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

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

Aristides' trainer, Ansel Williamson, had been born a slave in rural Virginia. Purchased by a wealthy horse breeder, he learned the art and science of groomsmanship, and was eventually hired by J.P. McGrath, of the famed green-and-orange silks, who'd been born dirt-poor but, after winning $105,000 in a single night in a New York gambling house, started a Thoroughbred farm that went on to become one of the most famous of its time.

1887. Eadweard Muybridge. Wellcome Gallery, London.

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

Sport of Kings.

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

Young Henry Forge turns the family's tobacco farm into a Thoroughbred empire where the green grass is "the color of money." His frustrated cosmopolitan wife, Judith, leaves him before too long and, in a deeply un-maternal move, also leaves their sole child, Henrietta, for him to raise. (One can't help but wonder if Henry and his daughter, or at least their naming scheme, are a nod to legendary horse trainer Leo O'Brien and his daughter, Leona; or if, given Morgan's divinity school background and this father-daughter pair's ruthless streak, it's more of a Herod/Herodias sort of thing.) Henrietta is bright, offbeat, and enthusiastic in youth, qualities that become warped into a strange, intellectual coldness by her father's intense, even immoral, over-involvement in her life. When Henrietta blurts a racial slur at school and is penalized, her father, irate, decides to homeschool her on a strange curriculum of evolutionary biology, manifest destiny, and horsemanship.

Henry Forge is, to put it mildly, obsessed with genetics. He's especially intrigued by the strategy of linebreeding: the idea

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

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

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

But Marie's chronic health problems, revealed to be lupus, are sinking the household. As with Erica Garner—the daughter of Eric Garner who was killed by police violence in 2014 for selling cigarettes without tax stamps, herself dead at 27 from a heart attack after childbirth—a legacy of racism and poverty

live in Marie's body, the "gendered necropolitics" of anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence, the sequelae. "Make me an animal," Marie begs, in a heartbreaking prayer, "so I won't know anything. Make me a man, so I won't give a damn about anyone."

Her son Allmon does give a damn, but he is orphaned too young to know what to do with his anger and his aching heart. He is led into crime by older boys on the street; tried as an adult for possession of narcotics, an illegal firearm and a stolen car, he is sentenced to seven years, some of which is described in horrifying detail as he learns to defend himself.

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

—

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

> *Anyone who lives with poor health or chronic pain, or who has endured poverty—real poverty—knows what it is to live with lack and a resulting fear so incessant that it becomes thoroughly normalized, invisible in its ubiquity. If you're*

> *lucky enough to have that fear begin to ease, which it has for me only in the past year, it's an odd experience. A stranglehold eases off your entire body.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

—

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

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

—

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

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

was told he could not enter through the front door.

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

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

THE WORDS ON THE INTERNET SAID MICHAEL HERR HAS DIED

Where were you when Michael Herr died in 2016? What were you doing? Did you listen to the opening voiceover of *Apocalypse Now*? Martin Sheen's main character said "all I could think of was getting back into the jungle. I wanted a mission and for my sins they gave me one." Did you watch Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* at the helicopter scene when Matthew Modine's Joker asks the doorgunner "How can you shoot women and children?" "Easy," the gunner replies, "you don't lead 'em so much." Or did you go right to the original source, a first edition of Herr's *Dispatches* from the bookshelf and flip to the passage when Herr overheard a bunch of infantrymen watching a helicopter full of journalists fly off an LZ, leaving Herr behind –"one rifleman turning to another, and

giving us all his hard, cold wish: ‘Those fucking guys,’ he’d said. ‘I hope they die.’”

I did none of those things. I was aware of them all, though, when my internet surfing tripped up against the news that Michael Herr had died. The journalist that I, like all my peers who once reported from Iraq, Afghanistan, Panama, Yemen and all the other places, wished we could have been.

It had been a long time since Herr had written anything, the last a short book about his dead friend Stanley Kubrick. The ultimate sin for any writer is silence, and by my reckoning Herr had chosen silence since 2001—an interview in a documentary “First Kill,” and nothing since. The author of *Dispatches*, the book that is the accepted highest standard for embedded reporting, had nothing to say about 15 years of war in the Middle East and South America in which journalists of all size and stripe broke their backs to emulate his style, approach, and see-it-all mindset. He had nothing to say about any of it— no comment on Sebastian Junger’s calling his own book *War*, as though it could somehow be definitive; no television commentary on Fox News or PBS, no taking a stand one way or the other; Herr neither boasted nor complained when reporters and freelancers, present company included, aped his surrealistic style in ways much more akin to plagiarism than homage.

I emulated him from my first moment in Iraq as a reporter in 2007. I got off a helicopter at the LZ at Forward Operating Base Summerall and a young captain offered to take my bags. “I packed them,” I told him, “I’ll hump them.” I learned that lesson from Herr, who wrote “I never let the grunts dig my holes or carry my gear.” And I thought of Herr when I first introduced myself to the soldiers at the Bayji Joint Security Station, where I arrived a month after a truck bomb nearly destroyed the place. The soldiers would look at me with either a scowl or a strange grin. Like Herr said, “It was no place where I’d have to tell anyone not to call me ‘Sir.’”

When I got back, I couldn't wait to talk about it, sending photos and stories here, there, everywhere, hustling up any publication I could. That was 2007.

Goodbye to all that.

