

Praying at America's Altar: A Review of Phil Klay's *MISSIONARIES*, by Adrian Bonenberger

One of the first books I read was given to me by my father, who got it from his father—a children's version of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Opening the tome in the garret that was our home, I'd be transported to the vastness of Homer's Aegean. A giant tome that has fit awkwardly on my bookshelf since, the book's pages demanded effort and dexterity from my young arms, each revealing some new story or chapter in the war between Greece and Troy, and, later, Odysseus' long and tortured return to Ithaca.

Beautifully illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen, the book has a distinctive look that was clearly intended to evoke black-figure and red-figure paintings found on pottery from Greece's Classical period and earlier. Illustrations often take up more than one page, with action swirling from left to right, and back again, a chorus between the characters, achieving an effect on the viewer not unlike that produced when walking around the urns and amphorae that unfurl stories of Achilles, Hector, and clever Odysseus in museums today.

A two-page spread early on in the book introduces the characters together, more or less in context. The pro-Greek gods are arrayed on the left, above the Greek ships, while Greek heroes form a single-file line walking rightward across the page and onto the next, where they encounter the Trojan heroes and other significant Trojan characters in a stylized

building. Above that building float the gods who support Troy.

It is a childish device, to introduce all of the characters immediately, and in their context, but this is a children's book. On those two pages, which almost serve as a glossary, I spent much time—either flipping back to cross-reference my understanding of a particular event, or simply to understand who fit in where with which story. With all of the love and care that went into building this book *for children*, it is not surprising that a war or wars that occurred nearly three thousand years ago remain entrenched within cultural memory. Indeed, they have come to form a great part of the literary basis of western civilization, and helped shape my own development.

Phil Klay's [*Missionaries*](#) does not introduce its characters all at once, in part because Mr. Klay assumes that his readers are not children who lack object permanence and are capable of holding thoughts in their heads for longer than a minute. Instead, *Missionaries* offers a sophisticated narrative template, the shape of which organizes further chapters, and accomplishes the goal of stitching disparate storylines and characters together. The point of this device is to bind the journey of its characters together thematically—to create a plot driven by ethical choices rather than linear, temporal accident.



In this sense, *Missionaries* occupies a place in western literature most sensible to readers 100 years ago. It is a modernist book: things happen for reasons, and rewards are organized around a central ethical framework. It is a moral book: the bad come to bad ends or are thwarted from achieving their plans, and the good are afforded some measure of satisfaction through their choices.

The first character readers meet is a Colombian child growing up in the rural south. He's devastated by war, a kind of avatar of victimization, losing his parents and home before being rescued from the streets by a Christian missionary. The story moves back and forth between this child's evolution into a criminal during the 1980s and 1990s and the life of a female conflict journalist covering Afghanistan in 2015.

Klay focuses on these two characters' arcs in the book's first section. Later, the story expands to include others—most significantly a special operations soldier who goes into the intelligence sphere, a former U.S. soldier who becomes a mercenary, a paramilitary leader turned drug lord, and a well-bred Colombian officer from a military family and his wife and daughter.

The final section of *Missionaries*, its denouement, is satisfying in a way that many modernist books are not. Klay avoids the impulse to “get cute” with the story—each of the characters is treated with dignity and respect, even the characters who make bad and selfish choices with their lives, and each one of their endings feels earned. When the journalist is presented with an opportunity to sleep with the mercenary—the two had been in some sort of romantic relationship in the past—what happens between them is both natural and surprising. The Colombian child turned criminal discovers an opportunity to atone for his choices, and how he takes advantage of it is perfectly in keeping with his trajectory.

Missionaries carefully avoids endorsing a particular perspective or world-view, which is refreshing given the contemporary moment—characters are rarely driven by politics, nationalism, or philosophy. Perhaps it can be said that *Missionaries* is not anti-religion. The moments when many characters are at their most empathetic—moments that cannot be

discarded later when characters behave selfishly or with cruelty toward others—often involve grace. The hidden hand of God is often seen deflecting or guiding bullets, presenting paths toward redemption, and, ultimately, offering mercy. Not every character takes the redemptive path, not every character accepts the mercy that's offered. That is part of life, and Klay has represented that sad, tender part of the human experience well. Any adult, looking back over the scope of their lives, will easily find some regretted words or choices, a chance at grace missed. Klay's characters, too, are beholden to but not quite fully owned by previous choices to a greater or lesser degree that's magnified as successive generations within a family make choices that accumulate as the years pass.

This is most conspicuously true of the Colombian officer's family. The officer, an ambitious, cultured lieutenant colonel, has himself been affected by the political and military choices of his father, a disgraced general accused of war crimes carried out by soldiers under his command. This is explained as part of the country's fight against the FARC, a far-left communist insurgency group aligned with and inspired partly by Che Guevara. The effects of this longtime war are already known to readers, having been described in the book's first chapter, when the Colombian boy loses his family and village to fighting between the left and right, and the confusing criminal violence that arises in between. By the time the Colombian officer has a daughter of his own, Che has become a popular figure in the capital, a counter-cultural icon, a symbol of South American independence. His daughter has become enamored of a worldview in which the Colombian military is at best a handmaiden of American imperialism, and the FARC a kind of quixotic rebellion against that foreign (to Colombia) influence.

The hard work of the lieutenant colonel's father to do what seems right at the time—to battle the FARC—has become

politically embarrassing, a liability during a time when political leaders are attempting to negotiate peace. The lieutenant colonel's own work training special operations to American standards in the war on drugs similarly comes to no spiritually uplifting end. But it is impossible to see what either man could have done differently in their lives.

Klay weaves his characters' arcs together slowly and imperceptibly, or reveals that they have been interwoven all along until all that is left are imperatives to act one way or another, selected out of expediency or faith. Those selected out of the former tend to elevate characters professionally, while further ensnaring them in some greater, obscure plan—operated or funded by the United States. Those selected out of the latter receive some sort of completion or absolution, and depart from the story.

Here is the essence of Klay's project. Using fiction, he has sketched out an investigative piece no less important than the Pulitzer-Prize winning "Panama Papers." The contours of the book outline a series of behaviors and practices that, collectively, both define and circumscribe human action—what might, in previous centuries, have been understood as "fate." The characters inhabit those patterns, unconsciously, living out their lives and loves as best they can. Religion factors into this equation, as does class, ethnicity, sex, nationality, and gender. But the patterns run deeper, and are not accessible to the characters. Envisioned, felt, like some transcendent explanation to which none have access, the truth is exposed only to readers, like a divine boon. The name of that truth is "The United States of America."

Eventually, everything in *Missionaries* returns to the U.S. In mysterious ways, everyone gets drawn into America's orbit of wars and machinations—the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, the various named and unnamed contingency operations sprawling

from sea to shining sea. A story that begins in Colombia ends, improbably enough, in an air-conditioned tactical operations center in Yemen. The role of some is to cover the wars, to write about them. Others create the wars, participating in their function as soldiers or officers on one side or another. Others yet fund them, or support them from afar. In this sense every American is a "missionary," and everyone who ends up taking a side, participating in the great global competition for influence, whether by birth or by choice, is a convert. America is its own God, its own religion, at least when it comes to the everyday, the mundane. America is the context in which violence occurs, America is the bad end of the deal that gets offered to you at gunpoint in some destitute village; America is a romantic liaison in a hotel room with a trusted confidante; America is the family waiting patiently in Pennsylvania or Washington, D.C. America can get you into trouble, but it will get you out of trouble, too, if you suit America's obscure purposes. America is not grace—America is the novel itself, the entire complicated project. This is not political, it's not "anti-American" as some might say; it is, as Klay has presented it, a simple and unarguable fact at the center of everything happening in the world today as we know it.

My grandfather was a diffident socialist. Largely apolitical, anti-war, having served in WWII, his socialism was the quiet, humanistic sort that started with certain fundamental assumptions and extrapolated from them ways of behaving toward and around others. The only time I recall him being worked up about a particular issue in a political way was to oppose my applying to West Point, threatening to disown me if I attended (who's to say I would have gotten in? I didn't apply).

Reading *Missionaries*, I realized that attending Yale was no different from attending West Point, on a certain level—or Dartmouth, where Klay went, or USC, from which my grandfather

graduated thanks to the GI Bill. These places are, essentially, the same, in the way that Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Yemen, Venezuela, China, and America are the same, aspects of a megalithic overarching schema. Socialist, capitalist, communist, religious, atheist, opportunist, everyone inhabits some niche that feeds back into the center. You make choices—attending Yale or West Point or neither—and you live by them. You end up in a war zone, writing about it or fighting in it. Or you pay taxes, run numbers, open a small business, and your tax dollars are spent chasing the traumatized products of war from farmhouse to untenanted farmhouse. *Missionaries* is about the wars, yes, but because the wars have come to define so much of what is and what we are, whether we like to talk about that or not, *Missionaries* is *us*, it's a 21st century Middlemarch, a 21st century *Iliad*.

Having spoken with my grandfather at great length while I was in university, and talked with him about his military experiences once I joined the Army, I feel confident that he would have loved this book, and seen in it as much value as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that he gave to my father. I enthusiastically recommend this to my grandfather, although he passed away thirteen years ago—his aesthetics led him to prefer nonfiction, but he would occasionally make exceptions—and I enthusiastically recommend it to anyone who has seen value in culture and civilization, who wants to better understand the world we live in today, and who values human life regardless of the choices that human makes. For although the structure of our world is not pleasant to many, and most of its poorest inhabitants, if there is any hope, it is that people from different backgrounds and cultural contexts can be kind to one another—that the logic of cynicism is not, after all, the only determinative mode of behavior possible on America's earth.

Klay, Phil. *Missionaries* (Penguin, 2020).

A Brief History of an Apology

Here are questions. How is it possible to engage in a process of healing for the evils of history? Who has the right to ask forgiveness for historical crimes? Who will be chosen to represent the perpetrators? Who is qualified to bring a spirit of contrition that is commensurate with the gravity of the occasion? And by whom will this person or delegation be appointed?

I have in mind, specifically, the centuries of violence committed against Native American peoples by the United States.

Of whom should forgiveness be asked? Would the request be tendered at official ceremonies, or in private, person by person by person? Who will represent the survivors of the victims and the violated, and how will these be chosen? On the point of reparations, how will historical trauma be quantified? What is the algorithm of loss, and how is loss to be tallied? In land? In memory? In boarding school rosters, on prison rolls? Along the Powder River, or the Washita? At Acoma? Near Sand Creek, in the Great Swamp, at Zia?

Other questions. What about the relocation and assimilation policies of the federal government that persisted into the 1970s, and led to incalculable destruction of culture and life? Or the poisoning of tribal land and water, which continues to this hour? The full effects of generations of uranium mining cannot be assessed, as cleanups remain unfinished and cancer rates continue to rise.

Who will determine the amount of restitution—will there be restitution?—or the protocols of apology? And if forgiveness

is refused, what then?

Who will decide how, or whether, to begin?



[Bartosz Brzezinski/Flickr](#)

*

In 1990, the one hundredth anniversary of the massacre at Wounded Knee in South Dakota, members of the United States Congress drafted this expression of official regret.

HCON 386 IH

101st CONGRESS

2d Session

CON. RES. 386

To acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the tragedy at Wounded Knee Creek, State of South Dakota, December 29, 1890, wherein soldiers of the United States Army 7th Cavalry killed and wounded approximately 350-375 Indian men, women, and children of Chief Big Foot's band of the Minneconjou Sioux ...

It is unclear why Congress felt compelled to “acknowledge” a well-documented event. The statement confers no added legitimacy on historical truth, but only raises questions about the legislature’s prior understanding.

Whereas, in order to promote racial harmony and cultural understanding, the Governor of the State of South Dakota has declared that 1990 is a Year of Reconciliation ...

Reconciliation is not unilaterally “declared” but, to fit the definition of the word, must be jointly and freely entered into (con, with) by more than one party.

Whereas the Sioux people who are descendants of the victims and survivors of the Wounded Knee Massacre have been striving to reconcile and, in a culturally appropriate manner, to bring to an end their 100 years of grieving for the tragedy of December 29, 1890...

Here, the word "reconcile" has no object, which confuses the matter. Grammatically, the statement implies that the Sioux have been trying, since 1890, to make peace among themselves.

Whereas it is proper and timely for the Congress of the United States of America to acknowledge, on the occasion of the impending one hundredth anniversary of the event, the historic significance of the Massacre at Wounded Knee Creek, to express its deep regret to the Sioux people and in particular to the descendants of the victims and survivors for this terrible tragedy;

The writer prefers 'regret' over 'apology'. It is uncertain to what extent the writer or writers debated the distinction. Regret is sorrow for some past action or failure, but it contains neither an implicit admission of personal responsibility for that action or failure, nor a commitment to right a wrong. An apology assumes prior agreement, by all sides, on the terms of the issue at hand, but such an agreement has been neither demonstrated nor even mentioned.

Regret is not apology. It is as if I say, "I am enamored" to a loved one, instead of "I love you." The former sentiment is self-centered, literally – not to say imprecise, and touched with timidity. Regret, like a hedge, is commonly a measure taken with an eye to the preservation of one's self-interest. An apology, on the other hand, is an implicit and total disavowal of all self-interest. Its sincerity demands the courage of vulnerability. Apology cannot be faked, at least not for long; the slightest false note rings like a cracked bell. Human beings are highly attuned to dissimulation. Insincerity, whether in tone or word, is something most people

are fluent in.

