New Nonfiction from John Vrolyk: “Black Bracelets”

In 2011, two years before I show up to Officer Candidate School, the Marine Corps changes its uniform order to allow black memorial bracelets in uniform. ‘Acknowledging the close personal nature of our 10 years at war and the strong bonds of fidelity that Marines have for one another, especially for those fellow Marines who we have lost,’ the Commandant says, the bracelets will now be allowed.

The officialese disguises a change of mind by our senior leadership – not something they like doing. But like it or not, after ten years of war it’s finally gotten too hard to keep yelling at young Marines for commemorating their dead friends.

By the time I arrive at an infantry battalion as a new Lieutenant in 2014, the bracelets are everywhere. For the older guys who are veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, sometimes many times over, the engraved names are talismans of violent and brutal memories. The scars are fresh, real, in the open.

Yet for the younger guys – the vast majority of an infantry battalion – their meaning has shifted over time. The experience of combat is at best second-hand. The infantry still deploys but it’s no longer to war. Everybody withdrew from Iraq in 2011 and only special operations regularly go to Afghanistan. The infantry goes aboard ship, to Australia, to the Black Sea. Nobody shoots at us, we don’t get to shoot back, nobody gets a combat action ribbon, nobody loses friends, nobody gets a good explanation for wearing a black bracelet.

My platoon sergeant and section leaders are the only ones

who've been to combat. My platoon sergeant's been four times. He doesn't wear a bracelet. I never ask, but he'd probably tell me he doesn't need a bracelet to remember the guys who didn't come home. But half of our salty lance corporals – veterans only of a six-month peacetime rotation to Australia – wear the memorial bracelets. Most of their bracelets are inscribed with the name of a corporal.

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He dies on a warm Sunday night in the spring of 2016. That night I'm at a beach bar in sleepy San Clemente, drinking cheap Mexican beer and watching the sun sink into the ocean. I would have been on base for all-night duty, but a buddy switched with me the night before.

My buddy on duty is the one who finds the corporal's body against the wall of his barracks room shower. He's used the detachable shower head's tubing to strangle himself.

I find out Monday morning at 0630 at morning formation. The battalion don't give us any details – just that he's dead. My buddy doesn't want to talk about it. I don't blame him.

As far as I know, they never find out for sure why the coporal killed himself. He'd deployed to Afghanistan the year before with a different battalion. Maybe he brought demons home and couldn't shake them. Maybe it wasn't related to the military at all. Across the United States, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for the fifteen-to-twenty-four cohort.

His death hits close to home for me. I knew him – not well, but we were in Charlie Company together for about eighteen months. He was attached to my platoon for a month-long exercise. Two days before we went to the field, I was walking through the squad bay late one night, checking on the guys. He and his buddies were about to start a movie – *Pitch Perfect* – on his laptop. He invited me to join them. I sat down. He told me he wanted to go to college when he got out on the G.I.

Bill. He asked me if college was just like *Pitch Perfect* but stopped me before I could answer. “Don’t tell me, sir. I don’t want you to burst my bubble if it’s not.”

I don’t put his name on my wrist after his death, though. In retrospect, I probably would have if he’d died in a firefight, been blown up by an IED, maybe even gone down in a helo crash. But as it happened, somehow it didn’t quite feel like I should. I don’t buy into the Sergeant Major’s old-school pontification about how suicide is somehow an ‘easy way out’ or selfish. There’s nothing about killing yourself that sounds easy or selfish to me. It just seems like dying by suicide is different than dying in combat.

Yet within days his name circles a lot of wrists. The three other guys in his fire team – they’re a given. Pretty sure that the ten others in his squad get them too. Most of the rest of his platoon. A good portion of the rest of the company. More than a few others throughout the battalion. Some of those guys knew him well and are pretty broken up. Some of them just want to be part of something.

Other guys, especially boots who join the battalion after his death, wear bracelets for guys from their hometowns, or the town over, or the town past that. If you ask them point blank, most will tell you that they never knew the guy personally. They’ll choke out something about ‘honoring sacrifice’ and ‘continuing the legacy’ and ‘community.’ Mostly they squirm, like they’ve been caught listening to Justin Bieber or they know you overhead their Mom on the phone, using their childhood nickname. Some of them wear generic bracelets with just the number ’22’ on them, honoring the not-quite-accurate number of vets who kill themselves every day.

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A few months later we’re in the field. We’re getting ready to

deploy, this time to the Middle East via ship. We'll steam across the Pacific courtesy of the Navy, to serve as the offshore 'theater reserve.' It sounds grand and noble, but it actually means being crammed aboard a too-small ship, cutting endless kilometer circles in the trackless ocean, working out, waiting for something to happen, knowing it probably won't.

It's the last day of the exercise when my platoon gets tasked with assaulting an objective way up in the mountains on the eastern edge of Camp Pendleton. There is only one road in – a washed-out dirt road that switch-backs up the side of a cliff face, an eight-hundred foot drop off just past the road's crumbling edge. Talega Canyon Road.

My platoon rates eight up-armored HMMWVs. The HMMWV was a great all-purpose utility vehicle back in the eighties, before someone up-armored them against IEDs with twelve-thousand pounds of extra steel. It turned out that strapping armor to the sides doesn't help much against IEDs because the IEDs are usually buried in the road. Mostly the armor does a real number on the suspension, the transmission, the brakes, everything.

At this point in the exercise only six of my vics are still running. 'Running' is charitable. One burns a quart of transmission fluid an hour. Another overheats at random, pouring steam and boiling coolant out of the pressure-release valve. Another has a broken door latch – which sounds trivial, but it means we've rigged a cat's cradle of 550 cord across the interior to stop the five-hundred-pound armored door from swinging wildly on its hinges as we drive. Another has a frayed throttle body cable which will fail halfway to the objective, though we don't know that yet.

I think the assault is a terrible idea. As it is, the trucks are barely running – if we go, we'll definitely break at least one, maybe two of them. Going up a 40% grade on a washed-out road with no place to turn around – let alone going back down

the same road – is asking for trouble. If the brakes fail and the truck goes over the edge, everyone inside the vic is dead for sure. There's a lot that can go wrong and not much margin for error.

I tell this to my company commander, then the operations officer, then the executive officer. They each agree, nod in turn, encourage me to bring it up with the battalion commander. It's showing I'm a responsible officer, they say.

At the brief, I lay out my concern to the battalion commander. '…at this point, sir, I just don't think the juice of the additional training value is worth the squeeze of the risks involved.' He listens without making eye-contact. He pauses. He tells me that we're going anyway. All he says about the risk, about my concern, the only thing he offers by way of explanation at all is 'that's what makes it special to be a Marine.' I stumble out a 'yes sir' and go brief my platoon.

On that day, I'm proved right about the risks we run. We break two vehicles – one on the road in, the other on the objective itself. We get lucky – nobody gets hurt. Allegedly victorious, we limp home towing the broken vehicles behind us, tasting burning brakes all the way.

It was never a surprise that my battalion commander – a combat veteran from a couple Iraq deployments – didn't wear a bracelet. Not his style, not even a little bit. But he was also right that day, about what makes it special to be a Marine. It's unbending fealty to an order of priorities: mission first, troop welfare (i.e., living through the mission) second. It's doing your job with the understanding the cost might be wearing – or ending up engraved on – a thin black strip of metal.

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Being a Marine is more than just having a strict order of

priorities, though. Having strictly ordered priorities isn't terribly uncommon. Most parents claim the same (kid first, themselves second). What makes Marines special, though, is that actually we want to follow through.

It's both almost universally true and almost universally unacknowledged that infantrymen become infantrymen because we *want to go to war.* Outside the infantry, this probably seems paradoxical, maybe even pathological. Inside, it's so patently obvious that it's hardly worth mentioning.

We want to go to war knowing full well that combat *is* casualties, pain and trauma. Our training makes that obvious, right from the first day. We spend too much time too close to the ugliness to put much faith in the lies society tells itself about war – neither the highfalutin language of glory and triumphs nor the clinical language of 'surgical strikes' and 'precision operations. We know full well that combat is a living nightmare.

It's just that avoiding *our* particular nightmare doesn't leave us feeling lucky. It leaves us feeling purposeless and cheated.

Officers and senior enlisted try to gloss this discomfiting truth with nuance. We'll tell you that we hope – broadly – that the country never calls anyone to go overseas and kill people and maybe die, but if our country needs to call *someone*, we want to be the ones to go. It's a way to see your choice of an uncomfortable and uncompromising life for yourself and your family as selfless and honorable. It's a feel-good explanation for the military, one you can say out loud in polite civilian company without raising too many eyebrows. It's also at least partially a lie.

