

# Arms Sales, Cash, and Losing Your Religion

The lucrative Arms Sales market exists in the exact place where rational self-interest intersects with humanist idealism. Much as individuals have a right to exist, countries have a right to exist, and few would contest the prudence of building and maintaining modern weapons by which to protect that right. When a country builds weapons for its own military, and the purpose of that military is to defend, one may argue or object about the extent to which it is wise to train and organize the use of those weapons, but their necessity is comprehensible. Countries, like individuals, have a history of attacking one another.

While building weapons and equipment for self-defense is therefore fairly uncontroversial, *selling* said arms and weapons to people or nations that will misuse them—or, worse, are already engaged in [busily and enthusiastically misusing them](#)—is not necessary or prudent. This is because (1) human life is supposed to have an intrinsic value beyond anything money can buy, and (2) bullets and blasts tear open human bodies in order to spill out guts, blood, shit, and all the strange fluids that lurk beneath every human's skin, maiming and/or killing them. How one uses weapons, therefore, is one of the most important things in the world, once the decision has been made to produce them for self-protection. Much as a war of aggression is immoral, the sale of weapons that will create the conditions of a war abroad is also immoral. That's pretty simple. Or... is it?

## Leaving Points on the Board

It is, it is simple. Nevertheless, in the ongoing effort to appear balanced, everyone's favorite "sick man of the old media" *The Atlantic* recently published an [article](#) arguing that

“Progressives” should stop allowing political rivals to [monopolize weapons sales to other countries](#). Written by Army veteran of Afghanistan (this means the author knows the effect weapons have on his fellow humans), former Obama policy thinkfluencer, avowed Democrat and (apparently) Friend to America’s Arms Industry Andrew Exum, the piece is titled “What Progressives Miss About Arms Sales.” It offers a logically coherent argument in favor of profitability (political, industrial) over morality.

This argument has been made by many over the years. Readers familiar with the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition likely know Satan’s temptation of Jesus Christ during the Son of God’s wanderings in the desert. Whether one is a devout Christian and believes that this was an actual event that occurred and Christ’s refusal to be tempted had the consequence of saving Christian souls by redeeming them from original sin, or one is an atheist and values the story as an allegory for how to resist debasing oneself and exhausting one’s moral and ethical (which is to say, one’s *human*) credibility, few would argue that actually Satan is the good guy with a smart idea, and Christ is the bad one who’s a dupe and sucker for not choosing all the kingdoms of earth (with their weapons-making industries) over the Kingdom of Heaven.



SATAN: Hey guy sell  
some weapons to  
this demon I know  
he’s a cool dude

CHRIST: That would  
be wrong

SATAN: Guy you’re  
leaving points on  
the board I know  
this other demon  
who’ll sell them

instead

CHRIST: Oh well in  
that case

But that's the piece's argument, that Christ was a chump. The too-good Progressives are foolishly spurning Satan's offer of cool, hard cash. They're damaging America's weapons industry by shrinking client pools, and eroding America's ability to exist as chief of the Western hegemony [*why* American should be chief if it cares more about profitability than people's lives is a question that goes unposed and unanswered]. These lousy point-missing Progressives are, through their Sunday-School fixation on morality (surely, the naïve morality of a decent if simple child), boxing Democrats out of controlling the Executive branch by letting Donald Trump and Jared Kushner take credit for sweet arms deals ("deliverables," for those who have any experience working in government, according to Exum, who has). Presumably, it would have been better if President Clinton had been able to score this deliverable.

Exum describes two Progressive objections to selling arms to bad people, what he describes as the strategic objection, and the moral objection. The strategic objection boils down to modern variations of "we gave the mujahedeen weapons to fight the Soviets but then they turned Taliban and used the weapons on us so we should avoid doing that again." This is a good objection, and reasonable. Exum's answer is that if we don't sell arms to bad people, other people will, so we should sell them to (a) maintain our influence with the bad people who want to buy our weapons, and (b) lower the costs of producing said weapons, for ourselves and for the bad people / bad actors. Exum himself calls this answer "quick and dissatisfying," which is a good assessment, so I'll just repeat it.

Objection #2 is "moral." And here's where I feel really bad for someone who deployed, and saw combat and the consequences

of combat, and attended Sunday School as a child, and “has a lot of respect” for the Progressive standpoint (which opposes selling weapons to repressive, totalitarian, religiously intolerant and/or authoritarian regimes). I feel bad because Exum’s answer to moral objections is equally dissatisfying, to the point where one really wonders what compelled him to write and publish such an article.

The first part of his answer poses the sales of weapons to bad actors (in this case the Saudis) as hypothetical: “selling weapons to the Saudis that might be used in Yemen,” is how he characterizes representative Chris Murphy (D-CT)’s objections to the deal. In general, hypotheticals can be good—we’re not selling arms to the Ukrainians because hypothetically they might be used to start WWII. But the arms deal with Saudi Arabia is unusually clear and—what’s the opposite of hypothetical?—*actual*. Weapons sold to the Saudis are either the exact weapons being used in Yemen, or weapons used to arm and equip soldiers in Saudi Arabia, freeing different weapons (that would otherwise not have been available) to be used in Yemen (or against rebellious Saudis, or anyone else). There’s no hypothetical about arming and equipping a regime engaged in warfare—you don’t get to choose which bullets Stalin uses to shoot Hitler and which he uses in a pogrom against Jews. It doesn’t work that way. Also, in this specific case, fuck hypotheticals, we’ve had 16 years of killing in the Middle East. “Uh, maybe they won’t drop that specific bomb” is the rhetorical device of a coward.



Irrefutable argument

The second component of the argument is even more absurd. According to Exum, when Progressives take a moral stand against arms sales, it’s “leaving points on the board.” This analogy is somewhat confusing; unless there is another context for it with which I am unfamiliar, “leaving points on the

board” describes the phenomenon in American football where Team A is penalized during a play in which Team B scores (practically speaking, usually, a field goal). Depending on the context and field position, the correct move for Team B’s coach is to “leave the points on the board” and accept the field goal’s result rather than taking the penalty and continuing to play but “taking the points off the board.” If there is sufficient time, or if the situation is desperate, the coach of Team B could elect to “take points off the board” and accept the penalty instead—if, say, time was running out and Team B needed a touchdown to avoid defeat, or, conversely, if there was plenty of time and the risk was worth it.

Exum’s formulation has the Progressives as Team B—the group which has scored a moral victory while Team A suffers the equivalent of a penalty by being seen to do something every scrupulous adult human knows is bad. Team B then elects to “leave points on the board” rather than use their position of moral advantage for profit. In so doing, though, Team B / Progressives somehow (the analogy does not make it clear) end up losing out to Team A, politically and financially. At best, this analogy is puzzled and incomplete—at worst, it makes a clear case to readers and thinkers that morality is something crafty people use to exchange for money, friendship, or political position.



Ol’ “Joltin’” Joe Namath doesn’t know all that much about arms sales, but he knows that in a clutch situation, you \*always\* leave the points on the board, always

What happened to arguing that generosity, kindness, and preserving the sanctity of human life were ends unto themselves? Surely, if one is being sincere, those ideals are incompatible with selling weapons to objectively unethical regimes. Wasn't this the ultimate intellectual lesson of the enlightenment, combined with humanity's experience with The Holocaust and other genocides in and around World War II? That after the hundreds of millions killed or forcibly displaced through warfare, ethnic cleansing, starvation, and outright genocide that there was ontological, immeasurable value to humanistic, non-utilitarian good, and that this good stood apart from whatever religion one happened to believe?

### **Collapse of the Democratic Party**

Deliberately or not, Exum asserts that political expediency should be the point of human action, rather than an outcome of virtuous individual and/or collective action. This assertion is evil, plain and simple. It has been popular with mainstream or centrist Democrats for most if not all of my adult life, and as far as I can tell, has severely damage the Democrats' ability to interest voters. By focusing on "deliverables" and "low-hanging fruit," a certain class of people without any identifiable ideology beyond profit for profit's sake has systematically bartered away the Democratic Party's reason for having existed in the first place. The science of politics to them is how a target demographic group polls with a certain political position during an election year—not whether or not the content of that position is ethical.

