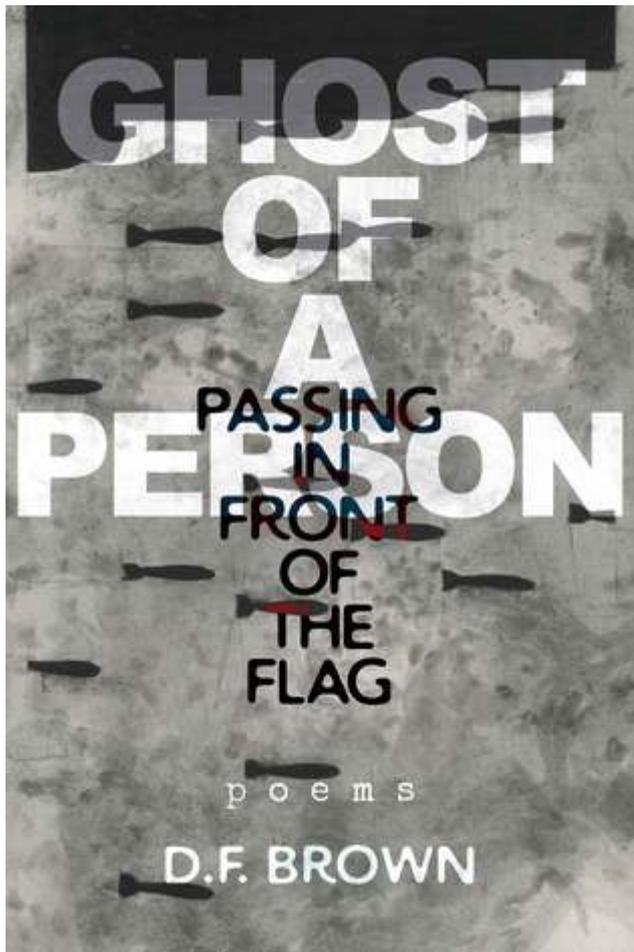


# New Poetry from D.F. Brown



## *So, Who Wants to Walk Slack?*

Because we have no home in language  
We keep memories there  
As if the past were true  
And grinning in a grainy b/w  
Teenagers posing johnwayned  
Twisted into facts  
Jungle-wise who knows  
What grows there deep  
All night knotted in your heart  
Form mangles with content  
Hear clouds scrape dark  
Clutch the claymore clacker like  
Life depends on blasting 1000 pellets  
Across the muddy path below

Meaning in its meat  
As if out there  
Our ass sad little war  
Had not ended  
Is never ever over and  
Because it's history we hold on  
And keep sending our children.

### **Every Meal is a Happy Meal**

Let us see the evening as raw meat  
Finest Grade A Prime  
Spitted ready for the burning

Charred and bloody rare  
Leaking on the platter white  
As we find our way into this scene

A table offered up with places  
And take our portions of the gore  
With salt and wines and candle flicker

Let us eat these products  
Over faces of the hungry  
From the heart range of this continent

The cowboy bounty of hard work  
Slice and savor the marbled meats  
And rub our full bellies round

And sense ourselves deserving  
These cuts and servings  
As if it were duty to an economy

That can no longer afford our appetites

*Floating Jack's Fork of the Current River,*

*Shannon County, Missouri, August 2010*

I try to pretend but the wind  
gets in my way, night enters and  
shadows crawl along the gravel shoals  
into the tree line across the water.  
At any other campfire they would be  
memories called up and spat  
into the flames, sizzle for a second  
and rise as smoke unto the stars.  
But in this dark they crawl

over old sandbags to my heart—  
great slobbering ghosts from Viet Nam,  
and set their altars

dig out dog tags, cartridges,  
belt buckle, buttons  
canteen and rations—

ashes, ashes, old bones of heat.

Houston/2018

To read more from D.F. Brown buy *Ghost of a Person: Passing in Front of the Flag* at [Bloomsday Literary](#).

---

**Fiction from Sara Nović:**

# After the Attack

Well, nothing at first, not right after. In those initial moments panic is still optional.

At the grocery store, the one across from your building on Frederick Douglass, or farther up on Ft. Washington near your boyfriend's place, depending—a shrill, unfamiliar tone piercing the Muzak. It startles awake a sudden bond between you and other shoppers, people with whom you'd so far avoided eye contact, mumbling a continuous apology for bumping into one another. Now there is camaraderie in the unison groping of pockets, the rifling for phones among purses and reusable totes.

Across the river on Atlantic Avenue, in the urgent care waiting room, you and the receptionist both jump. The emergency alert system, this is not only a test.

Or on your couch at home, your phone dead from the night before, you receive no alert. You won't see the special report ticker tape because you are watching Netflix. At the moment, it doesn't much matter. At first, there are only unconfirmed reports.

It can, as it has before, happen at any time, and therein is the bulk of its power. But city mornings offer certain opportunities—more people on the street, on subways, concentrated in office buildings. People running late, or still bleary-eyed, unseeing, unsaying. See 9/11, 8:46 AM; see Oklahoma City, 9:02 AM.

The West Fourth Street station is bombed in the morning. In your Columbus Circle office tower, a splay of technological gadgets laid out before you on the conference table sound unanimous alarms. The first alert does not contain the word "attack"; it only says "explosion." So you and your colleagues ignore it. Because the meeting is about to start.



Because New York is a big city, and old, and badly-kempt. Because, though you have watched your share of terror unfold live and on screens, it is still possible that this is not that. Possible is all you need, and in New York possibilities are myriad—gas line break, signal malfunction, flood, or trash fire. You've read the posters; the MTA boasts hundreds every year.

Nothing more will happen for a while. You get in line to pay for your groceries.

The receptionist will turn on the television just as you are ushered to the exam room, and you'll scroll through Twitter in your paper gown, seeking a hashtag.

Or you'll lie on your couch with your feet atop the armrest and let your eyes glaze hard against the electro-glow, allowing one episode to flow into the next. It is, after all, your day off.

When, that morning, about halfway through the meeting you remember it is a Tuesday, you pull your phone beneath the table and text your wife. She would've passed through West Fourth on her way to class. *U ok? Saw the alert*, you write, then put the phone back on the table, designating half an eye to the task of monitoring the indicator light that might signal her response. A moment later you see the graphic designer making a similar move. The meeting facilitator, who flew in from LA, does not notice.