Now, it's been eight years since my last time in Iraq. I think about it every day. I wonder how my life would have played out, if I hadn't gone? Would I have been one of the ignorant yahoos yelling at TV, certain that my opinion was the right one?

Maybe Herr's silence was a form of discipline. If he realized he had nothing left to say, maybe it makes sense. Otherwise it was a sin, for bottling up his wisdom and pulling a Salinger while the world crashed down around him. Call it coping, choosing peace and quiet over the endless cacophony that's only gotten worse—why demean oneself in such a world? Would his opinion or observation have carried any extra weight because of a book he wrote in 1977? Chances are much better that in raising his voice, he would have only made another more target for revisionist history. What did he make up? Is *Dispatches* really nonfiction? Composite characters? Is he a fabulist? Did he even *go* to Vietnam?

Iraq and Afghanistan were chockfull of Pentagon lies, media misperceptions, and first-person "so there I was" memories. What would one more blowhard have added to the mix?

Instead, Herr retreated into the silence—not even mystery, since there was no Salinger-esque clamor for his reemergence. Surely, we was sought out now and then, but those entreaties didn't reach the public (at least as far as a Google search can find).

Three movies, three books; that was his output, more or less. And hardly full credit for all of them – he wrote voiceovers

for *Apocalypse Now* and *The Rainmaker,* and co-wrote the screenplay for *Full Metal Jacket*. Most of *Full Metal Jacket's* dialogue came directly from Gustav Hasford's underrated *The Short Timers*. R. Lee Ermey took a lot of credit for improvising the drill sergeant's dialogue—but plenty of his profane monologues are right from the book; anyway, Hasford died in 1993, so he's not around to correct anybody.

And Hasford's no saint. I own his personal copy of *Dispatches*, annotated with quite a few short references, including a few times where Hasford wrote in pencil: "Problem. Did I steal this?" next to scenes that appear suspiciously like moments from *Dispatches*. Nothing major: a scarf on a character, a description of a spooky night. Maybe the word "spooky" itself, which both Hasford and Herr loved and used in equal measure.

Herr co-wrote the screenplay for Full Metal Jacket with Stanley Kubrick, but Kubrick didn't have the balls to go for Hasford's original vision—in the movie, the drill sergeant is killed by Vincent D'Onofrio's tubby Private Pyle. It's the same in the book—with the vital change that the Gunny knows what's coming, knows Pyle has lost his marbles and is about to shoot him dead—and the Gunny is proud of him. He created a killer and he knows it.

The second change is even starker. In the movie, a sniper kills Joker's friend Cowboy, and later, Joker kills the female sniper.

In the book, the sniper is never seen, picking off members of Cowboy's squad one-by-one until finally Cowboy is in the sniper's sights, shot in the legs so he can't move. The sniper intends to draw each desperate man in the squad out from cover as they try to rescue their wounded.

Joker knows this, so Joker shoots Cowboy, who knows it's coming and whose last words are "I never liked you, Joker. I never thought you were very funny."

In 1987, it’s unlikely a movie audience would have accepted a conclusion where one American soldier mercy-kills another. A lot had changed since 1979’s *Apocalypse Now*, which ended with Martin Sheen’s Willard decapitating Marlon Brando’s Colonel Kurtz.

The modern version would probably feature Navy SEAL Team Six swooping in at the last minute, rescuing Cowboy and Joker as Mark Wahlberg laid down suppressing fire and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson karate-chopped whatever faceless Muslim jihadist villain presented a threat. He would probably choke a female Muslim terrorist to death with her own *hijab* headdress — saying “That’s a wrap, *bitch*.”

It makes sense that Michael Herr remained silent, given our current culture. He’d lived long enough to see Vietnam demystified and reconstructed—turned into “do we get win this time?” foolishness matched with Vietnam’s real-life economic boom. Vietnamese tourist posters once used the English slogan “A Country, Not a War.” By 2017, it’s doubtful that clarification is even necessary.

Herr became a devout Buddhist, meditating at his home in upstate New York. It certainly sounds like a man at peace with himself, who was coping just fine with everything he’d seen and done.

This generation eof soldiers, journalists, and contractors has just started reckoning with these issues. As a coping method, “silence” is certainly the last choice many of us have made. Dignity, modesty, humility—all surrendered just like the old Iraqi firebases were lost to ISIS, overrun while we weren’t even looking. Who can blame us? This merry-go-round has too many brass rings hanging just within reach: book deals, screenplays, talking slots on news programs and bytes of space in internet columns, essays in collections that might be read, might not. So much to say, and too many years to go before Herr’s perspective is finally attained.

What it comes down too, maybe, is trying to add to the obituary – to overcoming that sense of dismay when one realizes its first paragraph is likely written. Herr got there – he knew what the first paragraph would basically say: "Author of this, screenwriter of that; lauded as a visionary journalist who created a new method of war reporting, who turned the businesslike voice of Ernie Pyle inside out, crafting war reporting as a surrealistic nightmare—and yet so entertaining." They didn't say that in so many words, but it would have been honest if they had—and I'm not sure to call it "entertaining" is a compliment. Herr did show that war reporting—embedded reporting, specifically—could capture the soldier's voice and life while keeping the real focus on the writer. Pyle didn't, not really. Herr's prize—and curse—was presenting his story first and foremost. For those of us today writing in first person, third person, it doesn't matter—it's a means to an end, and the byline is often the subject.

