

Poetry by Stephen Mead: Remembering Beirut, Halloween '83; Map Pins; Forced Labor



STOMA / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Remembering Beirut, Halloween '83

The ground beds a stuffed effigy with bulging leaves.
Through peculiar affinity
it resembles some soldier.
Notice the guise of these clothes.
Consider its uniform grubbiness. Be a witness.
Here is frailty.

I lug the dumb body as if carrying my own reflection.
In another land some marine is dragging the dead weight
of his friend from the steepness of a ditch.
Hear the solstice hour toll? It's the season of reaping
soon to be celebrated, full-fledged, on All Saint's.

Jack O' Lanterns gape from their pumpkin infernos.
They tug at my form, a sinewy candle lending motion to dusk.
The moon wears the same face of negligence,
staring directly through, perpetual, obsessive.

Skulking beneath it I haul my likeness on a cross
of dried corn stalks. In the garden a fire rages.
Leaves crackle, russet, auburn, yellow. Witches burnt pure
of skin, the singed autumn embers ascend and I let,
with a gasp, my twin fall to be caught.
In stacked grass, the silhouette burns and smolders.

Let flames state metamorphosis, take change
from the depths, their swaying shadows.
Let them be purged, untouched by harm and rise fertile

from earth to winter the long haul of a death and a grievance.

Tonight something in me was sacrificed but saved by the struggle.

Let it be just an event ritualized for one night
and not a sequence, serpentine, leading to another whole era
of hell.

Map Pins

& photo opportunities—

A world between say, this
President's address & some plane's covert
loading. Operation
Heartbreak. That's
melodrama, effete
emotionalism. Stick with
facts. Contracts. Point A
& Point B, land masses &
bodies of
water, the planetary typography
worn on a polyester shirt. There's

import, exports. There's the dollar
value status, the stock market
resources who happen to be human,
each significant as a billboard
but not all necessarily advertised.
An after-thought that would seem, the
boardroom memo, a game of

telephone,

the press (cover)

reports (up) inside leaks (dodge)

a thousand pricks (question &

answer) of light (the cameras)

fastened by (flash) brass tacks

Forced Labor

The long haul is the term for strain.

To go in, sweatshop ore digger, your colony owned
by a bigger government who, in turn, is at war with a
different one...

Sure, to go in, after the Big A & surrender subsequently:
reality a mirage but for body counts, headaches,
the daughter, photosensitive who can't leave darkened rooms &
dies

anyway, at 39, her siblings, one female born without bones,
& the next, presently 50 but burying his youngest,
such recessive aberrations passed on by their Mom,
a Korean import from Japanese mines...

Sound
familiar?

To put bombs behind us, prejudice, an epidemic,
look at Bikini Island on film:

the natives packed up, the burned homes,
and those natives told, shown diagrams:

"Testing Site. " "You are at war."

Foreign phrases. News to them. The pictures helped
while they smiled, waved at cameras none had ever before seen.
Next in came the Navy, understanding perhaps as little,
leaving 2 goats shorn and placed in metal crates:
no hemp to chew through or bolting when meters hit red.

To many, in tinted goggles, watching, the blast was:
"Magnificent." "A firecracker". "A sunset."

Others thought it "a let down."

Still, all the votes were not yet in—

There were still those sailors swimming through such liquid

marble,
the clean-up crews, the witnesses touching charred Palm,
their uniforms Geiger-clicking & their flesh as well,
having to shower, be re-tested & wash wash again
to get radioactivity off.

The same happened elsewhere, only to town-folk.

This is the humanity within inhumanity, that, in ignorance,
we bombed ourselves, & this is the knowledge:
genetics, marrow-solvent,
a tunnel pushing to upturn the stone fetuses.

In P.S., another news item my fingers squeeze:
a photo, its caption snatched from the TV page.
“Mushroom Cake, Navy Admirals Blandy, left, & Cowery,
assisted by Mrs. Blandy, celebrate first atom bomb test,
1946.”

Here’s the close-up: two hands, the Blandy’s,
joined by a knife slicing frosting, the confection rising,
a cloud of froth as washed out as Mrs. Blandy’s hat.

New Fiction from Matt Gallagher: Excerpt, ‘Empire City’

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Mia Tucker woke before the alarm. She usually did on weekdays. She was a person of routine and that’s what routine did. Sleep whispered like a lullaby through the black morning but she pushed it away, sitting up in bed to put her mind in order. If

she'd been dreaming, she'd already forgotten what about.

Monday, she thought. Cardio.

A storm had rolled through the city late in the night, leaving the brittle musk of rain. A coldness nipped at the top of Mia's shoulder. How do they keep getting in here? she wondered, rubbing at the mosquito bite. I shut the screen last night.