At this point, the resolution once more, unnecessarily so it seems, “acknowledges” the event, expresses regret yet again, and commits one further obfuscation by identifying the crimes at Wounded Knee as an “armed conflict.”

Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring), That— (1) the Congress, on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre of December 29, 1890, hereby acknowledges the historical significance of this event as the last armed conflict of the Indian wars period resulting in the tragic death and injury of approximately 350-375 Indian men, women, and children of Chief Big Foot’s band of Minneconjou Sioux and hereby expresses its deep regret on behalf of the United States to the descendants of the victims and survivors and their respective tribal communities

But the word “conflict” denotes a fight or a battle, which this was not. The resolution did not make provision for reparations to descendants of the victims.

*

Eighteen years later, the United States government tried again.

Joint Resolution 14 was introduced on April 30, 2009, during the 1st Session of the 111th Congress, and was easy to overlook, for it appears, oddly, two-thirds of the way through the 67-page [Defense Appropriations Act of 2010](#). This resolution was intended to “acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes.” Though it does officially “offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States,” there seems to have been no mechanism for

Native peoples to officially accept or reject the resolution.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

April 30, 2009

Whereas the ancestors of today's Native Peoples inhabited the land of the present-day United States since time immemorial and for thousands of years before the arrival of people of European descent;

As with many such documents, the antique and ungrammatical "whereas" is again in use, in an effort to confer a degree of authority on the pronouncement.

Whereas for millennia, Native Peoples have honored, protected, and stewarded this land we cherish;

Whereas Native Peoples are spiritual people with a deep and abiding belief in the

Creator, and for millennia Native Peoples have maintained a powerful spiritual connection to this land, as evidenced by their customs and legends;

Here, the histories of five hundred separate nations and discrete cultures, spanning twenty millennia, vanish in an undifferentiated haze of condescension. Then the reader arrives at 'real' history:

Whereas the arrival of Europeans in North America opened a new chapter in the history of Native Peoples;

Whereas while establishment of permanent European settlements in North

America did stir conflict with nearby Indian tribes ...

The writer - perhaps a young attorney with a couple rules from Freshman Composition class still fresh in his mind - acknowledges the legitimacy of the opposing side, with an

emphatic “did” that *does* reveal the speaker’s fair-mindedness (because demonstrating objectivity enhances a writer’s authority). This brief concession accomplished, the writer reverts, within the same sentence fragment, to his thesis:

... peaceful and mutually beneficial interactions also took place;

Whereas the foundational English settlements in Jamestown, Virginia, and Plymouth, Massachusetts, owed their survival in large measure to the compassion and aid of Native Peoples in the vicinities of the settlements;

Whereas in the infancy of the United States, the founders of the Republic expressed their desire for a just relationship with the Indian tribes, as evidenced by the Northwest Ordinance enacted by Congress in 1787, which begins with the phrase, “The utmost good faith shall always be observed toward the Indians”;

The quotation here is from Article Three of the 1787 Northwest Ordinance. Known as the “Good Faith Clause,” the passage concludes with these words: “their [the Indians] lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress.” As events were soon to prove, “just and lawful” wars were by no means difficult to conjure. Good faith notwithstanding, the 1787 Ordinance established provisions for carving states from the Upper Mississippi and Great Lakes regions, and a legislative procedure for admitting those states into the union. The expansion of the nation’s boundaries, not Indian relations, was the primary focus of the document.

Native peoples are mentioned only once more in the Ordinance, in Section 8, which grants the governor of each future state the power to further divide his territory, as he sees fit:

“and he shall proceed from time to time as circumstances may require, to lay out the parts of the district in which the Indian titles shall have been extinguished, into counties and townships, subject, however, to such alterations as may thereafter be made by the legislature.”

The wishes of the land’s first and present inhabitants concerning these matters were not solicited in the drafting of the document, nor were they reflected in the final product, nor were its provisions ever acknowledged by the tribes. At any rate, the issue of land ownership was decisively resolved by the American victory at Fallen Timbers in 1794, the attendant destruction of Shawnee and Miami fields and towns, and the subsequent forced removal of Indians from the lands in question.

In his selection of a single anodyne phrase to support his claim, the author of the 2009 Resolution commits the fallacy of suppressing evidence, cherry-picking from a document intended to set the legal groundwork for the expulsion of the region’s first inhabitants.

No matter. By alluding to the “Northwest Ordinance,” the young attorney has made a logical appeal and provided concrete details to support his claim, which is the first rule in college essay writing. The irrelevance of this ordinance to the events at Wounded Knee went unnoticed, apparently, by the committee. He may have safely assumed that few people would bother to check.

Whereas Indian tribes provided great assistance to the fledgling Republic as it strengthened and grew, including invaluable help to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their epic journey from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Pacific Coast;

Whereas Native Peoples and non-Native settlers engaged in numerous armed conflicts in which unfortunately, both took

innocent lives, including those of women and children;

The second assertion is misleading. The phrases "engaged in armed conflict" and "both took innocent lives" imply an equivalence of power, a condition that ceased to obtain as the nineteenth century wore on and the United States doubled in size. By 1890, the year of the Wounded Knee Massacre, according to estimates, fewer than a quarter million indigenous people remained alive within the present borders of this country, while the US population exceeded 60 million.

By the time of President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830, the eastern tribes could not mount any lasting resistance to American expansion. Prior to 1830, it was possible for confederacies of tribes (notably under Pontiac and Tecumseh) to face the westering Americans on roughly equal military terms, and even at times to prevail in battle. The First Seminole War (1816-19), and the decisive victories by the Ohio Valley tribes over Harmar's army (1790) and St. Clair's army (1791) attest to this. But by 1830, hopes of effective resistance had faded. The victories of Red Cloud and Sitting Bull, and the defeats of Fetterman and Custer, all lay in the latter half of the century, but these events could only postpone the inevitable. The wagon trains and railroads and mining outfits would not be stopped for long.

By the time the Apache and the Nez Perce were making their final stands, in the latter half of the century, American strategy had settled into a grimly effective process of eradication, dispersal, removal, internment, and forced assimilation, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands by exposure and disease. Accurate mortality figures are not known. Genocide may not have been the explicit or official goal, but it was the effective result, of a century of US policy.

Whereas the Federal Government violated many of the treaties ratified by Congress and other diplomatic

agreements with Indian tribes...

Whereas Indian tribes are resilient and determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their unique cultural identities;

Whereas the National Museum of the American Indian was established within the Smithsonian Institution as a living memorial to Native Peoples and their traditions; and

Now, because his pretenses are beginning to sound like excuses (a museum?), and because the attorney must fill the rhetorical hole with something, he invokes the only phrase from the Declaration of Independence that he can recall from high school ...

Whereas Native Peoples are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness:

... in an weirdly improper context, before proceeding to recapitulate the main points (English 101: "How to Write an Effective Conclusion") of his Resolution:

Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. RESOLUTION OF APOLOGY TO NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES.

(a) Acknowledgment And Apology—The United States, acting through Congress—

(1) recognizes the special legal and political relationship Indian tribes have with the United States and the solemn covenant with the land we share;

(2) commends and honors Native Peoples for the thousands of years that they have stewarded and protected this land;

(3) recognizes that there have been years of official depredations, ill-conceived policies, and the breaking of covenants by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes;

(4) apologizes on behalf of the people of the United States to all Native Peoples for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native Peoples by citizens of the United States;

Finally, we arrive at the true purpose of this Resolution, which, it turns out, is not to express contrition, but to abjure responsibility and to preempt future claims for reparations:

(b) Disclaimer.—Nothing in this Joint Resolution—

(1) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or

(2) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.

The apology “was never announced, publicized or read publicly by either the White House or the 111th Congress,” observed Mark Charles, spokesperson of Navajo Nation, who wanted to highlight the “inappropriateness of the context and delivery of their apology.” In view of the document’s dull-witted insolence, Charles’ response is restrained. It would be difficult to find a more shameful mess of inanities than S. J. Res 14. Its mock-sonorous patronization is appalling. The arrogant tone serves only as a cheap mask for the writer’s laziness and ignorance. It is an embarrassment to any thoughtful citizen.

*

Who will decide how, or whether, to begin?

It was at this time, on November 7, 2019, as our list of tough

questions lengthened, that an article appeared, with all the punctuality of the universe, on the Reuters news wire.

EAGLE BUTTE, S.D. (Reuters) – For the last 50 years, Bradley Upton has prayed for forgiveness as he has carried the burden of one of the most horrific events in U.S. history against Native Americans, one that was perpetrated by James Forsyth, his great-great-grandfather.

This week Upton, 67, finally got an opportunity to express his contrition and formally apologize for the atrocities carried out by Forsyth to the direct descendants of the victims at their home on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. ...

During an event on Wednesday on the reservation, Emanuel Red Bear, a teacher and spiritual advisor, told descendants that they deserve Upton's apology.

"Only one man had a conscience enough to come here to ask for forgiveness for what his great grandpa did," he said. "There needs to be more."

Upton's journey to forgiveness began when his great uncle sent him photographs of the carnage when he was 16 years old.

"I knew immediately that it was wrong," he said. "I felt a deep sadness and shame."

Two years later, Upton became a student of a Buddhist mediation master.

"I prayed for the next 50 years for forgiveness and healing for all of the people involved, but particularly because my ancestors caused this massacre, I felt incredible heaviness," he said ...

The event was reported by news outlets as far away as Taiwan. Not long after his apology, National Public Radio interviewed

Dena Waloke, a descendant of Ghost Horse, a Lakota killed at Wounded Knee. "I think our kids have to know," Waloke said, "our grandchildren, that it was a massacre but still cannot be going on with anger because it happened, you know? We need to forgive and heal from all that. That way, you know, this nation, the whites and the Lakota, we can all be together, have a better world for our grandchildren. That's what we think about is our grandchild, not us." I do not know how widely Waloke's sentiment is shared.

*

The Book of Exodus speaks about inherited guilt. The Commandments of the twentieth chapter are found chiseled on plinths and erected in town squares all across the United States. Often, these are engraved on concrete slabs formed into the shape of tablets, like the ones Charlton Heston carried in the movie. The words are usually printed in a faux-Gothic script (whereas antiquity sheds a sort of legitimacy on even the meanest pronouncement). If the Reformed Christian numbering system is followed on these public displays, you will see, for the Second Commandment, some version of this: *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.*

The remainder of the commandment is usually left out. Here it is in its entirety.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

(New International Version, 20.4-6)

To a modern sensibility, there is something distasteful about

punishing the children for the sins of the parents. But we see that the effects of evil do persist, passed down from parent to child, as a sense of shame, or worse. This shame may be adequately buried – even for a lifetime, even from oneself – or it may mutate, and manifest as some new form of malice or self-abuse.

Evil is viral, and those possessed of a fragile or warped sense of identity are most susceptible. It pollutes across space and down generations, infecting oppressor and oppressed alike, even unto the third and fourth generations. Some, like Upton – by some alchemy of grace and introspection – manage to heal themselves, transmuting an inherited evil into a good.

This conception of guilt serves as a reverse image of the Seventh Generation principle espoused by many Native American cultures, which holds that every decision I make today should be determined by its impact on my descendants, down to the seventh generation. To my mind, these two ideas represent two sides of one coin. Both proceed from an understanding that the past determines the future.

Journalist Ernestine Chasing Hawk writes the story of Upton's apology for Native Sun News. Unlike the reporters of the Reuters article, Chasing Hawk – knowing the pathology of evil – is careful to detail her subjects' lines of descent.

Bradley C. Upton and his two sisters are fifth generation descendants of Forsyth and fourth generation descendants of Brigadier General John Mosby Bacon. Forsyth was the commanding officer of the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment and Bacon served as a lieutenant under his command during the massacre at Chankpé Ópi Wakpála.

“We have observed and experienced vividly in our family histories both past and present, the very dark shadow of the massacre and its karmic effect,” Upton said.

Upton said for years he and his family members have been

praying in both the Buddhist and Christian faiths asking for healing, not only for the Lakota Nation but for his families "karmic debt" of commanding the Wounded Knee Massacre.

Upton, a professional musician and music teacher who resides in Longmont, Colorado, said he and his family have struggled with this "dark shadow" for more than a century.

Like a secret, or like a story the children must not overhear, the evil of the past infects the air I breathe; it is diffuse and ever-present, as elemental to modern American life as electromagnetic radiation. Evil demoralizes. It overshadows the life of a nation just as abuse overshadows the life of a family, or an individual. Left untreated, it makes a person anxious and unwell, judgmental and self-destructive, querulous and suspicious, and leads to spiritual death. Bradley Upton tells the reporters from Reuters of his belief "that the impact of the massacre can be seen throughout his family tree, which has been plagued by alcoholism, abuse and betrayal." A case history in trauma, endlessly replicable.



[Northwestern Photo Company/Flickr](#)

*

The story of Bradley Upton's apology begins, not at Wounded Knee, but at Blue Water Creek, near the Platte River in present-day Nebraska. There, in 1855, during a punitive expedition against the Sioux, 600 US soldiers (including elements of the 2nd US Dragoons, forerunners of the 2nd US Cavalry Regiment, which begot the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, a unit in which I served for two years, 1989-1991) under General William Harney attacked an encampment of 250 Brulé Lakota, killing eighty-six women, children, and men and capturing seventy more. Harney Peak, in the Black Hills, a range sacred to Lakota, was named for the commander.

