New Op Ed from Teresa Fazio: This Memorial Day, Let's Honor Essential Workers

In the first weeks of lockdown, I paced my two-room Harlem apartment, feeling trapped while an unpredictable threat loomed. After a few days, it clicked– the collective need for vigilance and protective gear had stoked memories of my deployment to Iraq as a Marine Corps officer. There, rocket and mortar attacks had punctuated long periods of boring routine for my communications company colleagues and I. In the early evenings, our company's evening brief provided solace and companionship.

In the midst of the pandemic, that version of nightly comfort became the Twitter feed of Columbia's Department of Surgery–a daily summary of pragmatic encouragement, written by its eloquent chair, Dr. Craig Smith. He used familiar military jargon of staff "redeployments" and "battlefield promotions" for emerging medical leaders. He wrote about colleagues infected with COVID, and one who committed suicide.

This Memorial Day, as Dr. Smith and other first responders lose colleagues on a scale not seen since 9/11, and supply chain personnel from meatpackers to grocery clerks risk infection to keep America fed, we should extend honors to all of the essential workers who've given their lives. Doing so would help unify the nation and bridge the military-civilian divide.

Healthcare workers watch U.S. Air Force C-130s from Little Rock Air Force Base fly over Arkansas, May 8, 2020.

Only about 1% of US workers currently serve in the military, but according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, an equal number serve as firefighters and law enforcement. A whopping ten times that number– more than ten million people– work in healthcare professions as doctors, nurses, EMTs, and hospital personnel. Transportation and delivery workers– warehousemen and truckers who transport everything from asparagus to zucchini– make up another 10% of American workforce. And that's not even counting agricultural, food, and maintenance workers. A mid-April CDC report listed at least 27 US healthcare workers dead of COVID, a number that has undoubtedly grown, and the Washington Post reported over 40 grocery store worker fatalities in the same time frame. As of early May, about 30 firefighters nationwide have died of the virus, too. The NYPD alone lost over 30 personnel to the pandemic, and national police casualties count dozens more. Like troops in a war zone, those essential healthcare, public

safety, and logistics workers now face a wily, invisible enemy every day. Paying respects to their fallen just as we veterans honor our own would mean acknowledging that it takes **everyone**'s service to help us get through this crisis.

Coronavirus is forcing businesses and governments to acknowledge the dignity of the blue-collar and service-industry workers who make our vast supply chain possible, similar to the physical work we honor in common servicemembers. In April, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) issued a joint statement with Stop and Shop calling on the government to classify grocery workers as "extended first responders" or "emergency personnel." Moreover, in Passaic, New Jersey, a firefighter's coronavirus death prompted a mayor to ask for state legislation to classify it as a death in the line of duty, which would entitle his family to additional benefits. We can't bring these workers back, but we can honor them by helping their families recover, and funding their children's educations—just as we do for fallen service members. If, as Fed chair Jerome Powell said, we are facing an economic downturn "without modern precedent," one piece of recovery will be financial remuneration for those who have sacrificed in the name of keeping the country running.

Emotional support is necessary, as well. Medical professionals who triage an avalanche of patients decide who lives and who dies. We don't yet know how many of them will suffer PTSD or moral injury from scenes like overflowing emergency rooms. In the past month, New York Presbyterian emergency room physician Dr. Lorna Breen and FDNY EMT John Mondello committed suicide in the wake of treating an overwhelming number of coronavirus patients. Military veterans who have rendered first aid at the scene of IED blasts, rocket attacks, and similar catastrophic mass casualties know these emotional scenarios all too well. Losing colleagues with whom one has served side by side— and perhaps blaming oneself for failing to protect the sick and

wounded, even in an impossible situation—are experiences many troops know intimately.

Whenever well-meaning civilians called me or former comrades heroes, we often told them, “The heroes are the ones who didn’t come back.” I suspect some of the medical professionals I now call heroes would say the same thing. Which is why we must honor the fallen without putting all those who serve on a holy pedestal. Veneration of the dead without practical follow-up care for the living only alienates trauma survivors; it doesn’t help them reintegrate into society. Military veterans have learned this the hard way; recent Memorial Days have included remembrances for troops who have died by suicide. So in addition to honoring essential workers who have died from coronavirus, we must treat the burnout and PTSD from those who survive, especially in the medical professions, so we are not remembering them as tragic statistics in future years.

Columbia’s Dr. Smith wrote a total of 59 nightly missives, each offering comfort and guidance to my anxious-veteran mind. In the meantime, the United States has lost over 83,000 people to coronavirus. In memory of them— 83,000 parents, first responders, warehouse workers, delivery persons, doctors, nurses and counting— let’s expand this Memorial Day to honor essential personnel, with the aim of creating a more united America.

Editor’s note: Teresa Fazio’s memoir, FIDELIS, is forthcoming in September 2020 from Potomac Books.

Fiction from Peter Molin: “Cy and Ali”

The following short story is based on the myth “Ceyx and Alceone,” as recounted in Ovid’s Metamorphoses*.*

Cy busied himself with the by–now routine activities of a combat patrol: gathering his personal gear and stowing it in the truck, drawing the big .50 caliber machine gun and mounting it in the gun turret, setting the frequencies and security codes on the radio, helping out the other crew members and being helped by them in turn. As he waited for the mission commander to give the patrol brief, he thought about his wife for a few moments. Ali had not wanted him to go on this deployment; he had had options that would have kept him in the States, at least for a while longer, and she could not understand why he had been so eager to return to Afghanistan.

“I think you are crazy,” she had told him. Left unstated was the suspicion that he liked the idea of going to war more than he liked the idea of being with her. She loved him dearly, and though he professed his love for her, too, she couldn’t help but feel that he didn’t value their relationship as much as she did. Cy also wasn’t sure what to think, either then or now while he waited for the patrol brief to begin. Returning to Afghanistan had been important to him, but beyond his claims about needing to be with his unit and doing his duty, he sensed that there was a cold hard nugget of selfishness about his willingness to jeopardize his marriage–not to mention his life–for the sake of the deployment.

Rather than give Ali an excuse or an explanation, he had offered a compensation. “When I get back, I promise I’ll make it up to you,” he had said, “I’ll go back to school, or find some job where I won’t have to deploy again anytime soon.”

The offer seemed lame, even to Cy, like he had thought about it for two seconds, but Ali acceded to it anyway. She loved Cy in part because he was a soldier, but some things about being a military wife were really bad. Now she busied herself with her classes, her part-time job, and her friends and family. But she worried a lot, and had a premonition that things might not end well.

The day's mission was nothing special: accompany an Afghan army unit while they resupplied three of their outlying outposts. The mission commander explained that the Americans' role was to inspect the readiness of the Afghan outposts, and to provide artillery and medical support in case anything happened along the way. Cy's job was gunner on the mission commander's truck, which was to be third in the order of march behind two Afghan trucks. From the truck's exposed turret he was to man the .50 cal while keeping an eye out for suicide bombers, IEDs, and ambushes. But nothing was expected to happen; "There has been no enemy activity on the planned route in the last 48 hours," the mission commander informed them. They had traveled the day's route many times before with nothing more serious occurring than a vehicle breakdown. Sure they planned well and rehearsed diligently, but that was all the more reason the actual mission was probably going to be not much.

Which is why what happened, at least at first, had an unreal feel. Three miles out, on Route Missouri, Cy saw the two lead Afghan trucks come to abrupt halts and their occupants pile out. The Afghan soldiers took up firing positions on the right side of the road and pointed their weapons back to the left side. Because he had headphones on and was chattering with the other truck occupants, Cy was unable to immediately distinguish the sound of gunshots, and it took him a moment to comprehend that the Afghans had stumbled into an ambush. Other Americans also soon gleaned what was going on and suddenly the radio net crackled with questions, reports, and commands.

“Action front…. Scan your sectors….. Anyone have positive ID?…. There they are…. 11:00 200 meters. Engage, engage!”

Cy identified three turbaned gunmen firing at the Afghan army trucks from behind a low wall. He charged his machine gun and began to shoot. He had fired the .50 cal dozens of times in training and thus was surprised by how far off target were his

first two bursts. But very quickly he found the range, and was rewarded by seeing the big .50 caliber rounds chew up the wall behind which the insurgents were hiding. Dust and debris filled the air; Cy couldn't tell if he had hit anyone, but surely the fire was effectively suppressing the enemy. By now, the other American trucks had identified the gunmen and were firing, too. Still, it was so hard to figure out exactly what was happening. That the three insurgents behind the wall were capable of resisting the torrent of fire unleashed on them by the American and Afghan soldiers seemed impossible, but no one could tell if there were other enemy shooting at them from somewhere else.

Soon, however, the sound of explosions began to fill the air. Again, it was not immediately clear that the Afghan army soldiers and the insurgents were now firing Rocket Propelled Grenades at each other. "What's going on up there?" Cy heard the mission commander ask him through the intercom. Loud booms resounded everywhere from the impact of the rocket-fired grenades. Cy next heard "RPG! RPG!" echo through his headphones as the Americans understood that they too were now under attack. A round exploded against the truck to his left and Cy felt the blast wave wash over him. How could the enemy engage them so accurately?

As the battle unfolded, Cy realized the situation was serious, no joke. The rest of the crew was protected inside the armored truck, but he was partially exposed in the machine gun turret. He continued to fire the .50 cal, doing his best to punish the insurgents who were trying to kill them. The noise was deafening, but in the midst of the roar of his own weapon and the other American guns, as well as the cacophony of human voices on the intercom, he discerned that enemy fire was pinging around him and sizzling overhead. Though he was not scared, he thought about his wife.

Ali had felt uneasy throughout the day. She had not been able to communicate with Cy, which in itself was not so unusual.

She understood that sometimes missions made it impossible for him to call or write. Still, she sent him emails and texts and the lack of a response for some reason felt ominous. That night, she had had a terrible dream. Cy appeared, looming over her, silent and reproachful, and Ali had awoken with a start. Nothing like this had ever happened before, not even close. She didn’t know what to do, so she watched TV for a while and then began surfing the Internet. She thought about calling her husband’s unit rear-detachment commander, but decided not to. There was no one she could talk to who wouldn’t think she was overreacting, so she didn’t do anything except continue to worry.

*

The next morning two officers appeared at Ali’s door. “The Secretary of Defense regrets to inform you that your husband has died as a result of enemy fire in eastern Afghanistan,” one of them intoned. It was all too true, but for Ali the reality of the situation dissolved in a swirl of chaotic thoughts and physical sickness.

Ali waited on the tarmac at Dover Air Force Base with Cy’s parents. An honor guard was also present, as well as a contingent from her husband’s unit, and a general whom she had never seen before and whose name she didn’t catch. Everyone was very nice to her, but Ali was confused. She didn’t know if she was supposed to be strong and dignified or to collapse in a pool of tears. She also didn’t know if she was angry with her husband, angry toward the Army, or just some strange combination of sad and proud. As her husband’s casket emerged from the plane, Ali felt herself drawn toward it. First she was taking small tentative steps, as if she were nervous about breaking some kind of rule or protocol. Then she was running, moving quickly toward the casket while the others in attendance waited behind. She was barely aware of what she was doing, but her feet seemed to no longer be touching the ground. It was as if she were floating or flying, and her arms

were beating like wings of a giant bird. “O, Cy, is this the homecoming you promised me?” she thought, or maybe said aloud. Then she remembered throwing her arms around the casket, but at the same time she also felt herself rising into the air, in unison with her husband, who now was alive again and also seemed a magnificent, noble bird. Together, Cy and Ali soared upward, and the plane and the honor guard and the onlookers whirled beneath them as they circled in the sky.

New Fiction from Rufi Thorpe: An Excerpt from ‘The Knockout Queen’

The following excerpt of The Knockout Queen *by Rufi Thorpe is reprinted with permission by A.A. Knopf.*

When I was eleven years old, I moved in with my aunt after my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way,

President Bush was a victim in all this too. Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. *Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated!* If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting. You have seen them so often on TV that seeing an actual one is grotesque: the real live lawyers, all sweaty, their dark mouths venting coffee breath directly into your face, the judge who has a cold and keeps blowing his nose, the defendants who are crying or visibly shaking, whose moms are watching or whose kids are trying to sit still in the back. It's a lot to take in when you're eleven and even just a few months prior you were making an argument that not receiving a particular video game for your birthday would be "unfair."

The town to which my little sister and I were relocated after a brief stint in foster care was a suburban utopia a la Norman Rockwell, updated with a fancy coffee shop and yoga studio. We moved in just before the Fourth of July, and I remember being shooed into a town fair, where there were bounce houses and hot dogs being sold to benefit the Kiwanis club. What the fuck was the Kiwanis club? I was given a wristband and ten dollars and told to go play. A woman painted a soccer ball on my face. (All the boys got soccer balls, and all the girls got butterflies; those were the options.)

Bordered on the west by the sea, on the north by a massive airport, on the east by a freeway, and on the south by a sprawling, smoke-belching oil refinery, North Shore was a tiny rectangle. Originally built as a factory town for the oil refinery, it was a perfect simulacrum of a small town anywhere in America, with a main street and cute post office, a stately brick high school, a police department with predictably brutalist architecture; but instead of fading into rural sprawl at its edges, this fairy-tale town was wedged inside the greater body of Los Angeles.

THE KNOCKOUT QUEEN

A NOVEL

RUFI THORPE

Author of *THE GIRLS FROM CORONA DEL MAR*

"This is a hypnotic, beautiful novel, and Rufi Thorpe is an unbelievably unique talent."
—KEVIN WILSON, best-selling author of *NOTHING TO SEE HERE*

My aunt’s place was one of those small stucco houses that look immediately like a face, the door forming a kind of nose, and the windows on either side two dark, square eyes. She had a cypress bush in the front that had turned yellow on one side, and many pinwheels planted on the border of her lawn, the bright colored plastic sun-bleached to a ghostly white as they spun in the wind. North Shore was a windy place with many hills, and I was shocked that people could live in such a wonderful climate without smiling all the time. The air pollution from the airport and oil refinery were pushed inland by the sea breezes. Even our trash cans did not smell, so clean was the air there. Sometimes I would stick my head into them and breathe deeply, just to reassure myself that trash was still trash.

On either side, my aunt’s house was flanked by mansions, as was the case on almost every street of the town. Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor’s face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.

If there were people living in the mansion to the right of our house, I never saw them. Their trash cans did not go out, no cars parked in their drive, except a gardener who came like clockwork every Tuesday, who always gave me a nervous but friendly wave. In the mansion to the left of our house, there lived a girl and her father, a girl who, though I would never have guessed it from looking at her, so young and unsullied did she seem, was my own age, and with whom I would go to school for the next seven years. Her name was Bunny Lampert, and she was the princess of North Shore, and somehow, almost against my will, I became her friend.

One thing that Bunny and I had in common, besides being next-door neighbors, was an unusual lack of adult supervision. North Shore being the paradisiacal bubble that it was, many children walked to school or rode their bikes. But I noticed that Bunny and I were never scooted out the door by parents who rushed to remind us of lunches or fetch lost backpacks, but instead climbed out of houses empty and untended, checking our belongings ourselves, distracted as adults about to set out on the morning's commute. Perhaps it would have been natural for us to walk to school together, but this did not occur. I was invisible to Bunny, and so I came to know a great deal about her before she learned anything about me.

The first year I was in North Shore, we were in sixth grade, but even then Bunny was tall, the tallest girl in our year, but also taller than the tallest boy. I'm sure there are people who would tell you who the most beautiful girls in our school were, and Bunny would not have been found on any of their lists, and yet I loved to look at her. Not for any arrangement of features or gifts of figure, but because she was terribly alive. Like a rabbit or a fox. She was just right there. You could see her breathing, almost feel the blood prickling in her skin, her cells gobbling the sunlight.

I think, as we headed into middle school, it was this vital, translucent quality that kept boys her age from having crushes on her, crushes that required a more opaque surface that they could project onto, that evoked different things than life itself. They were interested in girls who reminded them of movies, or who seemed older, or who seemed innocent, or who seemed smart. Bunny didn't seem. She didn't remind me of anyone. I liked to walk behind her for the cute way she would pull a wedgie from her butt, the way she would sing to herself, always a little sharp, the way she ate an Eggo waffle from a paper towel as she went, careful to throw the paper towel away in a trash can when she got to school.

Her father, though I hardly ever saw him, I saw everywhere. It

was his wolfish grin on almost every dangling for sale sign in the town, his arms crossed over his chest, his white teeth showing in a friendly laugh. He was on for sale signs, but he was also on banners at our school, where he sponsored a seemingly endless number of fund-raising events. He was on the city council and so his name was further attached to every fair, carnival, rally, or Christmas parade. Ray Lampert was inescapable.

I had seen him at that first Fourth of July fair, a huge sign with his headshot on it at a booth where a pretty blond woman gave out picnic blankets with his company's logo stitched on one side. Two Palms Realty. I was afraid to take one of the blankets, even though the pretty blond woman manning the booth told me they were free. In my child gut, I believed they were sewn with some kind of voodoo that would ensnare anyone who touched them.

