

Interview with Jay Baron Nicorvo



Jay Baron Nicorvo's novel, *The Standard Grand* (St. Martin's Press), was picked for IndieBound's Indie Next List, *Library Journal's* Spring 2017 Debut Novels Great First Acts, and named

“New and Noteworthy” by *Poets & Writers*. He’s published a poetry collection, *Deadbeat* (Four Way), and his nonfiction can be found in *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Believer*. You can find out more about Jay at www.nicorvo.net.

Interviewer:

We must first start with the sentences.

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

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

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

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

Nicorvo:

Thanks, and I couldn't agree more with you and Mr. Johnson. I've got zero patience for shoddy craftsmanship. The neat masonry of reading in English, left to right, row after row, is a bit like brickwork. And writing is little more than masonry. Stacking, unstacking, restacking. If the basic building block is the word, than the syllable – where we're able to isolate the music, the meter, of each word – is my mortar. Sounds of words reverberating off one another, that holds my sentences together. The syntactical choices I make are often musical. If a word doesn't sound right, even if it has the right meaning, it's got to go.

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

Interviewer:

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

and the reader is often rewarded with poignant paragraphs like the following:

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

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

Nicorvo:

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

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

burnout. *The Sympathizer* came from an academic.

The late Tom Hayden is a bit of an easy target, a peacenik Freedom Rider and the second of Jane Fonda's three husbands, but there's a [quote of his I think about a lot](#): "If you conduct a war, you shouldn't be in charge of narrating it." I take this to mean that those who conduct our wars should be doing the narrating, but not *all* of the narrating, and I don't believe anyone should be in charge of who gets to tell a story. We've got no shortage of soldier writers. Oddly enough, though, they're mostly dudes in my demographic: white working-class. I say oddly. One of the most beautiful things about the American military is how the institution takes in all kinds – though it likes the poor kind best – and puts them on firm but equal footing. I can't think of a more meritocratic American institution – for men, at least, though the women are securing their rightful place – and in my mind that makes it ideally American (even if the real America is about how best to subtly tip the scales in your favor).

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

contagious. Once I can overcome my anxiety – which is not the same as having no anxiety – then I can tell you the story of my trauma. In my experience, that’s one of the hardest things a person can learn to do, never mind do well.

Interviewer:

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

Nicorvo:

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

Maybe because I grew up poor – sometimes on welfare, sometimes

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

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

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

Interviewer:

A lengthy author’s note in the back of *The Standard Grand* lists a wide variety of source material. Your epigraph includes a quote from a Josh Ritter, a contemporary country

singer. You have told me that particular television shows like *Rectify* inspired moments in *The Standard Grand*. Not all artists are comfortable acknowledging the collaborative nature of an artistic project. Some would resist lumping different mediums together into fiction. Obviously, you have no anxiety of influence. How did you come to this expansive (and refreshing!) view of the art of the novel?

Nicorvo:

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

New Poetry by J. Scott Price



Captain Who?

That gut-black October night, a security patrol set out:
a platoon of Afghans
and two of us. They,
cloaked in toughness; we,
in mountains of gear, humped

an unseen base plate of irony
that chuckled, unheard.

Since the first tribes found common ground
with naming a common foe
and Allies first align side-by-side,
the dog sniff test begins— the unuttered,
unmetered tango that discretely discerns
the order on the Totem of Men.

Let's see what they can do, the closemouthed metronome
for the mission first cadence thrummed on the drums-of-tough.
Respect doled only
to those standing
when the pounding is complete.

Our security objective below, the key terrain far too far
above,

we must sweep the elevated ridgeline for threats.

Afghan comrades lead us up

and up

and up

that mountain until we

could take no more. Wheezing
far from the top, we stop, defeated,
conceding victory in this unavowed war.

They smirked in the dark, unseen. We, it seemed,
were merely piles of panted breath,
exhaling vanquished pride.

At this critical point of concession, something suspicious up
ahead in the dark.

Few mutual words to discern the threat, only frantic mimicry
of Charades-Gone-Bad to help:
but we all agree,
my NODs are needed now.

Leaning forward to green-light detect, I find no threat. But
with strained abdominals abused
and glutes pulling up the rear too loose
we are all ambushed by the unexpected—
a jarring, yet-almost-polite, puny
poof.

Not a valley rumbling show of force that loosens all inside

but a dry, mundane-almost-nothingness
that takes the Afghans by surprise.

