt in

1968, when it must have seemed in some ways that the world was ending. He was a history major in college, so he tends to have a good perspective.

“No, not at all,” he says almost immediately. “Because think about 1968. Think about the instability. I think it was much worse then. The draft was still going strong. You could basically be called up from your own house and have to go fight a war with no choice at all.”

I recall Didion’s essay “In the Islands,” which I’ve recently finished, one section of which she spends watching the funeral of a young soldier at the military cemetery in Oahu, in the dip of an extinct volcano crater called Puowaina. He was the 101st American killed in Vietnam that week. 1,078 in the first twelve weeks of that year. That essay, however, was written in 1970. Maybe 1968 felt somehow quaint by then. Maybe, by then, people were wishing they could go back.

“And you had Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death, RFK’s,” my husband is saying.

“And the Civil Rights Act had only been signed four years before,” I add. I have always liked brainstorming.

“Sure. Now I think it’s the onslaught of information, all this instantaneous, inflammatory news, that makes us feel that things are really unstable.”

I think he’s right. This is no summer of 1968. I start to believe that Joan Didion, less threatened by the events of the time than many, but more observant than most, held up pretty well, considering. And over time at least a few of the problems she was experiencing, some attributed to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and treated with lifelong prescriptions, waned. Others didn’t. She’s not a calm person by nature; she’s anxious; I imagine she cannot turn off her brain. She’s 84 now. She’s survived the loss of her husband and her daughter.

I’m not sure how. I do know that ten years after the events she describes in the title essay of *The White Album*, finally completed in 1978, she ends with the admission, “writing has not helped me to see what it means.”

*

Even later that night, as she has all summer, my youngest daughter wakes me at exactly three a.m. She appears by my bed in pajama pants and a short-sleeved shirt, clutching her stuffed animal. The animals change nightly. Tonight it is Joey, a seafoam-green sheep. She whispers, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

She does have to go to the bathroom. But more than that, this is her new ritual, exciting for her, a very mildly transgressive foray into the dark of night, in which I stumble groggily behind her and she switches on every light in the house as she goes, Joey under her arm, chatting up a storm. It’s as if the hours of sleep she’s had already have bottled up a torrent of potential communication, and she wants to tell me everything. She had a dream where she was drawing faces on paper plates. She had a dream that we all got ice cream. She talks and talks, all shaggy red hair and freckles like tiny seeds scattered across her sleep-pinked cheeks; expressive, energetic eyebrows. Her mood is tremendously good. She washes her hands, dripping water even though I say dry them all the way, please, and I switch off lights as I go to tuck her back in. She is perfectly happy to go back to sleep; this was all she needed, this little check-in under the pretense of a bodily function; and so I have made no move to curb this new habit, and in fact almost look forward to it, sometimes waking up just moments before she comes into my room.

As I start to shut her bedroom door she calls out, “I’m excited for tomorrow!”

I turn around, laughing. “Why?!”

She laughs, too. “I don’t know!”

I quietly close her door and wander into the kitchen, where there’s only one light still on, above the sink. I stand and look at the few dishes and mugs there, then out at the dark, flat yard. There is no way I can go back to sleep, and it does not, now, seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 2019.

An Interview with Jennifer Orth-Veillon, Curator of the WWI Centennial Blog, by Andria Williams

Andria Wiliams: Jennifer, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with Wrath-Bearing Tree.

We are all huge fans of the WWrite blog, which features posts from writers investigating a variety of aspects of the events and legacy of the First World War. Since 2016, you’ve had close to 100 contributions on topics such as the portrayal and care of wounded veterans and their rehabilitation; German battlefield cemeteries; writer-soldiers of the War; and more. It’s truly a feat and, taken as a whole, a remarkably intelligent way to explore the effects of WWI on art, literature, citizens, and the public imagination.

How did you get the idea to start the WWrite blog, and how did you go about it?

Jennifer Orth-Veillon: Over a glass of Beaujolais wine.

Seriously. In 2015, for family medical reasons, I packed up my life in the US and moved with my French husband and small daughter to a small village, Cogny, in the wine-making region of the Beaujolais, located in southeastern France not far from Lyon. Prior to the move, I held a 3-year-long postdoctoral fellowship in communication and literature at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta where I initiated the first student veteran writing group.

Jennifer Orth-Veillon

During these three years, I also taught a class on war literature and veteran memoirs. The students began by studying the literature of WWI as it was one of the first major conflicts that happened on foreign soil. For the returning soldiers, this meant an even greater gap to forge between the civilian community and their war experience. WWI also marked a break with traditional war narratives. Before WWI, these acceptable narratives communicated a sense of patriotism, triumph, and noble sacrifice. The strong soldier fought bravely and didn’t complain. The weak soldier was a coward and a criminal. While patriotism, triumph, and heroic sacrifice are certainly important aspects of the combat experience, they do not paint a complete portrait of the long-lasting effects

of war on soldiers, on families, and on the community. It could be said that WWI writing, for the first time in history, was responsible for exposing the severity, variety, and complexity of war wounds to the public. Hemingway's sparse prose and Wilfred Owen's grotesque images and irony did something revolutionary.

And why did it take WWI to do this? It inevitably had to do with the unprecedented elements this war introduced to an unsuspecting world—the unbreakable nationalistic alliances formed by powerful empires, the misery of inch-by-inch trench warfare, masses of soldiers suffering deep psychological damage ("shell shock"), new weapon technology that disfigured the human body beyond recognition and razed entire cities in seconds, entire populations wiped out not only by war, but also by the Spanish flu epidemic that swept the continents. In combat, Russia, France, the British Empire, Germany, and Austria lost close to a million soldiers each and their wounded nearly doubled that number. America officially entered only in 1917 but lost around 53,000 soldiers in combat during just seven months in 1918. The Vietnam War serves as an interesting point of comparison—this conflict lasted fourteen years and the combat dead totaled around 47,000. In addition, WWI-era's Spanish flu epidemic cost Americans another lost 63,000 lives by Armistice.

My class at Georgia Tech also read memoirs and war literature through the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, including works by Seth Brady Tucker, Kayla Williams, Brian Castner, and Brian Turner. I was fortunate that these authors were so accessible – Seth Brady Tucker and Brian Castner both had Skype sessions with my class, which was fantastic! And, after we finished the reading, the class, for their final project, had to write a multimedia memoir on a veteran from Georgia Tech or from the Atlanta community. When the students asked Tucker and Castner about their writing influences, both immediately mentioned the writing of WWI for many of the reasons I discussed above. Seth

Brady Tucker went as far to say that, while studying Wilfred Owen in an Iraqi foxhole, he learned to both read and write poetry (Incidentally, his post for WWrite is entitled "Discovering WWI Poetry in an Iraqi Foxhole"). In addition, many of the contemporary veterans who became subjects for my students' memoirs cited WWI literature in their interviews.

I left the US, but I knew I couldn't leave my work there entirely behind. I know that living in a golden-stone medieval village in the middle of French vineyards sound like a dream to any American, but the reality was that moving to France was professionally and personally a new start for me. And I wasn't in Paris. It's one thing for people living in this beautiful, rural region to encounter tourists. It's altogether another matter if someone from the outside wants to come in and be part of the community. The Beaujolais is full of families who have lived there for generations and finding ways to integrate was an isolating challenge. Yet I did find traces of my previous life. I would spend many days driving from village to village looking for work and writer/artistic communities. I didn't find either. However, each village's, each town's center features a monument to the WWI dead.

Beaujolais war monument in the village of Saint Julien, with the names of the dead on the side. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

What I learned was that, even if the monument was small, the place's loss was enormous. I would often get out of my car and count the number of dead and then go to the village municipality to see what the population count was in 1914-1918. One village lost 9% of its population. Another lost almost all of its young men. November 11th isn't Veteran's Day but Armistice Day – a national holiday for commemorating WWI only.

WWI monument in the village of Sainte Paule in the Beaujolais. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Once, after a car accident, I had to go to the police station

to finish filing the report. While waiting, someone called to report they had found an unexploded WWI shell while digging a pool in their back yard. After the police officer said he would send someone over and hung up, he looked at me and said “happens all the time.” It’s worth mentioning that no WWI battle took place in the Beaujolais region. This anecdote illustrates how central the Great War is in the French memory and imagination.

Which is why what I discovered over my glass of Beaujolais was so startling. I was in the town of Vaux-en-Beaujolais, otherwise known as Clochemerle, the setting for a famous French satirical film written by Gabriel Chevallier. Each village in the Beaujolais makes its own wine and has a central wine bar/cellar for tasting it.

