

Turn On, Tune Out, Drop In: Review Essay of Ben Fountain's Beautiful Country Burn Again

D.H. Lawrence once claimed that the “essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.” This sounds nice, something to be proud of in a masochistic sort of way; unfortunately (or fortunately), it’s not true. Americans might be hard, isolate, stoic killers at times, but what people aren’t? Here is the D.H. Lawrence quote on America that matters: “The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom. Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom. The shout is the rattling of chains, always.” This is a long Lawrence way of saying something rather simple: Americans are ridiculous.

Ben Fountain, the author of the 2006 short story collection *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, the 2012 novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, and the 2018 essay collection *Beautiful Country Burn Again*, has always been particularly good on this fundamental aspect of the American character. Here is the U.S. aid worker protagonist from Fountain's short story “Lion's Mouth.”

“So here was the joke: she'd come to Salone determined to lead an authentic life and had instead discovered all the clichés in herself. She wanted to be stupid. She wanted to be rich. She wanted to be lazy, kept, indulged—this is where her fantasies took her lately, mental explosions of the guiltless life.”

Here, in “Asian Tiger,” a former pro-golfer Texan half-wittingly enables a conspiracy between billionaire venture

capitalists and Malaysia's military junta:

"Maybe you felt the urge to scream and rage around, maybe you felt like that would be the moral thing to do, but you sucked it up and stayed cool. Because out here the critical thing was to play it straight. To go along with the joke. To concentrate, he realized with something like revulsion, on golf."

And here are two U.S. Army grunts in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Fountain's novel about an infantry squad invited to the Super Bowl Halftime Show at Cowboy Stadium while on leave from Iraq:

"At staged rallies, for instance, or appearances at malls, or whenever TV or radio is present, you are apt at some point to be lovingly mobbed by everyday Americans eager to show their gratitude, then other times it's like you're invisible, people see right through you, nothing registers. Billy and Mango stand there eating scalding hot pizza and their fame is not their own. Mainly it's just another thing to laugh about, the floating hologram of context and cue that leads everyone around by their nose, Bravo included, but Bravo can laugh and feel somewhat superior because they know are being used."

Fountain's characters consistently confront this American "joke"—that wild disproportion between "the floating hologram of context and cue" and the fact that they are, theoretically, choice-making dignified and sovereign individual human beings. This disproportion has little to do with the individuals themselves, who are, almost without exception, nice guys and girls, but with the fact that they were born in a country with more wealth than God. Add in the comically lopsided distribution of that wealth, a military budget larger than the next 7 countries combined, and a 24/7 entertainment industry that makes money off every hour of our waking lives, and it is difficult to be proportional. And to act without proportion—as Lawrence well understood—is to act ridiculous.

Of course, just as one can't "indulge the mental explosions of a guiltless life" unless one periodically aspires to authenticity, one can't truly be ridiculous unless one occasionally takes oneself Very Seriously. Hence Democracy. Hence Elections. Hence the hope that despite the various horrors of our past—the slavery, the segregation, illegal wars, and ill-gotten wealth—there might be hope of renewal, straight talk, progress, and redemption. And hence the genius of the *Guardian* in commissioning Fountain to report on the 2016 U.S. elections. Who better than Fountain to document our 6-billion dollar circus of platitudes, sanctimony, cynicism, and apocalypticism? Who else could trace whatever it is in the American character that made Donald Trump not only a possibility—horrifying in itself—but president of an entire country with living people in it?



Unsurprisingly the author of *Billy Lynn* rises to the ridiculous occasion. The introduction to *Beautiful Country Burn Again*—the Robinson Jeffers-inspired title of Fountain's collected *Guardian* reportage—even has a relatively straightforward historian "thesis" to explain both the last election and much of American history:

Our founding fathers, Fountain argues, promised us "meaningful autonomy," but we got "profit proportionate to freedom" and "plunder correlative to subjugation" instead. In other words, the more money an American takes in this country, the more freedom an American has. Which seems pleasant enough, except for the opposite also holds true, in that the more wealth an American has taken from them, the less freedom they have. Thus, despite "all the sound and fury of the most bizarre election in the country's history," this unhappy equation persists and belies all the talk of "meaningful autonomy," and until this equation changes, argues Fountain, "it's still a

chump's game."

But Americans today, some might protest, are educated, media-savvy, aware. We have internet. Color TV. Ironic cat memes. How can we be chumps? Fountain's fictional characters often struggle in similar ways, agonizing over how they, who went into life so clear-sighted and full of good will, became like everyone else, actively aiding whatever it was they didn't want to be. How could they, they ask, who so despise chumps, become chumps? Yet the reason for their failure is blindingly obvious, and all the more painful for being so obvious.

Money.

Here is Fountain in "Iowa 2016: Riding the Roadkill Express" on Hillary Clinton receiving \$675,000 in speaking fees from Goldman Sachs for three hours worth of speaking:

"The human mind wasn't built to comprehend moneys of this magnitude; we need time to behold and ponder, time for the vastness to seep into our brains like a cognitive vapor, and there remains an awesome abstraction to it all...And so the realm of political money is beyond the understanding of most of us. This many millions here, shit-tons more millions there...we numb out."

As money wears down the moral sense of characters in much of Fountain's fiction, so too Hillary Clinton. So too the Democratic Party. So too the American Middle Class. So too the American Working Class. So to you. So to me. Couple this impossible wealth with a trillion dollar entertainment industry—which Fountain christens the "Fantasy Industrial Complex"—and you and me not only numb out to morality but cease to believe in the possibility of reality.

"The old distinctions start to break down, the boundary between reality and fantasy," Fountain says in "Two American Dreams," an essay on the 1980s, Trump's New York, and advertisement. "It becomes increasingly difficult to know

what's real anymore, especially there, inside those screens where so much of our daily existence takes place."

Because how can you be moral or good if you don't see a difference between the real and the unreal? How do the words we use to weigh democratic participation and civic responsibility compete with a fantastical simulacrum that consists of color blotches and furry-Star-Wars-Guardians-of-the-Galaxy-crossover fan-fic Reddit threads? Trump, in this American Dream, becomes our Shakespeare, the playwright of a peculiarly American art form, one that does not so much privilege fantasy over reality but turns fantasy into reality, and all of us sprint drunkenly into the arms of infinite disproportion for fear of the stubbornly proportional chump game—"profit proportionate to freedom; plunder correlative to subjugation"—staring us in the face.

"Easy to despise the political phony," says Fountain of Trump's success in "The Phony in American Politics," "at least in retrospect. The harder work is plumbing the truth of an electorate that allows the phony to succeed. He didn't create the situation of fear; he merely exploited it. What is it about the American character that allows the long con of our politics to go on and on, electing crooks, racists, bullies, hate-mongering preachers, corporate bagmen, and bald-faced liars? Not always, but often. The history is damning. We must, on some level, want what they're offering."

And that right there is the really hard question. What if we, we of the oh-so-innocent and proletariat-like 99%, *want* what they are offering? What if we vote for the hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars because we ourselves are hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars? And, if so, do we gain a sort-of freedom by voting in the hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars that reflect our hateful, corporate, and prevaricatory values? Did we, despite all our handwringing over illegal invasions, foreclosures, and student debt, find meaningful autonomy in

Wal-Mart hypermarkets, Dallas Cowboy halftime shows, and Netflix binges?

No. If you are wondering. The answer is a no. Fountain trots out an impressive array of historical evidence to prove the extent which Roosevelt's New Deal and post-WW II prosperity have been sabotaged, how the middle and working classes have been robbed, humiliated, and manipulated by Reaganomic Republicans and Third Way Democrats, and how what happened in 2016, insane as it was, makes logical sense, given the historical record. In this view Clinton and Trump are less enemies, and more two sides of the same \$100 dollar Monopoly bill, one selling the soul, dollar for dollar, piece by piece, the other telling us to just be you because there's no such thing as a soul anyway.

Yet –joke of jokes—we buy what they sell. This is our “floating hologram of context and cue.” These are our “mental explosions of the guiltless life.” They leave us feeling like all insane pornographic fantasies do. Empty. Like chumps. Seen but not seen. Half existing. Manipulated (but ironically so!). Eating hot pizza in a giant football stadium.

So it's our fault. We are the chumps. We sold our neighbors and ourselves time and time again. We bought into the fantasy of the corporate bagmen and crooks, of the fantasy industrial complex, of the military industrial complex, of the neurotic self-doubting complex. We said there was no other way. We watch cowboy movies. Game of Thrones. Toy Story 4. Trump hugging the flag. Hard. Isolate. Killers.

But this is part of the fantasy, isn't it? The lack of choice. A Trumpian vision of callow sentimentality, ironic bombast, and murderous power politics thrives on the idea of necessity—“sometimes you get what you need,” the Rolling Stones sing at all his rallies—and the delusion succeeds

because it allows us to imagine there is nothing but necessity. This is the force of his fantasy. It has all the appeal of reality. We need (or want?) to believe it is real so we don't have to be real.

It makes sense. Being real means making difficult choices. And Fountain's uncanny understanding of the American character extends not from his belief that we have no choices, and that we are doomed to make the wrong choice, but that choices matter, and that we have made the right choice before (during The Civil War and New Deal), and, therefore, that we can make the right choice again. He believes the conscience is a thing. A real thing. God forbid. And that this thing should not be given up for profit. The artfulness of his fiction attests to this. So too the eloquence of these collected essays. His prose bristles with confidence, in the belief that there was once an America that believed in the possibility of dignity for all men and women, an America where sovereignty might not depend on one's bank account, and that there can be one once again.

In the collection's final essay, "A Familiar Spirit," Fountain recounts the long depressing history of racial violence in the U.S. He shows how the codification of "whiteness" promoted and excused the murder and plunder of our fellow Americans. He shows how it's back with a vengeance in 2016, and how this shouldn't surprise us, as it never really went away. It is a tragic note to end on, and would seem to confirm Trump's "American Carnage" horror show and Lawrence's "hard, isolate, killer" bit, to prove that behind all the sanctimony, sentimentality, and sententiousness is nothing other than a moral void of blind hopeless hate and greedy violence.

But Fountain does not actually end there:

"Fantasy offers certainty, affirmation, instant gratification, a way to evade—for a while, at least—the reality right in front of our face. It's so much easier that way, but perhaps

we're fast approaching the point where the fantasy can no longer be sustained. The evidence won't shut up; it insists and persists...Consciousness—historical consciousness, political consciousness—has been raised to critical mass, and to suppress it, to try to stuff it back in the box along with all its necessary disruptions and agitations, will destroy the best part of America. The promise of it, the ongoing project.”

The evidence insists and persists. And the fact that it insists, that people like Fountain are still writing, thinking, and voting based on this evidence proves that the idea of meaningful choice-making autonomy, while not exactly thriving, is not exactly dead either. The joke is there, yes. But the joke is not everything. It is a testament to the genius of Fountain and the power of this collection that he is able to point out the disgusting and disturbing schizophrenia so fundamental to the American character without giving up on whatever is good and true about the American experiment.

New Fiction from Roz Wiggins: “Lucky”



I.

Under a ceiling topped by swirling fans and surrounded by walls whose windows had no glass, the Private lay on the bed like a slab of stone as hands went about the routine tasks that evidenced that, despite all probability, he was still alive, even if no longer whole. The hands stuck a thermometer

in the Private's mouth, which opened instinctively, and fastened a cuff around his bicep, then inflated it with a *whoosh, whoosh*. The hands searched his wrist for a pulse, and paused a while when it found one. They patted and tugged at the bandages that covered his pelvis and thighs, not in an intruding manner but with inquiry, before retrieving the thermometer from between his lips.

The hands were soft and delicate with smooth short fingers and nails that occasionally scraped the Private's skin. Sometimes, before leaving him, one of the hands would rest gently for a few minutes on the mound of bandages that encased the Private's face. Then the soft hand would seek out that small square of his cheek that had been left uncovered like a forlorn orphan. The fingers would stroke the Private's cheek as if to convey to him that they knew he still existed, that he still was there, somewhere under the mountain of gauze and adhesive and plaster.

