New Poem from Jacob Siegel: The Old Gods

The Old Gods (No. 9, 2003)

I.

The towers bloomed up in the dark

Like nails scrolling from dead fingers

While around them a languid curtain fell

In drifts of violet gas that settled on the roofs

All of us honeymooners and mourners

Aware of ourselves as objects in a landscape

That held above the chipped skyline

Bristling in the greater darkness

A dream of New York City

II.

We must have lived inside that dreaming

No more able to escape than words can flee the page

Our old Gods who gave us a magic by which to love

III.

In those days, we could take the D from 59th to 125th in one stop

Or all the way out to Coney Island

Not for the 24 hour pool room where the Russians played snooker a floor above the street

I did not go there with you

One night I had you with nothing between us

You were sat up on a jetty rock

I had the tide at my back

You in the shadow of Astroland

Lit by moon and amusement, a castaway

New Essay by Patrick Mondaca: The Hideous Hypocrisy of Himmelstoss

"At the head of the column trots the fat sergeant-major. It is queer that almost all of the regular sergeant-majors are fat. Himmelstoss follows him, thirsting for vengeance. His boots gleam in the sun…Then he steams off with Himmelstoss in his wake."

Himmelstoss, as anyone who is familiar with *All Quiet on the Western Front* knows, is the sadistic corporal who bullies with

less power. The fat sergeant major, whose girth underscores his lavish and immoderate lust for comfort while the rank-and-file tighten their belts in the trenches, is happy to be the weight behind Himmelstoss's threats. As the protagonist (Paul Bäumer) recounts, he and the other soldiers immediately disregard both Himmelstoss and the fat sergeant-major, continuing on no worse for the wear.

Not every human is a Himmelstoss, and this photo almost certainly does not represent one. But those that are make life miserable for everyone else.

We've all had a Himmelstoss in our lives at least once. They're school principals and executive vice presidents and postal deliverymen and yes, sergeants-major. Some are fat. One should not dwell on men like these for any more time than is necessary.

I encountered one during my time at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, coming home from Iraq.

"Where is your beret, Sergeant?" the Medical Corps sergeant major, who had halted me on my way to an appointment, said. "And why are you wearing a desert patrol cap with a woodland uniform?" Thinking it obvious, I respectfully informed the sergeant major that my beret was still in a metal box somewhere in the desert. "Put that cigarette out, sergeant, and stand at parade rest when you speak to me. And don't you dare throw that cigarette butt in my grass," the sergeant major said. His posture was threatening, though I sensed behind it the existential terror of a man without serious occupation.

What else is one to do in such a situation but put one's cigarette out on the pavement, then collect and squeeze it carefully in one's clenched fist? His wet eyes pleaded with me

for a minor transgression. He ached to thrust himself upon me further, so that we might enter the kind of seedy relationships this type of flaccid fleshbag seems to require for satisfaction. At that moment, I was tempted to give in, but thought better of it.

“Roger, sergeant,” I said instead.

But that wasn’t the end of it.

“What’s your name? What unit are you with? Who’s your C-O? Take that flag off your right shoulder, you’re not in theater anymore,” he said, his voice picking up speed and certainty as he warmed to the subject. “Desert boots, that’s a no-go. Are you wearing a *field jacket liner*? Ohhhhh heeeeaaaayl naw,” he said, his voice rising almost to a full-throated shout.

It was true, I was wearing an old M-65 field jacket liner under my uniform top instead of the newer issued winter polypropylene. “Yes, Sergeant Major, I will remove it, Sergeant Major,” I said, standing corrected, quite literally, in the brisk winter air. I had no intention of removing it, and I didn’t. I wore the motherfucker to bed that night. Hell, I’m still wearing that thing, deep in the recesses of the old foot locker that keeps my mementos of such places, stinking of smoke and dust and sweat and bullshit.

Whether you’re still in the military or you’ve transitioned to the corporate world, or are a civilian and have never served, it’s always the same. An FSM lurks, waiting to gig you on some stupid, asinine shit. It’s a threat we all must face, and disregard, with a smile and a nod and a “Yes, Sergeant Major” or “Vice President” or “Foreman”. Because that is all they will ever be—the barking, savage whiff of authority barely missed, one step below or behind the real boss. Forever the bridesmaid, never the bride. And after you realize the measure of their soul, what else do they have left to them but the illusion of power, usually shouted? They’re stuck within this

sad, diminished aura, a victim of their penultimate rank. Give them “their grass” for the moment, or “their metrics” at close of business, or “their tie rods” in even rows in the next hour, and then go home. Or travel. Or go to school. Or anything. I have a photo of an Army cargo truck in Baghdad with “Stop the Insanity” scrawled across its passenger door. Sometimes that’s all we can do to remind ourselves who is really in charge and continue our idiosyncratic lives, one graffiti’d door at a time.

I never saw that particular sergeant major again, thankfully. I supposed he moved on to harass other troops about their shoulder patches until the regulation was changed a month later. I would have loved to see his face the morning after the paper came down, applying the patch he’d fought so hard against with resignation, then instructing the soldiers he’d yelled at the day before to get within regs… admitting his own impotence one betrayal at a time. Since then, there have been other FSMs who have thrown their “stripes” around in the various settings in which I have worked. Though, now that I think about it, when has it ever really mattered to anyone but them? We the people remain unimpressed.

In the Vietnam War film *Hamburger Hill*, a couple of troops try and buck up their platoon “Doc” after a casualty chanting, “It don’t mean nothing, man, not a thing.” And the medic, thus consoled and encouraged, goes on to fight another day. We all have bad days like Doc in the film. That sergeant major I met long ago now might have been having a bad day too. Doc doesn’t survive the battle. He succumbs to his wounds after imploring his fellow soldiers to finish taking the hill, so they can have something to be proud of. And they do. They do it for Doc and for each other. Those are the things that matter.

While violence is likely not the answer to fix people who

abuse authority, it's unclear what is.

We can choose to fall prey to the insanity of Himmelstoss and the FSM and others like them, or we can take their fear and insecurity in stride, their insistence that only by obeying the rules can one hope to elude destiny. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Bäumer and his mates lay a good old-fashioned beat-down on old Himmelstoss, and it's hard to feel sympathy for him. Like the bloviating sergeant major I encountered, Himmelstoss is a nonfactor. His existence to Bäumer and the men is of no great importance, like whether they live or die. It should be noted that Himmelstoss, when he's himself sent to the front, does eventually perform bravely following a motivational beating by Bäumer in a trench. Yet it remains to be decided whether Himmelstoss was merely a desperate ass-kisser seeking the favor of his lieutenant or acting out of a moral obligation to his fellow soldiers. The men aren't in it for Himmelstoss and the FSM though. They're in it for each other as were the men in *Hamburger Hill*. The regulations may not get changed every time so you can smile at the thought of the senior enlisted man or supervisor or other inflated authority wiping egg off their face. Nor will every Himmelstoss you come across fetch the beating of a lifetime every time they push the wrong troop too far. But don't you sweat it. In the end, they don't mean nothing, man, not a thing. Finish taking the hill, and be proud of it.

Fighting Like a Girl Means

Not Being a Pussy: Mary Doyle Interviews Kelly Kennedy

It’s never easy to voice suspicions that your boss is out to get you. No matter how you describe it, the accusation sounds crazy. By the time you’re ready to put your instincts into words, you’ve already spent hours, days, weeks making the argument to yourself and telling yourself it’s all in your head. It’s not until you’ve fully convinced yourself it’s true that you’ll talk about it.

