

# New Poetry by WBT Editors

This special September Poetry & Fiction issue brings you poetry by WBT Editors Adrian Bonenberger, Drew Pham, and Matthew J. Hefti.



Photo Credit: [philmofresh](#)

## Poetry by Matthew J. Hefti

### Poet,

Why do you speak of beauty?

Why do you invest

in currency that pays no dividends,

in one drop of dew on a thirsty blade of green grass?

Why do you search for sweet simile,

like a myopic infant rooting for her mother's breast?

Why pine for the radiant jasper of the New Jerusalem

in one perfect metaphor?

Why agonize over an alliteration that accompanies

the princely prancing of your perfect pet,

or the comrades, cots, cannons, and killings

you can't seem to forget?

Why do you expend the energy  
of the world's strongest man, chained and bridled,  
pulling a rusty green Volkswagen van with his teeth  
just to capture one singular image?

Why do you abdicate the embrace of the sun  
and the caress of the wind  
to seek pleasure in the squeaky office chair,  
the cracked coffee mug, and the sticky backspace key?

Why do you carelessly drop  
the dingy cotton bathrobe of your self  
to leave your own wounded soul on the white page naked,  
obscene, hairy, and a little overweight?

Poet,  
Why do you sate yourself with words  
while the world falls apart around you?

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## Poetry by Adrian Bonenberger

### The Dogs

Four soldiers stand atop a fort's broad walls,  
grandsons of an itinerated lot,  
alert for local mischief, native grief,  
the hostile truth beneath provincial eyes,  
they watch, Hellenic marble statues all,

aloof, scanning the hills around, flex backs,  
gulp coffee, water, soda, more—chew bread,  
defeat the empty seconds one by one,  
with puffs on Pakistani cigarettes.

An enterprising soldier yells and marks—  
*The Afghan dogs are out! Amid the shit!*  
the fort's high pile of refuse teems with dogs,  
they've risen unexpected from the dross,  
ten mottled muzzles nestle, snap, and gnarl,  
yip and growling, which to scarf the most,  
their hoary feral stomachs brook no pause,  
as heavy, reeking discharge spurs them on.

One man can stop the plunder, one look-out:  
the sergeant bounces out to shoot them off  
astride a monstrous four-wheeled greenish toy,  
and punctures every canine, clatters full  
each heaving hairy breast with hotted lead,  
then roars the iron steed back through the gates,  
his purpose-full demeanor purpose-slakes.

Below, the sergeant by his noble mare  
reminds the picket of its evening task:  
*Don't let them take us unaware again,  
to eat our trash, our shit, it's just not right,  
therefore you must keep circumspect, all night,  
to triumph in this brutal, dry campaign.*  
to underline his will, the sergeant points  
at each young soldier in their trembling turn.

But as the sergeant's kingly finger falls,  
the ablest soldier lifts his voice anew:  
*The Afghan dogs are back, let loose the cry!*  
*They've come again, in greater numbers yet,*  
*a host of mutts now twice the normal size!*  
This new band feasts on the dead dogs' hot guts,  
barking and howling blissfully anew,  
paw-deep in dysentery's awful stench,  
they tear and bolt the corpses of their kin.

The sergeant's iron steed has frozen stiff,  
appalled at the uncivilized repast,  
it coughs and stutters, mocks the sergeant's hand,  
while loud, ecstatic crunching echoes near.  
*Fire, the sergeant yells, don't stand there, shoot!*  
*these hellish curs cannot be let to root*  
*among their fallen mates, the dead to loot!*

Two of the guards align the fort's defense:  
machine guns drum and spit their lethal pills,  
entail the feasters, shred their wolfish snouts,  
flake howls of pleasure into howls of pain,  
remorseless hammered argument unchecked,  
until the routed lot, ableed, retreats.

The sergeant eyes his men, now, sees their stock,  
*too little ammunition, says his gut*  
*to guard this place from any more attacks.*  
No time to state this knowledge, for, a shout  
compels his vision to another place:

*The Afghan dogs again! Now from the East  
and North they lope, hundreds of feral curs  
a bolder pack, unlike we've seen before!*

Light dew bedecks the sergeant's upper lip,  
he bids it leave, as more slides down his brow,  
the shuddered knee he firms, puts fist in mouth  
then climbs atop the wall, aims at a face:  
*make each shot count*, he calls, and flames the dark.

Dauntless the dogs press on, now used to death,  
they've seen their comrades slain and know the why,  
ignore the feculence and blood beside,  
united in their newfound quest: the fort.

Rifles, machine guns stutter out their waltz,  
then one by one fall quiet, bullets spent,  
a rug of twitching paws and fur-filled forms  
becoat the fort's encircling, emptied glebe,  
their numbers thinned, the pack drives on despite.

As growls and barks the solid gateway near,  
a lusty vengeful wave prepares its swell,  
high-howled crescendo jars the stolid walls,  
beats fear beneath the helmets lined above.  
One soldier turns, *what feud have they with we?*  
*Surely this cannot be because our crap*  
*is of such value to the savage tongue—*  
*how could what we reck little, they think great,*  
*and fling their precious lives away for dung?*

The sergeant claps the soldier's nervous arm,  
draws out that old device they'd boggled with:  
the bayonet, tool of a bygone age,  
salvation to the military eye.

*Like Patton, George and Chamberlain before,  
we've but to show these strays our steel, once tamed  
by brave display, they'll trouble us no more.*

With that he knifes the rifle's edgeless front,  
urges the four young soldiers follow suit,  
so armed by five crude spears the team descends,  
the sergeant's thrice-swept clout compels their haste,  
beyond the iron gate to stand athwart.

Outside the fort's immense protective shell,  
those great chthonic wire-basket stacks,  
a gibbous moon now lights the dusty sea,  
non-Euclidean shade titanic grows ,  
strikes mute the men, a vast nocturnal blank:  
the cunning foe has vanished in the night,  
and spurned the group's aspiring gameful blades.

No dogs patrol the garbage hole, munch trash,  
lap crud-incrusted metal bowls behind;  
none harvest corpses of their fallen mates,  
nor swarm the fort in hundreds, hunt for blood,  
The desert's bare of life beyond the five.

*Well lads, that's done the cheerless sergeant sighs,  
deflated by the mission's sudden lack,  
we should feel happy, for, we've won, he says,*

then slumps, slouches back to the peaceful post,  
til safe, they wait within the pebbled pen.