The junior guys – the ones who do the majority of the killing and dying – are more straightforward. They'll tell you they joined the infantry to go to combat. They know that means

killing people. They know that means risking dying. They know that means losing friends. They are on the whole neither stupid nor blind. They've probably thought about it more seriously, more up-close-and-personally, than you have.

When they speak to these junior guys, senior enlisted types – the gunnies, the master sergeants, and some of the sergeant majors – will tell them all they have to do is stick around. The United States averages a new war every ten years. If you want to go, stay in, don't get out, you'll get your chance. If the speaker truncates the cover-your-ass part of his 'safety brief' and has a chest lined with combat action ribbons and valor awards, you'd swear you can hear the machinegunners in the formation salivate.

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We turn out to be among the lucky few – we won't have to wait ten years. It's early 2017 when we deploy to Syria to combat – at least a combat zone. It isn't Hue City, the Invasion, Fallujah, Ramadi, Haditha, Sangin, or Marjah – or even much like the combat deployments that span the gaps between the history book names. My platoon – actually, our entire battalion – fires exactly one shot in anger.

It isn't even really in anger. It's a warning shot, on our first night forward, at an unknown van that ignores the signs and the barbed wire and the flares and gets way too close. We find out the next day that it was our local partners, coming to link up with us.

That's as close as we come to a fire fight. For most of the next sixty-seven days, we're just shot *at*. It's all 'indirect' fire – quite a few Soviet or Iranian Katyusha rockets, I think a mortar two or three times, and once an old but terrifyingly accurate piece of Soviet artillery. Most of it isn't close – a thousand meters to the left or right, way short, a bit deep.

Sometimes it is close. One afternoon, that old piece of Soviet artillery drops three rounds in fifteen seconds within our inner wire. One round lands where a bulldozer was, at most fifteen seconds prior. The driver swan-dives ten feet into the dirt of an anti-tank ditch. A piece of diamond-cut rocket frag bounces off the dog-handler's helmet. No one is hurt.

None of us ever directly see the enemy. We wear our body armor, dig holes, fill sandbags (two hundred sandbags per man, per day), protect the daily supply convoys for building material and artillery ammunition, improve our position, go on patrol, and take cover when we hear the incoming call.

Initially, the aircraft overhead shoot back on our behalf. We send them the coordinates and a few minutes later the point of origin disappears into a grey cloud that rises from the horizon into the crisp blue sky. A few seconds after we see the smoke rise, we hear the sound of the bomb. We all cheer. Revenge.

Later our own artillery – the reason we're in country – arrives. They fire all day and all night into the city south of us. When we get hit, they race the aircraft to be the first to shoot back. Battalion tells us over the radio that our artillery is shooting back at the point of origin. Otherwise we wouldn't know – we have no idea where the rounds go after they pass over our heads. South, somewhere. Raqqa. Sure. When we know we're shooting back, the guys cheer under the rounds passing right overhead, trailing the tearing sound of their sonic booms.

Most of the targets are at close to max range, requiring the maximum propellant to reach them – five hotel. When the cannon goes off, the concussion shakes the all the dust out of the gunner's clothes at once. It looks like a ghost leaping fully formed from their body.

The regulation says gunners should only fire twelve rounds a day at five hotel, even in combat. At that charge, the gunners get a minor concussion from overpressure every time the cannon fires. On the big days they shoot more than one hundred. They MacGyver extensions to the firing lanyards out of 550 cord to get away from the guns. It doesn't make much difference. Dust cakes in the blood which trickles from their nose and ears.

The rounds from the cannons pass directly over my platoon's holes. At night we lie on our backs and feel the concussion through the earth. The blast from the cannons firing comes through the ground before you hear it. It moves faster in solids than in air. Thirty seconds later you feel the dull thump when the round explodes downrange.

On the opening night of the 'big push,' the ground rumbles all night. The aircraft drop bombs in waves. Our artillery shoots steadily, hour after hour. The Rangers to our north light off with HIMARS – big truck mounted rockets that leave red streaks across the dark sky. The horizon is a sea of flashes.

The next morning everything is quiet. A couple days later, we take our last incoming – fourteen rockets that all land within a couple minutes. A week later, we are relieved. We brief our relieving battalion on the situation, our procedures, what we're worried about, what we've left undone. Our artillery has fired more than five thousand rounds while we're there. By the time ISIS is out of Raqqa and the Marines leave Syria, those four cannons will have fired more than fourteen thousand – more rounds the U.S. forces fired in total in preparation for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. They'll literally have burned out the chrome lining of one of the barrels.

But that's all yet to come. We're just relieved to give them our positions, sign away our ammunition and special weapons, and hear them say they have the fight. We go home.

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We go to combat. We do our jobs. Everyone comes home safe. That's a happy ending. We should be proud.

But are we, really? No one comes home with a good reason to put on a black bracelet. None of us ever even fires our rifle. We don't earn the combat action ribbon. The lance corporal rumor is that the battalion commander submitted it too early, and his boss' boss – the division CG – said 'fuck no, not now, and now not ever.' He's seen too many people get ribbons for being on the other side of a hundred square mile airbase in Iraq that took one mortar round. We don't get a CAR for taking a few incoming rounds – not on his watch. The CAR is a big deal in the infantry. Napoleon said armies fight on their stomachs and for little pieces of colored fabric and he wasn't wrong. It's important to make sure the symbols you're willing to die for actually mean something.

Everyone knows you rate a CAR if you're shot at and you – like, you personally – shoot back. The order says you rate if you have 'rendered satisfactory performance under enemy fire while actively participating in a ground or surface engagement.' But what is 'satisfactory performance'?

'Satisfactory performance' could have meant extreme heroism under fire if our mission was, say, clearing ISIS out of Raqqa. For lance corporals, it would have meant unflinchingly taking point, house after house, room after room, when behind any door, *every* door, might be a homemade bomb, a burst of AK fire, disfigurement, death. For their leaders – me – it would have meant sending the guys I love into those rooms – to die, lose limbs, come out with scars nothing can ever really heal.

The lance corporals spend their days wanting that mission. But especially in the military, just wanting something – no matter how sincerely or desperately – doesn't make it happen. For us, 'satisfactory performance' will remain mundane.

So all the the lance corporals can do is talk endlessly about what could have been, what might yet be. They talk about it on post, staring at the empty desert. They complain about it in the bunker, passing time over endless games of spades. Sometimes late at night, when they can hide their faces behind thick darkness, they'll wonder aloud how they'd measure up, worry that they won't really be tested, worry that means they'll never really know.

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Three months after we get home, I am on a long run with my now-former platoon sergeant. He's getting ready to retire and I'm behind a desk as the assistant operations officer, counting down towards getting out and going to grad school. It's just the two of us now, no platoon. As we turn back towards Camp Horno, we see a medevac helicopter landing on the battalion parade deck.

Lance Corporal Haley was on a run with his platoon that morning. His platoon commander – the best staff sergeant I'll ever meet, then and still – was out with his guys, taking advantage of the last days they have together before they all go their separate ways. They were a good platoon and proud to be one of the few chosen for Syria. That morning PT session was part of their extended goodbye to each other, part of how they remembered who they were and what they did together.

Haley stepped off the trail with his squad to pick up a log. A branch from an old and rotting oak tree chose that moment to give way and fall. It landed on Haley, amputating his arm and killing him.

A week later, I am off work early, sitting at home. I drive back on base and put on my uniform. At 1800, I walk out of the command post and stand facing Basilone Road. Most of the battalion is already there. We're in no particular order or formation on the sidewalk, ranks and companies all mixed

together. As the hearse winds its way through Horno, our salutes rise and fall in a languid wave as Haley's body heads back to his parents.

After the procession has passed, I get back into my car and drive home. The drive takes me north, tracing Haley's route. On every overpass above I-5 the local fire departments stand on top of their trucks, holding up American flags, holding their hands over their hearts. I miss my exit, keep driving north, eyes blurring, flag after flag, all the way to LAX, all the way to the plane which will take Haley home.

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I'm sure a lot of guys from my battalion put Haley's name on their wrists. I separate from active duty shortly after his death and leave Camp Pendleton for good, having never worn a black bracelet. It always felt like I'd be appropriating something solemn and slightly holy without having paid the full measure of its terrible price.