As a Democratic Socialist, it seems plausible to me that this is simply one more manifestation of the way capitalism distorts and frustrates the will of the people, exploiting their work and the hours of life lived on earth to unethical ends. Pandering to a few million people who happen to be part of the industry pushing weapon systems sales to war criminals makes sense when you're the [CEO of a weapons manufacturing](#)

[company whose bonus is tied to sales](#). When you're a skilled mechanic, you probably care less about what you're making, exactly, and a bit more about what that thing is being used to do. The capitalist system depends on convincing everyone that participating in the festival of rapacity and shitty unnecessary product-pushing stretching from Silicon Valley to Hollywood, from Hollywood to New York, and then to Washington D.C. is in their best interests. It isn't!

We live in extraordinary times. Citizens have VIP tickets to the spectacle of hundreds of millions poured into [developing and marketing a device for which no clear demand exists](#) while veterans remain homeless. They watch on social media as poorly conceived, [Democrat-backed](#) charter school initiatives suck funding, teachers, and students out of the public system. They gape in astonishment as a popular Democratic politician [stuffs donations from the pharmaceutical industry into his pocket and then votes against the interests of his constituency](#). And let's not forget Obama basically [robbing taxpayers to bail out the banks](#).

Why can't establishment Democrats see how their ethically promiscuous attitude toward selling weapons is exactly what's turning workers of all colors, ethnicities, nations and gender and/or sexual identifications away from the party, and from America? That losing votes isn't a function of certain hyper-specific constituency platforms, but rather of conspicuous moral turpitude and blatant hypocrisy? Is the cash from Raytheon that good?

### **Globalism for Few, Insecurity for Many**

The hypothesis floated by George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton after the Cold War was this: increase the amount of money earned in the developing world, cultivate a middle class abroad and at home, and democracy would flourish. This was a good idea, but it seems to have failed, in part because a "middle class" as we understand it in the U.S. depends on

social mobility, and [that's actually been reduced](#) since the collapse of the USSR. [Fewer people have more money.](#) Capitalism's promise of a "better" life has been exchanged for the promise of a more convenient life. Convenience, conveniently, leaves plenty of room to argue for global and local exploitation, slavery, warfare, and all the awful shit most Americans and Westerners probably, if they thought about it, would say they don't think is something in which they should participate (and certainly not abet).

Without an ethical anchor, without a firm understanding of the difference between *good* and *evil*, otherwise known as the difference between *generosity* and *selfishness*, one creeps inexorably toward the latter. Either (or both) Real and Allegorical Jesus Christ makes an important and powerful decision [to embrace philosophical good not because it's an easy thing to do—money, power, and dignified employment are seductive](#). The better the money, the better the job, the better the *influence*, the more seductive the choice. Important: Jesus spurns this choice, offered by Satan.

And choices that result in people dying in war (*especially* Americans dying) weigh particularly heavy on Americans' consciences, more so even than [more quotidian choices with equally far-reaching effects](#). One might think that if the lesson was going to be learned, that Democrats would have learned this lesson after getting us into Vietnam, and certainly [after authorizing the use of force in Iraq \(they did not\)](#). Somehow in spite of history, the American Center-left has slowly but inevitably arrived at the current moment, wherein an Obama Democrat and *war veteran who* [knows what it means to make the argument](#) claims that if we don't arm and equip a horrific, repressive regime that is actively and enthusiastically murdering its own people as well as everyone with whom it disagrees and can lay hands on—Saudi Arabia, most recently—that China will do so, and we'll lose money and influence. And oh, right, Democratic squeamishness has made it

so that Trump can make this deal with the Saudis instead of the Chinese, and that's why workers support Trump, because he's willing to do what's necessary.

This hedonistic, Satanic view of the world (selfishness and cynicism usually descend into Hedonism, very rarely sublimating into Stoicism) only accounts for one part of the equation (the financial part that we can measure precisely, today) and ignores the probability of any potential negative consequence, even likely negative consequences. But there's another component—as long as we peddle weapons to bad regimes, we will always—as in, never not—live in a world beset by the type of systemic oppression and repression that only ever get resolved through violence. [Regimes](#) like the one ruling Saudi Arabia have a way of murdering their civilians and those of neighbors, then requiring more weapons.

### **The Piper Gets Paid**

Arms sales will make people employed by military-industrial companies and consultancies more comfortable (not as comfortable as they would be if they controlled the means to production but that's another essay). These people will buy homes, and afford medical insurance, and enroll their children in expensive private schools and universities. It's a pretty good deal for shareholders with stock in Raytheon or Boeing or Lockheed Martin or Kellogg, Brown and Root. Most of all it's a great deal for the executives who run these companies, and the politicians who benefit from their campaign contributions.

Ultimately, if one is a patriotic American, like myself, one is forced to reconcile injuring or killing other humans with turning a profit. And I'm not sure a few dollars is worth it if it means losing my integrity in the bargain, assuming that the profit is even real. For every multi-year \$100 billion dollar contract the U.S. signs with Saudi Arabia or similar execrable, criminal regimes, we dish out [well over \\$100 billion per year](#) fighting the terrorism that happens when the

same criminal scum uses these weapons against their rivals in and outside their country. This does not reckon the value of a human life (priceless), nor does it factor in the financial obligations we incur for U.S. veterans of those wars. Ethically and financially, selling arms to regimes that are inclined to use them for bad purposes is a bad deal for the U.S.

And that's what some people seem to miss about Arms Sales. It's an easy mistake to make, for those who view financial or political profit as capable of redeeming morally objectionable actions. Progressives would be wise to continue "missing" this point.

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## John Berger, Max Sebald, Teju Cole: International Men of Culture

*I think it was Ousmane Sembene, the Senegalese author and filmmaker, who talked of the writer being the voice of the voiceless. That is still true in all societies. Art should ignite our dreams for a more human world. —Teju Cole*

In a previous essay on the [Dictator Novel](#), I touched on the question of whether we can concurrently have good art and good politics. It remains an open, almost rhetorical, question. The most reasonable response is that we will rarely have anything approaching good politics, but we hope (or take for granted) that we will always have the ability to create and appreciate good art, because of or in spite of an apocalyptic or at least uncertain future [note: I use the terms *politics*, *art*, and

artist in the broadest possible terms]. An even more relevant question might be how much the artist [treats with politics](#) (or, to put it more bluntly, to what extent politics intrudes on art). Some think that the ideal artist should rise above petty, or quotidian, political concerns; others would claim that all art is grounded in some kind of political milieu, whether overt or not. As much as I would like to believe in the possibility of a creative genius who follows her muse isolated from the messy world around her, it is simply not realistic. Paraphrasing Aristotle, there is nothing in human life that is outside of, or untouched by, politics, and that goes for artists and writers as much as farmers, laborers, managers, and secretaries. Even Shakespeare, the ideal artist and writer, was limited by the Tudor and Stuart monarchs, and produced many propagandistic “history” plays to placate them. John Berger, in his book *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, states that the Cubists (1907-1914) were the last group of revolutionary artists who could at the same time be optimistic and almost wholly unconcerned with politics. Since World War One, no artist has been able to divorce herself, intentionally or not, from the real-world. Utopia is dead. For the foreseeable future, we are all grounded on the earth, condemned to be free, struggling in our various ways to survive, and, if we are able, to create and consume art. Therefore, for me, the important question in examining art is not whether or not it is political, but how politics influences artists and is manifested in their art.

In this essay, I will examine the works of three writers and artists, John Berger, Max Sebald, and Teju Cole, who all share a “family resemblance”. All three are sophisticated, polyglot, cosmopolitan writers who combine wide-ranging erudition and serious-minded aesthetics with a profound sense of humanity and social justice. All three are cross-genre writers, combining fiction, essay, criticism, and memoir; all three employ embedded photographs or drawings to support their prose. They all thoroughly investigate the arts in their

stories and essays: Berger focusing especially on painting and drawing, Sebald on architecture, and Cole on photography. They are all self-imposed exiles from their homeland who use their own cross-cultural experience to reflect on the lives and sufferings of others. Politics, on the other hand, is treated differently by the three: Berger was a highly engaged marxist whose politics were central to most of what he wrote; Sebald's work always deal obliquely or subtly with politics; Cole lies in between these two extremes. All three benefit from being able to live and work where they want, in free societies where politics does not interfere with art; nevertheless, all three extend their perspective beyond artistic solipsism well into the the political project of global justice for all.