*They won't soon bother us again, I think,  
one soldier claims, we showed them mongrels good  
then jumps—a booming, mournful howl erupts,  
and farther in the higher hills is joined  
by all the weary province, near and else.*

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## Poetry by Drew Pham

### War is a Place

(after Yehuda Amichai)

What did I learn about Americans  
Once, only glimpsed on TV screens  
in blue jeans  
The first ones I saw came out of the air  
spilled onto the earth by mechanical dragonflies  
They wore clothes the colors of earth and leaves  
They bore every possession on their chests and backs  
Like traveling peddlers selling nothing  
but a presaged defeat  
trailing each man like a wavering pennant  
And they took homes  
And took fathers  
Though he arranged my marriage to a stranger  
I did not wish that he disappeared in the night

What else did I learn. To smile always  
A smile could buy a clicking pen or sweets  
If it might save my brothers from my father's fate  
I smiled  
In refugee camps a smile meant  
a quart more of cooking oil  
traded for a clamshell of rouge  
There too, Americans  
Faces like night or the moon  
Eyes hypnotized by a screen, fingers on  
keys Smiles can end with visas, plane tickets

Above all I learned in America, war is a place  
Terrible, always, but also somewhere else  
Not here, but across a sea  
I saw the ocean for the first time in New York  
Once, I thought the mountains were great  
Now I know they are meager rocks  
compared to walls of water and salt  
Now I see America  
Why they found us  
Why they seared the earth  
Why they took my fathers  
Took me  
One day Americans will take my son  
he will go over the ocean, just a blue field  
And to him the mountains will be immense and  
endless

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# Poetry by Matthew J. Hefti

## What Poetry Is

When I was a prep-school student,  
I translated, "Gallia est omnis divisa in partest tres"  
from the dead  
ancient language.  
But I didn't care how they plundered and divided Gaul,  
so I scratched evidence of my presence  
into the cheap clapboard desk.  
Its underside was covered in chewed bubble gum;  
its top side was covered in names,  
and that was poetry.

I moved on to university  
and read Keats and Wordsworth and Shakespeare and Longfellow  
and more *dead*  
ancient language  
in musty, highlighted, used textbooks.  
But that too was dreadful,  
so I scratched my feelings  
all over college-ruled notebooks with black and white  
spotted covers,  
and I sometimes spilled beer on the pages,  
and that was poetry.

I read and I dreamed and I read,  
but soon everything I wrote bore a certain resemblance  
to all the *dead*  
ancient language.  
So I stopped writing,  
all except the occasional haiku in magic marker  
on the forehead of my passed out, red-headed roommate.

I melted into the velour flower sofa  
and watched a whisper of smoke at the end of a pipe  
climb up to heaven like a prayer  
or a whimper,  
and that was poetry.

Somewhere and sometime after that, life happened,  
and wars happened,  
and we dropped blood onto sand,  
and that was poetry.

I traveled around the world countless times (eight to be exact),  
and I visited countless countries (twenty-three to be exact),  
and I lost countless friends (twelve to be exact).  
I woke up in starts in cramped economy seats,  
always with a dry uvula and a chin covered in drool.  
Each cattle-car airplane was the same  
no matter which exotic desert we flew from,  
and it was impossible to rest.  
So I'd scratch the names  
of the dead  
on frequent flier ticket stubs,  
and this was poetry.

Then for years I just tended the lawn  
and plugged ear buds into my head  
and turned the music up way too loud  
to bury my own thoughts  
and the dead  
as I made perfect passes along the front of my perfect  
stateside house,  
alternating directions each week to make the green really  
pop  
the way the carpet pops after a fresh vacuuming,  
stopping only to drink more beer and admire the straightness  
of the lines.

And that was poetry.

It wasn't long before I caught a fever,  
and the music wasn't loud enough to bury anything,  
let alone the dead,  
so I bought notebooks with black and white spotted covers,  
and I let them pile up on my shelves  
until the tilted stacks nearly collapsed.  
But there was potential in those blank pages  
and I could feel it,  
and that was poetry.

Now I light the same nag champa incense every night because I  
once read an article  
that said to create you must create a Pavlovian response in  
your writing  
environment.

I light the incense and sit with a chewed up ball point pen  
in hand  
and I scratch a bunch of drivel into the notebooks;  
i.e., the college ruled notebooks with black and white  
spotted covers,  
and I sometimes write something that somehow  
buries all the dead,  
and that is poetry.

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# Poetry: “A Beautiful Day to be Buried” by Julia Wendell



The sun was shining violently,  
as if on a mission to see beneath the surface of things.  
Our cortege wormed its way past row on row

of identical white markers, the grounds immaculately groomed,  
(*Not even a single dandelion*, the brother noted),  
and visitors searching for Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

As if we were props planted by the cemetery on this Memorial  
Day Weekend,  
they swiveled heads to watch us pass,  
or glanced up from the shoulders of toddlers

their adult arms were both holding back and nudging forward.  
We were famous simply because we were sad.  
They needn't have been curious.

We were nobody. Not even much pain,  
though a few experienced twinges of nostalgia—  
that old sad, Arlington tug.

Once at the Columbarium, the lance corporal  
climbed a step ladder and slid her box into the open niche  
to join her only mate, not into earth's dark but the starkness  
of marble. I hoped we might also be able  
to climb the ladder, to double check  
and see what their version of Eternity looked like.

But no, he quickly took a photo with his cell—  
assurance the cremains were who they were supposed to be—  
before a drill gun set the one-way screws.

*A Beautiful Day to be Buried* originally appeared in [Consequence Magazine](#) on December 1st 2015

Photo Credit: Arlington National Cemetery

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## Excerpt from “Brave Deeds” by David Abrams



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We walk, we walk, we walk.

We head into the fireball sun, packed in battle armor, baking from the inside out, throats coated with dust, hearts like parade drums, adrenaline spiking off the charts.

We’re alone, cut off from the rest of the brigade back at Taji, and now thanks to a busted drive shaft weakened in last week’s IED blast along Route Irish, we are without a Humvee. We’ll have to finish this on foot.

We double-time across Baghdad on our twelve feet, a mutant dozen-legged beetle dashing from rock to rock, confident in its shell but always careful of the soft belly beneath. We are six men moving single file along the alleys, the edges of roads, the maze of beige buildings. We keep moving: ducking and dodging and cursing and sprinting. We

wonder how it could have gone so wrong so fast.

Going on foot was never part of the plan. That damn drive shaft—nobody saw it coming. And it's not like we can call for help—dial 911 or send up a flare—because we're not supposed to be out here. We're on our own and now we really have to keep up the pace if we're gonna make it.

The memorial service starts at 1500 hours. The last time we checked our watches, it was 1030. Half the morning gone. We may not make it.

From the back, Cheever calls out, "Hey, wait up."

"Keep moving, Cheeve," Arrow says, not turning his head as he jogs down the street.