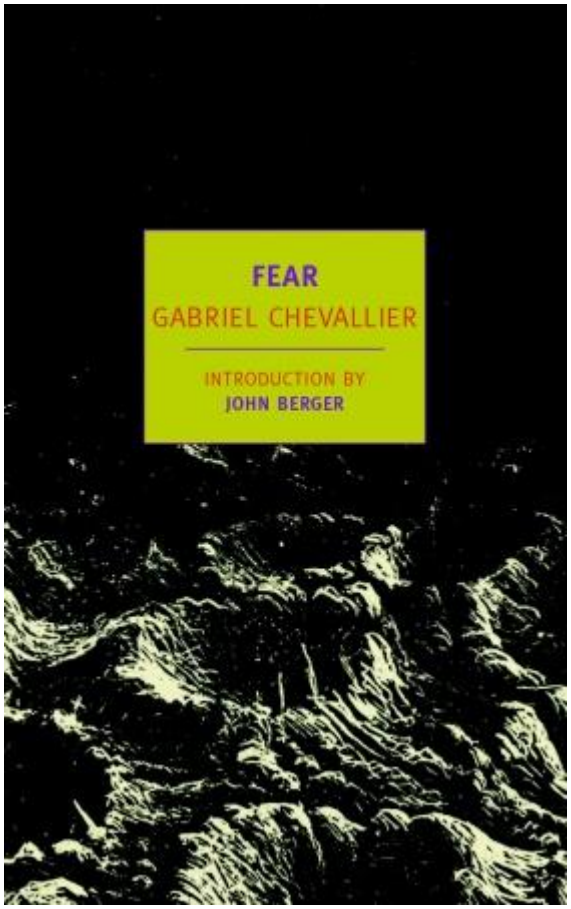
A painting of Vaux-en-Beaujolais by Gabriel Chevallier. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

I was chatting with the barman pouring me the wine about possible translation work for the town's tourist brochure when he asked me about my work in the US. I started to tell him about the veteran class [at Georgia Tech], thinking that it would have no relevance to his world and that he would listen because he felt sorry for my loneliness. However, he went to the door of the bar and asked me to follow him. Glass in hand, we went next door, which turned out to be a Gabriel Chevallier museum.

The entrance to the Chevallier museum in Vaux-en-Beaujolais, France. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

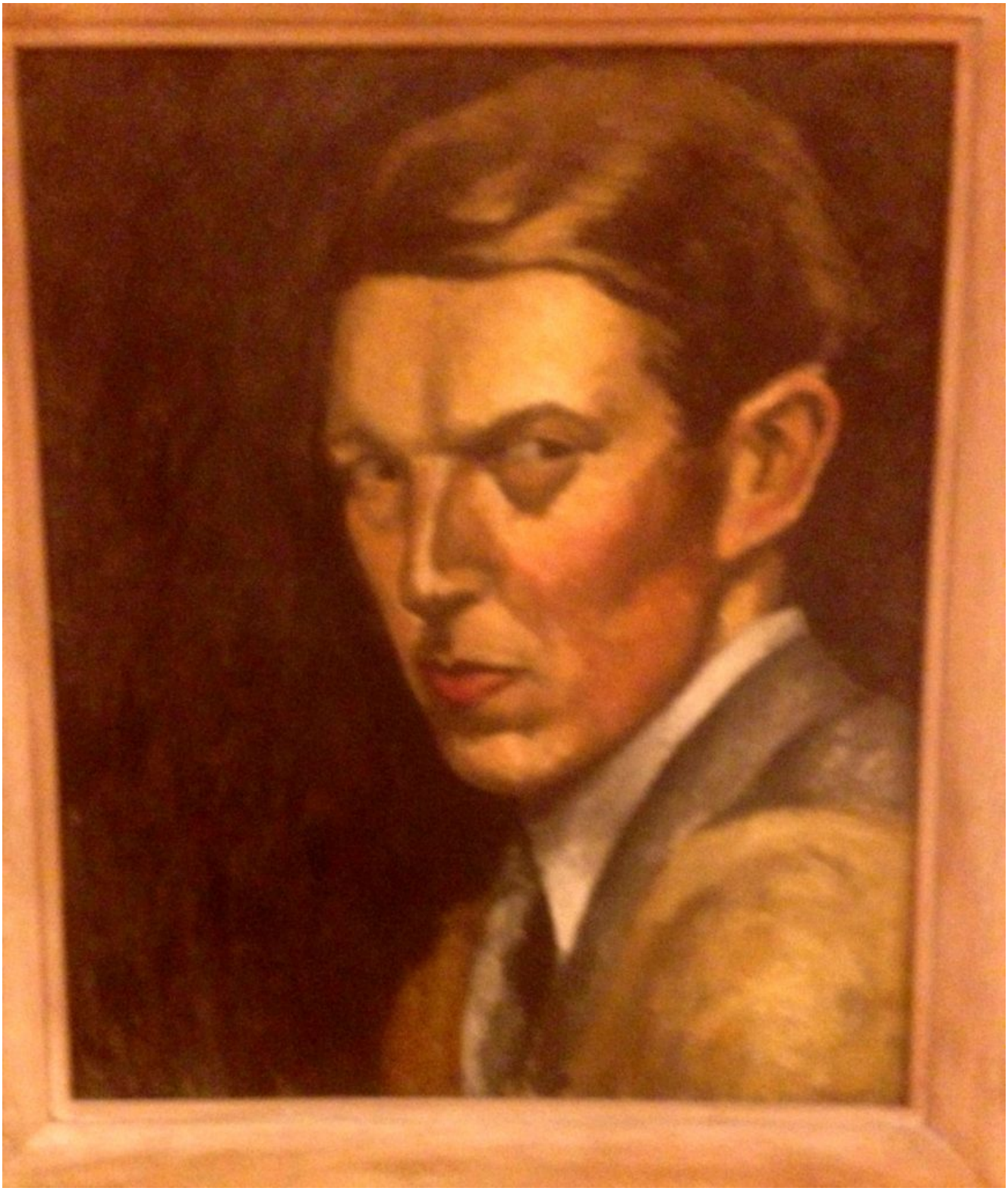
A part of the small museum was dedicated to the famous *Clochemerle,* but a larger section featured Chevallier's WWI experience and his novel, *La Peur*, translated as *Fear.* As I learned through the collections of drawing Chevallier did during the war and the pages from the manuscript, *Fear* was

nothing like the satirical *Clochemerle.* It has nothing to do with winemaking, socioeconomic class, or religion; it was a book that spared nothing as it described the ghastly details of the ways men were killed and maimed during Trench warfare. It was published in 1930, but like many works of art that criticized the Great War in France and elsewhere, it was censored. Today, *Fear* represents all that we know well about WWI found in books like *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Guns of *Steel*- it was a senseless, barbaric massacre.



As it was the only thing that resembled my literary work in the US, I visited the village, the museum, and the bar several times after that. No one was ever looking at Gabriel Chevallier and that’s when I realized that, in the middle of a huge national narrative about WWI, holes existed and were ignored. Amidst the monuments, the parades, and the days off, a real discussion of the Great War and the damage it did to France was missing. Everyone knows about the monuments. No one knows that Gabriel Chevallier wrote anything other than

Clochemerle.



Self-portrait of Chevallier. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

This was the theme I found in so much of the war literature I studied with my classes. Veterans from every past or present war we studied – the celebrated icons of war– felt neglected

by the public narrative. This did not stop with WWI. In fact, these same veterans, including contemporary ones like Tucker and Castner, had even expressed that this phenomenon was first brought to our attention by WWI writers like Owen and Hemingway. I realized that today's war writers owed something like a debt to WWI writing and, with the imminent Centennial, I wanted to explore that idea. I contact the United States World War One Centennial Commission with my ideas. At the time, they had no substantive information about WWI literature although I found such sites elsewhere. Looking not just at WWI literature, but at how WWI can continue to shape literature, writing, and thought today seemed original. They accepted my proposal and I started work in April of 2016. The first blog post went in January 2017. And it's been going ever since.

AW: Where did your personal interest in WWI begin?

JOV: WWI has always been both a personal and professional interest for me. I realized WWI had more importance than the few pages about alliances in my history textbook when I started working on my first novel, which is based on a lifelong friendship between my grandfather, a WWII battalion surgeon, and a concentration camp prisoner he liberated, a Dutch artist. I read the 1,000+ letters my grandparents wrote each while he was gone and one struck me as very important. It was a letter from August 1945, a few months after VE day in Europe. With his war over, he finally had the space to digest the horrible scenes from combat and he had terrible crying spells and nightmares. That's when he told my grandmother that he finally understood why one of his close relatives, who had served in WWI, was always "crying at nothing." Before that, he had considered this relative weak and unmanly. I knew that to understand WWII, I need to better understand WWI. That's why I jumped at the chance to be TA for a study abroad summer class on WWI and literature taught by James Madison University English professor Mark Facknitz, my former mentor. I was living in Paris at the time working on a Master's Degree at

the French University on WWII and Holocaust literature. Concentrated on Paris and the Nazi Occupation, I had never explored WWI in a deep way. With Mark and about 15 students and other TAs, we traveled in vans across the WWI battlefields and memorials in France, Belgium, and England. We read literature and essays and then applied the ideas about cultural memory and war narratives to the different public memory sites – the American cemetery at Belleauwood, the French ossuary at Douaumont in Verdun, Kathe Kollowtiz's famous statue "The Grieving Parents" in a German cemetery in Flanders. I did this for two summers and came to realize that WWI was present everywhere. It's end was one of the reasons for the turmoil in the Middle East today, it advanced feminist movements, shed new light on racial issues, and shaped many US federal programs today. I believe that to grasp any geopolitical issue today, you have to dial back to WWI to fully understand it.

AW: I know that no one can pick favorites, but I'm curious which contributions or posts surprised you the most, gave you new information or made you see something from a wholly new angle.

