New Nonfiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: “Alabama Village”

(Editor’s Note: Some names have been changed for privacy.)

The three white, rectangular buildings of Light of the Village ministry stand bright as a smile in the clammy humidity of a late Sunday afternoon in southern Alabama. A deep red cross rises above a stone walk where disturbed horseflies make a sharp buzzsaw of noise. On one of several bare trees, a cracked two-by-four scrawled with the message, *Holy Spirit I have You,* hangs unevenly. Arthur James Williams Sr., better known as Mr. Arthur, nailed up that sign and dozens more like it all around Alabama Village, an impoverished neighborhood in the town of Prichard.

I have just parked outside Light of the Village to meet its founders, John and Dolores Eads. They have been in Prichard since 2002 sharing their Christian faith. A friend told me about them. Before I became a reporter, I had been a social worker. Since then, I’ve been covering families who fall well below the news radar, and if in the unlikely or unfortunate event become noteworthy, are generally viewed with disdain. The residents of the Village fall into that category. Decades ago, white flight and economic downturns turned Prichard, and Alabama Village in particular, into a brutal place. Today, the chance to be a victim of violent or property crime in any given year is 1-in-19, making this town of 22,000 just outside Mobile one of the most dangerous places to live in America.

Because of the violence, some people have compared the Village to Syria. When I lived in Illinois, people called Chicago “Chiraq” because of its astronomical homicide rate——as many as forty shootings some weekends. But that was Chicago. It was

hard to believe that an obscure neighborhood in an equally obscure small town would in its own way be as bad, and yet that's what news reports implied. I'd worked in Syria as a reporter. That experience and my social services background made Prichard an irresistible draw as did John and Dolores. To work in the Village they had to be more than do-good, Jesus people who provide free after-school programs, meals, and other services, as well as Bible study. I called John. Totally cool, he said when I told him I wanted to spend two weeks in the Village. In late February 2021, I left my San Diego home for Alabama.

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As I drove into Prichard, I saw the collapsed roofs of abandoned homes punctured by trees that had muscled through them. Canted doors, buckled floors, charred outlets, fractured walls. The rotted remains of broken porches turned black by weather and rot. Chips of peeled paint dusted the ground and the scat of feral dogs.. Splintered steps sagged inward. Corroded stoves dust-covered and entwined in cobwebs. Pans and pots on stilled burners. The head of a doll rested against the leg of a broken chair beside a rusted, metal bed frame. Streets that once knitted the community together had been submerged beneath weeds and heaps of abandoned couches, mattresses, toilets, boxes and stuffed garbage bags. The air smelled rancid. *Destination*, the brand of one forsaken tire. There was no sound.

Now, as I get out of my car, a man calls to me and I see John and Dolores and a handful of staff and volunteers across the street on the porch of a house newly rehabilitated by the ministry. John adjusts his cap against the sun. Casually and unhurried, he introduces me to everyone. Dolores has a dome of short, dark hair and wears wide glasses. Her voice exudes joy. Hey Malcolm! she shouts, as if I'm the highlight of her afternoon. Then I follow John back to the ministry. He unlocks the front door and we walk inside and pause beside a wall

plastered with photographs of smiling children and teenagers. Some of them wear blue Light of the Village T-shirts. Other pictures show spent bullets, a splintered window, a shell casing.

One of the volunteers you just met, Jamez Montgomery, that's his uncle Mayo, John says, pointing to a photo of a grinning young man with dreadlocks. Mayo was shot. Jamez would be a great person for you to talk to you. That would be pretty cool. We got Jesse. You haven't met him. That's his mom, Cindy. She was killed. He'd love to talk to you. He's going to a community college.

Mayo. Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

John points to the photo of the shell casing.

Keeping it real, he says. We never forget where we are.

We walk back outside, squint against the glare. John shouts to Dolores, I cruise and distribute fruit.