He's on point and he's focused. We wait for no one; we pause for no Cheeve.

"It's these blisters, man. They're killing me."

"Aw, somebody call the waaambulance," says Drew.

"My boots're filling with blood. I can feel it."

"Squish, squish, squish," Fish says.

"That's enough, guys," says 0, his voice softer than ours: steel wrapped in velvet.

That's 0. He's never loud, but we always listen.

Everyone loves 0. His full name is Olijandro, but we keep it at 0—short, simple, sweet. Round as a bullet hole.

We have every right to give Cheever a hard time. He is, after all, the one who left the radio back in the Humvee—forgotten in our mad scramble to get

out of what at the time  
looked like a singularly dangerous situation, an SDS. That's  
what Rafe would have called  
it, the kind of thing he was always warning us about—before he  
himself was the victim  
of the ultimate SDS.

Two hours ago. *Jesus, was it really only two hours? Feels like  
a whole week since  
then.* Two hours ago we were cruising along, taking the streets  
quick and easy. There was no laughter because we were on a  
sober mission, but we were feeling good. As good as we could,  
given the circumstances.

Park said he knew the way and we believed him. Why shouldn't  
we? Park was quiet,  
but he was smart. He wasn't one to take risks. And today, of  
all days, we needed to be  
risk free.

Everything was going fine. Smooth as a baby's shaved ass. Park  
at the wheel, Arrow  
riding shotgun, the rest of us crammed in the back: O sitting  
on Fish's lap, Cheever  
digging into his second bag of Doritos for the day, Drew  
sandwiched somewhere in the  
middle. Early morning locals in fluttering robes swished past  
the Humvee's small  
windows. Burnt shells of cars lined the curb, lingering  
memories of bombs. Billboards  
with soccer players saying things we couldn't understand, but  
offering us a Coke and a  
smile. Everything good and fine, then bang! It's like the  
Humvee decided it had had  
enough. *Sorry, guys. I'm calling it quits. You're on your own  
from here.*

You should've seen the look on Park's face when the steering

wheel locked up.

*This cannot be happening. Not here, not now.*

Then came a hard *clunk*, and the Humvee shuddered to a stop. When we realized it wasn't coming back to life, we were out of there. Every which way in crazy panic, no time to stop and think. Even the Doritos got left behind.

By the time we regrouped two blocks away and Drew said maybe we should just turn ourselves in and call back to headquarters, we realized Cheever, our radio guy, was empty-handed and the situation had gone from bad to totally fucked.

A look came into Cheever's eyes and he released a string of curses.

Arrow closed his eyes, ground his molars, then said (over Cheever's *shit shit, damn damns*): "I know you're not gonna tell me you left the assault pack back there. Don't you *dare* let those words come out of your mouth."

"Just kill me now," Cheever moaned. He stared hard at the ground, his eyes boring a hole, digging the dimensions of a grave.

Some of us were all for doubling back and retrieving the PRC-119, but Fish shook his head and said, "Too late. Hajji's already scavenged the whole damn thing by now. We'd be lucky to find a single hubcap spinning in the gutter."

Humvees don't have hubcaps, but that's typical Fish—always exaggerating to make things worse than they were.

In this case, though, he had a point.

We blame Cheever. Never leave a PRC-119 in the hands of a guy like him. A platoon's radio operator is supposed to be the smartest guy on the team—like a Yale Law School grad slumming in the Army—but we ended up with someone who never quite mastered the call signs and treated the radios like crossword puzzles he couldn't finish.

Cheever is the self-appointed jokester in our little band of not-so-merry men. He'll go around saying things like: "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eggs" or "I'm so broke, I can't even pay attention." Once, when Private Cartwright slipped in the motor pool and came down hard on a trailer hitch between his legs, Cheever goes, "Ooh, right in the Balzac!" Lame-ass stuff that no matter what he thinks doesn't earn him any extra cool points.

Nobody's laughing at anything by this point. All kinds of scenarios unspool through our heads. We think about Jessica Lynch and all the wrong turns her convoy took in the labyrinth of streets. We remember hearing about a British journalist kidnapped last month. His beheading is now trending on YouTube. We think of those civilian contractors who were caught, strung up from the girders of a bridge, and then hung there for days after their bodies had been burned. They looked like big slabs of beef jerky swaying in the breeze. None of us wanted to end up like that.

So there we were, a cluster of dumb in the middle of Baghdad.

Oh well, at least we had a map.

We reached into our cargo pockets, unsnapped ammo pouches, probed fingers into pockets behind our flak vests.

Nothing.

We looked at each other, swallowing hard (none of us wanting to admit to the others that we were swallowing hard). We already saw how this would play out—like the surprise twist of a movie you can see coming fifteen minutes before the credits roll. If we were the virgin tiptoeing around the serial killer's lair, we'd be jeering and throwing popcorn at ourselves.

Arrow said we had to go back to the Humvee, take our chances, hajjis or no hajjis.

We didn't argue. We needed the map.

Arrow led us back. We were half a block away—keeping to the shadows, hugging the buildings—and were about to turn down the street where the Humvee was hasty-parked with two tires up on the curb when Arrow held up a fist for us to stop.

We didn't need to be told. We'd seen the men and boys and some women streaming down the street, magnet-pulled toward something unseen. We knew what that invisible attraction was. We'd been such fools to leave the Humvee like we did.

We slammed ourselves flat against the wall of an electronics store. Arrow inched himself up to the corner, snapped a peek around the side, then pulled back just as fast. He looked at us, shook his head,

then twirled his finger for us to reverse.

That's when we smelled the smoke and knew we were no-question-about-it fucked.

Mapless in Baghdad.

We threw together a quick plan and made a good guess at our current location. Then

we moved out away from the destroyed Humvee and the happy chants of Iraqis

celebrating what to them looked like a victory.

Now here we are, slipping from building to building, street by street, trying not to

call too much attention to ourselves in this city that already hates us.

"Arrow," Cheever calls again. He's still limping. "I'm not kidding."

Arrow doesn't stop, will not stop until we reach Forward Operating Base Saro safe

and sound. That's the mission and he's intense and focused as a shaft whistling through

the air until it thunks into the target at the FOB. Arrow's not his real name. He's tall and

thin and moves like he's been shot from a bow. His real name is Arogapoulos—the letters

squeezed together into tight, muddy stitchery on the Velcro name tag over his heart—but none of us could ever manage

that, so we called him Arrow. It started after one of the company "fun runs" back at Fort Drum. The last half mile,

First Sergeant usually let us break ranks and compete our way to the end. That day, Arogapoulos was leading the pack and he

pushed hard all the way to the finish line. Slim, intent on purpose (*finish FIRST finish FIRST*), the breeze whistling in

his ears. As we came out of the woods,

Arogapoulos whipped past the entire company and collapsed to

his knees, gagging on the grass in front of the barracks. Later, huffing from his own last kicking sprint, Sergeant Morgan looked at him and shook his head, grinning. "Jesus, you were like an arrow there at the end, Specialist A." So the name stuck. When Rafe christens you, you keep it.