Jesse hadn't come home. He'd sent a few texts, first saying he wasn't sure when he'd be leaving work, then saying he wouldn't be. All-nighters during Bureau emergencies weren't unprecedented. Mia knew the deal. All part of marrying a special agent. Even if waking up by herself in darkness brought on a loneliness she didn't trust.

Mia ate a yogurt, then changed into light workout gear and fitted her running leg and sneakers. Downstairs, the summer air smelled of metal and moss. Dim streetlights lined the corners like sentries and the sidewalks had almost dried. A garbage truck on an adjacent block groaned through the still while monitor drones pulsed red in the sky. She stretched her left leg and then her core in front of her building, looking up to watch the flag whip around atop the Global Trade. Sixty stars and thirteen stripes, pale against the dark. It didn't strike her as cluttered, anymore, all those rings and stars in the blue canton.

Mia finished stretching and tapped at her right knee. Her running prosthetic was hard and coiled, like a spring. She appreciated the city most during these early morning runs, because it was empty enough to seem welcoming, even hopeful. It reminded her of the city from her childhood. It reminded her of the America she'd grown up in.

Daybreak always ended the spell.

Cut the crap, Mia thought. These ten miles aren't going to run

themselves. Then she took a deep breath, set the digital green of her wristwatch to 00:00, hit start, and began, the joints of her leg cracking with the motion while the socket of her prosthetic did the same. She headed west, toward the harbor.

Mia had run most of her life, discovering as a girl that she was good at it and being good meant respect, and trophies, and approval. It made an object of her body, but it was a functional object, something that mattered to her even before she'd figured out why. She'd pushed herself to be very good at points in her life, competing in college for two seasons before it interfered with ROTC, and later running the city marathon her first year with the prosthetic to prove that she could. But she'd never crossed into greatness, and for that she'd come to be thankful. Mia lacked the masochism of true runners, the renegade fanatical gene to ignore and ignore all the warning blinkers thousands of years of evolution had instilled in the human brain. Bloody calluses and angry muscles were one thing. Tendons ripping from bone were another.

The baby, or not-baby, entered Mia's mind. She focused on her breathing. Then came General Collins's job offer. She focused on her breathing.

The first scratches of sun were tracing the water. Lady Liberty rose in the distance, droopy torch in her right hand. The whole statue needed repair, though how, and when, had become a political hot potato. Decades' worth of money allotted for national monuments had gone to the Council of Victors, toward honoring the triumph of Vietnam. No one wanted to be the congressperson who redirected funds from that.



A lot of citizens had come to loathe the statue, considering it an eyesore. Mia's father thought it a sentimental leftover. She sort of liked it, the way a person enjoys a musty

childhood blanket found in storage. She remembered climbing to the torch on a field trip as a girl, through a staircase of graffiti and rickety metal, seeing the city from an entirely new angle. A snapshot of old American might, sealed in memory.

They'd closed the torch after the Palm Sunday attacks, then the entire island. Students like her adolescent cousins wouldn't ever see Empire City as she had. No one could now. The sad, corroding statue was their normal. It was all they knew. In the meantime, Lady Liberty sank slowly into the island it rested on. Turned out it'd been set on sodden ground.

Mia adjusted her sports bra and glanced at her watch. A mile in, which meant her warm-up was over. She lengthened out her strides.

She turned north along a waterfront path, moving into the bike lane to dodge fallen tree branches and loose rocks. Other than the occasional taxi striking through the predawn and a man in rags watching the city from a bench, she was alone. The wharf across the river jutted out like a broken jawbone, suggesting a past when its docks did more than shuttle around office workers and tourists.

The city changed like a photo album, slowly and slowly and then all in a rush. Repair shops became delis. Parking garages became art studios. In the water a flotilla of coast guard barges that'd been restored as restaurants and pubs drifted to and fro. Steel and glass high-rises gave way to the architecture of the last century, rowhouses and squatty brick apartments. The streets narrowed, a few dotted by tidy cobblestone. The waterfront path leveled off, though Mia kept her strides long. She knew an incline awaited. She wanted to meet it in force.

Sunrise arrived somewhere between miles three and four, stained-glass clouds chipping the sky. Mia passed a vomiting

young man in a sport jacket too large for him. Probably an intern for one of the banks, she thought, before turning around to make sure it wasn't one of hers.

"Call in sick!" she shouted. He raised his fist and managed a weak "Defy!" before purging again. The motto of the old radicals' caucus in Congress. Funny, Mia thought.