The second alert changes things. It goes off mid-walk-up, echoing through the stairwell, and you abandon your grocery bags on the kitchen floor and turn on the television. There has been another explosion; cops are in pursuit of a suspect; there is speculation about his race and religion.

You shiver in your paper gown while your doctor, a Pakistani man from Jackson Heights, wishes for the attacker's whiteness, laments the hate crimes his neighborhood will be in for otherwise. Why, when there is an attack, must they always suffer twice? As he talks you reach for your phone to text your roommate.

Or you fall asleep there on the couch before the computer, waking only when Netflix stops its auto-play, seeking validation that you are, in fact, still here.

After the second alert, you step out of the meeting to call her. She doesn't answer. It doesn't even ring. Maybe, you think, she has made it to class and is mid-lecture. Maybe she is stuck underground, train traffic bottled up beneath you. Maybe, you think, New York should get its shit together and get some goddamn phone service in the subway like every other city in the goddamn world. Some Russian oligarch is probably dragging his feet, trying to figure out how to wring more money from it first. Fuckers, you think, aware that in your glass skyscraper on the Circle, many have thought the same of you. You call her again—no dice. You see Adrian—your partner

on the project—in the hallway. He is on the phone, and you nod at each other as you pass.

An inactive group text once made to plan a reunion dinner (failed due to irreconcilable schedules), is reanimated as friends check-in. Quickly, most everyone says they are fine—stay safe—and you wait for the stragglers to respond.

You ball up the paper gown and jab at your phone with one hand, pull your clothes on in brusque, awkward bursts with the other. You hop on one leg as you yank at the backs of your shoes. You hear from your roommate, or you still haven't heard from your roommate.

You finally plug in your phone and the missed calls from your mother, seven in total, are how you find out something is wrong. You try to piece together the story from her news jumble. No, you rarely go to the place where it happened, but this is cold comfort, and you do not attempt to detail the reality of city living for her. You wake up your computer while you listen to her relief set in. Of course you take the subway, everyone does, but you're home now. You remember a guy you'd had a crush on at your last job and wonder if he is okay, then if it is creepy to seek him out online and ask. You refresh Facebook to see if he surfaces.

The attacker's manifesto has surfaced, though what it says doesn't matter much. Whatever the angle it serves as fuel for someone else's vitriol. Already the feeds have been coopted by trolls of diverse hatreds, practically gleeful in how the dead people are indisputable proof of their political stances, casualty numbers collected and laid out as evidence like a good hand of poker. As if in defiance, the body count fluctuates all afternoon. NBC volleys between 30 and 33 while CNN holds steady at "dozens." A reporter reads snippets from the document, lines they have also turned into an infographic, to be shared and repeated in and out of context in the weeks to come.

Around the table, you and your colleagues are each engaged in your own ceaseless scroll, searching for a live newsfeed online. But the streams are jammed, or they are an erratic, pixelated froth—frozen in one moment, blurred and jerky the next, altogether unwatchable. Adrian drags a TV cart into the conference room, the kind the gym teacher used to pull out of the closet when it was time for the Sex Ed videos. Aptly, someone has drawn a penis in the dust on the screen. Once the TV is on you can no longer see it, but while the news flashes grainy Chopper 7 footage of fire belching up the subway stairwell, you still wish someone had wiped it off. You send another text as you watch the FDNY charge the flames. The hose water does not look like water; it looks solid, a length of rope lowered into the chasm, its impact on the flames inconsequential.

You want to go home, but with the subway down and traffic gridlocked, you are told to remain in a safe place as the police sweep the city for IEDs. Despite being forced to stay in the office, you are wholly unproductive. The guy from LA, trying to be kind, passes in and out of the room intermittently. At a borrowed desk he calls his home office, where the day is still new and unmarred.

The feeling when her message comes through: relief pushing up your chest with such force it is almost nauseating. Like eating something so sweet it burns your tongue, makes your stomach jump.

*I'm good. stuck on train for a while. class canceled so headed home. love u.*

You yelp when you read it, a weird, strangled sound, and you aren't even embarrassed. "She's okay," you announce. And they are happy for you.

Politicians from all over the country call in to news shows to offer thoughts&prayers, having less to do with either endeavor

than with being on record as having said the phrase.

You are out of the way and grateful to be so, way uptown in a place no one has yet thought to blow up.

You leave the doctor's office and try to decipher the map of bus routes that might get you back to your place.

Or, when you hang up with your mother, you remember you were supposed to meet a date tonight. You text him to ask whether you are still on.

You cut out at 4:30, a rarity for you, but you weren't getting anything done anyway, and you want to see your wife. You try to call, but it goes to voicemail. You're grateful you had some contact, you feel lucky. On your way, you notice the receptionist has been crying, but you don't stop to ask. Outside it is Sesame Street weather, such sharp contrast to the smoke screened footage of downtown, it feels as if it had all happened much farther away. Your phone rings but you don't recognize the number, so you ignore it and contemplate the nerve of telemarketers these days. You walk home, thirty blocks, and think it really is a nice commute on foot, that you should do it more often.

The doorman greets you, searches your face and, finding no distress, looks reassured.

"Good to see you, sir."

"You, too. All okay in your family?"

"Yes sir. And the missus?"

"She's fine. She's upstairs, actually."

He gives you a look that suggests he is trying figure out what he might say next. You register the question in your arched eyebrows.

"It's just—I've been here all day, sir. The other doorman couldn't make it in, because of the trains."

And you remember him bidding you goodbye early that morning. You excuse yourself and get in the lift and rush to your door, though you know before you open it—she isn't there. You call and call on the landline but it goes straight to voicemail like the battery is dead. A while passes before you remember the unknown caller.

You never hear the whole message. You hang up as soon as you realize it is the police, call the number back. They are uncharacteristically polite as they cast you around the circuit board.

Finally, an officer says your name, your wife's. Apologizes. Asks if you could come down to make an ID.

"There must be a mistake," you say. "I heard from her after the attack. She said she was okay."

"You spoke with her?"

"She texted."