My bookshelf is full of novels and nonfiction telling war stories from dozens of points of view. There is the patriotic jerkoff next to the self-flagellating regret; the melodramatic tale of a bright-eyed lieutenant rests on top of the cynical observer laughing at his own joke; a detached reporter unwilling to choose a side rests on a shelf full of world-weariness and guilt. My own literary attempt is right there with them—all my reporting packaged in my own self-produced creation, a marketing tool and manuscript to send to publishers back when I had something to say. It doesn't hold up—my conclusions fall apart, what I think I saw in 2009 revealed as a mirage just a few years later. I'm glad it wasn't published.

I'm certainly like to hear myself talk like the rest of them—I write reviews of books related to the wars, offering my take on somebody else's. Now and then, I trundle to a library or small venue where the silverhairs spend an evening, and I narrate my photos and encapsulate my three summers spent in

Iraq. It’s a paying gig; I can reuse my script and just make sure to change the venue’s name when I thank them for having me. I know the questions that they’ll ask. It’s all very familiar, and if it’s boring to me, I tell myself it’s maybe new to them, and isn’t that worth something?

I was in the Army, went to Iraq in Desert Storm decades ago. I play the veteran’s card when I can, an easy comeback against the sunshine patriots of this rancid and toxic modern era. But like my presentations, it all starts to feel a little hoary, my version of Fat Elvis creaking out “Love Me Tender.”

Still, in writing classes, I do enjoy using different drafts of my work as examples of revision—to show how the overblown melodrama of the first draft becomes a reasonable conclusion by the final. It’s a form of coping, the drafting and revision that is—working out the absurdities that no audience should be subjected too. But like I tell the students: You don’t know that at the time. I meant it when I wrote it. Nobody sets out to write a bad first draft.

Think of our emotional investment with a first draft as a kind of reverence—we’re so pleased with our words, with our thoughts and with ourselves. The revision process requires us to be—in Lester Bangs’ perfect words—*contemptuously indifferent*, to be willing to cut things out without passion or prejudice.

In that vein, I have deliberately disconnected with the soldiers I spent that Iraq time with, eliminating our ties on social media—no harm done, no big blowups, just a casualty of their grotesque Trumpian politics and my disinterest in tolerance of the same. We weren’t friends. What was it we spent together in Iraq? A month? Three? In the scheme of my 50 years, no time at all. It’s an edit; a paragraph in my story that doesn’t fit anymore.

If I walked into a classroom and started spouting the virtues

of *Dispatches*, I'd be preaching to a room of those who have never heard the name of the book or the author. I would have to spend time raving about it, and who is interested in hearing some old man run his mouth about the "bad old days of jubilee?" There are so many other books to read, and who says *Dispatches* is better than any other? I thought it was Michael Herr, you thought it was David Finkel or Sebastian Junger or Clinton Romesha or Siobhan Fallon, or *Zero-Dark-Thirty* or *Lone Survivor* or whoever or whatever you thought spoke to what you expected a war experience to read like, to look like, to capture the violence and the chaos in a way that made you say: "they got it." You wouldn't believe me if I said there was a time when we agreed on Michael Herr. He's been copied and parodied and distilled and diluted until he's just another name from another time, another war, and what's he really got to do with what we're talking about anyway?

Elvis Presley died in August, 1977, and *Dispatches* would be published two months later. In the next 10 years, Herr would then help on *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*—that trio arguably the most iconic creative outputs born from Vietnam. But from 1987 to his death in 2016, nothing of true note. Still, enough that, for a time, Michael Herr was the agreed upon war reporting standard—the center of the spoke from which everything would radiate.

What does Elvis have to do with it? Because Lester Bangs' 1977 prediction was right: When it comes to rock and roll, my generation has never agreed on anything like our parents once agreed on Elvis. When it comes to war reporting, no future generation of reporters will agree like we once did on Michael Herr. And nobody—*nobody*—will ever repeat his decision to sit on the sidelines during 15 years of war filled with reportage from so many of his imposters—and say *nothing*.

I am the most envious of that. His ability to take himself out of the game, to accept that what he had to say was said, in a book on a shelf. If we ever want to know what he thinks, we

can always go right there, to words that will not change.

I've left behind my own record, of stories here and there, of essays and reviews in this publication or that. In my reporting, I did my part to make these wars palatable for the masses. I feel a hint of moral crime in that participation. And it happened during a war. Put war and crime together, and what do you come up with? Did that thought occur to Michael Herr? Did he see all his copycats and sycophants and think "be careful what you wish for?"

Michael Herr showed us how to cope in a world riven by noise and discontent. Just be quiet. He has been dead for many months, but I need not bother to say goodbye to his corpse. I only wish I could say goodbye to you.

With much respect for Lester Bangs, and Elvis Presley.

Nathan Webster reported from Iraq in 2007-09 as a freelance photojournalist. He is also an Army veteran of Desert Storm. His work appears in many publications.

New Poetry By Abby Murray

Hercules and Cerberus, 1608. Nicolo Van Aelst, Antonio Tempesta. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

13 WAYS TO APPROACH A THREE-HEADED DOG

I.

Those who tell you

to carry raw meat

have never met me.

Bones are better,

they last longer,

but if there’s

no bones to be had

bring peanut butter.

II.

In this analogy

I am always Cerberus.

My beloved is inside,

changing.

When he wants me

to sleep in his bed

he comes to me

shaped as a body

like yours.

III.

I grew old here.