## John Berger

John Berger died in January 2017 at the age of 90. Originally from London, he had lived in a tiny village in the French Alps for over 50 years and was a highly prolific author of 10 novels, several plays and screenplays, and roughly 50 collections of essays and art criticism. He won both literary and public renown in 1972 when his novel, *G*, won the Booker Prize, and his popular TV miniseries, "Ways of Seeing", was broadcast on BBC. Berger donated half of the Booker Prize money to the Black Panther party as a token of support and a way of calling out the racist and exploitative legacy of the Booker foundation, whose fortune was built in the Caribbean slave-working sugar trade. Here is a key paragraph from Berger's essay explaining his rationale:

*Before the slave trade began, before the European de-humanised himself, before he clenched himself on his own violence, there must have been a moment when black and white approached each other with the amazement of potential equals. The moment passed. And henceforth the world was divided between potential slaves and potential slavemasters. And the European carried this mentality back into his own society. It*

*became part of his way of seeing everything. The novelist is concerned with the interaction between individual and historical destiny. The historical destiny of our time is becoming clear. The oppressed are breaking through the wall of silence which was built into their minds by their oppressors. And in their struggle against exploitation and neo-colonialism – but only through and by virtue of this common struggle – it is possible for the descendants of the slave and the slavemaster to approach each other again with the amazed hope of potential equals.*

*G* is a picaresque novel based around a Casanova-like protagonist in pre-World War One Italy. The most memorable sections for me are about the first flight over the Alps, and the dark atmosphere in Trieste before the war. With the rest of the Booker Prize money, Berger spent years researching and writing *A Seventh Man*, a photography-based book about the struggles of migrant workers around Europe. One of his later novels, *To the Wedding*, is one of the most heart-wrenching things I've read (comparable with other stories of the death of one's child such as *Cry*, *the Beloved Country*, *Beloved*, and *The Child in Time*). This beautifully written novel recounts the journey of an estranged husband and wife traveling across Italy to the wedding of their dying daughter.



John Berger,  
1926-2017

As good as his novels are, Berger's essays and criticism are probably his most important and lasting legacy. I have only begun to delve into these, but I have greatly appreciated and enjoyed everything so far. I have already mentioned *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965), which discussed a watershed moment in art history with such depth and persuasion that I was forced to reconsider everything I thought I knew

about art (which admittedly was not much in the first place). He summarizes, towards the end:

*I have tried to show you, on the evidence of paintings from 1900 to 1952, how Picasso's imagination and intuitions have always presented him with an alternative to modern Europe: the alternative of a simpler, more primitive way of life. The Cubist period from 1907 to 1914 was the great exception to this. Then, the influence of friends and of other artists led him to believe for a short while in the opposite alternative: that of a more complex, more highly organized, more productive way of life. Except for this Cubist period, his genius has always owed allegiance to the comparatively primitive. It is this allegiance which underlay his self-identification with outcasts in the so-called Blue and Pink periods. It is this which inspired the rage of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. It is this which explains the fancy-dress and magic with which he protected himself after the First World War. It is this which was the secret of the physical intensity of his work in the thirties and early forties when he was painting autobiographically. It is this which is now the excuse for the sentimental pantheism of most of his original paintings (original as opposed to his variations on the themes of other artists) since 1944.*

In his *Selected Essays* (2001) there are many fascinating theories and narratives weaving his erudition and knowledge of every artist in the Western canon with his political activism. As a vegan and animal rights activist myself, I was particularly interested in his "Why Look at Animals?", which discusses in surprising detail the long and evolving relationship between humans and animals, to the mutual detriment of both. His 2011 book *Bento's Sketchbook* uses the story of Spinoza's lost sketchbook for Berger to demonstrate many of his own sketches and the story behind them. In one episode, Berger tells of how he was kicked out of a museum by an overly zealous private security guard while sketching

Antonello da Messina's "Crucifixion", because he was not allowed to leave his backpack on the floor.

What is especially striking about Berger's fiction and non-fiction is the proliferation of incredibly beautiful and powerfully true lines of prose that complement the larger story he is telling. Here, for example, from *Bento's Sketchbook*:

*The human capacity for cruelty is limitless. Maybe capacity is not the right word, for it suggests an active energy, and, in this case, such energy is not limitless. Human indifference to cruelty is limitless. So also are the struggles against such indifference. All tyrannies involve institutionalised cruelties. To compare one tyranny with another in this respect is pointless, because, after a certain point, all pains are incomparable. Tyrannies are not only cruel in themselves, they also exemplify cruelty and thus encourage a capacity for it, and an indifference in the face of it, amongst the tyrannised.*

And another:

*To protest is to refuse being reduced to a zero and to an enforced silence. Therefore, at the very moment a protest is made, if it is made, there is a small victory. The moment, although passing like every moment, acquires a certain indelibility. It passes, yet it has been printed out. A protest is not principally a sacrifice made for some alternative, more just future; it is an inconsequential redemption of the present. The problem is how to live time and again with the adjective inconsequential.*

Here, from *G*, at a moment when the protagonist witnesses some of the widespread labor riots in the pre-WWI, pre-Soviet years:

*Every ruling minority needs to numb and, if possible, to kill the time-sense of those whom it exploits by proposing a continuous present. This is the authoritarian secret of all methods of imprisonment. The barricades break that present.*

Here, from *To the Wedding*, at the exact moment after the daughter, Ninon, learns that she has AIDS:

*All I had to offer, old as the world, God-given, balm for pain, honey for taste-buds, promise for always, silken welcomes, oh to welcome, to welcome, knees turned on their sides, toes extended—all I had has been taken.*

And later, after the wedding:

*The wedding guests are becoming a single animal who has fed well. A strange creature to find in a widow's orchard, a creature half mythical, like a satyr with thirty heads or more. Probably as old as man's discovery of fire, this creature never lives more than a day or two and is only reborn when there's something more to celebrate. Which is why feasts are rare. For those who become the creature, it's important to find a name to which it answers whilst alive, for only then can they recall, in their memory afterwards, how, for a while, they lost themselves in its happiness.*

## **Max Sebald**

W.G. "Max" Sebald died in 2001 at the age of 57 after having had a heart attack while driving near his home in Norfolk, England. He was from a small Bavarian village near the Swiss border, and lived in England as a professor of literature for most of his adult life. Though he began writing late, publishing only four books in the last ten years before his premature death, his works won him many admirers in the literary world and it is certain that his fame and recognition

would have grown. What we are left with, those four novels and a collection of essays, is a unique, powerful, and extraordinarily thoughtful body of multi-genre work. His novels are classified thus only for marketing reasons—they are all similarly constructed pseudo-memoirs of a character, seemingly exactly like Sebald, wandering around Europe and recollecting, often at second or third hand, the stories of places and people he encounters. They all deal indirectly with the paradoxical European legacy of Humanism and inhumanity, in which scientific and cultural development sits alongside constant imperialist war and exploitation. He focuses especially on World War Two and the Holocaust, treating this history in comparably non-traditional ways as, for example, recent Nobel laureates Patrick Modiano and Svetlana Alexievich (in 2001, the Nobel Committee chair said that Sebald, along with Derrida, were two recently deceased authors who were under consideration for the prize).



W.G. "Max" Sebald,  
1944-2001

Sebald's first novel, *Vertigo* (1990), combines a travel narrative across northern Italy with short vignettes from the lives of Stendhal, Casanova, and Kafka. As the title suggests, one of the main running themes between the four separate narratives is a lingering, unplaceable feeling of dizziness or anxiety; the reasons for these feelings remain unsaid, but it is possible to surmise, especially with the hindsight of Sebald's later work, that the weight of European history surrounding each of the characters was enough to produce a certain existential dread. To paraphrase Adorno, it is impossible to see the full beauty of a continent and culture that ultimately produced the Holocaust. Venice is a city with such a rich literary history that it is hard to say anything new, but here is how Sebald manages to work in a subtle shade of foreboding:

*As you enter into the heart of that city, you cannot tell what you will see next or indeed who will see you the very next moment. Scarcely has someone made an appearance than he has quit the stage again by another exit. These brief exhibitions are of an almost theatrical obscenity and at the same time have an air of conspiracy about them, into which one is drawn against one's will. If you walk behind someone in a deserted alleyway, you have only to quicken your step slightly to instill a little fear into the person you are following. And equally, you can feel like a quarry yourself. Confusion and ice-cold terror alternate. It was with a certain feeling of liberation, therefore, that I came upon the Grand Canal once again.*

While the main character takes a long rest at a resort on Lake Garda en route to his tiny Bavarian village he hadn't visited in decades, he encounters some of his compatriots, leading to a sentiment I, as an American based in Italy for the last decade, can sympathize with:

*I heard Swabians, Franconians and Bavarians saying the most unsavoury things, and, if I found their broad, uninhibited dialects repellent, it was a veritable torment to have to listen to the loud-mouthed opinions and witticisms of a group of young men who clearly came from my home town. How I wished during those sleepless hours that I belonged to a different nation, or, better still, to none at all.*

Sebald's second novel, *The Emigrants* (1992), more explicitly takes up the theme of exile from one's country. In four parts, it tells of four characters, all related to the narrator in some personal way, who were all emigrants from the greater German Reich before or during the Second World War. In all of these seemingly true biographies, the narrator only gradually begins to understand the deep secrets and traumas buried in these characters' past lives, hidden under a veneer of seeming

polite normality. In three of the four cases, the characters commit suicide. In the last story, the most powerful in my opinion, the narrator recounts his long friendship with a Mancunian artist and his late realization that he had never asked the necessary question of how the artist had come to live in England without his parents. The artist, based on Frank Auerbach, later showed the narrator a letter written by his mother while she and his father awaited transport to Auschwitz. The very slow and indirect unfolding in which Sebald deals with such a monumental tragedy as the Holocaust is sublimely cathartic.