"Sir, we'd still appreciate if you came down." He gives you directions to Washington Square Park as if you are an alien, and in that moment you feel like one.

You call your boyfriend and tell him to come over for dinner, you have been grocery shopping today and can make a nice stir fry; you can catch up on that show you've DVR'd.

You get a phone call from your roommate sounding groggy, saying yes, he is fine, but they're taking him to the hospital—somewhere nearby, maybe Brooklyn Heights. Or you hear nothing and lament your morning quarrel over toast crumbs, or hear nothing and invent grand schematics for his escape from peril—perhaps he is still deep underground, inching along the wall of the tunnel, making his way home.

Or you flat iron your hair and put on extra mascara and things go back to normal. You feel guilty about it or you don't. You take a cab in a wide arc around the affected blocks and look away when you see caution tape. You arrive at the restaurant right on time.

You take a cab, get out after ten minutes, feeling sick, remind yourself that nothing is for certain. You run twenty blocks buoyed by that hope, hail another cab. At the scene it is not yet night, the NYPD's neatly ordered mobile generator streetlamps muted by a fuchsia sunset so striking it makes you want to punch something. The police have cordoned off the park, one corner swathed with tarps where the EMTs swarm. You know this is where you are supposed to go before anyone tells you; the policeman at the gate who checks your ID confirms.

In the makeshift tent: ferric scent of blood and antiseptic-as-cologne. A policewoman leads you down the row to a stretcher tagged with your last name. On the ground beneath it is your wife's purse.

"I don't understand. She messaged," you say when the cop pulls back the sheet.

"It's possible the message was sent with a delay, after extraction," she says. "As they're brought above ground and reconnect to the grid—the phones—it's been causing some confusion."

You stare at the cop as if she is speaking another language. She expresses her condolences, tells you to take your time and then return to the front table for the paperwork.

Beneath the sheet you take her hand, except she doesn't feel like your wife anymore—fingers cool and taut—so you settle for stroking her hair, soot and shrapnel flecked through like glitter. You cry until you think your ribs might crack; you sign your forms and push your way out of the tent into the twilight. You stand there on the grass, holding your wife's

purse and wondering what the point of that goddamn arch is anyway, wondering what the hell you are supposed to do next. Once, when you were fourteen, you and your best friend skipped school and got high in this park, but you have never been as dazed as you are now, generator stars boring through your eyes and into your skull, no hope of an exit wound.

*"After the Attack" originally appeared in BOMB, June 16, 2017.*

---

## **New Essay: How does Politics affect Writing, and Vice Versa?**



I recently attended the 15th International Conference on the Short Story in Lisbon, where I met many interesting writers, read from my own work, and participated in a panel that discussed the question in the title. I would like to thank my fellow panelists, all wonderful people and writers: Garry Craig Powell, Sandra Jensen, Rebekah Clarkson, and Robin McLean. In this essay I will expand on some thoughts from before and during the discussion.

What is considered 'political' in fiction writing, and how far can the definition be stretched? Is it merely engagé works dealing with topics war, oppression, instability, or injustice? Or is it also anything regarding social identity and issues like race, gender, and economic class? Likewise, creating feelings of empathy is often cited as one of the greatest roles or benefits of reading fiction: is this itself a political end, for example is belief that empathy is good or that there is such a thing as shared humanity a political

belief? What about writers and readers who appear to fall short of that ideal? Is it true that reading, especially of the “great books”, is educative and character—and society-improving? I always wonder about [Stalin](#), for example—a voracious reader of literature and history, and a loving family man to boot, who was still one of modern history’s biggest monsters.

Is there a duty (or responsibility) of writers (and all artists) to take a stand against injustice or make political statements in their work? If so, does this risk the work becoming too didactic or heavy-handed, possibly subtracting from its aesthetic appeal? If not, does the writer risk accusations of withdrawal, ignorance, or cowardice, especially if they should somehow ‘know better’ based on their time and place (something akin to a writer’s version of the ‘Good German’)?

Is a writer’s attempt to avoid anything remotely related to politics itself a privilege?

Or, in times of political danger or instability (which is really all the time), is there value in creating fiction that allows the writer and her readers an escape from this reality, however brief or superficial? Is all fiction therefore escapist in some sense, or is that modifier appropriate only to popular “genre” fiction?

Regarding so-called “genre” fiction, is it possible to read mystery, romance, thriller, or fantasy novels as apolitical? It is possible, but it would be missing the point that the stories that a writer chooses to tell or not to tell is itself a political expression. For example, the paradigmatic version of the romance is often an affirmation of the status quo, and thus on the side of the patriarchy or other oppressors.

Is it fair to say that the “best” works of fiction combine a sense of personal, individual, or particular aesthetic quality

with something “bigger” than the particular story—a sense of collective, universal human solidarity, or a longing for justice, for example?

How important is the author’s identity itself in how she is read? And how important is the reader’s identity in how she interprets a work? How does this dynamic change in the case of pseudonymous or unknown writers? For example, the *Torah* is considered an archetypal text of patriarchy, but Harold Bloom reimagined it in *The Book of J* as a highly subversive and satirical work of a female courtesan in the Solomonic court.

Accordingly, how does the reader’s knowledge of (or assumptions about) a writer’s identity and biography either facilitate or preempt charges of cultural appropriation? Is such a charge only accessible to various minorities, or only against, for example, the typical Western (especially Anglo-American) white male who has long dominated our politics and cultural output? If there is some truth to this, how careful does a white male need to be when making characters and plots? Are there stories, characters, and words that can be used by one writer to great power, but used by a different writer to great insensitivity?

I have myself never been to Southeast Asia, and am ignorant of much of the literature and culture of that part of the world. As it stands, I would never even attempt to write characters or plots that involve, say, Vietnam, without the relevant knowledge and experience; to do so would be doomed to failure and rightly prompt accusations of cultural appropriation. There are many white male American writers who have written about Vietnam very powerfully and convincingly, however; veterans Tim O’Brien (*The Things They Carried*) and Robert Olen Butler (*A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*), for example, or David Joiner (*Lotusland*), an American who lived in Vietnam for years. Even such examples must be compared with someone like Viet Thanh Nguyen (*The Sympathizer*), a Vietnamese-American writer who is obviously even more well-placed to write about

his own country than the knowledgeable outsiders listed above. I think that charges of cultural appropriation can fairly easily be avoided by a sensitive writer carefully choosing only things that she can write about from experience or extensive knowledge.