Another mile on, Mia ran into a short concrete tunnel. The tunnel lay underneath an abandoned railway line. Sunlight filled it with a fierce yellow shine. Around ten feet long, the sides and top of it had been covered in graffiti, dozens and dozens of circles of different colors and sizes. Just about every inch of available concrete had been tagged, leaving a sort of rainbow mosaic. Each of the circles contained three arrows pointing down and to the left. The job was fresh—Mia could tell by the tint to the spray paint. She came to a stop in the center of the tunnel, her breaths sharp but controlled. She rubbed a hand against a small purple circle. It smeared across her palm.

I know what this is, Mia thought, looking at her palm, then at the purple circle, sifting through her mind to place where. It took a few seconds, but she remembered a course in modern European history, and this shape and question from the final exam. The antifascist sign, she thought. From Nazi Germany.

A gust swept through the tunnel, and Mia smelled storm from the night before. She fought off the urge to shiver. It was going to be a cold summer day.

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Most mornings Mia turned around and headed home on the same pathway, but the tunnel had spooked her. She pushed east and then south instead, running the sidewalks. The light and the city rose slow, together. A medley of urban noise was beginning to tune and it sounded mostly like construction din. There was order within the mayhem; one just needed to know the

refrains. Mia did. She made it back to her apartment building on time, stopping only to remove her running leg before showering and dressing for work. She was back out her front door sixteen minutes later.

The air had turned and smelled of humid dew. Mia decided to walk through Vietnam Victory Square. Under the gaze of the Four Legionnaires sculpture, a couple of kids had waded into the fountain, laughing while splashing water at each other. Across from them, a tour group stood in front of the grand white marble wall with the simple words: "Praise to the Victors/In Honor of the Brave Men who went forth to Vietnam/1955-1981." The guide was explaining why the inscription stopped there, despite the insurgency continuing after in parts of the north. He was stumbling through the history and Mia wanted to intervene. Because wars have to end, she thought. Just tell them that.

Coffee-charged angst and white-collar id crackled along the streets, bankers and lawyers and digital communications associates hustling to be at their desks before the workday siren sounded. As she turned onto Wall Street, Mia passed the brownstone Trinity Church she attended every month or so. She'd considered herself an atheist since her tour to Albania, but she still appreciated the ceremony of church and the sense of renewal it allowed for. Her family had fled to America in 1620 for that ceremony and sense of renewal. She wouldn't give up that heritage for something as banal as not believing.

Then there was Jesse. "Jesus's heroin needle," he liked calling Trinity's Gothic steeple. The church's adjacent cemetery, where a slew of American founding fathers and Union generals from the Civil War rested? "A yard of goy bones."

And he's all mine, Mia thought. Trinity was an option for their wedding, though her family wanted it held in Connecticut. One more decision that she needed to make, and soon.

Mia's bank was located in the Westmoreland Plaza, a mass of skyscrapers bundled together at the end of the island. As she neared it, a vast, bright fire engine came into view, its lights twirling and flashing like a hallucination. A row of police barricades separated the vehicle from the street, uniformed officers turning away confused citizens trying to get to work. Mia joined the crowd.

"No one's allowed in the plaza today," a cop was saying, not for the first time. "And yes, that includes you." His eyes lingered on Mia's blouse, and she stared at him flatly until he looked away. Her grandmother had taught her how to do that on her fourteenth birthday. It worked in Empire City boardrooms just as well as it had in aircraft hangars along the far edges of the world.

"Ms. Tucker." A man shaped like a square wearing a rumpled dress shirt and overlong tie called to her from a corner of the barricades, close to a large bronze globe. It was the security director of her bank. He looked wired to Mia, even eager. "Ms. Tucker," he repeated. "The office is closed today. Your father sent out a message to everyone—work from home, as you can."

"Hadn't checked my email yet." This didn't make any sense. The office, as far as Mia knew, had never closed. Finance didn't "work from home." That was for other people, other jobs. "What's going on?"

"I shouldn't say," he said, in a tone that suggested he very much wanted to.

"Mum's the word," Mia promised. "I'll be finding out, anyhow."

"A threat," the security director said, his voice low and hushed. "Whole plaza. Homeland marshals got it last night."

"Oh." There'd been a few lockdowns in Empire City over the years, for both real and false alarms, but Mia couldn't recall

any of them shutting down a main cog of the Finance District.
“Must be some kind of threat.”

The security director looked out the corner of his eye to make sure no one else was listening, then pulled out his cell phone and read.

WITH FIRMNESS IN THE RIGHT AS GOD GIVES US TO SEE THE RIGHT,
LET US STRIVE ON TO FINISH THE WORK WE ARE IN, TO BIND UP THE
NATION’S WOUNDS, TO CARE FOR HIM WHO SHALL HAVE BORNE THE
BATTLE.