In 2016, after years of protest and petitioning, the US Board of Geographic Names re-designated Harney Peak as Black Elk Peak. At the renaming ceremony, where tribal members gathered to commemorate the return of the Wakinyan Oyate (the Thunder Beings) to the mountain, one of the speakers was a man named Paul Stover Soderman, a [seventh-generation descendant of General Harney](#). Chasing Hawk covered this event as well for Native Sun News. Her story appeared on March 28, 2019, under the headline, "Ceremony welcomes Thunder Beings back home."

"I am a direct descendant of General William Selby Harney," Soderman said, "who was the general who commanded the army that committed an act of genocide at ... Blue Water Creek and attacked the Little Thunder village. He was also the third signer of the 1868 Ft. Laramie Treaty," Soderman shared.

The 1868 Treaty set aside lands for the Lakota, including the Black Hills, but contained many onerous conditions inimical to Lakota sovereignty and traditional practices and beliefs. Following George Custer's illegitimate expedition to the region in 1874, and the gold rush that began later that same year, the treaty was, for all intents and purposes, broken.

"I found out about 15 years ago who my ancestor was and we started to take action toward anything we could do to honor that 1868 Treaty when it comes to the Black Hills and Paha Sapa [the Lakota name for the Black Hills]," he said. "One thing that we thought would be good was to make an attempt to take his name off this mountain."

Bradley Upton of Colorado learned of the Black Hills ceremony soon afterward. In the November article, Chasing Hawk writes:

While visiting with his neighbor ... [Upton] happened to mention the healing his family must do.

"She told me about the ceremony that Mr. Brave Heart had performed, a ceremony to not only rename Harney Peak to Black Elk Peak but the ceremony of forgiveness of the

carnage that Harney caused at the slaughter at Blue Water Creek," Upton shared.

Upton was brought to tears and said he immediately set out to contact Soderman and Brave Heart.

"A couple of days later I was fortunate to meet Paul and his wife Kathy who shared the power of Mr. Brave Heart's ceremony with me and invited me to their sweat lodge as both new and old family," he said.

Upton contacted Brave Heart.

The Lakota elder comforted him by telling him he was carrying a dark shadow that was not his to carry.

"He couldn't stop crying and he told me he was a descendant of Major General James Forsyth and Brigadier General John Mosby Bacon," Brave Heart said and told him, "You came to a place to heal."

*

The English historian Arnold Toynbee (d. 1975) made an observation about these matters, and I don't know whether his contention is valid, but it is often in my mind these days. He identifies the destruction of Carthage (146 BCE) at the end of the Third Punic War as a sort of moral inflection point in the history of Rome. The war with Hannibal had ended and Carthage was no longer a threat, but Rome, on flimsy pretexts, sent an expedition to besiege the city. Roman forces destroyed Carthage and scorched the surrounding lands. Some say the soldiers cast salt into the fields, and trod the salt under with their horses' hooves, to sterilize the soil and ensure that the place might never again be inhabited.

Rome had debased itself, the historian argued. It had betrayed long-honored principles of justice and of clemency toward defeated foes. Thereafter, the empire drifted through

centuries of dictatorship, foreign wars, oppression, and the extortion of conquered peoples. Cicero would describe Rome's destruction of two great cities – Carthage and Corinth – as “gouging the eyes” from the Mediterranean. As Roman imperial power apparently waxed in magnificence, Roman crimes in fact polluted the heart of the social organism. Cultural and moral decay set in and social life gradually degenerated until Constantine's soldiers, with crosses sewn onto their tunics, put the empire out of its misery at Milvian Bridge (312 CE).

The Athenian destruction of Melos (416 BCE) may illustrate the same point. Strategically unwarranted, the siege ended with the execution of the island's adult men and the enslavement of its women and children, and coincided with the beginning of the decline of democracy at Athens.

A nation rooted in atrocity will bear noxious fruit. Unless it be transplanted in good soil, how can it do otherwise than yield corruption?

*

Basil Brave Heart, teacher and healer and combat veteran, lives on the Pine Ridge Oglala Lakota Reservation. In a *Rapid City Journal* article (December 27, 2019), he was asked whether forgiveness is possible, 129 years after Wounded Knee. “Forgiveness has its challenges,” he said, “but it is possible.”

Many Lakota relatives are suffering from the trauma of these actions and wondering – how can we forgive when we are still hurting and angry?

Recently, historic apologies for the Wounded Knee Massacre have been shared with the communities of Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge. These apologies have taken the lid off of something painful, like doing an emotional surgery. The displacement, abandonment, and lies that denigrated our way of life are coming to the surface. Anger, anxiety and

depression all arise as part of the process of forgiveness. These feelings come from the trauma that has not been worked through yet...

Forgiveness is one of the most profound and difficult things we can do. It takes prayer and commitment. Going through this process does not mean that the original difficulty goes away. As a Catholic boarding school survivor and veteran with PTSD, I know this to be true...

Back in 1938, my grandma taught me about the power of forgiveness. Her teachings have been with me throughout my life. The meetings and ceremonies of apology and forgiveness that happened in the last year are a spark to ignite a long journey of intergenerational healing. By connecting with our breath and asking for spiritual assistance, all people can return to our original human blueprint of compassion, love, and equanimity. Our challenging work of forgiveness will create wholeness for ourselves and the future generations. Forgiveness is the password to our divinity.

*

The crisis is one of values. It can be met ... only by a radical shift in belief, a profound realignment of thought and spirit.

– Elizabeth Ammons, *Sea Change* (2010)

There is a movement afoot these days. Good-hearted people, singly at first but in ever-increasing numbers, are setting about a great work. We are in the midst of one of those sea changes of sentiment, I believe, that sweep through history at times, quickening human consciousness. These changes arrive like the rogue winds that wander desert places, descending with a swiftness to rattle the walls, and leaving in their wake a landscape trembling and bright. They are watershed events, dividing everything that has come before from

everything that will come after.

One such change must have occurred in the 5th century BCE, when Moses, Buddha, Socrates, and Confucius lived and taught. Two millennia later, the telescope and the microscope inaugurated another great shift in the feeling for things. Henry Power, in his *Experimental Philosophy* of 1664, proclaimed that

This is the Age in which all mens Souls are in a kind of fermentation ... Me-thinks, I see how all the old Rubbish must be thrown away, and the rotten Buildings be overthrown, and carried away with so powerful an Inundation. These are the days that must lay a new Foundation of a more magnificent Philosophy.

Now I hear similar words spoken today, calls from every side for destruction of old modes and habits.

The change this time, unlike previous transitions, does not concern humanity in relation to physics, or to god, or to the cosmos: it has to do with humanity in relation to itself. I see proof of this in the altered trajectories of individual lives. Soderman and Upton are only two examples among many, individuals committing acts of healing, in ways unthinkable only a short time ago. Their paths to the Pine Ridge reservation were long apprenticeships for a single agonizing encounter with themselves, an encounter in which they were met—not with hostility and mistrust—but with compassion and forgiveness, almost as if they had been expected all along.

The place of this encounter—the “furnace of the truth,” as bishop and theologian Rowan Williams calls it—is where one comes face to face with oneself, often the last person in the world we care to see. To “come clean” is a common idiom, one that nicely figures the refining power of the truth’s furnace. It is painful, bitter, but the burden that awaits me on the other side is lighter, much lighter than the one I’ve carried till now. A good deal of religious truth turns on this point.

Freed of that burden, I am better able, mentally and physically, to be a faithful helpmate to my brother and sister. Until that occurs, I am only a burden to myself and to the world.

Until there is a reckoning for historical evil, this nation cannot hope to steer clear of the crash pattern of exploitation of human life and of nature, too. "Here," Linda Hogan writes in *Dwellings* (1995), "is a lesson: what happens to people and what happens to the land is the same thing."

That the work of peace and justice is hopeless and lonely, all of history bears witness. "It sounds silly to say *work without hope*, but it can be done; it's only a form of insurance; it doesn't mean *work hopelessly*," wrote the English war poet Keith Douglas, only a year before he was killed in Normandy at age twenty-four. They are difficult words, and they take on added weight every time I think of them.

*

The better part of my childhood was spent reading histories of the Eastern Woodland nations: the ill-starred uprisings of Pontiac and Tecumseh, the doomed alliances with the British and the French; canoe flotillas convening for the trading days at Michilimackinac, the seasonal dispersal to the hunting grounds. I was riveted by the tough freedoms of their existence, the harsh tuition of war and weather, and a talent for woodcraft and watchfulness that are mostly lost to this world. The harvest celebrations, too, and the somber winters of scarcity, and a relentless sense of humor that survived all of it. To wander the stacks looking for books on Indians was happiness. Shawnee and Erie, Wyandot and Delaware: I revered their stories like living things, because they are living things.

By the time I was old enough to walk alone to the library, the people in the books had been gone from that part of Ohio for

nearly two hundred years. The trees and animals that they had known remained, however, though much diminished in kind and number. Nevertheless, the woods around the neighborhood—somewhat ragged and littered—were the only connection I had to the first inhabitants. I spent a lot of time there. I remember, when I was nine or ten, setting off on a walk one early Sunday morning. I kept on for several miles, through unfamiliar neighborhoods, until I had passed well out of the suburbs, and came to a little valley where a thin black stream flowed through icy grass.

I sat at the edge of the woods and kept watch, fearful of trespassing, but all was calm in that beautiful place whose existence I had never suspected. In the black branches of a tree, a squirrel's tail flickered like an oil lamp flame. A bird perched on a broken stalk and sang, and in the winter cold I could see the tiny puffs of breath from its beak—a puff for each string of notes—backlit by the powder blue sky. Indians were on my mind that morning, as they were most days, and I imagined a band of women and men and children, Shawnees or Miamis, filing out of the treeline and down toward the stream. No doubt, they knew the place well, I thought.

Expectation faded to a nameless absence that spread across the little valley. Forty years on, I recall the stream and the sky clearly.

I could not have described on that morning the sense of something that had come and gone. And though days and months might pass in unawareness of it, still to this day that feeling has not left me. I never returned to that place.

*

It's funny how a difficult truth has the power to single you out. Others have noticed this. "What you look hard at," Gerard Manley Hopkins observed, "seems to look hard at you"—and has a way, I would add, of making a person feel alone. Not that you

cannot forget it, but that it will not forget you. In my mind, something is watching the boy who is sitting on a hillside, waiting for people who will never return. But it was only me after all.

There are other times when I've stood looking at myself, it seemed, through someone else's eyes. One time, when I was very ill. Once, when I was beaten by several people on a street at night. Again, when I watched the desert skyline blaze with oil well fires. And again, as I sat at a table, alone in an efficiency in a midwestern city, writing a letter of apology to someone I had wronged.

Why was it, I wonder, on these occasions that I drifted out of myself, a stranger looking on with, it seems, a kind of pity?

Illness, violence, forgiveness: these three. They have long memories.



Wounded Knee Massacre Burial Site/Wikimedia Commons

New Poetry from George Kramer: “Three Snapshots of Superman’s Mother,” “Google Earth”



ASTRONOMICAL DISTANCE OF LONGING / *image by Amalie Flynn*
Three Snapshots of Superman’s Mother

Budapest, Hungary. December 1944.

This stagnant end squats over its vile start
Faster than a speeding bullet!

from the slag pile, the louse waste
More powerful than a locomotive!

the fecal secretions of war
Leaps tall buildings in a single bound!

the girl's father was sought for
It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman!

the column of Jews being
Truth, justice and the American Way.

marched to the river.

This is a job for Superman.

It was then that God stole her belief
but left her fraught wonder.

Fort Collins, Colorado. November 1963.

The vertical hold hop-skips,
horses drawing hearses
plod inside the droning box,
fusing to the vitreous reflection
of his mother's tear-streaked face.

Preschool Superman stews.

No president calls Him to Dallas.

He was not consulted
on preempting His TV show for this
dull parade.

His caped powers, though mighty,
are no match for the elegiac bagpipes or
the morose Kennedys on this untuned Magnavox.

Alexandria, Virginia. April 2016.

Floating in my feeble galaxy of lost atoms,

I peer at an old picture frame.
Behind glass the girl's silver halide half smile
issues a cautious greeting across
this astronomical distance of longing.
I orbit that smile's twilight glow –
a planet where love has nowhere to go.

Google Earth

Somewhere Gerardus Mercator
met on an equator
the ragged hunter who first drew
from warm pitch and raw whisk
the rugged path she found
to the grazing grounds.

Their compasses agreed:
on friable parchment
mapmakers must have
their maniacal dragons, their
flawed seas, and their ranges
of rumpling blunders.

An old wall was woken by
a flattened paper globe,
a remnant copy etched
by an ancient calligrapher
with a cliff grip
chiseling a copper plate.

It is easy to see what is lacking here:
a map's crinkle, or its volcanic dimples,
green alpine frock, sweat of ocean.
No chance for glass-headed pins,
and lands not thick nor lean are plially lying
on a polarized screen.

Swipe past the displaced perspective
and its warning of the asphalt assault,

sharp canines snapping
at the ribs of gated jungles,
as the electric sky thunders
down boundless data.

In this benign monitor light I read
about the first arrow and its story
of the bloody hand that held it
and the slaughters that it stopped.
We daily stride newly into changeless air
on the journey to pixel from dot.

New Fiction from Matthew Cricchio: “War All the Time”

The Staff Sergeant shifted in his tight, class-A uniform and frowned. Phones rang and keyboards, the primary weapon of administrative Marines, clicked in the busy Personnel Support Detachment office. I said *please* a lot even though, if I hadn't lost my eye, I'd never beg a guy like that for a thing.

“Please, Staff Sar'nt. Who else can I talk to?”

“For what, Sergeant Bing?”