The Lion of Ghazni
they dubbed one of my friends
in awe of his courage and his heart,
and I secured my place on their Totem
as the anointed
Captain Fart.

B Hut

“Brand Vision: Making the best air conditioner in the world.

Brand Mission: Making life better.”

Chigo Air Conditioning Co., LTD

Chigo heats, Chigo cools
with labored breath that soothes
ambient air despite never taming
the beastly space inside the plywood shell

where 12 guys retreat from the daily 15 hour duties
that composes their yearlong song with

just one more mundane or horrifying measure.

There are melodies of boredom and harmonies of fear
and it serenades to unrestful-sleep the

12 guys crammed into their plywood shell,
smaller than a suburbanite's play room.

There's plenty of opportunity to partake
in olfactory unease, and plenty of opportunity
to never really be at ease.

Stacked high and hard against the walls, poncho liner
privacy offers only illusions of solitude
and enough space to retreat into that illusion
just to be somewhere else during sleep.

Steadfast Chigo, their toolbox-sized comrade
high on the wall remains unnoticed
unless deemed malingering.

Chigo will usually be abandoned ,
unthought-of when the song is done.

But one fated Chigo has a terminal task to perform,

never envisioned during engineering,
nor tested during production, for
aimed with a rock and Allah's will,
released with a wind up clock,
a discarded Soviet rocket rains
through plywood
and Chigo braces, unmoved
to shear off a detonator

that would have ended the song
in cacophony instead of a story that begins,
"You ain't gonna believe this shit..."

New Fiction: Excerpt from Jay Baron Nicorvo's The Standard Grand

"A bracingly original writer and a joy to read."

—DENNIS LEHANE

THE
Standard
GRAND

JAY BARON NICORVO

The veterans of the Standard had been back from their wars for some time, trying to figure out how to live lives in the face of newfound civilian freedoms. No one barking orders but their girlfriends, wives, and mothers. Fuck them. The vets could do anything they wanted anytime—they were Americans in America—though what they wanted wasn't what they needed.

They had good cause to bolt home and wind up straggling in the streets of New York City, where they couldn't qualify for hud/vash benefits, having exhausted the good graces of the dom program, unable to uncover any information on Project Torch, given the run around by the administrators of Operation Home. They had multiple DUIs, student loans for what the GI Bill 2.0 didn't cover to attend the University of Phoenix, credit cards with 20 percent interest rates. They were drug addicts, closeted queers, amputees, alcoholics. They were Born Again. They were Black Muslim. They were violent offenders and ethical vegetarians. They'd done short time in county lockups, charged with violating restraining orders, lewd and lascivious conduct, six counts of animal cruelty for selling a litter of kittens with pierced ears over the internet. To say they all expressed both the loss of physical integrity and a response to an event that involved terror and helplessness—the hurting-for-certain hallmarks of PTSD—would've been too easy. The harder truth was that they were men unmanned. More than the sum of the bullet points in the revised *DSM-5*, they were the very reasons for some of the revisions. They were outliers. They hadn't fallen through cracks. The ground opened up and they dove in face first—*hooah!* But they could only live like beasts for so long, so they'd gone with Milt, who gave order to their days, even if his orders were crazy.

The vets mustered at the center of the Alpine village. Over their secondhand camos bought in bulk from Liberty Military PX, they wore full alpaca pelts fastened with lengths of catgut. The pelts, worn casually, were their uniforms, part of Milt's psyop campaign to ward off trespassers while keeping

alive the legend of the Catskills Sasquatch.

They called their hides ghillie suits, except for Stotts-Dupree, who called his a yowie, which was how they referred to them at Camp Robinson, Army National Guard Sniper School, where Stotts-Dupree flunked out after contracting a bad case of the yips.

Most of the vets were accustomed to the notion that in uniform they looked like Germanic shepherds being retributively raped from behind by a herd of lanky sheep. Come winter, they'd again be grateful for the warmth the pelts provided. But here it was, end of a scalding, droughty summer, and they were in furs. They were uncomfortable and irritable.

Their routine had been busted. They hadn't eaten lunch. Midday Simon Says—part military drill, part camaraderie builder—had been canceled, the daily briefing pushed back to evening. All so Milt could make one of his weekly milk runs.