"C'mon, Arrow—"

"Shut up, Cheever," Park snaps.

"Yeah, we're all walking on blisters," Drew says.

"Fine! Fuck all y'all," says Cheever. He lags behind.

Five minutes later, Arrow is forced to slow, then stop. While we pull security, Cheever unties his left boot. We surround him in a ring, M4 barrels pointed out, a bristling pincushion. We scan the rooftops, the windows, the doorways. Somebody could be up there right now with us in his sights, ready to take us out with one RPG. Later, we'll look back on this—at least some of us will—and think, We weren't too smart, were we? Bunching up in a cluster around Cheever, the fat pudge. But since we know Cheever will pay more attention to himself than he will team security, we pull in close. Cheever has his good points, but selflessness is not one of them.

We are six men—Arrow, Park, Drew, O, Cheever, and Fish. And we are moving through the most dangerous sectors of Baghdad—the bubble of the boil—on foot now, thanks to the goddamn drive shaft and its microscopic cracks. We are on our way to FOB Saro to attend the memorial service for Sergeant Rafe Morgan and we are determined to make it there before sundown, alive, intact, all twelve arms and legs still attached.

We look at Cheever's foot outside the boot. It's moist and

raw—straight out of a  
butcher's glass case. And the smell. It's a sun-ripened  
leather bag full of vomit sprinkled  
with sugar. It makes our nostrils cry for mercy.

We all go, "Jesus, Cheever!"

"Moleskin," Arrow says.

Cheever drops his eyes, mumbles, "It's back at Taji."

Camp Taji, our home away from home, is thirty klicks behind  
us.

"Well, *that's* a good place for it," says Drew. "Better there  
than on your foot."

"Sure could use Doc right about now," Cheever says.

"Savarola, shit," Fish spits. "What a pussy."

"Hey," O says. "Doc's all right. He made his choice, just like  
we made a choice."

Savarola could have come with us, *said* he was gonna come with  
us, but he backed  
out at the last minute. We waited around the motor pool for  
fifteen minutes this  
morning—longer than he deserved—until Arrow called it and  
said, "Looks like he stood  
us up."

And so we went out into Baghdad on our own without a medic.

"Wish he were here now," Cheever is still going on. "At least  
he could give me some  
Tylenol to chew on."

"Suck it up, Cheeve."

"This whole day is turning out to be nothing but one big suck

hole," he grumbles.

There is a sound halfway down the block, a clang of metal. A baseplate getting set into position, or the metallic mumblings of crated artillery shells knocking together. We snap back into the moment. Our M4 rifles come alert.

We wait. We listen. We watch.

Nothing.

"Stand down," Arrow says. "Jesus." He shakes his head. "It's too early to be this jumpy."

We relax but don't lower our rifles.

Then 0 says, "He can have my moleskin."

"Bullshit!" we cry.

Arrow says, "You are not giving up your moleskin, 0."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

They stare at each other for a long time—*too* long, if you ask the rest of us. This is how it goes—testing a new leader's boundaries, poking the bear to see if he'll wake and, if he does, how hard he'll roar. They'll send over Sergeant Morgan's replacement soon—from Bravo Company or maybe HHC as a last resort—but for now Arrow is in charge of our squad. For today, a week—or, who knows, as long as a month if he's lucky. Besides, before he died, Rafe all but promised Arrow he'd get his stripes.

We're trying to get used to Arrow being the de facto squad leader. This day, this SDS we've gotten ourselves into, has called for one of us to step into Sergeant Morgan's vacuum. Given Arrow's time in grade—he got promoted to specialist long before the rest of us—it looks like he's the man of the hour. He doesn't have Rafe's stripes or his years—this was Sergeant Morgan's third deployment and he knew his shit—but on this day, things like that don't matter as much as they would if we were back on Taji.

We're all in the same boat. Like the rest of us, this is Arrow's first trip to the desert.

We're all blind men feeling our way across Baghdad; Arrow just happens to be the one in front with the cane. Like it or not, we trail behind him.

O looks at Arrow, says, "It's just a piece of moleskin, dude."

Arrow looks away, scans his sector of fire, says nothing more. O does the same—after pulling a patch of moleskin out of his ammo pouch and tossing it to Cheever.

We are silent, watching the street. After a minute, Cheever puts his socks back on his feet. As he laces his boots, he grumbles and curses, but that's to be expected. Cheever being Cheever.

We move on. Cheever limps but keeps up.

\* \* \*

Staff Sergeant Raphael Morgan was one of the best men we ever had. Rafe was what they call a born leader. He watched out for us, pushed us when

we needed it, backed off when he knew it wasn't the right time to push. We don't want to put him on a pedestal or anything, but he really was everything we could have asked for in an NCO. He knew the field manuals inside and out, chapter and verse. He was prime time in the field. The sloppier, wetter, and colder the conditions the better. He encouraged us to find our inner warrior; he was relentless in his quest for our perfection; he made us hate him in the times we were exhausted, blister sore, and sleep robbed. But then that night, he'd sit down with us at chow, give us the lemon pound cake out of his plastic MRE pouch, and ask nothing in return (and not because he hated lemon pound cake—we knew it was his favorite). He was a used-car salesman when it came to persuading us to do the difficult, the near impossible.

He wasn't a big man, not one to loom over his subordinates with a barrel chest and a Sgt. Rock jaw, using his NCO stripes to bully us. He wasn't like the others—the bitter assholes, the career sergeants who delighted in our torment. Rafe never flaunted what he didn't earn. In fact, now that we think of it, he always seemed to be curled into himself, as if apologetic for his stripes and rocker. Like he was and forever would be one of us, a guy among guys.

He was short, a stump in the infantry forest, and used that height to his advantage, swimming below the sergeant major's radar when he was prowling for an NCO to blame for his own fuckups. Sergeant Morgan kept his head down—below shoulder level of his fellow platoon sergeants—and went about his work without unnecessary chatter and

bluster. But the unwary were fools if they believed that quiet demeanor: Rafe was iron behind that black velvet. And man, he was smooth. We used to call him MC behind his back. Milk Chocolate. Goes down nice and easy.

We remember this one time back in the States, soon after we got a new commanding general. Word came down from on high that a weekend detail was needed for what turned out to be some special landscaping work around Fort Drum. Post beautification they called it.