MAYDAY, MAYDAY. FROM THE ASHES, HOLY REDEMPTION.

“Mean anything to you?”

Mia shook her head.

“The first part’s from a speech Abraham Lincoln gave. Used to be the motto of the old Veterans Administration. The second part . . . I don’t know. The distress signal or something.”

Mia contemplated that. “There’s a Council of Victors office down here. Some crazy’s angry about the colonies again?” She tried not to laugh but couldn’t help it. “It all needs to be taken seriously, of course. But shut down the plaza?”

The security director shrugged. “Federal’s think it means something. The Mayday thing, especially.”

“I see,” Mia said, wondering if this was the Bureau’s emergency, and if so, why Jesse hadn’t said anything to her. He worked intel analysis, not counterterrorism. Though he hadn’t always been behind a desk.

Gallagher, Matt. [Empire City](#) (Atria Books, 2020).

New Fiction Review: Matthew Komatsu On Matt Gallagher's 'Empire City'

As *Avengers* was wrapping up last year, I mentioned how excited I was to see the finale to a friend, who responded with a barely suppressed sneer. Granted, it's the same friend whose Blu-Ray copy of Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* I've had for nearly six years, never watched, and now that I think about it, *might* have been in the console of the car my wife and I just sold.

"Superheroes? Really?"

The question dogged me for the past year. 2019 marked the end of the seventeen-year *Avengers* franchise, the release of *The Joker* to immediate Academy Award buzz, HBO's critically acclaimed re-imagination of Alan Moore's graphic novel *The Watchmen*, Netflix's superb adaptation of *The Umbrella Academy*, and Amazon's remarkable superheroes-gone-bad-and-wild series *The Boys*. And it is into this tableau of a fanboy and fangirl paradise in which all our favorite comics and graphic novels are finally seeing the cinematic treatments that seemed impossible at the turn of the century, Matt Gallagher's second novel, *Empire City*, has sauntered.



[*Empire City*](#) is an alternate history of present times, one that through rich world-building and attention to all the right details, asks us to imagine a world in which the US won (sort of – an insurgency is still ongoing) the Vietnam War through the heroic efforts of something familiar to anyone paying attention to our very real, very present Forever War: a military force of volunteers who, in a unique twist, are

comprised of internationals serving in the hopes of US citizenship. The victory in Vietnam has been elevated and lionized so much that a "Council of Victors" would appear to control the national military narrative in its entirety. In this world, the present is, too, an unending global war against terrorism. With a wrinkle however. Our protagonists – three veterans and one civilian – have superhuman abilities.

The abilities appeared after they survived a friendly fire "Cythrax" bombing during a direct action mission gone bad. The protagonists who are veterans call themselves "the Volunteers" in a nod to our world's all-volunteer military, and are drawn into a conflict brewing in "Empire City" and perhaps across the country, as the social order of over-the-top military veneration is challenged by a growing movement of disaffected veterans organizing around someone who might not be entirely unlike the Volunteers.

Gallagher's three main narrative protagonists have relatively hum-drum abilities as far as superheroes go. Sebastian Rios, a bureaucrat and one-time war journalist who was a hostage at the hit site compound when the Cythrax bomb was dropped, can disappear. Mia Tucker, a pedigreed Wall Streeter who piloted a helicopter on the raid, can fly. And the immigrant soldier, Jean-Jacques Saint-Preux, can move at super-speeds. Which made me wonder why Gallagher would choose such recognizable abilities at all.

The answer of course goes back to my friend's question earlier this year: it's not about the abilities. OK, I'll revise that statement: it's not *just* about the abilities. The superhero phenomenon have always been about investigating what makes us human through a speculative lens. Even in the golden age of comics, when Jack Kirby and Stan Lee and all the old hats realized that giving human characters super abilities, and presenting their stories in graphic format, was a fun idea, they were doing things in their serialized stories to give them gravitas. We all know Superman can fly, that he's a Man

of Steel with x-ray and heat vision. So it's not a surprise when he uses those abilities to crush the bad guy. It's the story behind that counts: how does one live one's life given these abilities? What does ultimately tell us about humanity? Marvel's mutant X-men were thinly veiled discussions on the human invention of race; DC's Batman questioned the role of privilege and social order. Time now, superhero tales grant creative permission to carry out discussions that need to happen within society writ large, by attracting us with a wow factor (Check out character A! They can do B!) and sucking a consumer into a story in which that wow factor fades behind a substantive investigation into very real, very everyday, human dynamics. *Watchmen* – racism in America; *The Boys* – the fundamental question of whether a human would choose to apply their superhuman ability towards good or evil; *Umbrella Academy* – the unique dysfunction of the modern American family: we want to be drawn in as viewers and readers, but we also want something deeper to sink our teeth into.