JOV: That's like asking which child you love most! I have valued, loved, and learned so much from every single blog post and its author. That's what's so great about the blog – not only the variety of different kinds of posts, but the incredible quality of the writing. I have never been disappointed by a post and each time I get a new one, I feel so lucky to have discovered this author and their work. I guess that before the blog, I felt like a fair amount of knowledge about trench warfare, the events of combat, the major battles, the perils of nationalism, the poetry, the literature, the culture of commemoration. However, I knew much less about the role women, African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants played. And, sadly, I came to learn how much they had been forgotten. Chag Lowry's post on his

graphic novel about Native Americans, Soldiers Unknown, Tracy Crow's post about female Marine Sergeant Leila Lebrand, Peter Molin on Aline Kilmer, Joyce Kilmer's wife, Keith Gandal on the treatment of African Americans after the war, and Lorie Vanchena's post about German immigrant poetry provide a few examples. I also have a new perspective about WWI in other countries, even in enemy countries through Ruth Edgett's short story about Canada, "Hill 145," , Andria Williams' (your!) post on the British "Black Poppies", Michael Carson on Victor Shklovsky and the Russian Revolution, Mark Facknitz on German POWs in Japan, and Benjamin Busch's post about finding a British WWI cemetery in Iraq. From an ideological perspective, I was struck by Elliot Ackerman's post on Ernst Junger's *Storm of Steel*. Through Junger, Ackerman argues that we live in society that pushes us to thrive on violence rather than mourn war and hate death. But again, these just come to mind at the moment. If I had space and time, I would list every post as one of my favorites. Every post has given me new information and angles.

AW: What has been the biggest challenge in curating the WWrite blog?

JOV: I've had two major challenges. The first is the technical side of the blog and issues of design. I'm not a coding expert and I have to make everything fit the platform requirements of the WWICC site. I think it is much more sophisticated than I am. Formatting takes an incredibly long time. I've spent an hour on getting a picture inserted, margins adjusted, etc. But, I think this is an issue that many artists have to confront today. The digital medium is necessary but requires extra training and patience. The second is convincing writers that they are, in fact, influenced by WWI even if they don't think they are. Sometimes I'll contact a writer and, even if they are interested by the project, they say no because they don't know anything about WWI. I beg to differ! Everyone is touched by this war in some way. It just takes a little

digging. For example, I met and actor/writer in Atlanta named Darryl Dillard. We talked about the project and he basically said, good luck! But later he came back to me because he realized that African American WWI soldiers faced horrible racism, similar to what they faced on stage at the time.

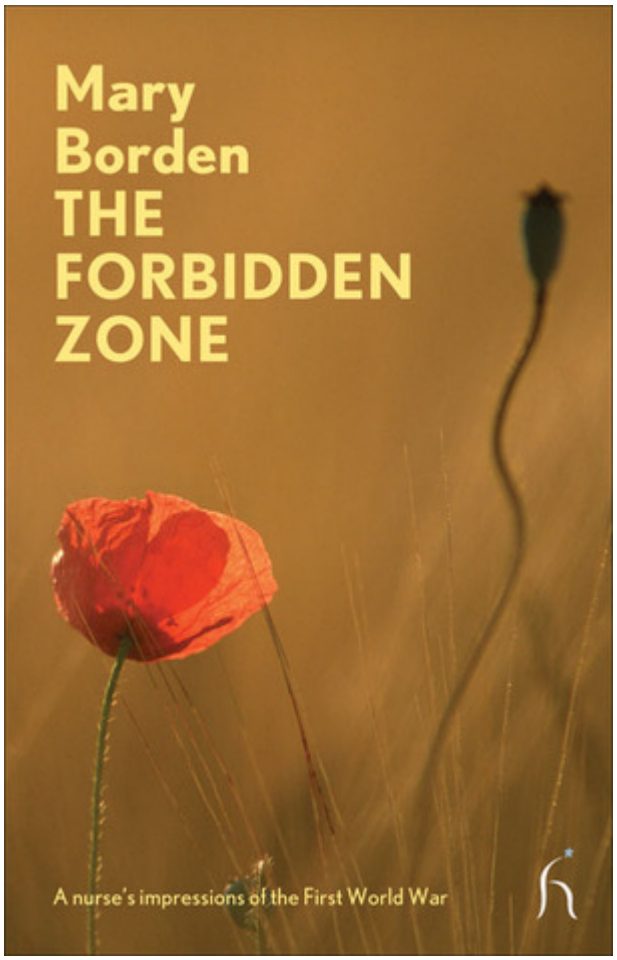
AW: Woodrow Wilson famously (after H.G. Wells) called WWI "the war to end all wars." How do you find the study of this war significant in our modern approach to conflict? Are there any particular lessons you think humanity stands to learn, or does WWI paint only a bleak picture in terms of the way history repeats itself?

JOV: I don't know if history is repeating itself or it's just the present asserting itself against things that haven't changed but should have throughout history – like nationalism, economic inequality, class inequality, gender oppression, emasculation, misogyny, racial oppression, using technology to kill masses of people – these things at the heart of WWI's tragedy haven't gone away. They are still present and still cause harm. So, yes, it's a very bleak picture.

However, I do believe that's it's not irreparable as long as we can take action by engaging in a fight to make these issues better. Remembering and commemorating war is not enough. As the French say, we need *engagement.*

AW: What is your favorite piece of art or literature to have come out of World War One?

JOV: Once again, picking favorites is hard. I think the work that has stood out for me most recently is Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone*, which was, of course, censored because it was considered too ghastly and graphic. As a nurse, she wrote this surreal memoir about the war during a period when most war memoirs were written as conventional autobiographies.



Using images and other aesthetic strategies, she seems to show that conventional language wasn't enough to capture WWI combat. Conventional autobiography cannot push the limits of human experience the way war can. I admire her battle to challenge us with language, to show that there are parts of war that are unimaginable, that don't fit into proper punctuation or sentence structure. The work is indeed ghastly, but it is so much more that I come up against my own limits of expression when I try to describe it to anyone. And, it's in that incapacity to describe that I know her writing comes from where no one can go and survive intact – no man's land, the space between the trenches. She uses language to take on that space. It's a battle.

WWrite Blog contributions by *Wrath-Bearing Tree* editors:

Adrian Bonenberger: Brest-Litovsk: Eastern Europe's Forgotten Father

Michael Carson, "The October Revolution, Russian Occupation of Persia: WWI Soldier Viktor Shklovsky's Sentimental Memoirs"

Rachel Kambury, "War Without Allegory: WWI, Tolkien, and The Lord of the Rings"

Andria Williams, "Black Poppies: Writing About Britain's Black Servicemen"

New Fiction from Andria Wiliams: "Polecat"

Camp TUTO, Greenland
1960

When Paul, a nuclear operator, had arrived in Greenland, the reactor at Camp Century was still not fully assembled, so he and a dozen other men were being held temporarily at another camp a hundred miles south. Everything he could see on the edge of the polar ice cap was white and brown like some kind of visual trick: dirt, and snow, and snowy dirt, and snowy air, and sometimes blowing dirt. The snow and dirt were constantly changing places.

He was in the mess hall when Master Sergeant Whitmore appeared at his elbow. Paul hopped to his feet, and Whitmore asked, with no preamble, "You ever drive a D8 Cat?" Whitmore had buggy, vein-scraggled blue eyes that seemed to intensify anything he said, giving any question he asked an oddly moral

implication.

Paul hesitated. “Not yet.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to fill in,” Whitmore said. “It’s just like driving a tractor, except it’s a giant one. You’ve driven a tractor, right?”

Paul had not.

Whitmore forged on. “You’ll be towing a fuel canister. All you got to do is stay behind me and follow the bamboo markers. Do not fall asleep and drive into a crevasse. We drive six hours on, six hours off. It’ll take about a week.”

Paul was relieved enough to simply get on the road, so he nodded, and when Whitmore left, his friend Mayberry appeared beside him.

“King of the road!” Mayberry said, grinning at Paul. Mayberry was the camp geologist, and this was his fifth tour in Greenland. Tall and thin, with a scientist’s buzzing mind, he worked in an underground lab below the base, surrounded by rows of ice samples stored in what looked like oversized poster tubes. Because he spent his working hours alone, he seemed perpetually delighted to encounter other people. He said that Camp Century was a dream compared to his first base in Greenland, which had been called Fistclench.

“How bad will it be?” Paul asked.

But Mayberry was watching Whitmore, who stood across the room talking to the camp cook. Cookie, as they called him, had been in Greenland for who knew how long. He was as thin as a Confederate zealot, and while the men ate he stood smoking in his stained apron, watching them as if it gave him either grim pleasure or unabated pain.

“Good!” Mayberry said. “We get to bring Cookie.”

“Should make for great conversation,” said Paul.

“Oh, he talks,” Mayberry promised. “You’ll see.”

The Polecat was idling next to several others just outside the camp’s garage. They rumbled in concert, swathed in plumes of steam and exhaust. Paul identified his by the orange fuel canister attached to the rear and mounted on skis. The Polecats were Swiss innovations, specially adapted vehicles with huge track frames – Paul guessed twenty feet – and wide track pads that could traverse uneven ice without tipping or breaking through.

There would be three other Polecats like his, carrying various types of freight in the middle of the caravan. Whitmore’s D9 led the line, with a blade attached, to help clear a path. Then there was the Command Train, a huge tractor that pulled the cook shack, radio shack, and three refurbished old boxcars on skis called wanigans, where the soldiers relaxed or slept. Finally, there was the last boxcar on the whole train: the latrine, that foul caboose, following them like a bad thought. What an absurdly human predicament, Paul thought, having to cross the polar ice cap lugging literal shit behind you.

Whitmore strode up and slapped Paul on the back. “Good luck,” he said. “Don’t drive into a crevasse.” This was becoming a common theme with the master sergeant, and Paul was beginning to suspect he wasn’t kidding. To Mayberry, Whitmore said, “Quit smoking by the fuel rig. Here’re your keys.”

Everyone climbed into their tractors. Slowly, Whitmore pulled his D9 out into the lead. At this rate, Paul thought, we will never get anywhere. Then he pulled his own tractor in line and found it moved even slower than the boss’s.