Compliment the quartz

mouth of my cave,

my heavy collars,

the bronze of my bark.

Tell me I sound

familiar.

IIIa.

I live to be recognized.

IIIb.

My hearing is spent.

Your language

is a red fruit

everyone loves

to chew.

If we lock eyes

I’ll stand.

V.

I wouldn’t call

human souls

delicious

or even tempting.

I swallow

what I must.

Dogs escape

all the time,

cats too, crows

and wolves.

I let wolves pass

because they sit

a while before

they go,

they don’t trust

this river any more

than I do.

We watch it twist

around itself together.

VII.

What would I buy

with your money?

Lie down. Stay.

VIIa.

I do not know what a changed mind

feels like. Grass? Maybe sun?

VIII.

In this analogy

you are convinced

you are *sui generis*.

You will be the one

with quick feet.

In this analogy

the ferryman drops

your fare into a sack

with everyone else’s.

Bring water.

I’m not saying

it will buy you

time

but I am thirsty.

In this analogy

you are the one

who thinks you saw

the city shimmer

before it split.

You’re not wrong.

XI.

My beloved

has built a city

where all the bread

is free.

XIa.

His garden

is free of spiders,

nothing

that can be crushed

is sent there.

XII.

Show me what

a sleeping dog

looks like.

XIII.

Are you the moon?

If you are,

make me know it.

I keep a song

in my throat

for you.

Johann David Wyss, The Swiss Family Robinson, George Routledge and Sons.

HOW TO DIE IN PEACETIME

Welcome the cancer cell,

its sense of justice

more twisted than the DNA

inside its rebel membrane.

Welcome its obsession

with reproduction and division,
the way it makes a home
in the left breast and waits
so patiently, still a pearl
within a pearl within a pearl.
Welcome its false history
and family-friendly values,
its desire for more and more
children, the way it butchers
its own meat forgiven
by the prayers it sends abroad,
the way it campaigns for leader
of the immune system
and loses gracefully each time
until it doesn’t, until the first
letter is tied to the first
brick and flies through the first
window of a neighbor’s house.
Welcome its lavish parties,
electrons everywhere,
flags that flicker like emblems
of peace in the bloodstream,

welcome its marksmanship

when it shoots down the doves

who wake it each morning.

Your body is a sovereign

unable to wage war on itself,

your body is a black night

rippling with radiation.

This is peacetime, this is grace,

this is our merciful killer

rising like a star in our bones.

Let us raise our telescopes

and toast to its brilliance,

its speed, its true aim.

ARMY BALL

You’ve outgrown the army ball,

the men I mean, not us, the wives,

who spend hours buffing time

from our necks and faces.

We dazzle in our pearls

and tennis bracelets clipped like medals

to our limbs: my OIF amethyst,

OEF diamond studs, SFAT cashmere.

Some new wives miss the mark,

overshoot the dress code

and show up in wedding gowns.

They pick and pick at the tulle,

the crystals, the ruching.

At our table, your jaw is softened

by gin and a single year,

the one before Iraq

when Blackhawks dropped you

into the unarmed mountains of Alaska

and you floated down like bread.

We toast the dead and drink.

We howl like dogs for the grog.

Men come forward with liquor bottles

so large they contain entire wars,

dark rum for the jungles of Vietnam,

canned beer for Afghanistan.

A bowl the size of a bus tire

is filled with two hundred years

of booze and we serve ourselves

with a silver ladle made in America

but polished last night, too early,

its grooves blushing with tarnish.

RANGER SCHOOL GRADUATION

A cadence is written like so:

wives show up for the mock battle

at Ranger School graduation

in heels and spandex skirts,

some of us threaded into silk thongs

and some bare-assed,

some in black and gold

I heart my Ranger panties,

all of us too late

to hear this morning's march:

You can tell an army Ranger by his wife!

You can tell an army Ranger by his wife!

Because she works at Applebee's

and she's always on her knees,

you can tell an army Ranger by his wife!

This is how we sway like choirgirls:

America oils our hips.

Rope off the wood chips

and call it a combat zone.

When you’re paraded into the lot

beside Victory Pond I pretend to know

which smudge of red is you.

Already I am washing your uniform, your back.

Your mother says *oh, oh!*

and claps: the sound of deer ticks

kissing your blistered necks

before we can.

New Poetry by J.E. McCollough

Kintsugi

The breaks on my soul

Are only ever repaired

Slowly.

Old pieces

Of the broken bowl,

Fixed

Back into their usual places

With silver. With gold.

Molten laces gleaming

Across my chest,

Across my beard,

And spreading from the corners of my eyes.

New Fiction: Excerpt from Taylor Brown's The Gods of Howl Mountain

There was the stone pagoda, three-tiered, built on a small hill over a stream that shone like pebbled glass. The platoon had dammed a pool in the stream. They crouched in their skivvies, soaping and scrubbing the August grit from the creases and crannies of their bodies. Howitzers were perched on the hills around them, like guardian monsters. Still, the

Marines washed quickly, feeling like prey without their steel helmets and green fatigues, their yellow canvas leggings that laced up at the sides. Their dog tags jingled at their necks, winking under the Korean sun.