Lt. Col (Ret.) Kate Germano wrote a book about it.

Germano had come into her new job as commander of Fourth Battalion with a specific set of goals. She took seriously her role in leading the unit responsible for guiding every female recruit from civilian to Marine as they met the challenges of Marine Corps basic training. The goals she’d set for her command, like boxes on a check sheet, had tick marks from top to bottom, and yet, it took her a long time to realize that, despite her successes, her efforts were being undermined. Eventually, Germano knew without doubt that her aim to prove women Marines could train alongside male Marines was being challenged by Marine Corps leadership. The men working against her started from the very top. But unlike most of us Germano had proof that her bosses wanted to see her fail.

She maps out that proof in her new book, *Fight Like A Girl,* (Prometheus Books, 2018) in a calm, methodical, and well documented way.

Helping her make that argument is her co-author, Kelly Kennedy. Kennedy, an Army veteran and journalist, uses her research skills and a logical progression to map out an argument so convincing the two authors bravely name names. The names include those of Germano’s former boss, Colonel Daniel

Haas and even the then, Marine Corps Commandant and now Joint Chiefs Chairman, GEN Joseph Dunford.

In 2010, when the book I co-authored with Shoshana Johnson (*I'm Still Standing,* Touchstone, 2010) was released, I remember feeling such relief that the book was well received and that my work on Shoshana's story had helped make people aware of what she'd gone through. I was anxious to speak to Kelly Kennedy about her work as a co-author on Germano's project and what it meant to be a part of telling this story that was so important, and yet, not her own.

Mary Doyle: I understand your agents introduced you and Kate Germano in hopes that you would work together on this project. Why do you think they thought the two of you might be a good fit? Had you ever worked on a co-authored project like this before? And how long did the project take?

Kelly Kennedy: Well, at first, I didn't. I had heard bits of Kate's story, and I was a bit worried that the military had it right—that she was abusive. But the more I dug in, and the more I talked with her, the more I felt not only that I trusted her (she backed up her story with plenty of documentation), but that I needed to help her tell it. Because we're both veterans, I was able to ask her some questions based on my own experiences, which sparked at least one chapter. But I was also able to tell her about my experiences as a civilian, which informed part of the story. This was my first time as a co-author. We worked on the project about 1.5 years.

Kate Germano (left) is interviewed by her co-author, Kelly Kennedy, during an event at Politics and Prose at The Wharf, April 10, 2018. Photo by Mary Doyle.

MD: Part of the reason I agreed to work with Shoshana Johnson on her book was because I thought her story was, not only

compelling, but an important story to tell. Germano's story couldn't be more important in terms of women in the military and proof positive that the decks are stacked against them. Did the importance of this story weigh on you at all? Did the weight impede or inspire?

KK: It was tough to hear her tell it, and it was tough for her to tell it. She often calls me her "therapist," which is something we hear a lot as writers. Part of recovering from a traumatic event is the telling of it until the words don't hurt as much, and it develops an overall meaning, rather than just a feeling of pain. But as the #metoo movement hit, and as we see more and more women prove themselves in infantry training, and even as we talked about women in endurance racing or crossfit or the tech world, we understood how important it was to say this is an issue that effects all of us, and that, as women, we really need to feel like we have each other's backs—that it should no longer feel heroic to say, "You okay? I got you. Here's how to…"

MD: How did you develop your work method and what did that look like? Was there ever a time when you had to stop and iron out issues? Or were you in sync the whole time? Did you have any influence in how the story was told?

KK: We started by meeting up for interviews. I would type in all of my notes, and come up with more questions, and then we would meet again. Kate speaks in story—she's clear and to-the-point, so that part wasn't terribly difficult. The harder part, I think, was getting the more emotional details out of her. Okay, that hurt, but what did you do? What about it hurt you? Where were you?

Generally, we were oddly in sync. When I sent over the proposal with the first three chapters, I think she was relieved. She has said, in reading the book, that she was terrified, but that she laughed and cried and got angry and loved it. But part of that is because she's so good. The third

chapter—the one about her background—didn't quite feel right to me. I liked parts of it, but I didn't like all of it. I sent it to her and said, "I'm not feeling this." And she added and reorganized and sent back something we both liked a lot. So it was collaborative and fun and so much work.

We had written the story about the investigation as basically a long slog of the things that had been said about Kate. Our editor said, "You know. I think you lose Kate's voice here. This is her story." So we regrouped on that and focused more on her reaction—that a lot of it was just nonsense, like hugging one person but not hugging someone else, or the captain who was angry when Kate yelled at her for not doing her job so she walked out of her office. These are not things that are normal in any other version of the military, so we concentrated on that.

And yeah, I set up the outline, and Kate liked it. I would write up a section based on something we had specifically talked about or something generally important, like the background of women in the Marine Corps, and then send it as a word document. She would add or not and send it back. But she saw everything at least twice before we sent it to the publisher.

MD: One of the most impressive things about the telling of this story is the bravery Kate demonstrates in being open about how personally devastating the entire experience was for her. She often says she could have taken her own life. Did you ever fear that the retelling would have a dangerous impact on her? Shoshana suffered from terrible depression and getting her to read pages always made me feel as if I was forcing her to relive things she didn't want to recall. It made me feel guilty, as if I were forcing her to bleed for others' entertainment.

KK: My whole career has been about traumatic stories—from being an education reporter covering the first kids-with-guns

stories to a cops reporter to a war reporter. Fortunately, I was chosen as an Ochberg Fellow after the series came out that led to “They Fought for Each Other,” because not only was I traumatized by the events that inspired it, but I was doing some incredibly intense interviews for the book. One guy talked for eight hours and said he hadn’t told any of those stories before. The Dart Center, which sponsors the fellowships, teaches journalists not only how to handle their own trauma, but how not to retraumatize someone. I have to say, I’ve never had anyone refuse to tell me a story, and I think they trust that I’ll listen, and that’s huge. We’re so often shut down: You’ve already said that. I can’t hear this. But you’re okay now, right? And I trust that the people I interview will be helped in the telling, and that the written story will lead to them being better able to tell it again—to invite people in. I hated seeing Kate cry, but I knew she needed to.

Kate Germano (left) is interviewed by her co-author, Kelly Kennedy, during an event at Politics and Prose at The Wharf, April 10, 2018. Photo by Mary Doyle.

MD: When I co-authored Shoshana’s book, the “with” co-authored inclusion was negotiated from the beginning. Would you have accepted the job if you hadn’t had co-author credit? Kate can obviously write since she has published in the NYT and other places. Did you worry that her ability to write would make life more difficult or less?

KK: I had no idea. Kate fought from the beginning to make sure I got credit—she’s huge on that, in general, and she’s been amazing about including me in the publicity afterward, which is fun. I think I just had no idea how it would work, but I did wonder what she’d think of those first chapters. I felt good about them, and they felt like her to me, if that makes sense, and it ended up being okay. After working with her for

this much time, and seeing her so devastated as she told parts, some of the accusations against her blow me away. The idea that she could be cruel or unstable? Didn't see it, and I was watching.