Scratching their beards of varying lengths, the Standard vets stood at a remove from the old fountain pool they used to contain their cook fire. The two Marines of the company climbed in, kicked over the sewer grate that served as a grill, and stomped out the coals. Smoke tumbled up around them. They sought to settle a grudge and, despite the disruption, the entire company was glad for a diversion from their standing orders—split wood; set snares; see to the meat rabbits, chickens, and alpaca; gather their droppings to age, mash up, and water down to fertilize the three-acre garden after they tilled; weed endlessly, harvest, seed the fall crops, on and on. Ready for winter was a nine-month means they got a break from only while trying to survive its end. This unrelenting work distracted them from their real-world guilt over the families they'd abandoned, and from the certain knowledge that these families were, to a one, easier off for their absences.

For most of them, the Standard was their last potshot at a decent life. Once they left, they'd be on their own, and most of them wouldn't make it alone.

Like Luce, who will leave in the middle of a biblical plague of bats to bum his way out to Greenport toward the end of the North Fork of Long Island. There, he begs his ex-wife, on a Tuesday, on his knees, on her sunken front stoop, to let him in, and when she does, as soon as the door closes behind them, he's back to begging her, back on his knees. He wants to get her off with his stump. She can't believe it, and against her bad judgment, she undresses and lets him. Despite her reservations and the ugly, unsanitary look of the thing, she appreciates it, enjoys it even, the bizarre behavioral therapy. Trying to turn loss into love. This alone gets them through the first month, but it doesn't erase her suspicions. In month two, she catches him picking up Asian men on Craigslist, using her computer, and she throws him out. He rents a room in Riverhead at the Peconic Inn, next door to a pizza parlor, a long commute to Greenport for a job crewing aboard the Shelter Island ferry. Before work, he buys a fifth of the cheapest vodka at the closest package store. Nipping from the plastic bottle, he walks to the Riverhead train station. Moments after a train passes, he can be seen, on his knees, as if in prayer, resting one cheekbone, then the other, against the tracks. The vibrations jostle, warm, and loosen the mucus in his sinuses, the tracks heated on the iciest days by steel wheels worn to a mirror shine. For a few seconds, his head clears. He can go about his day crossing and re-crossing Peconic Bay.

One blustery winter morning, he rises off the track lightheaded and chases after an unloaded freight train picking up speed. He heaves himself aboard with his good hand, his only hand, and settles into an empty unlocked stock-car, its floor covered in frozen manure. There, he eases into the long, windy ride, sub-zero, kept company by a fifth of Kasser's

Kavkaski, and twenty-four hours later he's found dead, no ID, his one hand rigor stiff and curled through an opening in the steel slats. The responding firemen and medical workers are confronted with the choice of cutting through the steel wall of the cattle car or breaking the poor hobo's wrist to free his body. An EMT tries a forearm massage to loosen up the hand. Nothing. Guy's hard as rebar. After a call to Anacostia Rail Holdings Company, they decide against cutting the cattle car. With a hair dryer, they take turns thawing the wrist and fingers, the freight train outrageously late by the time John Doe lets go.

Disrespecting the Troops

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

Alas, I have made a mistake:

Hey, real quick. For all y'all big ole football players who want to take a knee during the national anthem I just want to say "go ahead." That's right biggun', take that knee. The 1% got it. They will continue to embrace the suck for minimum wage in a country where you can't even begin to understand the various civil liberties that are violated. ...When the day is done and you take off your pads, have your interviews, sign your lucrative cereal box deal, and fly home to your castle, the 1% will clear their weapon, take a cold shower in the hopes of cleaning off their best friends blood and brains that

covered their face and flag. They will eat yet another MRE before laying on a ragged cot only to wake up, put a round in the chamber and walk the streets in the hope of providing just 1/10 of the lifestyle you kneel in protest against.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now, when the day is done and you take off your pads, have your interviews, sign your lucrative cereal box deal, and fly home to your castle, the 1% will clear their weapon, take a cold shower in the hopes of cleaning off their best friends

blood and brains that covered their face and flag. They will eat yet another MRE before laying on a ragged cot only to wake up, put a round in the chamber and walk the streets in the hope of providing just 1/10 of the lifestyle you kneel in protest against.

This is ramping things up significantly. There's not only a cultural-disgust element to this wee jeremiad, but a high emotional pitch, too. And emotion is why the post is being shared among the conservative underbelly of my friends-set, and agreed upon with such relief and gratitude ("THANK YOU!" "I'm so glad someone said it!" "I knew this would speak to YOUR family, X.").