Names were chosen, put on a roster, but they didn't tell us what it was all about until it was too late. Captain Bangor gathered us in a huddle after formation on Friday.

"Dandelions," he said. And we were all like: *What?*

"Men," he continued, "it seems the new CG's wife hates the color yellow and so we've been ordered to go out and pluck every single dandelion on post." And we were all like: *What the fuck?* But we didn't say that out loud, of course—not in front of Old Man Bang-Her.

It was up to Sergeant Morgan to get us through the weekend without all of us going to Officers Row, armed with knives, breaking into the commanding general's quarters, and stabbing him and his wife to death. Or maybe just dumping a bucket of yellow paint on their heads.

"Hey guys," Rafe said that Saturday morning, our garbage bags fluttering in the

wind. "This ain't so bad."

We looked at the parade field—the largest plot of grass on all of Fort Drum. It was a carpet of yellow.

"Sure looks bad," Arrow said.

"Naw, this ain't nothin'," said Rafe, giving us a milk chocolate smile. "Now 3-5, they got it bad. They been out in the field all week and it only stopped raining yesterday." (We knew this, but it was good to be reminded of Third Battalion's misery.)

"You think they ain't sick of each other's smell by now? And they still got another three days to go. Sucks to be them. But here we are—warm, dry, doing a little gardening for the CG. Can't believe they pay us for stuff like this."

It was still a crap detail, and we bitched and moaned, but we moved forward in a line across the parade field anyway, feeling like we'd somehow one-upped 3-5.

"Besides," Rafe said as we bobbed and plucked, "ain't none of you heard of dandelion wine?"

None of us had.

"You never read that book by Ray Bradbury? About the kid?"

We stared at him, our faces not moving. Sergeant Morgan, despite what you'd think by looking at him, was well-read. We were not.

"Anyway," Rafe went on, "I figure we got enough to make at least a bottle apiece right here at the parade field alone. Just wait till we get

over by the housing area.”

We moved across the field, our boots sweeping softly through the tall grass and weeds.

“Golden flowers,” Rafe said. “The dazzle and glitter of molten sun.”

“Whatever, Sar’nt,” we said, turning away to hide our smiles.

“Dandelion wine–like summer on the tongue,” he assured us.

“Okay, Sar’nt.” Our smiles gave way to laughter.

And so we made it through the day, picking dandelions and looking forward to drinking weed wine—which, as it turned out, we never made.

That was Rafe, always pulling us through the shit the Army shoveled our way.

That’s why we took his death hard.

We were there that day, that most horrible day on our calendar of awful. We don’t like to think of our Sergeant Morgan like that—the obscene pieces of him flying through the bomb-bloom air.

Yes, we took his death hard and, later, one of us might have gone outside to the solitude of a concrete bunker and cried until the snot ran, and one of us probably dashed for the latrine, vomit splashing the side of the toilet bowl, and one of us most definitely would press the tip of a revolver—a cold metal kiss good-bye—to his forehead eighteen months after our return. But we’re not saying who. That’s private stuff we won’t share.

And so here we are, out in the bull’s-eye center of Baghdad, on foot, moving through

hostile neighborhoods with no comms and minimal ammo but with plenty of love for our dead dismembered platoon sergeant. Dismembered but not disremembered. We're doing this for Rafe and there's no turning back.

Photo Credit: Grove Atlantic

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## **New Fiction: “East New York, After the War” by Gregory Brereton**



I miss the fragrance of Polish women. I have not encountered anything quite like it. This tender unwashed grassy odor. Part stench, part hymn, evoking mysteries, bygone days, some kind of particle enigma. American women smell of chemical flowers. False lavender, concocted rose. In the hallway of the row house, my cousin's wife leaves this botanical wash in her wake as she passes, as I press myself to the crumbling walls and bow my head at her coming.

I am distracting myself trying to recall the scent of Polish women, to recall what my Monika was wearing the last time I saw her and the dizzying lovely reek she gave off that's gone now twenty years along with the rest of her. Cousin Johnny at the wheel of the moving truck won't stop telling me to let it go, let it go, we turn around now and it's over, all the way through the Flatlands down to a spot I know off the Belt

Parkway with a trail to the water that can't be seen from the road. He has to talk loud over the strange gargling sounds coming from the rear of the truck, Roman Wszniewski all bug-eyed with the rag stuffed in his mouth.

The war is over, Cousin Johnny says. Think of our plans. Think of what you're throwing away.

He is cautious in that American style, always thinking of some bright future about to turn our way. I tried to be like this once but there is no counterfeit for it. There is only the past.

I am police these days. Before that I was only an exile but the difference is not as great as you might expect. Either way, you learn things. For instance:

They say Murder Incorporated never held the same sway over East New York after the cops threw Kid Twist out a window of the Half Moon Hotel and scattered his brains all over the Coney Island boardwalk but they also say that Jew gangsters hunt ex-Nazis with the apple pie aliases to this day through the rowhomes off Pitkin Avenue, Wyona, New Lots, Bradford, down through the python darkness beneath the elevated tracks over Livonia Avenue and out beyond toward Bushwick, Brownsville, Ridgewood and further still to the slinking green hush of the suburbs where nobody has a past worth remembering anyway, twenty years on from the war's end and that taste for revenge still whetted like a fresh blade.

I believe it all, every last word, mostly because in America, in New York, things surpassing belief occur as regular as the morning papers. When there is blood involved, they are a matter of routine.

My cousin Johnny and his wife Sophie are laughing in the next room. One could all but reach through the walls of these

cramped quarters. It is not merely sounds that pass through them – intimate, furious, the farcical bodily outbursts. Or the accompanying odors, though these are legion. The cheap plaster of these row house walls seem to be pliable and thin as memory itself. Resentments, treacheries, longings all come leaching through. Eventually it becomes difficult to know where your own share of these things end and the invisible incursions of your fellow lodgers take up.