The staff and volunteers collect boxes of donated oranges and grapefruit and load a pickup. I hop in the back with John, Jamez and Dacino Dees. Dacino works for the ministry. He grew up in the Village and had no idea what to make of John and Dolores. He was about eight years old when he first saw them playing games with other children. Why're these white people out here messing with kids? he wondered. White people bought drugs in the Village and left. They didn't play with children. Then John walked over and talked to his stepdad and persuaded him to let Dacino join the other kids.

My birthday's tomorrow, Mr. John. Can I drive? Jamez asks.

You ain't driving.

I'll be fifteen.

Now you sure ain’t driving.

Jamez laughs. He has been coming to the ministry since he was five. He has known John and Dolores for so long he calls them his godparents.

Let’s roll! John shouts.

The pickup turns out of the ministry, jostling on the pitted road.

We got oranges and grapefruit, Bo. John shouts at a man peering at us from behind the screen door of a listing house.

I’ll take a few.

Alright, Bo.

John calls almost everyone, Bo——men and women, boys and girls, sparing himself embarrassment when he forgets a name.

Thanks, Mr. John.

See you later, Bo!

We continue past a green house that opens as a juke joint at night. It stands in a block John calls the Donut Shop, an area used by drug dealers. Like a donut shop, 24/7, it never closes. Shirtless young men in blue jeans linger, watching us.

Bingo, what’s up, man? Want some fruit? Just off the tree.

I see the leaves on it, Mr. John.

That means it’s fresh. You doing good?

Yeah.

John doesn’t judge the young men before him. Drug dealing does not define the entire person. However, he does not underestimate how quickly his interactions with them can go off the rails. Christians say, God will protect you. Yes, John

agrees, and wisdom too. Wisdom has taught him to linger in the Donut Shop long enough to maintain neighborhood connections and no longer.

Keeping it real, he says.

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After we distribute the fruit, Jamez leaves for the apartment of his grandmother, Deborah Lacey. He expects her and one of his aunts to take him out for his birthday. When he was little, they would go to Chuck E Cheese. Now he prefers McDonald's. He especially likes Big Macs. However, he enjoys Chick-fil-A, too, and might go there.

Jamez and his grandmother used to live on Hale Drive in the Village, and he often heard gunshots. If the shots sounded close, he would run into the house. If not, he didn't worry about it. He has seen people firing guns on New Year's Eve but never at people.

Jamez has lost family. His grandmother's son, Uncle Mayo, was shot. His great-great grandmother, an aunt and a baby cousin have also died.. The baby drank lighter fluid. Jamez doesn't know how the aunt died. His great-great grandmother stopped breathing. She was old. Things are cool and then the next thing he knows someone's gone.

When Mayo died, his mother called him. Your uncle's been shot at your grandmother's house, she said. Jamez started running. When he reached Hale Drive he saw everyone crying and he began weeping. Blood pooled in the yard. The family had an open casket funeral. When Jamez touched the body it felt hard and not like Mayo. Everything about him was gone.

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Sixty-five-year-old Deborah Lacey left Alabama Village with her grandchildren after Mayo died. She hopes Jamez lives a better life. She tells him right from wrong. His older

brother, Jeremiah lives in Atlanta with his daddy. He'll turn eighteen soon and graduate from high school. He calls her every day. His younger brother, Jerry, got caught with marijuana and a judge referred him to a drug program for six months. Deborah took the boys just after they were born. Their mother, her daughter, was off into other things. Not drugs just running wild. Still is.

Mayo, her baby son, was twenty-seven when he died. He had just come from his girlfriend's place and had pulled up to his house when someone shot him from a pickup with a 9 mm pistol. Deborah spent days afterward walking and weeping. You killed him! she screamed. She lost her mind for a minute and has still not recovered. A niece took her in. Mayo sold a little bit of weed but everybody did. Deborah doesn't understand anything anymore.