I often passed by his office, which was on Main Street. He was never in there, though I grew used to seeing the blond woman I had met at the fair, wearing her headset, tapping keys on a space-age-looking computer with a monitor bigger than our TV at home.

Because our houses were next door to each other and on rather narrow plots, the bedroom windows were directly across from one another on the second story, and so I had a literal window into Bunny's life, although I could not see her without being seen myself. When she was home, I kept my blinds carefully closed, but when she was not at home, I would look into her room and examine its contents. In fact, I looked in all the windows of their home, which was decorated with a lavish '80s decadence: gilt dining chairs and a gleaming glass-topped table, white sofas and white rugs over dark, almost black, mahogany floors. The kitchen, which I had to enter their backyard in order to properly examine, was a Grecian temple of white marble, though they never seemed to cook and what was obviously supposed to be a fruit bowl was filled instead with

junk, papers, and pens and keys.

They had no dogs or cats, no hamsters, not even plants. Nothing lived in that house except for Bunny, and presumably her father, though he was never at home. As to what had happened to Bunny's mother, I knew only that she had died and that there had been some air of tragedy about it, a suddenness, not a prolonged illness, and I was in high school before I learned that it was a car accident. I found this explanation disappointingly mundane. Why had a simple car accident been so whispered about, so difficult to confirm? My informant, a glossy, sleazy little imp named Ann Marie, the kind of girl who is incessantly eating a sucker or popsicle in hopes of being seen as sexual, giggled. "That wasn't the scandal," she said. "The scandal was that her mother was fucking a day-care worker at the Catholic preschool. Mr. Brandon. And he was only like twenty at the time." Where was Mr. Brandon now? He had moved, had left town, no more was known.

I often walked by that little preschool, attached to the Catholic church, which was a lovely white stucco building on a corner lot with a playground and red sandbox, and wondered about Bunny's mother and Mr. Brandon. No one could tell me what he looked like, but for my own reasons I pictured sad eyes, too-low jeans, ice-cream abs begging to be licked. Perhaps I imagined him so only as a foil to Bunny's father, whose salt-and-pepper chest hair exploded from the collar of his dress shirt in that ubiquitous head-shot. Everything else about Ray Lampert was clean, sterilized, the bleached teeth, the rehearsed smile, the expensive clothes, but that chest hair belonged to an animal.

The gossip about Bunny's father was that he drank too much, and specifically that he was a regular at the Blue Lagoon, a tiki bar tucked a few blocks off Main Street, though he was what was referred to as "a good drunk," beloved for his willingness to spring for pizza at two in the morning and

listen to the tragic stories of other sad adult men. There was further supposition that his incredible success as a real estate agent was due to his habit of frequenting drinking holes, making friends with anybody and everybody. Having spent many years observing their recycling bin, I can attest that such a justification would be a bit economical with the truth. Ray Lampert was turning his birthday into a lifestyle, to quote Drake. Each week there would be two or three large gin bottles, and then seven or eight wine bottles, all of the same make, a mid-shelf Cabernet. Perhaps he bought them in bulk. It was difficult to imagine him shopping, wheeling a cart filled with nothing but Cabernet and gin through the Costco. How did someone with such an obvious drinking problem go about keeping themselves supplied? Or rather, how did a rich person go about it?

In my experience, addiction was messy. A pastiche of what you bought on payday as a treat, and what you bought on other days, convinced you wouldn’t buy anything, then suddenly finding yourself at the liquor store, smiling bravely, like it was all okay. What did the cashier at the 7-Eleven make of my own father? Did he note on what days my father bought two tall boys and on what days he bought the fifth of cheap bourbon as well, and did he keep a mental tally of whether he was getting better or worse, like I did? Or did everyone buy that kind of thing at 7-Eleven? Perhaps my father was so unremarkable in his predilections as to avoid detection at all. And what was happening to the children of all those other men? Buyers of beef jerky and vodka, peanuts and wine? What did a 7-Eleven even sell that wasn’t designed to kill you one way or another?

Most scandalous to me, and yet so alluring, so seductive, was the possibility that Ray Lampert felt no shame at all. That a rich man could stroll through the Costco, his cart clinking with glass bottles, and greet the cashier smiling, because she would just assume he threw lavish parties, or that he was stocking his wine cellar, that these dark bottles were just

like shirts for Gatsby, talismans of opulence, but whatever it was, even if it was weird, because he was rich, it was fine.

The first time I met Bunny, or what I consider to be our first meeting, because we did encounter each other at school from time to time (in fact we had been in the same homeroom for all of seventh grade, and yet never had a single conversation), we were in tenth grade, and I was discovered in her side yard. I had taken to smoking cigarettes there, and I kept a small bottle of Febreze hidden behind a piece of plywood that was leaning against their fence. The side yard itself was sheltered from the street by a high plank gate, and then was gated again before it led to their back yard, and because it ran along the side of their garage, there were no windows, making it a perfect hiding place. Bunny and her father kept their bikes there, but neither of them seemed to ever ride, and I had been smoking in this part of their property for years now without having been detected, so I was startled when she opened the gate, already wearing her bike helmet, which was pink.

She was surprised to see me and she jumped, but did not yelp, and swiftly closed the gate behind her. She tipped her head, made comically large by the helmet, and looked at me. “What are you doing here?” she whispered.

“I smoke here,” I said, bringing my cigarette out from behind my back.

“Oh,” she said, looking around at the fence, and the side of her garage. “Can’t people see the smoke as it rises above the fence?” Her first concern seemed to be abetting me in my secret habit.

She was neither offended nor concerned that I had been breaking into their property and hiding in their side yard.

“So far as I know,” I said, “no one has. But usually I kind of crouch with the hope that it dissipates. And I always figured

people would think it was you.”

“Your name is Michael,” she said with concentration, dragging my name up through the folds of her memory.

I nodded.

“My name is Bunny,” she said.

“I know.”

“I’m just getting my bike.” She started to walk toward her bike, which was just to my right.

“The tires are flat,” I told her, looking down at them. They had been flat for almost a year now, and I wondered what had possessed her today of all days to take a ride. There was a gust of wind then, and the fence groaned a bit, and we could hear, rather than feel, the wind rushing over the top of the fence, making a sound like scissors cutting through paper.

“Oh.”

“Where were you going to go?” I asked.

“To the beach.”

“By yourself?”

She nodded. “You know, I could put a chair out here for you. Like a camp chair.”

“That’s all right,” I said.

She put her hands on her hips then, and twisted her torso with such strength that I could hear every vertebrae in her spine crack. She was perhaps five inches taller than me. “Do you want to come in?” she asked.

“To your house?”

She took off her helmet. “No one’s home.” There was a babyish

quality to Bunny's voice, perhaps because it seemed too small for the size of her body, and she spoke as though her nose was always a little stuffed. Of course, I wanted desperately to see inside her house up close, and so I put out my cigarette and hid it in the Altoids tin that I also kept behind the plywood, and she watched as I spritzed myself with Febreze, and then we let ourselves out the back gate and into her yard.

"This is our yard," she said. "There's a pool."

I said, "Oh wow," though I had swum in her pool several times when she and her father had been on vacation. I had climbed the fence from my aunt's yard and dropped down into hers, which was dark, since no one was home and the outside lights seemed to be on a timer, and the pool, instead of being a lit rectangle of blue, was a black mass of reflected stars, and, shaking, I had taken off my clothes and slipped naked into the warm water and swum until I felt erased.

She opened one of the French doors that led onto the patio, and we entered the hushed cathedral of her living room. She closed the door behind us, as though it could never be left open. The outside, with its scent of grass and sway of water, its gauzy light and chafing winds, would destroy the interior, the careful, expensive furniture, a pretend world that had to be exactingly maintained.

She gave me a tour of the house, showing me her father's office, with its many bookshelves filled with leather-bound books I doubted he had ever read, and the marble kitchen. She offered me a Pop-Tart, which I declined. She opened one of the crinkly metallic packages for herself, and then, to my horror, spread the two Pop-Tarts with butter and slicked them together as a sandwich. She led me upstairs, taking bites of her Pop-Tart sandwich along the way, and showed me the spare room, decorated in an Oriental style with a disturbing red satin bedspread embroidered with cranes, and the connected bathroom, which had a shiny black vanity and sink, a black toilet, and

black floors. They were ready for Madame Butterfly to commit suicide in there at any time. While the house was uncluttered, I noticed that it was also not exactly clean. Gray trails marked the highest traffic routes on the white carpet, and the sink in the all-black bathroom was spangled with little explosions of white toothpaste.

She gestured at a closed door and said, “That’s my dad’s room,” and then took me into her own bedroom, which was done up, as I already well knew, like a much younger girl’s bedroom, with a white canopy bed and a white dresser that had been plastered with My Little Pony stickers. There was a small white mirrored dressing table with a pink brocade bench. Where there should have been makeup and bottles of fancy perfume, Bunny had arranged her schoolbooks and papers. There was a bookshelf that contained not books but trophies and medals and ribbons, all so cheap and garish and crammed together that it looked more like installation art than a proper display. On one wall, there was a bulletin board that I had not been able to see before as it was on the same wall as the window. At first, it appeared to be a Hydra of female body parts, but as I looked closer I could see that they were all women playing volleyball, and then, as I looked yet closer, I could see that they were all the same woman playing volleyball, carefully trimmed from newspapers and magazines.

“That’s my Misty May-Treanor altar,” she said. “She’s a volleyball player.”

“Not creepy at all,” I said. I would have asked her why she had invited me in, or why she had shown me around with the thoroughness of a realtor, except that I already knew, for her loneliness was so palpable as to be a taste in the air. I had been many places in my life. Apartment buildings where babies free-ranged, waddling down the halls with dirty hair and diapers needing to be changed; houses like my aunt’s, where everything was stained and reaching between the couch cushions to find the remote left your fingers sticky. Bus stations, and

prison waiting rooms, and foster-care homes, and men's cars, and men's houses or apartments where there was sometimes only a mattress on the floor, and none of them had scared me quite as much as being in Bunny's silent, beautiful house.

"I've never had a boy in my bedroom before," she said, a little apologetically, and she sat on the bed, as though she expected that I would fuck her right there on her white eyelet duvet.

"I'm gay," I said, my affect as flat and casual as I could manage. I had never spoken those words to anyone before, not in that way.

"Well, I've never had a gay boy in my bedroom either," she said, and flopped backward, finishing the last of her Pop-Tart sandwich, licking the butter off her fingers. She contemplated the ceiling and I began to wonder if I could simply leave. I was fascinated by Bunny and I liked her, but I was beginning to realize I liked her more from a distance than I did close up. It was too much, being in her room, smelling her smells, hearing her breathe. "You probably think my room is stupid," she said, still staring up at the ceiling, her legs, in their athletic shorts, agape on her bed in such a casual way that it was almost lewd, even though technically nothing was showing.

"It's a room," I said. "I'm not the room judge sent to adjudicate your decor or whatever."

"It is stupid," she said. "My dad keeps saying we should redo it. But I like it. I like it just like this."

"Well, thank you for showing me around," I said, trying to indicate that I would like to leave, when we both heard a door slam downstairs. Bunny sat upright on the bed, and I froze as we listened to the thumping of feet on the carpeted stairs. And then there he was, a man I had only ever seen in photographs, his giant head wedged between her door and the wall. "You're home!" Ray Lampert cried, giddy. "And you have a

friend! I thought we could get Chinese—do you feel like Chinese?”

“Ugh, I’m starved,” Bunny said. I, who by fifteen was already a neurotic counter of calories, almost gasped at this statement, having witnessed the 700-calorie Pop-Tart sandwich.

“And you’ll join us, obviously,” Ray Lampert said, turning to me. He was substantially fatter than in his picture, and whilethere were dark puffy bags under his eyes, the rest of his skin tone was so peculiarly even that I could have sworn he was wearing makeup. His blue dress shirt was unbuttoned a scandalous three buttons, and he was wearing a ratty red baseball cap. It occurred to me that I had probably seen him dozens of times and had just never realized that it was the same man as in the photograph.

“This is Michael,” she said. “Were you thinking Bamboo Forest?”

“No, I want good, really good, egg drop soup. Bamboo Forest is so watery.” He turned to me. “Don’t you think it’s watery?”

What I thought was that I didn’t know anyone was such a connoisseur of egg drop soup. To me it just came, like napkins and forks. “I should probably get home,” I said.

“You don’t really have to go, do you?” Bunny said with sudden, cloying desperation. “Say you’ll come with us!”

Ray reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “He’s got nothing better to do, right, son? Don’t tell me you’re one of these overscheduled kids that’s got back-to-back tutoring and chess club right before you off yourself because you didn’t get into Harvard.” He had found me unattended in his daughter’s bedroom; I stank of cigarettes and was wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and eyeliner, and I had a septum piercing. My hair was loose and went halfway down my back. It was unclear to me if his remarks were meant ironically or if he was actually blind.

“Let’s make it a party!” he said, slapped me on the back, and headed downstairs, shouting that he would meet us at the car.

Bunny turned to me and said in a low voice, “My dad’s kind of weird, but I promise it will be fun.”

And I thought: If Ray Lampert was one of the men I met on Craigslist, I would be too scared to ever get in his car, because he was the kind who would lock you in a closet or put a gun in your mouth and then cry about his ex-wife. Bunny took my hand and twined her fingers through my own. And she looked at me with eyes so hopeful that I nodded.

Honestly, I probably would have let her take me anywhere.

*

Thorpe, Rufi. *The Knockout Queen* (Knopf, April 2020).

Author photo by Nina Subin.

New Fiction from Ken Galbreath: “Checkpoint”

In high school, I was invisible—acne and braces, last year’s wardrobe. I didn’t have close friends. My grades weren’t going to win me any scholarships. The football coach offered me the equipment manager’s position after tryouts.

In the ninth grade, 9/11 happened. In tenth grade, I watched the Air Force drop daisy cutters on Tora Bora. In my junior year, I watched the Marines level Fallujah. There were yellow ribbon magnets on every car and American flags on every porch. The military was a way to be somebody.

So after I graduated, I ran to the recruiter’s office; shaved my head before I even shipped out. Some guys hated basic training. Not me. I couldn’t wait to get home in my dress uniform and strut through town, to show all those people who had looked over me or looked through me instead of looking at me. I’d be impossible to miss with a chest full of ribbons and medals.

I finished basic and shipped to Fort Bragg. My unit deployed to Iraq three weeks later, just in time for me to get some. But our area of operations was only peace and the endless desert. Nobody had died in almost a year. No Americans.

My platoon drove around Iraq in humvees, pointing our guns at the horizon, hoping to draw fire. We escorted supply convoys. We transported detainees. We set up checkpoints.

The recruiter never said shit about supply convoys. And he definitely didn’t mention sitting at a checkpoint, in a hundred and fifty degrees, in body armor, in a truck in the desert, just sitting. That lying prick told me about kicking in doors, calling in airstrikes, airborne infiltrations. Never checkpoints.

But, no shit, there we were.

When we arrived, the lieutenant radioed in our coordinates. Sergeant Schwartz and the other team leaders arranged orange cones and stretched out large, spiral coils of barbed wire creating a temporary barrier. Two soldiers positioned signs at either end of the checkpoint. In Arabic and English, they read, “Caution. Stop Here. U.S. Forces Checkpoint Ahead. Wait for Instructions. Deadly Force Authorized. Caution.” My job was to stand in the turret and man the .50 caliber machine gun, to provide security while the other guys set up.

Sergeant Schwartz pulled the heavy door shut as he got back into the truck.

“And now we wait,” he said.

Scwhartz took a pinch of snuff and tucked it in his bottom lip. He passed the can to Carpenter, the driver. I heard them spitting into empty bottles. Out past the barrel of the .50, the dirt road shimmered like water. Two hours went by, then three. Farmers’ trucks kicked up dust as they drove from one rural village to the next.

Ramadi, Iraq (Feb. 20, 2005). U.S. Navy photo by Photographer’s Mate 1st Class Shane T. McCoy.

So far, we had searched two vehicles and had found nothing.

“Hey Sergeant Schwartz,” I called down from the turret. “Is it always like this?”

“Like what?”

“This…” I said, “boring.”

“The last deployment wasn’t,” he said. “We were up near

Baghdad. Urban environment.”

“What’s the craziest thing you ever found?”

“No shit,” he said. “This one time, we stopped a car full of midget hajjis.”

Schwartz told us that Bobby Barrow, one of the other team’s sergeants, had halted four lanes of traffic so he could take pictures. This was back when he and Schwartz were still privates. While Bobby was getting his picture taken, the search team found a wooden box full of Iraqi money hidden under a spare tire. So Bobby and Schwartz had to zip tie all these tiny little hands together while the lieutenant radioed headquarters. Turns out, all the money had Saddam’s face on it, so they let the driver keep it. Before they left, one of the Iraqis tried to get Barrow to marry his daughter and take her home to America.

“Bobby told him, I can’t take no hajji girl home to my mama!” Schwartz finished, laughing.