Rory stood from the pool, feeling the cool water stream like a cloak from his form. His bare feet stood white-toed on the curved backs of the stones, eon-smoothed, so like the ones on the mountain of his home. He walked up the hill toward the accordion-roofed temple where they were billeted. He passed olive shirts and trousers drying on rocks and bushes, spread like the skins of killed beasts. The air felt full of teeth. Earlier that day, searching an abandoned village, they had taken sniper fire. Their first. They were Marines, but green. The whip-crack of the shots had flayed the outermost layer of courage from their backs; they were closer now to their bones.

A pair of stone lions guarded the entrance to the pagoda, lichen-clad beasts with square heads and heavy paws. “Foo dogs,” the Marines called them. There was a nisei in their platoon, Sato, whose older brother had fought with the 442nd Infantry Regiment in World War II. All Japanese Americans.

“Komainu,” he said. “Lion dogs. They ward off evil spirits.” Someone had thrown his shirt over the head of one of the beasts. Rory pulled the garment away, so the creature could see. He stepped on into the temple. The air felt cool here, ancient, like the breath of a cave. The black ghosts of old fires haunted the sconces. The place smelled of incense and Lucky Strikes and nervous Marines. Their gear lined the walls. He had never been in a place this old. Granny was never one for churches—“godboxes,” she called them—and those in the mountains seemed flimsy compared to this. Desperate cobblings of boards, some no more than brush arbors. But standing here alone, nearly naked at the heart of the temple, he felt armored in the stone of generations. Swaddled. No bullet could strike him here. No arrow of fear.

He wanted to remain in this place, so still and quiet amid the hills of guns. But a cold wind came whistling through the temple, lashing his back, and he remembered that fall was coming soon, for leaves and men. Blood so bright upon the sawtooth ranges, and the screaming that never stopped.

He could never forget.

Rory woke into the noon hour, his bedquilt kicked off, his body sweat-glazed despite the October bite. His lost foot throbbing, as if it were still attached to the bruised stump below his knee. He rose and quickly dressed. His bedroom window was fogged, the four panes glowing a faint gold. Paintings, unframed, covered one wall. Beasts of the field, fowls of the air—their bodies flaming with color where the sun touched them. They reminded him what day it was: Sunday. He scrubbed his armpits and washed his face, slicked his hair back and dabbed the hollow of his neck with the sting of Granny-made cologne. He donned a white shirt that buttoned to the neck, a narrow black tie, the bowler hat that had been his grandfather Anson's. He looked at his face in the mirror—it looked so old now, as if a whole decade had snuck under his skin in the night. The flesh was shiny beneath his eyes, like he'd been punched.

He was sitting on the porch, carving the mud from his boots, when Granny came out. She had a pie tin balanced in the crook of one arm.

"I can get that," he said, jumping up.

"I'm fifty-four years old. I ain't a god-damn invalid."

She sat primly in the beast of a car, straight-backed, as if she were riding atop a wagon. It was no stretch to imagine her riding shotgun on a Wells Fargo stagecoach, a short-barreled shotgun in her lap. She looked at him as he slid behind the

wheel.

“You had the dreams again?”

“No,” he lied.

“You need to take that tincture I made you.”

“I have been.”

“You been pouring it through that knothole in the floorboard. That’s what you been doing.”

Rory fired the engine, wondering how the woman could know the things she did.

In an hour they were down into tobacco country, square after square of mildly rolling fields passing on either side of them, the clay soil red as wounds among the trees. Giant rough-timbered curing barns floated atop the hills, like weathered arks, holding the brightleaf tobacco that would fill the white spears of cigarettes trucked all over the country. Chesterfelds and Camels and Lucky Strikes. Pall Malls and Viceroys and Old Golds. The highway wound through Winston-Salem, where the twenty-one-floor Reynolds Building stood against the sky like a miniature Empire State. It was named after R. J. Reynolds, who rode into town aback a horse, reading the newspaper, and went on to invent the packaged cigarette, becoming the richest man in the state.

“They say it’s the tallest building in the Carolinas,” said Rory. Granny sucked her teeth, wearing the sneer she always did when forced to come down off the mountain.

“It ain’t whale-shit compared to the height of my house, now is it?”

They passed Greensboro and Burlington, assemblies of giant mills, their smokestacks black-belching day and night, while beneath them sprang neat little cities with streetcars and

straight-strung telephone lines. They passed Durham, home of Duke Power, which electrified most of the state, and then on into Raleigh, passing along the oak-shadowed
roads as they wound upward toward the state asylum at Dix Hill. It was massive, a double-winged mountain of brownstone that overlooked the city, four stories high, the narrow windows stacked like medieval arrow slits. The center building looked like something the Greeks had built, four giant columns holding up a triangular cornice, with a glassed rotunda on top.

They signed the paperwork and sat waiting. When the nurse came to fetch them, Rory went in first. His mother came light-footed across the visiting room floor, hardly a whisper from the soles of her white canvas shoes. She was like that, airy almost, like a breath of wind. She could be in the same room with you and you might not even know it. Her black hair was pulled behind her head, waist-long, shot through with long streaks of silver. Her skin ghost-white, as if she were made of light instead of meat. As if, squinting hard enough, you could see her bones.

“They treating you good?” Rory asked.

She nodded and took his hands. Her eyes shone so bright, seeing him, they ran holes in his heart. She said nothing. Never did. She was always a quiet girl, said Granny, living in a world her own. Touched, said some. Special. Then came the night of the Gaston killing, and she never spoke again. Rory had never heard her voice. He knew her smell, like coming rain, and the long V-shaped cords that made her neck. He knew the tiny creases at the corners of her eyes, the size of a hummingbird’s feet. He knew the feel of her hands, so light and cool. Hands that had scooped out a man’s eye with a cat’s paw, then hidden the detached orb in the pocket of her dress.