Several times a week there were other hands, meaty and calloused, that would grasp the Private and roll and lift him on and off a bedpan. Other times they would lift him onto a gurney and set him aside while they changed the bedsheets stained with the blood and slime that oozed from his wounds or and with urine and shit when he had gone without the pan being under him. The strong hands would wipe along the exposed parts of his body with deliberation and efficiency, but with no more tenderness than if he was a tub that needed scrubbing. While he was set aside, they would change the sheets and then lift him roughly and return him, like an item being restocked, to his place in the middle of a bed smelling of bleach.

These things were happening to the Private in the dark silent space that he had come to inhabit ever since the day he had been on a hill in Kaesong with Randall. One minute they were trudging up the slope same as any other day, then there was a click—just a low barely audible sound, like snapping with butter on your fingers—and he had been thrown into the dark

silent void.

Sleep came and went for the Private in the dark space, but there was no rest. Sometimes in the void, the Private smelled his Momma's buttermilk biscuits baking in the oven or his Pops' corncob pipe rich with his special blend of tobacco that he made from the first leaves of the harvest, which he reserved for himself and cured with slices of apple or pear until it had a sweet intoxicating aroma. And when the void seemed too deep and so dark that the Private was sure he might never leave, the musky scent of sweat that rose from Marren's cleavage just after she came held him from the abyss. All through basic training at Fort Jackson, all during the long trip to Kaesong, and the stops at places with names he could hardly pronounce or remember, and then, even into the darkness, he had remembered lying beside Marren after they'd gone at it like a couple of rabbits in heat. He would close his eyes and suddenly he would be beside her watching her ample chest heave and inhaling her special scent.

The Private hoped that maybe one day he would have enough strength to leave the dark void. He was willing to go to Hell and back just so he could bury his soul in Marren's plump soft breasts until the light came again.

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One day the Private heard a woman's voice singing "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound," and it was like the voice of an angel because it had been a very long time since he had heard anything at all.

And then there were other voices—the fast, accented repartee that went along with the meaty calloused hands that lifted the Private on and off a pan several times a day and instructed him to piss or shit, which the Private sometimes did, and sometimes didn't. When he didn't, the meaty calloused hands were accompanied by foreign curses.

Most of the time what filtered through the Private's dark void was a general chattering and a low dirge of constant moaning. But from time to time, he would hear a car horn or a scratchy radio station, and all too often a nightmarish wail. Nighttime in the ward brought the low hum of the man who mopped down the floors with a strong ammonia odor that whipped across the Private's nose when the man splashed the mop under his bed. Then, the man's melodic self-serenade floated over to the Private like a jazz riff demanding to be heard.

Less frequently, other voices came; deep and authoritative, they invariably sounded irritated as big words flowed out. These voices were accompanied by the ruffle of papers, unanswered inquiries put to the Private, hurried questions to the singing voice, a few pokes and prods and occasionally the splat of a dropped metal chart.

"Now keep your eyes closed," one of the deep voices said one day as it unwound the bandage that had been tight around the Private's head and eyes. "The glare may hurt at first, but you will get used to it. You won't notice at first that the one is not there but eventually you will realize that you have a restricted view."

The Private struggled to open his eye lids against the crusty muck that had built up across them and the tears that flowed without effort. He finally succeeded with the help of a warm cloth pressed to his face. After a minute, he saw a midget of a man with very hairy eyebrows looking back at him. The doctor stretched to shine a small flashlight into Private's remaining eye and squinted through another instrument causing his eyebrows to move like fuzzy caterpillars.

"How's it look, Private?" said the doctor. "Looks pretty good to me."

The Private didn't say anything because he didn't know what to say. Didn't the doctor know that at that moment anything,

everything, *looked* good to him?

“There’s some shrapnel in your eye, but it’s too risky to try and remove it. You’re lucky that it’s not worse. Over time your vision may worsen as it moves around. Can’t say how long before you notice a difference. Could be years, could be a decade. But it’s just too risky to try and get at it.”

The midget doctor continued with his detailed explanation. He was an animated fellow and his face and caterpillar eyebrows bounced up and down as he looked at the chart then back at the Private throwing out words that pained the Private’s still recovering ears.

In response, the Private looked all around the ward trying to figure out just what he could see, and what he could no longer see, now that he was a one-eyed jack. The room’s lights cast an irritating glare that stung like a lightning bolt. It caused him to keep closing his eye even though that was the last thing he wanted to do.

The Private heard the singing voice approach and turned to face a petite woman the color of toast, not Negro Colored like him, but different with a generous length of wavy black hair that fell down her back like a fine mule’s tail and almond shaped eyes, very pretty.

“Good to have you back among the seeing, Private,” the singing nurse said patting him gently on the arm. The Private looked down and saw the smooth delicate fingers that he had previously only felt.

“Maybe now, we can get you to say something too?” the nurse teased.

The Private watched the nurse with the singing voice as she cleaned up the spent bandages and scissors and returned the metal chart to the foot of his bed. She arranged his sheets and fluffed his pillows. Pausing by the head of the Private’s

bed when she'd finished, she smiled down at him. The smooth square of his cheek that had not been covered by bandages now lay in what would have passed more for a plate of raw hamburger than a face; red and craterous.

"I guess you'll just talk when you're good and ready, and not before," she said squeezing gently his hand that swallowed hers.

Once the singing nurse had left, the Private raised himself up the little bit he could; and saw what he had before only felt, the bulkiness of a cast that started under his armpits and ran down the length of his torso. He gingerly lifted the sheet and saw other bandages, great white mounds that were fitted uncomfortably around him like a diaper (but open in the middle), and which spread down his right leg, devouring his knee but not his calf. His breath quickened at the sight and he hurriedly dropped the sheet letting it hide the mess he had become.

Later, when the Private felt that he had to pee, he wasn't on the pan and the men with the calloused hands were long gone. They had told him someone would come if he called. But he didn't. Maybe he wasn't thinking clearly. Maybe he was so messed up from the torrent of drugs that they were giving him to dull the incessant pain that he didn't know what he was doing. But some part of his brain told him that a man did not piss lying down flat on his back. So, he was determined to try.

The Private struggled out of the bed and onto his feet. It was rough going because the body cast did not allow him to bend. But he managed to get his feet to the floor and to grab hold of a chair that they had planted beside his bed. Placing all his weight on to it, he proceeded slowly like a bruised leviathan, stopping every few feet as he crept towards the light that signaled the bathroom.

At the bathroom door the Private stopped to heave breath into his lungs, exhausted. His atrophied muscles were overwhelmed by the effort and the weight of the cast. He almost hadn't made it the twenty feet. He backed into the bathroom pushing the door with his ample body weight. He reeled and almost lost his footing from the harsh storm of whiteness that assaulted him. Glare from the fluorescent lights bounced off the white tile that covered the floor and crawled up the walls, where it met white paint. Along one wall were a long porcelain trough and a row of sinks, all white and shiny. The Private turned the other way, towards the stalls, barely seeing through his half closed eye. It was not the manliest approach, but he needed to sit. Suddenly, a blurry image in one of the mirrors above the sinks caught his attention. He had thought he was alone. Out of instinct, despite the pressure in his bladder, he shuffled closer to it and as he did, the image multiplied into the neighboring mirrors. He rested a hand on the sink below him and leaned into meet the image, trying to make sense of it, and gasped. Then he lost his grip on the sink, and then the chair started to slide away from him. In the next instant, just as he lost his footing, and right before the floor became stained with his urine, his consciousness also fled as he realized that the horrific one-eyed monstrosity squinting back at him from the mirrors was, of course, him.

II.

It had been a crisp sunny day when the Private and Randall had started on the recon mission shoulder to shoulder, slowly winding their way up a craggily path on the side of a foothill that had been used by local farmers and their goats for centuries. The hill ringed their main target, the Hook, the bigger mountain in the distance outside Kaesong where the Communists were taking a stand even though they had heard solid rumors that a ceasefire would happen any day. where Movement on the backside of the hillock had been reported and

the Private and Randall were just going up to scout the area. It was to be just a quick reconnoiter mission and back down to report. They hadn't even been told to expect mines.

About half-way up the path narrowed, and Randall took the lead. A few minutes later, the Private bent to tie his boot and Randall got ahead of him. When the Private heard the click, he instinctively looked up and reached out to Randall, but only grabbed air. Randall turn towards him as if in slow motion and mouthed the words, "Oh Shit!" Then, the Private saw Randall explode, his arms and legs flying in different directions, a bloody burnt hole where his chest used to be. In the next instant he saw that Randall had no more mouth, no more head; there was no more Randall. There was just a mass of bloody slime where he had been and then the Private felt that bloody slime all over his face and body and felt it choking him, and felt a thousand pieces of shrapnel and rocks cut into him like a storm of bees. He flailed about and screamed trying to escape but it propelled him to the ground and then into the dark space where he couldn't see, couldn't hear, and couldn't think or move.

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The Private had liked Kirby Randall, a gangly white boy from Minneapolis, Minnesota with enough height, at six foot five, to look him in the eye when most other men of any age or persuasion couldn't . Randall would hang out with the Colored soldiers, drinking beers and listening to their special brand of foolishness that was so new to him. None of the other white boys hung out with them in Mr. Truman's newly-integrated army.

Before Randall, no white boy had ever walked right up to the Private and offered him his hand like he too was white as rice, not in his whole seventeen years of living. But that's just what Randall had done when he had first entered the barracks in Fort Jackson and saw the Private rearranging his army-issued supplies in his footlocker next to the only open

bunk on account that there was sure to be an inspection that afternoon. Even though they were in South Carolina where folks just didn't do that kind of thing, Randall had done so like he didn't know no better. Right then, the Private had said to himself maybe this army gig was going to be all right after all, if he could just manage to stay alive.

After a few weeks, the Private had come to believe that the real reason Randall acted like no other white man he had ever met was that Randall just didn't much care for the south's special brand of divisiveness. He hadn't known any Colored folk in Minneapolis, but his parents had been committed Lutherans who taught him to honor the dignity of all men since they were all God's creatures. So, much to the chagrin of most of the other white soldiers, Randall treated the Private and the other Colored soldiers like they too were human and like he might one day soon need to rely on one of them to save his neck.

III.

The Army patched the Private up. The eye doctor returned bearing a replacement made of glass that filled the caved-in socket on the right side of the Private's face. They sent another doctor for his hearing who shouted that there was not much that could be done there. Likewise, for the discolored blur resembling raw hamburger that now was the right side of his face. They said that it would just take time. Shrapnel was like a million little red hot daggers; it makes a mess. In time they would know how much more they might be able to do for him.

The next doctor was the one who carved patches of skin from the Private's buttocks and thighs and grafted them onto his torso to close up deep rips in his skin the exploding mine had left. He chatted away at the Private like he was a tailor who

routinely applying patches to the elbow of a coat.

And then the Army sent a doctor who removed the Private's diaper bandage and pronounced that he was still a man after all.

"It could've been worse", said the doctor while casually tapping the Private's thigh with the little metal instrument that he had used to lift his penis and examine the underside while straddling a small wheeled stool in front of the examination table. The room was cold and the Private felt colder down there without the bandage diaper.

"You're a lucky boy. You are," the doctor went on. "We've seen much worse."

The Private didn't respond as the doctor lifted his Johnson, moved him about, and then scribbled notes on his chart. Instead, he ignored this doctor whose teeth flared out like a mule's and were way too close to where they were never supposed to be. He focused his one eye on the rows of bottles filled with colorful pills inside the cabinet on the wall behind the doctor. The doctor scooted back his wheeled stool and stood up, checking his notes and nodding in that way that indicated that he was satisfied with the job he had done.

"Here's the deal, Private," he said while loudly snapping off his rubber gloves. "You took a bad hit down there, lucky to still have it, you are. But there was lots of shrapnel. We did the best we could. Had to take one of your testicles; it was just shredded, a damned mess. But we managed to save the other one. The swelling and discoloration you see, that should go away over time."

The doctor paused and waited for the Private's response but the Private was trying to ignore the chill on his Johnson and was desperately taking inventory of how many bottles in the cabinet on the far wall held the all green capsules and how many held the half-orange, half-blue ones. He wondered what

they were for and just how many of each, separately, or in combination, he would have to take to die.