Empire City succeeds in a similar fashion. Veterans, already totemized in the real world, are taken by Gallagher one logical step further and given abilities that set them apart from the rest of humanity. But that's just the appetizer. What's really happening in the book, as our heroes find themselves thrust into the beginnings of conspiracy set off by the potential presidential election of a retired general officer – one that threatens to unravel a modern social order that entirely revolves around the veneration of military service – is an investigation of our troubled real world. Less than 1% of the US have, are, or will serve in the military. The national has waged nearly two decades of war across the world with little accountability to an electorate willing to write a blank check to it, no questions asked. Veteran has become an identity, a flag around which to rally political and cultural inclinations. War criminals have become public figures and welcome pundits. Given what's happened in the real world, is it so far a narrative leap to consider a veteran

with superhuman abilities?

The book isn't perfect; Gallagher's first novel, *Youngblood*, had a tighter story arc, and the effort he takes to build a convincing world in *Empire City* sometimes feels like overkill. But it's a fascinating narrative. I've seen other readers comment on the novel's relevance – the whole thing has a *Man in the High Castle* feel to it. Recognizable as almost being our current reality, but tilted towards frightening. But the novel's relevance will hopefully fade over time, if the country can come to realistic grips with its military reality. What stands out to me about Matt Gallagher's second novel is that he was willing to do the legwork necessary to give contemporary war fiction a speculative edge, which puts it in territory more closely aligned with Joe Haldeman's graphic novel *Forever War* than it does with *Youngblood*, and enviable terrain if Gallagher is willing to claim it.

When I reviewed *Youngblood* a few years ago, I wrote that it delivered what we needed from contemporary war literature because it shunned the stereotypical war story for something more unique. With *Empire City*, Gallagher has reinvented himself yet again and produced another fresh, and timely perspective on the consequences of war.

New Nonfiction from Charles Stromme: “The Army Profoundly Regrets”

1972

I was back from a year of flying helicopters in Vietnam. The

Army gave me a make-work job at Ft. Riley, Kansas, a base over-crowded with dejected Vietnam returnees. I hated it there, where they said, "Custer told us not to change a thing until he gets back."

I was angry and disillusioned and clueless. A major called out to me in a hallway. "Captain, you're going to be the notification officer next month." He was an old major, a mustang combat vet in his last duty station. He wasn't a bad guy and we had been working in the same battalion for several months without incident. But he hated me for being an aviator. I hated him for not being one.

"You'll be on call for a month. When a new killed-in-action (KIA) report comes in you'll visit the family with the chaplain and you'll give the official first notice."

I couldn't bear the thought of inflicting that kind of pain on the good family of a good soldier. I was raw from the war. I didn't want to live the back end of events that I had witnessed in Vietnam. My emotions scared me and brought back ugly memories. "No sir," I said, "I won't do that."

He looked surprised. Likely no young captain had ever told him that he wouldn't obey an order. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Do you understand that this is not a discussion, it's an order?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I understand. But I won't do that job."

"I can take this to the battalion CO if you want." That was a profoundly underwhelming threat. I didn't care, period, and I wasn't going to do it. He brought out the heavy artillery: "I can court-martial you for this."

"Yes sir, I know. You'll do what you have to do but that won't change my decision. I will not, under any circumstances, be the notification officer."

I had unintentionally created a real problem for the major. He could, indeed, take this to the CO. He could certainly bring court-martial charges against me, charges against which there could be no defense. If he did, though, it would also bring to light his inability to control an officer under his command.

"We'll talk about this later," he said. In the Army that means "I'm going to give you some time to consider the error of your ways before I decide on your punishment."

We did talk again a few days later, but there was nothing for me to reconsider. My mind was made up. I wouldn't carry out his order. I understood that I would be punished and I would accept whatever punishment he and the CO deemed appropriate. It would surely be a court-martial, I thought.

But he surprised me by asking, "Can we reach a compromise?"

I was suspicious. Compromise is not the Army way. "What kind of compromise?"

"We need a presentation officer for the rest of the month. There are no presentations scheduled. If you'll take the job, I'll forget about this problem."

A presentation officer is not quite as bad as being a notification officer. The presentation officer visits the family of a KIA soldier after they have already been given the news. He delivers whatever medals and awards the soldier had earned and expresses the regrets and condolences of the Army.

There were only a few days left in the month and the major, after all, had said there was nothing scheduled. It looked like I might skate on this yet. "OK, sir," I said, "you've got a deal."