But I get why salty lance corporals want to wear them. I may be an officer but I'm still a grunt. I get that you want to feel like your performance, no matter how satisfactory, entailed more than filling sandbags. It never felt like quite enough to have volunteered, to have said pick me, I want to go, I will kill for my country and live with what that does to me, I will carry with me forever the names of dead teenagers I was responsible for keeping alive, I am ready to pay that price. I feel like it matters – like it matters a whole lot – whether someone took me up on my offer.

You'll be tempted to say that we don't know what we're asking for. Sure, that's fair – we don't. But if you're saying that, you don't either. The guy who really knows? He's the Gunny who stuck around, deploying over and over again, trying to keep his salty lance corporals alive long enough to earn being sad, jaded, jumpy around loud noises. He knows why

they want black bracelets. He wishes he could help them see that volunteering was enough, share the names he carries, pass them the memories, call it a day. He knows it doesn't work that way. So he tells them a war comes every ten years, stay awhile, you'll get your chance.

New Fiction from David Blome: "Bodies"

On a bright December morning, the lieutenant told me the news. An insurgent group in Latifiyah had executed about twenty Iraqi Shiites. Their unburied bodies were still rotting in the desert. We had to do something. We had to help. That's what he said.

"What kind of fucked up bullshit do you have us doing now?" I said.

The lieutenant crossed his arms. "We're helpin' out, Doc. That's why we're here."

"Sir, you can't be serious. After six months, after everything we've been through, we're gonna go risk our lives to clean up a bunch of dead Iraqis?"

"That's right, we're gonna go do our job."

"Pfft."

"Hey, Doc, you just do what you're told." The lieutenant loved that line.

"Roger that." I turned and headed toward the tent looking for Logan. On my way I passed Talal, our Iraqi interpreter.

“Good morning, sir,” Talal said.

“Where’s Logan?”

“Inside, sir.” Talal pointed to the tent. “He is sleeping.”

I nodded, entered the tent, and walked straight to Logan’s cot. He was lying facedown underneath a poncho liner. I sat by his feet.

“Guess you heard,” he said, rolling over. I shook my head. Logan put his arms behind his head and grinned. “You don’t look excited. At least it’s something new.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t give a shit anymore.”

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Three hours later we loaded up the Humvees, did radio checks, and headed toward the gate. As usual Logan and I sat in the back of the trail vehicle. He was smoking. I was staring at the casings lodged between the benches. Some of them were only a few days old. We stopped outside the medical facility on our way off the FOB where a young corpsman was waiting with a stack of body bags. He handed them to Logan then tossed me a box of latex gloves.

From there we drove at full speed toward our destination: a bombed-out munitions facility near Latifiyah. Right as the town came into view we veered off the asphalt and turned onto a dirt road. I kept my head down until Logan nudged my shoulder. “You gotta see this,” he said. I stood up and followed his gaze. He pointed to a gnarled mass of rebar and concrete the size of an SUV. It looked like a gigantic insect.

“Must’ve been a bunker,” I said, pointing to a few more in the

distance. We passed piles of rubble, the wreckage of various structures, a palm tree, and two burned-out vehicles. Tire tracks cut across expanses of dirt and brush. Not a soul in sight. “Hey,” Logan said, “this would be a great place to dump some bodies, wouldn’t it?” I nodded and sat back down. Then the lieutenant’s voice came over the radio.

“The road’s about to fork. Gunny, take your element south. I’m gonna head north.” Without slowing the lieutenant’s element bore right. We made a left and patrolled for another fifteen minutes until Gunny stopped the trucks. “I think we got something,” he said over the radio.

Logan, still standing, pressed his push-to-talk. “What do you see?”

“Don’t see anything, can smell it.”

I leaned forward to look through the windshield. Gunny stepped out of the lead vehicle, walked a few steps off the road, and stood still for a moment. He looked around then walked back to the truck. We started moving again. I stood up and took a deep breath. A sour stench filled my mouth and lungs. I shuttered. Logan wiped his nose.

“Can’t be too far away,” he said.

They weren’t.

“All right, stop the vehicles,” Gunny said. “About fifty meters to the right. Doc, Logan, go see what we got.”

Movement gave them away. Two mangy dogs circling a dark heap. We climbed out of the truck and they trotted off.

“I’m gonna shoot those dirty fuckers if this is what I think it is,” Logan said.

“Bro, I think we both know what this is.” I was breathing through my mouth to avoid the stench, a trick my mother taught me.

“Check it out,” Logan said, pointing with his boot.

An ulna or radius bone. Casings. I looked at Logan. Then at the heap of clothes, shoes, and decomposing flesh. I could see hair, blackened hands, and a few heads. The faces had rotted away.

“I guess we got our bodies,” I said, swallowing hard.

Logan shook his head and spit. “Seriously, man, how do we get stuck doing this shit?” He raised his M-4 and shot one of the dogs. The other ran off.

I reached for my push-to-talk. “Lieutenant, this is Doc, over.”

“Send it, Doc.”

“We have about five to ten bodies here in an advanced stage of decay.”

“Roger, you said advanced stage of decay?”

“Yeah, advanced.”

“Mark the location and keep looking.”

Logan and I exchanged looks. “Keep looking, sir? We found bodies.”

“Doc, we’re looking for a group killed in the last few weeks. Shouldn’t be seeing that much decay.”

Logan laughed. “Apparently the lieutenant’s a fucking coroner now.”

“You should tell him that,” I said. Then I pressed my push-to-

talk. “Roger, sir, we’ll keep looking. What about the bodies we found?”

“Just mark the location.”

“I got the location,” Gunny said, cutting in. “You guys head back to the trucks.”

Logan turned and left. I grabbed a handful of dirt and tossed it over the bodies. When I returned to the trail vehicle, Logan was lighting a cigarette. I sat down, still breathing through my mouth, feeling a little sick. The lieutenant’s voice came over the radio again.

“Gunny, need you to move to us, I think we got ‘em.”

I located the box of latex gloves. As we bounced down the road I shoved a handful into my drop pouch. About ten minutes later the other element came into view. They had stopped next to a circular brick building. Its roof had collapsed, the entrance lacked a door, and parts of the walls were crumbling.

The lieutenant was standing at the entrance, waving. Our truck stopped, and without a word, Logan and I made our way to the entrance. “They in there?” I said to the lieutenant. He nodded and we stepped inside.

Loose rubble covered the floor. A cloudless sky had replaced the roof. Against the bare walls leaned eighteen bodies, shoulder to shoulder. All men. Each shot in the head, some more than once. Powder burns speckled their swollen and disfigured faces. The casings said AK-47. All wore button-up shirts tucked neatly into dress pants. Their hands were unbound. One had a note lying near his feet.

We just stared until Logan said, “What do you think, sir, been dead a few weeks?”

“Yeah, Logan, I’d say so. Doc, would you agree?”

I leaned down and picked up the note.

“Doc, would you agree?”

“With what?”

“That they’ve been dead two weeks.”

“Sir, I’m a combat medic. I have no idea.” I held out the note. “Should we give this to Talal?”

“Why don’t *you* give it to him?”

“Be happy to.” I pressed my push-to-talk and walked toward the entrance. “Somebody send Talal into the building.” Talal came running. I handed him the note. He took it with both hands and started reading. “What’s it say?” I said.

Talal started nodding. “It say who did this.”

“Go show the lieutenant.”

“Ok, sir.”

I stepped out of the entrance, let Talal pass, and walked toward Gunny’s truck. He opened the door as I approached.

“We don’t have enough body bags,” I said.

“Don’t worry about that. We’re not cleaning this up.”

“You gonna tell the lieutenant that?”

Gunny stared at me for a moment. “Yeah, I’m gonna tell him that.”

I felt relieved. Then Logan and the lieutenant started shouting. We turned to see them sprint out of the building. They slowed to a trot, stopped, and looked back. Both eyed the building as they made their way to us.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Gunny said.

“Something started beeping,” Logan said between breaths. He pointed toward the building. Talal was leaning out of the entrance, motioning for us to join him. Logan shook his head. Talal motioned again.

I looked at Logan. “The place gonna blow?”

Logan smiled. “Maybe,” he said. “C’mon.”

We walked toward the building. Talal stepped out of the entrance, picking at his moustache. I faked a smile. “What happened, Talal?”

“Telephone, sir.”

“What?”

“Telephone.” Talal held a fist to his ear.

We stepped into the building. Talal took my arm and guided me to one of the bodies.

“Sir, this one. Here.” Talal pointed.