A small, eight-month-old dog the size of a Chihuahua with long, brown hair scrambles in circles on her lap. Deborah bought her for company and calls her Kizzy. The dog reminds her of Mayo. Hyped up just like him. When he was a boy, he participated in the ministry's after-school programs and summer camp, and he attended church on Sundays. In those days, Deborah worked at a Wendy's and cleaned offices. Then she got shot and had to quit. It was a big help to have Mayo at Light of the Village because she couldn't handle him all day while she recovered. It wasn't a bad wound. Bad enough, she supposes. Two people started shooting at each other just as she stepped off a bus. She hadn't walked but a minute when a bullet entered the calves of both legs. It didn't hurt, but it burned something awful. The bus driver called 911. Deborah was laid up for a good little while.

Alabama Village has been rough for so long it's hard for her to say when it started going downhill. She has seen just two shootings——Mayo's and her own——and that was enough. It scares her. She stays out of their way. She was caught in that crossfire once and that was once too many.

Deborah can’t hardly remember her younger days. She grew up in Prichard but not in the Village, and was into a little bit of everything. Whatever wasn’t tied down she stole, money mostly. Never broke into houses. She robbed people on the street. No guns. She was afraid of guns. Instead she used a bat or a stick, whatever was available to intimidate people. She spent five years in the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women and learned to leave stuff alone that didn’t belong to her and to live a better life if she didn’t want to spend it in jail. She kept her head down and got into a work release program making baskets in a Birmingham factory. Then the prison placed her with a telemarketing company that sold light bulbs. That didn’t work out. People would often cuss, become irrational, and worse, and company rules forbade her to respond in kind. But she broke those rules more than once and returned to making baskets.

Deborah tells her grandchildren how crazy she was at their age and where it led. She told Mayo the same thing. Sometimes he listened; sometimes he didn’t.

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Dacino picks me up at my hotel the next morning. He spent the night at the house of one of his sisters in Gulf Village, a project adjacent to the ministry. They sat on the porch, heard gunshots, and hurried inside to a room away from the road.

Anybody can get shot, he tells me. When he was little, older people ran the streets. Now it’s all younger people. Back in the day, they didn’t shoot in broad daylight like they do now. He could play outside but was aware of his boundaries. No one told him. He just knew, like instinct passed down from one generation to the next. He’d sometimes walk around, feel uneasy, and think, Yeah, I’m not going over there.

He was eight years old when he saw his first shooting. He and his brothers, Marco and Jamichael, and their stepdad saw a man

chase and shoot another man in front of a Prichard convenience store. Smoke flashed out of the shotgun and Dacino's legs turned to noodles. He had gone to the store on his scooter and after what he had seen, he couldn't move. The ambulance took a while to arrive, and the the wounded man bled out in front of the store. The storeowner wouldn't let him inside. He didn't want blood on the floor. Dacino's stepdad said, Ya'll get over here, and they went to another store across the street.

That night, Dacino refused to go outside. He didn't want to walk into something that could get him killed. He knows homeboys who hang out and sell drugs but never joins them. He doesn't go around toting a gun. Everybody knows he won't pull a weapon and try to kill or rob someone. That's not him. He's Dacino from the ministry. They do their thing, and he does his.

When he leaves the Village, the absence of gunshots unnerves him. Man, he thinks, this is too quiet for me. When he enters a building, he makes a note of every exit in case someone starts shooting, but nothing happens. He lies awake at night thinking of things he's seen. In the Village, his mind is going, going, going. He doesn't have time to dwell on bad stuff.

His mother rarely let Dacino and his siblings outside when they were young. He played on the football team at his middle school just to get out of the house. Even when the season finished, he would tell his mother and stepdad, I'll be at football practice. His parents never came to the games, so how would they know?

He never met his biological father. One year, Dacino got a text from him on April 15: *Happy birthday*. Dacino was born on March 15. He didn't reply. Dacino does remember his stepfather, though. He doesn't know how he and his mother met. Maybe he stole her heart because he sure knew how to steal everything else. One weekend, he walked into a store and left

a few minutes later with a slab of ribs stuffed down his pants. No one noticed. He was that good.