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile, the American public bears witness to a bizarre

lovefest for the American military, predominantly (but not exclusively) from conservatives. This is more than just supporting the troops. This is the first time your ex-boyfriend got suddenly, really weird. It's as if conservatives are channeling some kind of political and cultural fantasy into the notion of military service, using it to justify their beliefs, their prejudices, their vision for an America that not only does not now exist but maybe never has.

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

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

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

Here's one narrated by a disapproving-sounding woman; she's the worst secretary you ever had to wait with in the principal's office. As she addresses her conservative demographic, I can tell this woman would like to spit in my little liberal whore face. The ad scans over a filmstrip of images (alarming explosions, fighter jets, a waving flag, a smiling and very young male soldier with all of innocent Caucasiamerica in his blue eyes) and she warns of alleged liberal attempts to "cut off funding for our active troops, endangering their lives," as if liberals would like to rip the

weapons from their hands, leaving them encircled by slathering Taliban. The camera zeroes in on a triumphant-looking picture of Obama flanked by that estrogen devil herself, Nancy Pelosi on one side, and on the other an almost absurdly-thrilled-looking black politician I don't recognize who has his hands flung upward, fingers pointed in a double V-for-Victory, as if, at last, the domination of white America by minorities is finally complete.

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

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

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

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

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

possible racial biases of some viewers.”

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

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

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

In all seriousness, as a military wife, I have to ask these affronted and obstinate politicians: When do we *not* treat our

military like some kind of giant experiment? Any time we send men and women overseas, every time we commit them to action in Vietnam or Korea or Somalia or Iraq or Afghanistan, every time they're sent to meet with tribal leaders or walk through the streets, or to (in the case of female service members) form FET teams and enter Afghan womens' homes, it is all part of [some big experiment or another](#), all of which are far less predictable, with more immediate and potentially dangerous outcomes, than the possibility (or, "threat" as North & Co. call it) of compassionate social progress.

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

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

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

I can't help but feel that part this fantasy about the

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

*

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

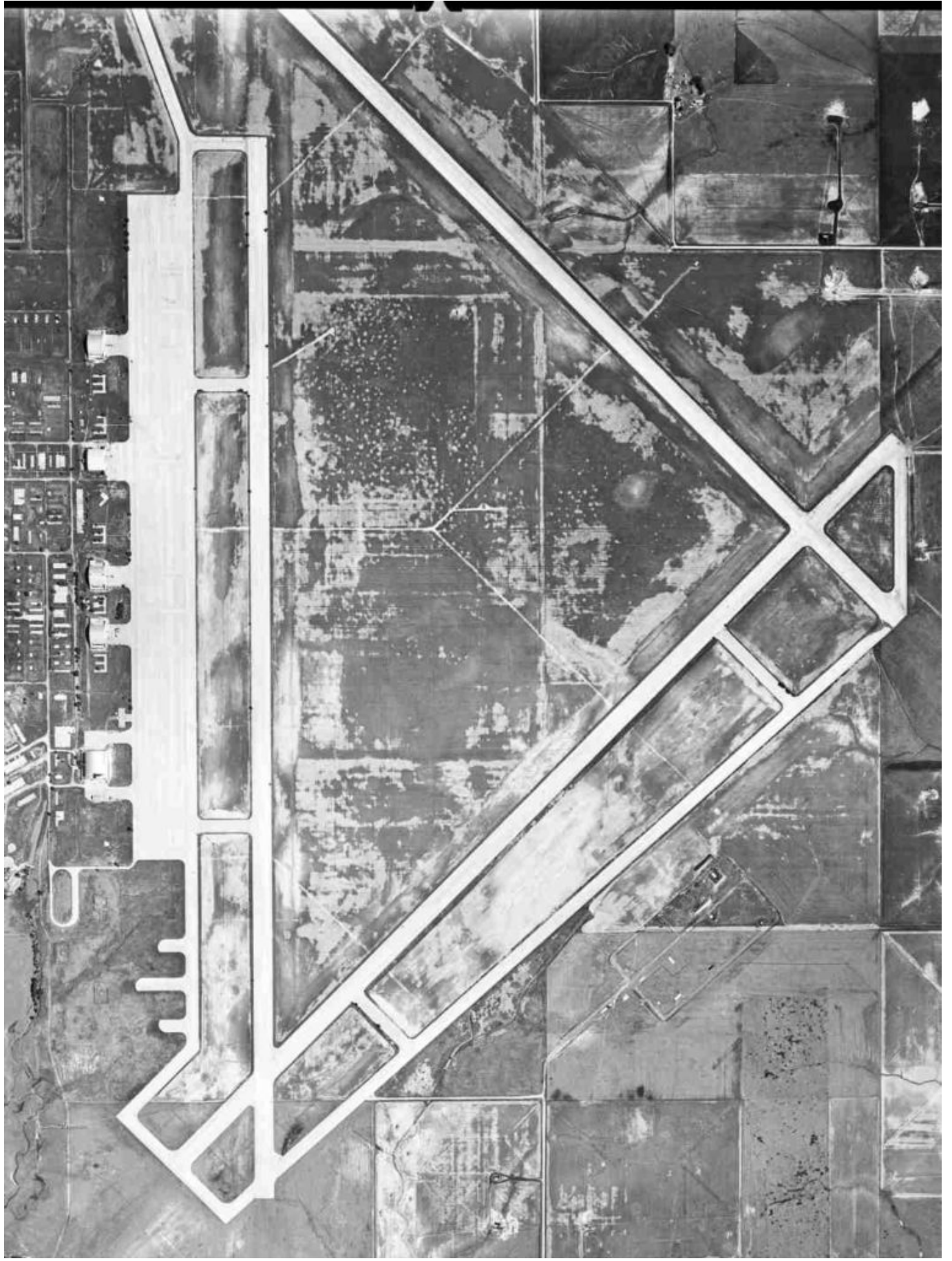
They are black service members who see, time and again, as people of color are beaten or shot by police who get off nearly scot-free. They are women who've served their country and come home to a president who jokes about grabbing 'em by the pussy. They are the many, deeply caring parents of children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