“Private, I know this is hard,” the doctor continued. He moved closer and laid a hand on the Private’s shoulder and the Private realized that the mule teeth came with sour breath. “But you need to understand what’s what, so I’m going to give it to you straight,” the doctor continued “It could’ve been a lot worse.”

Maybe, the Private thought, if he just swallowed a handful of each color, that would be enough. It would be a coward’s way to die, the way a woman would take her life. He wished he had his pistol. One shot to the head and all this talk about whether he was or was not a man would end. But they must have taken his pistol so here he was contemplating the pussy way out. He’d just take the whole bottle, that should be enough to do the job.

“Once the swelling goes away, you should be able to go at it. Even with just one testicle, you should be able to get an erection and ejaculate,” the mule teeth and sour breath droned on. “It might take a while for you to get your confidence back, that happens, the body has to remember. But physically you should be OK. Remember that... I gotta be honest though, son, your sperm count, it’s just not there. . . But you never know, Private, these things sometimes work themselves out. You have fun trying. With your luck, you just might be OK. It could’ve been a lot worse.”

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They said the same thing again and again at every hospital over the next two years. The Private came to believe that it was something doctors were taught to say no matter how bad the injury—Tell the patient it could have been worse. The Private wondered—How? Lose two eyes. Have half his face blown completely away instead of being roasted and riddled by a

storm of red hot shrapnel? Lose a leg? An arm? One of each? Loose both testicles and end up a total freak? How could it have mattered anymore?

They said it to him in Guam, Hawaii, San Francisco, Kentucky and Virginia—"You're a lucky boy. You are. We've seen much worse."

The Private had never believed them. Their words had never held one ounce of comfort for him. He had never reconciled to this luck that everyone spoke of. He was nineteen. He'd been in the Army just eight months and in country only thirty three days, and just days before the whole damned shebang was over, his life had been torn apart. Some fucking luck!

IV.

The Army sent him home, back to the tobacco farm he loved and loathed because it was home and because his family had worked it for a white man for generations, something he'd vowed never to do, which was why he had enlisted in the damned Army in the first place. His ten younger brothers and sisters acted skittish around him, even though his mother, who had given him his stature, kept telling everyone to stop being foolish. She insisted that he was the same boy who had gone away; the same giant manchild who could wring a chicken's neck by the time he was seven, hand as many rows of tobacco as she by thirteen, and consume half a dozen of her buttermilk biscuits nonstop. She would not admit the truth to herself, even as she slathered fatback on his mottled patched skin and calmed her littlest ones when his screams in the night woke them.

But his father did. And this small man, from whom the Private got his redbone coloring and his fierce wanting for more, this man with a frame made smaller from years of bending to the tobacco plants and hands grizzled from tussling with the red earth and wrenching a life from pure adversity, he knew

immediately that his first-born had left a great deal on that hill in Ko-re-a. He would load his giant of a son onto a wagon hitched to a tractor or a mule and drive him out to the backfield where the constant acres of cash crop finally broke and a kitchen garden bloomed.

In these alone moments, the Private's father would roll cigarettes with his special tobacco and they'd take long drags as the cicadas sang their forlorn song and the bees violated one flower after another with impunity. In the shade provided by the full leafy crowns of the clustered trees, with the air swathed in the sweet aroma of the tobacco, the father would go to work.

"Son," his pops would say, " You got to talk about it sometime. You got to get it out of you." He'd pull a long drag on his cigarette before continuing. "I'm not saying you can make the memories go away. Cain't no amount of talking make something like that go away. But you needs to talk about it, to get some of it out, or it will just become a big pile of rot inside of you. It will rot *you* if you don't get it out."

The father would let his words sit with his son as he wandered back among the garden rows to find the perfect melon. He would quarter the cantaloupe, scoop out the web of seeds and hand the fleshy orange quarter-moon to his son. Under the cool of the elms, away from the blazing sun and everyone, they would slurp mouthfuls of the delicate fruit with gusto, wiping their mouths with the back of their hands. And eventually, the father would listen while the Private poured out some of the horror that was inside him. Then the father would hold his son as he shook with the dry crying that men do only when they can no longer stand the pain. It was his father who convinced the Private that life, though different, could still be worth living.

*

V.

The first time the Private rode to town with his father, children started to cry at the sight of him and even adults shrank away. It didn't matter one bit that he was a war hero who'd been awarded a Purple Heart, that he had been injured fighting back the Communist hordes, protecting the American way of life and keeping the world, their world, safe for Democracy. After that, the Private shrank into himself a little more and when his Momma hid his pills that kept the pain at bay, he tried to drown out the world with bourbon.

He waited for Marren to come see about him.

She was the only girl that the Private had stayed with for more than a couple of months after she'd let him go all the way. Even at sixteen she had a way of making a man believe that Heaven lay right between her size 38D breasts and plump but sturdy legs.

The Private had hooked up with her at the beginning of his junior year of high school and spent the Fall driving her around in his pick-up truck, which was a hideous green color and rusted around both front fenders. But that didn't matter to the Private. He had bought it for only one hundred dollars with the money that he made the prior summer washing dishes at a beachfront hotel in New Jersey with his cousin Ray-Ray. The Private had brought Marren RC Colas for months before she finally gave up her stuff after the Christmas social at the Shiloh Free Will Baptist Church.

By the next summer, when he left for the Army, the Private had made up his mind (but had not told Marren) that he would marry her when he got back. He thought that maybe they'd move north where his cousin Ray-Ray said he could get them even better jobs working indoors wearing uniforms and waiting tables; they could make tips in addition to a wage. But he'd grown impatient waiting for Ray-Ray to send word to him and joined

the Army instead.

Marren didn't write to the Private while he was away. She wasn't good at words or writing, but that he forgave. The other stuff he could not.

He knew that Marren knew he was back as soon as he arrived. Everyone knew; it was a small, tight, community that prided itself on caring for (and gossiping about) one another fervently. About a week after his return she had sent word to his house that she was sick, then, that she had to tend to her sick mother, and then, that she had to watch over her sick brother. Well over a month passed before the Private had his brother Odell, who was just fourteen months younger and whom folk often mistook for his twin, drove him over to her place because he just couldn't believe what he already knew to be true.

By then, the Private's face no longer looked like raw hamburger, but it didn't exactly look like a face either. The chickens scattered as Odell brought the truck to a stop under a crooked old oak tree whose long branches spread majestically to overhang the front porch thankfully shading most of the dusty yard. It had been scorching hot for the past few days and everybody was craving any little piece of shade.

Odell climbed down first and went around to help his brother out of the truck, but the Private gently pushed him off even though he had to stop every few minutes to steady himself, holding tightly to and leaning on the Moses-like staff his father had fashioned for him. He hobbled to the house and made the Herculean effort of climbing the two squat steps onto the porch, pausing to catch his breath before moving to the screen door that had seen better days and which was clearly losing the battle to the flies and mosquitoes that snuck through its many rips. He banged on the screen door, too loudly and too urgently because of the tremor in this hand, which he fought to control even as he desperately grasped his staff in the

other.

“What y’all banging on my door like that for?” Marren said sashaying towards the door full on like he remembered her. She was wiping her hands on a dish towel head down as she came but paused midsentence when she looked up and saw him. She finished wiping her hands deliberately before tossing the towel aside and closing the distance between them.

“Heyyyy TJ, I heard you was back, “ she cooed smiling brashly from behind the screen door. She didn’t rush to give her big teddy bear baby a welcome back hug and kiss and press her soft body into his as had been their usual greeting when they’d spent any time apart.

“Been back over a month,” he mumbled. “Thought I’d a seen you before now.”

“Oh, you know how it is, folks getting sick. I’ve got to take care of them, she protested. “I didn’t want to come over there and bring all kinda germs on top of all that you got going on.” She narrowed her gaze and took a step backwards before looking him up and down, as if she could see just by looking at him all that he had going on. Satisfied, or unable to reach a conclusion, she started to fan herself with her hand. “Sure is hot today.”

“All that I got going on,” he replied with a half-hearted chuckle, “ain’t none of your germs going to make a difference.” He shifted his weight from one side to the other trying to keep the staff out of her view.

He saw that she’d put on a few pounds, which only made her curves more curvy. She wore a thin cotton dress, a slight, sleeveless number in a muted yellow with tiny red flowers all over. The dress had a deep “V” held together by four small white buttons that looked totally inadequate to the task of containing her glistening cleavage. It fell over her body perfectly, across her flat stomach and broad hips, ending at

her calves.

"You look good Marren," he said with as much of a smile as he could muster considering the scarred skin of his face, which at that moment felt like there were maggots crawling all over it. "How you been?"

"You know, been fine. I'm fine, about the same. This my last year; graduating in the spring. Class of 19-55!" She did a quick twirl and raised her arms in celebration, before coming back to face him full of giggles.

"Yeah, that's great. I knew you'd make it," he said with a sigh. "Kind of wished I'd stayed and graduated."

"Don't you tell that lie, TJ," she said sucking her teeth. "You been places, done things. You always wanted to go somewhere, and you did. TJ You've seen the world! Not many folks round here been to New Jersey and Ko-rea."

She fanned her face and let out a few deep breaths. Then she rested her arms on top of her head. "It sure is hot as hell today."

It was a habit of hers, unusual for a colored girl. They were usually so finicky about their hair, especially after pressing it with a hot comb. But Marren had just enough Cherokee on her father's side, and enough gumption of her own, to make her auburn hair loose enough so that she didn't bother with that. She stood winding her fingers in her thick braids and shifting her weight from one trunk-like leg to the other. The Private couldn't help noticing that her arms had been bronzed a deep chestnut color by the sun and now gleamed with perspiration. He loved how the sun just kissed her all over glorifying her even more.

Each of her armpits sprouted a tuft of curly auburn hair and every time she lifted her arms they flashed a torturous musky scent at the Private. Every time she took a breath, her

glistening cleavage threatened to pop the tiny buttons that barely contained it. Her nipples pushed at the thin cotton as if desperate to escape.

Without warning, she lowered her arms and leaned against the door-jamb. For the first time, she looked him full in the face and in the eye, "What was it like?"

He looked down at her and tried not to be too obvious about sucking the sweltering air. For a long minute he couldn't bring himself to answer as the sweat ran down his temples and beaded up in his crotch and armpits. A bee buzzed at the screen door agitated that it couldn't find one of the tears to enter through and finally moved away.

As he stood there, the Private admitted to himself that he had never looked at Marren's eyes much before, but now he did. They were a warm brown, large and doe-like, surrounded by thick lashes and set deep in her beautiful dark face with its slightly broad nose and full lips. He saw genuine curiosity there in her eyes, but he was hoping for so much more.

He shifted his weight from one side to the other and then back again, and opened and closed his right hand to calm the tremor before speaking.

"It was war," he finally responded flatly, not wanting for a minute to sully her with even the slightest hint of what he had done and witnessed. "War is hell. Don't let nobody tell you different." He inhaled deeply, stopping himself from saying more and fighting the ache that was beginning to burn in his right side.

Marren crunched up her nose at his confession and twisted her mouth around as if tasting his words and considering what to make of them. "That's all?"

"I thought about you every day, every minute of the day," he blurted out. "I just wanted to stay alive to get back here to

you. You kept me alive, Marren.”

He poured out his heart to her, blabbering on through the screen. He stood there like an idiot and clutched his staff as if for dear life, no longer able to obscure its presence. He tried not to show how badly he hurt just standing there mustering every ounce of muscle strength to stay on his feet and still the tremor, so he didn't appear a spastic moron.

He knew he was losing the battle as he reached up with his trembling hand to wipe the sweat from his face. “I came back for you, I did.” Spent, he lowered his head and took a few deep breaths inhaling her scent as she fidgeted and played in her hair. She bit her lip and started to speak a couple of times but managed nothing but fidgeting.

He waited, wishing for the courage to reach out, yank open the door and pull her towards him. He so wanted to sink to his knees and bury his face, scarred and mutilated as it was, in the sweat of her cleavage for one last time for one fresh memory of the feel of her to go along with the memories that had sustained him through those cold wet mountains in Korea and then the dark silent void of a dozen hospital beds.