A truck approached.

“Punisher 7,” I called it in. “This is Punisher 4. Vehicle approaching from the south. Over.”

“Roger. Over.” The bored reply.

A door clunked open and the truck rocked as Sergeant Schwartz stepped out. I heard the team leaders from the other trucks doing the same. Out at the furthest clump of orange cones, the white pickup truck slowed, as if the driver was reading the sign. I stood in the gun turret and held my hands and arms straight out in front of me like a traffic cop, but he kept driving, rolling past the sign.

The team leaders, standing in the road beside my truck, raised their long guns and pulled the butt stocks tight into their shoulders.

I fired a signal flare, a warning. The flaming red ball arced past his windshield.

Still, the pickup didn’t stop; it accelerated toward the barbed wire, our position.

“Light him up!” Sergeant Schwartz nodded at me.

I aimed. I fired three rounds.

The pickup lurched and jerked and skidded to a halt. The passenger’s side sagged off the dirt road into an irrigation ditch. A door screeched open, and three female figures scrambled out, screaming and crying. The search team corralled them. Someone shouted, “Clear!”

There was nothing in the truck.

And then Doc sprinted up and pulled the driver out. She laid him on his back in the road, cut his pants apart, and stuffed handfuls of gauze into the gaping wound in his groin. And then she gave up. I heard the call for a body bag on the radio.

I clambered up out of the turret, pulled my headset off, and ignored Carpenter’s questions about what I was doing, his warnings that I would be in trouble for leaving. I marched down the road, around the serpentine of barbed wire to where the truck had stopped.

One round had passed through the windshield of the truck high on the passenger’s side, a cloudy spider web centered around a clean hole. Another hole in the grill, driver’s side. Fluids leaked from under the truck, oil and antifreeze. Blood soaked the driver’s seat, dripped out the door and puddled in the sand to form tiny lakes.

I caught glimpses of the driver, with all of the people crowded around: the platoon sergeant, the medic, the team leaders, too busy talking about the details of “the report” to notice his wispy moustache. They didn’t see the zits that

dotted his face, because they were talking about proper escalation of force. They didn't notice me either, standing outside of their huddle.

Two young girls wailed on the side of the road. Their mother, or grandmother, was ancient and dry. The lieutenant asked the interpreter why they didn't stop at the sign, and the interpreter turned to the woman and said something in Arabic.

Her voice was papyrus. She held her hands out in front of her and patted her breast with her hand.

"She says they didn't know what to do," the interpreter said.

"Did they not read the sign?" the lieutenant asked.

"She says there is no school here," said Nasir.

The old woman patted her chest again and again.

"There's no school here," the lieutenant said, almost to himself. And then, not so quietly, "JESUS! FUCK!"

Heads turned to look at him, including the platoon sergeant's. I stood in the middle of the road. His eyes flicked to the empty turret 40 meters away.

"What are you worried about that for?" He jerked his head back over his shoulder. "You're supposed to be worried about your fucking sector of fire, dumbass." He shoved and pulled me to the truck and ordered me back up into the turret.

I watched my sector while the platoon packed up road cones and signs. They loaded everything into the trucks.

The platoon sergeant and interpreter spoke to the old woman, telling her how to file a claim. They gave her a piece of paper with the information printed on it. Before they left, Schwartz kneeled and offered the girls a package of M&Ms. The smaller girl burst into tears and clung to the woman's *burqa*.

As they walked away, the old woman stopped and rasped at me, “*Asif*.”

“I don’t speak your language,” I told her. “I don’t understand.”

“She says she is sorry,” Nasir said.

*

On the ride back to base, Schwartz kept telling me not to worry. We did everything by the book.

“You’ll have to write a statement when we get back. Probably answer some questions, but just tell the truth,” he said. “We did it all by the book.”

It was annoying, the way he kept repeating himself.

I finished my tour of duty. The army gave me a medal. Later, they gave me my discharge papers. I grew out my hair and enrolled at a state university.

I didn’t strut around town in my dress uniform.

*

Two years later, Carpenter’s email arrived. It was short.

“Hey G,” he wrote. “I don’t know if you heard, but Schwartz died. Wanted you to know. Hope you’re doing good.”

The first email came a week after I left the army. Donahue died. Suicide attack in Baghdad. Last year it was Bethea. IED on some road in Afghanistan. He had gotten married the month before. Now Schwartz.

At the bottom of Carpenter’s email, there was a link to an obituary. “Staff Sergeant Michael A. Schwartzenberger, age 32, died on…”

I hadn’t talked to Schwartz, or practically anyone from the unit, since I left the army, but I felt like there ought to be more than just some dates and a list of people he left behind.

I read his name over and over. Schwartzenberger. The name tape on his uniform had the tiniest little letters so that they would all fit. We had just called him Schwartz.

I emailed my professors and left that morning.

*

The honor guard stood off to the side with their rifles. Some hairless kid in a baggy dress jacket held a bugle.

Standing behind the crowd, I searched the backs of heads for familiar faces. Bobby Barrow was conspicuous, his shoulders as broad as ever. He was the only person in a dress uniform who wasn’t part of the honor guard. Carpenter would be here somewhere.

The chaplain stood next to the coffin rambling through generic scripture— *The righteous perish and no one takes it to heart. The devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil*— I wanted to shout him down. I wanted to tell Schwartz’s *real* story.

Schwartz was 20 when he joined the Army.

His grandfather and his father worked in Youngstown, but Schwartz was born the year after the steel industry moved to China. There was no future at the plant.

The Volunteer Fire Department didn’t offer a pension. No benefits package either. Fourteen dollars an hour might have been enough for him and Melissa, just the two of them, but then the baby came.

Schwartz was an all-American kid: athlete, honors student, Eagle Scout. The recruiters had hounded him right after high

school. Then, he had tucked their cards into his wallet and nodded and smiled. When things got tight, he dug through the drawer in the kitchen where old wallet clutter was archived with dead batteries and receipts of questionable importance.

Melissa’s belly was seven-months-fat when the recruiter came to pick up Schwartz for basic training. She sobbed on the porch while Schwartz rode away.

“Don’t worry,” the recruiter told him in the car. “You’ll be gone for a couple of months, and then you’ll move her and the kid down to Fort Bragg, and you’ll see her every night. Except for a training exercise every now and then.”

After basic training, he moved Melissa and Emily to Fort Bragg. He spent every night with them, except for the occasional training exercise.

After 9/11, the exercises came more often. The nights he spent at home, he lay awake, straining to sleep. He never explained it explicitly, but I understood. Some part of him needed to record the sound of his wife’s soft snores or the smell of her hair. He needed to absorb the blank hiss of the baby monitor.

On a tiny base in Khost Province, he earned an Army Commendation Medal and corporal’s stripes. He kept a picture of his daughter in his helmet. He wrote letters home every week. The letters never mentioned rockets or mortars or any kind of trouble. He told Melissa about his promotion. He wrote how much he missed her.

They had been in Afghanistan for six months and already there were murmurs about Iraq.

He received another medal and another promotion in Baghdad. He wrote letters. He kept a copy of his wife’s sonogram along with the pictures tucked in his helmet. The unit arranged it so that he could make a phone call home on the day that Ashley was born.

These are the stories he told us while we were overseas together—his third deployment, my first and only.

*

Schwartz's unit was still in Afghanistan. The honor guard had been scraped together from the fuckups left at Fort Bragg. The rifle detail and the bugler were privates, fresh out of basic training or discipline cases. The detail's leader was a fat, dumpy sergeant first class. All of the able bodies, and minds, were in Afghanistan.

The chaplain finished the service. The fat sergeant stepped up to the casket and raised his right arm in a slow salute. I watched to see who would jump at the first volley of shots. As the last volley's echo rolled through the cemetery, the bugler started to play "Taps."

It wasn't even a real bugle. There were so many funerals, and so few trained buglers, that the army had to use fakes. The digital bugles played a perfect rendition every time, but anyone who ever played a brass instrument would be able to look at the kid in the baggy jacket and tell he wasn't playing. He didn't even know how to hold the fucking thing.

The fat sergeant handed the folded flag to Schwartz's mom.

Some of the attendees walked back to their cars. Others waited to pay their respects to Schwartz's parents, still seated, looking as if they'd be guarding his grave forever.

*

Bobby, Carpenter, and I met at a bar near my hotel.

Neither of them knew how Schwartz had died. Bobby said Schwartz's unit had deployed eight or nine months ago, but like the rest of us, he'd lost track of Schwartz after leaving Fort Bragg. Carpenter hadn't really talked to anyone since he'd been kicked out—cocaine.

Schwartz’s honor guard walked into the bar a little after sundown. They were in civilian clothes, but I recognized the fat sergeant who had handed the flag to Schwartz’s parents. Bobby asked about my hair: “So, when your girlfriend is pegging you, does she pull your hair? You know? And, do you have to put it back in a bun when you’re licking her balls…”

I nodded toward the door, distracting him.

“Hey bartender,” he yelled. “Get these boys some drinks!”

We sat at a table and told stories about Schwartz. Bobby had known him far longer than me; Carpenter too, so I let them do the talking. I was drunk. I smiled and nodded in the right places, chimed in with exclamations when I was expected to.

We kept waiting for the fat sergeant and the honor guard to open up. They were happy to drink on Bobby’s tab, but they stayed quiet, like we were still at the funeral. They seemed surprised by the way we described him. It was like they had never even met Schwartz.

We wanted to hear their stories about him, but what we really wanted was to know how he died. The obituary had said nothing, not even *where* he died. And it wasn’t like he was a spy, out doing something classified. He was in the fucking field artillery.

The jukebox died. Bobby was content to give it a rest. There was a lull in storytime.

“Tell ‘em about that kid you smoked at that checkpoint,” Carpenter said.

My stomach dropped. I focused on the beads of condensation running down a bottle of beer, but all I could see was that dusty, old woman. I could hear her voice, her rusty tongue dragging across the roof of her mouth. *Asif*.

She says she is sorry.

I struggled away from the memory and looked up, hoping for an interruption, an earthquake, a meteor strike, anything not to have to relive it.

The men from Schwartz's honor guard stared at me hungrily, waiting for blood. Bobby wouldn't meet my gaze. He understood that this was necessary. If I shared my story of bloodshed, then they would tell us what happened to Schwartz.

Blood calls for blood.

"So," I said, "this kid, who it turned out couldn't read, blew through a sign at our checkpoint, and I thought I was doing the right thing, but it turned out—."

"Dude!" Carpenter interrupted me. "Tell it *right*, man!" He turned to the fat sergeant and the rifle detail. "So no shit, there we were, in the middle of this fucking dirt road …"

He told it all.

When Carpenter finished, the fat sergeant raised his bottle towards me, and then everyone at the table did the same. I waggled my bottle side to side. The label lay in shreds on the table.

"Sorry boys," I said. "I'm empty."

"Get me one too!" Carpenter called as I walked away from the table.

The parking lot was dark and cool. I pondered getting in my car and driving back to Asheville. The keys were in my hand.

Raised voices and breaking glass forced me to do an about face.

Inside, Bobby stood in front of his overturned chair, red-faced, cursing down at the fat sergeant. "You don't fucking know. You weren't there, you tubby shit!"

And now the fat man jerked to his feet knocking his chair to the ground too. “Listen, sergeant.” He pointed his sausage fingers in Bobby’s face. ”You need to tone it down. I don’t know who it is that you guys knew, but it wasn’t the guy that I knew. Schwartz was a fucking shit bag and a drunk. That’s why they left him in the rear.”

“What?” Bobby’s arms sagged.

When a unit deployed, they left people back in the States to take care of admin stuff— bitch work. They called it rear detachment. It was for broke-dicks, whiners, fuckups. Schwartz wasn’t any of those things. This was a mistake.

“They. Left. Him. In The. Rear,” the fat sergeant repeated, accentuating every word. “Schwartz got a DUI, and then he got busted for being drunk on duty. His ex took his daughters and got a *restraining order*. He was about to get busted down to sergeant.”

“Liar!” Bobby said. Angry tears brimmed from his blue eyes.

“That morning, when he didn’t show up to P.T. formation, no one blinked, because, like I said, Schwartz was a fuckup. When he missed 0900 formation too, we sent a couple guys to his quarters.”

Bobby made harsh cawing sounds and the tears spilled over.

The fat sergeant continued. “When they knocked, no one answered, but they knew something was wrong. So, they broke in. They found him in the garage, in his truck with the engine running.”

Bobby crumpled into a chair. Until now, I’d never seen him look deflated.

“Did he leave a note?” I asked.

“Sort of,” the fat sergeant said. “That’s how the guys knew

something was wrong when they went to Schwartz' place. He wrote *Sorry* in giant, spray paint letters across the garage door."

Asif.

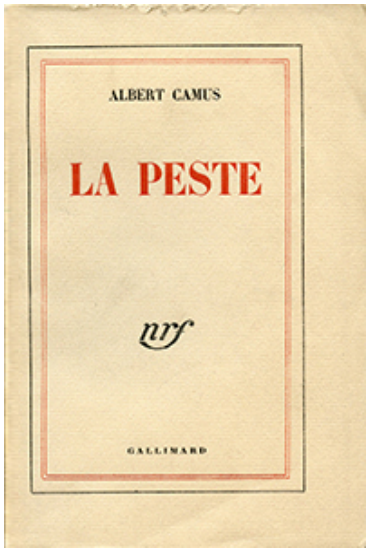
Reading Camus' 'The Plague' in 2020: A Dispatch from Lyon, France, by Jennifer Orth-Veillon and John Tyrrell

"It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not."

20th-century French writer Albert Camus chose these lines penned by Daniel Defoe as the epigraph for his novel, *The Plague*. It may come as a surprise that they hail from Defoe's 1719 fictional work *Robinson Crusoe,* about a slave trader who escaped after, in an ironic turn of events, he was taken prisoner and became stranded on a remote island for 28 years. Defoe's 1722 book, *A Journal of the Plague Year,* which is based on real historical events and a family member's diary kept during the 1665 Great Plague of London, would seem the more logical choice. Camus studied Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* along with other pandemic narratives as he conducted research for *The Plague,* but he decided ultimately that his plague story should be introduced by a statement emphasizing imprisonment rather than illness.

Albert Camus

When Camus began writing *The Plague* in 1942, he planned on calling the germinating novel, “The Prisoners.”[1] The Germans had begun their invasion of southern France and the Allies had landed on the coast of North Africa. At the time, Camus was convalescing in southeastern France after another bout of tuberculosis, an illness he had battled since childhood.[2] He was blocked from returning home to Algiers and his wife, Francine. While most consider Camus a French author, he saw himself as Algerian and the forced separation from his terra mater undoubtedly stoked the novel’s dominant themes of isolation, exile, and separation. “The Separated” was also among the working titles.



Original 1947 The Plague edition by Gallimard.
Editions Gallimard

The struggle of individual imprisonment was nothing new to Camus. In 1942, he published his absurdist story *The Stranger,* which chronicles the downfall of Meursault, a man who is convicted and sentenced to death not because he killed an innocent Arab on the beach but for not crying at his own mother's funeral. In that same year, his philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" appeared, which lays out his basic theory of the absurd. Like Sisyphus who continues to push the rock up the mountain despite its inevitable fall, humans will always search for meaning. What counts is not so much the struggle to push the rock up, but the walk back down the mountain while contemplating renewal.

The Plague marks Camus' shift in focus from the individual and the absurd to the collective and what he calls the literature of "revolt." Around the beginning of 1943, he wrote:

I want to use the plague to express the way we have all suffered from suffocation and the atmosphere of threat and exile we've all experienced. At the same time. I want to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general. The plague will give an image of those who shared the reflection, the silence of moral suffering.[3]

Cover of the French 1947 special edition of The Plague. Cover design by Mario Prassinos. Editions Gallimard.

The Plague tells the story of a bubonic plague outbreak that strikes the French-Algerian town of Oran, decimating the population. It begins with sick rats coming out to die in the streets. When the rats disappear, the disease moves on to infect humans. At first, most of the inhabitants, with the exception of the character of Dr. Bernard Rieux, refuse to believe that the disease is dangerous. Rieux works tirelessly not only to save sick victims, but also to mobilize a movement against the plague by calling on others to help in the fight against it. As the city closes its gates, Tarrou, Grand, le Père Paneloux, Rambert, Castel, and Othon are among the characters who risk their lives to care for the victims of the unrelenting epidemic.

In 1943, Camus joined the French Resistance as an editorial writer for one of the most influential underground publications, *Combat,* and became its editor-in-chief at Liberation. He wrote moving articles inciting citizens to resist and then detailed the shock of the painful return of

Jews and political prisoners who had been deported to concentration camps. Despite the fact that, in aiming for universality, Camus erased the most explicit references to the Second World War, the French recognized themselves in *The Plague*. As such, in 1947 the book became known as *the* novel about Nazi occupation, the Holocaust, the Resistance, and Liberation.[4] When Camus signed a copy of *The Plague* for his friend and fellow resistor, Madame Jacqueline Bernard, he wrote "To J., survivor of the plague."[5] She was deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp in 1944 and that same year her husband died on the way from Paris to Auschwitz.