It seemed unbelievable they’d travel at this snail’s pace for an entire week. Paul tried not to think about it. He wondered

when he would break down and allow himself a cigarette. He wondered what his wife, Nat, back in Idaho was doing. He thought quite a lot about what they would do if they were together. Meanwhile he squinted to keep track of the pointed tops of the bamboo poles they followed, many almost buried beneath the moving glacier. Sometimes the poles would be so hard to see that an impossibly-bundled man would have to walk ahead, locate them, and then wave in the direction the trucks should go. Paul's Army career had started in petroleum supply, and stunts like this were one reason he'd left that field. Lugging massive canisters and a shitter across the ice felt like some Neanderthal gig, the work of people without bright ideas.

photo by Ray Hansen

Between their shifts, the drivers sat in the rocking but well-heated wanigan, paging through month-old newspapers someone had brought from Fort Andrews. There they were joined by Cookie, who had never stopped smoking, his legs crossed and one foot jittering up and down. Cookie would wait until the men around him began to engage in any kind of interesting conversation—about sports back home, their previous tours of duty, anything—and then he'd suddenly interject his own litany

of complaints against the Army and life in general, as if that had been the topic of discussion in the first place. “I wasn’t meant to be here,” he’d say, sucking on one cheek, his small eyes blazing. “I’m from Mississippi. No way was I meant to be here.” He alternated this thought with its close cousin, “I wasn’t meant to be in the Army” (he had initially attempted to get into the Navy) and also, “I was never meant to be a cook” (he had hoped to be a machinist, but failed some critical aptitude test). Cookie and his quibble with destiny had rapidly become tiresome, and it was impossible for the other men not to occasionally respond with wiseacre remarks.

“*I* was meant to be here,” Mayberry said as he flipped the pages of the classifieds. It was the only section everyone had not yet read multiple times. “This, here, is the point in life I was born for.” The wanigan gave a lurch and someone in a bunk cursed.

Cookie ignored him and continued, “I was a runner in high school. I ran cross-country. I wasn’t meant to stand in one place, flippin’ burgers.”

Mayberry was reading the classifieds aloud. “Here’s an ad for a home dental care system. It says, ‘Polish Your Teeth on Your Own Time.’”

“That’s what I’ve always wanted to do with my own time,” said Benson from a folding chair across the room.

“We could let Cookie drill our cavities,” said Mayberry. “Maybe he was meant for that.”

“I had three ladies back in Mississippi,” said Cookie. “Three of ‘em, who loved me. They cooked for *me*.”

“Hmm,” said Mayberry, in a placating way.

“I had five women,” said Benson. “They polished my teeth for me.”

Cookie snapped to attention. “You did not,” he said. “That’s stupid.” Then he lapsed back into thought.

The wanigan hit a deep groove, and the men steadied themselves. “Jesus,” said Benson. “And people think they get seasick in the Navy.”

“I was meant to be in the Navy!” Cookie said, with sudden interest. Then he stood from his chair and looked at the boxcar door with a focused expression, his hands on his hips, knobby elbows sticking out from white shirtsleeves. “Forget this shit,” he said. “I’m going home.”

Mayberry rattled his newspaper so it wouldn’t slump. “Great,” he said, without looking up. “Tell your three ladies we said hi.”

“Forget you,” said Cookie, very loudly, leaning over Mayberry who looked over the top of the paper in surprise. “Forget you, all you stupid food-eaters, who just sit around eating my food. Complainin’ and complainin’. I am a man! I was not meant for this shit job!” He stepped back and glanced around with flashing eyes, muttering, “Maybe you should cook for your damn selves is what.”

“Geez, I’m sorry,” Mayberry began, but Cookie strode to the boxcar door, unlatched it, and heaved it open. The air that entered the room felt as cold as rubbing alcohol.

“Whoa,” said Mayberry, getting to his feet also. And then the cook, in only his short-sleeved white uniform, jumped right out.

For a moment everyone stood and the room was silent. Paul looked around, as if this had just been some optical illusion, and Cookie would actually be sitting back in his chair where he’d been a moment before. But the chair was empty. The wanigan door creaked slowly toward closing.

“Holy shit,” Mayberry cried, and he and Paul scrambled. They reached the door at the same time and yanked it open. Mayberry leaped out first, and Paul followed. The force of the cold nearly spun him around, and it took him a second to gather his wits and begin running. He heard Benson hit the ground a few beats behind him. Cookie had taken off across the ice, surprisingly fast, heading for the white horizon.

“He’s a runner,” called Mayberry as they sprinted after the cook. “He ran cross-country.”

“He’s gonna die,” Paul cried. Any second he expected Cookie to slip from sight into the narrow cradle of an unseen crevasse.

The ice was hard and slick, and their feet slipped every few steps. Cookie, on the other hand, appeared to have magic shoes. He was loping ahead at a steady pace, his body a slim, efficient machine.

“Go back, Benson,” Mayberry said over his shoulder.

Paul could hear Benson’s heavy breath like a zipper being yanked up and down. “Someone will radio the boss,” he shouted encouragingly.

“That someone should be you!” Mayberry said.

This is ridiculous, Paul thought. He knew he had to give the chase all he could. He focused on pumping his arms and legs as fast as possible. He narrowed his vision on Cookie and raced all-out, his lungs burning with an intense pain.

photo by Ray Hansen

Cookie might have actually gotten away, run off to the top of the world, if he hadn’t hit a ripple on the ice and stumbled. He caught himself and straightened, limping slightly, and Paul, feeling delirious and oxygen-deprived, gave his last burst of speed. The gap between himself and the cook narrowed. Paul took several long strides and flung himself against the cook’s lower back, pulling the two of them down onto the ice with a painful slap.

The second Cookie hit the ice he began yowling. He fought like a wildcat. He kneed Paul in the gut and smashed the flat of his hand against Paul’s nose. Paul realized that his only advantage was his greater size, so he fell forward onto Cookie and clung to the wiry man for dear life. It was like wrestling a greased snake. All he could see was Cookie’s white-shirted abdomen, into which his face was pressed, the muscles twisting and bucking against his cheek. He gritted his teeth and waited desperately for Mayberry to reach them.

A moment later Mayberry sprinted up and fell on top of them

both, and from a distance it must have looked like some ecstatic reunion, or the winning touchdown in a football game. “Sit on his arms,” Mayberry grunted, and Paul, dazedly obedient, tried to find one to sit on. He crawled up Cookie’s body and fought to pin down the cook’s skinny, flopping limb, which jumped over and over again just out of Paul’s reach like a fish on land. Finally, Paul pegged the arm and sat on it, and Mayberry sat on the other, and then there they were, gasping for breath, the cook writhing and screaming on his back beneath them.

Benson finally jogged up, looking ill, and in the distance they could see Whitmore’s D9 turn slowly, slowly, to come and get them. This seemed absurd; they could walk faster than it drove.

“I’m sorry, Cookie,” Mayberry was saying. “We’ll show you we care. We’ll bake you a cake.”

“We need to stand up,” Paul said. “We’ll freeze.” He was concerned about Cookie’s bare elbows on the ice.

They waited for Benson to catch his breath, and then they all grabbed onto an available part of the cook and lifted him to his feet. Cookie screamed; Paul winced to see the two lines of blood on the ice where his arms had begun to freeze to the ground. “Sorry,” Paul said to the cook, and “Start walking,” to the others. With mincing, difficult steps they made their way toward the line of tractors.

Sergeant Whitmore leaped down from his idling vehicle, waving his arms and shouting, “What the hay, Cookie?” for he was a man who did not curse. “What did you think you were doing?” Cookie stared at him defiantly, and Whitmore made a sound of disgust. “Tie him up,” he said, “tie him to a bunk til we get to Century. We’ll decide what to do with him there.”

On the count of three, Paul, Mayberry, and Benson heaved the slender cook up into the wanigan and over to a bunk. Whitmore

fetched a coil of rope. “Don’t you tie me,” Cookie began to shout, “don’t you dare tie me!,” but they did anyway, binding him to the bunk in a seated position with his arms behind his back. From there, he yelled half-sensible platitudes at them for hours. “You can’t keep a man where he don’t want to be,” he said, and “This is my life, not yours, you rat bastards,” and, cryptically, “You’re just like all them, you know what.” He hollered until he wore himself out, and then he stared at them despondently from where he sat.

That night, after a dinner of cream of wheat and tinned milk, Paul tried to sleep, but every time he opened his eyes he could see Cookie’s own, glittering back at him. Paul rolled onto his side to face the wall. Cookie’s gaze crawled up his back. He yanked his wool blanket to his shoulders. “Cut it out, Cookie,” he said.

Cookie’s voice came across the room, plaintive, almost mewling. “I ain’t doing nothin’,” he said. “I’m just sittin’ here like a good boy.” A moment later he hissed, “Come on, untie me. I won’t go nowhere. I’ll sit just like this.”

“Can’t do that,” Paul muttered.

Cookie’s voice was hoarse. “My Leroy’s itchin’.”

“Sorry.”

“Untie me, please,” Cookie begged. “Come on now, you’re the only nice one of them in here. You’re the nice guy. The best one.” A minute later he said, “Never mind, you’re the worst one. You a priss is what you is. You prissy!”

Paul had never been called this before and felt actually startled.

“A man’s body is his own,” Cookie said. “It’s the only thing he really got. You know, someday the rules are gonna be here for you when you don’t want them, either.”