But the strength eluded him as did the courage. What if he toppled over when he went to reach for the door? What if the door was latched? Which almost nobody did, but he couldn't be sure what all had changed in the three years that he'd been away. If he reached for the door he could miss and punch through the flimsy screen. And even if he did open the unlocked door and reach for her, would she recoil from him as so many did?

“I'm sorry,” Marren said finally. She peeled herself from the door jamb with an audible sigh and began shifting her weight from one leg to the other, which he saw were just as bronzed as her arms, and which ended in bare feet whose stubby toes were painted a harlot's red.

"I missed you too, TJ. I really did, " she purred benevolently. "You was my first and some of the best loving I ever had." She closed her eyes for just a moment, and he saw her tongue slide absently across her full lips before she looked at him again. "Not that I got whorish since you left," she quickly added. "But I've grown up. I'm graduating. I'm a woman now, and I got to think of my future. . . .I just needs me a whole man."

The words, coming out of her succulent lips, out of that beautiful dark face that he knew so well and loved with all his being, cut into him like the storm of shrapnel that had attacked him on that hill in Kaesong. For a minute, he stopped breathing. Then he started coughing and he desperately, jerkily, fought to regain his breath while fighting not to lose his footing. After a moment that seemed like an eternity, some instinct of self-preservation gave him back his breath and compelled him to retreat. The color of auburn and the smell of seduction painfully blended into one and chased after him like a taunting demon.

The Private lumbered down the stairs like the rejected, defective soul that he was, tilting heavily. Odell rescued him as he started to shuffle across the dirt yard. He had waited just five minutes as their momma had instructed him before getting out of the truck and standing at the ready. Equal in stature, he caught his older brother's weight, and this time the Private did not resist as he bore him the remaining yards to the truck. As Odell reached for the truck's door handle, they heard the screen door screech open and slam shut. Looking back, they saw that Marren had now dared to venture beyond her threshold and was standing at the edge of the porch.

"You lucky, you know," she called after him, as if tossing a stray dog a bone. "You could've died over there. Don't know what yo Mama would've done if you'da died over there."

VI.

The encounter with Marren chilled the Private for a long time and almost knocked him back to the dark void. It made him remember the stink of human flesh exploding and suffocating him on a hill in Korea and hospital beds that he knew only by their feel. It made him struggle with the taste of a revolver, steel mixed with bourbon and self-loathing. It made his momma order his ten siblings, from Odell down to three-year old Little Bit, to never leave him alone. And Little Bit, who had fearlessly taken to chasing the chickens around the dirt yard like a demon as soon as she could walk, took her instruction extremely seriously. She became her brother's anchor and his shadow. When he woke up, she would be perched on the edge of his bed staring at him. When he ate, she ate. When he headed out to the outhouse, he had to convince her that no, she could not come into the little shed, but had to wait outside until he returned.

Over time, the Private somehow managed to push the haunting thoughts that plagued him back to a far corner of his being. He knew he needed to stay out of the dark silent void. He knew with certainty, without knowing how he knew, that the next time he went there, it would be his coffin.

Eventually, he began to tell himself what his parents had been saying all along, that he wasn't dead. He could hear most things. He could see out of his one eye. Thanks to the Army plastic surgeons, his face looked less like raw hamburger as time passed. He didn't yet know if he could get a woman, but at least he still had most of his equipment so maybe he could, and maybe one day it would work properly again.

Little by little, day by day, the Private went on living. He limped around leaning heavily on his staff with Little Bit skipping beside him. And then he hobbled along without it. And

then one day, after Marren and the Class of 19-55 had made their ceremonial walk down Shiloh's center aisle, with the whole community, except him, cheering, he shuffled down to his old school and asked the teacher to help him study for his diploma.

Mrs. Ruby Dee Jackson had received him with perturbation and reticence, rather than sympathy and enthusiasm. She had chastised him about going into the army in the first place. She had even driven out to the farm to try to convince his parents to forbid him from enlisting.

"He should at least wait until he graduates," she had plead. "A high school diploma is a valuable asset, especially for a Negro. TJ is a smart boy. He could make something of himself, if he applied himself."

But he hadn't listened, and his parents had backed his decision.

Now, he spent hours listening to Mrs. Jackson, who had a face as plain as a paper sack but a mind as full as an encyclopedia, read him his lessons. She had graduated from Howard University in Washington D. C., and when she read to him the books and problems that he was to figure, her voice sounded like a news broadcast on the radio. His eye tired easily as he struggled to make out the words on a paper held an inch from his face and his damaged hearing was challenged to grasp the words as they tumbled out of her thin flat lips that she always colored in cherry red lipstick. But he persisted.

They spent months with her patiently repeating a passage or stopping to explain a word that produced in the Private (who despite her high opinion of him had never been more than the most average student) only a blank look of confusion or a frustrated pounding on the desk. But over time, he absorbed enough, and he finally became a high school graduate years

after he had become a disabled veteran.

The day after he received his diploma, the Private counted his discharge pay and the money the Army had been sending him. It wasn't much in the big scheme of things, certainly not enough to compensate for all he had lost, maybe not much to somebody else, but it was something to him. The Private used some of the money to buy his parents the first Frigidaire they ever owned. And to show his gratitude, he bought Mrs. Jackson a handkerchief on which he had her initials embroidered and a hat with a real ostrich feather sticking out of it that he sent for all the way from Raleigh. Mrs. Jackson burst out in laughter when he presented the hat to her and she caused quite a storm when she boldly stepped into the Shiloh Free Will Baptist Church with it perched on her head.

Mrs. Jackson told the Private about the G.I. Bill and how this time they were even letting Colored soldiers benefit too. She said that it could pay for him to go to college. He hooted at the thought, remembering the long painstaking hours it had taken for him to earn his diploma. "Don't tell me you want to spend your whole life reading my lessons to me."

Mrs. Jackson assured him that as much as she liked him, she had other plans for her life. But she also told him that he could get a job with the Veteran's Administration and a loan to buy a house. That got the Private's attention.

"Now you talking," he exclaimed, with one of his still infrequent grins. Since he was going to go on living, he would need a job. "Hell, that's why I joined up in the first place. So, I wouldn't have to hand tobacco for some white man all my life. Any job with the VA got to be better than that."

And why shouldn't he take advantage of all the VA could offer him, after all that he had been through? And as for the house, he hadn't thought much about it. But when he did, he wasn't thinking to live with his parents all his life. As far as he

knew, none of his kin had ever owned any property; if there was a way that he could be the first, he might just have to do that too.

In the following months, as Mrs. Jackson and he worked through all the required forms and applications, the Private would often whisper to himself *—I'm alive. I'm going to go on living.* He said it to fix it in his mind and to firm up his resolve.

But there were moments, despite his new-found prospects, when waves of despair would bulldoze him. Some new insult from someone in town would compel him to go out to the back field to sit alone and eat cantaloupe fresh off the vine, his body and soul aching so much that he often vomited. Or he would masturbate for what seemed like an eternity, until his flaccid penis was raw, without relief, which even a river of bourbon could not provide. At such times, the Private's thoughts would roam back to that hill in Kaesong and to that day that had changed everything. He knew in his mind he was lucky to be alive; but often he didn't *feel* lucky. He could walk, but now his journey through life was an obstacle course paved with hot coals and barbs he had to navigate barefoot, scarred, half-blind and half-hearing, maybe always alone. He didn't even know if he was truly still a man.

At moments such as these, the Private would think that maybe Kirby Randall from Minneapolis, Minnesota was the lucky one. Randall, who was crazy about his mother and his Labrador Spike and who carried pictures of both in his fatigues, whom the Private had called friend and seen become a flying mess of bloody body parts the instant before his life changed forever, who had been granted the dignity of a body bag and a closed coffin in lieu of the best medical care the U.S. Army could provide—maybe Randall had been the lucky one.

Maybe.

Interview: The Problem of the Hero: Peter Molin Talks with Roy Scranton

Introduction: Roy Scranton's soon-to-be published *Total Mobilization: American Literature and World War II* expands upon Scranton's controversial 2015 *Los Angeles Review of Books* article "The Myth of the Trauma Hero, from Wilfred Owen to 'Redeployment' and 'American Sniper.'" The *LARB* piece asserted that American war literature over-privileges the emotional suffering of white male American combatants at the expense of their war victims, while ignoring larger social and political aspects of militarism and war. In *Total Mobilization* Scranton locates the birth of the trauma hero in canonical World War II fiction and poetry. He connects literature with culture by making two arguments: 1) Treating soldiers as easily-damaged and pitiable victims of war obscures moral reckoning with war guilt and effective reintegration by veterans into civilian society, and 2) identifying and isolating veterans as a sanctified social caste offers veterans a dubious cultural reverence that overestimates the authority of their experience, while satisfying a dubious logic that preserves soldiers their identities as good men and the wars they fought as good wars. In making this argument, Scranton shuffles the deck of World War II-writing, inviting readers to seriously reconsider the cultural work performed by canonical works, and asking

them to pay more attention to a number of novels, poems, essays, articles, and movies that tell a different, more nuanced story about World War II and the decades after.

The interview was conducted via a series of phone calls and email exchanges.

– Peter Molin

PM: When did the concept of the trauma hero as a literary trope and cultural reality begin to form in your mind? Was it related more to your actual service in Iraq or to your reading and beginning efforts to write afterwards?

RS: I can pinpoint the origin of my conceptualization of the trauma hero and, in fact, the origin of what became *Total Mobilization*, in a graduate seminar I took on war literature at the New School, in 2007 or 2008. I was anxious about taking the class, because it was one of the first graduate seminars I was to take, and because I was highly sensitive about the way in which my personal experience in Iraq might distort the classroom dynamic. I wrote the professor an email in advance, asking about the course, expressing my concerns, and assuring him that I was really interested in the material, not in using the classroom as a space to talk about myself. He responded enthusiastically, encouraging me to join the class, and telling me that my personal experience need not be a focus in the seminar, though he was convinced the mere fact of it would help my fellow students better connect with the material.

The syllabus was fairly typical “war lit,” jumping from the *Iliad* to [Robert Graves’] *Good Bye to All That* and Wilfred Owen, then a bunch of stuff on Vietnam, then I think ending with [Anthony] Swofford’s *Jarhead*. What quickly became apparent, however, was that for the professor, all the material we were reading could only be understood through a combination of Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* and Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. For this guy, all war

literature was a story of trauma. But not just for him: he was merely a particularly dogmatic preacher of what was, I soon realized, a pervasive cultural belief.

Now I'd loved *Hero with a Thousand Faces* when I read it in high school, and spent two or three years annoying my friends by breaking down every movie we saw into its constituent archetypal moments, the giving of the boon, the crossing of the threshold, confronting the father, blah blah blah. But that had been a long time ago, and I'd long since realized the limits of Campbell's reductionist approach, despite the real insights it often offered. And while much war literature did seem to fit loosely within the adventure-story framework Campbell elaborated, reading something like [Ernst Junger's] *Storm of Steel*, to take only one example, through the lens of trauma seemed deeply mistaken, not only missing what was most interesting about the work, but wrenching its central premises into an alien ideology. The same thing seemed true with the *Iliad*, which is deeply misunderstood when viewed through the lens of trauma (as in [Jonathan] Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*, which misreads Homer and misunderstands Greek culture, though does nevertheless have real insights), as are numerous other works.

So I did what I do, which was to ask annoying questions, find counter-examples, and probe the professor's all-encompassing theory for weak points. The entire seminar was soon taken over by our intellectual grappling: things rapidly spun out of control and devolved into a power struggle. I was fighting for my intellectual integrity, my authority as a veteran, and my grade, while he was fighting for—well, it turned out that his brother had gone to Vietnam and come home fucked up, and this professor seemed to have devoted his life since to fixing his brother by proxy. I did not know when I started the class that I was to be another such proxy, but when our conflict climaxed in him sending me an eight-page email telling me how sorry he was that I was so traumatized and how much he wished he could

help me, I went to the department chair.

The professor was not invited back to teach. I saved my grade, wrote an essay about trauma and confession that was published in George Kovach's journal *Consequence* ("The Sinner's Strip-Tease: Rereading *The Things They Carried*," *Consequence*, 2:1, Spring 2010), and started delving deep into the idea of trauma: where it came from, how it worked, and why everybody seemed to conflate it with socially organized violence.