Combat

№ 46

1er AOUT 1943

Un seul chef : DE GAULLE
Un seul combat : pour NOS LIBERTÉS

Dans la guerre comme dans la paix le dernier mot est à ceux qui ne se rendent jamais. Clemenceau.

ORGANE DES MOUVEMENTS DE RÉSISTANCE UNIS

LA RÉSISTANCE TOTALE

Vous la connaissez, mes camarades, la chiennaille terrorisée qui, depuis trois ans, paille son ignoble détresse et supplie les Français d'attendre sans rien faire que la guerre se termine.

Vous connaissez cette racaille qui crie : « Si vous agissez, vous augmenterez notre misère ! ». Et, vous savez mieux que quiconque par quels « NON », la Résistance ne cesse de leur répondre. L'odieux tumulte des lâches est sans cesse

Par tous les moyens, là où vous êtes, vous devez lutter avec nous. Vous devez vous dire que tout acte contre l'occupant hâte la Victoire.

Chaque retard apporté aux communications ennemies est un début de paralysie qui frappe la Pieuvre.

Chaque fois qu'un véhicule ennemi est détruit ou endommagé, c'est une chance d'échapper au châtiment qui est retirée au Boche.

Combat accueille LE GÉNÉRAL DE GAULLE

C'est à "COMBAT" que le Général de GAULLE, à son arrivée à Alger a réservé une de ses premières visites.

Le 1er juin, nos camarades d'Afrique du Nord groupés au Centre d'Accueil de Combat reçurent le Général de Gaulle et lui furent présentés par son chef René Capitan :

"Vous avez, mon Général, dit-il, à votre droite les soldats de Leclerc et de Larminat, les combattants de Fondouk et de Pichon, à votre gauche les cadres de "Combat" civils qui depuis 3 ans luttent ici contre l'oppression".

DE GAULLE répondit par quelques mots rappelant que la vérité et le devoir de chacun sont dans la Résistance.

Puis les assistants entonnèrent la Marseillaise tandis que la foule manifestait aux cris de "Vive de Gaulle !".

Cover of underground French Resistance publication that Camus edited, Combat.

Almost 75 years later, it could be said that Camus' vision of *The Plague* gaining a more universal significance has found renewed focus with COVID-19. For Camus, the pandemic virus symbolized not just Nazism but was supposed to serve as an allegory for any omnipotent force that imprisons people and

inflicts human deaths in arbitrary ways. Since February of 2020, *The Plague* has made the bestseller list in countries such as South Korea, Italy, and France, and, in some places, has sold out on Amazon. When reading it, it's impossible not to wonder how someone writing in 1942 could have foreseen so accurately how things would play out in 2020. The general disbelief and denial of the severity of the virus, the unwillingness of government authorities to enforce prophylactic measures, the hoarding of goods, profiteering, quarantine, lack of medical supplies—these themes play out in *The Plague* as they do today.

Albert Camus

While these comparisons are striking, some of the less-sensational parallels of today's crisis with *The Plague* delve into the heart of the book's deceptively simple message – it is a story about acquiring a sense of love and duty for all humankind that functions outside of personal, moral, religious, or ideological motivation. It's about breaking out of a certain kind of individual imprisonment and isolation to combat a collective imprisonment and isolation.

Le métier d'homme, le devoir d'aimer, and abstraction

Two major terms from Camus' lexicon give shape to this concept: *le métier d'homme* and *le devoir d'aimer*. *Le métier d'homme,* loosely translated as "humankind's profession," means that all humans have a job, tailored to each individual, that involves combating misfortune in the world to reduce suffering. What drives *le métier d'homme* is *le devoir*

d'aimer, the "duty of love" not just to one's partner or family but also to humankind. Camus said, "love is the right and duty of each human" and "the only duty" he knows is "that of love."[6] It is only this conception of love and duty without moral or material motivation or compensation that can heal plagues, imagined or real.

At first glance, *Le métier d'homme* and *le devoir d'aimer* appear to be simple concepts that any decent human being should be able to enact humbly. However, throughout *The Plague*, Camus demonstrates that this becomes nearly impossible in times of massive catastrophe due to the third major term from Camus' lexicon—*abstraction*. Different abstractions allow the citizens of Oran to avoid confronting the horrible reality of the plague's spread and impact. At its most simple, abstraction means turning the concrete into the immaterial or ideal, and it's the different forms of abstraction that individuals employ—both wittingly and unwittingly—that become obstacles to the city's efforts in countering the plague. As long as they create abstractions, humans cannot love or do their duty in preventing the suffering of humankind.

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The rest of this article will be devoted to dissecting the different ways the characters of *The Plague* generate abstraction while comparing these with a few ways different, real actors in today's world have avoided confronting the most severe impacts of COVID-19. The authors—Jennifer Orth-Veillon and John Tyrrell— both residents of Lyon, France, who can't go further than one kilometer from our homes for more than one hour a day, are seeking to resist the abstraction of this pandemic in textbooks (years from now), or on social media (minutes from now). To that end we have interviewed two real people close to us who have, against the odds, won their own personal battle with abstraction and helped, or rather loved, humankind during this crisis.[1]

Abstraction and *The Plague*

In 1955, eight years after the publication of *The Plague*, the French journal *L'Express* published an article by Camus entitled "Le métier d'homme" in which he presents his recurring idea of "humankind's profession." He speaks of the human need for meaningful work, without which "life suffocates and dies," a theme he explored in *The Plague* through the actions of Doctor Rieux. In the article, he also addresses humankind's "duty to love" ("devoir d'aimer"), which drives Rieux, and undoubtedly motivates today's health care professionals as they work tirelessly and selflessly to protect lives against the onslaught of an invisible and deadly adversary. As a nurse in Lombardy, Italy, expressed to New York emergency-room doctor Helen Ouyang in early April when the city registered 47,440 cases, the merits of the profession can't be understated. "Please, don't give up," she wrote. "Our jobs are difficult but are the most beautiful ones."[2]

As with this nurse, Dr. Rieux's task – performing his "duty to love" – gives meaning to his existence. However, no lofty aspirations brought him to his calling. By his own admission, he entered his profession "abstractedly," as it was a desirable career "that young men often aspire to." Subsequently, as a young doctor, he was exposed to the hard realities of human suffering and death. The injustices he witnessed outraged him, challenging his capacity to see his patients abstractedly. Indeed, it was his inability "to get used to seeing people die" that spurred him on. But later, faced with plague in Oran, he found a new purpose for the abstraction of reality in allowing him to take on an unprecedented number of critical patients. He observes that "an element of abstraction, of a divorce from reality, entered into such calamities." However, he finally comes to the conclusion that he can never completely let down his guard and give way to abstraction, as he proclaims, "when abstraction sets to killing you, you've got to get busy with it." For

Rieux, fighting his own abstract view of the plague becomes almost as difficult as fighting the plague itself.

Somewhat like Sisyphus, Rieux rarely wins the uphill battle with the plague. While a few make what he views as miraculous recoveries, most succumb to a violent end as the plague attacks in horrific ways. Their buboes ooze, their fevers soar. As the plague continues its rout, a group of men let go of their abstractions and join Rieux in helping the communal effort. The journalist character, Rambert, decides to stop illegally planning his escape from Oran to join his lover in Paris. Since the outbreak, he has tried bribing officials and finally resorted to engaging the services of some shady characters to smuggle him out. For him, the plague was not about the arbitrary deaths of thousands of humans, but about his individual sadness. When he abandons the quest to escape and instead joins the rescue teams, he admits to Rieux "I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business." Rieux tells Rambert that he didn't blame him for wanting to pursue happiness with his lover. At this moment, it's easy to forget that Rieux has been separated from his wife too. "But it may be shameful to be happy by oneself," Rambert confesses.

Rieux and his friends fight the plague—and their abstractions of it—until cases diminish and an effective serum is found. About a year after the first case appeared, the gates of Oran reopened and the citizens flooded the streets and cafés to celebrate. It is just then that Rieux is shattered by the sickness and death of his friend Tarrou, who has contributed greatly to the efforts. As Tarrou dies, Camus resists imposing an emotional reaction on his readers, yet the impact of the episode on Rieux is clear. Unable to be of any use to his friend, the doctor nonetheless remains steadfastly at his side, recording the details of their interactions during Tarrou's final hours. The tragedy of this death, all the more poignant for having occurred as the plague was receding from

the town, finally forces back the protective shield of abstraction which had permitted Rieux to carry out his duty so assiduously and for so long. It is the first moment since the onset of the epidemic in the town that he puts aside the others who are sick to stay with his friend. And it is the moment where the reader is presented with the real human cost of the ravages of the plague, free from all abstraction.

The next day, when Rieux receives the telegram informing him of his wife's death, it is hard not to wonder how he will carry on. Yet we know he will, as will the suffering. Rieux admits that "He'd been expecting it, but it was hard all the same. And he knew, in saying this, that this suffering was nothing new. For many months, and for the last two days, it was the selfsame suffering going on and on."

Abstraction and COVID-19

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, abstraction has also been an important coping mechanism. For the general public, abstraction comes in the form of harsh realities in hospital wards reduced to news headlines and data points on graphs.. For front line medical professionals, it's the daily struggle to manage the waves of emotion resulting from unprecedented sickness, death, and deprivation of contact with loved ones. Like Rieux, some of those doctors and nurses have found that allowing the mask of abstraction to slip can be desirable in the face of such monumental difficulties. Italian E.R. doctor Andrea Duca said, "I realize now that keeping the emotions outside of me can help to manage the shift and the stress, but I need to be human to keep working."[3]

However, opening the floodgates to those emotional realities can also have devastating consequences. New York E.R. Doctor Laura Breen tragically took her own life following weeks of fighting the virus in others, and had even recovered from it herself. According to her father's account in *The New York Times*, "She had described to him an onslaught of patients who

were dying before they could even be taken out of ambulances." He said, "She tried to do her job, and it killed her."[4]

If ongoing mitigation measures are successful, it's likely that the vast majority of the global population won't contract COVID-19, or even have direct experience of it via immediate family and friends. This means that for most of us our experience will remain an abstraction, limited to what we see and hear on TV, radio, websites and social media in the form of soundbites, statistics, graphs, and their various interpretations through each channel's unique prism. As Camus suggests in *The Plague,* "we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away."

Today, the bad dream plays out on screens at home and on mobile phones, adding a further stage of disconnection with reality. Many are looking hopefully towards a better future post-pandemic, in terms of improved health systems, sustained reductions in urban pollution, or more flexibility in remote working for example. The mass-scale abstraction of the pandemic, however, could prove to be a hindrance to such positive outcomes. If COVID-19 doesn't directly touch a person's life, it's easy to ignore its reality, deny its impact and believe that there's nothing that needs fixing.

In *The Plague*, Camus says that discussing humans as being good or bad citizens in times of crisis misses the point. Rather "they are more or less ignorant." He suggests that "the evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding." It follows that to counter ignorance and gain this all-important understanding, people require information. But it needs to be correct information. This is challenging when facts depend on the way they are collected, and truth is subjective depending on the channel through which it is transmitted. In his story, Camus describes the "epical or prize-speech verbiage" employed by the media beyond the walls

of Oran when describing the situation within. This grates on Dr. Rieux because it fails to capture the reality of the "small daily effort" made by so many to sustain the lives of the afflicted.

It's possible to imagine that some Italians reacted in a similar way to the sensationalist reporting in British media in early March when COVID-19 began to exert its deadly grip on Northern Italy.[5] Fast forward to April, when the infectious tide rose to similar levels in the UK, and the tone of reporting in popular newspapers was muted in comparison. At times, it leveraged the distraction of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's own battle with the virus to keep the worst domestic horrors from the front pages.[6] It appears that it's only a sensation when it's happening to someone else.

Meanwhile, one debate currently raging in our communities and news media concerns the medical efficacy of wearing masks to protect ourselves and others from COVID-19. This might be missing the point, however. Camus goes straight to the heart of the matter, recording an exchange in which Tarrou hands a mask to Rambert the journalist, who immediately asks if it is really any use: "Tarrou said no, but it inspired confidence in others." Our leaders frequently speak of community responsibility and the vital role that everyone has to play in mitigating the worst impacts of COVID-19. Staying at home and following social distancing guidelines is vital, but for any who share Camus' view, the action of wearing masks is equally of value. It requires investment in modifying behavior to extend greater respect and understanding to those who share this world, its streets, and places of work and play. How people behave – whether or not they wear a mask, for example – has a very real impact on the level of safety or anxiety felt by others.

In Lyon, a sign reads “Stay home, that’s all.” Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon

In the high-score, high-stakes world of COVID-19 statistics, the relative differences of individual country’s approaches are laid bare. Every commentator has a different take, but it’s hard to claim that a country like South Korea has a lower infection rate because it lacks the freedoms of western liberal democracies. Sweden, for example, has achieved remarkable results. Some observers credit this to the heightened sense of social responsibility that saw Stockholm city centre foot traffic reduced by 70% without any enforced lockdown.[7] As COVID-19 takes its permanent place in the world’s ongoing reality, time will tell whether people are willing to invest in their communities through the wearing of masks and other perhaps inconvenient new behaviours as we seek to, as Camus suggests, “inspire confidence in others.” Such communal social responsibility is the manifestation of Camus’

“duty to love,” and its value should be embraced more than ever in trying times.

For individuals to grasp the importance of behavioral change and their wider social duty, it’s vital to break through abstraction and connect meaningfully with them. It’s here that the power of personal stories is paramount. The story that Camus told in *The Plague* is a fiction, but there are many narratives today that mirror its events, and it is those that must be elevated. By doing so, we can reveal the truth of Camus’ words when he says of the contagion, “it doesn’t always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away.” And we can begin to better understand our shared duty of love.

We have come to know two individuals whose stories are relevant and valuable in the context of Camus’ discussion of abstraction in *The Plague* and our city’s experience with COVID-19. Yasmina Bouafia and Walid Feda are two French citizens who, against great odds, demonstrate “le métier d’homme” and “le devoir d’aimer.”

Yasmina Bouafia, 6eme Arrondissement, Lyon

“With *The Plague*, Camus has given us the copy that we have cut and pasted into today’s Covid-19 France,” claims Yasmina Bouafia, a 38-year-old French-Algerian woman living in the Charpennes neighborhood in the southeastern city of Lyon. Yasmina’s parents are Algerian, but she and four of her nine siblings were born in France. “It’s hard to find an Algerian of my generation who hasn’t read *The Plague.”*

Yasmina Bouafia serves Algerian mint tea.
Courtesy of Yasmina Bouafia.

The pandemic has shed light on an aspect of Camus that she hadn't previously grasped in his work. Camus, although he became known as a French writer, had always considered himself Algerian, despite having joined the French Resistance, and eventually settling in France after Algeria won its independence in 1954.. Almost all of his writings spring from his place of birth, and when he was forced to relocate to France after the Algerian War, he chose to live in the south of France because the intensity of the sunlight there most resembled that in Algeria. Yasmina, born in France, to a family steeped in Algerian tradition, has always considered herself French.

It has been from her position as an outsider that she has been able to help women in Algeria improve their health. Two years after giving birth to her twins, she divorced her husband and found herself almost exclusively responsible for raising her five children under the age of 11. Uncertainty and stress about her family's future caused Yasmina to reach a weight that threatened her well-being. Through a combination of meditation, nutrition, and exercise, she regained her health, and went on to create a foundation co-sponsored by French and Algerian organizations, to help women in Algeria combat the rise in obesity and its related problems. Gyms, yoga studios, and nutritionists are easy to find in France, but in Algeria, they are rare and inaccessible to most women. Even though she is unable to go to Algeria now, she stays in contact with the women in her program, who have, Yasmina admits, struggled since being confined to their homes due to COVID-19. She tells them they have to hold out at least until September when she will be able to help them again in person.

Reading books like *The Plague* in the time of COVID-19 have allowed us to believe more in fiction than in reality, she

says. She’s taken to watching the British series, “Black Mirror,” and sees parallels in the way technology has taken over during the pandemic. Technology, she intimates, has made an abstraction out of the world and replaced real experience: “There’s no more kissing, no more hugging, no more face-to-face meetings.” Reality happens through the “black mirror” of our phones and screens.

Yasmina, worried about technology’s influence over reality, believes the screens and the media are masking stories many don’t want to be told. “I feel like the media is in competition for whoever tells the most sensational story, even if it has to do with pseudoscience.” For example, it’s rare to hear stated a truth that she believes most politicians don’t want to admit: months ago, President Macron’s government consistently crushed and criticized the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vest) Movement that involved working and middle class citizens protesting what they saw as the unfair decline in their standards of living. These people included nurses, farmers, truck drivers, and grocery store employees. They are the same people who, despite the dangers of contracting COVID-19, have been asked by the French government to continue working as they are considered “essential” to the nation. Their weekly protests throughout France have been forbidden, which probably “suits the government.” “The values have reversed,” she says.