Paul screwed shut his eyes. The wanigan lurched and groaned, and a coffee cup slid off a table, hit the ground with a thud, and rolled hollowly across the floor. Outside, the pitch of the wind rose and fell, a sound both strange and familiar: a waning alarm, distant machinery, blood roaring in the ear.

*

photos by Ray Hansen

Blood Money: C.E. Morgan's 'The Sport of Kings'

On May 17, 1875, under blue skies and wearing the flapping green-and-orange silks of his legendary employer J.P. McGrath, a diminutive, tough, whip-thin African-American jockey named Oliver Lewis, weighing little more than a hundred pounds, careened to the first Kentucky Derby victory on a chestnut Thoroughbred with a white blaze and two white socks named Aristides. Thirteen of the fifteen jockeys surrounding him as they thundered down the home stretch were also African-American. In fact, black jockeys would dominate the sport in the south for another thirty years, winning 15 of the first 28 Derbies.

Aristides' trainer, Ansel Williamson, had been born a slave in rural Virginia. Purchased by a wealthy horse breeder, he learned the art and science of groomsmanship, and was

eventually hired by J.P. McGrath, of the famed green-and-orange silks, who’d been born dirt-poor but, after winning $105,000 in a single night in a New York gambling house, started a Thoroughbred farm that went on to become one of the most famous of its time.

1887. Eadweard Muybridge. Wellcome Gallery, London.

That a former-slave-turned-Hall-of-Famer trained Aristides—whose statue now stands at Churchill Downs—and an African-American jockey the size of a young girl rode the pounding horse to victory, hints at the intrigue, breathtaking chance, and monumental toil involved in the sport of horse racing. It also, for novelist C.E. Morgan—with her sharp comprehension of history and a penchant for literary gambles of her own—sparked the genesis of a brilliant, winding epic novel of a racially and economically fraught America: *The Sport of Kings*.

Spanning over 200 years as it moves back and forth through time, *The Sport of Kings* opens in the mid-1950s. Henry Forge, a restless, ambitious teenager schooled from birth in the racial politics of the south, sets in motion a shocking crime against his father's black groom, Filip. The event is one of several sharp seismic blips in the bedrock inequity of Forge Run Farm, initially founded by Henry's great-great-great-great-grandfather, Samuel Forge, who came on foot from Virginia to Paris, Kentucky in 1783, accompanied by one slave. On such an act of claim and hubris the farm was built; and, as author Morgan levels her steady eye at the parallels of human history, a nation.

Young Henry Forge turns the family's tobacco farm into a Thoroughbred empire where the green grass is "the color of money." His frustrated cosmopolitan wife, Judith, leaves him before too long and, in a deeply un-maternal move, also leaves their sole child, Henrietta, for him to raise. (One can't help

but wonder if Henry and his daughter, or at least their naming scheme, are a nod to legendary horse trainer Leo O’Brien and his daughter, Leona; or if, given Morgan’s divinity school background and this father-daughter pair’s ruthless streak, it’s more of a Herod/Herodias sort of thing.) Henrietta is bright, offbeat, and enthusiastic in youth, qualities that become warped into a strange, intellectual coldness by her father’s intense, even immoral, over-involvement in her life. When Henrietta blurts a racial slur at school and is penalized, her father, irate, decides to homeschool her on a strange curriculum of evolutionary biology, manifest destiny, and horsemanship.

Henry Forge is, to put it mildly, obsessed with genetics. He's especially intrigued by the strategy of linebreeding: the idea that doubling down on a certain lineage can perfect and purify it, yielding—if the circumstances are just right—the ideal specimen. (Even today, the odd, invisible world of dominance, alleles, and zygotes is a hallmark preoccupation of the sport, so much so that even the casual gambler can combine mares and stallions on fantasy web sites such as TrueNicks.com to produce virtual "nicks," foals with an edge on wins. The site's slogan could have come from Henry Forge himself: "Do

more than just hope for the best.”)

The cloistered universe of Forge Run Farm is rendered in such careful and specific detail by Morgan that its sheer particularity could become claustrophobic—even her other characters realize how deeply weird the Forges are and try to get away from them, like the salt-of-the-earth veterinarian, Lou, who skitters to her truck to escape “these crazy people”—if it’s not for the sea change the author delivers halfway through the book, when Allmon Shaughnessy arrives on the farm.

Allmon is a 24-year-old fresh off a seven-year prison sentence, schooled in the Groom Program at Blackburn, and an undeniable talent with horses. He’s the only child of a wandering, handsome, alcoholic father, Mike Shaughnessy (“known in high school as that Irish fucking fuck”) and a caring but overburdened African-American mother, Marie. At fifteen, Allmon is noticed for his athletic promise and brought into a pre-NFL program, the Academy for Physical Education, where the coaches’ focus on phenotype is not so different from the horse breeders’ whom Allmon will encounter later (“‘How big was your dad?” “Six-two.” “Good….I want you big, fast, and I want you mean”).

But Marie’s chronic health problems, revealed to be lupus, are sinking the household. As with Erica Garner—the daughter of Eric Garner who was killed by police violence in 2014 for selling cigarettes without tax stamps, herself dead at 27 from a heart attack after childbirth—a legacy of racism and poverty live in Marie’s body, the “gendered necropolitics” of anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence, the sequelae. “Make me an animal,” Marie begs, in a heartbreaking prayer, “so I won’t know anything. Make me a man, so I won’t give a damn about anyone.”

Her son Allmon does give a damn, but he is orphaned too young to know what to do with his anger and his aching heart. He is

led into crime by older boys on the street; tried as an adult for possession of narcotics, an illegal firearm and a stolen car, he is sentenced to seven years, some of which is described in horrifying detail as he learns to defend himself.

The introduction of Allmon to the farm—their first ever black groom, hired by Henrietta without the blessing or even knowledge of her father—will change the course of the Forge family forever. Most likely not in the way you, avid reader, are thinking, because Morgan will not give the reader what he or she expects. But—and there's that wink at history again—change is coming, and change is, as Lyell and Darwin would agree, nature—and therefore man's—most unstoppable force.

—

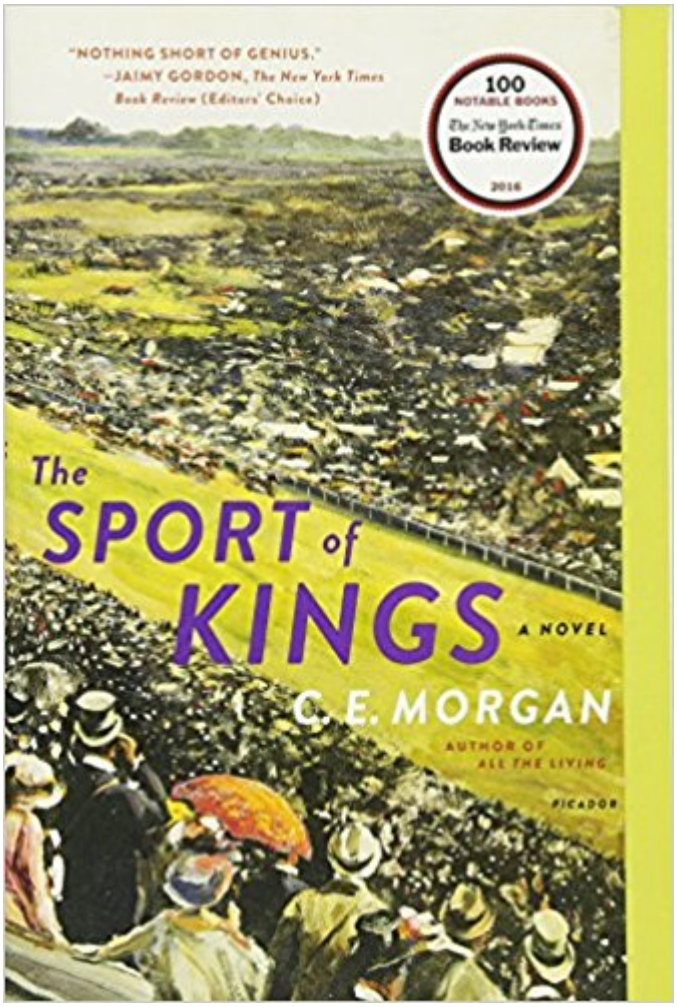
C.E. Morgan was born and raised in rural Kentucky. She

attended Berea College, a tuition-free institution founded as an abolitionist school in 1855, and later, Harvard Divinity School. And like Allmon's mother, Marie, she is no stranger to chronic pain, as indicated by this interview with *Commonweal Magazine*:

> *Anyone who lives with poor health or chronic pain, or who has endured poverty—real poverty—knows what it is to live with lack and a resulting fear so incessant that it becomes thoroughly normalized, invisible in its ubiquity. If you're lucky enough to have that fear begin to ease, which it has for me only in the past year, it's an odd experience. A stranglehold eases off your entire body.*

An essay Morgan wrote for the Oxford American, "My Friend, Nothing is in Vain," suggests that her own brand of chronic pain may, like Marie's, be auto-immune in nature, like lupus.

But it's important to keep in mind that a novelist need not have experienced firsthand that which they write into their work, and Morgan's first preoccupation is with the way she renders her subjects. "Evil's breeding ground is a lack of empathy," she explains. "Evil acts reduce the other to an object, a being to its component parts, and obliterate subjectivity….So I locate moral beauty in an other-regarding ethic."



She's also concerned with the notion of "attunement": "Humans struggle to remain attuned to one another—they want to turn away because of fear, or ambition, or boredom, or some lure of the ego. It's difficult. It requires radical vulnerability, radical risk."