“So I can stay in the Marines. I want to do my job.” I leaned in close so no one could hear me insisting, and pulled on the ragged border of my destroyed eye, the pink skin bubbling where the upper eye lid should've been. *“I can still be a grunt.”*

“Yeah?” he said, holding his black government pen on my blind side. *“Catch this.”* The falling pen disappeared into the

darkness of my non-vision and he groaned as he bent over to pick it up from the floor. "The Med Board makes these decisions. Not me. But it's obvious you can't see out of that eye." He took one last look at my paperwork before putting it into a folder and handing it to me. "You barely have an eye."

"But they let wounded guys come back a lot. Last year in the Marine Corps Times they wrote about that Recon Gunny who went to Iraq with a fake leg." A line of Marines looking to sort out pay issues, Basic Housing Allowance disbursements, life insurance policies, built up behind me and the Staff Sergeant became anxious to move me along.

"Marine Corps says you gotta have two eyes for combat shooting."

I'd been to Iraq, two times, and Afghanistan. I had my Combat Action Ribbon. Even had a gold star device on the damn thing. This guy, whose uniform was too tight, whose hands were too soft when we shook, knew fuck all about shooting, let alone combat.

"All due respect, Staff Sergeant, your rifle range isn't the same as my deployments."

"I understand, Sergeant Bing. What I guess I'm saying is," he leaned down to his cluttered desk, grabbed the hefty wad of my medical record and pushed that into my chest too. "People come here every day wanting out. Faking injuries, getting arrested just so they can get kicked out. They want out bad. We process them quick so they can go back to whatever fucked up place they came from. But *you*," he came around his desk, put his arm over my shoulder and walked me out because I wasn't getting the point. "You'll be medically retired. Have free health-insurance until you die. Get a pension. The whole nine. This is your new life. You gotta embrace it." At the front door, he turned away and called the next person in line.

It only took walking those 20 feet and I wasn't a marine

anymore.

*

I was in the Holding Company for another week before they finalized my medical retirement pay. Legally restricted from driving, I had to ask my parents to pick me up from the base. We rolled through the gate, past the marines in formation, in pairs, in dress blues, class- A's, and cammies and I felt like the kid who was embarrassed to have his friends see his mom pick him up after school. They were in. I was out.

We drove from Camp Lejeune to Virginia Beach in record time if they give records for being as slow as possible. My dad was against me living alone, so during the entire trip he was stalling at rest stops, barbeque restaurants, and those giant road signs marking long destroyed historical sites.

"I've always wanted to read these things. Haven't you?" he yelled over the scream of passing cars on the highway as he read the tiny, raised print. My mom was quiet and probably just very happy I wasn't in the Marine Corps anymore. What none of us ever talked about was the fragments, from the bullet that hit me, lodged in my brain. My parents were honest, even blunt people, but these fragments, which could migrate and possibly kill me, were something they were never honest about. Instead, they just talked about all the reasons me living on my own was a terrible idea.

Every time my dad slowed the trip down, I told him, making sure to thrust the badge of my eye forward, that I was still an adult. We'd lived in Virginia Beach when I was a kid. I knew the area and might even run into a few old friends. All I needed to do was dry out for a minute, get settled, and then start regular school. Through the internet I'd already rented a small, terrible apartment. Seriously, I'd been in much worse. When we got there they helped move my three cardboard boxes inside, took me out to eat, and lingered for a half-an-

hour wanting to ask me, or tell me, to come home before they finally left without mentioning a thing.

*

I took a job interview at a grocery store because I could walk there from my apartment.

The assistant night shift manager, an older lady who seemed afraid of me but masked it with a sample tray of rainbow cookies from the bakery she put as a barrier between us, asked me the standard questions.

“What’s your work experience?” “I’m a Marine.”

“Is that,” the assistant night shift manager touched her eye socket unconsciously, “what happened?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Oh, okay.” She marked something on her piece of paper. I had the job if I was willing to work first shift, ready to help open the store at 0600. That was easy. What was hard was the slow pace, old people in the morning, unemployed people before lunch, working people shopping with no time to be shopping when work let out. Every instruction was broken down Barney-style until even my dumbest co-workers could get tasks done with little supervision.

Other than being on time, I had no responsibilities. It didn’t matter that I led a fire team in Ramadi or Musah Qaleh. No one cared that my platoon had captured six High Value Targets in Iraq. Or that we fought our way out of multiple ambushes in Afghanistan, including when I was wounded. I “didn’t yet have the grocery experience to be a morning lead cashier.” Sitting back wasn’t the way I had been raised to work so when I saw problems I addressed them at the lowest possible level. That went wrong too when they wrote me up for approaching a chronically late coworker:

"Listen, Robbie. I shouldn't have to tell you this, but you have to be on time." The kid rolled his eyes at me. I moved forward, touched apron to apron. His eyes were brown and dumber than a blood hound's. "Don't fucking roll your eyes at me."

"Listen man, you ain't the boss." He smoothed his short moustache, licked his lips and stared at me meanly.

I clenched his apron. I was strong. He was not. Lifting him off his feet was an inevitable result of the laws of physics. "It's everyone's job to do their part. Don't be a Blue Falcon. Don't be a Buddy Fucker." He was embarrassed, which was good—embarrassment is the truest motivation—so I put him down.

"This ain't the damn military," he said without looking me in the eye. He walked away before turning to add, "bitch." I'd confronted him in the small break room in the back of the store, to avoid attention, but they'd heard the scuffle and the room filled with the fat ladies that worked in the dairy cooler. It took four of them, wrapping their soft arms around me, to hold me back from finishing him. I was suspended from work for a week.

Once a month, my father took me to my appointments at the VA Hospital. It worked out, because when the doctor asked if I was maintaining a "social support network" I could fake it and point to my dad who sat there, never betraying my independence, rubbing his face. I had the same doctor every time, which was good, but it was always the same speech. My scar would become less prominent. There'd be less fluid leaking. The unspeakable fragments in my brain couldn't be removed and our only option was to keep watching for migration. When the appointments were done, my dad would take me out to eat, argue cheerfully with me about sports, and as he dropped me off ask me to move to northern Virginia so I was closer to my parents. I refused, every time, and he'd nod sadly before driving away.

At night, in my apartment, I'd pace. I would pace for hours and be unable to control the energy of my legs, feet, and hands. I had no idea what I should be doing other than pacing.

*

When I first used the Adult Services page on Craigslist it was because I wanted to do something dangerous again. Something with a pay-off.

I only looked at the ads with pictures. They didn't offer sex, explicitly, but an hour of companionship. It was something they had to write in order to keep it legal. I called a few of the listed numbers to see what would happen:

"Yeah?"

"Hey, I saw your ad on Craigslist and was interested."

"Okay sweetie, what time did you wanna come see me?"

"Hold on a minute. What're your rates?" Money wasn't really an issue for me. My apartment was cheap, I sat on lawn furniture, slept on a twin mattress on the floor. I had no bills. I just wanted to keep her on the phone.

"Everything," she covered the phone and violently coughed. "Oh, 'scuse me. Everything is on my ad, sweetie. I don't discuss anything over the phone."

"Will you give me a blowjob?"

The silence bulked between us. "I don't discuss anything over the phone," she said again, then hung up.

✘

I kept searching and found a girl who called herself Octavia in her ad. 95 roses. Roses was code for dollars. I called, this time skipping the part where I asked for a blowjob, and

she told me her motel. I walked there and called her again from the parking lot for her room number. Short and thick in a red velour jump suit, she was not as pretty as her picture. She had a tattoo of the Columbian flag on her neck.

“Columbiana?” I said.

“Ya,” she motioned for me to sit on one of the unmade beds in the dim room. “How’d you know?”

“Took a guess.” I didn’t know what to do next. I took out the 95 dollars and put it on the bed. She didn’t look at my face, my eye. She looked at the money. Then she looked at my cock.

When it was over, I walked home slowly in the delicious quiet. I’d tempted risk and won. It was good, felt like the old days. That night, in my rat-fucked apartment, I paced the beaten brown carpet. I felt like myself again. If I’d turned out the lights I would’ve sparked through the darkness.

The next escort I saw was a brunette. She had a tattoo like the other girl, except on her tit, but I couldn’t even tell what it was because it looked like she’d done it herself. It was gray and, in the dim motel breezeway, looked like scratches over her stretch marks. When I knocked she swung the door open all the way and stared at me with her hands on her hips.

“Hi.”

“You da boy dat just call me?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t move out of the doorway and I couldn’t see inside the room except for the reflection of street lights on a mirror.

“What happen’ to ya face?” She crossed her arms over her chest and the tattoo swelled out of her low-cut shirt.

“I kinda got shot.” My skin prickled. I looked over her and

nervously scanned the dark shapes in the room.

“Oh f’real? Damn. You got ma money?” I nodded and she suddenly dropped her arms to her sides and jumped out of the door way, jamming tightly against the frame.

A huge man ran out from inside the dark motel room and punched me in my destroyed eye. I heard his boots squeaking then there was a flash of white light, searing pain and heat. I fell down and couldn’t move. He stomped on my legs and ribs.

The girl was screaming, “take his shit! Take all his shit!” He lifted me up by my belt, almost ripping my pants off, taking my wallet and phone. He looked for car keys and, not finding any, kicked me harder. When he found the keys to my apartment he threw them down into the parking lot.

“Not even a fucking car!” The girl screamed.

The man dragged me to the stairwell at the end of the breezeway. He punched me again in the eye before he threw me down the steps. I never saw his face and I can’t tell you what he was wearing. But I can still smell his dusty breath and feel the drip of his sweat on my face as he worked me over. No one came out to investigate the screaming at that cheap motel, though there were lights on in some of the rooms when I walked up. No one cared about me.

I was bleeding heavily from my face. Even my ears bled. I didn’t try to find my keys. I limped as fast as I could through some woods to my apartment and kicked in the locked front door. I’d tell the complex manager to fix it in the morning.

The last time I’d been hurt this bad was when I’d gotten shot in Afghanistan. After I was hit, PFC Meno dragged me down a wadi for cover, treated me for shock and held my hand until the medevac helo arrived.

Inside my apartment I wet some towels in hot water and mopped the new wounds. That Admin Staff Sar'nt who processed me out was right: this was my life now. I had to embrace it. I was alone and nobody was coming to save me. I had to adapt or be killed. I'd continue doing this dangerous thing, because that's who I was, but I decided that something like this would never happen to me again.

*

I developed selection methods to help pick the escorts I would meet. I bought multiple Trac phones and called the girls from those. I'd never use a personal phone again. I set up a Tactical Operations Center in my living room. Multiple dry-erase boards hung from the walls listing phone numbers, girls they belonged to, and the copy from their Craigslist ads. I searched ads by phone numbers in other cities and states to develop a pattern of life analysis on which girls shared phones, worked with each other, or how often they left town, where they went, and when they came back. I had huge maps of Virginia Beach with acetate overlays so I could mark in wax pencil their motels. There was a kill board too, if something happened again while I visited a girl and my parents came looking for me they would know where I was last.

I called multiple girls to ask for the rates and chose to engage only the politest. This was no indication of safety but it was a method and better than my previous efforts. I'd send them to the wrong address in my apartment complex and watch from my window what they did when they got here, who was in the car with them, who followed them in another car. If a girl came to my fake address with a man in the car I never called her again. If a man followed in a separate car I never called her again.

Another thing I did was sit counter-surveillance in restaurants near their motels.

Sometimes late at night I'd hide behind a dumpster in the motel's parking lot and blow an air horn to see who came out of their rooms. If, after I blew the air horn, she came out with another man I'd never call her again. I mitigated risk at all cost.

I was visiting one escort a week but stopped having sex with them. It wasn't about that anymore. We'd talk for an hour and I'd pay them for that and leave. I really was paying for the company.

My focus returned at the grocery store and around the same time I got an award from management. We even had a ceremony like the ones in the marines. I was the most productive worker for January. Everyone forgot about the time I'd been written up.

Besides the first one, the only other escort I had sex with was blond and slightly taller than me. She called herself Starr. Her thighs were thick and she had a small belly. Her face was beautiful and her hair wasn't brittle like the others. It was long and full and it looked strong, bouncing in the pony tail high on her head. She'd been drinking wine and watching television when I knocked on the door. She hugged me after I said hello, told me to sit on the bed.

"You're in the military," she said. "Why do you say that?"

"They hurt you."

"That was a long time ago." The room was dim and the fine smell of cigarettes came up when we shifted on the bed. It was warm. "Believe it or not it used to look worse."

"Either way it's no good." She reached up and touched my cheek. "My cousin is a Marine."

"Really? No way. I'm a Marine," I said.

"Oh, *you* must be the hot guy in his unit he was always telling

me I should call." We laughed. "Come on." She kissed me, which no other girl ever did. "Let's have some fun."

When we were done I paid her for the hour even though I didn't stay. She insisted I keep half of the money. "Really, it's no big deal," she told me.

I usually showered immediately after I came back from a motel but I could smell the wine, cigarettes, and the lived-in feeling of her room. I went to sleep with all my clothes on.

*

The Motel 8 was on Virginia Beach Boulevard. It was L-shaped with rooms that faced a large parking lot. Every room had two windows, four feet by two feet, on either side of the door. All the windows had red curtains except rooms 108 and 222's were blue. The doors had hinges that opened to the inside. The six-digit grid for the Motel 8 was: 18SVF657453. I wanted 10 digits, which would be accurate within 10 meters, but my civilian GPS couldn't do it.