Cynthia Ozick, an American writer most famous for *The Shawl*, has been primarily a writer of the Holocaust and its aftermath. She appears to refute Theodor Adorno's famous (and probably misunderstood) quote that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric." In *Quarrel and Quandary*, there are several essays that deal directly with the issue of politics and fiction. In fact, just quoting some of her lines would be much more effective than anything I could come up with. For example:

*George Orwell, in "Why I Write," asserts that "the opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude." There are times when one is tempted to agree with him... Yet inserting politics into literature has, as we have seen, led to the extremist (or absurdist) notion that Jane Austen, for instance, is tainted with colonialism and slave-holding because Sir Thomas Bertram in Mansfield Park owns plantations in eighteenth-century Antigua.*

As would be supposed, she holds that not only do politics and writing mix, but it is necessary that they do so. All of the writers I heard from at the conference would readily agree. Despite this, the apolitical writer is not a mere straw man. At one point she also mentions a speech E.M. Forster gave in 1941 arguing for "Art for Art's Sake", even at a time when evil was spreading across the continent. Here is the crux of Ozick's essay:

*Art may well be the most worthy of all human enterprises; that is why it needs to be defended; and in crisis, in a barbarous time, even the artists must be visible among the defending spear-carriers. Art at its crux—certainly the*

*“Antigone”!—doesn’t fastidiously separate itself from the human roil; neither should artists. I like to imagine a conversation between Forster and Isaac Babel—let us say in 1939, the year Babel was arrested and tortured, or early in 1940, when he was sentenced to death at a mock trial. History isn’t only what we inherit, safe and sound and after the fact; it is also what we are ourselves obliged to endure...*

*There are those—human beings both like and unlike ourselves—who relish evil joy, and pursue it, and make it their cause; who despise compromise, reason, negotiation; who, in Forster’s words, do evil that evil may come—and then the possibility of aesthetic order fails to answer. It stands only as a beautiful thought, **and it is not sufficient to have beautiful thoughts while the barbarians rage on.** The best ideal then becomes the worst ideal, and the worst ideal, however comely, is that there are no barbarians; or that the barbarians will be so impressed by your beautiful thoughts that they too will begin thinking beautiful thoughts; or that in actuality the barbarians are no different from you and me, with our beautiful thoughts; and that therefore loyalty belongs to the barbarians’ cause as much as it belongs to our own...*

***The responsibility of intellectuals includes also the recognition that we cannot live above or apart from our own time and what it imposes on us;*** that willy-nilly we breathe inside the cage of our generation, and must perform within it. Thinkers—whether they count as public intellectuals or the more reticent and less visible sort—are obliged above all to make distinctions, particularly in an age of mindlessly spreading moral equivalence.

She mentions how Forster ends his speech with Shelley’s well-known quote that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”, and notes the irony that Forster took this as a dictum from Mt. Olympus even while Panzers were running roughshod over Europe and the camps were already operating. I

like the quote myself, but I would certainly not interpret it to mean that poets (or all writers) should withdraw from the world in the hope that the aesthetic beauty of their work alone is enough to improve the world. Ozick's comments above demonstrate why that will never be realistic.

Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* rejected the possibility that there was a single "aim of the writer" or "nature of literature". He compared writers who pursued private, aesthetic perfection, like Proust and Nabokov, with those seeking human liberty, like Dickens and Orwell. He says "There is no point in trying to grade these different pursuits on a single scale by setting up factitious kinds called "literature" or "art" or "writing"; nor is there any point in trying to synthesize them." In response to this, I have heard it said that even aesthetic pleasure is political. If this is true than all the admirers of *Lolita* will surely perceive the political foundation underlying that aesthetically pleasing novel, even if not overtly present in the plot.

[J.M. Coetzee](#) is a white South African who was opposed to the Apartheid regime, but chose to avoid overt politics or write about it obliquely, almost in the form of Platonic ideas. Here is his quote explaining his method:

*In times of intense ideological pressure like the present when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: **supplementarity** or **rivalry**.*

On the other hand, Nadine Gordimer, another white South African writer and life-long opponent of Apartheid, chose to deal head-on with political issues, or to supplement history, in her works. They both won the Nobel Prize, and both showed how writing about politics can still be done in many and various ways, including supplementing it, à la Gordimer, or rivaling it, à la Coetzee.

Social reform has been a goal of certain types of literature (and art) at least since the 19th century. Dickens comes to mind as one example among many. It has always been hard to pinpoint concrete effects literature may have had on politics, beyond vaguely influencing readers to feel empathy for people unlike them. One notable exception is the much-anthologized short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The story tells of a woman oppressed and driven mad by her doctor husband's "rest cure", a real-life treatment popularized by a doctor named Weir Mitchell. After the story was published, Mitchell read it and actually retracted this psychologically destructive treatment method. Other real-world political effects came from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the muck-rakers, including Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, to name two more examples.

Could Kafka be considered a political writer? Is there a spectrum of how political a writer is, or how political certain literary themes are? For example, alienation and outsidership play a big part in Kafka's work, but is this because of his identity as a hated minority living among another group of oppressed minorities, or because he held views against the imperial and royal Hapsburg authorities? On the other hand, is there anything political that could be found in Borges' stories? He seems to stick rigorously to the theme of intellectual escapism in the form of his unique literary metaphysics. What about Chekhov, whose incredibly deft, character-driven portraits seem, on the surface, to be apolitical? Or Zweig, who tried to be apolitical in all his fiction even while he was working to build a more cultured and cosmopolitan Europe in real-life (and who killed himself in Nazi-induced despair in 1942)? The answer is that, obviously, all these writers were/are very political.

And all art, including fiction, is political. That holds true even if the author herself denies it or tries to avoid it. We have been told to never trust the writer but to trust the

work; this seems a bit of academic sophistry, but in the case of a politics-denying writer we may do well to keep it in mind. The fact is that art production can only happen when the artist is free. Freedom of speech is central to the artist just as it is for the survival of a free society. There is no escape from politics for a writer or for anybody. We are all bound to the systems of power and human behavior that surround us. To not see or to deny this only reveals one's privilege.