I leaned forward to look. Talal backed away. Sure enough, I saw a rectangular bulge in the dead man’s front pocket. I reached into my drop pouch and took out a pair of latex gloves.

“What are you doing?” Logan said from the entrance.

“What’s it look like?” I donned the first glove.

“Dude, seriously.”

I donned the other glove, stepped between the dead man’s legs, and tried to angle my hand into his pocket.

“Goddamnit,” I said.

“What’s the matter?”

I looked back at Logan. His face was wrinkled with disgust. “It’s not gonna work,” I said, “not with him sitting up.” I stood and surveyed the bodies. “Logan, you think these guys are boobytrapped?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. You need a pressure-release fuze to do that. Would’ve blown by now.”

“Okay.”

“Why?”

I leaned over, grabbed the dead man by his ankles, and pulled the body away from the wall. My efforts left a trail of gore and wormlike creatures writhing on the floor. Talal gasped. I held my breath and went right to work. Using my thumb and index finger, I wiggled my hand into the guy’s pocket, pulled out the phone, then turned away and exhaled.

I pressed zero on the pink Nokia and the screen lit up. The Arabic meant nothing to me but the battery icon was about a quarter full. I tried to hand Talal the phone but he backed away with his hands up, shaking his head.

“What’s the matter?” I said. “You want gloves?”

Talal looked at his hands. “Yes, gloves.”

“Let’s go then.” We walked back to the truck. The lieutenant, still holding the note, was talking to Gunny but stopped when he saw the phone in my hand. “Where did you get that?”

“Out of a dead guy’s pocket.”

“You’re serious?”

“What do you think was beeping?”

The lieutenant just stared at the phone. Gunny shifted in his seat and said, “You took it out of his pocket?”

I nodded and dug another pair of gloves out of my drop pouch. “Talal, here, put these on.” Talal didn’t move. “Hurry up,” I said. “Put ‘em on.” Talal took the gloves but started fumbling with them.

“I said hurry up!”

That got him moving. He donned the gloves, cupped his hands, and I handed him the phone.

“Hey, Doc,” the lieutenant said, looking at my face, “you okay?”

I tore the gloves off my hands and dropped them in the dirt.

The lieutenant took a step back and said, “Why don’t you go to the truck? We got it.”

“You wanna hear my suggestion first?” I said.

The lieutenant looked at the building. About five seconds passed. “Sure, what’s your suggestion?”

“Let Talal return that call. He can tell whoever it was where to find the bodies. We’ll leave the body bags and gloves. They can bury their own.”

“You know, Doc, before we left, you were ready to let these guys rot in the desert. I’m glad to see you still care.”

“I’m not sayin’ I care, I just wanna be done with this. Let Talal call that guy.”

“Let me handle this.”

I locked eyes with the lieutenant.

“You wanna handle it?”

“Yeah, let me handle it.”

My fists clenched. “All right, I’ll let you handle it.” I turned and almost walked away. Almost.

“You know what, sir?” I faced the lieutenant. “I’ll do better than that. I’ll let *you* take the body bags out of my truck and *you* do what you want with ’em.” I took a breath, ready to continue, but Gunny lunged between me and the lieutenant and gripped my arm. Hard. “Let’s go,” he said in a low voice.

We started walking. “I could kill him,” I said.

“You could, but what you’re gonna do is go sit down until we leave.”

Logan walked with me to the truck and we climbed into the back together. I sat down, leaned back, and shut my eyes. That stench filled my mouth and lungs.

“Logan?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Who do you think called that guy?”

Logan chuckled. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

I sat up and opened my eyes. “Who do you think it was?”

“No idea,” Logan said, shaking his head, “but somebody’s still looking for him. Kinda sad when you think about it.”

“I know, I’m trying not to.” I leaned back again. “Can I ask you something else?”

“What?”

“How many more you think are out here?”

Logan sat down next to me. “Bodies?” He took out his cigarettes. “Honestly, bro, nothing would surprise me. Could be hundreds. Thousands.” He looked at me and smiled. “Tell you one thing though. Long as mine ain’t one of ‘em, I’m not gonna worry about it too much.”

He had a point. “What do we got,” I said, “two weeks left over here?”

“Sixteen days.”

I nodded and shut my eyes. “I just hope Talal calls that guy.”

New Review from Adrian Bonenberger: Brian Castner’s “‘Stampede’: Disaster and Gold Fever in the Klondike”

My earliest exposure to the literature of 19th century Alaska came in the form of Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*. An adventure to match the dreams of idealistic youth, *Call of the Wild* carried me away, and may have been my first book-length encounter with anthropomorphism. Its characterization of good and evil—of right and wrong, justice, and injustice—has stayed with me to this day.

Even before reading London’s works, though, I’ve a deeper memory—one of Charlie Chaplin’s “The Gold Rush,” an ostensibly

humorous look at the Klondike rush. The film, a smash at the time, came out in 1925, nearly thirty years after the rush to Yukon (in 2021 terms, that would be analogous to someone releasing a movie today about The Gulf War, or perhaps the early Clinton years). Each summer during an annual community bbq, my parents would screen it on an old projector, using actual cylinders of film. We kids would watch the line of prospectors crawling up the mountain in the movie's beginning, what looked like an endless snake in the snow, simultaneously huge, and also tiny when presented against the backdrop of looming snow-filled mountains—a serious prologue to Chaplin's The Tramp's later absurd and treacherous wanderings. Chaplin's choice to begin the comedy on such a realistic and somber note is telling; he can't resist the urge to remind viewers of the vast human suffering that exists as a foundation for his tale.

This is all background on why and how I was prepared to rip through Brian Castner's *Stampede: Gold Fever and Disaster in the Klondike*. I grew up on myths, and anyone else who spent some part of their childhood fantasizing about or watching movies about The Wild West will love *Stampede*, too. For readers who enjoyed the HBO series *Deadwood* and watched *Unforgiven* more than once (by choice), and of course anyone who's read Jack London's *White Fang, The Sea-Wolf*, and *Call of the Wild* will have difficulty closing the book's cover once opened, and, as I did, find themselves making excuses to their spouse about lunch and chores, and carrying it around the house flipping pages, while stumbling over various impediments.

The book follows people who were integral to discovering and sensationalizing the gold that sparked the stampede for which it's named, as well as profiting from it. Its characters include many prominent figures, including a young Jack London. Of particular interest is the way in which Castner disentangles myth and legend from fact, aligning historical misconceptions that were spread far and wide at a time when it

was difficult to correct a narrative once it appeared in a newspaper. In reading *Stampede*, one has the feeling that one is reading as close to the final word on what happened, and how it happened, in the voices of the people who lived the events.

There are so many surprising and extraordinary details woven into the narrative, hardly a page goes by without some new and unexpected turn. London's story was particularly gripping; in addition to being interesting on account of his later writing career, London seems to have been a capable outdoorsman. He survives a winter along with some other comrades, and, before that, helps pilot improvised boats through a section of rapids. One gets a sense that London is able to write so capably about high stakes survival against the odds because he was skillful enough to recognize what success took—and how fickle a thing fortune was, how narrow the line between disaster and wealth. Reading *Stampede*, one understands how London could have come by this understanding as a young adult, and how that influenced his writing.

Readers may also appreciate that Castner—no slouch when it comes to trekking himself—hiked the trail many took from Skagway to the site of the strike. His experience and memory of the terrain helps animate the book, bringing it to life with accounts of the physical landscape.

Stampede doesn't shy away from the uglier parts of history, either. In many ways, the most important and interesting element of *Stampede* is the way it highlights how exploitation of First Nations people was integral to the first strike's discovery. Widespread racism and hostility toward First Nations people occurred during the rush, and afterwards, in their erasure from a narrative that focused on the luck and ingenuity of white prospectors—when the success enjoyed by American and Canadian prospectors depended on First Nations labor and resources. Take away either group, and there is no "Stampede" at all.

Another detail that may interest American audiences is the presence of Donald Trump's grandfather—a Bavarian immigrant named Fredrich Trump, who made his first fortune running a restaurant and brothel (and thereby provided seed money for the Trump family real estate business). For all the gold that was pulled out of the Klondike, and the fortunes made therefrom, far more was made by catering to the appetites of the people flowing into the area. Unscrupulous purveyors of less-than-fine merchandise gladly equipped countless doomed missions with substandard inventory, or took their money in exchange for creature comforts. Some merchants ran a scheme by which they sold equipment to groups that seemed unlikely to succeed, then had agents waiting further down the trail to buy the equipment back at a fraction of the cost once the gullible rubes had a taste of the trail and found it not to their liking.