PM: At what point did you begin to sense that the trauma hero trope worked not as a redemptive effort by authors to "humanize" soldiers by illustrating the brutality of war, but a pernicious cultural mechanism that valorized an unhealthy way of thinking about soldiers, war, and militarism? Was there a specific book, thinker, or event that crystalized the impression?

RS: From the beginning, really, I was asking myself how this worked and who it served. Cui bono, right? I was also—let's just say that I was deeply formed in the hermeneutics of suspicion, and at the same time as I was taking that seminar on war literature I remember reading Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. Now Foucault... I'm not going to spend any time defending Foucault, as a thinker or a historian or whatever. I've always thought he's the Jamiroquai to Nietzsche's Stevie Wonder. But a key point of the *History of Sexuality*, which is a basically Nietzschean point, is that saying we're *not* going to talk about something is a way to talk about it. Repression is a mode of expression. Foucault made this point about the Victorians and sex, but it's worth keeping in mind anytime you start looking at cultural practices, since taboos and mysteries and so on are usually key to a culture.

This may seem sideways, but it's important to remember that trauma is always "that which cannot be spoken." Recall Tim O'Brien's mystical lyricism about how there's no such thing as

a true war story (which I discuss in my chapter on trauma). Narrating the unspeakable is a power move: it designates you as a master of mystery. Now I already knew about and was suspicious of the moral authority invested in veterans simply by fact of their having joined the military. It was a pretty short step then to see how trauma functioned as a way of evoking and preserving a sense of mystery around that authority. Luckily, I happened to come across Israeli historian Yuval Harari's magnificent book, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*, which provides a deep synoptic cultural history of how the experience of war changed in the west from being understood as a testament to one's capabilities, like a bullet point on a CV, to being understood as a revelation of esoteric wisdom. That book was very useful for helping me understand how contemporary perspectives on the experience of war evolved and what kinds of cultural work they do.



PM: Early in [Total Mobilization](#), you list a fairly conventional canon of well-known World War II fiction and poetry. But these are not the works you want to discuss in *Total Mobilization*. Instead, you bring to the fore authors such as poet Kenneth Koch and popular entertainment fare such as a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Why? What do we get by paying attention to this “alternative canon”?

RS: Norman Mailer wrote in “The White Negro” in 1957 that “The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it.” Yet by the early 2000s, if not before, a clear mythic framework had emerged for understanding World War II, which can be seen in the pre-eminent WWII films of the late 1990s, *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, both from 1998, that re-interprets WWII through both the American war in Vietnam and the 1990-1991

Persian Gulf War. This framework interprets World War II as primarily an individual traumatic experience of violence that leads the individual to a more enlightened state, in *Saving Private Ryan* to a deeper patriotism, in *The Thin Red Line* to a deeper Transcendentalist engagement with the non-human world. But these films come out of a major cultural revision of the meaning of World War II that happened primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, first in literature, then in film, which laid the groundwork for these more explicitly trauma-based narratives. The mere fact of this should strike observers as puzzling, since World War II was an unquestionable American victory, a war in which America suffered fewer casualties than any other major combatant nation, and the origin of a half-century of American global hegemony. *Total Mobilization* explores two questions concurrently: First, how did World War II (and by extension, all war) come to be identified with trauma? Second, what is this re-interpretation obscuring?

What I found in my research by going back to the literature of World War II with fresh eyes, discounting the academic and literary consensus which tendentiously declares that World War II "didn't produce any great literature," is that writers attempting to make sense of WWII—from Ralph Ellison to Herman Wouk, from Wallace Stevens to Kenneth Koch, from James Jones to Joan Didion—were obsessed by a set of problems I group under the idea of "the problem of the hero," essentially questions about how the individual relates to society in a time of total mobilization.

What was at stake was a conflict between different kinds of stories society told itself about its values, which is to say, how Americans told themselves the story of who they were: on the one hand, narratives in which every individual was an equal and independent member of a commercial democracy where everything was for sale, and on the other hand narratives in which every individual was subordinated to the collective and the most important thing anyone could do would be to sacrifice

their life for the nation. The total mobilization of American society to fight World War II demanded, in Kenneth Burke's words, a "change from a commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives to a collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives."

In effect, World War II opened wide a conflict that had been building within the western world since the Napoleonic Wars: the conflict between nationalism and capitalism, specifically the conflict between the metaphoric logic of nationalism and metaphoric logic of capitalism around the issue of bodily sacrifice. This is the conflict at the heart of *Total Mobilization*, the conflict at the center of World War II writing from the 1940s to the 1960s, the conflict for which the "trauma hero" provides an imaginary solution. Looking at works that have fallen outside the canon—such as Kenneth Koch's war poetry, wartime Bugs Bunny cartoons, Wallace Stevens's wartime poetry (which is generally derided or ignored as war poetry), or James Dickey, who has been more or less deliberately abandoned—while also revisiting canonical works such as Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," *Catch-22*, and *The Thin Red Line* with new eyes, helps us see the complex historical reality that the post-Cold-War academic and literary framework erases and obscures.



Author Roy Scranton

PM: In particular, I was struck by your rereading of Randall Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." How has that well-known very short poem been misunderstood or not appreciated in its full magnitude?

RS: Jarrell, as many readers will know, was drafted during the war, and served stateside as an instructor in "celestial navigation." He never saw combat, but he did see plenty of men who were headed that way. One interesting thing about Jarrell

is that he writes all these poems in which youthful, virile young men are sacrificed to state power, but his letters show a pervasive and thoroughgoing contempt for his fellow soldiers. What he thought of the actual men he served with (he calls them racists and says they are intellectually “indistinguishable from Cream of Wheat”), however, is less important than the use he made of them in his poetry, which was to revitalize the British trench lyric through a Protestant American mindset. In his poetry, pre-eminently focused on bombers, Jarrell is performing a complex ritual substitution: the victims of American political violence—German and Japanese soldiers and civilians—is being replaced by the agents of that very violence—the bomber crew. The picture is flipped, so that instead of seeing Germans and Japanese women and children physically wounded and killed by American bombing, we focus instead on the suffering that bombing causes the person doing it. With the fully developed trauma hero myth the suffering is purely spiritual, but we can see Jarrell working it out de novo, as it were, making the transition from the physical—as in “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”—to the spiritual—as in the poem “Eighth Air Force.”

The observation that Jarrell turns killers into victims isn't new. As Helen Vendler noted in her 1969 review of Jarrell's *Complete Poems*, “The secret of [Jarrell's] war poems is that in the soldiers he has found children; what is the ball turret gunner but a baby who has lost his mother?” What I do in *Total Mobilization* is look at the context and mechanism for how this happens within the genre I identify as the “bomber lyric,” within the literature of World War II, and within broader currents of American literature from 1945 to the early 2000s.

As I write in *Total Mobilization*: “If we want to understand the human experience of war, we must come to terms with numerous difficult and unpleasant facts. One of them is that no agent of violence can be deemed innocent or faultless, even

if that agent is drafted against their will to fight in a war ultimately considered just. We must understand the soldier first, foremost, and always as an agent of state power, since that is their objective social role. Hence stories of soldiers must be read in light of their complicity with and participation in sovereign power. Soldiers are the state's killers. That's their job. Jarrell's efforts to excuse the men engaged in bombing the German people on the basis that they like puppies and opera, or because they are mortal, turn soldiers into victims of their own violence. Such efforts are not only deluded and obscurantist but ethically naïve."

PM: In the chapter section titled "The Hero as Riddle: The Negro Hero and the Nation Within the Nation" you tie together Richard Wright, James Baldwin, John Oliver Killen's 1962 novel about a black quartermaster company in World War II *And Then We Heard the Thunder* to interrogate the racial dimensions of the trauma hero. What is significant about the African-American literary perspective on World War II?

RS: What looking at the African-American literature around World War II really helps illuminate is how much the question of war literature, and the related question of the hero, are related to what Benedict Anderson famously called "the imagined community of the nation." War literature qua "war literature" is fundamentally tangled up in questions about the national identity of the writers and subjects of that literature. This is why when people say "Vietnam War literature," they typically mean [Tim] O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* or [Larry] Heinemann's *Paco's Story* or [Karl] Marlantes' *Matterhorn*, rather than B o Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* or Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*.

The single most important issue at stake in the African-American literature of World War II is the question of national belonging. As James Baldwin puts it in a reminiscence written many years later, "This was in 1943. We were fighting the Second World War. *We*: who was this *we*? For this war was

being fought, as far as I could tell, to bring freedom to everyone with the exception of Hagar's children and the 'yellow-bellied Japs'.... I have never been able to convey the confusion and horror and heartbreak and contempt which every black person I then knew felt. Oh, we dissembled and smiled as we groaned and cursed and did our duty. (And we *did* our duty.) The romance of treason never occurred to us for the brutally simple reason that you can't betray a country you don't have.... And we did not wish to be traitors. We wished to be citizens."

As I discuss in the work of Baldwin, Richard Wright, John Oliver Killens, Gwendolyn Brooks, and most notably Ralph Ellison, the dilemma faced by many African-Americans under total mobilization during World War II was that they were being *ordered* to sacrifice themselves for the war, they *wanted* to sacrifice themselves for the war, but they were structurally incapable of actually sacrificing themselves—because while they could serve and while they could die in that service, like Messman "Dorie" Miller died, like Lieutenant John R. Fox died, like Sergeant Reuben Rivers died, their deaths were not recognized as legitimate sacrifices for the nation, since they were not seen as genuine constituents of that nation. In Jim Crow America, the negro was not regarded as a free citizen, hence while the negro was expected to give their life for their country—or indeed anytime it was demanded—that act was not regarded as sacred.

For writers such as Ellison and Killens, this problem emerged not only as a sense of having been prohibited from joining the (white) nation, but also as a provocation to understand their own identity as already existing within a "nationality," what James Baldwin called "a nation within a nation," which is to say Black nationalism.

When we take into account how nationalism is constructed through ideas of shared blood, either through inheritance or through sacrifice, we begin to see the powerful ideological work narratives of collective violence do in shoring up

cultural hierarchies—or in opening them to criticism and question. It's no mystery that the trauma hero in American war literature has been predominantly white, or that when we talk about "American war literature," people mostly mean literature by white men. Militarism, American identity, and white supremacy are deeply intertwined, and in fact have been woven together since World War II over and over again, in novels and poems and films that focus on traumatized white citizen-soldiers suffering for the violence they themselves unleashed on countless unnamed Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Iraqi, and Afghan bodies.

PM: An author who is not a veteran and who is not often thought of as a writer with an abiding interest in World War II is Joan Didion. But *Total Mobilization* asserts her importance in understanding how the American West and the World War II Pacific Theater were connected in ways that differed from the American East Coast's connection with the war in Europe. How can we think of Didion as a World War II writer?

RS: One of the central conceits of so-called "war literature" is that it is primarily by and about men in combat: Wilfred Owen, Ernest Hemingway, Tim O'Brien. But the violence of combat, as dramatic as it may be, is only one aspect of the larger phenomena of socially organized mass violence. Even thinking back to the *Iliad*, say, only parts of that work are about actual combat, and not necessarily the most interesting parts. Who can forget the scene on the battlements between Hector and Andromache, where Hector's son Astyanax recoils from his father's helmeted face in fear?

The Trojan War was perhaps the greatest literary and dramatic subject of Athenian culture, but the work addressing it was in no way restricted to narrow representations of the combat experiences of individual warriors. From Homer's *Odyssey* to Aeschylus's *Oresteia* to Sophocles's *Philoctetes* to Euripedes's *The Trojan Women*, we see Athenian dramatists and poets

exploring a wide range of that war's events and effects. Similarly, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, World War II was a hugely important cultural event in American history, easily the most important event of the 20th century, and when we take a wide view of post-1945 American culture, we can see that cultural and aesthetic representations of World War II have struggled to come to terms with its staggering historical, ethical, political, and psychological complexity in a variety of ways, in poetry, novels, musicals, history, television mini-series, comic books, video games, and films. From Pearl S. Buck's novel *China Sky*, depicting American doctors caught in the Japanese invasion of China, to the first-person shooters set in World War II that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, starting with the now-classic *Wolfenstein 3D* and continuing with the blockbuster franchises *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*; from Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* to George Lucas's *Star Wars*; from Chester Himes's novel of racial tensions in wartime Los Angeles, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, the protagonist of which is a professor of "Hitler Studies," the variety of American cultural production from the last seventy years that works explicitly, allegorically, and sometimes unconsciously with and through World War II is at once a testament to the war's importance and an overwhelming strain on our efforts to understand it.