My own biographical information, if relevant: I was an officer in the US Army for over four years and spent two years in Afghanistan. This has obviously had a big effect on my character and political development, but in the 10 years since I have been out of the army, I have mostly had no desire to write or create fiction dealing with military themes. The exception so far is my story in *The Road Ahead*, a 2017 anthology featuring writers who are all veterans of the American wars. My other stories and the novel I'm working on were not apparently motivated by any explicit political stance and are more like historical fiction. After this panel, however, I have realized that I was rather naive and that all of my fiction and ideas are very clearly based on political realities.

Recently, like many Americans, I feel that the gravity of the political situation demands of all of us to do more. I know other American writers who have told me that they are not able to work lately because of the weight of the 24/7 news cycle. I know others who are trying to produce art or poetry specifically engaging political issues (like [gun violence](#), for example). As a white male from the global hegemonic power, who has participated personally, if incidentally, in the ongoing state-sponsored violence, do I now have a duty to anyone other than myself, to fight for justice or against oppression? Would it be considered insensitive or even unethical of me to write only for myself? There are probably no absolute answers to any of these questions, but most of their utility comes from their

very formulation and expression. In the end, there is probably no absolute duty of a writer to bring politics into their works, but it will still always be a good idea, and probably the best thing we can do.

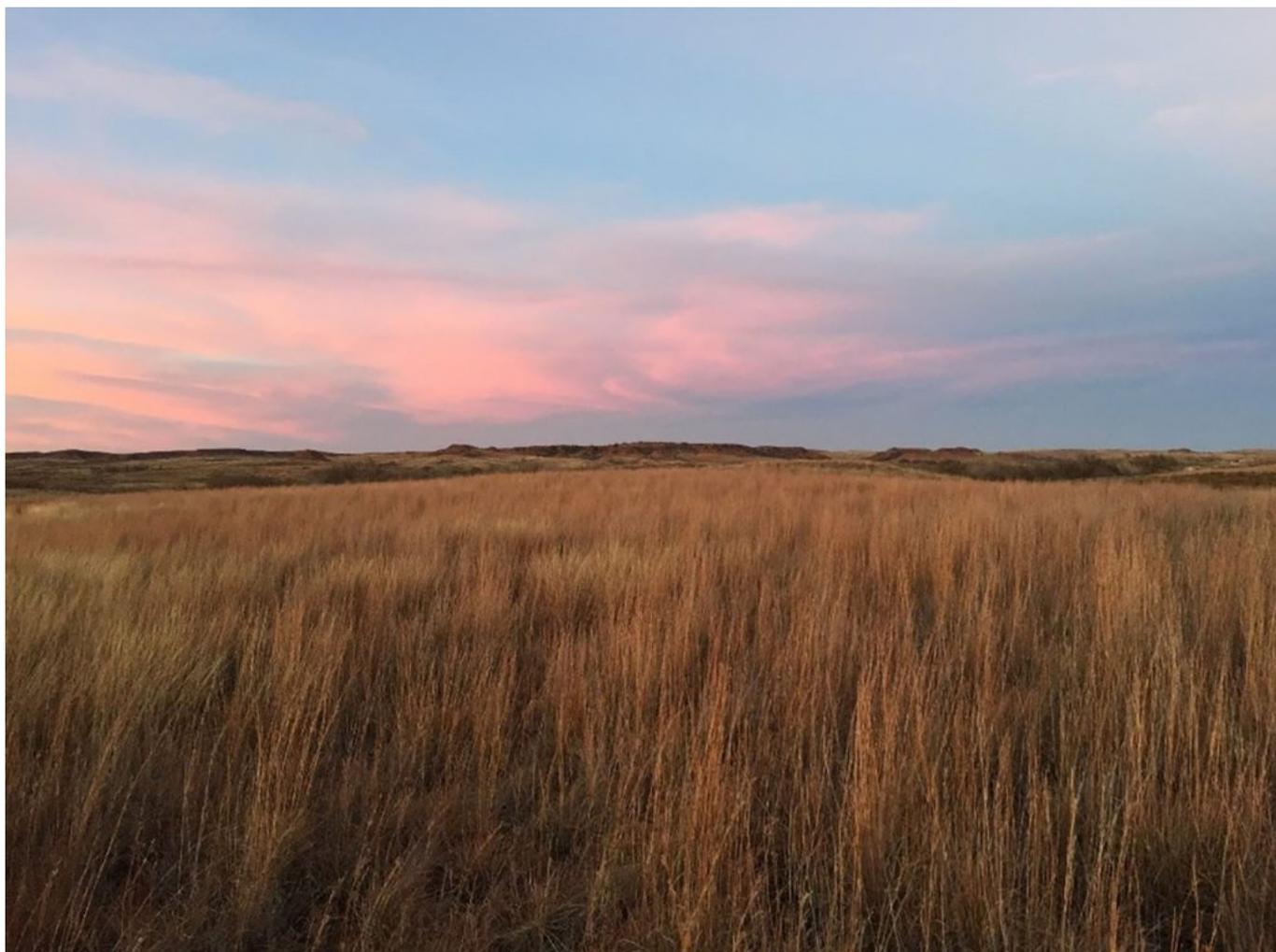
---

## **New Fiction from Ulf Pike: “Welcome Home, Brother”**

My arm burned red resting out the window in the summer sun as I drove east out of the mountains. I passed through the shade of centuries-deep bluffs carved by the Yellowstone River, then curved south into open, tall-grass prairies.

A road sign for Little Bighorn Battlefield flashed by with its mileage—more than once a “stop along the way” during road trips when I was young. A few cars passed with the vanity license plate of General Custer staring across the plains at Sitting Bull. I tried to picture the battle, as I always had, hear the rifle-fire and war cries. I tried to picture my great-great grandmother, speaking no English, boarding a passenger train with her children en route to a new life in Montana. What might she have been picturing? What did she hope for and fear, studying the strange landscape into the West, into *Indian Country*, news of Custer’s defeat no older than her youngest daughter?