Those groups of prospectors who turned around, and who paid for their avarice or foolhardy curiosity with their health and thousands or tens of thousands of dollars in today's terms, were the lucky ones. The unlucky or unwise fell victim to the various hazards one could encounter on the 400-mile long trail to the strikes: banditry, disease, avalanche, freezing temperatures, starvation, wild animals, falls, and drowning, to name some of them. Castner captures this exhilarating story in all of its tragic scope—both from the well-known American perspective, and that of a lesser-known and failed Canadian attempt to reach the site of the strike overland.

At the end of Chaplin's "The Gold Rush," The Tramp and his partner are on a ship sailing back to the mainland US. They've become "multi-millionares" from having struck it rich largely through luck, having stumbled upon a "mountain of gold," according to the movie—an apocryphal cultural memory of how wealth was built. A more accurate ending would have them heading back with a small pile—some tens or hundreds of thousands wrested out of the earth, if they were among a

handful of hardworking groups who got to the strikes early. Either that, or they'd have made their money through less legitimate means. In either case, the odds were against them holding onto the money in any meaningful way. The Trumps invested in cheap NYC real estate, eventually the fortune that Donald Trump inherited. Another family of prospecters, a husband-and-wife couple, turned their fortune into more and greater mining operations, dominating a sector of the oil industry in California, a business that was recently sold for over $4 billion. And the man Castner and history ultimately conclude was responsible for striking "gold" in 1896—a First Nations man nicknamed "Skookum Jim"—spent some of his fortune on easy living, but also willed upon his death that the remainder be placed in a substantial trust dedicated to the welfare of his people—a trust that endures to this day.

Different visions for what wealth can accomplish—corporate organization, personal wealth and celebrity, the elevation of a community—reflecting the personalities and priorities of the people who made their fortunes in the Klondike.

The timing couldn't be better for *Stampede*, as modern-day prospectors spend tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars on data processors to "mine" bitcoin hoping to satisfy what amounts to an atavistic urge for something the modern world, the civilized world, cannot provide. As with the original Klondike gold rush, the people who are truly striking it rich are those who are building and selling the hardware—building and maintaining the servers and exchanges—creating the framework by which individuals can gamble in a system that almost guarantees they'll fail or lose. As much as anything else, *Stampede* is a cautionary tale—well-researched history books always are. Maybe that's why there's so few of them, and even fewer written with the skill and power of a page-turner. I greatly enjoyed reading this book, and ended up coming away smarter and wiser for it. If you're thinking about investing in cryptocurrency, remember all those people who trudged up

the Chilkoot and never came back, and buy this book instead. It's cheaper, and will be of more use to you!

New Poetry from Kevin Honold: "Elegy for the Emperor Frederick II"

HERE AND GONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

i.
view from Emigrant, Death Valley

The snowy Amargosas kneel
beside the salt flats stained
with the blue shadows of clouds and the fading
paths of walking rain.

The bitter dust comes back to life.
Dervishes of gypsum and borax
spin across the basin, divine conjurations here and gone,
celestial legerdemain.

The winds entice them, no prayers detain them.
Beloved of heaven but a moment,
then drown themselves
in salt and distance.

ii.
Mesquite Flats

They say the dunes of the basin
pace a vast circle on the desert floor, inch

by inch, a millennial march about the perimeter
of their colossal stone corral until they arrive
back where they began.

Not a grain of sand, they say, escapes this valley,
but each is buried in its turn a thousand years
until disinterred by a chosen wind
that carries the grain to the next dune,
there to be buried once again.

Centuries pass
in this manner: a wild leap then a long
long wait, an elemental orbit
to nowhere—not at all like us or
maybe not.

iii.
Your Majesty had so many questions.
Where is Purgatory, where the Pit?
Below ground? above the clouds?
What strange things to ask when the very
seas and mountains were counted
among the treasures of state!

iv.
Certain winds prevent departure,
wrote a Jin poet during the difficult
months after the Mongols sacked Kaifeng, observing
how breezes compose
abandonment in dead leaves and in memories

of friends no longer with us.
But little troubled was the old master
in his cups, seated on a stool
beside the door to his mountain hut, knowing
the costly scent of haw blossoms
will vanish at a touch of breeze.

Such grace in the face

of hardship and change
is rare, and always has been.

v.
traces of old wildfires in the Panamints

The tangled cries of unseen coyotes echo from hillsides
arrayed with the black skeletons
of junipers torched by the fires
that crossed these hills
ten years ago.
A howling so
joyously unreal, a purling

bright as the waters of Shilohs,
Hiddekels, Pisons,
and many other streams
I'll never walk beside.

vi.
That the intellect would expire
of inanition except it find nourishment
in the world of things, was current wisdom in Frederick's day.
The mysteries of faith were for slaves to proclaim, and so
he called Christ and Moses
arch-deceivers.

Ill-advised citizens who disdained the imperial corvées
inevitably emerged from their beleaguered
towns with their swords hanging from their necks
in token of submission. Anyhow,
he hanged them in the royal forests where
they ripened, split, and fell
like fruit in its proper season.

Stupor mundi he called himself, Wonder of the World,
no longer with us.
Truly, not all his ships, not all the slaves,
not convoys of painted

oxcarts creaking with treasure, nor all the blood
and all the pain will be forgotten
till the last jewel is pawned
for the last war.

vii.
death of Frederick

At the limits of knowledge stand the sentinel
oaks of curiosity and desire, and there he paused,
dispirited and syphilitic.
The contention that those who possess
great power are more terrified
of death than common folk

is probably true. With his own hand he drew the white cowl
over his brow, took the bread of Christ on his tongue
and died on the feast of Saint Lucia.

A period of silence lasting seven nights
was periodically broken, the chronicles say,
by the mournful cries of gibbons trapped in narrow silver
cages in the imperial menagerie.

To this day, Frederick’s
Science of Hunting with Birds remains
the final word on falconry.

viii.
The great wheel of stars
turns above the Chloride Cliffs,
            shedding peace and ancient light.

                        The stars are pinholes in the night’s
blue brocade, so the royal stargazers affirmed,
through which the ethereal fire
                          or the Holy Spirit burns.

In the high pastures, the Herdboy leads the moon by a rope

up and over the Providence Mountains.
The stars—so many silver bells
each of which I must
dust and name before I sleep—

keep company with honest
Orion, who hath no place
to lay his head, who rests
a bony jewel-encrusted
hand upon a crook,
lamenting his meager
flock through the wee hours.

New Poetry from Alise Versella: “Parallels,” “Red-Breasted Sparrows,” “I Wonder If History’s Men Knew They Would Be Great,” “A Fierce Sense of Resolve”

TRENCHES OF MY LUNGS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

PARALLELS

The birds with conviction
Tap out their lyrics in the snow
And their chatter descends upon the mountains

Look how the flowers still struggle to grow
Like lungs filling with air
The soft despair
      of endings
           of so much life lived
It must be written
And then it must be sung
Like the chorus of a sun after a lightning storm
The bees like oboe players thrum
The morning sky an afterbirth of blood
This is how we love
It’s also how hate seeds in the veins
But mostly
Morning’s birthing is how the stars are made
Occasionally
The stars burn out
Like flames in church hall candles
Their ashes floating on the wind
But for centuries death is how time begins
Infinite explosions and black holes
All the songs the Earth sings that we don’t know
The words to
Like psalms in a foreign language
But they have always been my favorites
Like autumn’s blood-red season
Her heavy soil and decay
I love how a little death choreographs
The sycamores in a grand ballet

RED-BREASTED SPARROW

There’s one red-breasted sparrow and he speaks
To me of grief, how snow diseased emerald
Spring, the morning worm dying in his beak
All alone he’ll sleep between twigs nestled

As I am nestled warmly into bed
Goldenrod spears through plants on windowsills

That know not of sickness in heart or head
Mourn not, for there’s glory in winter rose

The map of my veins runs wild with blood
I breathe to fill my lungs unconsciously
Outside the beehive with sweet honey hums
Hexagonal cities, combs built between

These milk bones of mine like geometry
Have faith in the calculations a body sings

I WONDER IF HISTORY’S MEN KNEW THEY WOULD BE GREAT

In case you were wondering
If at all you do wonder
I mean stare off into the space collecting dust particles in the sun
Wonder
I hope you wander forward

Do not get stuck in the loop of reliving
All the conversations you wish you held
Isn’t it funny how we always think of the right remark after the arrow has left the quiver?
Sailed on like great fleets on uncharted seas
Circling around unknown America thinking it was the West Indies
We all just want to discover something

Like a cure for the aching
I hope your daydreams lead you to rejoicing
In the architecture of your body
A city skyline rising
How it glimmers like those dust particles in the sun
I hope you wonder about the things you could become
Not what you have done
I hope you never ruminate on anything you think you missed

That it isn’t here anymore only means there is room on the

gallery walls for new art

Do you understand what I am telling you?