MD: Kate makes some very bold statements and charges throughout the book, every one of which she backs up with detailed facts and a logical argument to support them. Did you have influence in how the arguments were presented? Did you know all along that you would need to include the citations and notes at the end? I was surprised at first to see the citations in the text but understand why you used them. It's further proof that her arguments are absolutely sound. Here's just one excerpt among many that is an example of her supporting arguments:

We also had women break their hips. Male leadership assumed it was because of a physiological limitation, rather than a combination of a lack of fitness, their poorly fitted packs, and recruits running during the hikes rather than taking short, choppy steps.

Just like everything else at boot camp, hikes were part head game, part physical fitness. A lack of mental preparedness could make five miles seem like a marathon. But some of it was due to a lack of attention by the drill instructor staff. The hip-injury rate at Fourth Battalion had me wondering if I was training teenagers or octogenarians.

A lot of the problem had to do with how the women wore their packs. They wore their packs too far down, so the hip belts hit the wrong place. So, as they added weight, they hurt themselves. As it turns out, at one time, our athletic trainer had conducted a class with the drill instructors to train them on how to fit the packs for the recruits. But she had given the class to the battalion the year prior, so the new Marines and recruits hadn't gotten the training. Broken hips were the result of a problem that could have been remedied with a

simple solution. No one had shown the recruits how to adjust their packs properly.

> *Literally, adding insult to injury, the Marine Corps used that data —the hip injury rate—as justification for why women should be excluded from ground combat jobs.*

KK: Sure. She's very well-spoken and thoughtful, so I had much of the argument from the beginning. I did a lot of the research, but she constantly reads and thinks and writes, so she was sending me stuff, too. The fun one was Mona. She told me about Mona, [a section in the book about an alligator] and I kept thinking it over and thinking it over, and then it became this metaphor. So I wrote it up, and held my breath and hit send. And she was right there with me. Because she can be so black-and-white, I think part of my role was to help people understand how empathetic and funny she is, too.

MD: Since she was relieved of command, Kate started speaking out in the press about her position that female Marines need to train alongside their male counterparts for a long list of reasons. The way she has been treated since she began speaking out is further support for her arguments. Not only are her charges eye opening, she has never been afraid to name names and to boldly confront the issues. Did you ever caution her about the potential consequences? What is her attitude in terms of what consequences she expects?

KK: She understood from the beginning. Much of the time, I was trying to explain that she was going to end up helping people, and that it would all be okay in the end—that someday she would be glad she was fired. I think she's just now starting to believe me. It's part of her make-up to be brave, so I can't imagine her backing away from anything.

MD: I found it interesting that you began most chapters with a letter of support Kate received shortly after she had been relieved. You also included one nastygram but she must have

received many more. Some of the comments on *Marine Corps Times* are about what you'd expect. How did you and Kate prepare yourselves for the potential of negative comments once the book came out? You must have been deep into the writing when the *Marine Corps United* story broke. Did that impact the project at all?

KK: We talked about Marine Corps United a lot, but not as something to worry about—it was as something to fight. We've surrounded ourselves with tribe. We've worked hard and done our best. We've focused on the importance of what she had to say.

MD: There are a couple of places where Kate's husband, Joe Plenzler, adds his take on Kate's situation. Hearing his perspective is a major shift in the story telling but it adds an angle you wouldn't otherwise get since he worked at the pentagon and had direct connection to Marine Corps leadership. In fact, it is in one of Joe's portions that the main nugget of this book is revealed. Was this Kate's idea? Yours? Did you have to negotiate its inclusion at all? What did you hope his point of view would add? Here's an example of Joe's input:

I served with the Commandant, General Dunford, when he was the Regimental Combat Team Five commander back in 2003, then as his speechwriter in Afghanistan in 2013 for three months, then again for the first five months of his commandancy. He too was no help.

It was pretty clear to me that General Dunford wanted to keep women out of the infantry at all costs. He was the only member of the joint chiefs (senior leaders of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and National Guard) to ask the secretary of defense for an exception to policy in September 2015 to keep women out of ground-combat arms jobs and units. That's one way of saying it. The other way is to say that he wanted to perpetuate the Marine Corps' policy of discriminating against women for some jobs based on their sex alone—regardless of

whether or not they could meet the standards. His request made a lot of headlines because it placed him in direct opposition to his bosses, the Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus and Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, who were pushing for all jobs to be open to any person, male or female, who could meet the standards. Even more disappointing, when Dunford didn't get his way, he skipped the secretary of defense's press conference on December 3, 2015, announcing the policy change. It's practically a Pentagon tradition for both the secretary and his top general, the chairman of the joint chiefs, to attend together any press conferences announcing major policy changes.

In retrospect, it makes sense that the commandant would do nothing to ensure Kate's complaint about systemic gender bias was properly addressed. It's pretty evident that every advancement Kate made with her Marines at Fourth Battalion stripped away justifications for keeping women out of ground-combat arms jobs and eroded claims that women don't shoot as well, don't run as fast, and can't carry the same weight as their male counterparts.

> *With every improvement to female performance, Kate was quashing critical elements of those arguments.*

KK: We didn't have to negotiate. I talked with Joe a couple of times to get some back story, and it started making sense to have him there. There would be no book without Joe because he was at the Pentagon to hear all the background, so it was nice to get him in there as a primary source having heard those conversations. But they're also so different—Kate's type A, obviously, and Joe, while incredibly talented and aggressive, is much, much more laid-back. I think he helps people like Kate, which was important to me—that people see more of her personality. I mean, you kind of go into the book judging her.

But I think Joe also helps us better understand how we should (or could) feel about her story, almost like he gives us permission to just be pissed.

MD: Kate's story is obviously an important one to tell. How do you feel about the role you played in ensuring that it has been told? Would you do this kind of project again? What advice would you give to others who are trying to tell their story in print?

KK: I'd definitely do it again. For whatever reason, I feel like we were the perfect team for this project—just our joint experiences fell in well together. I loved that we were able to include civilian and enlisted women, and I think some of that was me. My role, I think, was making sure that the Kate piece—the who she is a person piece—didn't get lost in the facts piece.

MD: Just after Shoshana's book came out, I received emails and phone calls from people who wanted me to help them write their stories. I imagine you are already receiving queries like that. I did end up doing one other co-authored memoir and seriously considered another but that project never came through. What would be your criteria for doing this again? What considerations would go into the decision?

KK: Some of that will be up to my agent, who believes I need to be careful at this point about choosing something that will allow me not to have to work a full-time job while writing a book full-time. I'm so glad I worked with Kate, but it was a labor of love for both of us. But also, I would need to believe in the truth of the story. At one point, Donald Trump's biographer came out and basically said, "I wrote this book for the money, and it's not truthful," and Kate said, "Oh my god. I don't know what I'd do if you felt that way." My response: "I wouldn't. I would never knowingly falsely

represent someone." That still stands. That happened a lot as a journalist, too: "I saw the story you wrote today. I want you to write a story about me." You have to have some news judgment. I'm also finishing up a novel, so I don't feel like I'm in a huge hurry to start something new.

MD: Has Kate had any interaction with Haas or BG Williams or even Dunford, since all of this kicked off? Have they expressed any regret? (I thought Dunford's position was indefensible when he testified on the hill. It's even more ridiculous after reading Kate's book!) Does she ever worry that one of them will show up at a book signing?