The maids began cleaning the rooms without Do Not Disturb signs around 0730 and usually finished at 1000. There was one maintenance man, black, 45 to 55 years of age, 5'8 to 5'10, 165-175 pounds, athletic build, short salt and pepper hair, goatee, glasses, thin gold chain around his neck and left wrist, usually in a gray button up shirt and black pants. The name "Sam" was stitched in red thread over his left breast pocket. Noticing these types of details kept me safe and tactically proficient.

The escort I was meeting in that Motel 8 posted a Craigslist ad titled JuSt wHaT YoU nEeD J . She offered half hour incall sessions for 100 roses and hour outcalls for 175 roses. An incall was me coming to the Motel 8, outcall was her getting into a 2002 sea green Honda Accord, license plate WSJ-1463, and driving to my apartment.

I was watching the motel from the Denny's across the street, shifting uncomfortably in the booth from the taser in my waistband digging into my hip. I almost left it at my apartment because when I got beat up the guy didn't use weapons but I'd just bought it and it was cool. I grabbed it, figuring it was like the intelligence I gathered; just another way to diminish the danger.

I finished the runny eggs from my Grand Slam and called the escort on my cellphone, scanning the motel windows for movement. It rang four times as I slid down the sticky green vinyl booth to avoid the constant hover of the waitress refilling my coffee cup.

"Hullah?" She answered softly in a lilting southern accent.

"Hey, I called you earlier about meeting up." The blue curtain, room 222, second floor, north side, moved. That's where I had guessed she was staying. "Yep. I'm pulling up to the parking lot, just like you told me." She scanned the parking lot from her window. "What room should I come to?"

"222. The door's open, just come in."

"Be up in a minute," I said. I waited for her to close the curtain, took a last bite of a burnt sausage link, threw down twenty dollars and left the Denny's to go to her room.

Climbing the stairs to room 222, I unzipped my jacket. I wore the taser on the right side of my body, streamlined, low profile, and accessible. It was barely noticeable and I needed the extra seconds it would've taken to unzip a jacket in case something happened.

When I knocked she cracked the door and stared at me.

"Are you Krystal?"

"Maybe, are you James?"

"Yessum," I said. "My name is James Webb."

"Come on in, James." She smiled, opened the door and motioned me inside. Petite, her brown hair was teased into an obnoxious wave and held in a pink, ruffled hair tie. She looked *exactly* like her picture, which'd never happened before. The beds were made like they hadn't been slept in. There were no suitcases in the room. I immediately didn't like the situation.

"Well, shit ya don't mind if ah smoke, d'ya?" I said, faking an accent. The room smelled like it had been scoured with chemicals.

"Honey, this isn't a smoking room." I knew something was wrong. I hadn't met an escort yet that didn't smoke. She went over to the bed and patted the cheap, magenta comforter. "Come over here, James. Right next to me. You got the money?"

The hair on my neck went stiff. My balls tightened into a knot. "Money for what?" I scanned the room. The bathroom door was closed. There was a door in the wall beside the two twin beds that led to the adjacent motel room. The chain lock was unlatched.

"We need money if we're going to fuck." She rubbed her face nervously. "Come on, take off your jacket."

"No. You take off your shirt, Krystal." I took a step back toward the front door.

"No, no, no, James. Not without money. You did come to this motel room to pay me to fuck, right?"

I started to breathe heavy. My hands clenched and unclenched. I threw my jacket open a little and it caught on the taser under my shirt. "Take your shirt off, Krystal."

"What's under that jacket, James?"

"My cellphone. See ya later." I reached for the door knob.

She quickly stood up from the bed, walking backwards to the door that joined the two rooms. "*Brisket.*"

"What the fuck." I drew my jacket completely open.

"*Brisket,*" she said again and the connecting door exploded inward as a tall, fat, bald guy pushed it until it was completely open. Another man was behind him. He had a blonde handle bar moustache and a jean shirt. They both pointed pistols at me.

When you're in an ambush, particularly a near ambush, the only way to survive is to rush that ambush. I crouched and combat-glided toward her pimps, reaching for the taser.

When I was an E-2 or E-3 and deploying to Iraq for the first time, a psychologist gave us a lecture on something called Cooper's Scale. It's a color-coded scale of mental states in stressful situations. It started with white, which was being completely in la-la land and progressed to yellow which was having your head on a swivel. Next was red, when you focused in on one thing to the slight detriment of other events around you. You usually went red when you were engaging the enemy in combat but it was best to be there for just a moment and quickly peel back to yellow. The spectrum ended with black. Black was pure dumb instinct. If you went black you had no recollection of what you did. Go white or black in a fire fight and you will die. Yellow and red are fucking fun. When that connecting door opened and I saw those guys with guns I went pure yellow, like the color of melted butter.

"He's going for something!" The big, bald guy screamed. He was in Weaver stance with his gun on me at center mass. That's when I knew they weren't pimps. Pimps aren't tactical.

The two cops cleared the corners and moved down the wall just like they were supposed to. The girl was gone. I dropped the taser and raised my hands. I'd seen enough movies to know what to do next.

"I hate to break it to you fellas," I lifted my shirt above my chest to show them I didn't have anything else. "But this isn't the first time people've put guns in my face." That wasn't the truth. I hardly ever saw the people who'd shot at me. It just sounded badass.

Do you see how war works? You train to fight an enemy by transforming yourself through pain into whatever it is you need to be to win against that particular foe. But, when you have worthy adversaries, there's always something else waiting to surprise you. I assumed I'd get beat up and robbed again. Getting arrested never even crossed my mind.

I was cuffed after they punched me a couple of times for scaring the shit out of them.

*

Later, the big, bald cop interrogated me in a barren room at the police station. "Your name's Rod Bing, right?"

"Yep."

"Not James Webb."

"No, but it was clever wasn't it?"

The bald cop snorted like a bull. "Do you regularly see prostitutes?"

"Maybe."

"Do you pay them?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you see a lot of prostitutes in this area?" "Possibly."

He slapped the table forcefully. "I can't help you if you don't help me, Rod." "Help with what?"

"You seem like a smart guy. In shape, good looking."

"Damn straight."

"Why would you do something like this? Don't you have friends? Girlfriends?" "I was trying to figure out my next move before I got around to that."

"Tell me what's going on. So I can help you."

"Sure," I said. "But you're not going to get a narrative response out of me by asking leading questions. That's amateur shit. Didn't they teach you how to interrogate?" I threw up my cuffed hands and smirked.

"Okay, maybe you don't want me to help you." He looked around like he was searching for something that had just been in his hand. The room was as tight as a broom closet and the cinderblock walls were sweating with condensation. "You smoke cigarettes, Rod?"

"No."

"You want a soda?"

"Never."

"What the fuck do you do other than meet prostitutes?" He slammed his hand again but not to scare me. He was genuinely frustrated.

"There you go! An interrogative! *What* do I do? Look at me, I'm a beast."

"So you like to work out? Okay. What're your favorite supplements?"

"Fuck that," I said. "If it had a face, soul, and a mother I eat it. If it grows out of the ground or you can pick it from a tree I eat it." I smirked again. "All that other shit'll kill you."

"You like music?"

"Sure."

"What type?"

"I'll be that asshole and just say I listen to everything. That's what everyone else says, right?"

"You look like a rock guy."

"Uh." I shrugged. "Okay."

"Who you like?"

"I don't know, man. Okay? I like fucking music."

"You were in the Marine Corps, right?"

I nodded.

"I'm in the Army Reserves. I've been to Afghanistan twice. You deploy anywhere?"

"Iraq twice, Afghanistan once. Marine Corps Infantry, man. You see? *That's* what I'm really supposed to be doing. Not this prostitute shit." I leaned across the narrow table. "You know what a Pashtun is?"

"They're the people in southern Afghanistan, right?" "You got it. What about the Popalzai?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what those are."

"The Popalzai are a Pashtun tribe. See, that's what I do. I try to be the best at my job. So I studied Afghanistan harder than my officers because knowing everything would keep my marines alive. I was good at my job because I put in the work. That's who I am." I placed my cuffed hands on the table, pushing them toward his scribbled note pad. "The Pashtun tribal structure is tight because it's really what they all

have in the end. Without your tribe you don't exist. If you're a Pashtun that gets kicked out of your tribe, you might as well be dead. It's like being shit out." I licked my dry lips. "Do you know what it feels like to be *shit out*?"

"No," he said.

Of course he didn't. But I did.

*

"Turn here," I told my dad. He hadn't said a word since he picked me up from the police station. "You want to get something to eat?"

"Nope."

"Yeah, you're right. I was only in jail for 36 hours with no food." I stretched in my seat. "But then again I'd rather be a skinny dog in the streets than a fat dog on a leash." He was mad so he was giving me the dramatic silent treatment. Typical for my dad. "It's just a misdemeanor."

He accelerated to a red light and stuck the brakes hard. "How are you going to keep your job?"

"The grocery store? Fuck that job." Turning into the parking lot of my apartment complex, he found a spot and threw the gear violently into park. "Look, I know it took you awhile to get over me being hurt," I said. "You were mad I even joined the Marines. But being in the Marine Corps was good for me. Really good."

"Shut up, Rod." He sat back and exhaled loud. It was all fucking drama. "You're being a stress monster, dad."

"Yeah, really? What'd I tell you would happen if you lived on your own? Look at this place." He motioned through the windshield at my rundown apartment complex. "You can't live here. You need to come back with me."

"Fine, whatever." I pulled the handle on the car door. "Not much left for me here anyway."

"Rod," he whispered. Still all theater. "You're not well."

I opened the door and swung my feet out, back turned. "You need to understand that I'm only coming to live with you because I don't want to live here anymore. Not because you're asking me to."

"Rod, you're in a lot of trouble."

"And you're more drama than Shakespeare." I got out of his car. "Come inside and help me with my stuff."

My dad lost his mind when I opened the door to my apartment.

"Holy shit, Rod. This is bad." He spun in place, taking in the entire living room, the maps, the kill board, the six digit geocords of motels on white boards, the picture printouts.

"This is bad bad bad." He walked over to the comms gear on the sagging card table. "How many phones is this? You got a dozen cell phones?" He picked two up, raising them over his head, and turned toward me.

"Trac phones," I said. "Throw-aways. The primary communication method of drug dealers, insurgents and terrorists at large. And this guy." I smiled at him, his shock, but also at the order and symmetry of my work. He dropped the phones, their backs blowing open and lithium batteries spilling on the carpet. I stooped to the ground. "Come on, these are fragile."

"-Is this a HAM radio? Is it? What is this for?" His mouth hung open in surprise. I put the reassembled trac phones on the card table and took hold of his wrists before he broke something else. He let me move him, like a tired child, toward the single nylon lawn chair in the middle of the room. Seated, I placed the HAM radio on his lap.

"I bought it on E-Bay for like 20 bucks. It's fucking useless. Just looks badass." I sat at his feet, cross-legged on the brown and dirty carpet, looking up at his face for something more than terrified shock.

"Rod, son." He placed the radio at his feet and looked away from what he must of thought was a terrible sight. "Not good. None of this."

I laughed when he said that to convince him that this wasn't a problem. It was cool. This stuff, this way of life, was cool. "Look." I swept my hand across the space. "You're getting a glimpse into what I did for 6 years. Welcome to my TOC."

He stood from the lawn chair, stared at me. His eyes were lined with tears and he tilted his head back to keep them from spilling out. "Come here. Stand up," he said. I grabbed his hand and he took my shoulders for a moment before pulling me against his body. "This is not the only thing you have to be." He pushed me away to see my face and held my head on the wounded side. My dad rubbed my scar softly. "You can be something else."

I slapped his hand away impulsively then grabbed it again, pushing it into the thick bands of my scar. The tear ducts in my wounded eye were gone but I cried from the other. "But I didn't want to be anything else, Dad. This is what I wanted to be."

"Come home with me. We'll figure it out."

Just like mom, my dad had never wanted me to become a Marine. He didn't get it, never had any desire to do it himself, hadn't ever even known anyone in the military except for my grandfather who was in World War II but never talked about it—like *everyone else's* fucking grandpa—and had spent his life wearing a collared shirt and some khaki pants hanging out in an office and drinking coffee with co-workers he called friends but never came over to our house for birthdays or

holidays or even a summer party, let alone hide him in a wadi and keep him alive as bullets screamed over their heads. And he was convinced I would get PTSD, probably because he'd watched too many sad Vietnam movies. I couldn't explain to him that machine guns had made me excited the same way footballs and baseball bats or SAT prep had for other kids. And sometimes I wish I hadn't been their only kid, had an older brother or sister that joined just so I could blame it on them and make it easy.

But when I graduated boot camp, and *especially* when I started to deploy, my dad became prouder than anyone I knew. He bought a Marine Dad hat at Parris Island and a t-shirt too, put my goofy looking boot camp photo on his desk at work. My mom once told me that he faced it toward the opening of his cubicle just so people could see it when they walked by and would ask him about me.

Later, when I was wounded, my dad barely came into my hospital room in Germany, and when he did, he'd spend five minutes there, never sitting, looking out the window before leaving again. I thought he was an asshole. Really, he just couldn't stand seeing me hurt.

Standing together in the living room, my dad asked me what I wanted to pack, but I was crying so hard I could barely talk. He took my clothes and we left as soon as he was done stuffing them in my sea bag. I never went back to that apartment in Virginia Beach. We went to my parent's house in Fredericksburg and they set me up in the newly finished room over the garage.

That first night I slept well and in the morning I could hear him downstairs talking to my mom before they went to work. It was the first morning in eight months I hadn't woken up alone.