Writing so boldly outside one's historical period, race, and gender also puts the novelist in a position of "radical vulnerability," and the whole thing can only work if it is a radical risk: the author wholly invested, putting her emotions and reputation on the line, tapping into voices that are not her own. It's a gamble with a nearly paralyzing moral and ethical obligation, and that's before you even get to the whole issue of "craft." But if the stakes were not so high, how else could Morgan have propelled herself to create a character as stunning in thought, action, and voice as "The Reverend," Allmon's restless, glittering-eyed, charismatic

preacher of a grandfather? (Morgan is excellent at writing convincing, multi-dimensional characters of faith, and their sermons; her first novel, *All the Living*, a quietly gorgeous, small-scope book taking place over only three months and focusing on just three characters, features pastor Bell Johnson, whose words read much like Morgan's prescription for novel writing itself, her "other-regarding ethic": "My heart was like a shirt wore wrong side out, brothers and sisters, that's how it was when God turned me, so that my innermost heart was all exposed.") But The Reverend is a different kind of preacher. An urgent, assertive, slightly wild and dogmatic man with an Old Testament streak, he has chosen a life of urban poverty and service. He harshly judges his own daughter, Marie, for her decisions, and is easier on his flock than his own family, much like John Ames's grandfather in *Gilead.* He also speaks many of my favorite lines in the book:

> *"Y'all act like Jesus is dead! Well, let me ask you this: Is Jesus dead in the ground? 'Cause I heard a rumor Jesus done rose up from the grave!"*
>
> *A woman cried out, "He rose!"*
>
> *"And how come he rose up out of that dark and nasty grave?"*
>
> *"Tell me!"*
>
> *"How come he said, 'Eat my body and remember me?'….Because my Jesus, my Jesus is the original Negro, and he said, only I can pay the bill…"*
>
> *…Now the Reverend stopped suddenly, plucked a pink handkerchief out of his suit pocket, and mopped his streaming face, and when he spoke again his voice was conversational: "Now eventually somebody's gonna tell you Jesus ain't had no brown skin. And you know what you're gonna say when they tell you that? You're gonna say: If Jesus wasn't born no Negro, he died a Negro. What part the cross you don't understand?"*

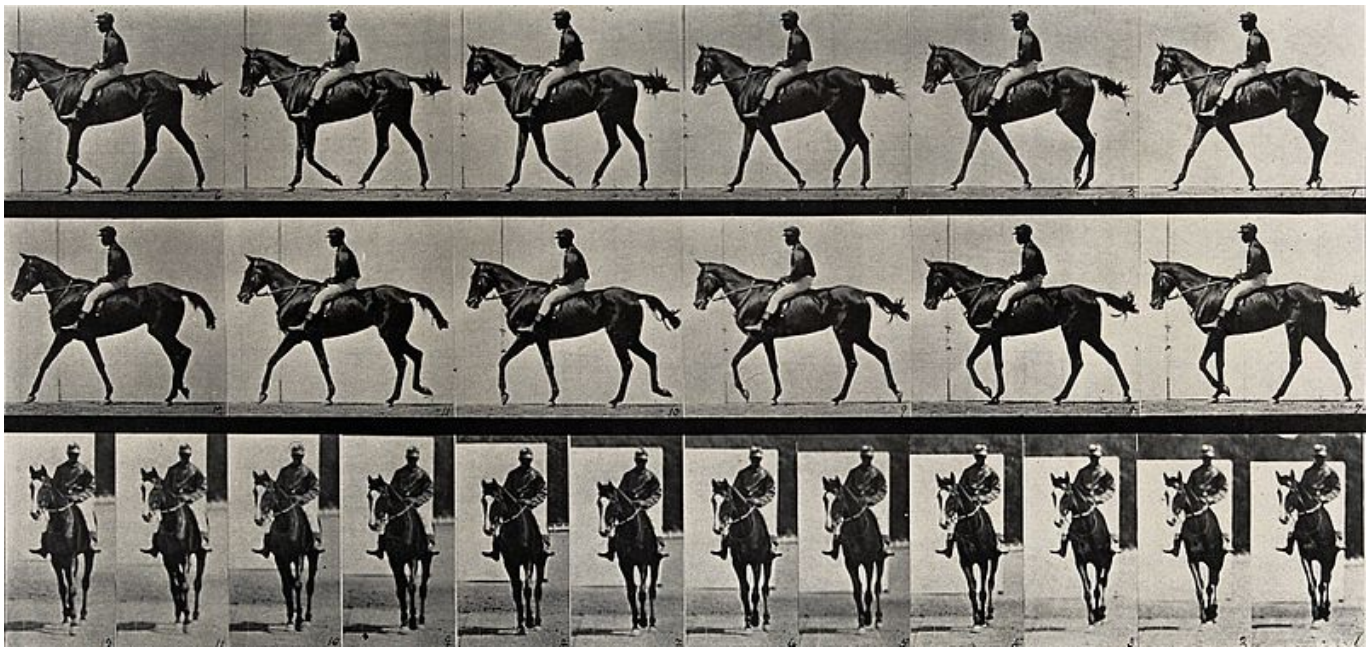
—

The Sport of Kings is by no means a “perfect” book: its arc treads a little too close to Philipp Meyer’s *The Son* to feel wholly new, and at one key section, delving back into the early days of slavery on Forge Run Farm, the novel takes a sudden dive so immoderately Faulknerian—all dark and lushly incestuous and overwrought—that it threatens, like kudzu, to choke up the whole book.

But *The Sport of Kings* possesses a certain perfection of spirit, a reckless authorial gamble. Something special happens when a novelist combines that gamble with a terrific intellect and a heart for human suffering. We end up with a book that’s one in a million, a Secretariat, a Hellsmouth, pounding for the finish.

—

And what of those African-American jockeys who dominated the sport of horse racing in its early decades? The athletes like Isaac Burns Murphy, whose 44% win rate has never been surpassed, and whose earnings would have made him a millionaire if he lived today; or Jimmy Winkfield, who won 220 races in 1901 alone, every one of them a threat to life and limb?



Sadly, Jim Crow racism, and sometimes direct sabotage, thinned their ranks. The Irish jockeys of the northern states were not, on the whole, kind. Isaac Burns Murphy was once discovered, apparently drunk, on the back of a horse prior to a race; it was later proven he'd been drugged by an opponent. Winkfield escaped segregation in the United States with a successful second career in Russia, winning the Russian Oaks five times and the Russian Derby four; but when he was invited back to the States for a *Sports Illustrated* gala in 1961, he was told he could not enter through the front door.

No African-American jockey has won the Kentucky Derby since 1902, though Winkfield placed second the following year.

The sport is now dominated by riders from Latin American countries, immigrants from Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, rural gauchos of small stature and true grit. (Leona O'Brien, that daughter of famous horse trainer Leo O'Brien, whom I mentioned earlier? She went on to marry her father's jockey, the Puerto Rican-born John Velazquez, now the highest-paid in his sport; they have two children). Morgan gives these newer jockeys a brief nod in *The Sport of Kings*, and a reader can't help but think that fifty years from now, there will be a novel in their story, too.

Disrespecting the Troops

Sitting in front of my computer one evening, scrolling idly through Facebook items, a long post catches my eye. As a novelist, I'm sympathetic to fellow writers who can't fit their thoughts into tidy soundbites, who need space to express their concerns. So I click "read more," hoping someone will give me valuable food for thought in a simplified world.

Alas, I have made a mistake:

Hey, real quick. For all y'all big ole football players who want to take a knee during the national anthem I just want to say "go ahead." That's right biggun', take that knee. The 1% got it. They will continue to embrace the suck for minimum wage in a country where you can't even begin to understand the various civil liberties that are violated. …When the day is done and you take off your pads, have your interviews, sign your lucrative cereal box deal, and fly home to your castle, the 1% will clear their weapon, take a cold shower in the hopes of cleaning off their best friends blood and brains that covered their face and flag. They will eat yet another MRE before laying on a ragged cot only to wake up, put a round in the chamber and walk the streets in the hope of providing just 1/10 of the lifestyle you kneel in protest against.

I feel myself thinking, for the billionth time since last year's election: What the hell is this?

Why is protest seen by some sectors of US society as disrespectful to the troops? Photo by Britta Hansen

Right off, there are some things I can recognize: the Fox News sneer, oddly colloquial hostility, and chummy racism. Why do these conservative op-eds always feel like being advanced upon by an irate stranger in a grocery-store parking lot?

Instead of slamming my computer shut, for some reason, I want to understand this. I want to get to the bottom of why this person is so very, very angry, and what it is about men kneeling at football games that makes him so, and what on earth that has to do with the poor guy sleeping on the cot in some unnamed country.

So I read the post again. And I can start to see it: that familiar bitterness, rage even, toward any non-white person who’s ruffling the status quo. Somehow, this anger is “justified” through the righteous defense of veterans.

Wait, hold up, what? What have veterans got to do with it?

The answer, I believe, is very little. But an *idea* of veterans, and of the American military as a whole, is being cultivated by American conservatives, with striking confidence and vehemence, to justify the right-wing platform—one that now more than ever imagines the US as white, masculine, and authoritarian.

My Facebook rhetorician's name is "Todd", but I don't know Todd personally. The post was shared by a female acquaintance of mine, whom I happen to know is neither a military spouse nor a veteran. What could appeal to her in this message?

The 1% got it. They will continue to embrace the suck for minimum wage in a country where you can't even begin to understand the various civil liberties that are violated.