KK: She has not. There is no response. It wasn't their story, and honestly, they've already had their say. They released Kate's investigation within 24 hours of her firing in an attempt to spin the media coverage. The investigation is still available online. I don't think she worries about them showing up—and no. No one has offered any regrets.

MD: While they may not have come out and said it, it appears the Marines have taken many if not most of Kate's suggestions and put them into practice. One small example is removal of the chairs that formerly were placed behind the women's platoons in case one of them needed to sit down for fear of fainting. Has the Marine Corps leadership acknowledged the role Germano played in making those changes?

KK: Nope. But last month, they started pushing stories about how boot camp doesn't need to be integrated because they're doing such a mighty-fine job of integrating it now—and it looks as if they've made some changes. But it's still not integrated at the battalion level.

MD: Is there anything you wanted to add that you wished I'd asked?

KK: This has been an odd project for me because I've usually stayed so far from a story I'm covering—I'm a journalist. This

story was much more intimate, and I'm sure I could have stood back, but so many of the things she writes about have also happened to me or around me, or I've reported on them over the years, and so the story was important to me. In addition, I like her. She's become a dear friend, and I'm proud of her.

MD: You have every reason to be proud, of her, and of this project. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Kelly! I think this co-author/big story relationship is so important and not one that is fully understood. I'm hoping your book, along with discussions about how these types of co-authored relationships come together, will help others understand that there are ways their stories can be preserved even if they can't write them themselves.

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Fight Like a Girl (Prometheus Books, April 2018) can be purchased at your local independent bookstore, online, or anywhere books are sold.

New Fiction by John M. McNamara: "The Mayor of West Callahan Creek"

A bare bulb in a hooded fixture illuminated the sign. Fog obscured the wooden placard, and as Joseph neared it, the black lettering seemed to recede into the white plywood. It read:

WEST CALLAHAN CREEK
POPULATION 1,187

EST. 1866
CITY LIMITS
VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED

Prosecuted for what? Joseph Hunter walked his bicycle along the highway shoulder; the rear axle ticked off his progress like a metronome, tires crunched on the gravel. He paused and stared across the embankment at the billboard, and then chuckled.

The ashen fog had intensified since Joseph battled the shadows earlier that afternoon, enshrouding him more thoroughly than the day before, clouding his concentration and fuzzing his perceptions. The attack came as suddenly as an ambush. He'd developed an instinct for anticipating the murkiness, but it had descended upon him with viciousness soon after he crested the tallest of the hills on Highway 22, which paralleled the Loup River. He had pedaled off the road and kicked down the bike's stand, then squatted and caught his breath. Under an overcast and featureless sky, he rolled onto his back and locked his hands behind his head. Then the choking shadows, their edges indistinct, (they lacked clarity, which he assumed meant he lacked it as well), assaulted in full force. His chest constricted and the panic rippled; the sensation felt like his organs were being drawn through seams in his skin. Deliberate breathing, measured and slow. Fingertips pressed firmly against the temples in circular rotation, eyelids lowered while his thoughts focused upon past recoveries.

Paul Vogler, Lane Near A Small Town, 1864.

No one had agreed with his decision to undertake this journey, not parents, therapist, or friends. To a person they fretted about the solitude, about his coping mechanisms, about tendencies they dared not name. His therapist warned about the risks of self-diagnosis, the danger of assuming Joseph knew

what was best for Joseph. It’s the brain telling the brain how to fix the brain, she’d said. It’s unreliable.

He opened his eyes and glanced around, assessing the location for possible campsites. He made out a barely visible fence line beyond the sign, rows of barbed wire on wooden posts, and continued rolling his bicycle slowly, keeping to the edge of the highway in the limited visibility, fearful that in the fog a vehicle would encounter him with no time to react, to swerve and avoid striking him. He’d witnessed IEDs heave men and metal skyward in sooty, sandy-brown plumes, and believed the mockery of a collision on an American roadside might prove more than he could process. In the distance he spied spires of evenly-spaced lights vanishing up into the fog, each encircled by a woolly halo. Silos, he realized, like so many he’d encountered in towns across the prairie. They sharpened in definition as he neared the gated entrance to the co-op. Farther down the road he saw a dome of diffused light.

As he approached, its structure materialized: a Gas’n’Go with two pumps and a manual car wash bay. A widow sign advertised cold beer.

A hundred yards or so beyond the store, Joseph crossed a bridge with a low, steel railing, peered down at the slow-moving water, and imagined it must be the creek that offered the town its name. On the other side of the bridge, the gravel edge gave way to asphalt. The entrance to a parking lot; a single pinkish bulb cast an aura on the space. Joseph read the redwood sign with mustard-colored, inset lettering: West Callahan Creek Park. Below the lamp, a path led away from the empty parking lot; Joseph wheeled his bicycle and the small trailer in which he towed his camping supplies past the circle of light, along that dark path, navigating more by intuition than sight. He stopped, retrieved a flashlight from a pouch on the trailer, and switched it on. The fog refracted the beam into a ball of hazy illumination, affording little visibility of his surroundings, but he did discern a curtain of drooping

tree branches a short distance from the path. Willows. They favored stream and creek banks, he knew; he switched off the flashlight and steered his bicycle toward them.

Joseph managed to pitch the tent in the foggy twilight (the mechanics had become rote during the two weeks of his trip), and when he'd spread the foam camping mat and unrolled his bag, he lay quietly on his back and listened to the environmental sounds: a sluggish hint of water, feathery wisps of the willow branches chafing when a breeze rippled, and (undulating along the creek like a current), the metallic clatter of a hog feeder. He dined on dried fruit, a handful of mixed nuts, two strips of beef jerky, and a packet of cookies, checked his cell phone for messages, surprised when he saw three bars in the upper corner (it seemed West Callahan Creek had a cell tower nearby), and then lifted the tent flap to go out and relieve himself. It was an evening routine he followed with rare deviation. (One afternoon when the western sky portended thunderstorms, he stayed in a no-name motel, lavishly soaking in a hot tub in the dark bathroom as the thunder bouldered, lightning illuminated the room, and the rain strafed the windows). He lay on his sleeping bag, reading of a North Vietnamese soldier who had survived that war on his Kindle for an hour before stripping to his underwear, rolling to his side and closing his eyes, wondering what dreams he might encounter, and how much of them he would recall in the morning.

—

Hello, someone called. Wake up in there.

Joseph stirred and rose to a sitting position as he realized someone stood outside the tent.

Hey. Open up.

Joseph said he was awake and slid into his jeans, then unzipped the tent and crawled out into bright sunlight. The

fog had disappeared and as he stood, he glanced quickly at the topography of the park: flat ground, the willows trees he had discerned the previous evening lining the bank of the narrow creek.

This isn’t a camping area.

Joseph shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at the sheriff’s deputy who had retreated a step or two from the tent entrance.

Sorry. Last night in the fog, I couldn’t make out much and I needed somewhere to sleep.

Well, it’s a violation. I’m going to have to take you into town. Judge will probably fine you. Let’s go.

The sheriff removed handcuffs from his equipment belt and gestured for Joseph to turn around.

Are you serious? He couldn’t read the man’s eyes behind his sunglasses, to determine if his tactic was to scare Joseph into quickly moving on, not lingering in the town.

Dead serious. Turn around.