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

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

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New Memoir: Solitaire by Lauren Hough (Part I)



Part I of II

My first time at the closest gay bar to Shaw Air Force Base, the bouncer asked me if I had a membership. I wasn't expecting that question. But South Carolina blue laws only allowed private clubs to serve liquor on Sundays. So every bar in South Carolina called itself a private club. I was expecting to have to show my driver's license. It was my twenty-first birthday. And I didn't want anyone to notice, least of all this bouncer with bad skin and frosted tips that made him look like a youth minister.

I told him I was not a member. "Well, you gotta sign up here. Fill this out." The bouncer handed me a card. Name. Address. Driver's License number.

"I can't fill that out," I said. "I'm military. I can't be on a list at a gay bar." My paranoia wasn't unfounded. This was 1997 and Don't Ask, Don't Tell was the law. I'd heard rumors of witch hunts at other bases. Though so far, it seemed no one suspected me.

There's an oft-repeated maxim about women in the military—you're either a whore a dyke. You hear it first from your recruiter, as a warning. You hear it thereafter as an accusation, sometimes it's meant to be a joke. But even so, if there's a useful side-effect to homophobia, it's that most people who find gays abhorrent, find it rude to assume someone's gay, despite all obvious signs. Which is why any gay person could have told you Ricky Martin was as queer as eight guys fucking nine guys. And yet people were shocked. It's not gaydar. It's the ability to see reality without the constraints of judgment.

Still, I knew I had to be careful. All it took was one person, the wrong person, the wrong grudge, the wrong rumor, and my career was over. The criminal investigation arms of the military would find one gay whose roommate or ex turned him

in. They'd use that one person, his emails, phone calls, confession, to root out as many homosexuals as they could. For the most part, they'd just kick the gays out. But some went to prison for violating the UCMJ, the military code of law. I was determined to keep my secret.

My pen hovered above the line. I hated that I couldn't just write my name without thinking of all the ways this could hurt me. Fear is, above all else, exhausting. And the frustration of my indecision made me want to cry. The bouncer leaned toward me. "Honey, I don't care what you write on the card," he said. His voice sounded like he'd smoked a pack of road flares. "You put a name down there, and when you come in next time, that name will be on this list." He held up a clipboard with a list of names and coughed. "You point to what you wrote. And I put a little check mark by it. I don't give a shit if it's the name your mama gave you." He coughed again. Swallowed something large. "Look babe," he said and pointed to the list. "We got Mary Jane, Trent Reznor, Anita Dick, Cherilyn Sarkisian, Sam Iam, and that's just the obvious ones. You sure as shit ain't the first military we got."

I stood there trying to make up my mind. Trying not to ask if Cherilyn was Cher's real name, afraid he'd laugh at me. Part of me wanted to run back to my car, drive back to base, and forget about gay bars. I'd sat in my car listening to the radio for a good ten minutes just trying to build up the courage to walk in the door. I'd been waiting three months, for my birthday, just to come here.