His third novel, considered the last of the trilogy, is *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), which is ostensibly a walking tour across Suffolk with long discourses on various historical personages that are somehow connected to the places he visits. In one long section he gives an account of the life of Joseph Conrad, and how much he was affected by the brutal exploitation he witnessed in the Belgian Congo. As is typical in Sebald's work, there is always as much lurking under the surface of the explicitly stated. In this case, though I don't recall any mention of the Holocaust by name (though he markedly uses its original meaning of a burnt sacrifice), there seems to be a subtle ongoing dialogue about human capacity for cruelty, even in scientific experimentation. In one example, he says, almost as an unimportant aside to the main story:

*Again, the inspector of the Rouen fish market, a certain Noel de Marinière, one day saw to his astonishment that a pair of herring that had already been out of the water between two and three hours were still moving, a circumstance that prompted him to investigate more closely the fishes' capacity to survive, which he did by cutting off their fins and mutilating them in other ways. This process, inspired by our thirst for knowledge, might be described as the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by*

*disaster.*

Here is another evocative passage during a recurring discourse on Thomas Browne:

*The almost universal practice of cremation in pre-Christian times should not lead one to conclude, as is often done, that the heathen were ignorant of life beyond death, to show which Browne observes that the funeral pyres were built of sweet fuel, cypress, fir, yew, and other trees perpetually verdant as silent expressions of their surviving hopes. Browne also remarks that, contrary to general belief, it is not difficult to burn a human body: a piece of an old boat burnt Pompey, and the King of Castile burnt large numbers of Saracens with next to no fuel, the fire being visible far and wide. Indeed, he adds, if the burthen of Isaac were sufficient for an holocaust, a man may carry his own pyre.*

Near the end, Sebald concludes the last of many references to the history of the silk worm across Europe with this strangely disturbing passage which is as close to a literary climax as Sebald ever gets:

*After all, the Professor added, quite apart from their indubitable utility value, silkworms afforded an almost ideal object lesson for the classroom. Any number could be had for virtually nothing, they were perfectly docile and needed neither cages nor compounds, and they were suitable for a variety of experiments (weighing, measuring and so forth) at every stage in their evolution. They could be used to illustrate the structure and distinctive features of insect anatomy, insect domestication, retrogressive mutations, and the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to preempt racial degeneration. –In the film, we see a silk-worker receiving eggs despatched by the Central Reich Institute of Sericulture in Celle, and depositing them in*

*sterile trays. We see the hatching, the feeding of the ravenous caterpillars, the cleaning out of the frames, the spinning of the silken thread, and finally the killing, accomplished in this case not by putting the cocoons out in the sun or in a hot oven, as was often the practice in the past, but by suspending them over a boiling cauldron. The cocoons, spread out on shallow baskets, have to be kept in the rising steam for upwards of three hours, and when a batch is done, it is the next one's turn, and so on until the entire killing business is completed.*

His last book, *Austerlitz* (2001), seems like a full-length version of one of the biographies from *The Emigrants*. The narrator tells of his many conversations with the main character, Jacques Austerlitz, over the course of three or more decades in which they randomly meet each other in stations and libraries across Europe. Austerlitz is an architectural historian, and the narrator always recounts his own version of the many precise details about the various buildings and cityscapes they encounter in their mutual peregrinations. The narrative is presented in an even more oblique and unreliable way than Sebald normally uses. For example, a typical line from the narrator could be something like, "Years later, I remembered what Austerlitz told me his landlady had remembered what his mother had told her the night before leaving." Austerlitz, like the narrator and then the reader, gradually learns of and then reveals the details of his background. He was raised in Wales by a pastor and his wife under the name Dafydd Elias. When his parents died he was told by the headmaster that his real name was Jacques Austerlitz. When he asked what that name signified, he was merely told, "I think you will find that it is the name of a famous battle." That battle, as well as the Paris station named after it, play a role in the narrative. It is also notable how similar the name Austerlitz is to Auschwitz. The story comes round eventually to the fact that Austerlitz was

sent on one of the last refugee boats to England as an infant, and later travels to Prague to discover more about his parents. This haunting novel is a significant work, probably Sebald's best. Like all his novels, the narrative is supplemented by found photographs that add to or silently comment on the text. One of these is a close-up of Wittgenstein; most often they are anonymous pictures of architecture, signage, or family gatherings. In his introduction to the novel, James Wood writes: "As Roland Barthes rightly says in his book *Camera Lucida*, a book with which *Austerlitz* is in deep dialogue, photographs shock us because they so finally represent what has been. We look at most old photographs and we think: "that person is going to die, and is in fact now dead." Barthes calls photographers "agents of death," because they freeze the subject and the moment into finitude." Sebald's novels as a whole tend to do something similar: to freeze the disturbing history of modern Europe both in order to preserve it, and to help block its return.

## Teju Cole

Teju Cole, a Nigerian-American, was born in 1975, making him conspicuous in my comparison as the youngest of the three authors, as well as the one who was most influenced by both of the previous writers. He openly and enthusiastically speaks of Berger's influence in many public dialogues, including a valedictory celebration of that writer's life after his recent death. He has dedicated at least two essays to Sebald, including one story of how Cole visited his grave near Norwich, England. Cole's first novel, *Open City*, was widely praised and widely noted for following a Sebaldian construct—a narrator, apparently similar to the author, wandering and meditating on modern cityscapes and the history they conceal, and engaging in intellectual but emotionally fraught conversations with friends and strangers along the way. As with most of Sebald's works, we gradually learn of secret

crimes and forgotten traumas that are not-so-neatly hidden away in the subconscious. It is a powerful and important debut novel.



Teju Cole, b. 1975

Cole's second novel, *Every Day is for the Thief*, does not appear to be a novel at all except that it is labeled as such. It tells of the narrator's visit to Lagos after over a decade's absence. It is partly a travelogue, partly a story of the corruption that has so pervaded Nigerian society as to pervert even human relationships.

Cole is a notable photographer and critic, as well as a popular Twitter writer until finally closing his account. Many of his essays appear in his recent collection *Known and Strange Things* (2016). This book is divided into three parts on writing, photography, and travel. The whole reveals an almost impossibly thoughtful, erudite, and wide-ranging mind. Every essay is littered with references to poetry, art, history, as well as popular culture. One fantastic review of *A House for Mr Biswas* is preceded by an essay telling of how Cole came to be invited to a dinner with "Vidia" Naipaul. After the dinner Cole and Naipaul flip through a Mark Twain first edition and laugh together at his witticisms. Naipaul is taken aback when Cole beats him to the punch in comparing them to La Rochefoucauld. Despite this, Cole is unsparing in his appraisal of the Nobel laureate's personal faults. The essays in the photography section are so well-done as to have captured my interest even though I know nothing of that craft. It has prompted me research many of the named photographs and artists and begin taking more note of photography in general.