Tracer round trajectories, Vietnam war. (U.S. Air Force photo)

The next day an order came down. I was to make a presentation in three days to a family in southwest Kansas. My first thought was to refuse that order too, but I had made a deal. I was honor-bound to carry out my part of it.

The newly-grieving family deserved more than the Army offered in the way of condolences and they deserved someone better than me. They deserved someone who knew exactly what to do. I was terrified.

I picked up the meager package of medals and awards that the KIA soldier had coming and the orders and citations that go with them. I would travel to wherever the family asked me to be, in this case to their home town in southwest Kansas, in time for the funeral. I would make an awards presentation.

It's easier to describe than to do. No one tells you what to say. They just give you the medals, some dry military orders and a grieving family. You're supposed to honor and comfort them, even if you're only a dumb-kid captain like I was, with no experience in this sort of thing and no idea how to do what so obviously needed to be done.

It took most of a day to drive to the small farming town. Before I checked in at the local motel I drove out to find the family home where I was supposed to be in the morning. It was way, way out of town, a very large farm on flat wheat land that stretched forever. I went back to town, put on some civvies, ate and turned in for the night.

I set a 4 AM wake-up time, common for me in those days. I had worn my Army greens on the way down, with ribbon bars, wings and service patches – First Division on my left shoulder, First Cavalry on my right. Today I would wear my dress blues, complete with full medal display. Even on a modestly decorated soldier like me, that uniform looked impressive. I loved the silver pilot's wings that symbolized the one great achievement of my life. I had paid dearly for them. Shave, instant motel

coffee, re-spit shine my best low quarters (shoes, to the rest of the world) to a mirror finish and I was ready, or so I thought.

I drove out to the farm again. It was just past dawn but already a crowd of family, neighbors and friends was gathering. I parked in an out-of-the-way spot. Several men detached themselves from the main group and walked over. "Are you Captain Stromme?" one asked.

"Yes, sir, I am."

"We saw you drive by last night. Why didn't you come in? We thought you would spend the night."

Spend the night? That wasn't something I had imagined.

"Well, come on in. We're just starting breakfast. The newspaper editor will be a little bit late and we don't want to start before he gets here." The editor was a long-time family friend. People don't really come and go in small Kansas farming communities; they come and stay. The families had been close for generations. It wouldn't do for the paper not to cover the ceremony.

People came to meet me and shake my hand. Some asked about my patches and medals and wings, congratulating me for things they imagined I had done and making small talk, getting to know me.

The young soldier had been named Donald. I met his grieving parents right away. His mother shyly welcomed me, then went back to work in the kitchen with the other ladies. The father's welcome was a little warmer. What I didn't understand was that the fuss everyone was making over me wasn't about me at all. No, it was because I was a stand-in for their Donald. This was the welcome home that he would never have.

I sat with the father and some other men at a table reserved

for the men-folk, a long, worn, heavy plank-topped table that could easily have been 100 years old. The women had their own tables; I caught several of them peeking over at me. They were normal in this world. I was the misplaced oddity.

Their men were normal, too. Most were brawny and muscled from a lifetime of hard work and heavy food, red-faced, calloused hands. Along with their wives they were straight out of Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*.

The coffee and breakfast were hot and good and I began to learn a few names. The father said, "So you were in the Infantry, too, like Donald?"

I nodded, swallowing. "Yes, sir. I was in the Infantry but I flew Huey helicopters. I didn't do any ground combat duty at all." And with apologies to my Infantry brothers, I still thank God for that. Most aviators do.

"Do you mind if we ask you some questions?"

"Well, sir, I'll do my best."

They asked me some ordinary questions. Where was I from, what did I do at Ft. Riley, what was Vietnam like?

What was Vietnam like? I still don't know, even though I had been there for 366 days minus an R&R in Hawaii. I had flown its skies at very low levels, walked in a couple of its cities, spoken to a few of its people. But that wasn't what they wanted to know. What they really wanted to know was "What is war like?" and "Why did Donald have to die?"

Then his father, cut from the same rough cloth as his neighbors, asked me, "What do you know about claymore mines?"

I was surprised by the question. I happened to know something about claymores, but it isn't a subject to be discussed lightly at breakfast. They are God-awful weapons, small, curved plastic packages of death on little steel legs. They

explode violently when triggered, spraying 700 deadly steel balls in a broad arc. They have "FRONT TOWARD ENEMY" in raised letters on the front to remind GIs which way to point them when they're setting them out. I had been trained with them but I had never deployed one for real. It's not something that aviators often do.

I told them a little bit about claymores, though I didn't tell them all of that.