"Embrace the suck" – interesting. Is "Todd" a veteran? Vietnam, maybe? An impersonator? Or, more generously, someone who's simply channeling a pro-military self-righteousness that utilizes whatever slang he's picked up?

Now I want to know: What are the various civil liberties I can't even begin to imagine are being violated? Aren't "I," in the alternate universe of this folksy polemic, somehow partly the big guy kneeling to protest violated civil liberties which I have not only imagined but to which I have likely borne witness?

Now, when the day is done and you take off your pads, have your interviews, sign your lucrative cereal box deal, and fly home to your castle, the 1% will clear their weapon, take a cold shower in the hopes of cleaning off their best friends blood and brains that covered their face and flag. They will eat yet another MRE before laying on a ragged cot only to wake up, put a round in the chamber and walk the streets in the hope of providing just 1/10 of the lifestyle you kneel in protest against.

This is ramping things up significantly. There's not only a

cultural-disgust element to this wee jeremiad, but a high emotional pitch, too. And emotion is why the post is being shared among the conservative underbelly of my friends-set, and agreed upon with such relief and gratitude ("THANK YOU!" "I'm so glad someone said it!" "I knew this would speak to YOUR family, X.").

Because here we are: this is about loving the veterans. This homegrown Pericles is offering his support to the veteran, defending what he imagines is his life of harsh privation – interestingly, not something to be protested against but something in which to encourage pride, around which to rally.

Other than the offensive casual racism of the author's viewpoint to begin with, that pride is what worries me most. The conception of modern soldiers as thralls on an endless treadmill of violence and sacrifice. The author's hypothetical soldier seems to have had the worst day of his entire military career, and yet it's described as almost run-of-the-mill. Certainly, days like that, or worse, have taken place for countless soldiers since the wars on terror began: days when they lost limbs, or friends; were lonely or depressed or at the least very physically uncomfortable. But, thirteen years after the 2nd Battle of Fallujah, is this really what civilians think a full "one percent" of the American population continues to do daily—to literally wipe their best friend's blood and brains off their faces every night before sleeping in a "ragged cot?" To live the same sort of horrific, numbing day over and over again into infinity, for "minimum wage," in a country that apparently can't respect them?

And if so, why the hell would they be okay with that?

*

Much of what happens on social media today is the equivalent of watching someone throw a flaming dog turd into a swimming pool, then sitting back to see who paddles delightedly toward

it and who thrashes away. But it can be a useful vehicle for recognizing patterns in human thought and behavior, and like many members of military families I can't help notice the constant contrast that's being drawn between veterans and, most immediately, the NFL protestors, who've undertaken the very American act of regular, meaningful, and visible protest. From the conservative corners of the newsmedia, in conversation, and across the lightning-fast interwebs, I've seen veterans contrasted with virtually anyone conservatives don't like: all those spoiled, whiny millennials, for example, or immigrants, who apparently should be grateful to get through the day without seeing the inside of a holding cell. It's like constantly being lectured at the dinner table by a crabby, work-exhausted dad in khakis who (although he didn't serve, but his father did) answers your every complaint by telling you to shut up, because men died for this country and you've had everything handed to you on a silver platter.

Less than 0.5 percent of Americans currently serve in the military. This is the "military-civilian" divide we've all heard about, though exactly what can be done is still up in the air. Overwhelmingly, the divide is referenced by veterans and their family members, because (and this is part of the problem) they are the ones most concerned with it. The veteran-artists who bravely write, talk, act, or make art and music about their experiences do so for a wide range of reasons, but for many, stripping away a romanticized notion of war and military service is part of what they hope to accomplish through their work.

Meanwhile, the American public bears witness to a bizarre lovefest for the American military, predominantly (but not exclusively) from conservatives. This is more than just supporting the troops. This is the first time your ex-boyfriend got suddenly, really weird. It's as if conservatives are channeling some kind of political and cultural fantasy into the notion of military service, using it to justify their

beliefs, their prejudices, their vision for an America that not only does not now exist but maybe never has.

This is what I think of as "the American military in the modern conservative imagination." Or, the way my friend Peter Molin put it in an e-mail, conservatives have mentally constructed a military that is white, masculine, and "safe" in the sense that it defends all that the right holds dear. Conservatives seem to hope this vision will reflect back onto the nation as a whole, giving them the whiter, manlier, safer America they desire. But you make the military out of the people who live in America; you don't somehow make America out of your idea of the military.

And the only way to craft a fantasy out of a differing or even opposite reality is through force.

*

I'm watching a series of old GOP attack ads made during the Obama-McCain election in 2008.

Here's one narrated by a disapproving-sounding woman; she's the worst secretary you ever had to wait with in the principal's office. As she addresses her conservative demographic, I can tell this woman would like to spit in my little liberal whore face. The ad scans over a filmstrip of images (alarming explosions, fighter jets, a waving flag, a smiling and very young male soldier with all of innocent Caucasiamerica in his blue eyes) and she warns of alleged liberal attempts to "cut off funding for our active troops, endangering their lives," as if liberals would like to rip the weapons from their hands, leaving them encircled by slathering Taliban. The camera zeroes in on a triumphant-looking picture of Obama flanked by that estrogen devil herself, Nancy Pelosi on one side, and on the other an almost absurdly-thrilled-looking black politician I don't recognize who has his hands flung upward, fingers pointed in a double V-for-Victory, as

if, at last, the domination of white America by minorities is finally complete.

The camera goes back to that young white soldier, his life, paradoxically, in our very hands. “Obama and Congressional liberals,” says the angry-sounding woman. “Too risky for America.”

Alright, so this is par for the course when it comes to political ads. They’re the equivalent of those Facebook posts I mentioned earlier, except the flaming dog turd has been traded for an actual human shit with sparklers sticking out the top. Anyway. While I find them irritating, it’s neither the existence, nor the tenor, of these ads that particularly troubles me.

It’s the fact that Obama’s skin has been deliberately darkened in almost every single one of them.

A Stanford University study analyzed more than 100 of the videos and found the difference in his skin tone between the ad images, and the same images in their original forms or publications. Furthermore, “[Obama] appeared especially dark-skinned in Republican attack ads that aired closer to election day. Meanwhile, McCain’s skin appeared gradually lighter over time in the same ads.”

While you’re wondering how America possibly possesses the technology to make McCain’s skin even whiter than it already was (was he translucent?), consider this: the article’s conclusion, put forth in an understated way: “The study… suggests that the images could have been intended to tap into possible racial biases of some viewers.”

I’ve just watched a visual implication that the very fact of a black President might be harmful to American troops.

*

No matter what the political far-right would like to believe, the American military has never upheld its regressive dreams. Forty percent of active-duty service members are people of color, with African-Americans and Native Americans represented in higher proportion than their actual population percentage in the United States. According to a Pew study, racial intermarriage is also “typically more common among people in the military than among civilians.”

The desegregation of the U.S. military took place in 1948, sixteen years before *Brown v. Board of Education* made segregation illegal here at home in 1964. Even so, desegregation was seen as particularly dangerous for the troops. The Army was not an “experiment,” claimed Army Secretary Kenneth Royall to Harry Truman, adding, “It is a well-known fact that close personal association with Negroes is distasteful to a large percentage of Southern whites.” Secretary Royall’s warning has been echoed with strange fidelity by conservatives in the many years since, over everything from women in combat to the presence of LGBTQ+ troops. “The U.S. Armed forces aren’t some social experiment,” said Sen. Chuck Hagel in 1999 when asked about the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”; and over a decade later, former Marine Corps Lt. Col. Oliver North said the same thing, with a little of the righteous indignation we now expect to accompany political statements: soldiers “deserve better than to be treated like lab rats in Mr. Obama’s radical social experiment.”

In all seriousness, as a military wife, I have to ask these affronted and obstinate politicians: When do we *not* treat our military like some kind of giant experiment? Any time we send men and women overseas, every time we commit them to action in Vietnam or Korea or Somalia or Iraq or Afghanistan, every time they’re sent to meet with tribal leaders or walk through the streets, or to (in the case of female service members) form FET teams and enter Afghan womens’ homes, it is all part of

some big experiment or another, all of which are far less predictable, with more immediate and potentially dangerous outcomes, than the possibility (or, "threat" as North & Co. call it) of compassionate social progress.

Maybe we should take greater care with the lives of our fellow citizens than to hazard them trying to prove that people in the Middle East prefer our form of representative democracy, or the notion that given enough money thrown at them, feudalists or tribalists will suddenly become responsible middle class citizens.

And if we really want to stop "experimenting" on our troops, maybe we should stop doing things like sending them out on caravans in under-armored Humvees, or deliberately exposing them to chemical weapons and psychoactive agents the way the U.S. Army Chemical Corps did at Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland for twenty years, or making them tend burn pits in the toxic fumes of everything from scorching rubber and plastic to unexploded ordnance to human and medical waste.

Or would the political right like to think of this, too, as a strange mark of pride? Does military service mean that anything can be done to you, to your body? Is that what you signed up for? As a female service member, if you are raped or assaulted during your service, should we all, like Trump, simply wonder, "Well, what did they expect to happen?" If you spend, as in that original Facebook post, every single day in discomfort and loneliness, away from your family, wiping brains off your cheeks, is that just what you signed up for?

I can't help but feel that part this fantasy about the American military that it's both the seat of rule and order, but also a lawless place where anything can happen. It's HBO in a sitcom world, where men are sheriffs or cocksuckers and women are angels or hookers. In this masculine dream, let men do what they are gonna do; just don't try to improve them, or make them think. Save that for the lab rats.