If she has not already, I suspect my cousin's wife Sophie of thoughts toward another man. I can't yet say who it might be. My suspicions arise in part from a soft disarray, a mild turbulence, to her thoughts and ways broadcast through the walls. Through a spot just below the portrait of the Black Madonna, clear as a radio speaker, so that the wall like a murmuring heart itself seems to pulse with these things, the sounds of a restlessness come. Pacing footfalls, clattering dishes, a vase of flowers filled and emptied and filled again in quick succession. I suspect her as well because it has happened that I myself seem to have fallen at least a little bit in love with my cousin's wife Sophie, and so I am keen on her moods and feel these odd inner shufflings at her ordinary arrivals and departures. These have been erratic of late. I have too this sense of a far-off despair, abstract as though it were a story I heard once the details of which are dim to me now, to think of her feeling some powerful emotion for another man. In part, this is loyalty to my cousin Johnny. In part, this is the hateful ache of unrequited longing. Most of all, I suspect her because I suspect all women. I have it in me to know I would never act on these feelings or even look too long or too deeply at the feelings themselves. Perhaps, as is usually the case, it is not love at all but simply a masquerade of solitude, a thrown-voice howl of desire in protest against a condition of life so unnatural as mine. I rise in the afternoons and walk my beat, in the borough of Manhattan, way uptown. I return before dawn, tired and free. My only contact with another occurs along the wrists of

criminals as I bind them in metal cuffs or the colored women who sell their companionship in my precinct. But if I have gained nothing else from that chaotic and transient past of mine, even as it too recedes to a sort of impersonal fable, it is the absolute omnipotence over every act, beginning with a control of the breath beneath floorboards creaking heavy under Gestapo boots all the way up to the approach signals of something as absurd and perilous as love.

Most days, we listen to baseball and drink beer and my cousin speaks of his dreams to someday own a tavern and I let him believe that his dreams are my dreams as well. I have no resolve for dreams of my own. I want simply to forget. He grants me this, in his indirect way. He doesn't care to hear about the war. He was on a mine-sweeper in the great Chesapeake Bay in the state of Virginia for the war's duration and to him it was all something distant and strange. The war was a thing the Americans went over to and beat the Germans at and then came home singing. They don't care to hear about the camps, the incinerations. They don't care to hear tales of eating children in the ruins of cities.

This is all I want. To be free of memory in the American style.

Life will proceed as it has been planned, because our plans are modest. I will work to full pension and Johnny will sell the moving truck and we will open a tavern somewhere out beyond Brooklyn and be each a friend to mankind. And Johnny and Sophie will grow old together and I will slip easy into my fate of the mad drunken uncle from the old country, with each passing year growing more adept at folding up old longings and tucking them away back in the darkness where the disastrous ends of past longings are cast unremembered. I will grow so adept at this that eventually doing anything else will seem unnatural and perverse.

I am police now but it makes no difference. A bullet is a bullet, whatever the uniform. The bullet meant for me has been travelling twenty years now, ever since it passed clean through the pale cool forehead of my Monika, beloved and doomed, and continued through the darkness beyond where all she felt and desired and fought for lay earthen still and out again to cross the continent of Europe in ruins beneath the tailwinds of a billion spent bullets and on across that cold gray ocean vast beyond myth or reason, whistling low as it gathers strength to someday trace me clear to this room, to this open window at which I sit, top floor of the row house on Bradford Street, East New York, cleaning my service revolver to the sounds of transistor rock 'n roll. It is coming for me.

I've found that the condition of the exile is excellent training for police work, for the policeman is a kind of local exile. People are wary and they speak at him reluctantly, always with careful deliberation. They keep things from him. They want to be away from him as quickly as possible.

So when we rouse this Yid body boy from a policy bank off Lenox Avenue and he asks me about my accent and inevitably he reveals we were all but brothers in the old country, I know that things are catching up to me.

These things proceed as always. You must ask every question but the one you want answers to. He hears my accent and dips into Polish and in a few deft phrases we are back on Florianska Street in Krakow, piano music tumbling up from the bricky catacomb taverns there behind the cathedral. We are arm in arm along Paulinska Street beneath the lindens nodding over the old rectory walls at the edge of Kazmierz. Past the Skalka sanctuary to that park on the river where the girls would pass with bare knees in the summer.

English, I say. You must speak English here. I don't know anything about all that.

He tells me he knows my name. Knows my people out in East New York.

I know friends of yours, he says.

I have no friends here, I say.

He goes reeling off names, half of East New York, half of Brownsville, half of Brooklyn. Long dead, half-remembered crooks. He is talking now to save himself. There is nobody in Brooklyn beyond his knowing in service to that kind of salvation. Says he knew Abe Reles aka Kid Twist before he got his brains dashed all over the boardwalk. Says he drove for Pittsburgh Phil. Says he shook hands with Lepke Buchalter in Rose Gold's candy store on Livonia Avenue once during the war.

They never really gone away, he says.

You want what? My thinking is you'd likely keep your mouth shut, I say. If any of it were true. Names in the papers. That's all you know.

They're still around. Not what they once were. Not like that, of course. But there are killers out there. Friends of you and me. They got a hit squad out for ex-Nazis to this day. Them ones we brought over through the ratlines. The ones who slipped through secret. Camp guards, SS men, if you will, may they drink dog's blood and get cholera. You simply can't outrun fate, officer. Especially when fate is dressed like an old Jew gangster.

I've heard this tale before.

Me? I'm some schmuck trying to make a living. What can I tell you?

Enough fairy tales, brother.

It's all true, take it or leave it. Check your records.

There are no Jews left in East New York, brother. It's all going to the coloreds now.

They'll burn the place down, he says.

I don't tell him how I much respect the coloreds. The colossal remembering in them, the perseverance against such wrongs. I never saw a colored until they posted me uptown and now I think they are the finest of the lot. Deserving better, anyway, than the habitual swindle of policy bankers. He goes on naming names but it's not until he gets to the name Roman Wzniewski that I stop him.

I don't talk about how I came to America, to New York. I learned a strategic ignorance as I moved across borders with the imploring silence of the refugee. I was admitted because in 1912 my father had a sister who left for work in a candle factory in Hamburg and when the first war broke out she couldn't go home. Go west, go west. Now my cousin her son owns half a rowhome in Brooklyn on Bradford Street near the elevated train and I tell anyone who asks I got my English from him. He got his English at the church school of St. John Cantius on New Jersey Avenue. His children got theirs from the cradle and only know enough Polish to curse and say the rosary and their children in turn will only know the curses, which is enough, God help us.

But the name Wzniewski calls back to me through the despair of all those intervening years. We were Home Army during the war. Then the war ended and the Nazis went away and the Soviets came and there was hope for a brief instant and then that too went away. But Roman was nothing if not shrewd, merciless shrewd, and saw with great clarity the smallness and cruelty of the coming regime. Small, cruel acts were to be the new currency, exchanged against the grand annihilations of the past six years. He gave them my name and the names of a half

dozen others – friends, comrades in arms, men he had fought and bled beside in the underground. Versions vary. In one, he blurted it all out only after the temple screws touched bone in the Palace of Miracles, the big house on Rakowiecka Street. In another, he went direct to the NKVD and spilled like a fishwife. He gave us up to secure certain things for himself inside the new regime. He gave them my name but when they came for me I was somewhere west of Salzburg, moving steadily on, my name and the life over which it had hung like a shingle or Damoclean sword all relinquished eastward where the bloody past went on repeating itself. They found my darling Monika instead.