The father nodded. "Donald was killed by a claymore mine."

The room was silent, everyone looking at me and expecting... something. I was appalled, unable to say anything meaningful. What could I say? Not for the first time I lamely expressed my condolences.

"His coffin got here yesterday," the father said. I had already seen it, on its bier in the front room. "It was sealed, you know, but we got it open."

I thought, you opened your son's sealed coffin? They are sealed for very good reasons.

Grimly, he said, "It took us a while, but we finally got it open. He looked pretty good. We just took a peek from the shoulders up."

Donald had been cut in two by the claymore. They didn't see the bottom half. The people who prepare KIA bodies had apparently done a good job with his remains and his father wanted us to believe he'd seen what he hoped to see, the handsome young boy he had loved. But his eyes were full of stunned grief, and I wasn't sure even he could believe what he said.

He smiled a sad half-smile. "How 'bout I show you his room?"

I thought, "Please, God, let this be over."

The family had a huge basement. This was tornado country and most people had them. This one was finished in grand farm style. We entered Donald's basement bedroom. It was the room I would have slept in had I spent the previous night. Donald had left for Vietnam only a few weeks before. His room was fresh, clean, the bed made for him, or maybe for me. I imagined I could still smell a boy's scent.

He had earned a full-ride agriculture scholarship to Kansas State University, the leading aggie school in the region. K-State is located in Manhattan, Kansas, not far from where I lived. Shortly before admission he had decided to enlist in the Army. You know, before it was too late to see any action.

They showed me his yearbooks, his sports pictures, prom pictures of Donald and his girlfriend. She wasn't there yet. They brought down his Future Farmers of America awards, his 4H projects and certificates, his award buckles, his letter sweater. All for me to see, to bear witness that Donald had lived, that Donald was a person worth remembering. What I saw was a freckle-faced boy, a parent's dream, and I thought of a father's cruel last view of his son.

The minister arrived. The editor was late and we waited for him as though we were waiting for royalty. When he finally arrived he took me aside, asking "Did they tell you we opened the casket? God, it was awful."

Then we gathered in the front room with Donald's casket. This wasn't the funeral. That would come later in the day in the family church, with sermon and music, then the burial. I would not attend. This was the farewell, though. This was coming over to visit Donald like they always had, to say good-bye in much the same way they had said good-bye to him a few weeks before. Some friends and family spoke, then it was my turn.

The Army does little enough for its men and women but one thing it does well is train them to be soldiers. I was, am, a

product of that training. It, and luck, had kept me alive when nothing else could have. Unfortunately, no one had taken the time to train me to be a presentation officer. Where was the Army Training Manual for this situation? What did it say?

When the father introduced me, I panicked. I was at a complete loss for words. I had only a few things to work with: the few minor medals themselves, the dry orders that accompanied them and whatever I could think of to say on the spot. I had thought of some words while driving down the day before. I even rehearsed them a couple of times in my motel room. I don't know if they were appropriate because I couldn't remember any of them.

I began, speaking directly to Donald's father but loud enough for the room: "The Army profoundly regrets the loss of your son." Where did that come from? What did it mean and why did I say it?

I spoke of the American commitment in Vietnam, the one in whose name their son and friend had died. I read the medal commendations, then shared what I knew about each of them. I was wearing nearly all of Donald's medals and more myself and I spoke of the comradeship in arms signified by those medals, pointing out his and my own in turn.

Finally I ran out of things to say. Almost. My ad hoc performance needed an ending but what do you say in those circumstances, to those people gathered there?

I handed Donald's father the small group of medals with their accompanying orders. The words I chose were "Sir, on behalf of your son's comrades in the United States Army, I salute you." Then I raised my hand and saluted, a smart Infantry officer salute or so I imagined, one that would impress the women and children.

Since I had made all this up, the father had no idea what, if anything, he was supposed to do. A silent awkward moment

passed, then he stood and slowly raised his hand, callused and scarred from a lifetime of farming, and returned my salute as though we had practiced yesterday.

The minister spoke again, then we prayed for Donald, for all soldiers, for America, for ourselves. I made my excuses and left, not looking forward to the long drive home. The day had drained me, saddened me, used me up.

I wanted a drink, but that was no surprise. Alcoholics usually do. I wanted to make love to my wife. Not out of lust or love. I owned some of both, certainly, but neither was in play now. No, I wanted her because I wanted to feel that I was human and alive, cleansed and renewed by the act and not in pieces in a stainless steel box forever in the ground. I didn't know how else to find that comfort. Mostly, I wanted to be held and loved, to be told that everything was going to be all right, that I would be OK. The Army doesn't tell you how to ask for that, either.