She cites another underrecognized issue in Algeria. Many people in Algeria work, as she describes, “day to day,” meaning they leave for work in the morning in order to make enough money to eat in the evening. With the stay-at-home order, they can’t leave their houses. This is especially difficult during Ramadan. In one particularly hard hit commune, Blida, military service members have been delivering meals to struggling families at night to break the fast, a response made possible by donations of food from over 1,000 households.[1]

Algerian Ramadan specialties prepared by Yasmina Bouafia. Courtesy of Yasmina Bouafia.

In France, Yasmina has managed her family's food budget by dipping into her savings. As a single mother of five children, she benefits from a reduced lunch fee at the school cafeteria. Even if her children don't eat much at night, she is reassured that they had at least one good meal with meat and vegetables during the day. With the children at home, her food budget has more than doubled and she worries about providing proper nutrition on a daily basis. In addition, she is limited from buying the necessary quantity of food since it is impossible for her to go out each day with all of her children and she doesn't own a car. In France, it's not permitted to go outside without a government-issued justification citing for example exercise, shopping for necessities, or seeing a doctor. There is also a one-parent-to-child obligation. Each time Yasmina went for a walk with her children, the police stopped her and ordered her home. Her older sister decided to move in with her to help ensure the children's outings could continue.

Instead of taking her sister's help as a cue to let down her guard, Yasmina decided that the extra pair of hands at home would finally allow her to do what she felt was her "human duty." While her sister watched her children, Yasmina went to the local chapters of the Salvation Army to prepare meals for the poor and homeless. She wore gloves, a mask, and protective clothing and declined to help distribute due to risk of infection. However, she reported each day to the centers until she severely sprained her ankle, forcing her to walk with crutches and stay home until the injury healed.

The task of fasting has become a greater challenge during Covid-19 due to the fact that Muslim families and friends can't visit each other during the day. This is especially painful in the early evening as the fasting draws to a close and they prepare to eat for the first time in over twelve

hours. Yasmina explains, “In the Maghreb culture, we are used to taking a walk to visit family and friends after eating the evening meal and we talk late into the night. It’s a time to reunite with people. Now I have to eat alone.” Most of Yasmina’s children are too young to fast during the day and her evening Ramadan ritual has felt less celebratory as she eats in isolation.

A few days ago, her children surprised her. As if they had inherited their mother’s selfless, benevolent impulse, they surprised her as she prepared their breakfast – they announced that they had all decided to join her in fasting for the day. And, in spite of a few grumbles, they made it to sundown. Instead of the traditional Ramadan soup, *chorba,* or orange-flower blossom pastries, her youngest begged to go to McDonald’s, which is one of the restaurants that hasn’t stayed open for take-out or delivery. “If McDonald’s were open, I would have definitely taken him,” said Yasmina, still flabbergasted by her children’s resolve.

For Yasmina, Camus’ novel is valuable because it isn’t about Algeria. It’s not about France either. “It’s a novel about humankind.” As she explains, this is what Camus meant by “métier d’homme.” Yasmina isn’t helping Algerians or French. She’s helping humans.

Walid Feda, 1er arrondissement, Lyon

“The most negative word of 2020 is positive,” pronounced Walid Feda, owner of the Lyon neighborhood convenience store, Panier Sympa (The Friendly Basket).

Walid Feda, owner of Panier Sympa convenience store in Lyon, waits for customers. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Since high school, Walid has read *The Plague* several times, reflecting his lifelong interest in major global pandemics in history. Every 100-400 years, he reports, the world faces something like COVID-19, be it Bubonic plague, cholera, or the Spanish flu. Still, he never thought such a thing would affect him at all, either positively or negatively.

In his shop, Walid sells the basics— fresh fruits and vegetables, canned goods, sodas, chips, candy, cold beer, bleach, toilet paper. He also sells more high-end goods like expensive champagne, aged cheeses, vintage wines, and cured meats. In normal times, both the bourgeois and working-class flock to Panier Sympa on Sunday afternoons or as the sun goes down, when regular supermarkets are closed. His store is never overcrowded, but there’s always at least one person purchasing

something and a few others hanging around the fruit and vegetable stand at the entrance as permanent fixtures. On summer nights, the smell of exotic spices wafts through the neighborhood and we know that Walid is not only cooking things to sell – he is also preparing meals for his friends and neighbors, free of charge.

Walid’s storefront in Lyon. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Walid was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. His mother was a schoolteacher and his father civil engineer and well-known intellectual. They were both outspoken community leaders against the regime and, as such, their lives were threatened. When he was 10, Walid and his parents were granted asylum in France and settled in Lyon. Walid was educated in international schools in Lyon and Dubai, and after gaining a degree in computer science in Lyon, he returned to Dubai where he led several technological and commercial enterprises. When

he met his wife in India, his business was doing well, and together, they had three children—two boys and a girl, and lived between India and Dubai. When his wife fell ill with breast cancer in December 2007, they made the decision that she should pursue her treatment in Lyon, where cancer treatment facilities were cutting-edge. In 2008-9 the subprime crisis and the Arab Spring hit his businesses hard and they folded in Dubai, Bahrain, and China. With his children, he moved back to Lyon. His wife still sick, he used his remaining money to open the convenience store because, as he told himself, "people always need to eat." The store limped to modest success until 2014 when his wife's cancer returned and she died, leaving Walid alone with his three children. He floundered economically and emotionally. Luckily, his parents agreed to help with the children and he found himself back on his feet again in late 2018.

Things were starting to look up until March of this year when the rapid spread of COVID-19 imposed a lockdown of citizens. Considered by French law as an "essential" business for the health of the nation, Walid has been allowed to remain open. However, he knows that his sales of foodstuffs are anything but essential. "The seniors in our neighborhood see me as security," he says. "They come here once or twice a week to buy a few things but really they come to talk. For some, I bring them their groceries. If I close, I'm scared they will fear the worse and succumb to their isolation. I look after them." Walid explains that he orchestrated placing a local woman in an assisted-living facility just before the pandemic because no one could take care of her. He calls and checks on her each day to make sure that the new Coronavirus hasn't invaded the facility and that she remains in good health.

Finally, he's remained open not because he offers essential food, but because he offers a service for those who are in danger in falling outside of what the French nation considers legal. For some time, Walid has helped asylum seekers,

refugees, and immigrants process governmental documents related to obtaining French legal status. Among the bleach bottles and disposable hand wipes stacked in the back of his shop, he’s set up a card table and chairs. A pot of hot tea and cups sit among the scattered papers along with a few empty beer cans. Prior to Covid-19, he had cases that helped fill the occasional monotony of afternoons before the shop’s business picked up in the evening. Today, however, he has a steady string of customers. The French government has decided to extend visas to all immigrants awaiting decisions regarding their permanent status. While this may appear to be good news, it presents a lot of unknowns—not only on the part of the immigrants, but also on the part of those who are sometimes unaware of the new rules. For example, if a pharmacist is not aware of the visa-extension law, they may not understand that the client still has the right to a lower price for medicine. This gets especially complicated when the immigrant in question doesn’t speak French or English.

In the back of his shop, Walid helps two men from Afghanistan with their papers. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Nowadays, Walid accompanies these people to pharmacies to argue in their favor, and helps them fill out paperwork that guarantees the extension of their rights on French territory. “They have legal status that not everyone knows about. That’s why I have to be there,” Walid explains. “My religion is my humanity. So, no matter where they are from, I help them. It’s more important to do something good for humanity.”

Walid charges no fee for this service. “It’s my heart, my humanity that does this.”

Walid has remained open for business and, no doubt, he has helped many, but his business has paid an enormous price. “My debit and credit cards are maxed out,” he reports. “My bank has blocked me. I use the cash I make from shop purchases to buy stuff to replenish stock. I let my oldest son work here so

he can have some pocket money and feel independent." The French government has promised to help struggling businesses during COVID-19, but only those who were doing well before the crisis will get immediate and substantial aid. Walid was just getting back on his feet after recovering from his wife's death when the pandemic exploded. He fears the worst. With three children who will all encounter the rising costs of French higher education in the next few years, he hopes he and his family will be spared. His oldest son has his eye on an aeronautical engineering school and, besides his work in the shop, fixes smartphones for pocket money.

When we asked Walid if he would respond to a few interview questions, he requested a few days to reflect. After this time, he produced a narrative of eleven handwritten pages. Here is, fittingly, the abstracted version of some of his most pertinent reflections on Camus:

Today, we are living in a historical moment of our lives. In the world, we are observing certain ideological and political discriminations within our own communities and even families. The virus is forcing us to come back to a notion of family again by enclosing parents with their kids. Are we seeing that our relationships have become more virtual, making us express even our gratitude to the ones we love only on screens? When I come home from work, I want nothing more than to hug my kids, but I have to take off my clothes and shower first. My clients come into the shop – we have always been friendly, shaking hands or giving the French "bise" – a kiss on each cheek. Now, behind masks, we nod heads coldly. But, at the same time, my actions for others come from my solidarity and my responsibility is to my humanity.

The Rats Will Rise Up Again

French writer Roland Barthes took issue with *La Peste* in 1955,

claiming that Camus' use of allegory muted rather than exposed the catastrophic reality of the Holocaust.[8] But only reading *The Plague* as an allegorical mirror of the COVID-19 masks its fundamental message about humans helping humans. By not speaking directly about real events, *The Plague* allows for this more universal meaning, which is especially relevant for today's COVID-19 world.

Outside of Lyon, France, quarantined Yellow Vest protestors hang their symbols outside their windows. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

If we believe that *The Plague* can only stand for political totalitarianism or health crises, we will have too quickly dismissed one of the essential functions of the book, which is to provide a blueprint for both identifying and overcoming

the kind of abstraction that prevents us from performing our "métier d'homme" and our "devoir d'aimer." With *The Plague,* Camus has created a neutral space from which the rise of catastrophe and collective resistance against it can be staged. Walid and Yasmina are but two of thousands of individuals who have played their part and we can only hope that more faces and names like theirs are revealed as the COVID-19 crisis marches on, and indeed the next one lies in wait. Because Rieux, in the last lines of *The Plague* warns that these kinds of fights are far from over:

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.

Notes:

[1] http://www.aps.dz/regions/104503-association-kafil-al-yatime-de-blida-distribution-de-30-000-aides-alimentaires-a-la-fin-du-mois-sacre

[1] http://www.gallimard.fr/Footer/Ressources/Entretiens-et-documents/Histoire-d-un-livre-La-Peste-d-Albert-Camus

[2] For an explanation of the way France had been divided into the northern zone and the southern zone during WWII, see https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/france

[3] Camus, Albert. *Carnets*.1942-1943

[4] Agnès Spiquel, https://www.livreshebdo.fr/article/une-relecture-de-la-peste-par-agnes-spiquel

[5] Jacqueline Bernard. "The Background of *The Plague:* Albert Camus' Experience in the French Resistance." Volume 14, 1967 *Kentucky Romance Quarterly,* Issue 2.

Pages 165-173 | Published online: 09 Jul 2010 Taylor and Francis

[6] Albert Camus. *Les carnets.* 1942-1951

[1] For a description of France's restrictions see this article in *The Local*

[2] Read more of Helen Ouyang's harrowing article about her experience in her *The New York Times* article, "I'm an E.R. Doctor in New York. None of Us Will Ever Be the Same."

[3] Quoted in Ouyang's article, listed in footnote 2

[4] See article on Dr. Breen, "Top E.R. Doctor Who Treated Virus Pateints Dies by Suicide" in *The New York Times*

[5] For more on the UK coverage of Italy, see the article published on itv, "Italy's soaring coronavirus death toll and Covid-19 panic buying in the UK dominate Monday's headlines"

[6] For more on the coverage of Johnson's illness see the article "How the newspaper front pages reacted to Boris Johnson in intensive care" published on *Yahoo News.*

[7] For more on Sweden, see "Sweden disputes accusations of lack of coronavirus action" in *The Local.*

[8] Barthes, Roland. "*La Peste*: Annales d'une épidémie ou roman de la solitude." *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. Eric Marty. Vol.1. Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1999, p. 540.

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Poetry Review of Jabari Asim's STOP AND FRISK

Stop and Frisk

american poems

JABARI ASIM

"This book challenges the boundaries of the art by being, in a very good sense of the word, documentary." —Robert Pinsky

1.

They say

Stop-and-frisk
Is a *brief* and *non-intrusive stop* of a *suspect.*
Which can be deadly in America where
Statistics show being black in America
Makes you *a suspect*

Even. When you aren’t.

2.

They say

In order to *stop*
Police must have *reasonable suspicion* of a crime.
Which can be deadly in America where
Statistics show being black in America
Makes you *a criminal*

Even. When you aren’t.

3.

They say

In order to *frisk*
Police must have *reasonable suspicion* of a gun
Which can be deadly in America where
Statistics show being black in America
Makes you *armed and dangerous*

Even when.
Even. Even. Even. Even. Even when you aren’t.

4.

They say

The word *reasonable*
When statistics show police in America are
Racist.

5.

Jabari Asim’s poems sing and scream *America.*

6.

And here
Here is what is true about America.

7.

America is racist.

America is unjust.

And being black.

Black in this

America is dangerous.

8.

How being black in America

Can get you.

Get you killed.

9.

The Talk is instructional.

How being black in America means giving the talk
Talk to children.
How there is
A hope it will keep them
Alive.

Asim writes –

It’s more than time we had that talk
about what to say and where to walk,
how to act and how to strive,
how to be upright and stay alive.
(The Talk)

But throughout Asim’s poetry there is
A painful futility.

How being black in America means *no matter.*

No matter. What someone does. How many
Talks they have. How high. Up in the air they
Raise their hands. Where police can see them.
No matter how many times
They do as they are told. During another and
Another and another traffic stop. No matter
How many times they
Say *no* and *yes* or *please don’t kill me*

It will not matter

And they might get killed anyway –

But still there is no guarantee
that you will make it home to me.
Despite all our care and labor,
you might frighten a cop or neighbor
whose gun sends you to endless sleep,
proving life’s unfair and talk is cheap.
(The Talk)

10.

Asim gives us America.
All its unfurled and bloody white supremacy.
He marches America up and down the pages
Of *Stop and Frisk*

Like a parade.

And makes us.
Makes us watch.
Makes us listen.
Makes us *watch and listen.*
And wonder *what the hell.*

How I am wondering *what the hell I am doing here.*
Standing. On the grass. Holding an American flag.

11.

In *Warning: Contains Graphic Violence* and *Menace to Society,*
Asim structures the poems as police dispatch calls.
Where a dispatcher sends police to a scene of someone who is
Black and doing nothing wrong

Encouraging police to respond

Brutally.

12.

The woman in *Warning: Contains Graphic Violence* is a woman
In her fifties. A grandmother armed. With a pink purse. Walking
Eastbound on 1-10. Or how the dispatcher uses the word *suspect.*

Or how the dispatcher says she will resist by walking away slowly.

And how. How police should respond –

Throw her on her back and squeeze her
between your thighs.
Raise your fist high and punch her face
until she is still.
(Warning: Contains Graphic Violence)

Or how –

She may resist by
continuing to breathe, in which case
raise your fist high and continue
to punch
(Warning: Contains Graphic Violence)

13.

The woman in *Menace to Society* is a professor.
Not a menace. How the dispatcher calls her in
Anyway –

Attention all units,
black woman walking
outside the lines

near College and 5th.
(Menace to Society)

The dispatcher warns police. How –

She may resist by flexing her vocabulary,
insisting on respect and kicking your shin.
(Menace to Society)

At which point –

consider your life in danger.
Be advised that promising to slam her
conforms to university police patrol,
as does twisting her arm behind her back
before you throw her to the ground.
(Menace to Society)

14.

Asim's *Walking While Black* is an American
Play
In three acts.

How it starts with –

A man walking in the middle of the road.
A man walking in the middle.
A man walking.
A man.
(Walking While Black)

Then the muzzle flash. Blast. And whip of a gun –

Firing
Firing
Firing
Firing
Firing
Firing
Firing
Firing
Firing
Firing
(Walking While Black)

Or how this American play ends painfully. Predictably –

A man dying in the middle of the road.
A man dying in the middle.
A man.
Dying.

Heat.
(Walking While Black)

Curtains start to shiver. Before lowering. Smattered
Applause. Hands coming together again and again.
This impact of a performance that happens every
Day in America. When you are black in America.

15.

Asim's *Stop and Frisk* poetry is a poignant profile

Of a racist America. Heartbreaking poems about
People who are racially profiled.

16.

A man looks for loose cigarettes outside a gas
Station. Making noise in *Cancer Sold Separately.*

Asim writes –

Apparently he slept on the surgeon general's warning
to black men: bellowing in public
may be hazardous to your health.
(Cancer Sold Separately)

17.