Joseph stepped toward the man, who gripped his wrist and sefficiently around. The sheriff affixed restraints to his wrist, gripped his elbow and guided him toward the path.

What about my stuff?

We’ll collect it for you.

During the short drive, while the deputy radioed in that he had a prisoner in custody, Joseph tamped down anger and worried about a rise of the shadows. The patrol car, with emergency lights flashing and siren keening, circled a three-story, red brick courthouse, situated in a town square ringed by storefronts. The deputy completed a loop of the building

before steering the car to the rear of the structure. He parked beside a set of concrete steps leading to an iron door.

He opened the rear door and rested a hand on Joseph’s head, as he had when he placed him in the back seat at the park. Up the steps, he indicated. His tone, calm, without inflection.

The heavy door opened onto a small holding area with a polished wooden floor; another deputy behind a half wall, the upper section caged with chain link fencing, except for a small slotted opening on the countertop.

Vagrancy. The arresting deputy nodded to his counterpart, who smirked as he reached under the counter. A loud buzz sounded and he steered Joseph through another door, into a windowless, high-ceilinged corridor; creamy globes Joseph associated with school rooms hung from the ceiling.

Is this really necessary? Joseph loathed the plaintive quality of his own voice, as though he’d galvanized the words with solicitousness.

You can ask the judge.

At the end of the corridor, the deputy turned a polished brass handle and ushered Joseph across the threshold, into a courtroom filled with people, who rose almost in unison and began applauding. He turned his head to the right, where a woman wearing black robes rose from her chair behind the elevated judge’s bench, and with a wooden gavel in her hand, motioned for the deputy to bring Joseph to the area directly before the bench. She extended her arms and patted the air a few times, urging the people in the gallery to sit and grow quiet.

What is your name? Her voice startled Joseph, her tone officious but her smile playful.

Joseph Hunter.

The deputy gripped his wrists and unlocked the handcuffs. Joseph swiveled his head and studied the people in the wooden rows behind him. Everyone smiling, a few nodding and waving to him. His imagination flashed visions of horror movies through his mind, of human sacrifice cults and inbred cannibal creatures, and then he turned back to the judge, asking what the hell was going on.

You've been found guilty of violating our municipal code, Joseph Hunter. Do you have anything to say before I pass sentence?

Twittering and laughter from the crowd.

What is happening here? Are you kidding me? He rubbed his wrists where the handcuffs had bound him.

I'm quite serious. The judge leaned across the bench and aimed the gavel at Joseph. You do have a choice how you serve your sentence. Three days in jail. She paused and her eyes glinted as she surveyed the rows of people behind Joseph. Or you can serve as the honorary mayor of our town for this weekend's sesquicentennial celebration.

The entire gallery erupted once again in applause as the deputy clapped Joseph on his back, leaned in and whispered an apology for the cuffs.

Personally, the judge said, I recommend you accept our offer as mayor.

Joseph stood dumbfounded as people streamed out of the wooden seats, entered the area beyond the counsel tables, and crowded around him in front of the judge's bench.

He wanted to ask again if the judge was serious, but within the new context of the celebrity she had asked to confer on him.

Quite a bait and switch, he said to the deputy, who stood with

his arms behind his back in a parade-rest position. The man, his eyes unmasked now, squinted as a smile enveloped his face.

We like a little theater, he replied.

A balding man gripped Joseph's hand, pumping it as he introduced himself as the office holder Joseph would supplant for the two-day celebration of the town's one-hundred-fiftieth celebration.

Ben Hampton. Happy to relinquish my duties and responsibilities, young man. Welcome to West Callahan Creek.

The judge banged her gavel several times, calling for quiet. The prisoner hasn't chosen his sentence yet. What do you say, Joseph Hunter?

Joseph wagged his head, glanced around at the folks in the courtroom, and then looked up at the judge. That's *Mayor* Joseph Hunter, your honor.

More laughter and applause, as Ben Hampton led Joseph out of the courtroom, trailed by townspeople. Let's get you settled at the hotel. It's really more of a bed and breakfast. Only four rooms, but they're clean and comfy. You'll like it there.

How did you choose me? Joseph followed Ben Hampton outside the courthouse, down a wide set of stone stairs, and onto the green expanse of the tree-lined lawn.

We left it up to the sheriff. The town did the same for its centennial and it seemed like a fine gesture for this anniversary. You kind of surprised us, though. We thought he'd nab a speeder where the limit falls from fifty-five down to twenty-five. The twenty-five-mile-an-hour sign *might* be blocked by a low-hanging tree limb. He chuckled. But finding you was good fortune. I hope all the festivities won't inconvenience you unduly.

Gale Stockwell, Parkville, Main Street, 1933.

They arrived at a stone walkway in front of a two-story Victorian, crowned by a cupola with a pheasant weather vane, bedecked with gingerbread trim, trellises along the wrap-around porch laced with blooming vines; two women Joseph assumed were mother and daughter stood on the porch, smiling as he and Ben Hampton climbed the steps.

Good morning, mayor, the older woman said, looking directly at Joseph. Her gravelly voice reminded Joseph of the sound of his tires on the roadway edge in the fog. Your room is ready and I've laid out your things. She wore a wrap-around denim skirt and a pale blue cotton blouse.

Joseph paused until he felt a hand on the small of his back. He glanced sideways at Ben Hampton, who arched his eyebrows, nodded.

The younger woman, light brown hair pulled back in a long braid, wore black shorts and a sleeveless blouse, flesh-colored, pale against her tanned arms. She held open the screened door and Joseph entered the house. In the foyer stood a round oak table, covered in a lace cloth, upon which rested a vase of black-eyed-susans. To his right he saw a sitting room, with several upholstered wingback chairs, a red brick fireplace, and a settee with carved wood legs. To the left a dining room with a long table that he surmised cold easily sit twelve people.

I'm Sally Hutchins and this is my daughter Peggy.

He noted resemblances between the two women: blue-gray eyes, brown hair (worn longer by Peggy than her mother, and with straw-colored highlights), the square shape of the hands.

Here's your room key. It's up the stairs, last one on the left, with a view of the gardens out back. Why don't you take

some time to freshen up and I'll come get you around noon for lunch?

Joseph thanked her, mounted the staircase, and turned left along a corridor papered with a pattern of alternating rose and lavender stripes. The door to his room hung open and as he entered he saw his clothing laid out on the canopied bed. In the adjacent bathroom, his sparse toiletries had been arranged on the black granite vanity. The floor was covered with white, octagonal tiles, the walls with white subway tiles; he twisted the taps of the claw foot tub and tugged the pull-chain handle of the old-fashioned commode; the water tank elevated above the bowl whooshed, and Joseph chuckled. He wondered how he could have achieved a greater contrast between the claustrophobic fog of the previous evening and the expansiveness of the morning's surprising revelations.

As he had the night of the thunderstorm, Joseph drew a hot bath and lay with a wet washcloth over his eyes, recalling what have given him the impetus to begin this trip: sessions with the therapist, isolating himself in his parent's house, watching marathon reruns of *Law & Order* and its spinoffs, eventually switching off the television because he needed no reminders of how horrible people could be to one another. Deciding to act according to his nature as a fighter, to learn to cope with the shadows without assistance, but not pushing himself to exhaustion. Going the distance, but not at a sprint. Trimming away life's excess to reveal a core, essential truth about himself.