I think the best piece in the collection is the strange, short, stream of consciousness essay called "Unnamed Lake". It was supposedly written in one sleepless night as Cole's mind

wandered variously between the Tasmanian tiger, Derrida, Furtwängler's version of the Ninth, concentration camps, the Biafran War, and the atomic bomb. The book's final section on travel is more explicitly autobiographical, personal, and political than Cole's usual work. In one piece he reflects on a six-month paid residence in Switzerland, in which he walks in James Baldwin's shoes. He writes of the troubling disconnect between Obama's rhetoric and his escalated drone killings. He writes of Joseph Kony and the white savior complex. He writes of a trip to the Mexican border and a Berlin-style piece of the wall he brought back. He rewrote the first lines of famous novels as if they were all part of a drone assassination report. Everything he writes makes you think, often long after you've finished reading; like the best essays, everything in this collection not only warrants a rereading, but it is essential to do so, which is the greatest praise I can give to a writer.

## Conclusion

So where does this leave us in regards to my original question of the relationship between art and politics? I do not have a final answer, and do not think there exists a final answer. Rather, every work by every artist is part of an ongoing dialogue between every other work of that artist, as well as his interlocutors, and the world around her, both past, present, and future. An artist can make politics her *raison d'être*, like John Berger, or deal with it occasionally or obliquely, per Sebald and Cole. All three artists have benefitted from their personal freedom to create, living and working as they did in countries of the post-war western democracies. I would not say that any of them engage with politics in their art as a result of personal traumas or limitations, but rather due to their sense of humanity and the cold injustice of history. If any of them had been born a few decades earlier, or possibly later, or in another country, they could have possibly been killed or imprisoned for their

art. Insofar as all three writers understand this, I would guess that they understand freedom more globally than just their personal ability to create art.

As Geoff Dyer writes in his introduction to Berger's *Selected Essays*: "The 'invasion of literature by politics' may have been inevitable but Orwell was somewhat grudging about having to forgo the single-minded literary devotion of Henry James in favour of the manifold obligations of pamphleteering (though his distinction as a writer depends precisely on this abandonment). For Berger, there was no tension or regret on this score. Responding to his critics in a letter to the *New Statesman* (4 April 1953) he insisted that 'far from my dragging politics into art, art has dragged me into politics'." What is necessary to the artist, beyond mere survival, is the freedom to produce art. This underlines the fact that whether or not "art" is political, its existence is always predicated on a set of political circumstances that are either more or less "free", and thus more or less open to art. This counts whether or not the artist subjectively considers politics as something that happens around us without our control, or something we choose to value or fight for. No matter what politics she claims, defending this freedom should therefore be the central preoccupation of the artist.

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## **New Fiction: "Old Wounds" by Therese Cox**



The YouTube walkthroughs have names, like action movies or episodes of a serial TV show. *Judgment Day. Suffer With Me.*

*Fallen Angel. Old Wounds.* If you were playing, you'd fire up your console, scroll through the list, pick your game, and go. But Tracey Knox doesn't play. She's only here to watch. One quick click and SchoolofHardKnox is leading the way through the war.

She's watched them all, headphones on, grinding through anti-tank fire, lobbing grenades at ditches, clamoring for weapons, hoping there'd be one, just one, with a voice-over and a *howzit goin'*. How else is she going to hear Geoff's voice? Flat Michigan vowels with those U.P. dips and stalls: a sound she doesn't get a lot of in New York. She's spent hours patrolling these deserts. It's only grown worse since she lost her job at the architecture firm. There's nowhere she has to be at 9 a.m. No project manager to look over her shoulder. No more designing cat fences for rich ladies in Connecticut. She is thirty-nine and can do as she likes.

There are thousands of views. Who was Geoff making these walkthroughs for? He didn't do voice-overs, didn't narrate, never popped up mid-scene in a Fugazi t-shirt, flashing his tats, to explain strategy. Each episode is like a movie he lived once and forgot about, one long jittery dream that Trace lives over and over.

"Old Wounds." She likes the sound of that one. He dies too soon in it but it's badass and medieval to gallop on horseback, brandishing a sword pried from a skeleton's ribcage. She clicks on the name and lets it roll.

\*

It's Friday night at the Hampton Inn in DC. Tracey Knox is incumbent on a queen-sized bed, surrounded by plugs and remote controls. A screen flickers from her lap, lighting her face in flashes. Her eyes glazed, ears snug under industrial-sized headphones. She's been dressed in the same clothes for a week straight—baggy cammie trousers bought discount from the Gap,

\$4.98, an end-of-summer deal, and a faded Jackass t-shirt. She's skinnier than usual. All week it's been nothing but sunflower seeds and Arizona iced tea, but then, the anniversary usually has that effect. At the moment she's knee-deep in a YouTube k-hole and doesn't care who knows it. Each fresh burst of gunfire grinds her guts with a bad longing. It calls back the barrage of explosions drifting down the hall from under Geoff's bedroom door. The on-screen desert had been Geoff's playground. Virtual Sergeant Foley, a stand-in for Dad.

Tracey's best girlfriend, Constance Lawson, is knocked up and across the room, embedded in a nest of Hampton Inn pillows. They've decided to do a girls' weekend in DC. Just the two of them, like the old days, one last hurrah before Constance, now Connie, becomes an FTM, or full-time mommy.

Connie had planned everything. Two queen beds and an all-you-can-eat menu of reality TV shows and room service mocktails. Right now Connie's reading to Tracey from an upbeat email. Connie's writing a book about her experience of IVF, half memoir and half how-to. The future for mommy lit is apparently bright. She's landed a slick agent on the basis of a sample paragraph and outline and is already in negotiations for a book deal for her WIP.

"What's a W-I-P?" Tracey asks, slipping off one headphone.

"Work in Progress," says Connie, who's superstitious about names for unborn projects.

Tracey, for her part, has no reason to fire up her email on a weekend. She recoils at the memory of the last exchange before HR sent her the marching papers, a "reply all" that should very definitely not have been a "reply all." Tracey nods, says it sounds promising. She switches to half-listen mode and goes back to the screen.

On her laptop, a menu of a dozen other options pop up, all

listed under her brother's screen name. She's stopped talking to people online after a Skype with their LA office went balls-up and cost Tracey her job. She's been living off her severance package above a tire shop in Greenpoint, buoyed by the salary of her Dutch bicycle-parts designing husband, Niels. Her job search is equal parts day-drinking, flirting with bartenders, and experimenting with the font size on her CV. If there's a café with free wi-fi, she's freeloading. Whenever either of her parents, divorced of course, gets her on the phone, Tracey says the same thing: she is pursuing other options.

"Do you think I should come up with a new name for TBD?" Connie asks.

"To be determined?"

"No, no, Trace, T-B-D. The Baby Dance. It's what the *What to Expect When You're Expecting to Be Expecting* book calls sex."

"Why don't you just call it sex?"

"Because," Connie says, "That's so louche."

Connie reclines in yoga pants and places her hand on her swollen belly. She balances the phone on top and shows Tracey a new app, plugging in a set of hot pink earbuds. The app's main feature is the frantic liquid throb of a fetal heartbeat so Connie can eavesdrop on her unborn infant. The baby, in all its amniotic fury, pounding away. It is just a cluster of nerve endings and cells and life pushing blood through its fetal chambers, *but listen to it go*. The heartbeat hypnotizes her with its systole and diastole, evidence of its miraculous, furious progress. Connie is transfixed in the dull spell, fingers slack on the edges of her iPhone, earbuds shoved in, the better to hear the back and forth of the protean sludge. Tracey tries to ignore it but Connie insists. Through the wire comes a birdlike thrum, frantic and pulsing, the life that is both part of her yet apart from her—primordial—she is life-

giving—this baby-to-be, sloshing over and over just for her, the sound (she makes Tracey listen. *Listen, Tracey!*) going *mama mama mama* oh god.

“But Tracey, don’t you think about it sometimes?”

Sure, Tracey thinks about it sometimes. The possibility of new life. The thing her friends are all doing, the thing she knows Niels wants. It’d be a beautiful baby: half-Dutch, half-red-blooded-American. Niels would have the kid on training wheels in no time. She could forget about the architecture. Embrace the FTM. Make their offspring her avatar.

But Tracey Knox pursues none of those things. She unhooks herself from Connie’s app and slinks back to pole position, head hunched, knees curled, itching to get back to her trance. She’s not even playing the game, a level way worse, just watching virtual violence, eyes glued to the stuttering screen, explosions collapsing around her in bursts of orange and red, choppers snip-snip-snipping the sky above.

Outside the hotel room, DC lurks. Connie had come to grad school here. Tracey, dragging an art history degree behind her, had followed her out and spent a year mopping gallery floors, playing the mistress to a fastidious art buyer who lived in Dupont Circle. DC never spoke to Tracey in quite the same way it did for Connie. When Connie had first suggested it, that if they came to DC, Tracey could visit *the grave*, Tracey blanked.