Unrevealed days of wandering across the ruins of Europe followed. Eventually, I washed up here, where we all end up eventually. Brooklyn must be a sort of afterlife for the beleaguered Pole and the hunted Jew and the gypsy of the every bloodstrain braided loose in exile. Maybe there is the kind of heaven they evoke Sundays in the mother tongue at St. John Cantius. Where my thoughts slip back into the language of my birth as into healing waters. But if you kill a Polack like me, the kind with more killings to his name than he can recall, he gets sent express to Brooklyn. If I am fortunate in anything, it is in that name which I surrendered back in the old country, back when my comrade gave it up to the man from the NKVD. This was part of their mission to liquidate partisans and they came for me and found my Monika instead and did to her what they had planned all along. The squeezed trigger, the flash bang and soot in the air all appear when that old name returns to me in the silence of my thoughts there in the pews of St. John Cantius. I plead with God for mercy for that man I was. For that name I have surrendered. They killed me once already, in the war. We all rise again, say the priests. Some of us sooner than others. Maybe the trouble is that we don't get to choose the time or place of resurrection. Or whatever precedes it. I beg that if there is a heaven, that Monika is there and her sadness has been taken

from her along with the life itself. I clasp my hands and bow my head, my thoughts washed with that soft sibilance of the mother tongue, and beg God to grant me the chance to forget it all. I never dared pray for a chance at revenge. But most people pray too modestly. God is many things but modest is not one of them.

When it comes, it happens in the way of all things in this city. A bit of rumor, a stray thought, some overheard snatch of nothing talk that goes unraveling out and slithers from subject to subject. A Yid body boy from a policy bank off Lenox Avenue with a loose mouth and too many friends and his own skin to save.

Roman Wzniewski. Sure, you must know him. Though he dropped that rather unwieldy moniker soon as he stepped off the boat no disrespect. He goes by Ray Wisdom, you believe that?

Where does he live?

I can see it in you, my friend. The blood rising. It comes right to the rim of your eyes. Not such a good thing I think. Information like this maybe. Maybe I've said too much.

What do you want?

I want what any man wants, he says. To run a legitimate business in peace. What can I do?

Tell me where this man lives and you are free to go. Or keep it to yourself and I will visit you every single day from now until the revelation, keep my boot in the ass of your whole operation until you're begging nickels on the subway. These are the only choices available to you now.

What can I do, he says again but the tone has turned and the light has dropped from him.

Lights are strung across Bradford Street. We've been drinking all afternoon. There is a predictability to a city like New York. No matter where he might be, what borough or neighborhood, I am nearly certain that Roman is sitting at an open window, in a small room, hearing the same things over the radio, looking out over crowds in the street, thinking perhaps as I do now how very little the particulars of a man's biography amount to in a city like this.

I ought to let it go. Let the past lie. But that name in my ears after so long has me remembering.

Nights, I clean my gun by this open window to radio music and ballgames. I am five years from full pension. Johnny hauls davenport and dining sets up the narrow stairwells. There is an old tavern out at the edge of Queens with a down payment in reach, where I picture myself drinking away the remaining days. An exquisite stupor, then a solitary corpse wrung dry. I only became police several years after arriving here in New York, after pushing brooms in schoolhouses and hauling furniture down tenement halls, after working for the city spearing trash on the end of a little stick in the dark eerie calm of the parks of Manhattan. I held court with my thoughts there below the hissing streetlamps and the rats the size of puppies and the brown-skinned teenagers who menaced me occasionally with knives or sticks. Sometimes they merely glanced up from their work painting odd names and phrases on the rocky outcroppings or restroom walls. When I became police and donned that crisp blue uniform, it was the response to my appearance that took some getting used to.

Winter, summer, winter, summer, as my mother would say. Twenty years go by and whoever you happen to be is the life you've made for yourself. I am some cop with an accent, living in a small room in a house full of drinkers, somewhere in Brooklyn. Trying half-heartedly to forget.

I am never lonely. I have not spent a single lonely night

since I arrived in America. There are paid women in my precinct and I visit them from time to time. They'll let police have a go for free but that feels wrong to me. Payment feels somehow more honest. These are colored women. It is all dark people in my precinct. They are clamoring for something now. Preacher types with that righteous fire. Dr. King. Malcolm X and him they gunned him down February last on stage at the Audubon Ballroom, two precincts over from mine. I thought of Kid Twist, of the efficient ways this city has of ridding itself of inconvenient men. The coloreds who are beaten like dogs in the street. Who remember every wrong. But vengeance is mine, the Lord says.

I don't bother asking if he remembers me, remembers my face or name or what we lived through together. Cousin Johnny brings the furniture truck around from the warehouse on Liberty Avenue. Cousin Johnny who tells me to let it pass. We have plans. We have this life we've built. Cousin Johnny with his beautiful wife and his half a rowhome and what have I got? Cousin Johnny brings the truck around when I ask at least, I will say that much for him. I myself did not know how it would play out until I set eyes on him. I thought of Monika then. I wondered not for the first time what had passed through her panicked mind when the betrayal was laid bare. Roman W. walking along Pitkin Avenue like any other man in any other city.

We go up to his apartment on Starr Street and I press myself to the wall while Johnny knocks, holds an old bill of lading up to the peephole and says delivery for Mr. Wisdom. The reply comes fuck off in a voice I last heard in dying echoes in the sewer below Warsaw. Johnny says it again and there is the jangle of undone chains. I move Johnny aside and step into the doorway and the look on the man's face as the door swings away is almost worth all the years and the troubled sleep and the remembering.

There is a trace of wonder in it. There is a certainty. There is the faintest shadow of relief. After all he has seen and done and lived through, when the prospect of dying was as near to him minute by minute as the drum of blood in his ears, he meets his revelation here in deepest Brooklyn. To know at last must have seemed a somber kind of mercy.

I myself did not know how it would play out until I set eyes on him. I thought of Monika then. I wondered not for the first time what had passed through her panicked mind when the betrayal was laid bare.

In the back of Johnny's truck, I cuff him to the door handle. We don't speak at first. My brother in the underground. I take in his face, the marks left by the passing years. Something close to affection returns even now. Something else, some complicated feeling of anguish overlaid with a numb confusion, makes me reach for the pint of rye under the passenger seat. I take a pull and hand it to him and as he drinks I slip my service revolver from my waist and rest it on my knee. He swallows and breathes deep and it all comes back up over the wood slats of the truck bed. He takes a second, modest nip of rye and begins to speak.

We could use someone like you, he says.

You already have, brother, I say.

We are engaged in a holy mission.