The darkness imposed by the washcloth reminded him of the previous day's fog, how at twilight it had enshrouded him in a gray chrysalis. Something his father had expressed as Joseph left: hopefulness that his quest would be successful. He may not have fully understood his son's need for this journey, but he identified with it as a mission. He had served in Vietnam. His father's father had served in the second world war. Joseph associated singular smells with each man: cigarette smoke with

his grandfather, Lava soap with his father. As a child, Joseph watched TV shows with his father about war: *Combat*, *Twelve O'clock High*, *Hogan's Heroes*. When he asked why there no shows about Vietnam, his father said they didn't make TV shows about wars that were lost.

As he dried himself with the plush bath towel, Joseph wondered: if he had a son, what smell would the boy associate with him?

Through the window overlooking the back yard, he watched Peggy clipping herbs from a raised-bed garden. Her braid slipped over her shoulder and she flipped it back; as she moved down the row of plants, it continued to slide over her shoulder and she continued to flip it away from her work. Retaking the same ground again and again, he observed.

—

When he sat at the dining room table with Sally and Peggy Hutchins and saw the size of the grilled pork chop on his plate (an inch-and-a-half thick, stuffed with a sage dressing), he nearly chuckled. After the meal, Ben Hamilton arrived with a garment bag: khaki slacks, white Oxford shirt, red tie, and Navy blue blazer. We guessed your size, he said. Weren't sure if you were traveling with dress-up clothes. Why don't you change and then I'll take you on a tour of the town? Introduce you to some of the people who'll be attending the dinner tonight at the lodge.

Joseph nodded, slinging the garment bag over his arm and retreating to his room. He had urged Sally and Peggy Hutchins to talk about themselves during lunch. People enjoyed that, he knew, and regardless of whether they blared like a horn or whispered secrets, it kept them from asking questions of him.

The clothes fit: not tight but also not loose enough to make him appear clownish. When he descended the stairs to the foyer, Ben Hamilton offered a thumbs-up. Sally Hutchins

brushed an imaginary fleck of lint from his shoulder and bestowed a proprietary smile.

The two of them walked back toward the town square, which Joseph noticed had been transformed: patriotic bunting draped from building fronts, lamp posts, and second-story windows; a grandstand in front of the courthouse; and a banner stretched across the street proclaiming the celebration of the town's founding in 1866. He and Ben Hamilton greeted folks who extended their hands, welcoming and congratulating Joseph. Most of the people on the street fit a curious demographic, old people and teens; there was hardly anyone Joseph's age and he imagined them fleeing the town for more exciting settings as soon as they reached the age of mobility.

They circled the town square. The barber, pointing a finger at the hair falling onto Joseph's collar, offered a free trim, which Joseph declined. At a florist shop, a woman pinned a red carnation in the buttonhole of the blazer lapel. Hand-crafted caramel was presented at a candy store. Every stop brought excessive yet heartfelt generosity and hospitality. He developed a soreness in his neck from the frequent nodding and tension in his jaw from the repeated grinning. But his anxiety of meeting new and unfamiliar people remained submerged as Ben Hamilton introduced person after person, names that floated away like windblown pollen, faces that morphed into a single countenance of genial salutation.

Fear of the shadows often menaced more frighteningly than the shadows themselves; he'd described the fear to the therapist as a light gray hint of the ebony darkness. Being enveloped by them was the least amniotic feeling he could imagine. When he told her he was unsure how to live, she counseled that PTSD was not a weakness.

Acknowledge it. Understand what it is, she'd said, and you'll learn to control and handle it.

But it had not been in his nature to wait, so he embarked on the trip, and in a paradoxical twist, conceded that patience was one of the trip's most constructive lessons.

Many of the people they encountered expressed hope that Joseph was not too inconvenienced by his honorary incarceration, to which he responded that all he was losing was time. Thoughts of loss had consumed him when he returned from the army, but one stood out above the others: loss of feeling that his childhood home was home. The absence of people his age in the town and his urge to leave home reminded him of an old song lyric: *How you gonna keep'em down on the farm, after they've seen Paree*.

For Joseph it was the shadows; for the town's youth it was the escape of the gritty sameness of their lives. Had any of them chosen the army, he wondered? And would they come to regret their decisions? The therapist told him regret was punishment levied by an internal authority. Self-imposed penance, she said. Forgiveness doesn't always come at a cost.

As they approached the bed and breakfast, Ben Hamilton laid out the schedule for the celebrations: a dinner that night at the lodge, a parade the following day (during which Joseph would serve as the Marshall), and then a cookout at the park and fireworks.

Sally and Peggy will drive you to the lodge tonight. I'll see you then, he said, and then walked away, a man with purpose in his stride.

Instead of mounting the steps to the porch, Joseph followed a flagstone path around the house to the garden in which he'd seen Peggy Hutchins clipping herbs. In a gazebo at the rear of the yard, he removed his blazer, reclined on a padded chaise, and closed his eyes, birdsong in the trees surrounding the yard serenading him. He had encountered so many birds on the trip and lamented not having brought a field guide to help

identify them. One vestige of life in the army: the ability to fall asleep anywhere, anytime, under nearly any conditions.

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The lodge hall struck Joseph as a haphazard fusion of a high school cafeteria and a roadhouse bar. It was cluttered with folding tables and chairs. Large, metal-framed windows overlooked the gravel parking lot on one side, and on the other a corn field. Framed photos hung on the wall of stiff men in dark suits, aligned in stiffer rows in front of the building. Guided to a raised dais, Joseph passed folks he'd met that afternoon, who greeted him with the intimacy of an old friend. The closeness of the space and the volume of people (more than a hundred, he estimated), sparked worry that the shadows would harass him. He envisioned them reaching out from the walls to harass him; a fear of reacting to them in the environment that engendered them often doubled the anxiety. A nagging feature of fear: it rarely emerged in a pragmatic location. Of course, what sort of location would that be, Joseph mused.

Remarks followed dinner. Ben Hamilton. The judge who had sentenced him and other town officials, but the keynote address was delivered by Selma Fenstrom, introduced as the town's unofficial historian, a retired teacher and part-time librarian.

Joseph Patrick Callahan, veteran of the civil war, served in the 18th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, fought in several notable battles: Second Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and Petersburg, where he sustained a bullet wound to his lower left leg, and as a result, he walked with a slight limp for the remainder of his life. Achieved the rank of sergeant. Returned to his home in Bristol after the war, but soon embarked west, by train to Omaha, and then, burdened with the tools and trappings of a farmer in the bed of a buckboard, followed the Platte River, turning north

where it was joined by the Loup River and diverting then again along a then-unnamed creek. He paused one night to camp and, according to his journal, (the prized possession of the West Callahan Creek Library collection), determined he'd put enough distance between himself and Massachusetts to forget his home and memories of the war.

Joseph Callahan quickly learned he possessed no aptitude for farming and after two disappointing seasons turned instead to shop keeping, establishing and managing a general store for neighboring farmers and ranchers. The town of West Callahan Creek grew around the store, (Selma Fenstrom noted that the official date of incorporation differed from the date of Callahan's arrival on this stretch of prairie, as detailed in his journal; they preferred the latter for purposes of marking anniversaries).