Yet if we were to go looking for the war's impact strictly in the canonical "war literature," which is focused on the traumatic combat experience of individual soldiers, we would not see it. The focus on trauma obscures and elides the historical complexity of the event. This is how someone like Joan Didion, for whom the effect of World War II on American society is probably the central subject of her career, can be excluded from the canon of "war literature."

There is much to say about Didion's work, not least to speak of its sheer technical brilliance, or of the interesting place she occupies in literary history, as the American heir of

Conrad and Orwell and the progenitor of the pop-art merging of advertising and the Stein-Hemingway tradition we eventually see fully developed in Don DeLillo, for example. But first and foremost she is a chronicler of American empire, the complex way that the frontier mentality of "the West" transformed into the Cold War mentality of "the West," through the crucible of victory in World War II. As a native Californian, old enough to remember Pearl Harbor but too young to do anything about, dragged around the country by her father (a reservist called to active duty), who saw her home state undergo a dramatic transformation from what was essentially agricultural feudalism to being perhaps the primary sector of the military-industrial complex and the utopian dream-space of suburban America, Didion was remarkably well placed to witness the disruptive and disturbing emergence of the post-45 American military Leviathan, which she tracked through her fiction, journalism, and memoir, from her first novel, *Run, River*, which is about the effects of World War II on agricultural life in the Sacramento Valley, to her memoir *Where I Was From*, which explicitly connects the frontier mentality of the Western pioneers with the emergence of American hegemony, while also elucidating the inescapable, long-term effects of military industrialization on Californian culture. Indeed, as she argues about modern Hawaiian culture in a key article I discuss in *Total Mobilization*, postwar Californian culture is inextricable from hypostasizing American militarism. And while it may be easier to see this in the west, in Hawaii and California, which only exist as they do today because of World War II, the insight applies to the whole nation. Since 1942, the United States has been a society mobilized for war, organized for war, even if only a small cadre do the actual fighting. Didion helps us see that.

PM: To what extent do veteran authors and artists knowingly and culpably participate in the trauma hero narrative? I would think, or maybe hope, that most would be horrified to think that their works instantiate or re-instantiate

misguided, reactionary, and generally oppressive cultural and historical practices and patterns of thinking. But you suggest that they do.

RS: The most generous response would be to say that we're all figuring it out as we go. We have the stories we love, the stories we were raised on, like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now* and *Star Wars*, for example, we have the stories we take up when we're trying to figure out how to make sense of an experience, we see how people respond to the stories we try to tell—and we make decisions as we go. Especially those of us trying to have careers, trying to reach a wider public; you can't just say whatever shit you feel like. There's some back and forth, whoever you wind up talking to, and sometimes there's more freedom and sometimes there's less, and most folks will take the path of least resistance rather than try to fight their way through to a deeper understanding. Some people maybe know better and choose not to give a fuck. But most people think they're good people, most writers believe they're trying to really get into the complexity, and that they're doing the best they can. The deeper issue is that people lie first of all to *themselves*, but that's just human nature.

One example we could discuss from *Total Mobilization* is Brian Turner. I know Brian, I like Brian, I respect Brian. I have long admired his poetry. I think he's a good man and a good poet. But the situation he found himself in with the cover of *Here, Bullet...* The cover of that book is a striking visual example of the work that the trauma hero does to refocus attention from the typically brown-skinned victims of war to the spiritual travails of the white American soldier: it shows Turner himself, alone in an empty landscape, facing the viewer with a thousand-yard stare. As Turner describes the process that led to this cover (in an interview in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*), he and his editor decided to literally erase Iraqi bodies from the photo they used because he thought

the blunt truth of his experience would repulse readers. The thing is, he's not wrong. From a certain perspective, he made the absolute right choice. On the other hand, telling people what they want to hear, trimming off the unpleasant bits, leaving off the hooded Iraqi prisoners—all that contributes to a collective vision of the Iraq War that focuses on the psychological suffering of American soldiers at the expense of even *seeing* the bodies of the people we killed, never mind discussing the larger political context, which is an outright scandal. So do I sympathize with Brian, as a young poet making decisions about his first book, to minimize the unpleasant reality of the Iraq War and try to keep people focused on his poetry? Of course. But I think we also have to consider the big picture.

Several scholars have begun attending to the ways that the “veteran-writer” operates in the MFA economy of postwar American literature, most pre-eminently Mark McGurl, Eric Bennett, and Joseph Darda. What they've found is that the role of the veteran-writer has been privileged in the MFA-dominated literary economy as a form of white ethnic identity writing. Just like writers of color are expected and encouraged to put themselves forward first of all as representatives of their racial or ethnic trauma, so are veteran-writers expected and encouraged to put themselves forward as representatives of their war-time trauma (A broader critique of how identity-based grievance works to create subjects conformable to the commodity logic of neoliberal capitalism can be found in the work of writers such as Joan Scott, Allen Feldman, Wendy Brown, and Asad Haider, among others). These expectations function all along the line, at every level of gatekeeping, from MFA admissions to agents to publishing to award committees. Working against these expectations is profoundly risky, especially for emerging writers.

It can be done—Percival Everett's wicked satire *Erasure* comes to mind, or Eric Bennett's novel *A Big Enough Lie*, perhaps my

own novel *War Porn*—but it's not usually going to win you accolades.

PM: My reading of *War Porn* is that its Iraq vet protagonist refutes sympathetic identification as a trauma hero, nor can we grant him the experiential authority of the “noble veteran.” What is the relationship in your mind (and chronologically) of *War Porn* and the academic work that became *Total Mobilization*?

RS: I started *War Porn* pretty soon after coming back from Iraq, while still in the army and stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, then finished the first draft the summer after I ETS'd, in Berlin in 2006. There was a lot of revision ahead, but the main generative work was done. And as you suggest, I was even at that point working out a pretty strong critique of the trauma hero, even if I hadn't distinctly articulated the figure itself. I feel like *Total Mobilization* is working out analytically some of the things that *War Porn* was working out narratively.

PM: Your framing of the issue seems divisive and perhaps even something of a betrayal of the veteran-writer community, which we might say you helped establish with the seminal 2013 *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* anthology (co-edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher, and containing work by contemporary veteran-writing luminaries such as Brian Turner, Phil Klay, Colby Buzzell, David Abrams, Brian Van Reet, and Jacob Siegel, and military spouse Siobhan Fallon). Can you talk about the desire or efforts by contemporary vet-writers to form a veteran-writer community? Can you talk about how you see your work in relation?

RS: In the conclusion of *Total Mobilization*, where I talk about the end of the Cold War and shifting arguments about the meaning of World War II, I bring up as an example the National Air and Space Museum's attempted exhibit on the 50th anniversary of the end of WW2. The exhibit failed, largely

because of pressure from veterans' groups. One of the sticking points was the number of expected American casualties in the planned invasion of Japan, which was a key piece of evidence in arguments about whether the use of the atomic bomb was justified. The historical record—the consensus of professional historians—is clear: there was a clear path to surrender with Japan that would obviate any Normandy-style landing on Honshu and Kyushu, which invasion the US military at the time expected would lead to 30,000 to 50,000 casualties. The Air Force Association and others kept insisting that the language in the exhibit employ later estimates of 500,000 or more casualties, which come from Truman and Henry Stimson's postwar memoirs and are unsupported by the historical record. As military historian John Ray Skates notes in his book *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*, "the source of the large numbers used after the war by Truman, Stimson, and Churchill to justify the use of the atomic bomb has yet to be discovered." At one point in the argument, Tom Crouch, who was the chairman of the museum's aeronautics department, put the problem neatly: "Do you want to do an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want to do an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both."

Historian Edward Linenthal describes this as conflict between a "commemorative" view and a "historical" view. We face the same conflict every time we come back to the act of representing war, discussing war, talking about war literature, because—as I argue in *Total Mobilization*—war is one of the key practices through which human beings construct their collective identity. Every discussion about war, about a museum exhibit, about the cover of a book of poetry, about a poem, is a discussion about who "we" are, which is to say what it means to be American. And the conflict Linenthal describes, the conflict exemplified in the issue at the National Air and Space Museum, is over whether we should focus on

commemoration—remembering together, emphasizing our bonds and our unity, reassuring ourselves of our basic goodness—or on the objective historical record, which often shows the American military and American government doing horrible things for morally unjustifiable reasons.

I've seen this play out in smaller ways in the vet writers community. When we were putting *Fire and Forget* together, around 2011 or 2012, it seemed like one major thing vet writers could do for each was to help keep each other honest: to help keep each other from telling readers what they wanted and expected to hear. I think a lot about Jake Siegel's story from *Fire and Forget*, "Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere," in this respect: the experience of war the characters in that story are commemorating is so raw, so powerful, that the idea of betraying the experience is tantamount to betraying your battle buddy. But as the vet writers community became more definitively established, as the actual experiences of war have faded into the past, as people have built careers as professional veterans, I've seen the community grow increasingly hostile to dissent. It seems like there's been a real closing of ranks, a sense of a community supporting and protecting each other, and any real critical function has been lost (present company excepted, along with a few others). Commemoration has won out over any concern for the historical record. This is no doubt connected to the way that the "vet writer" serves to recuperate white ethnic militarism as a commodifiable victim identity (as discussed above), a fundamentally unstable identity formation given the historical and contemporary privilege afforded white men in American society, and given the tendency of militarism (however tempered by liberal multiculturalism) to resolve into a fascistic worship of power as such.

PM: The conclusion of *Total Mobilization* asserts that contemporary war-writing about Iraq and Afghanistan represents a continuation, even a doubling-down, on the trauma hero

trope. How has this come about and what are the consequences?

RS: I wouldn't say it represents a "doubling-down"—while I think trauma has remained central to contemporary war writing about Iraq and Afghanistan, I also think that many writers have looked for ways to innovate, if only to distinguish themselves from previous generations and each other. The film *American Sniper* and Kevin Powers' novel *Yellow Birds* are the most obvious and conventional versions of the contemporary trauma hero story, but even Powers struggles to renovate the trope, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, by pushing through O'Brien's total negation of truth to wind up with something that is the obverse of Hemingway and Owen's insistence on particular factual sensory data: representing the act of violence as the origin of linguistic indeterminacy and the font of literary production as such. And with [Phil Klay's] *Redeployment*, [Brian Van Reet's] *Spoils*, [Elliot Ackerman's] *Green on Blue*, and [Will Mackin's] *Bring Out the Dog*, just for a few of the most talked-about examples, you can see writers struggling to get past the trauma hero, with varying degrees of gumption and success. Overall I think it has to do with long-term cultural changes: trauma remains a powerful concept for understanding reality, but I suspect that it's on its way out, and that a new emphasis on materiality is emerging. Which is to say, that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in trauma is increasingly less persuasive than that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in the body. But this is only a supposition. We'll have to wait and see. But as soon as the traumatized veteran becomes useful again, we see him return. The trauma hero will probably be around for a long time.

PM: In practical terms, how can understanding the trauma hero as a literary trope and cultural myth help us think better, more clearly, about actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war? What might the nation, or its military-medical apparatus, do to help them?

RS: Well, I've written a work of literary and cultural history, not a practical guide to coping with trauma. I would say, though, that the entire way that we understand "actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war" must be understood as process of collective meaning-making. The psychologically damaged veteran is certainly suffering, but that suffering takes shape in performing a specific social role, which is the "traumatized veteran." As long as we stay within the bounds of the discourse, there's no way to "help" such a person by pointing out that their genuine suffering is culturally produced. I suppose we might tell them "trauma isn't real," but then what? They have to make sense of their experience somehow, and the best that could come from delegitimizing a culturally dominant way of making sense of experience would be the emergence of a new way of making sense of experience. Are there better and worse ways of making meaning? I think so. But that's another discussion. The only *practical* help my project might offer is, I would hope, some understanding of the ways that the "actual veteran" exists in relation to the "nation."