Both him and my mom eventually went back to Virginia Beach and cleaned out my apartment, throwing out all of the TOC gear and bringing what was left home. There were boxes full of

uniforms. The three boxes labeled *Afghanistan* had frayed, dirty cammies I'd worn for five months straight.

When my parents were at work I put one of the cammie blouses on, pulled a pair of the trousers up to my waist. In front of the bathroom mirror I almost looked like myself. There was my wounded face and the muscle I'd lost but I was almost myself. It was the uniform that was wrong. On the chest there was the left name tape with my last name, BING, and another on the right that read US MARINES. I found my pig sticker knife in the same Afghanistan box and used it to cut off the US MARINES. I pulled the rest of the uniforms from the box and cut US MARINES off them too. I went back to the bathroom mirror. With just my last name the uniform looked much better.

I looked like who I was. I was good to go.

Artist Profile: Singer-Songwriter Jason Moon

Jason Moon served in Iraq with a combat engineering battalion. He returned to the States in 2004 and was eventually diagnosed by VA psychologists with depression, insomnia, and adjustment disorder. Despite medication his condition worsened, leading to a suicide attempt in 2008, which resulted in a diagnosis of PTSD. This diagnosis started his healing process, which actually led to his creative resurgence. Apart from his own music, Moon founded Warrior Songs **1**, with the goal of using music to help veterans integrate and transform their military experiences into song. To date Warrior Songs has produced two CDs. The first, *If You Have to Ask . . .* (2016), features fourteen cuts by Army, Air Force, and Marine vets of Iraq and

Afghanistan, with a little help from Vietnam vets Raymond Cocks and Jim Wachtendonk. The second CD, *Women at War* (2018), contains fifteen cuts by a variety of women vets.

Moon's breakthrough CD is *Trying to Find My Way Home* (2010). The genesis of the album is his work with film director Olivier Morel, whose 2009 documentary *On the Bridge* features current veterans telling their stories of war and post-war life. Moon says that Morel "encouraged me to work on these songs that I'd begun when I returned from the war but had been unable to finish." As the title suggests, the album expresses Moon's attempt to regain a sense of "home." However, the return is problematic due to feeling disconnected and alienated, as the title track indicates: "The child inside me is long dead and gone/Somewhere between lost and alone . . . It's hard to fight an enemy that lives inside your head" "Alone With Me Tonight" continues the theme of the inability to reconnect to others and to society. He recalls "the mystery and marvel of a smile on a face" but this has been replaced by "broken dreams and empty bottles." All he sees are ghosts. "Happy To Be Home" takes a bitterly ironic tone when he writes that "all this 'welcome home, we're so proud of you, good job' bullshit is wearing thin." "Thank you for your service" from well-meaning civilians only goes so far until the phrase becomes an empty cliché. Other songs discuss his psychological numbness and need to self-medicate. The album ends on a cautiously hopeful note. Although the effects of PTSD are overwhelming he tells himself to "hold on" as there is always the chance that tomorrow, or the next week, or the next month, will bring him relief.

As Moon's music developed it became more optimistic. Although *Love & Life* (2014) reveals some of the same themes as the earlier work, there are more hopeful signs. While the title track and "Railroad Song" touch on loneliness and alienation, in "My Child, My Boy, My Son" Moon finds joy in the fatherly role, giving his son "life advice" to help guide him through

life's ups and downs: "Now what can I say except, somewhere along the way, You may find yourself on a road that you had never known. And this road may be rough, and this road may be long, So keep with you always in your heart this song." "Family Song" tells the story of his family when he was growing up and the importance of home and family to him today.

His newest album, his fourth solo CD, is entitled *The Wolf I Fed* (2020). Again, there are undertones of isolation and loss but out of those arise a growing sense of hope and reconnection. In "Wisdom of the Wound" Moon writes that because of the war "that person I once was, is now a distant memory." The memories of his war experience "brought him to his knees." However, the song takes a positive turn when he realizes that in order to be free from the burden of the past he (and by extension, all veterans) has to tell his story, and that civilians need to listen: "And if you share our story then our healing can begin. Now the next chapter can begin." That healing from trauma can emerge from sharing one's story and starting a "new chapter" is seen in other songs on the album. In "You Didn't Say Goodbye," Moon looks back from a twenty-year vantage point at a failed relationship. For most of the song he is wistful and rueful, writing, "sometimes late at night I still hang my head and cry, when I think back on the day that you didn't say goodbye." However, as the song ends, Moon is happy that the relationship ended because he is happy with a wife and family. "The Sweetest Little Thing" is a whimsical lullaby to his daughter, revealing his joy in getting her to sleep. **2**



Jason Moon and co-performer.

Another aspect of Moon's healing journey is *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, a live presentation in which he uses songs and narration to discuss PTSD. Having given over 200 presentations from 2010 to 2015, Moon made a video of a 2016

performance at a jail health care conference in Wisconsin. About *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran* he writes that “unable to keep up with the ongoing requests to give this presentation, I offer this DVD with the hope that it will serve to equally inspire and educate. PTSD is not a weakness, you are not alone, and we do not leave our wounded behind.” In the film he tells his story as a way of educating the civilian audience about his post-war experiences and subsequent diagnosis of PTSD. Using his songs from *Trying to Find My Way Home* as a counterpoint, he tells of his cycle of depression and drinking, isolation, and inability to sleep. He discusses the physical and psychological effects of trauma generally, and war trauma in particular, which led to his suicide attempt in 2008, which he says was an attempt to “eliminate the threat. I am the threat.” The film ends with seven statements that the well-meaning civilian should not say with six points that are helpful. His overall message is to share the burden and share the story as a way to heal oneself. **3**

1. www.warriorsongs.org; info@warriorsongs.org; jasonmoon.org; fullmoonmusic.org
2. Liner notes, *Trying to Find My Way Home*, Full Moon Music, 2010; all lyrics quoted from fullmoonmusic.org
3. *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, 2016, produced by Julie Olson, distributed through warriorsongs.org.

Interview with Jason Moon:

Larry Abbott: Just to start with, what were your musical influences?

Jason Moon: Growing up, the most influential was Bob Dylan. Then I got turned on to John Prine. Another big influence was kind of an unknown songwriter named Jason Eklund, who my friend Little Rev from Milwaukee turned me onto. Lil’ Rev **1** was like a musical mentor who I knew locally. He actually

taught me some chords and notes and a lot of what I know about music and performing. But the big one, Bob Dylan. That was when I understood that you could do something with words.

LA: How would you say your music has evolved? You've been writing and performing for over 20 years.

JM: When I started out I just wanted to write songs because I wanted to be like Bob Dylan. Then I started writing songs to express emotions, and they became like a musical diary to me by the time I was in college. Then the war happened. I wasn't really able to write songs for a while. And now they've become a tool to help others have that catharsis of hearing your feelings and story in a song. It's a release from trauma.

I started learning music for fun, writing songs for fun, got into singing for my own life trauma, then went to war, started using music to heal myself from more serious war trauma, and now I use it to help others.

LA: Do you see then your songs as stories?



Singer-songwriter Jason Moon

JM: Yeah, almost all my songs are stories. They're almost always stories. If they're not, then they're just snapshots of a story. But they're almost always a story.

LA: What would you say are the key themes in your songs/

JM: Healing, self-discovery, transformation, and truth in terms of looking at the human experience and trauma we all go through.

LA: What would you say is your songwriting process? You've written, what, 50-plus songs?

JM: It depends on what type of song you're asking about. The

type I write for warrior songs, I have a different process than when I write for myself. Generally, with the warrior songs, I help other veterans turn their trauma into song, and that's usually a collaborative process. Normally, I'll do it with a group. I was just at a retreat with thirteen women veterans who had been raped in the military, so I listened to all their stories and we threw a bunch of words up on a whiteboard about who they were before they were traumatized and who they were afterwards.

And then I took those words and what I had heard of their testimonies of their trauma and crafted that into a song. There's a process that's creating a story, an arc, and making sure that you're using everyone's words. The hardest part is when you sing it back to them, the thirteen of them, and then ask them honestly: "Did all of you hear your truth in this song?" And then all said, yes, they had all heard something, something unique to them in the song we wrote. The new one I just wrote is called "See Me" **2** from that retreat.

That's the magic, listening to those traumatic stories and then finding the light and arc and the theme, and making sure everyone's voice was included.

LA: So, you would say music, as well as the other arts, is instrumental, no pun intended, in the healing process?

JM: Absolutely. The way it works with war trauma, what I'm seeing . . . you have to remember, I don't have a degree in this; I just healed myself through songwriting and then started healing others, and through my music I've prevented thirty-three suicides. What I do is purely based on what's working. The trauma that is caused by the military is so large and so outside the ordinary. The average person just doesn't experience what someone who's been to war or what some of these women who were victims of MST. It's beyond normal comprehension, so it is, of course, beyond normal verbalization through standard language, because it's outside

of the contextual norm of our civilization.

When war trauma happens to people, they have no way of expressing it to their peers, so they're forced to carry it internally. The arts provide a way to bridge that gap between our un verbalized emotions. It's like, I hear a Christmas song by Bing Crosby, and I get a warm feeling. There's a memory attached to a song that I wouldn't be able to really tell you about. It's the same concept.

Veterans who've had traumas beyond explanation, they have to carry that alone. But when you give them a tool to explain it to their peers, to their community—we use the arts for that—it does two things: it allows the community to hear it. It's easier for people to listen to a song or look at a painting or hear a short poem than it is to listen to a testimony of a gruesome, traumatic event. That's easier on the civilian side, on the community side.

As for the veteran's side, it's also easier to use the arts because if I start talking about times and dates with you, I'm going to have an onset of PTSD symptoms, and it will cause me to stop talking, because I recall the memories. But when I'm allowed to just recall pain from a memory, or the sadness from a memory, or the fear from a memory, which you can do in the arts, and just say "paint your fear," then I don't have to necessarily touch the linear, fact-based triggers that would be normal in a therapeutic setting, where I would tell you about the time and the date and the place of the trauma. That'll cause the veteran to be triggered and have PTSD, which is why so few of us want to talk about our shit, because it hurts us to allow that process to happen.

The music, the arts, can heal the veteran. The veteran can express the trauma, the civilian can hear the trauma. I actually think it's one of the most important things for healing, for trauma, and probably all trauma, and I wish I had a better way of proving that scientifically.

LA: So, you would say then that the song or the artwork or the poem is able to transform the trauma or the pain into something that is easier to express?

JM: Yeah, so it's more digestible, I guess, is one way to say it, easier to carry, because the veteran has discovered that the trauma that she couldn't talk about in normal words now has a way to be expressed. It kind of lives outside of them to some degree, and they feel a little lighter. I actually have testimonies from the veterans who come to our workshops that say those exact words, "I feel a lot lighter," because they put their trauma into the art.

When the civilians see it, they actually carry a little bit of it. But it's a lot lighter now and it's easier for all of us to look at that. That allows the individual who, by nature of that trauma is outside the normal context of our cultural realities, they get to come back now into the community. That's what happens once they express themselves through the arts, once they talk about that horrible thing that they've never been able to talk about, once they express that and civilians hear it, then all of a sudden they start to get back into community.

When they start to heal, that's where most of our suicide prevention and most of our success stories happen. Someone was frozen. They were in the darkness—it was PTSD, drinking, self-harm—and we teach them to self-express. We show them they have the power to speak. They put it out there. It's outside of them. Civilians have heard it, and then they start to heal. They start to move back towards the light.

LA: In a way, the arts are a bridge from the veteran world to the civilian world, but also the civilian world into the veteran world?

JM: It's the point where their trauma separated them from their community. They are no longer home. They may come back

to the USA, but until they are received back into their community, they are not home. And that does not mean integration into the community, that means received “as they are.” It’s a necessary step. All of this is based on the work of Dr. Edward Tick **3** from Soldier’s Heart, who had this idea, partly based on Joseph Campbell, about healing from war trauma. But, yeah, it’s that bridge between those two, and that bridge is the final piece of all those veterans coming home, really coming home, where they get to stand before their community and say, “Hey, I went to war, and it was more horrible than anything anyone in their room has seen, but I need to tell you about it or I can’t really be home because then I’m just carrying it alone.”

But when you put that experience into art, now it’s easier for the veteran. It’s not as traumatic for them. It’s not as triggering. And it’s easier for the civilians. You’ve heard some of the songs we’ve written, right?

LA: Yes.

JM: I think most people would say it’s easier to hear that and for me to say, “Listen, I’ve heard...” If you go on our webpage now under “unreleased songs” and look at “See Me,” you listen to the stories of thirteen women who were raped in the military. You’ve heard their truths. That was four and a half minutes for you to do that. It took them lifetimes to do it. But it’s the easiest way to get those two things. Each of the women had ten minutes to tell their story of MST at this retreat, and it took four hours. That’s four hours’ worth of truth on sexual assault in the military distilled into four and a half minutes and made palatable—as palatable as it can be. I mean, they’re right to be cautious. It’s not easy, but it is easier.

When I’m staffing a retreat, I’m sitting there listening to these horrible stories. But I can tell you it’s much easier to listen to that four and a half minute song than it is to sit

in that room with an open mind and open ears and a heart and hear how these people have been hurt. But know that these four and a half minutes come from four hours spent listening to thirteen women who have the collective wisdom of over 100 years of recovering from military rape trauma. Songwriting is distilling 100 years of collective trauma and wisdom into four and a half minutes of raw truth.