But even if I gave up now and turned around, it's not like I felt any more at ease on base. On base, at Shaw, I worked in an office building, the headquarters of CENTAF, the part of the Air Force that worries about the Mideast. To say I worked is a lie. I showed up every morning at eight, jiggled the mouse to wake my computer, and read news for an hour or so.

Sometime around ten, Major Coffindaffer would hand me the

half-filled-in crossword from the USA Today he bought on the way to work. He'd switch his radio from the John Boy and Billy show to the right wing AM channel.

The guys in my office loved John Boy and Billy. There was this clip they'd play for anyone who hadn't heard it. My supervisor, a big cornfed looking guy called Sergeant Ewing, played the clip for me my first day—some guy from the radio show, their serious news guy, reading what was supposedly a news story about queers and a gerbil. I got grossed out and laughed, asked which desk was mine. But Ewing blocked my path and said, "no, wait this is the best part." I'll spare you the "best part" (there was a fireball). The guys were all looking at me, waiting for a reaction. I smiled and tried to force a laugh. I wasn't angry. I was just sad. It's easy to hate what you don't understand. But I'd never be able to explain how stupid it was to believe gay men played with gerbils, without the inevitable follow-up, "How do you know?" They're like kids, really, guys in the military. They never get tired of gross-out jokes, trying to make the girl gag, and suspecting anyone who doesn't get the joke of being different.

All day long, I'd listen to Rush Limbaugh and friends debate the President's treasonous blow job, and gay scout leaders, and gays in the military. Major Coffindaffer would mutter about how we should just go ahead and hold public hangings like back in the good ol' days. And I'd fill in the crossword. Sometimes I'd read at my desk, what Major Coffindaffer called "book report books."

I couldn't see myself spending two years in that office. I'd been there two weeks when I heard this guy who worked in my building complaining one day at the smoke pit. He'd received orders for a four-month stint in Saudi. His wife was pregnant. They didn't have a car. I told him I'd go for him if he could get permission to switch.

He tried to argue with me. I didn't blame him. I can relate to

a suspicion of altruism. But I wasn't motivated by altruism. He said, "You can't drink there. Seriously. Not even beer."

"I'm twenty. If I keep drinking here, I'm gonna get caught. And I don't need an Article 15."

"There's nothing to do."

"There's nothing to do here."

"You'll really do it? I mean, if I go ask my sergeant and then he asks you, you won't

change your mind?"

"I'm totally serious, man. What's your job? I mean, what do you do in Saudi?"

"I'm a one-charlie-three. Same as you." Meaning we'd both been trained to answer phones and follow checklists in a command post—the nucleus of a military base. As there's only one command post on each base, the rest of the command post techs get assigned to command units like CENTAF, where we were, to fill desks at operation centers—larger command posts. We were basically phone operators with really high security clearances.

He said, "But there, we only do the briefing. You just need the clearance to be in the Op Center. We take the sortie numbers and build the slide for the daily briefing."

"I can probably figure out a power point slide. I don't have to stand out on the runway and count planes as they take off for sorties do I?"

"Shit. You don't even have to make the slide. We just switch the numbers out every day. And then you hang out in case the numbers change. It's boring as fuck. You'll really go to Saudi?"

"I'll go anywhere that isn't Shaw. I'm bored out of my skull here. Can't be worse." The truth was, I was itching to leave the country. No one joins the Air Force because they're dying to see more of South Carolina. I wanted to travel, even if that meant Saudi Arabia. But more than that, I needed a place like Saudi to keep me out of trouble. My problem wasn't the drinking. Though, had I been caught, the penalty would've ruined my career. I was gay and didn't know what to do about it. I needed time. It's not that I'd put much thought into going to Saudi. But, determined to avoid the problem I couldn't solve, I saw four months in Saudi as the perfect way to buy time.

We shook on it. And I went to Saudi. I left him my car keys while I was gone. I preferred Saudi Arabia to Shaw. I preferred being locked on a base that we only got to leave twice, and only in full-body abayas with the hijab. At least in Saudi, I'd had something to do. And because we were all locked on base, I'd had something of a social life. I'd go to the base bar where they served near-beer and play cards with all the others who had nothing better to do.

When I got back from Saudi, nothing had changed. I was still gay and still in the military. Still stationed in South Carolina. Still sitting next to guys who I was sure, any day, would look at me and recognize what they hated.