She spoke of Callahan's service as the town's first mayor, a thirteen-year tenure, his reluctance to observe the tenth anniversary of the surrender of Lee at Appomattox, his contrary attitude toward the neighboring Pawnee, Ponca, and Arapaho, (contrary to that of other settlers, Callahan advocated peaceful relations), and how he riled many townspeople by banning the wearing of firearms within the town boundaries. But he was overall a popular, if at times moody, citizen and public servant. Selma Fenstrom continued with her biography of Callahan, but Joseph latched onto the single word: *moody*. Was there within his journal a more detailed account of the cause of his moodiness? Sipping from his water, Joseph scanned the crowded room: Many of the attendees nodded at her recollections about the town's growth, its sons who had served in both world wars, Korea, and Vietnam. No mention of any active duty service members or casualties from Afghanistan or Iraq, and Joseph hoped the town's youth had wised up to the nationalistic rhetoric of army recruiters.

One hundred and fifty years on this prairie we call home, Sarah Fenstrom said, born of a wanderlust by a man from

Massachusetts who answered the call of his country to preserve the union.

Joseph side-glanced at her as she neared her conclusion. A birdlike woman, with closely-cropped graying hair, wire-rimmed round glasses that reminded him of photos of John Lennon. Her voice belied her slight frame. Strong and confident. The commanding projection of a teacher accustomed to corralling fidgeting children.

In his final journal entries, Callahan reflected on his life, and logged his life's greatest regret: he never married, never fathered any daughters or sons, remained disheartened within his pride that the town bearing his name would never be home to any descendants. But, Selma Fenstrom concluded, we are all the children of our founding father, Joseph Patrick Callahan.

The crowd applauded as she shuffled her pages and nodded once, then twice, and waved a hand at the audience, returning to her seat on the end of the dais opposite from Joseph. Ben Hamilton rose to the microphone, as Joseph stared at Selma Fenstrom, determined to speak with her at the conclusion of the dinner. Reminding everyone that during the town's centennial, an honorary mayor had been drafted to oversee the celebrations, Ben Hamilton indicated Joseph with an extended arm, his palm up, gesturing for him to stand. Joseph complied, facing the room, grinning, bobbing his head, glancing at Selma Fenstrom, whom he discovered had been studying him in profile, squinting through her eyeglasses, smiling in a manner that made him feel she recognized in him something he didn't wish to reveal.

Mayor Joseph Hunter, would you care to say a few words?

Ben Hamilton's request startled Joseph, and he glared at the man for a moment as applause rippled through the room and people stood, chanting *Speech! Speech!*

Ben Hamilton beckoned him with a wave of his arm and stepped from the microphone.

Refusing was an untenable position, so Joseph stood, walked to the tabletop lectern, gripping it with both hands, and surveyed the crowded room as a tightening in his sternum warned that the shadows lurked patiently on the periphery of the room, awaiting the most inopportune moment to cloak him in debilitating fear and anxiety. But they remained at a distance, and he wondered if the good nature and the good will of the assembled people kept them at bay.

Thank you all, he said, hopeful his amplified voice repelled the shadows, even if temporarily. It's an honor to be your honor.

Laughter coursed through the room. Joseph wondered if cheerfulness and good spirits could also inhibit his shadows.

I've been given every hospitality. I'm very grateful and looking forward to tomorrow's festivities. Thank you all. He waved an arm above his head in a sweeping arc and stepped back from the lectern, nodding and smiling like a campaigning politician, and then returned to his seat. He glanced quickly at Selma Fenstrom; she stared at him with a close-lipped grin and nodded at him as she sluggishly blinked.

As Ben Hamilton announced an official end to the evening, Joseph side-stepped behind those seated on the dais until he stood beside Selma Fenstrom's chair.

I'd like to hear more about Joseph Callahan, he said. If you have some time.

The woman's eyes softened as she rose from her chair. Why don't I meet you at Sally's and we can talk there?

Joseph nodded. Thank you.

—

Selma Fenstrom's late husband, a Marine veteran of the Korean War, exhibited symptoms of PTSD, although the condition then

was called combat exhaustion or fatigue. His spells, she called them, never turned violent, but her research into the life of the town's founder uncovered what she called common singularities.

It's a contradiction in terms, I know, but too many quirks in their character aligned like fence posts.

Callahan's journal alternated between brief and lengthy discourses. The short entries recorded mundane, day-to-day goings-on, notes about the weather (an unremitting concern in an agricultural community). But the longer entries revealed the man.

Bared his soul, she said. It was tortured at times by recollections of the war. He wasn't alone in that out here on the prairie. Many veterans from both sides went west after the war. Seeking what they couldn't find any more at home.

Callahan wrote that he knew when to stop his travels because it was in his nature to recognize it.

As I suppose you'll know as well. It'll be in your nature to know. Selma Fenstrom sat on the settee in the sitting room, cradling a glass of bourbon in both hands. Sally Hutchins had escorted them to the room, returned with the bottle and glasses, and then withdrawn as though she and Selma Fenstrom had choreographed the scene.

You mentioned he had a reputation for being moody. Joseph traced the rim of his glass with the tip of a forefinger.

Those were other people's observations. Nothing too erratic. He mentioned trying to control his spells. That's what he called them. He described how his conscience haunted him, like a specter, often at night, and at other, inopportune times.

Joseph chuckled at the mention of inconvenient timing.

Like yours, right? Selma Fenstrom lifted the bourbon to her

lips and gazed at Joseph over the rim of the glass.

Sconces on either side of the fireplace and a floor lamp behind the settee illuminated the room in a golden glow, casting shadows in a variety of geometric forms against the walls, papered in a pattern of tiny roses among giant peony blooms. No good time for them, Joseph said. Did Callahan mention how he coped with his spells?

No. Only that they occurred. But he wrote about how coming west affected them. Founding this town gave him a new flag under which to fight. That's a direct quote. An allusion to his war experiences, I'm sure.

A new flag. I like that, Joseph said.

A flag that represented him, not a nation at war. That's what I want to believe. And that Joseph Patrick Callahan founded this town as a form of occupational therapy, long before the benefits of such an approach were even anticipated. He never called his spells demons. He understood what haunted him. Not a single incident but the cumulative experiences of his wartime years. We're a curious lot, you know, people. We strive to isolate a problem's cause, then fix it.

One fell swoop.

Exactly. Ridding the body of a parasite, but without destroying the host.

I've been questioning whether that's possible.

Oh, my boy. It's possible. Callahan wrote that toward the end of his life he felt like a husk, but he didn't have the resources available to you today. Ironically, he was surrounded by men who shared similar experiences; talking to them might have helped quell the spells. Selma Fenstrom laughed at her own rhyming phrase. He could have held a group therapy session in his general store. Wouldn't that have been

a sight to set tongues wagging!

It would have done them a world of good.

I think that’s exactly what Callahan sought. A world of good. Not of war. Not of destruction and death. Juts a world of good. And he tried to establish that here. His writings reveal his wishes in that regard.

He sounds like an interesting man.

He was. Like many public figures, we’ve mythologized him, sanded down his rough spots to fashion a presentable figure. But I’ve glimpsed into his soul, as trite as that sounds. He possessed the breadth of a prairie sky and the depth and of the deepest well. A fascinating man.

Do you think he ever achieved his redemption?

Fascinating question. In all his writing, I’ve never seen him use that term. Unlike a lot of the people at the time, he was not religious. But I suppose redemption was wrapped up in what he sought. What about you, Joseph Hunter. Do you seek redemption?