Again. In *Loosies.* The warning –

Enough loosies over time can be hazardous to health,
As deadly as breaking up a fight in an intersection crowded
With witnesses or dashing through drizzle for Skittles and tea.
(Loosies)

A man rummages in the glove compartment of his own car
In front of his own house –

But a black man in the middle
of the night knows better than
looking for loosies beyond his own driveway.
Safer instead to root around the glovebox
For that previous, planned-ahead pack.
(Loosies)

The man. The man
Rummages in the glove compartment of his own
Car. In front of. Front of. Of his own house. And

Gets shot at by the police –

Later he'd say it felt like a firing squad
when deputies opened up from behind, leaving him
not only smokeless but sixty years old and shot in the leg.
Suspected of stealing his own car in front of his own house,
he thought his neighbor was joking when he heard a
command to put his hands in the air.
(Loosies)

18.

This is a profile. Of an unjust America.
That does not care. Care about the pain
Of being black and brutalized in America.

19.

Of course, there is the accusation. White
Supremacist accusation of –

All he had to do was comply and he would not be dead.
Tough shit and too damn bad.
(Found Poem #2)

In *One thousand chokeholds from now,*
It powerfully lingers.

Or how Asim's poetic response is a
Measurement of necks squeezed or
Choked and strangled. He writes –

One thousand chokeholds from now,
Black and brown people will no longer insist on access to taxis.
They will not step into elevators when white women are already inside.
(One thousand chokeholds from now)

20.

Because how many chokeholds will it take.

How many beaten bodies. Bloodied cheeks.
How many
Broken hyoid bones
Snapping strangled necks. How many. How
Many penetrated raw rectums. How many
Will it take.

21.

Or what it does. What is does. To people

When a country does this.

22.

In *We Have Investigated Ourselves and Found Nothing Wrong*
Asim shows the effects of racism and injustice in America by
Manipulating font. Using a strikethrough. And crossing out
All the references to rights. Or how. All that’s left are words
And lines like this –

remain silent
broken
choke
you’re next
(We Have Investigated Ourselves and Found Nothing Wrong)

23.

Every poem in *Stop and Frisk* is an answer
To the question of compliance. The accusation
of *One thousand chokeholds from now.*

Because no matter how many necks get choked.

No matter.
Backs or chests get
Shot up.

No matter how many abdomens get ripped up. High velocity
Muzzle or shred intestines. No matter how many heads get
Shot. Bloody hole matted by hair and follicles. No matter
How many.

24.

The. Brutality. Will. Not. Stop.

25.

Furtive Movements gives us names. A poem
Made up of names. First names last names.
Targeted by racial profiling. And brutalized
By police. How almost all of them are dead.

Killed by police.

26.

Because Eleanor Bumpurs did not leave when evicted. How police
Shot her dead. Because Tyisha Miller was unconscious in a broken
Down car. How she had a gun in her lap or when police woke her.
She sat up and grabbed it. And they shot her 23 times. And dead.
Because when his football hit a police car. How Anthony Baez. He
Resisted arrest. And police choked him. How he died of asphyxiation.
Because Jonathan Ferrell crashed his car. Went to a house. Banged
On the door. Or how he ran at police. And they shot him 12 times.
Dead. Because Claude Reese was 14 and standing on stairs in such
Darkness. How police thought he was holding a gun. How he wasn’t.

How the bullet entered his skull behind his left ear and how. It never
Came back out. Because Amadou Diallo looked like someone else. Or
Did not put his hands up in the air. How he reached in his pocket for
His wallet. But they shot him. Shot him and shot him 41 times dead.
Because. Because Michael Wayne Clark. Because Jonny Gammage
Did not pull over. Because Oscar Grant. Police had him face-down.
On a subway platform. Shot him in the back close range. Because
Police beat Mohammed Assassa when he struggled. Broke it. Broke
His hyoid bone when they strangled him. Because police hit the car
That Sean Bell was driving. Hit it with more than 50 bullets. Because.
The Central Park Five were innocent. Because LaTanya Haggerty was
A passenger in a pursued car. How police thought she had a gun. But
She was talking on a cell phone. And police shot her dead. Because.
Henry Dumas came through the turnstile. Shot dead. Because Sonji
Taylor was on the roof of a hospital. How police say she lunged at
Them with a knife. But they shot her 7 times in her back. Because.
Jordan Davis. Because Johnny Robinson threw rocks at a car draped
In the Confederate flag. Because Eula Love resisted. How it was over
An unpaid gas bill. Because Michael Stewart sprayed graffiti. How

Police hog tied him. And then choked him to death. Because Rekia
Boyd was in a park. Because Prince Jamel. Because Gavin Eiberto
Saldana. Because Aiyana Jones was 7 and in a house that got raided.
How police shot her. How it was the wrong house. Because Marcillus
Was homeless and sleeping in a bush. How he threatened a K-9 dog
With a screwdriver. Police shot him dead. Because Rodney King. And
Everyone. How everyone saw. Because Abner Louima got strip searched
Outside a nightclub. Police kicked him in the testicles. Raped him at the
Station with a broomstick. Broke teeth when they shoved it in his mouth.
Because Kenneth Chamberlain was wearing a medical necklace. Because
Julio Nunez. Because Patrick Dorismond. Because Jimmie Lee Jackson who
Police shot in Selma. How he was unarmed. Because. Because. Because.

27.

Their names are eulogy.

Presented in *Furtive Movements* as a list. Their
Brutalized bodies paraded out. The letters that
Make up their names are the drumbeats rolling
The low guttural groan of a tuba. This screaming
Trombone. Or how Asim capitalizes some of the
Letters. These are the lyrics to the song that is his

Poem. How it reads *FUCK THA POLICE.*

28.

But we cannot. Let’s not. Forget
Renisha McBride. Crashed her car –

Renisha reeling
Head full of fire, wreck and
Ruin behind her.
(Reckoning, for Renisha McBride)

How Renisha ran to a nearby house
For help.

For help and Theodore Wafer came
To the door. Shot her through it. The
Screen door dead.

Let’s not. Let’s not. Let’s not forget
How racism and injustice in America
Is all encompassing. Dark streets or
Racist neighbors. How a bullet can
Tear through a screen door like
Skin. Which is why. Which is why –

No more odes for the Confederate dead.
Let’s grieve for Renisha instead,
All the Renishas, the broken sisters crushed to dust
And bone in our neighbor’s tangled pathologies.
(Reckoning, for Renisha McBride)

29.

Asim makes the powerful point in his poems
Not to. Not to forget women. Because racism
And injustice in America crosses and breaks
Gender lines. Being black and a man in this
Country means. Getting thrown against the
Hood of a car. Cheek bone. Zygomatic bone
Crushed. Horseshoe hyoid bone fractured

From the gripping. Pressing and strangling.

Or shot dead.

But so are women.
And girls.

Because when you are black in America
And a woman. Racism and injustice in
America means you may be expendable.

30.

Asim's poems *don't start none, A House Is Not,* and *Wild Things*
Offer a portrait of a woman caught up in the racism and injustice
Of America. She is an abused wife who. Finally shoots at him. Her
Abuser. She is –

A woman wreathed in smoke,
standing her ground.
(don't start none)

And when she misses. Bullets hitting air. How police come.

Drag her half naked outside. Breasts exposed. Outside of
Her apartment complex and her neighbors. How they are
Standing and watching and filming. Or police. How there
Are 12 officers. So many. So many men. Asim writes –

Good men stood all around all around the good men stood all around
(Wild Things)

Conjuring. For her and for us. A memory of –

your great-grandmother
raped by white men with guns on the dirt floor of a bar what she

remembered most were those who stood and watched, doing nothing
(Wild Things)

31.

Asim’s poetry serves as a gut-wrenching indictment.

How brutality may come in the shape a man’s hands make
When he wraps them around the neck of another man and
Squeezes until he kills him. How brutality is also standing on
The stairs of an apartment complex and watching a woman
Dragged out of her apartment by police. Her breasts exposed
And the skin of the back of her thighs and buttocks scraping
Raw against cement.

This is the parade.

Parade of what America is. And who is responsible.

32.

Or Relisha. In *Vanishing Point.* A child in a DC shelter
with –

A numb mom and three hungry brothers,
dirt, scabs, bedbugs, and a teddy bear
named Baby.
(Vanishing Point)

How the janitor preys on her. Reveals his plan to
Groom her with candy. And kidnap her. Or how.

It will not matter. Because –

Don’t nobody care about these kids.
Half they mamas don’t want ‘em
and the city sure don’t.
(Vanishing Point)

33.

Vanishing Point is terrifying.

That moment. The one where Relisha will
Disappear –

You'll see her for the last time at Holiday Inn,
Pink boots and paper bags streaming light
From a security camera.
(Vanishing Point)

But Relisha is just one. Just one.

One of the already. Forgotten.

34.

In *The Disappeared* Asim writes –

Every portrait posted on the Black and Missing website
looks like someone I know.
(The Disappeared)

How –

Sixty-four thousand
mostly missing in New York, Georgia,
North Carolina, Maryland, and Florida:
signs of struggle, prints wiped clean,
empty cars with engines running.
(The Disappeared)

35.

The dead and gone haunt Asim's poetry.

Or how they should. Should haunt all of us.

36.

In *Young Americans,* they march in the streets –

Dead children make mad noise

when they march. The doomed, solemn-eyed youth
of Chicago are putting boots in the ground,
gathering in ghostly numbers
to haunt us with their disappointment.
(Young Americans)

How they will keep marching. Keep marching.

How –

The slaughtered innocents of Chicago
ain't going nowhere gently.
Circling the sad metropolis
in loud, unearthly ranks,
they raise their voices to the bloody sky,
above the roar of the monstrous guns and the
bullets, falling like fat rain.
(Young Americans)

37.

Asim shows us America.

America where being black means
A bullet will come for you. Where
Police will come for you. America
Where you will be forgotten even
As you lay on the floor of a subway
Platform. Police knee in your back.

Laying on the on ramp of a freeway
Pinned. Pinned between the thighs
Of a police officer.
Where you struggle. Struggle to just
Breathe one more time. Pleading.
Pleading for your humanity to be
Remembered.

38.

The men and women and boys and girls
Brutalized and beaten. Raped and killed
For being black in America march in the
Powerful and heartbreaking poetry of
Stop and Frisk.

39.

Poems that are snare and are bass.
Skin stretched over the drum of this
Country. Poems that are percussion
Of police brutality. Pounding beat in

This American parade

Of black bodies assaulted. Performative
High step. Poems that are the alto and
Tenor. The deep bassoon.

Sharp piccolo of human pain.

40.

Poems that are 8 and 8s on loop. That
Are feet hitting cement. Feet strapped
In showstoppers and patent leathered
Marjorette boots. Leather tassels that
Shake. Heels smacking asphalt.

41.

Asim’s poems sing and

Scream *America.*

42.

How every day America assembles its
Racist and unjust formation. And how.
Every day. Racism and injustice march

In an endless and brutal loop.

43.

I am a white woman.

Asim’s poems coil around me like a marching
Tuba. Around my body like a metal snake.

How they blare what is true in my ears.

These are American poems.

These are beautiful brutal bloodied American
Poems.

New Essay by Anthony Gomes: Is There Finality in Death?

All beings in this world, all bodies must break up: Even the Teacher, peerless in the human world. The mighty Lord and perfect Buddha has passed away. – The joy of renunciation in *The Radical Buddhist.*

Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, It seems to me most strange that men should fear, Seeing that death, a necessary end, Will come when it will come.– Julius Caesar, Act 2, Scene 2. William Shakespeare

With the sudden appearance of COVID-19 that has been killing the elderly at an alarming rate, doctors may be forced to make life and death decisions based on age, underlying medical condition and the need for respirators, something unthinkable in the near past. Emergency Medical Service (EMS) teams who cannot find or restart a pulse while administering CPR on adult cardiac arrest patients have been instructed not to bring those patients to hospitals. How the COVID-19 epidemic will change our approach to death remains unclear as of this writing. In this regard it is noteworthy remembering what the Roman Seneca commented some 2000 years ago: *death is sometimes a punishment, often a gift, and for many a favor.*

Death is a dreaded word no living human being wants to hear. But ultimately, all of us have to face our own death or that of our loved ones. For only one thing is certain in our lives: the fact that one day we will die.

Medically, death is declared when an individual sustains either an irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions or an irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem. On the other hand, if a person experiences the “irreversible cessation of all functions of the brain,” he or she is considered legally dead. With the availability of life-support measures, a legally brain dead subject with a beating heart may be kept “going” until the decision is made to remove all life-support measures.

The process of dying, of how, when, and where, has changed over the last century. In the US, nearly two-thirds of deaths occur in a hospital environment, in the intensive care-units where patients often undergo all sorts of complex procedures, including surgery and other life-extension measures. Some of these patients are transfers or admits from nursing homes, and many are oblivious of their life-expectancy. Their relatives not uncommonly plead with the doctor: “Please doc, do all you can,” and often the doctor obliges seeking consultations for

each failing organ from a host of specialists: cardiologists, pulmonologists, gastroenterologists, kidney specialists and surgeons, all doing their thing, as if to maintain each "organ" disregarding that they are human beings, whole entities rather than parts of an unraveling body. Yes indeed, modern medicine can prolong life, but ultimately cannot avoid death. These so called "medicalized deaths" are not exactly what people desire. Polls conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *The Economist* report that most healthy people hope that they will die at home peacefully, free from pain and surrounded by loved ones. However, that doesn't mean that their wishes will hold when they are faced with a catastrophic illness such as COVID-19. In the past, I have encountered patients and their relatives rescind DNR (do not resuscitate) instructions to insert a pacemaker in a terminal patient.

♥♥♥

The insecurities associated with death, and the much argued presence or absence of an afterlife compound our anxieties and add to the fear of dying. One can argue that death is preferred to severe disability or suffering with its devastating effect on quality of life. However, some would strongly hold a counter position that life is sacred, ordained by God, and, nobody has the right, the subject or his doctor to end life prematurely, no matter how miserable the existence. Indeed, few people if any will celebrate death with champagne as Anton Chekhov did. Chekhov's wife, Olga was with him when he passed away. She writes that they had ordered champagne; he took a glass, and turning his face towards her, he smiled at her and said: "It's a long time since I drank champagne." He calmly drained his glass, lay down quietly on his left side, and shortly afterward, fell silent forever.

In the US, in contrast to some European and Canadian cultures, we prefer to let life ebb away and ultimately extinguish itself. I have been following a patient for several years on whom, years ago, I had performed a successful ablation of a

rapid heart-beat. Recently however, she was going downhill with severe limitation due to a lung condition, weight loss, and a previous cancer that left her with a single lung, now diseased as well. She was in a nursing home barely able to breathe. She said to me: “I am waiting to die a miserable death…I wish I would go quickly.” Her feelings are entirely honest. If ethicists and psychologists confirm those wishes are genuine, then one might ask whether society, cultural norms or “religious righteousness” can or should deny them. With the sudden appearance of COVID-19 doctors may be forced to make life and death decisions without the input of the patient or his/her spouse or relative.

♥♥♥

As much as death is abhorred in our society, even in the setting of terminal cancer, heart failure, and old age, the recognition and understanding of the importance of quality of life and of death itself, a subject little talked about, let alone discussed, assumes considerable import. Unlike Asian societies, Western culture, more so the American, hold in disfavor old age and death. In other societies, particularly in the Eastern, old age is revered, and in some, death has no absolute finality.

One might argue that in affluent western societies there is much to live for. And so, nobody in his/her sound mind wants to die even if the ravages of age or illness are evident. Undoubtedly, a healthy mind irrespective of age and disability can amply enjoy the fruits of living, particularly if one has a caring, loving family or one has “purpose” to keep on living. It is pleasurable for an older person, a matriarch or patriarch of the family, even if disabled by disease, to be surrounded by children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren for some or all festive occasions. Furthermore, not uncommonly, in terminal medical conditions, the will to live or the “will to die” is highly personal. Even in the most desperate of situations, death may not be a welcome

alternative. A patient of mine who survived the holocaust and is now over 90 years of age and disabled, but with decent mental faculties, told me that in the Nazi concentration camp she had the option to get electrocuted on the fence while trying to escape, and some did just that. She was afraid of death and rather preferred to live a tortured existence. She survived, came to America, and raised a family. Even now, this courageous woman desperately wants to go on living, and even today, having witnessed the ravages of history, and having made a life for herself and her family, she still fears death.

♥♥♥

OUT-OF- BODY EXPERIENCES

Some of my patients who survived an episode of sudden cardiac death, and lived to recount the experience, describe seeing their long-gone ancestors around them, perceiving detachment from their own almost lifeless bodies, and looking down at them. Immediately, thereafter, they passed through tunnels into another universe of scintillating lights, and subsequently were pulled back into their bodies at the very time of successful resuscitation. Obviously, we do not have clear scientific explanations for these perceptions. But I do believe, after questioning my patients at some length that these are true and rather repetitive perceptions in people who survived an episode of sudden cardiac death, and not a fancy of their imaginations, nor perhaps dream-like states. Quite astounding is the fact that these experiences have, most of the time, been positive and not frightening. Whether they occur during activity at some cortical level due to an alteration of neurotransmitters as a result of the cessation of blood supply to the brain, or they reflect the detachment of the living energy from the body, perhaps can only be determined by scientific experiments such a functional-Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) or Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scanning during a cardiac arrest, something that is practically impossible to accomplish in the setting of

a non-beating heart and no blood circulation.