“The grave,” Tracey said, nodding. “Right.”

As she fires up the next episode, she thinks maybe she’ll look Danny up again after she gets back from DC, hit him up for a couple of cold ones and ask him more questions about what else he knows about Geoff. Now that she knows the story, or enough of the story. Maybe it’s that she knows too much?

Blood and Gore Intense Violence Strong Language Suggestive

Themes Mature 17+ Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB

Let's roll—

She adjusts the headphones so they're snug and then *wham!* she's back at the helm of the war machine, flexing assault muscles and tactical ops, leaping out of choppers as shrapnel rains from tall sheared-off buildings. Jump cuts, jittery exterior shots, implausible musculature and digitized MRAPs. Quick flash of landscape porn, desert mountains and desolate horizons, fade in then fade out, the Ken Burns effect plus amphetamines, amplified and sped up and pumped out, life through the barrel of an assault rifle. She hijacks a chopper and mainlines that view from above—*I don't see, I fly*—then *whoosh*, she's back at ground level, hand to hand combat, slow sexy focus on metal and skin and tattoo and blood. She swims and she flies with her entourage, industrial war machine overhead in twenty parts glittering. Down below in the rubble it's all dirt and desert and fumes, the phosphorescence of foreign war, choppers rising up in clusters and scattering.

She's shooting lasers from what looks like a souped-up staple gun, exuding godlike luster in a landscape of smoke and red sand. She's busting into hideouts and blowing up bodies, dodging the splurge of vermilion enemy blood, no time even to blow on the smoking gun. Here she is no one, she is cranked up to full speed and smoothed down to her essentials—blood and muscle and armor—kicking down doors, spitting steel. She has no womb, no wounds. Tracey Knox is a killing machine, trained to close and destroy, breach and clear, dismantling all the architecture, trafficking in the invincible.

\*

When Geoff Knox came back from his first deployment in Afghanistan, he was full of stories. They weren't usually what you would think of as war stories but more about things going wrong—stupid stuff, just everyday things: bad latrines and

gravity-fed showers and pranks with packages. Over time the Afghan villagers had picked up certain American phrases. Sex was “up-and-down.” Bombs were “bang-bang.” The one word pretty much all of them knew was “killed.”

One day, Geoff said, there'd been a bomb in a neighboring village. The usual shit-IED-and their interpreter-their “terp,” Geoff called him-was off meeting with some village elders. So there's Geoff, asking around, trying to get a tally of the civilian dead. There was this one kid, maybe eleven or twelve, name of Omar, who spoke some English and was trying to translate. And the kid had told Geoff, “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.”

Geoff scratched his head. “Two killed, not dead? The hell does that mean?”

Omar kept saying it. “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.” It took Geoff some time to realize that by “killed, not dead,” Omar was trying to say “hurt.” The kid didn't know the word for “hurt.”

There's a lesson in that now, Tracey thinks. Every wound, especially in the war, *killed* you. It's just that some wounds left you dead, and others left you alive.

*I have two siblings*, Tracey Knox says. She'll say it to this day, will say it to the end, whenever anyone asks. *I have two siblings, a sister and a brother*. One older sister: killed, not dead. One younger brother: killed, dead.

Tracey lost her brother, and her brother was in the war. At thirty-nine years old it was her saddest story. Some days it was her only story. Maybe she should just fix people in the eye and say, *My brother died in the war*. Or: *My brother was killed?* She's always hated the passive voice, hated the linguistic gymnastics she had to do around the topic of her brother, who was dead, and it had nothing to do with just causes. He didn't die in the war, he died during the war. And

that's as close as Tracey will ever get to telling Connie the truth.

\*

After 9/11, Geoff Knox marched up to Lake Superior State University to the fold-out desk. The Army recruiter had been a bemused bruiser who, learning he had an eager fourteen-year-old kid on his hands, didn't change much about his pitch. Geoff didn't tell the recruiter about his big sister Tracey, who was living in New York when it happened. The desk was busy that September.

The Soho firm had been Tracey's first job after architecture school. She'd landed a position with an architecture firm in the city and had been downtown when the planes struck the towers. She got to the eighth-floor window just in time to see the fireball roar through the second tower. Through glass she watched the haggard red stripes of flame rip the steel beams and the confetti of paper and debris that had fluttered out of the twin towers from gaping black maws. She called home, unable to get through till almost midnight, called that night and every night after to talk to their mom and Geoff, trying to describe the scene. What does she remember? The smoke, mostly. There was the smoke, first the black plumes and then the blanket of white ash and then the nauseating waves of air for days after, the rank stink of rent steel and rotting flesh.

As for New York? Vigilance—that was the word on the street. That was the order. Be vigilant. But what did it mean to be vigilant? *Semper Vigilans*. You'd better know, because you were supposed to be it at all times. If you see something, say something. The city's nervous system ran on a code. Orange alert. Red alert. Tracey played into the system like the compliant citizen she was trained to be, reduced to stimulus/response. Tracey tried with the subway but she couldn't be underground. She started taking buses. Goddamn

buses. They were inefficient and made her late. But she had to see the world through windows, had to be near the yellow tape so she could press it at the first sign of mayhem and get the fuck out.

The American flag hung in every window. Stars and stripes stabbed into every lapel. Passing strangers on street corners, or sharing an stuffy elevator ride, Tracey looked into their eyes and asked them with her eyes, *If I look at you, if I show you my humanity right now, can I stop you from blowing yourself up? Or: If this top floor gets blown to kingdom come, will you hold hands with me?* She looked down at a stranger's hand and pictured its entangled with her own. She pictured their two hands, severed, fingers entwined, lying on a pile of smoking wreckage. She saw the first responders finding their mutilated remains, heard the heavy goods vehicle carting off the load to Fresh Kills, all in the time it took an elevator to climb four floors and the stranger to scratch his nose.

There'd been the thing with the shoe bombs and the nitroglycerin. There'd been the anthrax letters. Investigating, Tracey learned the word *cutaneous*. Cutaneous, subcutaneous, airborne: it could get you any of those ways. Weeks of tension and indigestion. Ash and aftermath. Couldn't look at headlines. While Tracey Knox was commuting to work in Soho and coming home to hide in her Tribeca basement bunker, workers ten blocks south were down there shoveling through the rubble. Firemen, policemen, EMTs, contractors and volunteers, picking through smoking wreckage. Deadly particles seeping into skin, latching onto lungs. Outside the Century 21, finding actual human remains. But then somehow, over time, the terror here was wrapped up, boxed, and shunted back to its place over there. Till Ground Zero became just another construction site. Till the whole thing just deteriorated into a cycle of hearsay and fear-whispers and rumors—a ticker tape terror feeding the twenty-four-hour newsroom beast. Till the rumor of war had hardened into the certainty of war. A war

that, fifteen years on, would know no end.

There's a longer history than the story she tells herself. But she still thinks back to that blue-sky morning. The day when, fresh out of Harvard, from the eighth floor of the architectural firm, she watched the towers burn.

Maybe Tracey feels at fault for the stories she has told. But the truth is, it didn't matter at all what she had or hadn't said all those years ago. All he had to be was an American citizen, clap eyes on those collapsing towers, and his mind would be made up. He would want to do something for his country. For his sister. For all the usual words. Freedom. Terror. These are laden words. Tracey doesn't get them, didn't then and doesn't now. She understands form and function, angles and AutoCAD, blueprints and markups. Geoff hadn't seen the things she saw. He lived in a different aftermath. For a while, he put off enlisting. There was that degree he'd decided he wanted after all. He was so close to not being a part of it. That scholarship, Tracey thought, had saved him. But through four years of university, through a trail of tailgates and chemistry lectures and test prep on Red Bull and Adderall, he never forgot the towers. After all, Geoff Knox went off to war.

\*

The third tour was to be the last. It is three years since Tracey stood in that moon-drenched kitchen and heard the story of Geoff's death, and she can't shake that phone call. Elyssa—it's always Elyssa who's the first to know everything—calls to tell her sister the news.