Your mouth is a paint brush; I want the acrylic to speak to me a new language
Teach me a new word for matrimony
That colors and my empty sighs could wed
And the canvas and I

Would bleed a glorious red
                The beautiful ruin of the withering day
How you empty it out for its worth because no gold can stay

In case you were wondering
I dream about the galaxy, turn my mind to stargazing
Believe in little green men terrorizing craters like two-year-old boys ransack the waiting room
We are all waiting for something to begin

Daydream about what that is

I know it to be breathing under water; I am waiting for my gills to appear
I want to swim, Pinocchio in the mouth of the whale

Don’t you see?
Movement is the way the lake ripples, breathing
The sky is a wave cresting
And you could be as great
As history’s greatest men
                If only you believed the way they did.

A FIERCE SENSE OF RESOLVE

Resolutions require revolution
And I have been at battle with the nation of my body since puberty
I have gone to war with my heart as it broke
And broke

And broke
Reinforced the battalions to hold the pieces up
And the bullets ricocheted off the trenches of my lungs
And I swore the fires pillaging the village of my stomach would wipe out the living

I am living like a militia razing the fields of foreign countries
I am burning the boundaries
Rewriting the policies
I am done policing this body

I am done living like I am a war-torn country
A refugee seeking refuge from my own self-pity
I am finished doubting the ability to achieve my dreams
Just because they haven’t happened yet

Civilization was not built easily
There was death in battle and conquerors invading
Trespassers trying to take away
All that I made
Of myself

How dare I
Monarch and sovereign body
Forget that I am royalty
A king
A rajah in the Bhagavad
How dare I lose faith in the ruby red of my blood
Propelling the turbines of this heart

I have resolved to tap this vein
And inundate the land
The great flood once again
Ready your ark and corral your lambs

The fox is on the hunt
I am cunning enough
To see through the lies I tell myself

A kitsune never deceives herself
Never traps herself in the hunter’s snare
She will own the year
And the forest
And the air
Breathe the freedom she pulled from his rib.

New Review from Michael Carson: “Cherry” by Nico Walker

Early on in Nico Walker’s *Cherry*, the narrator, working a dead-end shoe store job to pay for drugs while his parents pay for his college, says that he has a well cultivated sense of shame. This is true. He does. Many people do not. Many people are shameless. They do not care how they degrade themselves as long as society says it’s okay to degrade themselves in this way. Or they are full of shame in an uncultivated way. It just spills out here and there, at rare moments, when they let their guard down. It makes you wonder if they even care about their shame. If they too are shameless as those that are shameless.

That would make everyone shameless except for Nico Walker. I think this might very well be true. I think only Nico Walker feels shame. He is the only writer from the recent wars that I’ve read who has taken his shame and cultivated it to such a degree that it is impossible not to be ashamed of the Iraq War

(or whatever the journalists and historians are calling it now).

He makes you ashamed of your country. He makes you ashamed of yourself. He makes you ashamed of being alive.

It's glorious. *Cherry* is an absolute delight. I have not had this much fun reading a book in a very long time.

Maybe it's because Nico Walker robbed a bunch of banks. Maybe it's because Nico Walker was a bad soldier. Maybe it is because Walker had a "bad" war (whatever that means). Maybe it is because Walker was a junkie. Maybe it is because Walker is actually funny. Maybe it is because Walker can write. Or maybe it's all these bound into one. Maybe the urge to make it about one or another is to miss the point. It shows a terribly uncoordinated sense of shame. It is maybe, even, a little shameless.

So I kind of love this book. Walker's narrator doesn't play fuck fuck games (as they used to say in Ranger school, one of those schools that train us to kill better, to play roles better, to take pride in shamelessness). He gets straight to the point. He knows the ending. Death, indignity, compromise. The ending, as he says, is fucked.

Here he is talking about Emily, the woman that provides a strange and mysterious through-line in the novel, which feels, at times, to be more of a fantasy than anything else, the idea of a woman we might imagine for ourselves but also, miraculously, a woman who insists on being herself:

"The day I met her we went for a walk after class and we ended up in her dorm room. We talked for a while there and then for whatever reason I got to crying, like really bawling-my-fucking-eyes-out crying. I'd already seen everything that was going to happen and it was a nightmare. Something like that. And she was really sweet to me. I don't think there was ever anyone who felt more compassion for weak motherfuckers."

Whoever Emily is, whatever her fictional or physical reality, I love her too. I love this compassion. I love the fact that she disappears and then reappears mysteriously under sewer grates. That she follows the narrator through the war and then into drugs and his life of crime and that she puts ice on his crotch before his final robbery that sends him (and Nico himself) to eight years in jail. That she is always cursing. That she is fucked up, that she sees that it is fucked up, all of it, yet somehow, she still has compassion for a man who says (idiotically, perversely, criminally), “I take all the beautiful things to heart and they fuck my heart until I about die from it.”

She is an ending that is not an ending. She is the possibility of a person. He tries to be good for her. Not jerk off to anyone but her. Not sleep around. Keep her high. He tries to be decent in a world that is not, that cannot be, that does not care about beauty, that does not want to die from beauty so dies all the time, forever and ever.

Mid-deployment, between one succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders and the next succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders, the narrator and other soldiers watch pornography and see that the “unsuspecting” woman wears a wedding ring and that the reality TV pornography is not reality TV pornography.

The narrator says:

“And we know then that life was just a murderous fuckgame and that we had been dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.”

If we don’t have compassion for the weak, for those who don’t have a choice and those who make bad choices, we have nothing.

Or not nothing. Not exactly. We still have Staff Sergeant North.

North looks like Morrisey. North is from Idaho. North is a

killer. He grows to hate the narrator for being incompetent. For being, deep down, a faker. Not a soldier. North disappears from the narrative. But we are told that he survives the war unscathed, that he goes on to bigger and better things. Killers often do.

The narrator is not a killer. It kills him.

He's a medic, though. A bad one. Here's the narrator trying and failing to save an Iraqi that his squad accidentally murdered for leaving his own house at night.

"I should have packed the haji full of gauze, I should have kept packing the wound til I couldn't pack it anymore, til it was packed tight. But I didn't. I should have had him lie on the side he was wounded on. But I forgot. I said I was going to prop the haji's feet on my helmet because he could go into shock if his feet weren't propped up that way. And even though this was true I was only saying it just to say things because there was no exit wound and I didn't know what to do. The haji's eyes rolled up in his head and then came back, focused again, rolled up again. I said I was going to give him morphine to keep him from going into shock.

North said, 'Do what you have to do, doc. You don't have to tell us.'

I gave the haji morphine, so I could look like I was doing something right. I stuck him on his right thigh and went back to working on a line. His arm was thin. I couldn't get a flash. Then I got a flash, but he moved and I lost it.

I said, 'Keep still, you fuck! I'm trying to help you.'

North said, 'Be quiet, doc.'"

The narrator does not listen to North. The narrator is not a professional. He cries. He yells. He makes jokes. He commits crimes. He goes crazy. He counts his failures one by one,

lovingly, like someone with a well cultivated sense of shame. Like Jerry in Edward Albee's play "The Zoo Story" (which provides the epigraph to one of Walker's sections), the narrator won't shut up, won't not fall on his own knife. He is going North from the zoo. To tell his zoo story. Our story. That life is very often a murderous fuck game and that we are almost always dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.

So. This being a fact. What do we do with this? Where do we go from here?

We might laugh at flying babies. Before deployment, the narrator is put in charge of a recruitment "rockwall" in Ohio somewhere. Parents hand him babies and the babies don't weigh enough for the pullies, so they just fly up to the top of the rockwall. The narrator doesn't know what to do but the parents keep on handing him babies. He straps them up and away they go.

We could also, perhaps, be crushed by the beauty of it all, as the narrator often is. This, remember, is what makes him a weak motherfucker in the first place.

Here is Emily and the narrator getting fake married for real extra benefits. She's wearing some kind of gas station attendant uniform and his nose is swollen from a friend's headbutt:

"And we knew at that moment we were the two most beautiful things in the world. How long it lasted, I don't know, but it was true for at least a few minutes. Six billion people in the world and no one had it on us."