There had been three of them, nightriders, each in a sack hood. The year was 1930. The men had caught her and a mill

boss’s son in an empty cabin along the river. The place was condemned, destined to be flooded under when the waters rose. They bludgeoned the boy with ax handles, but she fought them, finding a cat’s paw from a scatter of tools, an implement split-bladed like a cloven tongue. She took back from them what she could.

An eye.

None of them was ever caught.

The boy they beat to death was named Connor Gaston. He was a strange boy, people said. But smart. He liked birds, played the violin. His father ran the hosiery mill in town. A boy of no small advantage, and she a prostitute’s daughter. Probably one herself, the town said. Didn’t she live in a whorehouse? Wasn’t she of age, with all the wiles and looks? Hadn’t she lured the boy there to be beaten, robbed?

She refused to defend herself. Some said a hard blow to the head had struck her mute. Others said God. The doctors weren’t sure. She seemed to have one foot in another world. She had passed partly through the veil. The Gastons wanted her gone, buried. Forgotten. This stain on their son’s name. The judge declared her a lunatic, committing her to the state. Her belly was showing when they trucked her off. Rory was born in the Dix Hill infirmary. The Gastons were already gone—packed up and returned to Connecticut, with no forwarding address.

Rory and his mother sat a long time at the table, holding hands. Rory asked her questions, and she nodded or shook her head, as if too shy to speak.

“Any new paintings?”

She nodded and brought up the notebook from her lap. They were birds, mainly, chimney swifts and grey shrikes and barn swallows. Nuthatches, bluish with rust bellies, and iron-gray kinglets with ruby crowns. Carolina wrens, chestnut-colored

with white thunderbolts over their eyes, and purple-black starlings, spangled white. Wood thrushes with cinnamon wings, their pale breasts speckled brown, and lemon-breasted waxwings with black masks over their eyes. Cardinals, red-bright, carrying sharp crests atop their heads, and red-tailed hawks that wheeled deadly over the earth.

They were not like prints on a wall. These birds were slashed across the paper, each creature angular and violent and bright, their wings trailing ghostly echoes of fight. They were water-colored, slightly translucent, as if she painted not the outer body of the bird but the spirit, each feather like a tongue of fame. Strange fires that burned green and purple, rust and royal blue. Rory knew that eagles could see more colors than men. They could see ultraviolet light, reflected from the wings of butterflies and strings of prey urine, the waxy coatings of berries and fruits. Sometimes he wondered if his mother was like that, if she discerned the world in shades the rest of them couldn't see. As if the wheeling or skittering of a bird's flight were a single shape to her, a poem scrawled in some language the rest of them didn't know. His heart filled up, like it always did. Tears threatened his eyes.

"They're beautiful," he said.

As always, she sent him home with one. This time it was a single parrot, lime green, with red flushes about the eyes. He would paste it on the wall of his room, part of the ever-growing aviary that kept him company.

It was late afternoon when they started toward home. Rory lit a cigarette, Granny her pipe. Their smoke unraveled into the slipstream. They passed city cars painted swan white or flamingo red, glade green or baby blue—bright as gumballs under the trees. Every yard was neatly trimmed, many staked

with small signs that read: WE LIKE IKE. The people they passed looked strangely clean and fresh and of a kind, like members of the same model line.

Soon they were out from beneath the oaks and the traffic thinned, falling away, and the land began to roll and swell, an ocean of earth. In the old days, Rory would ask Granny to tell him stories of his mother. Of how beautiful she'd been and how kind. Of how she once held a death vigil for a giant grasshopper she found dying on the porch, singing it low lullabies as it lay legging the air on its back, green as a spring leaf. How she buried it behind the house with a little matchstick cross.

"Girl had angel in her blood," Granny used to say. "Where she got it, I don't know. Not from me."

But all those old stories had been told, again and again, save one. The story only his mother could tell. What really happened that night in the valley.

The land rose before them, growing more broken and steep, the mountains hovering over the horizon like smoke. Howl Mountain was the tallest of those that neighbored it, the fiercest. It rose stout-shouldered and jagged, like the broken canine of some giant beast. On its summit floated a spiked island of spruce and fir, a high-altitude relic of prehistoric times. The wind whipped and tore through those ancient evergreens, whirring like a turbine, and it did strange things.

It was said that gravity was suspended at the mountain's peak, and in the falling season the dead leaves would float upward from the ground of their own accord, purring through the woods, as if to reach again those limbs they'd left.

There was a lot of blood in the ground up there, Rory knew. Guerrilla fighters from the Civil War, throat-cut and shot and

hanged by rope, and frontiersmen before them, mountain settlers with long rifles who warred with the Cherokee, dying with arrow-flint in their bellies, musket balls in their teeth. And who knew how many rival tribes in centuries past, blood feuds long forgotten before any white man showed his face, the bones of the fallen scattered like broken stories across the mountain. Some said it was all those men's souls, trying to rise, that made the dead leaves lift.

Rory thought of what Eustace had told him, when he was little, of how men in the mountains had made a sport of eye-gouging and nose-biting. How those wild-born woodsmen faced each another inside rings of roaring bettors, their long-curved thumbnails fired hard over candle flames and greased slick with oil, and how Davy Crockett himself once boasted of scooping out another man's eye easy as a gooseberry in a spoon. Back then there was no greater trophy in your pocket than another man's eye, followed closely by the bit-off tip of his nose. A cruel story, like any Eustace told, but designed perhaps to make the boy proud of what his mama had done when cornered.