Being a fifth-generation Montanan had always nurtured in me a special kind of pride and ownership. But nothing felt that way anymore, not since I got back.



My brother-in-law's penciled directions read *end of the world gas station – L*. I turned the wheel as I took in the derelict old building, scrawled with graffiti, a sunken canopy over absent pumps, pointed shards left in the windows. The truck bumped a few more miles through open range where sparse groups of horses pondered the ground and swatted flies with their tails. One tan and bony mare ambled along the shoulder of the road, unfazed by my passing.

As I drove through town past pairs of following eyes, I had to reassure myself that I'd been invited. Feral dogs with taut stomachs trotted through alleyways, cowed as if under an invisible raised hand. In a dirt lot a girl of maybe three sat alone on a swing, pumping her legs and grinning vibrantly. I caught her eyes and smiled. Behind her, two shirtless teenage boys with long braided hair played basketball under a netless hoop.

Turning onto a dusty two-track, I saw the first sign and slipped the directions into my shirt pocket. Through sagebrush up the hill, spray painted in safety-orange on scraps of plywood with arrows at the turns, they guided me to the *Other Medicine Sun Dance*.

---

I woke in the bed of my truck to the first rays of light and the sound of drumming, rhythmic and steady, above which men's voices sang in solemn unison, one occasionally leaping from the rest, a piercing wail which made my blood rush. The first of the four-day ceremony had begun and the many family and friends who'd come to support the dancers and offer prayers gathered around the lodge, which was constructed of numerous tree trunks stripped and re-planted in a large circle around a much taller center-tree, all of them linked with draping boughs and long strips of thin fabric which wavered in the gentle morning breeze. I stood a distance away and waited. No one regarded me with scorn, nor did they encourage me to come closer, until a man in a wheelchair rolled up from behind me and told me they didn't bite, "...most of them anyway."

I followed close behind him and stopped at his side in the shade just outside the lodge. He wore a black hat with "Iraq War Veteran" embroidered in yellow around a Purple Heart. His face was puffy and badly scarred. Both of his legs were missing above the knee. When he turned his head to look up at me he seemed to smile and spoke so as not to be heard over the singing: "An Offering Song."

I nodded.

He extended his massive calloused hand and said even softer, "No Mud."

I took his hand and told him my name.

"So," he went on, keeping his grip, "how many years did they

get out of you?" At my hesitation he explained, "I saw your vet plates last night when you drove in."

"Oh, right. Just three. One deployment."

His dark eyes were watery. He seemed to be looking vaguely beyond me. I asked him the same question.

He applied more pressure and pulled me closer as if to tell me a secret and breathed warm into the side of my face, "They took years I ain't even lived, little brother." He loosened his grip and disarmed his voice, adding a quick, "Hey!" before dropping my hand as if forgetting why he was holding it. A couple people glanced back with looks of restrained concern then sent their eyes in search of someone else.

A tall woman approached No Mud, crouched and put her arm around his shoulder, lowered her face to the side of his and said something softly in another language. He appeared to weep momentarily but quickly composed himself and kissed her on the cheek. She squeezed his shoulder as she stood up and then the back of his neck, glanced a courteous smile at me and returned to what she had been doing. We waited in silence until there was a change in drumming and the singers began a new song.

Four men emerged from a small tent behind the lodge and filed toward the center tree. They wore only red and white cloth around their waists and a whistle-like piece of bone with a feather at the end around their necks. No Mud nudged my leg and leaned towards me: "Eagle Dancers," he said. I didn't tell him one of them was my brother-in-law, but I figured it was obvious enough. Seeing him made me blush with the heat of a hundred eyes.

Each dancer stood his turn before the center tree as a long-haired elder wearing aviator sunglasses and latex gloves, used a surgical scalpel to make two inch-long incisions down each of their pectorals. Then like a lace through a stiff leather boot-tongue he pushed the sharpened end of two three-inch

sections of deer antler under each bleeding loop of flesh. Four ropes hung from the top of the center pole, each split at the end like a Y. He attached these ends to either side of both antler tips thus marrying each Eagle Dancer to the tree. For the next four days they would go without food and be called upon to dance when the drumming and singing began, their sacrifice shared and elevated by the presence and prayers of their family and friends.

---

My brother-in-law had ridden bulls in a semi-pro rodeo circuit for a few years until finally giving in to the doctor's insistence that his body wasn't going to last another eight seconds up there, let alone under hoof and horn. He moved to Montana to cowboy with a vision in his head he gathered from accounts like *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sundance Chief*, a book he would later present to me as a gift. The author spent months with the Crow leader recording everything he was told. He was adopted by the Yellowtail family and in time participated in their Sun Dance. For my brother-in-law it was more than a romantic notion, it was a calling from a time he felt he was meant for, but by some tragic cosmic glitch had ended up fair-skinned and red-bearded in a world of credit cards and cell-phones.

He hunted elk, deer and antelope with both rifle and bow in the valleys and eastern plains of Montana and alone deep in the Tobacco Root, Beartooth and Crazy Mountains. Each time was a spiritual attempt, he insisted, to dislocate his *self* from his body and reintegrate with the universe. Though I barely knew him then, he would send letters to Iraq, to the brother he never had, a brother fighting in a war, also in pursuit of something beyond his sense of self. I received envelopes with return addresses of *Deep in the Crazies* and *The teeth of a Chinook*. I imagined him crouched behind a boulder high above the timberline gripping the paper and pencil, jotting down a few words between gusts. He was almost mythical to me, as I

would learn I was also to him.

I read of his friends, the sweat lodges, feasts and the Sun Dance. The new-old way. I allowed myself to escape through his descriptions of rituals and celebration, of the *eternal hunt* and finding his *forever eyes*. Under stars after a night patrol through open desert, where there was no thing nor body, where officers would call for fire from artillery to explode in the emptiness, I'd relieve myself of armor and ammo, light a cigarette and try to imagine myself stalking elk in knee-deep snow through the mountains or crawling naked into a sweat lodge, into the *womb of the universe*, as he said it was called. I tried to imagine it and hoped to dream of it when I fell asleep—though dreams were rarely anything but fevered scenes of some repetitive task like cleaning a combat-load of bullets one-by-one after a sand storm.