I'm a Spinozist at heart, which means I'm a materialist, but it also means that I believe freedom comes first of all from understanding. Until you understand what compels you to understand your experience through certain roles, frameworks, and practices, you'll be stuck performing those roles, seeing through those frameworks, and acting out those practices. Understanding may never provide physical or social liberation, but it can at least open a space for some freedom of thought and movement, and the possibility of equanimity toward the world as it exists, which is to say a sense of peace.

PM: On what grounds can a veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan feel good about his or her service? On what grounds can a veteran construct a guilt-free life post-military?

RS: I'm not here to make former soldiers feel good about their experience. The whole premise feels a bit absurd to me. Nor am

I interested in articulating a way for anyone to live life “guilt free.” I think guilt, like shame, can be useful and healthy. How else do you learn and grow as a person except by confronting your mistakes and owning them, internalizing them, recognizing what you did and finding a way forward? “Guilt-free” is an advertising slogan.

This goes back to what I was talking about earlier with the difference between “commemorative” and “historical” views about war and the role of the veteran in American culture. I feel no obligation as a scholar, critic, or writer to “commemorate” war or to “honor” the direct role some people play in America’s wars. On the contrary, I feel an obligation to be faithful to the historical record, objective facts, and unpleasant realities. Because I am myself a veteran, some people see a contradiction there, as if selling my ass to the US Army for four years somehow obliges me to participate in the collective myth-making of American militarism. But such an expectation is absurd. I refuse to play the role of the professional vet.

It seems clear that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are unjustifiable in any moral sense. Everyone involved was not only complicit, but an active agent in genuine evil and massive human suffering. You have to come to terms with that.

PM: You also have a novel coming out this year, titled [I \[Heart\] Oklahoma](#)? What can we expect?

RS: It’s a “road movie novel,” a vision-quest, a deep dive into the blood myths of modern America. Let’s just say there wind up being a lot of bodies on the highway. LitHub is publishing an excerpt, which I’d suggest as the easiest way to see whether you feel like taking this particular death trip.



“I Like the Real Stuff”—WBT Interviews Ben Fountain

Ben Fountain, the award-winning author of Brief Encounters with Che Guevera, Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk, and, most recently, Beautiful Country Burn Again, was kind enough to invite two WBT editors, Matthew Hefti and Mike Carson, into his Dallas home for lunch and an interview this past month. The interview took place at a dining room table piled high with well-organized stacks of reading material (including Ulysses S Grant’s annotated memoirs and at least a year’s worth of New York Review of Books back issues) and surrounded by a colorful selection of Haitian and Mexican folk art. Fountain got things going by asking us if we were sure we were recording. A reporter from another publication recently failed to record his interview with Fountain on two separate occasions. That person should know better, Fountain explained (using a choice expletive), as redoing an interview is the “most painful thing.” Fountain’s speech mirrors the concerns of his writing. He is always searching for the right word, and adds on to what he has already said with words like “just” and “like” and “and,” not because he can’t find a useful or appropriate word or simile, but because he wants to find one that is truly tethered to experience, to details, to the real, and he is aware of just how much of our language has been emptied out, “un-moored,” as he says in the interview. His refusal to abide linguistic insincerity and passionate commitment to (and faith in) authentic human experience is a source of inspiration for these interviewers and the whole WBT team. You can read a review of his most recent book [here](#) and buy it [here](#).

—WBT



WBT: Walker Percy. No one talks about him much anymore yet you, in an early interview, put him down as an important

influence. How did Walker Percy influence your writing?

BF: I discovered him in college. I graduated college in 1980, and that year he was the hot guy in American fiction. He had this slow build to his career. And each step, you know, he got stronger. By the late '70s, he was at his peak in terms of reputation. And he'd also gone to Chapel Hill. And he was a southerner. He had figured out a way to take Southern literature beyond Faulkner. It seemed like the generation after Faulkner everybody was kind of working in the same vein, the same idiom, and Walker Percy figured out a way to make it new, to keep it genuine and authentic, but also take it to the contemporary world, and find a different medium, a different language for it.

You know, I'm sure he's very out of favor right now, because of the way he wrote about women especially. And I'm sure certain views of race haven't aged well, at all. But I think there's a lot that's worthwhile in his writing, I mean a tremendous amount, and so I still think of him quite a bit. And I can't read him when I'm writing my own stuff, because his voice is too powerful, his vibe. But I do appreciate the way he used humor. I think there's this notion in American letters, this attitude, that if it's not depressing the hell out of me, then it must not be profound or important. I think the really great writers use all 88 keys on the keyboard, like everything from humor, to pathos, to utmost tragedy. [Gabriel] Garcia Marquez does it, and I think Walker Percy was really, really good at humor. So I paid attention to that when I started reading him and still do.

WBT: We've come across people who find humor in your writing and describe it as satirical. Do you consider yourself a satirist?

BF: I think satire is different than humor. My notion of satire is exaggeration. You take reality, and you push it at least one step further. The classic example of that is "A Modest Proposal" by Jonathan Swift, where he says, "we'll let the rich eat Irish babies." God forbid we ever actually get to the point where someone seriously proposes that. To me, that

is satire. I think I'm a straight-up realist. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is not satire. Because everything that happens in that book, either had happened, was happening, or has happened since. So it's just straight-up realism, and if there is humor in it, the humor, hopefully, just comes out of who the people are and the nature of the situation. I think people cracking jokes is just a basic part of human experience. I mean even in the concentration camps—people were making jokes. I'm not saying they were doing it a lot, but it's just a basic component of human nature. In *Billy Lynn*, every time you get a group of guys together, within 4-5 hours, they have this inside joke that's going on and it's constant. There's a lot of laughter. So, satire and humor, I would say satire can be humorous, but they aren't necessarily the same thing.

WBT: Much of your writing focuses on history. Do you do a lot of historical research when writing fiction and, when you have free time, do you read history or fiction?

Both. There's always the thing you need to read specifically, either for background or direct knowledge. I had the idea for *Billy Lynn* in 2004, and I didn't start writing until 2009. I was working on other things, but I had the notion for it, and I started making notes. You know, it's a sign when the notes keep coming that maybe you got something here. So my default reading for the next five years was about these wars. Because if there wasn't anything pressing, whether in I needed it for work, or just something I really wanted to read for my own pleasure, I was always reading about these wars, about Iraq and Afghanistan, just because I thought if I'm going to make a run at this *Billy Lynn* story, I want to have this deep background. And that's where my head and my heart lead me anyway. It felt very important to me to try to understand these wars and all the levels of experience that go into them.

WBT: Did you read war writing and fiction from previous wars in preparation for Billy Lynn? Or did you just focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

I mostly focused on this recent war, and nonfiction accounts,

like long-form journalism. There's been a lot of really good long-form, like magazine journalism, written about these wars by very talented writers at *Rolling Stone*, *Harpers*, and in daily newspaper accounts. My stack of periodicals and newspaper clippings probably got about this [points to the space next to his chair], three feet high. They're all in a file somewhere, but I'm just trying to immerse myself.

WBT: When you're writing fiction, when you're actually in the middle of a novel or a short story, do you read fiction by other writers? Do you ever worry about their work influencing yours?

I mean certain people—their voice is too strong. I can't read Saul Bellow while I'm writing. And I shouldn't read Joan Didion while I'm in middle of heavy duty, writing my own work, because they'll bleed into my stuff. But the more I've done this work, and just the more I have seemed to dial into my own signal, the less of a concern that is; it's like I'm a little more immune to this bleed over of styles. I always try to keep some poetry going, because I think it's good for prose writers to stay in touch with that wonderful compression of language, and I do usually have a fiction book going on the bedside table.

WBT: Is there a poet you return to most often?

Yeah. Those I read are all almost contemporary poets. I could not pick out one in particular. But there's a lot of really fine poetry being written right now, as we're kind of in a golden age. Obviously, no one is making money at it, but there are a lot of fine poets doing great work, and lots of little publishers bringing out their books and these beautiful additions. Poetry is thriving in this country right now.

WBT: Do you ever write poetry?

No. It's too hard. It's like look at the poets—they're the Formula One of writing whereas prose writers are like NASCAR. We kind of trundle around the track in these hunks of junk and Formula One is all purity and elegance. No, I'm going to stick

with the stock car.

WBT: You've written acclaimed short stories, acclaimed essays, and an acclaimed novel. Which genre do you feel most comfortable in?

I think I'm a fiction writer. At least I want to be a fiction writer. When the opportunity came along for the essays in *Beautiful Country*, when the Guardian said, do you want to write about the 2016 election for us? I thought, yeah, I really want to do that. I had been dissatisfied with that kind of writing I've done in the past; it was like I hadn't figured it out yet. So I thought, I really want to study these elections, figure out what's going on, and I also want to get better at this kind of work. But starting out I didn't know if I could do it properly—go out on the road and on campaigns. And then a book came out of that, and I'm happy with the result. I'm at peace with it. Let's put it that way. It's like, I did the best I could, and didn't take any shortcuts, and I didn't take any cheap shots. Whatever shots were in there, they [the politicians] deserved it. I now know if the need arises, I can write like that, and there's a chance I can do a good job. But I'm working on a novel now set in Haiti, and I'm really happy working on it. I'm getting these chances to write about the election coming up in 2020, and I'm trying to say no, because I'm happy working on a novel.

WBT: Speaking of other genres, your short story "Fantasy of Eleven Fingers" has always struck me as somewhat anomalous in your short story collection Brief Encounters with Che Guevara. What is the genesis of that story?

My kids. I made them take piano when they were growing up. I would always sit there at recitals where I could see the kids' hands. And I was just, you know, sitting there for a recital once and these are normally bright kids—I mean no prodigies here—these are just kids who applied themselves, and you're looking at their hands. And I was thinking, My God, this was really amazing, you know, what these kids are doing with their fingers. And it just came to me: What would it be like if you threw an extra finger in there? The idea sailed in there

randomly. I walked around with it for a few days after thinking about that extra finger and it started to coalesce—for whatever reason—around fin-de-siècle Vienna and Jewishness.



WBT: Music is an important element in that story. I also noticed many song references in many of the Beautiful Country Burn Again essays. What is the relationship between music and writing for you? Do you listen to music when you write?

No. I never have music on when I'm writing at home. As for the music references—it's just that there's a lot of music around these campaign events I went to. It seemed like part of the fabric of the story. Like, you know, describing Trump's playlist at that rally in Iowa, and just how eclectic it was and the crowd's like half-conscious reaction to it; or, at the Bernie rally, at the end, they're playing "Star Man" from Bowie—*Here's a star man waiting in the sky*—and just as the event cleared out, down on the arena floor, there are a bunch of kids doing a whirling dervish, that deadhead thing. I thought that I needed to record that. That has a place in there somewhere, these little whirlpools of ecstasy going on, eddying in the wake of this Bernie event, and, honestly, it just seemed a natural part of the story to weave in those songs.

WBT: In Billy Lynn you have strange text breaks where the words begin to float away. In Beautiful Country Burn Again you have mini-chapters called "Book of Days" that also break up the text. What are you trying to accomplish with these breaks?

In Billy Lynn I call them "word clouds." They are kind of floating all over the page. By the time I started writing it I felt that there were certain words that had become detached from reality in the culture. They were used but they no longer signified what they originally did. They had become something else. In a way they had become not signifiers of realities but ways to obscure reality. You know, I thought if I heard George W. Bush say "supreme sacrifice" one more time I'm just going to fucking knock my head against the wall. It was bullshit. You could tell that often they weren't even thinking about what they were saying; it was so automatic, like "they have made the extreme sacrifice." There were a lot of words like that—"9/11," "terrorism," "war on terror." It's like you hear those words and your brain shuts off. And, I was trying to

think, how do you get that on the page, just like they're no longer tethered to lived experience. I thought I would have them kind of float around, and kind of like in this fog. So that was me acting out of desperation, trying to figure out a way to get as close to the experiences as I could, or at least the experience I was having of language unmoored. I just thought, well, there will be times when Billy's hearing those words and they are no longer lines that you know, they're no longer in orderly progression, they're just kind of floating.