I know all about it. You go by the name Ray Wisdom. Nazi killer. Avenger of the Jewish race. All that ended long ago, brother.

It goes on still, brother.

That's not what I'm here for.

You remember things funny, brother, he says. You talk like a man who has been wronged. But I was there too, brother.

How could I forget, I say.

Maybe it's been too long. You have it backwards. I was the hunted man, brother. I was the one who had to flee for my life. Maybe Monika has been in the ground so long you remember her like she was someone else.

All that is over now, I say.

Do you have a wife, he says.

That's neither here nor there, I say.

Not you, Roman says. I'm not talking to you.

Cousin Johnny looks at me, looks back at Roman.

None of your fucking business, Johnny says. How's that?

You would do well to keep an eye on her, Roman says. With this man around.

He starts to laugh in a low, dry way and I slip the gun from my waist, turn and jam it up his right nostril and the laughter goes on, his whole face distorted with this mad glee.

Down along the rim of the parkway, the tidal flats crammed with refuse, we pick our way between the truck tires and animal bones and broken bottles upturned in the mud like jagged flowers. Roman doesn't struggle. When I cuff his wrists I can see his eyes brimming with tears in the moonlight. All his deceptions have brought him to the edge of this stinking estuary, this particular moonlight. The cool scent of salt water in the breeze.

In the end, we had to flee Warsaw by way of the sewers. On a fathomless slow-moving Nile of shit we made our getaway. You might expect some altered character to the waste of a populace starving, terrorized, insentient with worry, futureless.

Bowels clenched with dread, inert, sustained on nothing very much, down to vermin, shoe leather, sawdust, could hardly be expected to metabolize in the customary way. Yet life at the level of bestial necessity seemed to go on in much the same way, if anything more fulsome in keeping with the animal savagery taking place up above.

This is what I remember of those days. We stop at the water's edge, Cousin Johnny restless. Roman who had come all this way, across an ocean by way of a river of shit, only to receive that same bullet roving now twenty years. Let it go. You too might hesitate. Then I see a pair of jade-colored eyes with that sadness to their cast that recalls Monika for a moment. That kind of soft sadness in her looks to make the bearer believable in all things. And how she knew this. How it made her so effective in her deceptions.

She died weeping, he says. Pleading for them to take you instead. Since you seem determined to make an end of things, there ought to be no illusions between us any longer.

I have none. Never have.

There is something else.

He is telling tales now, the beloved rat standards and ancient heartless singsong of the traitor. He tells me it was for my protection. He tells me it was for my own good. It is always somehow for the good of the dead when the living are made to explain their crimes. He asks me to remember. He says do not forget about your beautiful Monika. She possessed secrets of her own.

This I should believe, I ask. A man two minutes from death?

And were you so pure, he says, near tears. Were you so good and holy?

The end is already here, my friend. This is no time for

excavations. Tell me something true.

I tried to save you, my friend. Monika, my friend. She was the one. You must have asked yourself why she stayed behind. You must have wondered about the lives she carried in her. She would not have made it out of Warsaw. She was being watched at all times. Which means you were too. You must have known.

I know nothing. I remember nothing, I say. Only a name.

You must understand, he said. She was my wife. I loved her. More than you can know.

I would have liked to know if he was being truthful or if it was only a ruse to prolong his life by way of my confusion. The difficulty in this arose from that sort of crazed, breathless smile he gave me as he said it and the bullet I placed as close to the center of that smile as I could manage in the darkness.

I cannot see the blood against the black water. His open eyes gather the moonlight in and I would swear I saw cloud shadows pass across their dazzled whiteness. He moves gently away over the little lapping swells coming up the sea channel, those last futile gestures of some distant oceanic furor coming to rest at last broken on this unknown shore.

Photo Credit: [JV@NYC](#)

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## New Poetry by Maurice Decaul



# U S Grant on the Disbanding of the Iraqi Army

I heard thunder in the mountains  
witnessed soft amber lightening in the clouds  
saw in the saplings, & yearling whitetail, promise.

When I reached out to take Lee's hand  
to shake, I noticed also, the newness of his uniform  
recognized that my own had been caked by  
mud & dirt from my ride, & knew then  
those questions which had kept me awake  
the awful headaches which  
overtook me, were for naught.

We had achieved our grand strategy  
while in Richmond, the opponent was mired in tactics.

Magnanimity & benevolence being  
my best & softest weapons  
I applied them aggressively & fed  
those desperate men, twenty-five-thousand  
meals. I pardoned them & let them keep  
hold of their horses therefore denying  
them any excuse to develop into a resistance.

This I did in prudence  
not wanting to ask the great General to surrender  
instead providing him a means  
to retire his army from the battlefield, with dignity.

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## Blue Ridges

Virginia moon, like a wet breast of an old lover

firm like an unripe doughnut peach, has been playing  
hide & come find me with clouds & shadows.  
On the night highway, road signs like  
men in robes, guard rails like teeth or head stones  
deer with their headlights look, stand poised  
& ready for martyrdom.  
Rain clouds blacken the sky; after it rains, Sairan  
give the mountains their name. A blue heron lifts its wings.  
Southern faces carry confederate residue  
like a disaster or a nude woman, I stare.  
When is a plantation no longer a plantation?  
On the lake shore, with nutria, turtles, brown recluse  
& copperheads, I know, I know these waters.  
The small voice in my head says leap  
it says, these waters will mask your smell.  
How will I live here, in the south?  
When my belly warns me, be home by dark.

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## Charlottesville

A woman sits next to me on the bus  
I have nothing to say so I look out the window  
& I think, if this was a generation ago  
& I chose to ignore or respond to this lady's  
entreaties, I might've become like strange fruit  
ripening in a southern summer.

I want to throw up.

A brochure reminds those of us unfamiliar  
in its quaint, elegant way, that “you” are now  
in the rural south where respect & gentility...

I hope this woman doesn't expect a toothy smile  
or a chortle, or that I will step off the sidewalk  
or keep on listening to her go on & on.

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## **Aleluya**

Flocks of birds, explode like atoms;  
cottontails, in coyote scat.

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## **Climate**

In the market, we look past each other  
even as we both reach for strawberries  
Excuse, me.  
, excuse me.

\*

I have a habit of biting my nails.  
I fear being bitten by water moccasins.  
I dread country roads during new moons.

Last night, I mistook, the whitetail, for spirits.

\*

During afternoon rumbling  
wind shouting through fractures in stone  
like an invocation from the dead  
for hemlocks to sacrifice their branches.

\*

Slaves' tears fall from heaven, floods  
our plantation, loosens clay, rounds out pebbles.

**Photo Credit: Matthew Brady**