People ask how hot it was over there and I tell them many nights failed to sink below triple digits and we patrolled often in a hundred-and-thirty degrees during the day. They raise their eyebrows and I don't tell them of the eighty-plus-pounds of body armor, weapon, ammo, food and water. I don't tell them how unnatural it all felt. And I don't tell them how our suffering seemed almost absurd reflected in the stare of a shepherd, a shop keeper, a mother standing in the doorway of her home as we passed, assuming the worst of them. Theirs was an ancient suffering most of us could only wear like a costume. Whenever I locked eyes with them I found it nearly impossible to pretend they weren't beyond us somehow, seeing us not as we imagined ourselves but as we truly were. They were willing us away.



Official U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Arlo K. Abrahamson.

Every day I wanted to leave more. And every day it was less from fear of dying. It was a feeling that slithered around inside. The best you could do was try and shake it loose and hope it coiled up in a different part of your body.

—

A stern wind carried dust from the road and drove it through the lodge. Thin strips of fabric tied to the tips of each tree thrashed at nothing from their knots. The drummer's song fled out over the sage brush and a distancing presence was felt. New resolve seemed to rise in the dancers against the assaulting air, each of them tasting the ground in it with dry tongues, reassured of their purpose in the sting of splitting lips.

*No sacrifice can be made if doubt is not confronted.* No Mud assured me of this. I saw it in the dancers when they closed

their eyes and gathered themselves against visible inner friction, lifting and dropping their bare feet as if to draw the song back from the squall driving it away. I imagined myself an Eagle Dancer, the person enduring suffering that it might be undone, though vanity banished the vision like a swirl of fine earth to some unseen end. The wind tore at us in gusts and No Mud secured his hat on his head with one hand.

---

As a boy I rode a dreamed horse through desert washes, open plains and timbered mountains with a carved tree branch for a rifle. I imagined ambushes and firing lead into swift animals, into enemies as they rose from behind boulders and thickets with bows drawn. I'd mouth the explosions of my rifle and fall from my saddle with an arrow sunk deep in the muscle. Invoking the movie scenes which most haunted my sleep, I'd break off the fletched end, clinch it in my teeth and push the tooled stone out the other side and pull it free, wincing with great drama at the tragedy of my own blood. I'd pack the entry and exit wounds with gunpowder and taste the bitter chokecherry wood as I brought the flame to each wound and my eyes would roll back in my head with the pain and smell of carbon and seared flesh and I would fall into sand, into pine needles, and follow the merging and dispersions of clouds.

After carrying my rifle for almost a year through the desert, the day finally came when I switched it off of *safe* and squeezed the trigger. It was not an ambush, not a battle, not movie material. It was a serene afternoon in late October. We were patrolling outside a rural village when someone spotted a tunnel entrance dug into the side of a canal. Ordered to *recon by fire* I prayed my bullets would find a meaning there. For months I tried to convince myself I was disappointed that the only thing I ever shot while at war was a hole in the ground.

"Come to the Sun Dance," my brother-in-law wrote in his last letter. "As a warrior you are invited to help cut down the

center tree for the lodge." Even though most people I met seemed obliged to convince me, or at least themselves, that I was a warrior or some kind of hero, I had stopped trying to convince myself. When anyone shook my hand and thanked me for my service, or worse, for their freedom, I became vaguely nauseous as if shallowly buried beneath our feet was a decaying corpse we both pretended not to smell.

---

By the third day the Eagle Dancers seemed to have transcended the failure of their bodies and rose each time from the grass to pledge their feet to the drums and move in toward the center tree then back, breathing rhythmically through the eagle-bone whistles between their teeth with the drummer's voices urging them in song to dance "for their heart's deepest wound," No Mud told me, "and pray for healing."

The sun was high behind us and burned the back of my neck. I drank guiltily from my water and watched my brother-in-law. His skin was badly burned, as if bruised by exposure and peeling from his forehead and shoulders. His lips were visibly cracked and bleeding, the loops of skin in his chest stretched and raw from being pulled taut repeatedly by the weight of his body as he danced away from the center pole to the full extent of his rope, sometimes leaning back, his points of flesh pulling skyward as he sunk into the pain.

A breeze occasionally wafted smoke by, giving the air a burnt sweetness. Anyone entering the inner portion of the lodge received the attention of an elderly woman holding a bundle of smoking sage, which she would pass over and around the individual's body in a motion that reminded me of an airport security guard scanning someone with a handheld metal detector, which she performed with similar practical efficiency. I followed No Mud's gaze to a line of women approaching the lodge. Each stood before the elderly woman as she drew the smoke over their heads with a cupped hand and

under each of their feet, indicating when she was finished with a hand extended in the direction of their next steps toward the long-haired elder wearing latex gloves.

“The women will make flesh offerings,” No Mud said to me leaning closer but not turning his head. Then looking at me askance and patting his stumps he said, “I already made mine,” managing an upside-down grin. His eyes returned to the elder who was pushing the root of a feather through the incisions he had made in a woman’s shoulder. “That’s my sister,” he said, “the tall, pretty one.” She waited her turn behind two other women. I remembered her measured smile and feeling politely tolerated. The elder held both ends of the feather and made a quick jerking motion breaking the loop of skin holding it in place. “I made her a promise,” No Mud continued. “I’m here to honor that promise.”

---

The Eagle Dancers laid in the cool grass under the first stars blinking into sight. A drumless song was being sung almost like a lullaby by two elderly men, both with long braided hair and wearing pearl-snap western shirts. No Mud invited me to eat with him. We filed through the tent and filled small bowls with elk heart stew and a piece of fry bread. Crickets seemed to sigh with relief in the cool stillness as we made our way across the matted grass of the field turned parking lot. I lowered my tailgate like a table and waited for No Mud to finish before asking him what had been bothering me ever since I decided to come to the Sun Dance. He laughed to himself and told me other tribes have made declarations of war against non-Native participation in their Sun Dances, calling it a desecration of their sacred ceremony. “Some people don’t think your brother should be here,” he told me plainly, “or you.” Feeling the blood run from my face I asked him what he thought about it.