So it's happened at last. Their brother has died in Afghanistan. The first thing Tracey thinks when she get the news is that it's not Geoff who's died. She doesn't think of her brother dying in Afghanistan. She can't. She thinks of her brother, alive, in Michigan. She thinks of him back from basic

training, planting green plastic army men on the Christmas tree for hide-and-seek the way they used to do as kids. The sniper was always the hardest to find, laying low in the bristles and garland, aiming his plastic gun at this ornament or that: the macaroni candy cane, the cradle in the manger. Or she thinks of her brother with skinned knees and gap teeth, climbing the crabapple tree in their old backyard. Or maybe she's remembering how he was the last time she saw him, at home on the couch at Thanksgiving, lean and muscled and laconic, eyes glazed after his second tour, dream-weaving his way through Call of Duty while she was trying to talk to him, you know, actually *talk* to him about his deployment. But she's hard-wired against accepting such bullshit, that her brother would actually go to Afghanistan and get himself killed, of all things.

All evidence to the contrary—in four days she'll be carrying that urn—and she refuses to believe Geoff's mortal. Won't buy that it's her little brother who died in the war. She's going to watch him get hitched to some cute, fake-tanned Michigan chick and raise a crop of cornfed kids. He'll settle down in some government job, spend his weekends with his buddies at the Joe watching the Red Wings lose, eat red meat and wipe his ass with *Foreign Affairs*. Such news—her brother dying in Afghanistan—doesn't register. And as Elyssa keeps talking, the details really don't line up. In this story, there are no notifying officers, no Army chaplain. There are ER doctors and paramedics. She distinctly hears the word *Detroit*.

And so when it turns out that her brother dies but it's not in Afghanistan, that Geoff never went back on that last tour like he said he was going to, when it turns out her brother dies less than a mile down the road from DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital, that he's died all right, but it's in a squat with festering walls and peeling linoleum floors, when it happens that Geoff's been kicked out of the Army and OD'ed on oxycodone, Tracey tries to to piece together the unbelievable

story she's hearing with the scenario she didn't even know to imagine. And none of it makes sense.

Tracey books the flights from JFK to Toronto, Toronto to Sault Ste. Marie, pronto. She pays way too much for the tickets but what is she going to do, it's her brother's funeral. She flies back to Sault Ste. Marie with Niels, who is Dutch and has never been to an American funeral before.

One day after the phone call, just before she flies home for the funeral, Tracey meets up with Danny, Geoff's war buddy, and gets a debriefing in a Queens sports bar en route to the airport. Tracey rings Danny on their way to JFK because he's local and he'd once given her his number and said, *If you ever need anything, give me a ring*. The place reeks of Windex and buffalo wings. Tracey and Niels sit next to Danny at the sticky bar under flickering screens. They bear hug and order a round.

"You didn't know about Geoff's TBI?"

Danny blinks at Tracey, then at Niels, dipping a wing in sauce and gnawing chicken from the bone. Know about it? Tracey doesn't even know what the letters mean. Danny has to spell it out for her. Traumatic Brain Injury.

"Is that like PTSD?" she asks, timid. It's hard to make herself heard over the din of the bar and the Eagles-Patriots game.

Danny talks, gesturing to his temple with the chicken bone. "After the blast. He was bleeding from the ears, man. It scrambled his brains. He was all messed up. They had to send him off to the unit."

Tracey doesn't get it. Danny washes down the gnawed meat with a Rolling Rock and tells all. Things that didn't make sense before start to make sense. Geoff's fuzzy details about the last deployment. Her letter, stamped *Return to Sender*. And the

discharge, unearned in Danny's humble opinion, of Other Than Honorable. Tracey feels her face flush. She hasn't touched her Jack and Coke. Danny, wide eyed, looks from Tracey to Niels, Niels back to Tracey.

"You don't know he spent that time on a wounded warrior unit?"

"Geoff's Humvee *got hit with an IED* and he didn't tell you?"

Well, and what if he didn't? That was always Geoff's way. If he was sick, he wouldn't admit it. Wanted to take care of himself, always did, didn't cry even when he was six and Tracey, who'd more or less brought him up, went off to college. And here's the big sister, not one but two higher degrees. Graduates from Michigan with honors, goes off to Harvard and can't tell when her own brother is lying about his last deployment. But why would Geoff do that that to her, to all of them? Who had he been trying to save?

Trace feels sick so they leave the bar early. They hail a cab on the parkway to take them to the airport. Niels loads her luggage in the trunk. Tracey's eyes are hot with rage. The driver rollercoasters them to the terminal, and all Tracey can think about is their mom. Geoff's not going to have the military burial, that's one thing. Their mom had been hysterical about him going off to war in the first place, said she had a premonition. Now the premonition's come true, so good luck with that anxiety disorder. At JFK Tracey pushes her purse down the conveyer belt, is patted down by TSA, goes with Niels to the gate. There's that sense of being cheated. There's that Other Than Honorable. The discharge hung Geoff out to dry, now it's going to leave their mom without any benefits. Mom's on disability, their stepdad's a barely functioning alcoholic, and their dad, their real dad, oblivious in Grand Rapids with his new wife, will be no help at all. Remember when their mom was a successful marine biologist? Remember when Geoff was still alive? Tracey does. That life. What is it now but history?

At the gate, Tracey goes online to find out what's she's missing. She learns a lot of really awful vocabulary in the process, like the word *repatriate*, but she does gain some intel. It turns out when you take the whole foreign war component out of it the whole thing can be over and done in a lot faster than you imagine. The body didn't die in Afghanistan, so it doesn't have to be repatriated, it doesn't have to be flown into Dover on a military plane. A quick trip in a fast ambulance to the ER of DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital doesn't cost as much, and it's much quicker. You can place a notice in the paper days later of the general death and keep details quiet. All you have to say is "in a private ceremony" and everyone has to respect that. They won't ask, you don't tell. Except when it's your best friend involved, and you happen to lob her a fib. Then it gets complicated.

He wished to be cremated, so they honored his wishes.

She'd been distraught at the sight of the urn. Who wouldn't be? She'd always imagined it as an elegant container, a silver goblet with a name engraved, displayed on a mantelpiece. This, though, was decidedly not that. This had been an industrial plastic tub stamped on one side *Detroit Crematorium* in an inelegant sans serif. The plastic lid screwed on and off. It looked like it held weed killer.

There'd been debate after the ceremony about what to do with the ashes. This was the Knoxes. Of course there was debate. The whole thing was ghoulish, Geoff's body stashed into a Ziploc in the *Detroit Crematorium* tub, but Tracey had wanted to give him the honors he deserved. And so the day before she'd flown back to New York, Tracey had unscrewed the lid and made off with a scoop of her brother's ashes. Is this the story she is supposed to be telling Connie over room service mocktails?

Because there's the story Tracey told Constance, the story she'd told all her friends. The one about the military burial,

about Geoff dying in the goddamn war. And here is Tracey Knox, anniversary number three, stationed for two days in hallowed DC. From the Hampton Inn, Tracey Google Maps the directions: 2.3 miles from that cemetery. That great green ground of tended graves. She ought to do something. She ought to lay it to rest.

\*

It's bone-chill weather, mid-November. Week before Thanksgiving. Tracey is stalking the grounds near Washington Mall alone. She gets to thinking about monuments. You can't avoid it. Here, Lincoln parked in an armchair on that grand staircase. There, that obscene obelisk, rising up out of the ground like Mother Earth with a concrete hard-on. Tracey takes it in, drinking coffee from a to-go cup, her hands in mittens. A couple of people with clipboards and smiles, college kids, come at Tracey on the curvilinear walkway wrapped in bright red smocks that say *Save the Children*. Tracey dodges them, staring at her feet as she hurries past. Does she have a few minutes today for saving children? It would seem not. She cannot save children. She couldn't even take care of her little brother, the one child that had ever been entrusted to her. She let him go into that war. Is the people in the red smocks' plan to not let the children go fight wars in foreign countries? Because maybe she'd have a few minutes for that.

Tracey pitches her coffee in the trash and keeps walking, hands in her pockets. There's the packet of ash in her right pocket. She feels its uneven lumps through her mittens. She thinks maybe she'll find another Knox, a namesake, and scatter the dust there. But so far, no Knoxes, and the mission's making her sweat.

Tracey dreams, as she walks, about designing a monument for Geoff. Or no, monument isn't the right word. A memorial. She thinks back to her architecture school days and calls up a quote from Lewis Mumford. "The more shaky the institution, the

more solid the monument." So, a memorial then. She can imagine it. There's a field lit in a haze. Lemon-colored light. Reeds and grass and stems. There's a crop of pink and red poppies, swaying and bending. She'd call it "The Poppy Field." It would be a vast stretch of land designed so you could walk through it. No sign would tell you not to touch the flowers or not to step certain places. You could press the velvet-soft petals of the poppies to your cheek. Or you could stand in the middle of the field and let the wind blow through your hair. You could breathe in the scent of earth, of sweet prairie grass and Queen Anne's lace. There would be no bodies buried underground. There would be no bodies at all, no ash, and no plaque to tell you what to think about. No why, no when, no who.