*

I’m attending the memorial service of a veteran here in town. He was a Vietnam vet, twenty-year career. He and his wife had no children, and she feared she’d be alone at the memorial, so the local VFW has put out a call for people to attend the service and show their support.

I’ve dressed the kids in their best; they’ve made cards with rainbows and hearts for the red-eyed, exhausted widow, who seems genuinely touched by them. My husband, like the other active-duty service members present, is in uniform. We marvel at the hundreds of people who’ve shown up: whole legions of bikers in bandannas and black leather, smoking and chatting and already sipping beer at the bar; a serious and highly-decorated African-American Marine who waits in line behind us; cars full of Air Force cadets, so bright and shiny in their blue uniforms that the mom in me wants to remind them to wear their seatbelts.

Standing in front of us in the long line, which winds through the VFW with its many coffee pots and posters and plaques and ancient dark-green carpeting, is a young man in a burgundy leather jacket, holding his toddler son. “I brought him ‘cause I want him to grow up to have respect,” the young man says. “Kids don’t have respect these days.” I tell him I think it’s nice that he’s there. He keeps talking about respect. He’s so earnest about this, he’s almost excited. His face shines with nervous sweat. His son, far too young to understand what’s going on or certainly remember it, plays with the lapel of his dad’s jacket.

ann)

As we walk back to the car, my high heels clicking, my kids trailing behind me, my husband in uniform, we spot the young man again, buckling his toddler into his car seat. The child babbles something and the dad says, “That’s ‘yes, *sir*!’ You gotta have respect. You say, ‘yes, sir.’”

We pass bumper sticker after bumper sticker: “Hillary for Prison 2016.” “Hillary Lied, People Died.” “Proud to Be Everything a Liberal HATES.” “The Lefties Are Coming! LOCK AND LOAD.” I peer at who’s climbing into these trucks. Overwhelmingly, they are not the service members in uniform, but civilians who’ve been drawn to the service out of a sense of patriotism and a desire to support the troops. Minutes before, they were, quite warmly, shaking my husband’s hand.

*

It’s a very gray November morning, and I’m drifting through a Facebook page called “FuckColinKaepernick,” maintained by a man who makes the not-so-comforting claim of being in law enforcement. I don’t really want to be here, and I feel anxious that my surfing, however research-motivated, is being catalogued by some demon algorithm and will come back to publicly haunt me. But I suck it up in the interest of trying to understand why Kaepernick’s protest in particular has instigated so much conservative ire, and whoever devotes himself to the cultural abscess known as “FuckColinKaepernick” is giving me some clues.

The page features the sort of intellectual gems you’d expect: photo after photo of—who else— soldiers and Marines and policemen honoring their flag; images of Kapernick paired with captions like, “I Only Take a Knee When I’m Blowing Someone for a Job”; “ISIS Signs Free-Agent Kaepernick to 1-Year Deal.” One commenter, “ColinKaeperdick,” mentions enthusiastically that he’d like to see the football player dead.

Through this disgust for the First Amendment-as-expressed-by-nonwhite-people runs a familiar vein of support for authority, for force, for the smackdown. Don't put up with that SHIT, is what every post seems to yell. You are the authority. You are strong. The defiance of other races, the simpering of women—you are above that shit. The conservative loathing of crybabies seems to extend even to actual babies, I learn a few minutes later, as I come across an unexpected image on the "FuckColin Kaepernick" Facebook page: a stock photo of a mother cradling a crying child. The mother appears sympathetic and tender, but a bigger issue is resonating with FuckColinKaepernick as he posts the meme:

"When you touched a hot stove, what was your parents' reaction, A or B?"

1. A) [illustrated by the picture of the mom comforting the child.]
2. B) "Bet you won't do that shit again huh?'"

This meme gives me pause. It's been given some "likes" and a few laughing-face emoji in response. And, sure, while the thought of this mom snapping something so harsh at her cute child is a little off-putting, it's hardly shocking after the garbage I've been scanning for the last fifteen minutes. I've seen similar on the Facebook pages of conservative friends.

Still, it seems part and parcel of what's troubling me. I remember, from our time stationed in Virginia, an approach touted by many of my friends: the "Biblical Approach to Spanking." A little while later I'm looking for the official word from Focus on the Family, a conservative, evangelical organization that puts out 4 million pieces of mail a week and is so prominent it has its own zip code. On its web site, a man named Chip gives step-by-step pointers on how exactly to spank your child:

Have the child lean over his bed and make sure you apply the

discipline with a quick flick of the wrist to the fatty tissue of the buttocks, where a sting can occur without doing any damage to the body. You want to be calm, in control, and focused as you firmly spank your child, being very careful to respect his body.

I won't get into the merits or demerits of corporal punishment here, and I am very familiar with the myriad frustrations of parenting, but I do find it telling a few paragraphs later when Chip writes, "For my part, some of the most intimate, touching moments I ever had with my kids were right after exercising discipline."

*

Perhaps one of the most startling revelations of the 2016 Presidential Election was the almost-surreal enthusiasm of conservatives for the modern Russian state and especially its bullish head honcho, Vladimir Putin. It shouldn't have been so surprising. The conservative love affair with Putin, cultivated steadily through Obama's presidency, has spawned fawning articles by the likes of Pat Buchanan and Matt Drudge of The Drudge Report. In "What Trump's Putin Love Reveals About Conservatives," Neal Gabler points out that, quite simply, "authoritarians love authoritarianism," and that "the Russian state does appear to be the conservative paradigm: white, highly nationalistic, militaristic…nostalgic for a lost past."

American conservatives share something even more specific with Putin, and that's his almost monomaniacal hatred of homosexuals. "They should be banned from donating blood, sperm," he has said, "And their hearts, in case of the automobile accident, should be buried in the ground or burned as unsuitable for the continuation of life."

No wonder that the military is where conservatives try to police homosexuality first, where they hope they'll have the

most success. Again, I can only comfort myself with the certainty that they can't make the America of their dreams simply by tweaking the military to their specifications; it simply won't happen.

But still, these are the people in power, in America, in 2017. And they love the troops so much that they aim for its conservative perfection, for it to give them—when America itself sometimes can't—that perfect dream of a white, white, masculine world – a world where, if people do dare to step outside the lines, we simply will not put up with that shit.

*

Despite my aversion to being lumped in with the authoritarians of the world simply because of my husband's military service, I can't ignore the fact that many conservatives do genuinely wish our veterans well. When people thank my husband for his service, which always embarrasses him somewhat, I don't think they are being insincere. And if the greatest gift you can give someone is paying attention to them, well, conservatives *are*. They may be paying a myopic attention, but it's there.

The troops sacrifice physically and emotionally during training and operations, so that citizens can express different opinions without fighting. Kneel away!

The military is a complicated beast, and I feel it every time I'm at a social gathering: at a little girl's birthday party, for instance, where, amidst a cheerful Pinterest explosion of tissue-paper flowers and tea-party hats, the parents' discussion somehow veers into a brief Colin Kaepernick Disgust, making both my husband and I squirm (and I'm sure I see in his eyes the pleading, *Woman, please do not announce you are writing an essay on this!*). Everyone there is white. At that moment, can I say that the conservative idea of the military is false?

Or: While watching a friend's children this weekend so she can run some errands, she returns with the report that she's gotten a phone call: her husband's battalion has had their first K.I.A., just weeks into a 7-month deployment. "Oh, shit," I say. "No, no." The deaths of these men are our nightmares. Her husband is Special Forces, and his experience may be as close to that Facebook poster's imagined lifestyle as any active-duty service member's can get. Just because it is, at this moment, rare doesn't make it less real; conservatives do understand this.

Downstairs, my own husband's heavy uniform is tumbling around in the dryer. My friend and I are squinting to talk in the fall sun. Funeral arrangements, childcare, meal trains: the brisk, terrible, simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these things. The sun is bright and beautiful over the mountains. There's a new widow somewhere here in our temporary town, and our nation is still, still, still at war.

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As a woman, I'm used to watching the way men imagine us. The

male imagination, with its prominence in film, art, sports, politics—everything— has obvious and obsessive ideas of what women are, so intense at times that you can't tell what part of you even came first, what part of you was naturally feminine, or what part developed that way as a coping mechanism or simply so you wouldn't rock the boat.

Now, I see veterans put in a similar situation, a similar discomfort. They didn't, perhaps, enjoy the violence of war, but they're coming home to an increasingly violent and divided country. They are a diverse group, quite often thoughtful, often (if this is still the minority) liberal, but they're supposed to pretend that they're not.

They are black service members who see, time and again, as people of color are beaten or shot by police who get off nearly scot-free. They are women who've served their country and come home to a president who jokes about grabbing 'em by the pussy. They are the many, deeply caring parents of children with disabilities, using the Exceptional Family Member Program to get the best care for their kids while they watch their president boggle his eyes and jerk spastically on the TV screen, mocking a disabled reporter. They are soldiers from Puerto Rico watching their president leave their American islands nearly for dead and complain about providing even basic aid. They are combat veterans who watch as a civilian with more weaponry than they maybe ever handled in-country guns down 500 people at a country music concert, of all things, and how do they not feel like, what the fuck is this, what the fuck were they fighting for?

It may take force to make a fantasy out of a reality, but somehow, in America in 2017, the far-right pulled this off. It still feels like a sleight of hand, a magic trick. A joke. Sometimes I wonder if, for Donald Trump, those moments of conquest were when he felt closest to America, to his people. If the authoritarian pleasure is in domination, then we've all been royally had.

This essay is solely the work of the author and is not intended to represent the Department of Defense. All opinions are the author's own.

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