LA: You did *Women at War: Warrior Songs: Volume 2* (2018). What led you to do that?

JM: As I was collecting stories for volume 1, *If You Have to Ask . . .* (2016), I was hearing a lot of these stories from women that were similar, that I wasn't hearing from the men. The women were being passed over for promotions and not being respected, having someone see a veteran sticker on their car and ask, "Did your husband serve?" or "Who's the veteran?," always assuming their husband. It made me angry and I thought it should be addressed, but there were just so many that spoke to MST and sexual assault, being assaulted, being harassed, being punished for reporting. It was so many, so many of them.

And then I started to look into it, and the more I got involved and learned about it and talked to women veterans, the more I realized it was worse than most people imagined. That's when I just thought, we need to talk about this. So, we finished up volume 1. We began working on volume 2 while we were finishing up volume 1. That was our first CD, and I got a lot of criticism for it. Most of the veterans were men. It was very male, very white. So, that's generally how I answer criticism, by addressing it.

So, we did volume 2 with women. Volume 3 is with Vietnam veterans. Volume 4 is veterans of color. We're talking with the Native American music community, maybe do one on Native voices. I think I want to do ten volumes total.

LA: Are volumes 3 and 4 in the works or are they out?

JM: Volume 3 is just beginning. We have it mapped out. We have the songs assigned. Some of them are done. One's recorded and it'll be about a year and a half. The fundraising is in progress, and we have to get all the participants in the studio. Volume 4 we just announced, so we're starting to think about what stories need to be told

With each volume we learn how to make them a little faster and a little better, and figure out what needs to be done.

LA: Let's look at some of your albums. Your first album, *Naked Under All of These Clothes*, came out in '96?

JM: That was my first one. That was a big deal back then, to have a CD.

LA: It struck me that at least one of the songs, "American Dream," was an expression of anger at society and the plight of the underclass.

JM: Yeah. I was 16, I think, when I wrote that, and my older brother and his friends were all excited to go off into the workforce. We were all a little bit on the poor side, so a lot of them were dropping out and doing manual labor. It just started to look unfair to me, growing up pretty poor and wondering what it was all about.

And facing that, at least at that time, the reality was that I would probably have to join the Army if I wanted to go to college. That was something that, even as a 16-year-old, I started to realize, "Hey, this world's unfair, and I'm not gonna get the same shake as the other kids in the town. And, oh look, those kids with the brown skin, they're gonna get an even worse time than we are. I've gotta join the military to go to college. What do I get out of that? I get to work for 40 years."



LA: Was your second album *Poverty* from 2006?

JM: Yeah, that was the second one that was officially released. It wasn't done in the studio. Once I started trying to be a full-time musician, it doesn't pay well, so it was always hard to be in the studio when you need the money that you're making from your shows to pay the light bill.

I think that one was after I got back from Iraq in 2004. I had been struggling to write new songs, and one of the things I thought was, maybe if I released these old songs that were supposed to be on a CD that I could never afford to fully produce, put it out as a bootleg and kind of clear the palate. Maybe if I had a bunch of blank pages, I'd write some new stuff.

I didn't really know what was going on with me back then. I had been home two years. I just released it. I was broken from the PTSD. I called it *Poverty* because I was too poor to ever finish all these songs. And now I've actually had a chance in some of the most recent CDs to redo some of those songs.

LA: It seems like "Catch a Ride" has a satirical edge to it. "St. Thomas Blues" seems to be more about disconnection, alienation. "Let's Be Passive" is an attack on complacency.

JM: Yeah, although it was a little more of an easier time for me back then. Those are the pre-deployment songs, so they're kind of a younger protest. I was kind of disillusioned. I went to college. I left that small, ignorant, kind of backwoods town of Eagle River, white trash, poverty—we didn't live in a trailer park, but we were poor and ignorant.

When I got to college I was expecting it to be a lot of people really wanting to do important things, change the world things. Instead, it was just a bunch of people partying, getting drunk and getting ready to be cogs in the machine. So,

I was a little disillusioned by that whole experience. I've always been a little disillusioned by that "go to college, work, die" script. What's it all about? I guess that's what happens when you have a philosophy degree!

LA: In your documentary, *The 7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, you have the song "Trying to Find My Way Home," which is also the title of the other CD. That song seems to be more explicitly about PTSD. You sing, "It's Hard to Fight an Enemy That Lives Inside Your Head." What were you were looking to do in that song?

JM: So, I got home in '04, and I couldn't write. Something was clearly wrong with me, and I didn't know what it was and nobody told me. It was PTSD. It affected my songwriting. I wasn't writing songs. That's why I released *Poverty*, all these unreleased old songs, because I didn't understand why I couldn't write any new songs. It had been about five years not writing, except this song I had written, "Trying To Find My Way Home," and that was heard and shared, and then it was heard by Olivier Morel, who did the documentary *On the Bridge* (2010). **4** He asked me if I had any more songs about the experience of going to war.

I had started a bunch, but it always led to the same thing. I'd have some emotion that I'd want to purge through a song. I'd try to write it and it would make me really sad and symptomatic, and then I'd drink or avoid thinking about it for as long as I could. I had all these notes and half-started songs about the experience. So, finally I sat down and wrote that whole CD. It was about that five years of coming home in 2004 and then just not having any idea what was happening to me. That's what I was going for.

LA: In *On the Bridge* you were featured as one of the seven participants. Toward the end of the film you sing "Hold On." You mentioned that you wanted to stay away from the song; it was screaming and ranting. But it was also about holding on

for one more day.

JM: I had been working on finishing that one about five weeks before I attempted suicide, so that was always a difficult one. That's the song that affects the most people because that's not specifically about PTSD; it's about depression and sadness and suicidal ideation. I get the most emails about that one from people who aren't military. They say that listening to that made them understand they're not alone and got them through a tough time.

LA: Some of your songs are about PTSD and the military, but they can expand to trauma or depression.

JM: Yeah, and oftentimes those are emotions that overlap. Insomnia or depression is something that people with PTSD suffer from, but people without PTSD suffer from it. And sadness, feeling like you want to end it all, is something that, unfortunately, a lot of people have felt to varying degrees and for varying reasons.

The goal now, as I write new songs, whenever possible or as I'm producing the CDs, I always try to make them as vague as possible to reflect as many situations as I can. But that song really was just about sadness. I didn't have a lot of thought into the other songs back then, as I did with "Trying to Find My Way Home." That was just pretty much raw emotion. I just opened my mouth and "hold on" came spilling out.

LA: Maybe we can talk about the CD *Love and Life*. You have some songs about loss and disconnection, but others are a little more hopeful.

JM: *Love and Life* was 2013, the one after *Trying to Find My Way Home*, and that was when I started traveling the country. *Trying to Find My Way Home* came out in 2010. I start traveling the country and doing all the work with Warrior Songs and helping veterans, and I'm hearing all these stories and collecting all these stories for volumes 1 and 2, and it's

just a lot to deal with. I'm not trained in PTSD or trauma work. And I'd just survived a suicide attempt in '08, so it got to be a bit much.

I was trying to separate my work helping trauma recovery through Warrior Songs and my own Jason Moon stuff. Where's the line between the fact that I write songs about traumatized veterans for a living? Am I still entitled to write a song about smiles for fun? Where do I put the fun songs, or the funny songs, or the love songs? And I actually found myself writing more of those because I don't need to deal with sad topics, because I do that at Warrior Songs. So, my songs that I was writing personally were becoming more and more happy.

That CD, *Love and Life*, was intentionally an attempt to take a sharp break from Warrior Songs, and I just made a CD of positive songs. They're not all happy, but they're not sad.

LA: They talk about family and relationships.

JM: Yeah, and it's essentially supposed to be, "here's what you get. Here's why you do all the hard work." *Trying to Find My Way Home* is about pushing through all the horrible shit you suffer from after a deployment to war. Well, why would you want to push through that? Well, you get what's on *Love and Life*. "Rise Up" is on the new CD that comes out this February.

LA: What's the title of the CD? Is that *The Wolf I Fed*?

JM: It's a personal album. It's a Jason Moon album, but it's the first time I've tried to integrate the veteran side with the personal. It's not released through Warrior Songs, but on my personal label, Full Moon Music, but it's got some stuff about the work I do with veterans. For the first time I tried to integrate the whole experience. The individual Jason Moon is not like *Love and Life* where I'm all happy. I'm inundated in veterans' work all the time because of what I do at Warriors. I was trying to figure out, I don't know, where I

stop and where the work begins.

That's how it's different. This is the first time I've integrated the healing work I do with veterans into my own person music and not kept them separate. And I've also tried to take an honest look at like: how did I go from a young man who just liked to party and play guitar around a campfire to someone who runs a nonprofit that's helped some thirty-three suicide preventions? What's the road you walk to go from a poor kid who has to join the Army and isn't really going anywhere fast to nationally recognized veterans advocate known for preventing suicides? That's kind of what the song is. The CD is an exploration of how I got here.

LA: I really appreciate your time to discuss your work.

JM: Yeah, no worries. I thank you for looking into it. I'm hoping that more of the world will wake up to the understanding that we can do a lot of good healing trauma through the arts.

- See <https://jasoneklund.com/> and <https://www.lilrev.com/>
 - <https://warriorsongs.org/track/1906473/see-me>
 - For example, see Edward Tick, *War in the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2005) and *Warrior's Return: Restoring the Soul After War* (2014)
 - Olivier Morel, *On The Bridge* (<https://www3.nd.edu/~omorel/jason.html>)
-

Poetry from Westley Smith: “Homecoming,” “On Not Dying,” “Nocturne”



THE SHOTGUN, BREATHES / *image by Amalie Flynn*
Homecoming

He doesn't feel quite right, being there—
same house, a little run down, dirtier
than he remembers. They smile and shake his hand,

escort him to his room—with everything just where he left it.

Then, they surprise him—they leave. He hasn't been alone in years. When night arrives with no boots to shine, no weapon to clean or letters to write, he listens for threats that never come. He's up and moving before everyone to stalk the house, lock and relock each door, his family asleep in separate rooms.

*

Days later, he finds a retail job at Sears, takes orders from some stateside twit named Greg. When he's had enough, he slams Greg into a wall—Then, no more job.

He starts to drain his savings. His family adjusts to him being home. They start ignoring him, which he prefers.

*

Deer season now. He packs his rucksack, grabs the shotgun, leaves the family a note and hikes out to the deep woods of Ohio. First time he's felt himself: carrying and wearing his BDU's, scarfing MRE's.

He sets up camp near where he tracked a deer—swatches of scraped oak-bark and tramped ground mark its territory. On the cold, hard ground, he sleeps the best he has in months.

*

He wakes, packs up his gear and climbs the oak. Wandering back to friends, to when he knew what was expected, back to when he had

a purpose, when he knew his life mattered.

In the tree stand, he sees the shotgun's dirty—
a stick jammed in the slide and around the chamber.
He pulls it out, unloads the shells, and wipes
the weapon down with the pre-oiled rag

he carries in his pack. He does a functions check,
reloads, then sees a deer, a five-point buck
breaks cover and stands, looking him in the eye.
He aims the shotgun, breathes. The deer just stares.

On Not Dying

I'm glad I didn't pull the trigger
on the .44 magnum while

the barrel was in my mouth.
Oh, I've done crazier shit—

Walking at night along
the handrails of bridges, backwards,

to entertain laughing friends.
Drinking rotgut whiskey

on top of abandoned buildings, hoping
never to wake, but always waking again.

After the war, during a protracted
divorce, unable to see my kids,

I'd wake from a nightmare to grab
my gun and patrol the perimeter

of my ranch-style in Richmond,
Indiana, to make sure everything's

secure, everyone's safe.

Finding no threats, I'd sit
on the couch, in the dark, feeling
stupid, still fighting—
for what? I didn't die there
and I refuse to let it kill me now.

Nocturne

I'm awake—the bed shakes
as I bleed out, alone, a blade still
buried in my thigh.

I feel the warm wet
on my legs but it isn't blood.
I throw the sheets in the washer,

retreat to my favorite chair.
Flipping through reruns,
I settle on a comedy I've seen.

It's dark. I hear his breath
wheezing slow. The odor
of cigarettes as he drives the blade

deeper. I scream—my dog barks.
The windows blush:
I'm on the floor, the TV
flickering the news of a new day.

A Dispatch from Fort Atwater



Nostalgia is another word for history, but only our personal, petty, smalltime histories; history is all about the size of the frame, and nostalgia is a 3x5 photograph cropped around the perfect images of memory, and never more than in love and war. In these recent days, as veterans like me confront our old military bases named after Confederate traitors, I thought about nostalgia's allure; it's a loyalty, created by once being stationed at places like Fort Bragg, Benning, or Gordon, making us resistant to any modern change to those wartime memories we sort of loved.

In nostalgic memories, my mind's-eye zooms in tight on "Bragg." Not the person or his history, not the place, just that name; of course I'm nostalgic for the identity I found at Fort Bragg, where all Army roads lead. "Bragg" is shorthand – the real Army, the Division, the Corps. I wore airborne patches on both sleeves – never earned either one in some eyes, including maybe my own, because I never went to airborne school. An airborne sandwich with no meat in the middle is a strange sight at Bragg; yell if you want, I'm an airborne sandwich all the same.

So I know what I am trying to convey when I say, "When I was at Fort Bragg."

I know what I am trying to convey when I say, "When I was at Fort Belvoir." A sleepy post during my time there, the opposite of Bragg in every way that matters. I used to run through the leafy streets of the officer's housing and down by the Potomac's edge – motivated myself because it was the kind of post without organized PT.