He was.

He just wished it had not stolen her voice, and he wondered sometimes if there wasn't something wrong with him, that he wasn't himself silenced by what he'd seen in Korea. By what he'd done. He looked at Granny.

"Is it true you got that eye hid somewhere, stolen by some deputy you had in thrall?"

She sniffed.

"Ain't nothing but trouble in that eye, boy. Some things are best left buried."

"I got a right to see it."

“Sure. And I got a right to tell you to go to hell.”

Gods of Howl Mountain *is forthcoming from St. Martin’s Press on March 20, 2018 and is available now for pre-order wherever books are sold.*

An Interview with Taylor Brown, Author of Gods of Howl Mountain

The Wrath-Bearing Tree (Andria Williams): Taylor Brown is the author of a collection of short stories, *In the Season of Blood and Gold*, and three novels: *Fallen Land*, hailed by Booklist as “a masterpiece;” *The River of Kings*, and *Gods of Howl Mountain*, out next month (March 2018), of which a starred *Booklist* review said:

> *It’s the characters, so wonderfully vibrant and alive in their all-too-human variety—scared, tightly wound, angry, damaged, yet resourceful and resilient, some honorable, some not—that demonstrate Brown’s prodigious talent. Brown has quickly established himself in the top echelon of Southern writers.*

An excerpt from *Gods of Howl Mountain* appears in this month’s issue of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

Thank you so much for answering our questions, Taylor.

Let’s start with some background on *Gods of Howl Mountain.* The novel is set in rural North Carolina in the 1950s. Rory Docherty, a young man freshly home from the Korean War, has returned to the mountain where he grew up. He lives with his grandmother, a folk healer; his father is dead and his mother, mute since witnessing a terrible crime, has lived most of her life in a mental hospital nearby. Rory finds work running bootleg whiskey for a powerful local family. But when he falls for the daughter of a preacher, he gets himself into a new brand of trouble that may open up secrets about his mother and his past.

Begging my own Yankee ignorance here: Is there a Howl Mountain, North Carolina? How did you develop a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains and its long legacy of family feuds, bootlegging, folk medicine, snake-handling, and more?

Taylor Brown: There is no Howl Mountain, North Carolina – the place and history are products of my own imagination. That said, I was inspired by the history and folklore of Blowing Rock, a town in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. The town itself is named after “The Blowing Rock,” a rock formation that stands three thousand feet above the Johns River Gorge and is storied for a powerful wind that blows upward out of the gorge. Legend has it, a heartbroken Native American brave leapt from the cliff, only to be blown back into the arms of his lover. That idea of mysterious winds inspired the cyclonic updrafts at the top of Howl Mountain, which I do envision as being in roughly the same area as Blowing Rock. However, I wanted to be free to create a geography and history of my own.

Though I grew up on the Georgia coast, I’ve long had a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as the world of bootlegging, folk medicine, stock car racing, and more. As a child, I remember hearing my father play the song

“Copperhead Road” by Steve Earle, still one of my favorite songs. The narrator is a Vietnam vet whose family has been involved in bootlegging for years, and who returns from Vietnam to begin growing the new cash crop of the region – marijuana. I can remember sitting in front of the stereo in my dad’s study as a kid, playing that song over and over again.

Like most of my novels, *Gods of Howl Mountain* started with a short story. This time it was “Kingdom Come,” the second story in my collection, *The Season of Blood and Gold*. With that story, I decided I wanted to write a novel set in this time and place. In fact, it was a large part of my motivation to move to western North Carolina in 2009, where I lived for two years—first in Asheville, then in Black Mountain, NC.

It’s strange how organic these books become over the years. In 2013, I met Jason Frye, a writer who has become a great friend and editor of mine. Jason is from Logan, West Virginia, and his grandfather used to catch rattlesnakes to sell to the serpent-handling churches in the area. Jason has a black-and-white photograph of this one-armed snake-handling preacher on his office wall, and he directed me toward Dennis Covington’s incredible book *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Later, I ended up seeing someone who was in herb school in Asheville, and she was an incredible help for the specifics of Granny May’s folks medicine.

So, as you can see, this story has traveled quite a long road with me.

WBT: I can’t help but notice that many of your novels and stories feature characters whose lives have bumped up against the vast movements of history and, in particular, war. There’s Callum and Ava in *Fallen Land*, for example, caught up in General Sherman’s “March to the Sea” in the final year of the American Civil War; or Lawton in *The River of Kings*, who’s still grappling with the legacy of his recent service in ways

that sometimes baffle or worry his college-student brother. In *Gods of Howl Mountain*, Rory is a Korean war vet and amputee, and you've mentioned that your newest work-in-progress features a female Army vet as well. Where do you think your attentiveness to veterans comes from—and your—what I would call—remarkably mature, long-range, compassionate interest in the ways war shapes whole generations, whole nations?

TB: That's a very good question, Andria. I've begun writing a little about my father, who was killed in a motorcycle accident last fall.

WBT: Yes, I remember that, and I am so sorry.

TB: He was of the Vietnam generation, and I grew up with stories of his time in the Army. For instance, he sent his 21st birthday on guard duty at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, marching through a hailstorm. Later, he graduated from the University of Georgia Law School and Army OCS at Fort Benning in the same year.