On the other hand, electroencephalographic (EEG) studies that determine brain activity have been recorded during blackout spells (in the condition known as vasovagal syncope) induced by head-up Tilt Testing, where the bed is tilted to a 70, or 80-degree angle, for a period of 20 to 30 minutes. These studies reported by Ammirati F and coworkers [1] showed that in patients who blacked out because of temporary cessation of heart rhythm, there was *a sudden reduction and disappearance of brain wave activity (i.e. a flat EEG)* seen at the onset of blackout spells. The EEG normalized immediately after recovery. This study obviously proves that loss of consciousness even over a short time span is accompanied by loss of brain activity. Moss and Rockoff [2] reported on a 62-year-old woman who had simultaneous EEG and ECG during emergent carotid artery surgery. While the surgeon was closing the incision, the patient developed cardiac arrest. There was loss of EEG activity within 15 seconds of heart stoppage and activity returned almost instantly after resuscitation. In animal models of cardiac arrest produced by rapid injection of potassium chloride, a flat EEG occurred within 25 seconds of cardiac standstill. These studies do show that the occurrence of cardiac arrest with resultant loss of blood flow to the brain is associated with a loss of brain electrical activity. *Does this then imply that extrasensory perceptions during cardiac arrest are not related to brain activity, but rather to the release of another form of energy from the body?*

THE CONCEPT OF AFTERLIFE

Not uncommonly, fear of death, or lack thereof, and the idea of an afterlife are strongly rooted in religious beliefs. The teachings of world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism have different philosophical viewpoints on these matters. In Judaism, the Torah is silent on the presence of an afterlife. Instead, it entirely focuses on *Olam Ha Ze*, meaning this world. This view is contrary to that held

in the Christian and Muslim faiths, where Heaven is the eternal realm for chaste people, and damnation into Hell for evil ones. I have met dying people of the Christian faith who expressed certain contentment that soon they would attain the Kingdom of Heaven and perpetual life in the presence of Christ. Yet, despite their belief in a better eternal kingdom ahead, these believers were eager to delay dying. In the far eastern religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, and even in Kabbalistic Judaism, an afterlife is grounded in the theology of reincarnation, in which life is reordered after death as another earthly life in the physical world. The transmigration of souls, or *samsara*, results in the passage of a soul from body to body as determined by the force of one's actions, or Karma, in the recent past. Successive reincarnations attempt to achieve a superior grade of consciousness, which ultimately leads to liberation from the cycle or rebirth, and the attainment of *Moksha*. In Tibetan Buddhism, Bodhisattvas are not reborn through the force of *karma* and destructive emotions, but rather due to the power of their compassion. Thus, the Hindu and Buddhist do not view death as an end in and of itself.

Death, on the other hand might be more difficult to accept for a Jew, in contrast to a Christian or Muslim, who has the promise of Heaven. I have witnessed prolonged and futile resuscitative codes on Rabbis sometimes for over an hour, when the doctors in attendance well knew that the effort was useless.

♥♥♥

Reconnecting in the After-Life

A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty.— Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

There is a strong desire for a loved one, particularly for a spouse or a parent to communicate with the dead person, and

this is often achieved through mediums. One of my patients, whom I shall call Mary, related her story in search of her dead child, whom I shall call Mallory. Mary together with her husband and her teenage son had a meeting with a psychic. She said to me: “Immediately the psychic said there was a little girl present and she would not stop talking. The psychic’s voice changed to that of a little girl, and, looking directly at me, said, ‘“Mommy, you are crying too much. Please stop. I don’t throw up anymore and I can run and dance. I am so happy here. Those doctors can’t hurt me or call me names anymore. Please stop crying. I am okay.”’ To her father, she asked that he should not be so sad. To her brother, she said she loved him and made reference to a tattoo he talked about. She also said that what happened to her was supposed to happen, and none of them could have changed it.

“The tears were flowing heavily,” said Mary. “We heard a lot from Mallory that day. We all left there with a new peace in our hearts, and I felt a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I often think back to that reading and how it played a major role in my being able to move on.”

After my wife died of cancer at a young age of 40, I searched for her wherever I went, in whatever I saw. I expressed these feelings in a poem I wrote:

“*Amid flowers: I searched her face;*

in the ocean wind: I heard her cry;

in the falling star: I saw her leap;

in the snowflakes: I felt her breath.”

Recently, a friend of mine whose wife died of cancer claimed that he felt her presence at home in the form of shifting light. Undoubtedly each encounter, whether real or a figment of one’s imagination, provides relief and closure to overwhelming grief. Needless to say, it’s not the objective of

this essay to refute or confirm these extra-sensory perceptions; after all, the existence of anything only occurs when we perceive it, and so if one perceives and believes that the person felt the presence of the dead person in a parallel universe, so be it. Something that we do not perceive for all practical purposes does not exist *for us, but might exist for others*. Undoubtedly, the lonely deaths due to COVID-19 without the presence of loved ones will leave families grieving and empty for a long time with a strong desire to connect in the afterlife.

♥♥♥

The Concept of Mass/Energy Applied to the Afterlife

The much acclaimed, Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, though his heteronym, Bernardo Soares, said of death: *When I see a dead body, death seems to me a departure. The corpse looks to me like a suit that was left behind…*

In death, all the physical, biochemical, and mental energy within us, the very idea in our brains of who we are and what we are, is energy that dissipates slowly as the body cools down. The French philosopher Rene Descartes said: "I think, therefore I am." One can therefore pose the questions: Where does the energy spent on thinking of who we are, and other mental functions disappear? *One of the fundamentals of physics is that energy does not die, that it cannot be created nor destroyed—it simply gets converted into other forms of energy.* And so, the body ultimately reverts to dust, intermingling with the soil of the earth, passing on its mass/energy, or rather converting into other forms of energy, such as biochemical energy into plants and all living beings—providing nourishment to mother earth, the continuum cycle of death and rebirth. An important common belief in native American culture is profound respect for Mother Nature—the earth, the sky, the trees and the animals, and that we humans are a part of nature. Our suffering, our illnesses are not different from

those of the animals around us, and when we die we become part of that from which we came: from dust to dust. Our biological material is recycled and re-distributed; and even if we do not believe in an afterlife we live on as biological matter in mother earth in the cycle of life and rebirth.

But of the soul or the spirit of man—where does that energy go?

I am incapable of conceiving infinity, and yet I do not accept finity. I want this adventure that is the context of my life to go on without end. – Simone de Beauvoir.

*I depart as air—I shake my white locks at the runaway sun, I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags. I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love…*Walt Whitman

In $E = mc^2$ Einstein reached the conclusion that mass and kinetic energy are equivalent, and can be converted into each other since the speed of light (c^2) is constant. Thus, a small amount of mass can generate a large amount of energy and vice versa. Who is to say that this energy within us does not transcend from one universe into another? Or pass on to the closest of kin? Indeed, do we not feel the energy, the life of the dead person, within us? I believe that after the death of my young wife, I was no longer the person I was before. I became a different person incorporating within me her energy. In my view, this was not a concerted effort on my part, but rather a spontaneous phenomenon without thought or intention. Thus, I believe that the very thought, the idea of a dead loved one: a wife, to a husband, or vice-versa, a parent to a child, lives within our minds as the very source of our own new amalgamated energy.

One can plausibly argue that there is no such thing as a soul or spirit as separate entities; that the very soul or spirit resides in our brain as a conglomeration of a host of neuro-

hormones and neural transmitters that makes us feel and appreciate beauty, spirituality, a sense of transcendence though chemical interactions.

However, any such chemical interactions are, after all, a source of mass and energy.

There are possibly an infinite number of universes, and everything that can possibly happen occurs in some universe. All possible universes exist at the same time, regardless of what really happens in any of them. In this regard, space and time are limitless. In Einstein's theory of relativity, there is no such thing as time in the singular. Time passes differently for different observers depending on motion. Time slows down substantially, and with it the aging process when travelling into space and at the speed of light. When Einstein's old friend Besso died, he lamented that Besso had departed from this world a little ahead of him. That means nothing, he thought. "People like us…know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion." Thus, immortality does not mean a perpetual existence in time without end, but rather resides outside of time altogether. This spiritual energy within us, the soul, the atman, whatever you may want to call it, exists within us, around us, since the past, present and future, or what we call space and time, could be but timeless illusions.

Undoubtedly, science has come a long way in understanding the physical nature of the human body, but our understanding of the human brain, the thinking process, such lofty and abstract attributes like spirituality, clairvoyance, the soul, and the presence or recognition of alternate parallel universes is lacking profoundly. It is possible that life continues as forms of energy in a parallel universe—some solace to the living and dying in these tragic times.

[1] Ammirati F, Colivicchi F, Di Battista G et al: Electroencephalographic Correlates of Vasovagal Syncope

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[2] Moss J, Rockoff M: EEG Monitoring During Cardiac Arrest and Resuscitation. Journal of American Medical Association. 1980; 244: 2750-2751.

New Essay by Lauren Kay Johnson: Things Received

A portion of this essay was originally published in Cobalt Review*.*

It came by helicopter twice a week, if weather and security were sufficient for air travel. In the shack next to the Helicopter Landing Zone, it was sorted by unit; everything bound for "Provincial Reconstruction Team Paktia" loaded onto the back of a rickety cart, driven by our personnel officer down the gravel walkway to the meeting area outside our military barracks. Sometimes we waited there too. On clear days, we anticipated the announcement before the sergeant's booming voice crackled over the radio.

"Mail call! Mail call in front of the B-huts!"

There were letters and cards, photos of people we missed and postcards of places we couldn't be. I taped mine to the plywood wall next to my bed in a patchwork wallpaper of home. Sometimes cards fell down on me while I slept, blanketing me in sentiment:

We're all thinking of you, Lauren.

Stay Safe!

I love you.

Kick some Taliban butt!

Though America at large may have forgotten, it was clear that elementary schools and church groups remembered we were a nation at war. Students mailed handwritten notes with endearing misspellings, backward letters and stick-figure doodles. Adult influence peppered the messages—too vengeful, too assured—but they succeeded in making us smile. Churches sent crocheted crosses and assured us that God was blessing the brave soldiers and America, though blessing us with what they didn't specify.

There were favorite snacks. For me, Twizzlers, trail mix with M&Ms, and the Risen chocolates I'd horded as a child from my grandparents' candy bowls. There were baked goods that had gone stale during transit (we still ate them), chocolates or gummies that melted into one gooey glob (we ate them too). We learned to hunt for the tiny plastic baby inside a New Orleans King Cake and that Italian pizzelles look like crusty waffles but taste like buttered heaven.

There were resupplies: batteries, shampoo, baby wipes, lip balm, my favorite pomegranate body wash; and practical luxuries: alcohol-free hand sanitizer, extra strength moisturizer to combat the dry air and highly-chlorinated water that flaked off our skin in scaly patches. There were indulgences: the stockpile of gourmet coffee that doused the stale office in rotations of chocolate-covered cherry and hazelnut biscotti fumes, Netflix discs that often arrived out of sequence: *True Blood* Season 2 disc 2, while disc 1 stalled somewhere in southwest Asia. There were iPods to replace those done in by Afghan dust and CDs for an attempt to keep up with pop culture. We ordered books and movies to read and watch, but also to ensure our names would be called in front of the barracks in 2-4 weeks.

There were holiday treats, which made missing holidays both more tolerable and more obvious, and knickknacks we imbued with greater meaning. A Halloween skeleton decoration from my mom became an office mascot, a meager version of ventriloquist Jeff Dunham’s Achmed the Dead Terrorist: Scull replaced with a printout of Achmed’s turbaned head, “I KILL YOU” scrawled across a speech bubble. He would get new attire to mark each holiday.


I KILL YOU!!!
TROPICAL JELLY

Achmed enjoys Mardi Gras

There were what we called “leftovers,” items that had outlived their American usefulness or had been cast off from larger bases: gossip magazines broadcasting celebrity marriages, which by the time we read of them had ended. Cases of Girl Scout cookies, but only the tasteless shortbread variety. (I once heard rumor of a single box of Thin Mints but never saw evidence.) There were packages designated “for any soldier,” usually stuffed with candy; for well-meaning patriotic souls, sugar was a salve for any conflict. Occasionally, a “for any female soldier” made its way to our tiny base on the Pakistan border, and the seven of us gathered to ogle expired Mary Kay lotions, nail polishes and lipsticks we weren’t authorized to wear, and, once, a box of extra-large bras.

There were things that defied categorization, like the shipment of promotional materials for American Idol Season 4 runner-up Bo Bice. There were items designated for Afghan humanitarian aid: hats knitted by a widow in Florida, school supplies, sunscreen and summer sandals, and boxes and boxes of Beanie Babies.

The Beanie Babies came from Indiana, the headquarters of Beanies for Baghdad, an organization that collected the stuffed animals to send to deployed troops in Iraq and Afghanistan for distribution to local children. The PRT Paktia recipient rotated to a new unit volunteer every nine months. For nine months, the Beanies came to me.

I thought it a noble idea, reallocating American surplus in the form of fuzzy, bean-stuffed animals that were fleetingly thought to be a valuable collector’s item. I was no stranger to the toys—I still kept one of the rare nine original Beanies on a bookshelf in my childhood bedroom: Flash the Dolphin, purchased at a swim meet in my pre-teen years—and I was happy to be their Paktia courier. I wasn’t expecting, however, the sheer quantity of Beanie Babies that made their way from

American households to Indiana, to cargo space on a commercial airliner; to Germany or Spain for redistribution and refueling; likely to Kuwait or Kyrgyzstan for further sorting; then on military aircraft to the Regional Mail Distribution Center at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan; then on smaller aircraft to eastern region hubs in Khost or Paktika provinces; then finally by helicopter to Paktia, separated into the PRT pile, loaded onto the back of the gator, driven down the gravel walkway and passed, with growing amusement, into my expectant hands.

The author out on mission

At first, I opened the boxes alone at my desk, rummaging through layers of bright plush, pulling out any pigs (insulting in Muslim culture), the American flag-emblazoned bears (a bit too overt), and any snacks or novelties buried underneath to be tossed in the office “morale pile” for mass

consumption. The remaining Beanies were stacked in the humanitarian aid freight container next to bags of rice and fluffy piles of winter coats. After a while, though, something happened that neither I nor the founder of Beanies for Baghdad could have predicted. Maybe it was the regularity of the packages in a place where nothing seemed regular, or nostalgia to bridge comforts few and far between. Perhaps it served as simply a colorful diversion from the monotonous, dusty brown. Whatever the reason, I suddenly became very popular on mail days.

The coffee maker spewed sweet fumes over a growing crowd while I sliced the packing tape on the familiar boxes. Over the *clack* of busy keyboards and wind rattling the flimsy outer door, the office rang with cries of, “Oh this one’s so cute! I’m gonna put it on my desk!” A young Airman started a collection of sea creatures; by the time we left, she could have staged a production of *The Little Mermaid*. We could barely see our head medic behind the community of bears that inhabited her desk. I kept two cats perched next to a picture of my real cats. At Christmastime, a parade of festively-adorned Beanies marched across the conference room table. We discovered a dinosaur that bore uncanny resemblance to the sword-wielding figure on the insignia for the neighboring Army unit, and the unit adopted him, using a sharpie to make color corrections and gluing a plastic knife between his paws. Some, like the gruff Army First Sergeant, feigned annoyance, but a smile twitched across his lips as he cursed the Beanies under his breath.

Even the PRT’s hard-headed, no-nonsense lead engineer who worked next door took a liking to a lemur with large, goofy eyes. One day I threw the lemur over the wall that separated our offices—it had become habit for us to launch care package goodies back and forth, a form of warzone entertainment. On this occasion, though, all that came flying back was a comment about “this one” being “especially ugly.” Big Eyes spent the

rest of our tour displayed prominently on the engineer's desk (watched over by Bo Bice's shaggy-haired, bare-chested image from a calendar that the engineering team swore they hung ironically).

A few of the Beanie Babies even made it back to the States. Birthday bears were popular to send to loved ones at home, but occasionally another critter grabbed someone's attention. I remember one afternoon a Security Forces soldier plucked a Beanie from its box and held it out in his burly arm. The soldier's rifle, slung across his chest, rattled as he bounced excitedly, smiling through a cheek-full of tobacco.

"Hey L-T, mind if I take this one? I want to send it to my daughter. She loves pandas."

I didn't think about it then, the irony of these well-traveled Beanies, making their way from their original homes to Indiana and through the 2-4 week odyssey to Paktia, only to be boxed up and sent back in reverse. On both ends, something to fill the gaps between the lines. Something to miss or hope for, something to crave. A distraction—escape from monotony and chaos and uncertainty, and from other topics we'd rather not discuss.