Vonnegut once said that there are billions of people in this world and that he supposes they all want dignity.

They do. They do. And sometimes they even get it.

Vonnegut also said remember the nice moments.

Here’s a nice moment from Iraq:

“One time the prisoners all sang together and you could hear them outside the jail and it was very beautiful and it made you feel like an asshole.”

I feel like an asshole after reading this book.

It’s okay. Sometimes it is good to feel like an asshole. Sometimes we need to remember we are assholes. How else could we ever stop being one?

There’s been a lot of controversy lately about the book and the movie and instagram photos. Some say that Walker didn’t write it. Or he doesn’t deserve this after what he did or didn’t do. Blah blah blah. The internet keeps on handing us babies. Away the babies go.

The question is this: Do we want a hero? Or do you want a novelist? I for one have had enough of heroes. Bring on more Nico Walkers. If only because Nico Walker cares about how he degrades himself. He is sensitive to his degradation and the different ways that each one of us degrade ourselves on a daily basis. He lives it, understands it. I would not recommend this way of being to anyone else but Nico Walker. I wouldn’t even recommend it to Nico Walker (not all the time anyway). But I’m glad we got this book out of it. Because that war was fucked. And we should be ashamed.

New Film Review from Larry Abbott: “This is Not a War

Story”

Timothy Reyes (Danny Ramirez), a young Marine Lance Corporal veteran, spends his days riding subway trains throughout New York City. As he travels he pops more and more pills, surrounded by uncaring strangers oblivious to his plight. Eventually he is found in a deserted subway car, dead from an overdose. Dave Van Ronk’s song “Luang Prabang” provides an ironic counterpoint to Reyes’ suicide.

This sequence opens Talia Lugacy’s new film *This Is Not a War Story*. The four-year project, a collaboration which she calls a hybrid narrative, stars Lugacy and Sam Adegoke, and features veterans from the Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq wars who have found that the arts, music, poetry, and especially paper-making, prints, and handmade books, offer a chance to reconnect to others and to the broader society. Paper-making is a collaborative process with a tangible result, a transformation of experience, often traumatic, into art.

Lugacy plays Isabelle Casale, a Marine MP who, newly returned to the States from Iraq, cannot regain her footing. Her relationship with her brother is tentative, and her mother has rejected her, telling her before her deployment that “I don’t want to know nothing about you. You’re not mine anymore.” Incidents she observes on the street lead to flashbacks about her experiences in Iraq.

Lugacy is not a veteran, but she prepared for the role by immersing herself, she says “twenty-five hours a day, eight days a week” in the company of veterans at Frontline Paper. She continues: “I found the Frontline artwork online, and I was very moved by it. I got in touch with them and chased after them until they agreed to be in the movie. The genesis of the film goes back to when I was writing a script that was contending with suicidal ideation and trauma. I had characters that were dealing with those issues. I gravitated to personal

accounts by veterans and realized there was a lot of cross-over in their experience and mine so I thought I'd dig into that."

In a search for some sense of community, Isabelle reluctantly joins a veterans' paper-making workshop. In the workshop old military uniforms are cut up into small sections and become the base material out of which paper is created. Eli Wright, a former Army medic, one of the paper-makers, tells Isabelle that the vets "make handmade paper from military uniforms. We want vets to tell their own story in their own words and images." She admits that she "needs to be around people," and gradually becomes more involved in the workshop activities but hesitates at first to cut up her old uniform. Although it represents the pain and suffering she and others feel, the uniform is also a connection to a definitive part of her past. She leaves the workshop, non-committal.

Another participant in the workshop, Will LaRue (played by Sam Adegoke) is a three-tour veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan. He too has returned home unsettled. In order to regain a sense of meaning he became a peer-to-peer mentor for Timothy Reyes. Will feels intense guilt over Reyes' suicide, thinking he should have prevented it. Even though Will's peer-to-peer mentor, a Vietnam vet, tells Will that Tim's death "ain't on you," this doesn't absolve his guilt. The remorse interferes with his ability to maintain personal relationships.

The stories of Isabelle and Will intersect when he becomes her teacher in the workshop. On her second visit she ambivalently cuts up her old uniform and adds the shreds to the slurry, and Will tells her "everything goes into the vat . . . blood, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Carolina, sweat, Panama . . . " All of these elements of individual and national military experience are incorporated into the final product, embedded in the paper, a visable record of war and its aftermath.

She looks to Will as a type of savior who will help her learn

how to live again. Lugacy notes that “the confrontations and the bond between Will and Isabelle propel them into a deeper questioning of themselves, and into what it means, finally, to want to live.” Lugacy was deliberate in casting Adegoke, and indeed herself, in lead roles. She believes that it was essential to have a Black man portraying a more humanized vet than usually seen on screen. “The fact that our lead is a person of color representing the veteran experience makes the film extremely rare – almost all American films about veterans feature a white male protagonist and deal with the war through this lens.” She also felt it was important that the character of Isabelle not suffer from Military Sexual Trauma. She wanted her character not be defined by MST but to reveal how women “suffer, hurt, fight, and feel remorse and guilt for actions in war, no less than men do.”

Isabelle gradually opens up to Will and the other vets. She tells of her confusion at checkpoints when her CO said that the “only way to tell the good guys from the bad guys . . . the bad guys don’t stop.” But she realized that the good guys, fearful of imprisonment, might not stop either. She also talks about her interaction with detainees that she had to deal with in Iraq, and the guilt she feels for putting sandbags over their heads and confining them for questioning. In a poem she reads to the group of vets, “Detainee” (written by Kevin Basl), she says “I felt the black hole open . . . now they’re ghosts in my thoughts.”

Midway through the film she arrives announced at Sam’s rural home in upstate New York, still seeking his help. “Show me how to fucking live,” she asks him, “I don’t want to be dead.” He is unable to be the guide she hopes for, but they do become closer and tenuously break down the barriers of guilt and confusion. Before she leaves, they inscribe Timothy’s name on luminaria and set them afloat at dusk on Seneca Lake, commemorating his life and in a way letting him go.

After she returns to the city she tries again to re-establish

a relationship with her mother. In an emotionally-wrenching scene, her mother barely acknowledges her, more concerned with her makeup than her daughter. Isabelle leaves, distraught, and walks the streets of Brooklyn while a voice-over by Vietnam vet Everett Cox talks about his PTSD and thoughts of suicide ("I could not cross a high bridge without thinking of stopping and jumping. I must have spent a thousand hours on the George Washington Bridge"). As Isabelle wrestles with her psychological turmoil there is a parallel-action shot to Eli Wright cutting off Cox's uniform for the next round of paper-making, what Wright calls "a rite of passage," a virtual ceremony signaling a transition from the military world to the civilian world. He adds, "while cutting Everett's uniform off in the film, I said something about how we must expose the wounds in order to treat them. I approach the cutting of a uniform with care and compassion, just as I was trained to do as a combat medic."

Isabelle's stops on a bridge, staring down. Is she pondering a jump? The final shot of the film is her return to the workshop, choosing life, however painful, over death. There are no perfect resolutions.

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Lugacy has said of her film that "a person who views it will have their heart stirred awake and their mind charged with thoughts and questions. The film isn't telling you how to feel or what to think. It's capturing an experience of trauma, and an experience of people trying to deal with trauma. The viewer goes through the emotional experience rather than being told what to think or believe." A few lines from Jan Barry's poem "The Longest War" could be a coda to the film: "The longest nightmare/Never seems to/Ever/Quite come/To/An end."

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Lugacy was born and raised in New York City, and started

watching movies seriously in her early teens. She worked in various positions in film production in her mid-teens, from production assistant to assistant director to writer, actress, editor, producer, and director. She graduated from high school a year early and received her degree in film from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Along the way, she was influenced by such directors as Andrei Tarkovsky, Stanley Kubrick, Ingmar Bergman, Robert Altman, Roman Polanski, and David Lynch.

Lugacy is currently Assistant Professor of Screen Studies at Eugene Lang College of the New School. She made her "breakthrough" film in 2007, *Descent*, starring Rosario Dawson. *This Is Not a War Story* is featured at the San Francisco IndieFest until February 21 and can be screened virtually. (https://sfindiefest2021.eventive.org/films/5fd0240a140bcb0075ea380e).