The Book of Days [in *Beautiful Country Burn Again*] was also a solution to a problem. So much happened in 2016. It really was an intense year, an extreme year, and a violent year, and a surreal year. And so how do you set up that context for these discrete events that I'm writing about without overloading the beginning of the chapter? It's like so much happens in the month before the NRA convention in Louisville. How am I going to shotgun that in and give people a proper sense of the context? So I took a clue from *Harper's Magazine*, in their weekly blast, where they would shotgun all this stuff that happened in a given month. I thought, all right. Let's try that. I felt like that's probably the most efficient way to do it.

WBT: That makes sense. It was very hard to for me to read those sections. It felt like like an assault at times.

BF: I wanted it to be an assault. Because it was. And we forget quickly. It was a wild year. Leading up the Republican Convention there had been 6-bloody weeks. And not just in the U.S. There was the truck attack in Nice, France that killed 80 people and the shootings in Dallas at the Black Lives Matter rally the week before the convention. Then, just when we get to the convention, on that Sunday, there's somebody shooting cops in Baton Rouge. So you're arriving in Cleveland, and you're thinking, what's next? Whatever is going to happen is going to happen here. Well, you know, amazingly it didn't. Nothing happened. Except Trump getting nominated. It was a wild year. I think we forget that quickly. It's just the nature of life these days. Something new is always coming at us.

WBT: You write a lot about the shortage of America's collective memory. What is your first individual memory?

BF: The very first?

WBT: Yes.

BF: [Long pause] All right. My dad was getting his PhD at Carolina. He was a TA, so he was making starvation wages, and he had 3 kids, and a wife to support, and so money was really tight. My first memory was graduate student housing, there on the campus at Chapel Hill, and I'm sure it was falling down. Anyway, my first memory I think is being in a crib, like with bars, with that white enamel paint. I have a memory of those bars and white enamel paint, some of it chipped, and being sick. Down the hall there's the sound of cartoons playing and also the smell of pork chops. My mom was frying pork chops. It's just a powerful sensory memory and maybe it crystallizes around being sick.

WBT: WBT is run by veterans and the family members of veterans, so we enjoyed the chapter on chickenhawks and Ambrose Bierce in Beautiful Country Burn Again, and we, of course, loved Billy Lynn's Halftime Walk. Where did your interest in the military come from?

BF: Well, I come from a very non-military family. Like we go when we are drafted. But I grew up in North Carolina, eastern North Carolina. And there were a lot of soldiers around growing up, like our neighbor in Kinston was a sergeant major in the Army. He had been at the Battle of the Bulge and was a career, noncommissioned officer. Soldiers and veterans were all over the place. And I was a normally, savage, bloodthirsty little boy. I was really into wars and reading about wars. Some kids like to play with trucks and erector sets. I liked to play with soldiers and guns. I was always very conscious of that part of history and always reading about it and am always conscious of it being around me. I thought at one point when I started writing *Billy Lynn* that I've known veterans of American wars going back to World War One. I may have even

crossed paths with a veteran of the Spanish American War. I was born in '58, so it's entirely possible, growing up in the South also, where everybody's ancestors fought. My great-grandfather enlisted in the Confederate Army when he was 18 or 19 in 1861. Our generations are long in my family. For most people my age, it's their great great grandfather or great great great grandfather, but for me, it's my great grandfather. So that history, at least to me, and a lot of other people in that place and time, the Civil War felt very present. And also North Carolina was so rural back then that if you stood a certain way, it could be 1863 again. There was nothing modern within sight. There might be an old harrow or piece of farm equipment sitting out, unchanged from 1860. The landscape of it was very present.

We discuss military obsessions in Southern writers like Barry Hannah, William Faulkner, and Walker Percy, and how this doomed military past often permeates the consciousness of the southern male.

BF: They were doing a documentary on Tim O'Brien this last year, and I got to talk to him for a few hours. He and I got talking about the Civil War and he asked me if my ancestors fought for the Confederacy. And I said, "yeah, they did." And he said, "are you proud of them?" I said, "yeah, I am." And he pressed me on it. He said, "Why are you proud of them?" Well, it's conflicted. They did their duty as they saw it. They risked themselves. But he was really pressing me on it. He was not being just polite. And I was like, okay, let's get real. Let's get down and dirty. Let's talk about this assumption I've been walking around with my whole life. They went off and did their duty. They fought and risked their lives. Yet it was for the absolutely, absolutely the wrong side.

My great grandfather, he was in a private school, a small private school. He and all his classmates enlisted with their schoolmaster. The schoolmaster became their sergeant. He must have been a pretty charismatic man. In 1863 the schoolmaster got killed. In a letter my great grandfather says of the schoolmaster, "he died hard." The schoolmaster was wounded and it took him a week to die. He was the mentor of all those

kids. They must have been shattered, to watch him suffer, like that, their hero. My grandfather comes home and marries that man's little sister. There's some powerful bonding in that group. They just saw it like this, like okay, boys, the war's on, let's go join up. And you wonder what they are thinking. It's like—I'm not staying behind.

Long interval where the WBT editors discuss our own choices at 18 and 19 to participate in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and whether or not we would have made the right choice in other historical circumstances and what the right choice is (or was).



WBT: Over lunch, we talked to you and your wife Sharon about the move from North Carolina to Dallas 37 years ago, and the 5 years you worked as a real estate and bankruptcy lawyer before turning to writing full time. At one point you said, "I've made my peace with Texas." What did you mean by this?

When I came to Dallas, I interviewed for a job here. I was coming here because Sharie was a year ahead of me in law school. So I was visiting her here and I was thinking, Oh, this is pretty much like North Carolina. I was lucky in North Carolina to grow up around a lot of really fine adults. That was my sense of it, then. And looking back on North Carolina, you know, as a person of some experience, I think it's still, by and large, true. Like these were people, a lot of them had real integrity and principles, and they paid the price for it at various times, but they were real role models. You know, I'm sure a big part of that perception is me being young, and just not understanding the complexities of things, but I also think there's some truth to it.

So I came here, and one of the signals was people kept asking me who's the richest man in North Carolina. I said that it never occurred to me. Nobody talks that way. Whereas in Texas, there's these lists, you know, who's the richest mofo in Texas, and every year you get these lists. In North Carolina, whoever the richest person was, he or she damn sure didn't want to be on any list. Plus no one really had any money. In every town, the richest three men were the Coca-Cola bottler, the guy who owned the tobacco warehouse, and maybe the lawyer or doctor, but everybody else was middle class at best. Whereas, you know, you come to Texas and money—just materialism and conspicuous consumption—is part of the air you breathe.

WBT: Do you think that's uniquely Dallas? Or Texas?

BF: I think it's Texas. I think it's very Texas and it's very, very Dallas. In Dallas and Houston you get the purest strain of that kind of Texanism. When I went to my firm in Dallas, I was thinking it was going to be people like the lawyers I'd grown up around, like those I worked with as a summer associate and as a page in the legislature for four months. These lawyers back in North Carolina, they—at least in my experience—taught me this is how you should be in the world. You stand for certain things, and you work for certain things, and money is not the main thing. In North Carolina I'm living a certain kind of life and being part of the community—that's

the main thing. Then again, that's an adolescent's and a youth's perspective, and yet it still feels pretty genuine to me. So I came here, and in the legal profession, money was in your face. It really was different. I'm not finding any Atticus Finches around here.

I mean I was around a lot of good people in Dallas, but not as many and not to the degree that I assumed I would be. I was also around a lot of people I did not respect. So that, and just how powerful capitalist culture is here, almost to the exclusion of virtually any other awareness that there might be different ways. It's like what else is there besides the free market? Who wouldn't want to have this no-holds-barred survival-of-the-fittest society?

But I made peace with it. There are certain things to be said for this kind of life. It's a very dynamic, energetic place, and lots of amazing things happen. Texas Instruments changed the history of the world. And that's just one example of the innovation and dynamism and initiative both corporate and individual. It's important to recognize the good, but there remains a lot that unsettles me or strikes me as inauthentic.

WBT: What time of day do you write? Is it a set time? Or do you let the inspiration strike you?

BF: I've always treated my writing like a job. I get up in the morning with everybody else, see the kids off to school, start writing until lunch, eat lunch, lie down for 20 minutes to clear my head, then get up and write some more until it was time to pick up the kids from schools. The kids are grown now, but it's still basically the same schedule. Get up, give it most of the hours of the working day, and the best hours. And that decision—am I going to write today?—is already answered. Yes, you're going to write today. It would drive me crazy to get up in the mornings and ask: Am I going to write today? Should I write now? Should I wait until later? I can't do it. It's too much indecision.

WBT: Would you consider yourself a southern writer? Or are categories like these unhelpful?

I think it's a legitimate category. It's a legitimate way to start thinking about certain things—different traditions in American letters and placeness and particularities and peculiarities of history and geography. It's a starting point. But I didn't want to be one of those Southern writers. I don't have anything against this type of writer. Jill McCorkle and a number of other people in North Carolina and around North Carolina, they are Southern writers. They are working Southern history and Southern culture. But I wanted to do something different. I wanted to go in a different direction. You know, I've felt guilty because I didn't read as much Faulkner as I was supposed to. Being a Southerner and a writer, you're told you should read every single word that Faulkner wrote. It's just that certain writers grab you and hold and others you see the good in them but there's not that visceral connection. When I discovered the Latin American writers, and started reading them systematically, I discovered they had really gone to school on Faulkner. I thought, okay, I'm getting my Faulkner. It's being filtered through Latin America. That helped me get over my Faulkner guilt.

WBT: Which Latin American writers?

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is the master. [Julio] Cortázar, [Mario] Vargas Llosa, [Jorge Luis] Borges, [Clarice] Lispector. There are huge gaps in my familiarity with Latin American literature, but the things I do know feel very relevant. It's like Garcia Marquez especially. That's writing. I can't try to imitate him but the scope and the spirit of it—

WBT: The magic and the humor and the wonder?

BF: Yeah, but also how it is incredibly grounded in human experience. Salman Rushdie is a writer that people hold up as a 2nd generation magical realist. But his work doesn't ring true to me because it feels untethered. His magical realism isn't as grounded in the real as Marquez. Marquez's understanding of the world, and how it works, and how people behave, it just seems very profound to me and it is not as strong in Rushdie. That's true of some other writers who have

gone the magical-realist route. Garcia Marquez is not magical.

WBT: You described your work as realist earlier. Is this what you meant?

BF: Human experience is so complex. Take *Beloved* [by Toni Morrison], which I think is a great American novel. There's a lot of talk about the metaphorical aspect, the symbolism and the magical realism. I'm not so sure. She's profoundly real. It just takes a little shift in the shadows. Like place the light over here instead of over here, and it's as real as anything in life. Whatever trauma and angst and pain is bound up in that is fucking real. I don't like symbols very much. I like the real stuff.

WBT: Then, strangely, labels like magical realism actually work to limit the possibilities of reality?

BF: If you aren't careful, yes. It's shorthand. Marquez is magical realism, but that's a start. It shouldn't limit the discussion. Human experience is so complex and deep and varied and leveled and layered. Are ghosts real? What exactly do we mean when we say ghosts? If we are talking about the past, in the present, and the past in us, and in our psyches, and in our families, ghosts may be a way of talking about that, embodying that. There's a mystery there that maybe we shouldn't sweat so much. We should let be, and acknowledge, and try to portray it as authentically as we can.



Author Bio:

Ben Fountain's most recent book is *Beautiful Country Burn*

Again: Democracy, Rebellion, and Revolution, and is based on the Pulitzer Prize-nominated essays and reportage that he wrote on the 2016 presidential election for *The Guardian*. He is also the author of a novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, and a short story collection, *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*. His work has received the National Book Critics' Circle Award for Fiction, the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction, the Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize, and a Whiting Writer's Award, and has been a finalist for the National Book Award in both the U.S. and the U.K. (international authors division). His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Le Monde*, *IntranQu'îllités* (Haiti), *Esquire*, *The Paris Review*, *Harper's*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, and elsewhere.