A Review of Rufi Thorpe's New Novel 'The Knockout Queen,' by Andria Williams

"Who deserves anything?" asks Lorrie Ann, one of the protagonists of Rufi Thorpe's first novel, *The Girls from Corona del Mar* (Knopf, 2014). She's putting the question to

her stunned-into-silence friend, Mia, who has so far known Lorrie Ann only as something of a saint, a martyr of circumstance, the golden child from a perfect family ruined by terrible twists of fate—until the two women meet up suddenly after years apart. Lorrie Ann pops a baklava into her mouth—she's a junkie now, to Mia's shock; she only wants to eat sugar, she's raving a little—and she demands, "Do we deserve the spring? Does the sun come out each day because we were tidy and good? What the fuck are you thinking?"

Even when the line is delivered by a young heroin addict whose husband has been killed in Iraq and whose father was a Christian rock musician, it's an important one to Rufi Thorpe's writing. The question—"who deserves anything?"—permeates all three of her books, which also include *Dear Fang, With Love* (2016) and *The Knockout Queen* (April 2020). Her characters, sometimes taken far astray by life, puzzle over what they have done, or what has happened to them—has it made them good or bad, or is that a spectrum like anything else?— or maybe their worst fears really are true, and good and bad are terrifyingly, irrevocably definitive.

Lorrie Ann, former evangelical, junkie, cuts through all that with her blunt, manic aphorisms and her baklava-smeared fingers. She knows how the historical intersects with the personal. She's seen it herself. Still she wonders, Do we deserve the spring? What are we all thinking?

*

In Thorpe's most recent novel, *The Knockout Queen,* our narrator's name is Michael. He is (at first, briefly, before we inhabit his teenage self) eleven years old, and his mother has been sentenced to three years in prison. Michael is looking around at a world that makes no sense:

When I was eleven years old, I went to live with my aunt when my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too.

Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated! If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting.

This is the lively, engaging, youthful, and astute voice we will hear from Michael throughout the rest of the novel. As a young teenager he is already aware that perceptible deviance will assign you blame. Women fare horribly in domestic violence cases, he knows, because no one expects a woman to be the aggressor. No mind if she has put up with years of abuse, prior—there's just something that's not right about it. (But are we *sure* that we can place any blame on President Bush?) With his mother gone, he has been taken in by his exhausted Aunt Deedee and is sharing a room with his cousin, Jason, "an effortlessly masculine and unreflective sort…who often farted in answer to questions addressed to him." Jason's also got a mean homophobic streak that only makes life harder for the closeted Michael. Finding it hard to make friends, Michael turns to a dangerous habit: meeting much older men online.

This is Orange County, California, circa 2010. Michael has the internet and a false sense of confidence, or maybe hope. He has seen how history intersects with the personal. Still, with the sun glaring outside his window, he aims for privacy in the darkness of his room. He reaches out. Maybe there's someone on

the other side. His tension and longing are a tender thing, snappable. What will he find, or who will find him?

*

Across her three novels, Rufi Thorpe's characters share a common childhood in the sun-drenched, high-wash landscape of Southern California, often pre-or-mid-dot-com, when some normal people still lived in normally-priced houses. Michael, for one, does, now that he has moved in with his Aunt Deedee. But she's working two jobs—at a Starbucks and at the animal shelter—just to pay her mortgage and to provide some kind of future for that aforementioned, flatulent meathead son. Michael observes that she has a personality "almost completely eclipsed by exhaustion."

Still. Still. It's California. A reader can almost feel that legendary warm air coming off the page, the smell of hot asphalt, car grease, stucco, sea salt, chlorine, oleander on the highway medians, bougainvillea; the too-prickly, broiled grass in small front yards. I've read that Thorpe's novels have the quality of a Hockney painting-turned-prose; they do, the brightness, the color, the concrete, the sky—the scope and scale—but there's also a nostalgia, a tenderness, and a cellular-level familiarity in her writing that's capable of delving even deeper into that locale, and which can probably only come from having had a California childhood. I could almost feel my eyes burnt by the bright white sidewalks, the way, as a kid walking home from 7-11 or Rite Aid, you'd have to look at something else for a moment, glance at the grass for relief but still see the sidewalk rectangles bouncing vertically behind your eyelids.

Our teenage narrator, Michael, muses that he can't believe anyone could live in a place with such terrific weather and not simply smile all the time. However, at this point California is already changing. "On either side, my aunt's house was flanked by mansions," Michael describes.

Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor's face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.

*

Though she lives in one of the hulking new-construction mansions next door, things are not much easier for Michael's

neighbor, Bunny. Bunny is the tallest kid in their class. Soon she grows taller, to her own horror, than all of the teachers and parents as well. This is not something that she can help. When she meets Michael stealing a smoke in her side yard—not knowing he's also been swimming in their pool whenever she and her father go on vacation, though she'd hardly care—the two strike up an easy and natural friendship.

Bunny lives with her father, Ray, one of those realtors "smiling toothily" from billboards, and perhaps the most ubiquitous of them all, having risen to the highest ranks of his toothy, hustling kind – his face plastered on bus stops all over town, attached to every holiday and parade, to the point that he seems to Michael a sort of local, B-grade royalty. Off the billboards, the real Ray is a somewhat fatter, puffier iteration of his entrepreneurial visage, and he has a bit of a drinking problem as well as a fixation on his daughter's future in sports. (This last bit will become important.) He will also be, under Thorpe's skill, an intermittently hilarious, bizarre, very deeply flawed delight to read.

Complicating factors, there's cruel gossip circulating around the death of Bunny's mother in a car accident some years before.

So life is hard for Bunny, too, and her friendship with Michael becomes a once-in-a-lifetime sort of friendship, which will be forged even stronger when Bunny does something irrevocable, sending both of their lives spiralling. This is an often sad, and not an easy book, but I can say with confidence that their rapport, due to Thorpe's seemingly-effortless skill and sparkling dialogue, is a joy to read.

*

Thorpe's novels grapple, frequently, with what it means to be "good" – for women, men, kids, parents. What happens to girls

and women who aren't seen as "good," boys who are not tough enough? (What happens to the boy who cannot, in fact, fart on cue?) What happens when there are deviations from the strict masculine and feminine markers our species depends upon to send immediate signals to our poor, primitive basal ganglia? Some people – the unreflective sorts, maybe, the Tarzan wannabes like Jason, the ones who take solace in the bedrock of their own infallible outward markers—could get upset.

In Michael's case, his cerebral nature and his kindness may be nearly as dangerous, at least in high school, as his sexuality. "The people I had the most sympathy for," he thinks, "were almost never the ones everyone else had sympathy for."

Still, both Bunny and Michael want, the way most teenage kids want, to be good—to be liked, to be happy, to have positive relationships with their friends and parents; to be, in the ways that count, *pleasant*. Here's Michael:

[It] was a popular take when I was growing up, among the post—Will & Grace generation: Fine, do what you want in bed, but do you have to talk in an annoying voice? I did not want to be annoying, I did not want to be wrong, I wanted to be right. And yet I knew that something about the way my hands moved betrayed me, the way I walked, my vocabulary, my voice. I did not consciously choose my eyeliner and septum piercing and long hair as a disguise, but in retrospect that is exactly what they were.

"As often as I was failing to pass as a straight boy during those years," he later thinks, "Bunny was failing to pass as a girl. She was built like a bull, and she was confident and happy, and people found this combination of qualities displeasing in a young woman."

Through the figure of Bunny we see, then, what qualities might instead be pleasing in a young woman. Contrast Bunny with her

volleyball teammate Ann Marie, as seen through Michael's eyes:

Ann Marie was a special kind of being, small, cute, mean, glossy, what might in more literary terms be called a "nymphet," but only by a heterosexual male author, for no one who did not want to fuck Ann Marie would be charmed by her. She was extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine, a creature white-hot with lack of irony. She was not pretty, but somehow she had no inkling of this fact, and she performed prettiness so well that boys felt sure she was.

Thorpe stays impressively in Michael's voice: only a young man of his very-recent generation would speak so easily about lack of irony and "performing prettiness" in the same breath as "extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine" and "fuck." Her mention of that "heterosexual male author" with a nymphet preoccupation is also a smart nod to a later scene in which Bunny's dad, Ray, somewhat drunk (as usual) and sentimental (less usual), sits Michael down and strong-arms him into looking at an old family photo album, a socially awkward and therefore very funny situation several narrators across multiple Nabokov novels have also faced. It's equally funny in *The Knockout Queen*. But Thorpe gives the monumental authority of the male gaze a clever twist, for Michael, unlike one of Nabokov's middle-aged narrators, is not at all titillated by these photos of Bunny but instead empathetic, fascinated by his friend's life before he knew her, before her mother died, before her whole world changed.

I wished I could go back and really look at the divide in her life: before her mother's death, and then after. When she ceased to be part of a scene that her father was documenting and began to be posed artificially, always on her own. Was I imagining the sadness I saw in her smile? Or was it an effect of the camera flash, the glossy way the photos had been printed, that made her seem trapped in those images, sealed in and suffocating behind the plastic sheeting of the photo album?

“Thank you for showing these to me,” I said.

Michael marvels at the loving photos he sees of Bunny’s mother, decried as a slut by the gossips in town, her death whispered “suicide.” Do these images tell the truth, or do they lie as much as any other, prone to the bias of the photographer, prone to distortion? Michael feels that the tenderness he sees in them is genuine, even though he knows how easy it is for a certain angle to tell it wrong. Where he feels the distortion has occurred is on the outside of this album, this family, in the crucible of group thought. (There’s a joke both in Nabokov as well as here about the distorting power of the visual: in *The Knockout Queen*, a Facebook photo of the high school volleyball team goes viral because, due to perspective, Bunny erroneously looks fully twice the size of any other member of the team. In Nabokov’s *Transparent Things*, the slim and attractive Armande in an early photo is given, “in false perspective, the lovely legs of a giantess”). As with Hugh Person, in *Transparent Things*, or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, the camera and the idea of a photographic memory eventually lose some of their stability, some of their complete control—and so, through Thorpe, does the male gaze and the historical power of the speaker, or of the loudest one in the room. There are hints of knowledge, Thorpe suggests, that evade group accusation, that dodge the iron maiden of a harsh mainstream and even the seeming authority of daguerreotypic capture: like motion, or like memory.

It would be hard to write three California novels without the specter of Joan Didion hovering overhead, so Thorpe leans into this, as well, with the addition of a grisly, community-shocking murder that seems to come right out of the *White Album*—the sort of local tragedy Didion might have learned of while floating in her Hollywood rental home’s pool. With this event, too, Thorpe challenges what we think we know from the outside.

There are real problems in this paradisical California town.

Racial inequality, homophobia, the fact that fewer and fewer people can afford their own homes. A salacious news story is a most excellent distraction. But Michael, young as he is, feels the sick appeal of the outside verdict and tries to resist it. Yes, everyone's talking about the murder with concerned gravity—*so* grave, *so* concerned— at every Starbucks you wait in line at, everyone whispering, *Can you believe it? It happened to someone from here? How could she have let that happen to her?* But he senses the *tsk* of judgment in their analyses. Why would anyone let violence happen to them?

We needed to pretend violence was something we could control. That if you were good and did the right things, it wouldn't happen to you. In any event, it was easier for me then to demand that Donna [the victim] *become psychic and know how to prevent her own murder than it was for me to wonder how Luke could have controlled himself. It was easier for all of us that way.*

Luke, here, the killer in question, is a sort of (pardon the comparison) George W. Bush, perplexed by his own power, almost a victim of society's forgiveness for what is already understood and comfortingly masculine and clear. (It seems intentional that the victim's name, literally, means "woman.")

Isn't it easier to cast your lot with someone who seems to have control – even if they can barely understand it – rather than the weaker person, the one still striving?

*

Bunny and Michael decide to play at "realness." It's a term they've gleaned from the drag queen documentaries and the reality TV they love to watch—RuPaul, and *Paris is Burning*—where Michael can practice at performing and Bunny, riveted, can "deconstruct" femininity, which still eludes her even as she longs to attain it. They crack each other up to the point of tears with their impressions of people they know,

at which Michael is very good and Bunny just abysmally horrible.

One of the terms we stole from RuPaul's Drag Race was the concept of "realness." They would say, "Carmen is serving some working girl realness right now," and a lot of the time it just meant passing, that you were passing for the real thing, or that's maybe what the word began as. But there were all different kinds of realness. In Paris Is Burning, which we must have watched a hundred times, a documentary about New York City drag ball culture, there were drag competitions with categories like Businessman or Soldier. Realness wasn't just about passing as a woman, it was about passing as a man, passing as a suburban mom, passing as a queen, passing as a whore. It was about being able to put your finger on all the tiny details that added up to an accurate impression, but it was also about finding within yourself the essence of that thing. It was about finding your inner woman and letting her vibrate through you. It was about finding a deeper authenticity through artifice, and in that sense it was paradoxical and therefore intoxicating to me. To tell the truth by lying. That was at the heart of realness, at least to me.

I loved this, as a fiction writer. The fun of pretending, how it can be an empathy, or a skewering. The wildness of that ranging, creative, odd and hilarious act—trying on voices, affects, personalities, lives. Trying your hand at fiction.

To tell the truth by lying. What is "realness," then, but a mission statement on writing fiction? On invention, on possibility?

And it feels so very Californian, in a way, adding gravitas to Thorpe's chosen locale, to "[find] a deeper authenticity through artifice." Ray laughs to Michael, "No one was born in North Shore!" There are plenty of people who were born in California and live there now, but also a huge number who were

not. Isn’t that, in a sense, passing? What separates one kind of passing from another, makes it more or less acceptable? How could some transplanted midwesterner who adopted whole-hog the California lifestyle judge a gay kid for wearing eyeliner?

What is the line between authenticity and fiction? What do we do with what is given to us?

*

At the end of the day, Michael and Bunny are two kids whose parents have royally screwed up, probably because someone also screwed up when *they* were kids. So it goes, on and on. *Amor fati*, reads the tattoo on Lorrie Ann’s slim shoulder, which, as Thorpe points out, is just another way of saying “embrace the suck,” and which Nietzsche re-purposed from the Stoics.

Why tell these stories, I wondered, if nothing is ever going to change? After all, *amor fati* seems a last resort. Lorrie Ann’s husband dies in Iraq. George W. Bush and Michael’s dad both get off scot-free. The outsider kids will always be bullied. In Thorpe’s second novel, *Dear Fang, With Love*, the narrator, a young-middle-aged college English professor named Lucas, who has been exploring both his family’s Holocaust-razed past and his daughter’s newly-diagnosed schizophrenia (and who sounds, here, influenced by T.S. Eliot) thinks:

Our family had been jumbled by history, by war, by falling and rising regimes, by escapes across the world, by drives through orange groves and trips to Disneyland and the slow poison of sugar flowers on supermarket cakes.

America was not safe. We would never be safe. The danger was within us and we would take it wherever we went. There was no such line between the real and the unreal. The only line was the present moment. There was nothing but this, holding my daughter’s hand on an airplane in the middle of the night, not knowing what to say.

Thorpe understands the way trauma makes its way through society and through an individual life. Trauma is not always the blunt instrument; or, even if it started that way, it may not be, forever. It can be sly and nuanced. It can be both traceable and unknowable, brutal and delicate. Do we try to pass, within it, above it, until we are all okay? What if we know that not everyone will be okay, even though they try, even though they deserve to be?

There is a Bunny who exists outside the gossip against her, separate from her jarring appearance and possibly, Thorpe suggests, even separate from some of her own actions. "You don't have to be good," Michael tells Bunny. He means she doesn't have to be socially acceptable, she doesn't have to be fake-good, girly good. She already is good. They both are.

Thorpe, Rufi. The Knockout Queen. A.A. Knopf, 2020.

The Knockout Queen *is now available anywhere books are sold.*

New Poetry from Matt Armstrong: "Covid Night"

SUSPENDED PETALS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Paris sirens
Pewter sky
The white lace
Of a dogwood bough
At midnight

Reach up
Clutch and huff
Hungry before bed
For the sweetness
Of a rose

But a dogwood
Is a dogwood
And there’s no escaping
The sentence
For the world:

The old blacks
And the new poor

Must die
From the bugs
At the grocery store

Drones police the distance
Between
New Yorkers
Robots shout from spring sky:
Stay away

While sanctions
Strangle Caracas children
Bleed Persian women
And a million singers scream
To the people of the screen

A poet in Madrid
Sits under house arrest
Another in Algiers
Might as well
Be in Madrid

And what do I mean by
Paris sirens
Beyond the sad
Pin pon wail
That cries arretez

I mean a rhythmic wigwag
Just a bit more rounded
Now our own martial horn
But Greensboro, Nazareth,
Athens, Melbourne

It’s all the same sentence tonight:

No more fingertip touches
From the beached weaver
No more whispered breath

From the one making masks
For the world

Just this:

The unyielding petals
Of a midnight limb
As the strange siren hunts
For those with a touch
Of needing too much