What can she say about the evenly spaced rows, the dignified engravings, the markers of moral purpose and patriotism? She can only wonder: Where is my brother? Where was I for him? She is insurgent milling through the manicured lawns. As she walks, she thinks about the memorial she wants to design, the one with the poppy field, and thinks it shouldn't be called "The Poppy Field." It should be called "Old Wounds."

Tracey hadn't meant to tell Constance, those years ago, an untrue story about her brother's death. It had started as a story Tracey was telling to herself, a story she could use to comfort herself with, a story that he had died for a just cause. She wasn't thinking when she typed it into a screen and hit send, and then the whole story had gotten out of hand. Tracey doesn't know how to say it. That she never flew to DC for the funeral. That there had been no honors, no gun salute. That they'd scattered most of her brother's ashes in Chippewa County into the St. Marys River between Michigan and Canada. All Tracey knows is, she didn't tell the real story right away, and at some point—who knows when?—it had become too late. Connie, who has planned the whole weekend, has carved out a grave-shaped space into Sunday, assuming Tracey will

want to use the time to visit her brother's grave in Arlington National Cemetery. And who is Tracey to say that Geoff is not buried there?

That morning, Connie had asked if Tracey wanted company when she went to visit "the grave." Now, coming back into the hotel room, cheeks flushed from the cold, it's all Tracey can do is turn to her best friend and say, "Geoff's not here, Connie." It's her attempt to come clean, and Connie misses it entirely. She thinks Tracey is being figurative, that it's something spiritual. So close to telling the truth, Tracey lets the confession drop. She hangs her coat from the plywood hanger where it swings, the packet of ash still sitting in her right coat pocket.

That night, Tracey crawls into the hard bed and snaps on the bedside light. She takes it out of its drawer, the little green Gideon's Bible. But all she's thinking about as she rifles through the tissue-thin pages is Geoff's copy of *The Art of War* and how she'd claimed it as her own. Geoff's secondhand paperback copy, underlined and dog-eared, is the closest she's come to his idea of a theology. The book's not with her. She hears Connie's breathing deepen. Tracey puts down Gideon and opens her laptop. She opens a browser tab and searches Geoff's username until she finds what she's looking for. No graphics, no explosions, just a careful set of instructions. She reads through the list for "Suffer with Me."

*Throw a knife at the guard at the post.*

*Spam the FIRE button when Woods climbs to the first guard post.*

*Survive enemy RPG blast which causes collateral damage (to buildings).*

Her tasks, here, are clear. Destroy enemy chopper with mortar round. Destroy tank with anti-tank mine. Her eye scrolls down to the last lines.

*Kill 8 enemies in the clinic.*

*Collect all Intel.*

*Do not die.*

From *The Art of War* to *Call of Duty*, military theory boiled down to one order: Do not die.

And if you do?

Tracey dips her head, plugs in the headphones, goes back down into the Black Ops forest.

\*

“All Hunter victors, this is Sergeant Foley. Prepare to engage. We’re taking sniper fire from multiple directions.”

“Prepare to engage, we’re going in! Spin it up!”

The screen is flecked with blurs and drops of crimson. It’s an ambush. She moves forward but with difficulty. The explosions now have ceased to be controlled, now she surges forward with a deep nausea through the exploding mortar and shrapnel. Tracey hears the breath of the soldier come in hard, heavy bursts, so intense she can’t tell if it’s the soldier breathing or if it’s her. A message flashes on the screen: “You are Hurt. Get to cover.” The hands in front of her, her hands, Geoff’s hands, stay set on the gun as they stumble deliriously through the wreckage.

They are under sniper fire. She sees clothes and rags draped on a clothes line, a banner on which something is written in Arabic. Her head jars with every lurch. It feels like she is under fire from the very infrastructure. Her hands don’t leave the rifle. She falls into an alley between a chain-link fence and a corrugated steel shed. The sky is a smudge of smoke and rifle fire, the tracers of bullets garlanding the background. It feels like being drunk, stumbling to find a doorway she

cannot find. Gunfire goes off but it's a muted spray. She can hear Sergeant Foley screaming directions through a walkie-talkie but she can't move her mouth to answer. Breathe. Breathe. The message flashes again, small, insistent: "You are Hurt. Get to cover." Geoff does not get to cover. Tracey is spinning with him, stumbling each inch forward. She cannot rescue him, cannot get him to cover. The screen is streaked with fog, her eyes stung with shattered glass, drops of crimson, this is the way the world ends, not with a bang but—

"Tracey."

Tracers, rocket launchers. Connie is saying her name. How long has she been saying it? How long has Tracey been holed up in this hotel room in DC with her pregnant friend? There is nowhere to go. Her neck is clammy with sweat, her heartbeat going like mad, its pulse wild and lone and unmeasured. The screen is flashing but the sound no longer fills her ears. A desert stretches up to her feet, all the way up to the dull upholstery of the olive-colored couch, the beige wallpaper, the styrofoam coffee cups. Her hands, shaking. It would be so easy to snap the laptop shut, but she can't bring her hands to do it. She's still waiting for orders.

Photo Credit: [the yes man](#)

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## **New Poetry by J.J. Starr**

**☒ Concerning whether or not I am a horse**

I strap torso & press arms

to diaphragm with breath

deep the distressed  
voice of mistress  
mumbles wishes  
amid plum trees  
& white headlight  
bum-rushes the alleyway-

Am I a horse

kicking at its leathers?  
How many full rides & how should I count?

Thought made in moonlight appearing  
cogent, succinct behind glass  
what makes a full ride?

Pulling hard & pulling harder, making iron  
break soil, dancing in dirt, hooves  
wet, mane draping the strength of a neck-

Am I

if no bit made better a turning  
head? No harm but tightened  
hips? & if my breast hardened by use?  
My rump sheened in sunlight

Am I a horse?

Many hands have made my length  
& I've never been bought.

Many hands have made  
my length. Many hands.

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## God Between Us & All Harm

Lighted hallway, delighted guest,  
the television the  
lens of it, lends itself to you.  
Trump again, brackish, weighted  
eyes dilated, throat-moaning

“The beauty of me is that I’m very rich.”

Beleaguered, who can even remember a face  
these days? My grandfather used to say things  
like you can drown in a teacup of water  
if you fall right. He was gladly on his way out.

Sometimes I see his point:

LSU live tiger-mascot dies of cancer at age eleven  
his empty cage strewn with flowers, paper cards  
a student says, “nobody else had a live tiger.”

company shares tumble by 8%  
top of the news feed  
taking so much light  
I’ve forgotten there’s war in Ukraine •

Afghanistan • Iraq • Nigeria • Cameroon • Niger •  
Chad • Syria • Turkey • Somalia • Kenya • Ethiopia •  
Libya • Yemen • Saudi Arabia • Egypt • India • Iran •  
Myanmar • Thailand • Israel • Palestine • Philippines •  
Colombia • Armenia • Azerbaijan • China • Bangladesh •  
DRC • Algeria • Tunisia • Burundi • Russia • Mali •  
Angola • Peru • Lebanon • Mozambique •

where &

& where else?

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## **L asks what I think of the song**

Listening with ears pricked upon  
to Young Thug's Wyclef Jean  
I cannot be sure where I meet it

when he says let me put it  
& I think of course not—but then  
fingering the hem of my skirt

do I reject his desire to squirt  
his cum on my face slick as a ghost  
because I'm honestly or dishonestly

deposed? I want my skin touched—  
perhaps it's how he asks,  
telling me to deny my desire to bask

In the wet filth & become  
part perversion myself. Because it was me  
that morning who told

my beloved to do it & yes, I did want  
kneeling deep in the tub looking up  
all my skin like a socket, drooling mouth

blossomed, filled like a pocket.  
L said to me, You don't think  
about the implication, the intention.

I said, I don't think  
of the gesture as blind contravention  
or anything more than body & mess

upon mess in the deluge of sex. I confessed  
I want to be seen as a canvass.  
She said, I don't want to be mean,  
  
with the swat of her hand, but  
he's no Jackson Pollack.

**Photo Credit:** [Cesar Ojeda](#)