Cast Interviews:

Jan Barry, a Vietnam vet from "the class of '63," is a writer, editor, and activist. He is the co-editor of two seminal anthologies of Vietnam veterans' poetry, *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972) and *Demilitarized Zones* (1976). In 1981 he edited *Peace Is Our Profession*, in which artists and writers confront the threat of nuclear war. More recent work includes *Life After War* (2012), *Art Work in Progress* (2015) and *Hudson River Views* (2015).

Kevin Basl served is the Army as a Mobile Radio Operator with deployments to Iraq in 2005 and 2007-08. He co-edited the 2014 *Warrior Writers* anthology, and co-wrote *Warrior Writers Guide: How to Facilitate Writing Workshops for Veterans* (2018), and is the author of numerous essays about veterans. He curated "Rendezvous with Death: A Century of War Poetry by Veterans" for the 2019 National Veterans Art Museum Triennial. Basl received his MFA in fiction writing from Temple University.

Eli Wright was deployed to Ramadi, Iraq in 2003-04 with the 1st Infantry Division and served as a combat medic. His poetry appeared in the 2008 and 2014*Warrior Writers* anthologies. As a social justice activist he worked as a medic at Standing Rock in 2016 as part of a contingent of veterans. He now teaches paper-making to vets.

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Larry Abbott: Can you describe the collaboration process for writing the script?

Kevin Basl: Talia approached us a few years ago, interested in including a papermaking workshop in a film she was writing. Over a couple years, she regularly visited our art groups in New Jersey and Ithaca, NY. We would simply talk, make paper—just do what we usually do. She brought drafts of her script and we would give her feedback. In some instances, she asked us to create new work for the film. For example, Nathan and Eli made a couple silkscreen prints—one was a memorial to a friend who had died by his own hand during the writing of the film. I wrote two poems for Isabelle's character, "The Detainee" and "The World You Once Loved." I also wrote the song "The Wound That Will Not Heal." So the process was fruitful for all involved. Incidentally, most of the dialogue between the veterans in the film is improvised. We're just being ourselves. It's all very personal.

Eli Wright: Talia consulted extensively with me and the other vets involved in the film to develop improvisational dialogue with very loose guidelines, and then allowed us to just be ourselves when the camera was recording. The dialogue represented our typical conversations when hanging around the studio space and doing work together. The bulk of the script was written primarily for the two main characters Will and Isabelle, which she wrote and revised for nearly two years before shooting.

Larry Abbott: What is the importance of the film to Vietnam vets? Current vets? Civilians?

Jan Barry: It provides a window into the anguish of PTSD and survivor guilt and some creative ways of coping in collaboration with other vets and allies.

Kevin Basl: The film, hopefully, challenges a lot of cliches about veterans. Our attitudes toward military service are layered, nuanced. Many of us are not proud of what we did in the military. Hopefully the film will serve as a history lesson of sorts, too. I'm continually shocked by how little American citizens know about the post-9/11 wars—like the fact that we're still fighting them.

Eli Wright: I think the importance of this film for both veterans and civilians is that it portrays an often unrecognized or under-represented story– that many of us carry home a deep sense of betrayal and moral injury related to our combat experiences which has rarely been honestly or accurately portrayed in the polished patriotic propaganda that Hollywood has given us over the years. This film finally challenges that convention by casting real veterans to tell our own stories, instead of exclusively casting actors to tell our stories for us.

Larry Abbott: Do you see similarities between Vietnam vets and today's vets? In the film there seemed to be a feeling of camaraderie between the generations.

Jan Barry: Yes, there was a lot of camaraderie in this process of making art together. In many cases, vets of current wars are sons/daughters of Vietnam vets.

Kevin Basl: Many Vietnam War veterans have been mentors to us post-9/11 veterans, especially in anti-war activist circles and artist communities, precisely what's represented in *This Is Not a War Story*. I've learned a lot from Jan and Walt [Nygard], the Vietnam veterans in the workshop in the film.

We've sat in many writing workshops together, protested together, turned a lot of uniforms into paper together. What you're seeing on film are natural conversations we had while the camera rolled, totally impromptu. It's exactly the sort of conversations you'd hear if you stopped in at a papermaking workshop on any given Sunday.

Eli Wright: The camaraderie between generations that you see in this film is authentic because the elder veterans understood the anger and confusion that so many of us were struggling with when we first came home. We consider them as wise uncles and mentors who have helped guide us back to "the world" and divert us away from some of the self-destructive habits which were so rampant among their generation. They have taught us how to survive the biggest threat we face: ourselves.

Larry Abbot: In the film, paper-making is a path toward healing, transforming experience into art, finding new meaning. Jan, you've done some music with Darden Smith. What is the importance of the arts to the "healing process"?

Jan Barry: In making paper together from combat uniforms, vets often are triggered by an experience, which they may share with the group. The discussion then focuses on how to tell that story—visually, in writing, some combination. And work is done on it collaboratively. This is very different from vets getting together in a bar and feeling one has to top each other's war stories. Making art suggests there are creative ways to deal with life's current problems.

Kevin Basl: Art encourages people to see the world afresh, to transform things, to learn, to teach, to collaborate, to survive. In this sense, the process of traditional hand-papermaking is not only a great metaphor, but is literally all of those things happening simultaneously. In my experience, art, writing and music especially, have allowed me to explore my memories, my conscience, my dreams, and my political

convictions in a way I've not been able to elsewhere. I often write and make art with friends, but it's also a private, daily practice for me, like meditation. And like meditation, it can be as frustrating as it is rewarding. But it always keeps my mind working, always keeps me moving forward, and often takes me to interesting places. It reminds me that life is worth living.

I've been a musician since I was a child. I played hand bells in church, then later drums in the school marching band and guitar in jazz band. I also played in a rock band with friends in high school and college before the Army—playing bars, festivals, parties. I always had a guitar with me in the Army.

I started writing as a teenager, but didn't start taking it seriously until after the Army. What's important about the Army and deploying to Iraq in my artistic development is that my military experience actually gave me something to say. I learned a lot about myself and my country in that five years' time. After I got out of the Army and finished my MFA in writing, I got connected with a lot of veterans through Iraq Veterans Against the War and Warrior Writers who were using art to express themselves and build their own community and culture. It was a natural fit for me, and I got completely immersed in that world for about five years. I'm still deeply involved, but during those years that work is all I really did. Perhaps most importantly, I made a lot of great friends during that time.

Eli Wright: The work we do has always blurred the lines between art and craft. I've always seen papermaking as an important bridge between worlds. Through the craft of papermaking, we learn to build connections between communities, between individuals, between cultures, and also between past, present, and future. Through the art we create on our paper, we've learned ways to make meaning out of complicated and difficult experiences. We've learned how to express through images that which cannot be said in words.

Many of us tend to shy away from portraying this as a "healing" process, because it doesn't necessarily serve that purpose to everyone who engages with it. But for me, it has been incredibly helpful in processing trauma and grief, learning the value of mindfulness through a simple and repetitive creative process, and teaching me the value of solidarity within a community of fellow survivors. I've never claimed this work will save anyone's life, but it certainly saved mine.

Larry Abbott: Any final thoughts?

Kevin Basl: I sing "The Wound That Will Not Heal" in a bitter sort of voice—a voice often found in the poetry of veterans of unpopular wars. It's meant to be a confrontational song. It's meant to haunt the listener. The song is my answer to the question: why are so many veterans killing themselves? My answer—perhaps an unpopular one—has to do with the shame of participating in an unnecessary, costly war and then having the society that sent you want to simply move on as if nothing happened. No lessons learned, no change of course. Such circumstances can create a profound dissonance, warping a veteran's sense of justice, sense of virtue, sense of purpose. It can lead to self-loathing, and can really make a person feel like an outsider unless they get connected with a group of like-minded people who can help a person understand and give voice to such sentiments in a healthy way.

Eli Wright: I would like to point out something that I think is relevant about the recent storming of the U.S. Capitol. In the film, I tell a true story of how a large formation of vets, myself included, peacefully faced down an angry mob of riot cops at the 2008 DNC protests, without any injuries or arrests. So far, approximately 25% of those arrested for storming the Capitol are veterans. For far too long, many of us have been fighting against the stereotype that we're all a bunch of crazy right-wingers who love violence. If you compare footage of our standoff in 2008 versus what recently happened

in D.C., it’s clear that we are not the same. *This Is Not a War Story* shows the world that veterans are not a monolith, we are complex and unique individuals just like anyone else. Many of us who’ve been to war and experienced the worst of humanity have been fighting like hell to make peace in the world through the disciplined practice of non-violence. I hope this film can show the world that we exist, we’ve always been here, and, sadly, we’re not going away.