He looked away past the lodge up a darkening hillside, tilted

his head back slightly and spoke from a different place, "My grandfather says some people have blind sorrow, and they abuse us with it. They make themselves feel better by honoring us like ghosts. But they honor their own guilt." Then leveling his eyes after considering this he continued, "Sometimes I wish I was a ghost." He was quiet again and seemed to be listening to the men singing, who could be heard faintly. "If people tell you what you are for long enough then that's what you can become in your own mind if you're not careful... But I think your brother has a good heart. Maybe he wants to assimilate to our ways for the sins of his people. *Your* people." He laughed again, hitting my leg with the back of his hand. "Maybe it's a sin for my people to let him think he can."

Late in the sun of the final day the singers struck the drum with a tempered fury and dug for their most naked voices. The long-haired elder approached my brother-in-law, standing as if in a lucid dream, and removed the tether-loops from the antler ends letting the rope swing back to the center tree as he pulled out his scalpel and stepped around to face his back. Of the same size and depth as the chest incisions he calmly made six, three down the right, three down the left side of his back, pushing then the sharpened antler tips through each and attaching to them the six split ends of another rope which hung slack like a tail on the ground behind him.

A man from the far side of the lodge labored slowly toward them, his fists around a rope at his chest and slung over his shoulder pulling behind him six horned buffalo skulls linked and dragging the well-danced ground by their teeth, dust rising around them in the dry heat. This man collected the rope from the ground and tied them together so the chain of skulls lay only a few feet behind my brother-in-law. A third man draped a buffalo hide over his shoulders like a blanket and gave him a tall staff.

His first attempt to move forward summoned a kind of

impossible acceptance to his eyes as the rope pulled taut and he planted the end of the staff, clutching it with both hands and leveraged himself forward, each step holding that acceptance as if too close to a flame. Sharp, deliberate breaths left his mouth as he pulled the skulls around the center tree, eyes cast to the ground, blood staining the white of his cloth and running in thin streams down the backs of his legs. The singers sent their drum sticks into the stretched hide as if to drive it into the ground and the high, clean voice of a young child sprang from among them singing with un-lived years. I heard the murmuring pleasure of proud parents.

My brother-in-law made his way around the inner lodge and soon he was near me and he lifted his eyes from the ground as he approached and held mine as if to pull himself closer. I shuddered to be recognized and though I wished to shield my heart from the piercing eyes I imagined all around me I could not. Righting himself before me, seeing me from some burning emptiness, he extended the staff to touch my shoulder, and spoke his only words in four days as if speaking them made our bodies present and visible again. Standing next to No Mud, who did not so much as shift his weight, my skin flushed to be so spectacularly recognized.

As the skulls were drug out of the inner lodge my brother-in-law was reattached to the center tree. Before the pounding of my heart could subside I was asked to participate in a final ceremony where a sacred pipe would be passed between anyone with a prayer before being given to an Eagle Dancer that he might finish his dance with those prayers in his guard. No Mud urged me to do it.

The elderly woman drew sage smoke over my head and under my feet and I again tried and failed to shield my heart. We lined facing one another as the lit pipe was passed down the line alternately, each individual placing it to their lips briefly and inhaling. At the mouth of the line where the pipe would be handed to a dancer, my brother-in-law stood waiting.

The final dance is a rite by which each dancer prepares their heart to break free from their rope by moving methodically, prayerfully into the center tree then back, gathering the strength and resolve needed to honor their sacrifice before sprinting backwards from the tree with enough force to break the loops of flesh, as foreshadowed by the women's offerings. Each dancer in their own time did this, the sound of their separation a visceral snap in the dry air.

As the pipe-bearer, he went last. With it cradled in his arm he moved in toward the tree, his bloody legs tensing then gaining speed until meeting the full purchase of his rope. But instead of breaking free, his body bucked forward, sending its extended length past parallel with the ground and six feet above it then down on his chest with a dusty thud. Returning to his feet and immediately back to the center tree he danced without noticing half of the pipe lay broken behind him. A second time running back and he met the end of his rope as if being shot in the shoulder, one loop breaking sending that half of his body in a violent twist hinged off the other. On his third attempt, he broke free and stood panting for a moment before looking finally at the pipe.

His eyes searched back to where he had first impacted the ground. Kneeling there as if to make himself as small as possible he retrieved the other half. I looked at No Mud and knew nothing would be said. The collective silence was static like that of dry lightning and followed me back down the dusty two-track onto the highway, through the tall-grass prairies along the Yellowstone River, into the low sun.

---

We all crawled naked into the lodge, No Mud using his fists like feet, the rest of us on our hands and knees, shoulders and thighs pressing together as we formed a tight circle inside. The elder shoveled stones from the fire outside and placed them in the pit between us. Once full he crawled in and

closed the flap behind him, sealing the lodge in darkness. At his side was a pile of beargrass bundles which he passed around one-by-one. "It opens your pores," my brother-in-law whispered as he handed me one. Into a bucket of water at his side the elder dipped a cup and poured it over the rocks which hissed and steamed and he began to sing.

The heat was instantly unbearable, the vapor burning the back of my throat, searing my skin. I clinched my eyes shut and rocked back and forth begging myself to endure it. Everyone sang, their voices moving through my head with a submerged, burning singularity and I felt myself sinking into the ground. They soon began using the beargrass like whips over their legs, stomachs, shoulders and backs. I bent to the dirt in search of cooler air. Finding none I sat up desperate for breath. I gripped the beargrass and whipped my face reflexively then my chest and shoulders. I whipped my back repeatedly as if the thin clean sting of it might drive the deeper burning away. This went on until it seemed there was no time nor space and I was certain my muscle shone exposed beneath the skin.

The singing eventually ceased and the flap was peeled open, flooding the lodge with light and cool air. Relieved and suddenly proud, I watched for the men near the entrance to begin crawling out. But they remained seated with their eyes closed, inhaling sharply through their nostrils then letting the air out slowly, silently. No Mud clutched the beargrass between his legs. His chest rose and fell, glistening, spotted with the scars of many Sun Dances. I looked to the entrance and saw the elder watching me. He turned, reached up behind him and pulled the flap closed, sealing the lodge in darkness. There was only breathing until my skin became warm with it. I heard the cup emerge from the bucket and the thin, seething hiss of the stones.