This fear never left my mind, but day-to-day, the good thing about the little office where I worked was that the officers like Coffindaffer mostly ignored me. The NCOs, like Sergeant Ewing, were busy sending out resumes to government contractors where they'd double their pay once their enlistments were up. So that Friday, no one knew or cared that it was my birthday. No one had to know I was going to check out a gay bar.

Now I was standing outside the bar and worse, people were

noticing me. I'd told myself *just walk in, don't be obvious, get a drink, look around. Then you can go home.* I wondered if I'd worn the right clothes. I could see inside, just over the bouncer's head. Gays. And all I knew was I was gay and these were supposed to be my people, my community.

Someone came up behind me, and asked what was going on. I turned around. He was about my age. Just a kid. Military haircut, the unmistakable ill-advised mustache that, following military regulation, always rests one shaving mishap away from Hitler-lip. He lived in the same dorms I did. Not my floor or I'd know his name. But I'd seen him in the laundry room. I felt better seeing him, until I realized this meant I might see others from the base. They might see me. I hadn't considered this. I'd driven thirty miles to have a drink where no one would see me. I told him I didn't want to put my name on a list.

"Why? I'm on the list," he said. The bouncer handed him the clipboard. "Right here, Truvy Jones."

"Steel Magnolias," I said. He clapped like I'd learned to roll over. And I realized then he had just as much to lose as I did. But he didn't seem at all scared. I put down Ouiser Boudroux on the card, filled out the address for the local carpet company with the annoying radio jingle, and Papa John's phone number on the line for driver's license.

I sat at the bar waiting for the bartender to finish wrestling with the little airplane bottle of Jack—another oddity of South Carolina's liquor laws. And I watched the room through the mirror behind the glasses. Truvy was nowhere to be seen. I'd hoped he'd come get a drink. We'd talk about Steel Magnolias. He'd be impressed with my vast knowledge of Dolly Parton trivia. We'd bond and maybe become friends. I wouldn't feel so obvious sitting there alone.

Seemed like everyone at the bar knew everyone else. Everyone

was divided into factions. The younger lesbians owned the pool table; the older lesbians occupied the tables outside. As I walked by, they all stared like I'd walked into their private house party and changed the music. A few older gay men took turns on the poker machines. The younger gay boys held the dance floor. I didn't belong here. That I was used to the feeling didn't make it any more comfortable.

I found a payphone in the alcove for the bathroom. I dug my calling card out of my wallet, hoped I had minutes left on it. And I called my brother, Mikey. He answered. "Where are you?" he asked. "Is that Prince?"

"Yeah. I'm in a gay bar. I don't think the lesbians are in charge of the music," I said.

"That's a relief. But still, gross," he said. "Not gross that you're in a gay bar. Obviously."

"Obviously. There's a mirror ball over the dance floor. Your bedroom is bigger than the dance floor."

"Jesus. You spent a year in San Fran."

Right out of basic training, I spent a year in Monterey, two hours south of San Francisco. And I'd had a fake ID. But I was too scared to drive to San Francisco on weekends and hang out in the Castro. Of course, if I'd known I'd be sent to South Carolina, I might've worked a little harder at accelerating my coming out.

"Monterey isn't San Fran," I corrected him.

"Okay. But you're still dumb. What's a gay bar like in South Carolina? Are you counting mullets? Oh, dude, you should find the butchest woman there and bring her home for Thanksgiving," he said. Then added, "Gabe wouldn't let you in the house." I'm sure he was picturing the scene. But even alone, Gabe wouldn't let me into the house if it were burning.

"I don't think I'm coming home," I said. And it occurred to me I wasn't sure when I'd see my brother since I was no longer welcome there. He was nineteen but still living at home. I thought about buying him a ticket to come visit. "Oh, there are three. And that's not counting the almost mullets. I think they want to fight me," I said.

"If you knew karate, you'd probably live," he said. "I was thinking it would be cool to have a gay brother. He'd run off to New York and starve a couple years. But then I'd get to move into his shitty studio and paint. And he'd introduce me to all the rich guys who'd buy my paintings 'cause I'd be the hot brother of a gay guy."

A skinny kid with what I thought was a bad cold because I'd never been around a coke problem came out of the men's room. I flattened myself against the wall so he could pass. But he just stood there across from me and sniffled and stared. You could've fit three of him into his jeans.