Fortunately, he was never sent to Vietnam, but the threat of war hovered over his entire early manhood, as it did over his entire generation's. He had so many friends who were impacted. One of his good friends, Sully, was a Green Beret in Vietnam, and I know my father was very moved by how the war has impacted his friend—the emotional and physical trauma. I think, as a burgeoning writer, you're maybe especially attuned to such stories or emotions.

What's more, 9/11 took place during a very formative time for me: when the towers fell, I was a freshman in college—nineteen years old—and I knew my generation was going to war. The military was never an option for me, as I was born with bilateral club feet, which have necessitated a multitude of reconstructive surgeries. but so many of my friends had to consider their involvement (or lack thereof).

Of course, 9/11 kicked off the GWoT, so our nation has been at

war for most of my adult life. I think it's easy for the average civilian to forget that; after all, so little of the general population has "skin in the game" these days. But, as a writer, I think your job is not to be incognizant or unaware of such things, you know? I think your job, in some part, is to try and empathize with the experiences and traumas of others, to put yourself in their shoes (or boots).

WBT: Yes!

In a "Writer's Bone" essay interview with Daniel Ford, you mentioned that you've written several stories based on old ballads, and that *Fallen Land* was inspired by an American ballad of Irish descent, "When First Unto This Country, A Stranger I Came" (Library of Congress Archives of American Folk Song #65A2). What is it about these ballads that speaks to you so strongly? Was there any particular music that inspired, or worked its way into, *Gods of Howl Mountain*?

And, as a fellow writer, I'm curious: Are you careful about the music you listen to when working intensely on a novel, the way some authors are careful about what they read? Do you have "sets" of music that have sort of accompanied each of your novels?

TB: Yes, as I mentioned before, I think Steve Earle's "Copperhead Road" certainly influenced this book—it's just a song that's been big in my imagination since I was a kid. It's a modern ballad, really, and I love how it juxtaposes outlaws from two different generations. Steve Earle's "Johnny Come Lately" does much the same thing, exploring the vastly different homecomings of soldiers returning from WWII versus Vietnam.

WBT: I know that song! We had it on an old Farm Aid CD when I worked in rural political organizing. Steve Earle is a good guy – a big supporter of Farm Aid! And wow, that video really has the same feel as the opening of *Gods of Howl Mountain*. I

can see how the tone of it worked its way into the novel.

TB: As for the old ballads like the one that inspired *Fallen Land*, I think there's something so timeless and visceral about them. These were songs of the people, sung again and again and again, the verses evolving over the decades. I think of those ballads as survivors, really. It's like natural selection—only the strongest songs survive century after century, migrating from old countries to new ones, from mountains to prairies to coasts. There must be a nugget of truth or beauty or power in these old songs that just won't die, that continue to move our hearts and blood.

I'm fairly careful about what I listen to when I'm actually sitting there writing. Often, it's music that doesn't have lyrics, or else I can't understand the lyrics well—I don't want to have other words in my head. Rather, it's the mood or atmosphere of certain songs that seems to help. Also, there's music that helps with certain projects, but not while I'm actually writing. For instance, I've been working on something that relates to motorcycles, and I've been playing various renditions of my favorite song of all time—"Vincent Black Lightning 1952"—on repeat.

Not surprisingly, it's another modern ballad.

WBT: You are thirty-five, and *Gods of Howl Mountain* is your fourth book. This just might make you the Leonardo DiCaprio of fiction writing! What is it like to have published "early and often?" In Virginia Woolf's "Letter to a Young Poet," she famously writes, "For heaven's sake, publish nothing before you are thirty." How would you respond to Ms. Woolf?

TB: Ha, sometimes I feel a lot older on the inside than I look on the outside! To be honest, though, I only had a few short

stories published before I was thirty. It may seem like an "overnight success," but I spent the large part of a decade working in near isolation, writing and throwing away two novels before *Fallen Land*, as well as tons and tons of short stories. I really didn't know another serious writer until I was around thirty years old.

I've heard that Virginia Woolf quote before, and, I don't know—I think that sometimes writers use it as an excuse. Looking back at my early stories, there are some cringe-worthy moments, sure—and plenty of things I would do differently now—but I don't regret them. We only have so much time to express ourselves in this life, and early work shows us where we were then and how we've arrived where we are now. It's all part of the journey, I think.

WBT: I love that—"we only have so much time to express ourselves in this life."

This seems like a good time to ask if you have any advice for the even-younger poets (or fiction writers) out there, those who hope to make writing their life's work?

TB: I think Harry Crews said it best: "Get in the chair." There's really no secret but that. Desire, discipline, and force of will. And what did Calvin Coolidge say? "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence." I think that's as true of writing as it is for anything. It isn't going to be easy. You're going to get knocked down again and again and again. You're going to have to write through shitty jobs and shattering heartbreaks and rejections. But that makes you tough—not just with writing, but in life.

I hear young writers whine sometimes because they got rejected from the hippest new lit journal. Fuck that. In my book, rejections are badges of honor. Paper your walls with them. Each is proof that you kept writing despite all the forces trying to keep you from making your art, and every rejection

is one step closer to the glorious moment of publication. Every rejection makes that moment sweeter. So keep your chin up and keep swinging, and remember your heroes went through these same battles. If they didn’t, you might want to find new ones.