Not by that name. Maybe reconciliation.

Selma Fenstrom nodded, braced herself on the arm of the settee and rose. It’s been a pleasure meeting you. She extended her arm and Joseph gripped her warm hand in his own. Trust your nature to help you recognize when it’s your time to stop. She clasped Joseph’s hand in hers as he walked her through the foyer to the door.

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Seated in the grandstand in front of the court house, Joseph (wearing a blue sash with the word MARSHALL emblazoned in gold satin letters) applauded bands, floats bedecked in crepe-paper flowers and tugged by tractors, a convoy of fire trucks from

neighboring towns, a procession of antique automobiles restored to pristine condition, and a bearded man in the uniform of a Union sergeant, riding a black horse and waving a sword at the crowds lining the streets that enclosed the square. Trailing the Callahan figure in a ragged picket line, half a dozen other men in Union garb paused every few yards and fired off a volley from their antique rifles. Joseph winced at the first report, but with repetition grew more confident the gunfire would not trigger the shadows.

Ferdinand Krumholtz, Dom Pedro II. von Brasilien, 1849.

He recalled his conversation with Selma Fenstrom, realizing his predisposition to try and glean wisdom from her familiarity with Callahan. Tracing the name of his spells through the histories of war: shell shock, battle fatigue, stress response syndrome, PTSD. Even Job, the embodiment of patience, was said to have suffered mental disturbances from battle. Every person around him bore a smile and he imagined that later circumstances in their lives might enforce grimaces or expressions of sadness; nothing was permanent. But then, the grimaces and expressions of sadness held to impermanence as well. He remembered moments when he and his brothers rested, post-action, guzzling water, leaning their backs against walls, removing their helmets and shading their eyes beneath blinding, cloudless skies, and then regarded one another as similar smiles and then laughter erupted to rinse the amassed tension from the clustered squad members. The parade. Could it be his victory parade? The conquest of fear. The taming of the shadows.

At the cook-out in the park, Joseph wandered among the crowd, asking questions, listening to the answers, and revealing some of his story to those who asked about his life. Person after person thanked him for his service, to which he nodded and told them they were welcome. His father early in young

Joseph's life had emphasized the importance of how to receive a compliment. It's a gift to the giver to acknowledge their thanks, he'd said. Tell them they're welcome and look them in the eye.

The fireworks that night drew a collective *oohing* and *aahing* approval of the gathered onlookers, and although Joseph flinched at the first noisy bursts, he soon relaxed on a grassy spot in the park, watching the display with what he could only define as a lightness in his heart, a sensation he wondered if Callahan had ever experienced in this town that bore his name. The deafening finale brought him and those around him to their feet in explosive clapping, and as the quiet night replaced the booming echoes, Joseph joined Sally and Peggy Hutchins for the ride back to the bed and breakfast.

As they wished him good night and walked toward their rooms at the rear of the house, Joseph felt an urge to ask them to linger, to engage them in conversation, could envision night stretching into dawn, as it had sometimes in Iraq, as man after man talked, the subjects varied and unimportant, camaraderie being the unspoken objective.

In the morning, Joseph descended the stairs for breakfast, with Ben Hamilton, Sally and Peggy Hutchins. He had hoped to say good bye to Selma Fenstrom, but reasoned such a farewell might seem anticlimactic. She'd provided Joseph all the assistance she had to offer the night before. At the conclusion of the light meal, the mother and daughter flanked him as they descended the steps to his bicycle and trailer. At the curb beside the sheriff's squad car, the conjoined vehicles rested, cleaned and polished, the blue frame glinting in the morning sunlight.

As befits mayoral transport, the sheriff said, emerging from his car. I'm going to escort you to the town line.

Joseph grinned, gripping the hand of Ben Hamilton, looking him

in the eye as the man thanked him for being such a good sport, accepted hugs from both Sally and Peggy Hutchins, and then mounted his bicycle and followed the sheriff's car, its emergency lights flashing, as it crept back toward the town square, where several people paused and waved at Joseph, wishing him good fortune and a safe journey. No one had gathered to see him off or welcome him back from Iraq. A few blocks from the square, the sheriff steered to the shoulder and turned off his lights. Joseph pulled astride the driver's window.

I know you're not a marine, the sheriff said, but *Semper Fi*.

Joseph eyed him and the sheriff chuckled.

First gulf war.

Thanks, Joseph said. For everything.

Our pleasure. Stay safe.

Watching the car complete a gravel-spitting U-turn and speed back toward town, the sheriff blasting the siren briefly as he waved his farewell, Joseph recalled Selma Fenstrom's confidence that his nature would allow him to recognize his destination, if not his destiny, that he would receive a signal that he finally knew himself. Shadows, he considered, might darken and diminish his vision, but they need not blind him.

New Poetry from JD Duff

Night Flash

You’ve been having nightmares again.
The cruel shaking of a body
resisting slumber.
Hands twitching,
chest jerking to beats
of unknown song,
playing over and over
like memories you sold at a tag sale,
buried on the Tuscarora trail,
dumped in a white room
at Bethesda Naval Hospital.


Jules Tavernier, Heart of a Volcano Under the Full Moon, 1888.

I awake to the moon beaming
unto a lonely bed,
find you out back where dreams
smear on a blurry canvas of recollection,
and ghosts rise from wooded corners of truth.

I climb under the poncho liner
that covered you through
countless peaks of ice
and frost, Persian sandstorms,
fighting holes where you used
the cloth to shield you from walls
of claylike dirt.
The June breeze dries the sweat
around your lips. I lift a rifle
from your chest, place it beyond
the reach of ready palms.

A single leaf rests
on your cheek.
Cicadas cry for their lost
as I hush your silence with a kiss.

The Homecoming

It rained for a week
after our mailman’s son
died in a roadside bomb
attack near Al Karmah.
The sky wept
as half-mast flags
blew gently
on the prairie’s haze.
Signs of well wishes
bowed in store windows,
bellowed from alters of diverse
domes of prayer,
rested in alms of flowers
and fried dough.
A Corps led procession,
thick with mourners,
crowded the lot
of the pearly
mountain church.
Bagpipes sang
for a Lance Corporal
draped in dress blues,
mother betrayed
by dark dismissals
of nightly pleas,
father wilting
to soft hymns
for his broken boy.
The lone sibling

stared at the casket,
wondered why he survived
the trashings of war
while his brother
lay in a box,
waiting for rifles
to speak his praise,
a dark tomb to welcome
another lost Marine.

Seal of God

Foxholes and submarines led you to farm life
where you graze the vast splendor of still land.
Crickets speak to the quiet hush of night
as an elusive sky captures secrets,
spits sins in large chunks of hail,
disrupting the tranquil flight of time.

Faith’s armor shoves you in church
where peace is offered between pews
and sounds of crossfire muffle
the graceful hum of atonement.


William Holman Hunt, Cornfield at Ewell, 1849.

You sneak home through cornfields;
stalks reek with bruised dents
of blistering flesh.
Wounded frogs leap past
thick tridents of reticent thought,
darkness dismantled by the crippled promise
of a swelling cherry dawn.

The euphonies of children

replace cancors of slivered screams
as the wind blows you
toward our kitchen, where we break bread
with an Amish farmer
and wait for God to heal us.