"Sorry," I said. "I know this is tough on you." This was not tough on him. I'd officially sealed my brother's role as favorite child by being gay. He'd recently been caught smoking pot. Gabe, the stepfather most likely to call the cops on his stepchildren, laughed about it.

"You should be. I can't hear you though. I'm gonna get off the phone. Gabe's coming home soon." The skinny kid was staring now. Assuming he wanted the phone, I held up a finger to show I'd be done in a minute. But he shook his head and sat down on the wet tile floor. I turned around.

"Are you not allowed to talk to me?" I asked. "Last time I called to talk to Mom, he just hung up on me."

"No, but he thinks this is something you're doing to him. Like, on purpose to piss him off. It's just weird now. I think they're getting a divorce," he said.

“Well, fingers crossed.” I didn’t believe my mother would ever leave Gabe.

“Shit. Happy birthday,” he said. “I’m gonna send you a book. I’m almost done with it.” I wasn’t offended he’d forgotten. He forgets his own. But the reminder didn’t help my mood.

Maybe it was weird to call my brother from a payphone in my first gay bar. But I’d always had him with me in these situations, when I didn’t belong, when everyone else knew each other, knew the rules, and the language, the dress code, knew who and what to avoid.

My brother and I grew up overseas, in one of those cults that sprang up in the late sixties. Ever since we came back to the States, after we left the cult, I’d tried to feel like an American, like I belonged. Funny thing is, I felt more American in the cult than I ever did out of it. Back in the cult, being American was part of my identity. I had what the other kids told me was an American accent. I had an American passport. My grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins lived in America. My parents were American. And so, from the time we landed back in Texas when I was fifteen, desperate for any identity, I tried to be what I thought was American, the way I understood it, which was not at all. I said the pledge of allegiance in school. I listened to country music. I ate junk food and drank more soda and milk than water. I smoked Marlboros. I tried to love football and pretend I found soccer painfully boring. I joined the military and took an oath to defend the constitution. I actually read the constitution. I hung an American flag on my wall. I considered buying a gun. I was like an inept spy pretending to be American based on movies I’d watched and books I read. None of it worked. I felt nothing. And I couldn’t understand what I was supposed to feel.

I walked back to the bar but couldn’t get the bartender’s attention. So I drove home alone. When I was a kid, I never

thought I'd live to be twenty-one. The Antichrist was supposed to show up around the time I turned sixteen. Even if I survived the wars and the persecution of Christians, the world would end soon afterwards. By the time I realized all that was a lie, I didn't have much time to plan a future. The Air Force recruiter was very helpful with that.

There's this day in Air Force basic training where they try to make you feel like you're really in the military. They keep you up most of the night before working in the kitchen. At dawn, you march a few miles carrying your duffle bag, singing jodies to keep cadence. You shoot the M16 for a couple hours. You sit in the dirt and pick through MREs for lunch. Airman Eudy who watched all the right movies tells everyone else to avoid the Lucky Charms—they're bad luck. And because you've never eaten an MRE, you enjoy the plastic food. Then they march you back, into an auditorium.

You file in without speaking because you've been in basic training six weeks now, and no one has to tell you not to speak. The lights go out and there, on the stage, a single spotlight pops on to show a guy, one of the instructors, tied to a chair. The bad guy enters, stage right. You know he's the bad guy because he's wearing a towel on his head. The bad guy slaps the good airman around a little. But the good airman won't give up the mission plan. Just name, rank, serial number—which is really your social security number, but I didn't write his down. The bad guy pulls a gun. Shoots the airman dead. And the lights go out. Then, I shit you not, you hear Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" kick on.

At that point, I looked around. Everyone was crying, shouting the words. Some of the kids fell back on their evangelical upbringings and waved their hands in the air to the music. I knew I was supposed to feel something. And I did. I felt revulsion. Because I'd been through this before. All of it.

The sleep-deprivation, the fun outdoors preparing for war, the play-acting interrogation by the bad guys, and the singing. Always the singing.

When I got back to the base, I sat on the hood of my car facing the highway. Just past the highway stood the fence surrounding the base, and just past that, the runway. The runway lights never went out, but no one was flying tonight. I leaned back against my windshield to see the sky. I'd always searched the sky when I felt alone. I'd look for the constellations my mom taught us when we were little. I don't remember the stories she told about Cassiopeia or Andromeda. I only remember how to find them. But here, in the South Carolina lowlands, there were no stars. The damp air was too thick and glowed a sickly yellow from the lights on the runway and the sodium lights on the highway. I could see the moon, but barely.