That 1972 day is long gone. Back then I thought I could see my entire life stretching out predictably before me. A career of some sort (the FBI, I thought), a home with 2.5 children, grand-kids eventually, strength and joy mixed with occasional sadness, and at the end the personal satisfaction of a life well lived. Nothing lay ahead for Donald. Everything lay ahead for me.

**Hostile Threat Detected:
Adrian Bonenberger Reviews**

Joe Pan's "Operating Systems"



Joe Pan popped up on many veteran writers' radars in 2014. He had recently written the first great poem about what let's call the Global War on Terror, "Ode to the MQ-9 Reaper." At that time it was possible to find the poem in pdf via [Pan's website](#); it may be that this is still the case. Many downloaded it and read it, and reread it, and were carried away by its vision and drive, and talked about it over beers in trendy taverns. It is a powerful poem, urgent, reckless; it is also, in its own way, scored through with hope and possibility. In the MQ-9 Reaper's flight one hears the screech and wail of Hart Crane's "The Tunnel"—one also sees the flash of a seagull's wings, turning over the Brooklyn Bridge and out to sea:

& I get why we heart the hype. Your sleek iBomb design is haute Apple adorable: the extended wingspan, the ball turret cam. Viewed full-frontal, Hellfire missiles hang loosely clamped to the horizon of your asterisk body, itself a fusion of X-Wing Fighter & Lambda-class Imperial Shuttle from Star Wars, a sexy sort of curvilinear Geek Goddess whose forehead slope recalls the stately dolphin fish, rear propeller the whirr of a rubber-banded planophore. Behold our Indian Springs Sphinx, riddled with weapons.

The MQ-9 Reaper is a type of drone capable of firing missiles. It was well known to soldiers who deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan between 2005-2012, and also to people who played the video game "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2."

"Ode to the MQ-9 Reaper" is simultaneously the drone itself—its physical characteristics, an accounting of its capabilities, its uses—and a way of looking at the world when one is an American. The poem is an exploration of the specific type of systemic power capable of producing a thing like a

drone. It begins with the narrator's third-grade, childhood self dreaming the Reaper into existence, and then wanders through the past and present, shifting perspectives and narrators to catalogue the ways in which seeing and thinking about the Reaper has come to dominate modern life.

As a collection of poetry, "Operating Systems" elaborates on the Ode (the collection's final and ultimate poem) as an extended preface, delving into how people think about and communicate with the world around them. Written mostly in free verse, "Operating Systems" offers an unsparing look at how people live in a world predicated on well-meaning urges, and desire, and hope, and need. It is less a manual than a guidebook to a world where subjectivity and perspective shift along with the narrator. Each poem is a formula for a moment in time, a mechanism by which that moment plays out.

The collection is organized into five sections of six, six, five, seven, and one poem, respectively. Each poem is assigned an OS or "Operating System" in code, that offers some insight into the poem's meaning and tone, from the serious (*Thanat*OS*) to the whimsical (*Whack*OS*). It's meticulously organized, which helps orient readers on the one hand, and gives one a sense of confidence and security that Pan's poetry is deliberate, in addition to beautiful. One can sometimes become lost in a collection of poetry, especially when it is sincerely felt and written; Pan is one of those rare poets who balances the intense emotions he evokes with careful attention to how each poem's construction.

In spite of the overarching concern driving the collection—the worry that when we aren't using operating systems to govern our own behavior, we have given over our agency to a series of literal operating systems that choose our friends, and our news, and the things we buy, the poetry we read and (worst of all) the wars we fight—in spite of that all, "Operating Systems" maintains a dogged optimism. In poems like *In "Tattoos,"* where a garden thrush that endures the stings of

bees for a meal becomes an avatar for desire, and “Bedford Avenue L,” where Pan shows how in spite of the formulaic modes of language and mechanics of social interactions, the impulse to help or assist others can be sufficient in a moment of crisis:

*This is the moment I tell you you will be okay
& this is the moment you say no.
I do not know who I am
& this is the moment you say no.
I do not know who I am telling this to.
I do not know myself in this moment,
& I do not know you. But hey buddy, hold on.*

This underlying redemption exists in the Ode as well, as when its narrator discusses one of the oldest operating systems to appear in the book: the story of Abraham and Isaac on the mountain, envisioned from the perspective of a son having the story read to him in bed by his father.

“Operating Systems” should be read and considered at length. It is not easy or accessible, in contrast with the systems that almost everyone uses to facilitate the minutiae of their daily lives. If much of life is an effort to simplify communication, and the acquisition of those things that bring people satisfaction, isn’t it necessary and good occasionally to step back with a good collection of poetry, to pose the question?