When I think of those places, I don't think of William Fairfax's slaves working on his Belvoir Plantation, or of the

Confederate traitor Braxton Bragg. I think of Army days when I was young and life must have been so simple. Isn't that a trick of memory, when it wants to fool us? How it smooths out the rough patches, so our life feels like a simple, straight path to whoever we became.

My first Army assignment was to Fort Gordon, Georgia, and the Public Affairs Office where we produced *The Signal* newspaper. I would browse clippings from the 1960s that felt so ancient. As a teenager from New Hampshire, I knew nothing about the South's view of history: the 1960s were five minutes ago; the 1860s last week or the week before.

I once represented Fort Gordon, and by default John B. Gordon, the Klansman the place was named for. I was my battalion's, brigade's, and finally Fort Gordon's Soldier of the Month. Three times I stood before boards of more and more intimidating First Sergeants and Sergeants Major, answering questions now lost to my memory. I remember a question I missed: who was a military officer murdered in Lebanon? I was ashamed I didn't know, mostly because the fearsome training brigade CSM was the one who asked. While I've forgotten his name, I remember the correct answer of Lt. Col. William Higgins.

A perk of victory was attending a rotary breakfast in Augusta, Ga., where the emcee introduced me and I stood up in my Class As with a single Army Service Ribbon, and the place applauded like I'd done something. And they came up to me after and talked in strange accents about how impressed they were and I was a solid young man representing America, representing them, and for that brief time, a living, breathing representative of John Gordon, a Confederate and a traitor.

Am I angry? Of course not. I didn't care who John Gordon was. To me, Fort Gordon is a place of my first Army friends and hanging out on the second floor of those barracks, road trips to concerts in Columbia, parties at my off-post apartment, and

a cute legal specialist who grew up to be a judge. Angry?

—

Simplicity is another word for nostalgia. It's simple to let Fort Gordon stay as-is, and ignore each traitor's name tacked on to pop-up military compounds during the build-up to World War II, names that stuck as the bases grew into economic engines of provincial towns. At the time, weren't they named by chance, more than any deliberate intent? They needed a name, so why not those names? Let the southern rubes have their trinkets of the past—what do I care?

Without being African-American, I think anger might feel frivolous — the Confederates are villains but they have no connection to me. It's important to maintain perspective, to let those with the moral righteousness of earned anger own this moment for themselves. What the world doesn't need is another white man making it about himself.

Still, I want to write something, about the comfort and the shame of these names, that conflict between simplicity and reality, nostalgia and history. I cared — care — about Bragg, and Gordon, they mean something to me; I want to confront that feeling, to defend it, dismiss it, deride it but at least demand that measured, disciplined, objective search inside myself. So I do some digging, to find something Civil War-related in my past, some touchstone I can build on. A great-great-grandfather was Brig. Gen. Nathan Augustus Monroe Dudley, but he was a staff officer, too above-it-all. I do a little research into Samuel Stevens, a wagoner with the Sixth New Hampshire Regiment. He was the son of my great-great-great-grandfather's brother, so a first cousin, three times removed. I want a more direct lineage fighting for the Union, and it's a sting that the family tree is so mundane.

In my wish for a wartime connection, can't I then empathize with the effort it would take from the other side, to feel

forced to explain away a heritage connecting back to an officer for the Confederacy? It would no doubt be easier to lean into courage and rebellion, flawed and vile though it was. If I was from the South, wouldn't I believe some first cousin, three times removed, had courage of their convictions? Is it so wrong to keep names from that misguided version of courage alive? Do I have a better idea?

I have Samuel Stevens. He returned to New Hampshire, died in an accident in 1866, is buried in his hometown. I know him from a daguerreotype image, tight-cropped in a small frame, a relic of family history. To my child's eye, the history of the Civil War appeared in his face, reduced to 3x5 simplicity. It's a place to start, a nostalgic place, a simple place.

Take that tight-cropped photograph of an ancestor's picture, or the name of a fort, any of that nostalgia in your mind's-eye frame and you will discover that it has edges that can be unfolded. So to find more information on the war stories of Samuel Stevens, dates, actions, I unfold the Sixth New Hampshire.

✘ _

Tim O'Brien once wrote that true war stories don't have morals, that there's no lesson in destruction and death. Roy Scranton lacerated the idea of heroic trauma, the rationalization that war stories can find paths to healing. They examined war stories as literature with an artistic intent, but maybe war stories are no more literature than nostalgia is history. War stories aren't that complicated.

War stories are only Noir thrillers, pulp paperbacks with simple plots and dark results. Dialogue is the melodramatic vernacular of a particular place and time; stakes are low but personal; a lurid cover entices readers with promises of schemes and sin; in Noir, the narrator thinks he's a hero, but becomes the rube. That is Noir's important part: a revelation

uncovers a bitter secret, changes the world the narrator thought they knew, answers a question they didn't know they asked.

Writing a war story is writing for that twist, where the story you thought you were writing becomes the story that you are writing.

So this was never Samuel Stevens' story.

For when I skim the Sixth New Hampshire's roster, a single Webster is also among the names, and I'm immediately certain we share some relation. His hometown is East Kingston, not far from Hampton, where my earliest American ancestor grew my roots.

My line of Webster's traces back to Thomas Webster, arriving to America in 1636, settling in Hampton in 1638. He had been born in Ormsby, England, where his father died and his mother remarried but didn't change her only child's last name. Thomas Webster journeyed overseas at just five years old. On such thin limbs do family trees continue.

Thomas and eventual-wife Sarah had nine children, with three middle sons – Ebenezer, Isaac, and John. Ebenezer was grandfather to New Hampshire legend Daniel Webster; Isaac started my line, was my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.

Those genealogies are well-researched, so new digging is not hard. There are false starts, finger pricks in information's tangled bramble where nostalgia turns into history, but my wife and I connect the dots.

We discover that Thomas' son John Webster begat Jeremiah, who begat Jeremiah II, who begat David, who begat John Augustine Webster in 1827, my fourth cousin, three times removed.

John Augustine Webster is who I find on the roster of the

Sixth New Hampshire Regiment. He mustered into the unit in November, 1861, and then headed south to do his duty.

The Sixth fought at Bull Run, Antietam, the Overland Campaign, and others. On May 28, 1864, at some skirmish northwest of Richmond, near Virginia's Totopotomoy Creek, several members of Company I were captured, including John A. Webster.

From Richmond, a railroad took Confederate prisoners, like John Webster, on a week-long meandering journey through Charlotte, Columbia, Augusta, and Macon, to the terminus at Andersonville Prison.

—

John Webster would have arrived at Andersonville in early June, just as summer's heat coated the open-air prison camp. Of Andersonville's conditions, Union prisoner John Ransom had written on May 28: "It really seems as if we are all going to die here. I don't seem to get hardened to the situation and am shuddering all the time at the sites."

Ransom had arrived at the prison in mid-March, 1864, and after the war, he published his account as *Andersonville Diaries*. On June 3, he wrote that new prisoners arrive all the time; that was about a week since John Webster's capture, about the length of a train's journey to Andersonville's 27-acre swamp, where 45,000 prisoners were jammed in.

On June 15, Ransom writes, "My teeth are loose, mouth sore, with gums grown down lower than the teeth in some places and bloody." On June 28, "Can see the dead wagon loaded up with twenty or thirty bodies at a time, and away they go to the grave yard on a trot."

On July 19, he wrote that, "Nine out of ten would as soon eat with a corpse for a table as any other way. In the middle of last night I was awakened by being kicked by a dying man. He was soon dead. Got up and moved the body off a few feet, and

again went to sleep to dream of the hideous sights.”

His July 25-28 entries hit the bottom: “Am myself much worse, and cannot walk, and with difficulty stand up...Swan dead, Gordon dead, Jack Withers dead, Scotty dead...Hub Dakin came to see me and brought an onion. He can barely crawl himself...Taken a step forward toward the trenches since yesterday and am worse. Had a wash...Battese took me to the creek; carries me without any trouble.”

Then an ever-so-small rebound.

July 29: “Alive and kicking. Drank some soured water made from meal and water.”

July 30: “Hang on well, and no worse.”

Ransom recovered enough to be transferred to another prison, and he escaped later that year, aided by freed slaves on his journey back to the North.

John A. Webster would make no turnaround. He had died of diarrhea on July 28.

My fourth cousin, three times removed, was laid in Plot #4156, one of 13,000 naked corpses that filled the trenches.

Imagine, diarrhea and dysentery and scurvy in the rain and the mud and the sun and the heat with the flies and the maggots and mosquitos of central Georgia in late July without toilet paper or fresh water while living in rags under a hand-sewn tent next to men pissing and shitting and stinking and dying and trying to evade former comrades turned into thieves and turncoats and murderers and hoping at the end you have a friend still healthy enough to carry you to the creek or bring you an onion.

—

How do I know the fate of my cousin, John A. Webster, in Plot

#4156?

Dorence Atwater, a teenage messenger boy for a Union Cavalry unit, had been captured in 1863, and arrived in Andersonville later that year. He had good handwriting, so he was tasked with keeping up with the hospital's death list. He was no fool, and knew the list kept by the Confederacy might – or might not – be seen by prisoner's families down the road. So he kept two lists, hiding his own secret list after chronicling each day's dead.

In a war with 150,000 unidentified Union dead, Atwater's list of names matched with numbers carved on wooden slats above the trenches represented the most accurate catalog of the 13,000 who died at Andersonville, and in what spot of Georgia dirt they lay.

After the war, Atwater returned to Andersonville with Nurse Clara Barton to mark out the cemetery with the proper names. The U.S. government then tried to take control of his list, not necessarily intending to publish it. Atwater was court martialed for stealing the "government property" of his own list of names. He spent time in a Federal prison before a Presidential pardon – imprisoned by both forces of the war, devoted to his list of men killed by one side, ignored by the other.

It made some sense for the U.S. government to try and cover up 13,000 dead men – not their deaths, but where they died, in such squalor, when prisoner exchanges would have saved so many.

"Secretary of War Edwin Stanton was afraid that the public would ask who in the federal government was responsible for Union prisoners of war being abandoned to the Confederate prison system," wrote Edward Roberts in *Andersonville Journey*. To Stanton, "it was in the interest of the Republican Party that the families of the dead men continue to assume that

their loved ones died in glorious combat to save the Union rather than starving to death in a filthy Confederate prison.”

Working with Barton and newspaper publisher Horace Greeley, Atwater’s full list was published, giving families from all the Union states that final accounting. Today, Andersonville’s white headstones identify most of the cemetery’s tight-packed occupants, rows and rows of names and names.



Andersonville National Cemetery

—

John A. Webster’s journey from the Totopotomoy Creek to Andersonville likely traversed Augusta, Ga., eventual home to my home for 18 months: Fort Gordon.

When we name a Fort, it’s not supposed to be nostalgic – it’s supposed to convey sprawl and history in as big a frame as one can imagine – not small men of evil causes. Patton, Eisenhower, Grant, so many better names. In 2020, Fort Gordon is now the Cyber Center; it makes no sense to leave it named after John Gordon, a failed commander, a traitor, and a Klansman.

Cyber warfare exploits the cracks in a network – finding the one place where a line of code has left a gap, an exposed breach where a careful series of actions can work through the failed defenses. Dorence Atwater broke the code of Confederate prison guards and Union bureaucrats, exploited gaps with good handwriting and grim patience, wormed his list of names through the obstacles of distance and disease, carving a trail across a century. Atwater was a primitive cyber-warrior, teaching any young soldier that time and death are no excuse: some messages simply must get through.

Fort Gordon is named with petty nostalgia, a tight frame around a dead and useless man. Dorence Atwater is history, his

list pointing to John A. Webster's grave 150 years later, one of 13,000. In my mind's eye, the frame expands, Gordon shrinks, fades, overwhelmed, forever, by Dorence Atwater.

—

It's a three-hour drive from Fort Gordon to Andersonville, a doable day trip. If I had known all this back then, it's a mini-adventure I would have done some Saturday when I was bored. If I had known, I might have felt a bit of shame representing John Gordon, might have written about Dorence Atwater for *The Signal* newspaper. So I like to imagine. Nostalgia is another word for that wistful revisionism.

Now, the chance of visiting my cousin's gravestone is on the bad side of low.

[I can see its picture.](#) A white headstone, a touchstone, a keystone proving that a Webster took a stand. All the relatives of 13,000 men can say the same. Nostalgia is another word for pride, that confidence in what was right.

Nostalgia is another word for privilege, to have that backward-facing sanctuary of simplicity, safety, certainty and selfishness.

Even those 13,000 white headstones are in a tight, nostalgic frame. My relative is long dead and in his place of honor, my white life safe, sound, slightly better informed. Unfold Andersonville, all the tragedy and terror, and it becomes a white speck in the middle of a black canvas – of bodies disappeared into frog ponds and deep forest holes, of city streets hiding the wood of broken coffins and shattered ancient bones, no places or names to remember, no genealogy that can be tracked by curious dilettantes.

Like I said, war stories are Noir stories. A headstone in a far-off cemetery, low stakes, but now it's personal. Andersonville, Totopotomoy, the Sixth New Hampshire, all

melodramatic language of the Civil War. The righteous schemes of Dorence Atwater. The lurid horrors of corpses in a trench. Me, thinking I was the hero, thinking I could examine my “*feelings*” about Confederate-named forts with a measured, disciplined, objective perspective. Instead, I stumbled into mysteries I didn’t know I was exploring, a rube who didn’t know my history.