When he didn’t steal, he beat Dacino and his siblings until they gave him money they had earned cutting grass. I can make it work with this, he’d say, and leave the house to buy drugs. Sober, he didn’t have a kind thing to say about anyone. High, he was nicer. After sixteen years, he left Dacino’s family for his own in Michigan.

Dacino’s mother never commented on his behavior. In fact, she rarely talked. She never whooped Dacino or got on him about not doing homework and skipping classes. He wishes she had because then he might have graduated from high school. Now, he’s studying for his GED certificate and wants to earn a degree in physical therapy. About two years ago, he developed a staph infection and now he can’t bend the fingers in his left hand. He would like to help others with similar problems. No one knows how he contracted the infection. His arm just started swelling one day. He went to three emergency rooms and each one dismissed the problem as tendonitis. This ain’t no tendonitis, not with my arm this big, Dacino said. The doctors at a fourth ER agreed and rushed him into surgery. John and Dolores stayed with him the whole time. His mother never visited.

Sometimes children need their parents to give them a shove, Dacino thinks. Hearing his stepdad telling him he’d be nothing and his momma sitting there letting him be nothing made him think he was nothing. Dacino assumes she just didn’t know how to raise kids because she lost her parents at a young age. She had her first child at fifteen. Eight followed. She moved in with her older sister and just winged it. Dacino always felt like a stranger in her house.

She’s my mother, Dacino tells me, but that’s it.

Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

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When we reach the ministry, Dacino takes me inside and shows me a wall with forty-three photographs of people who have died in the Village since 2005. He points at the pictures, speaks in a matter-of-fact tone of voice:

He got killed on D Block.

He got killed in Gulf Village.

He got killed walking to a store.

He drowned.

He got killed by his cousin.

I notice a photo of Mayo. Dacino had been on D block near Hale Drive the day he died and heard the gunfire that killed him. I hope no one got shot, he thought, and then he heard screaming from Hale Drive. He walked toward the noise and saw a man futilely giving Mayo CPR. Everybody liked Mayo. No one in the neighborhood would have shot him. It was somebody from outside the Village, Dacino feels sure, somebody he had dealings with. The guy saw him and found his opportunity. Nobody was around but Miss Deborah. Had Mayo been with a friend they could have shot back and the guy wouldn’t have made it out. That was a crazy day.

Another photo shows a baby boy who died of a gunshot wound in 2020. This morning I’m meeting his father, Corey Davis, better known as Big Man. He sits in the parking lot waiting for me in a red Dodge Charger R/T. I get in on the passenger side. Big Man slouches behind the wheel, barely glancing at me. Small diamonds are set in his teeth. He wears a red sweatsuit that he says cost $1,500. He paid $38,000 for the car. It took him a minute to get accustomed to the push button start. He owns five other cars including a Oldsmobile Delta 88 and a 1989

Chevy Caprice.

As I begin to ask my first question, Big Man raises a hand to let me know he will speak first. He never would have agreed to see me if Mr. John had not asked him, he says. He loves Mr. John and Miss Dolores. They help anyone. He has never seen two people give of themselves as they do. They pay bills, provide food, clothes, and talk about Jesus like he's this cool dude who lives down the block. They do more than they should, way more. Big Man will let no harm come to them.

Now he lets me talk. I ask him if he'll introduce me around in the Village. He shakes his head. No. If he took me to someone's house, they'd want to know why. They could make a bigger deal out of it than necessary and that could lead to a shooting. On the other hand, if I walk around by myself, people will want to sell me drugs. Why else would I be there? He suggests I stick close to the ministry.

Rain begins falling and he turns on the windshield wipers and the defrost, dialing down the heat when it gets too hot. He can't say how he earned his name. He weighed a few pounds more than he should have as a boy and he supposes his family decided to call him Big Man. No one uses his real name except girls. At twenty-five he has been with a few and has four children, including a baby whose photo I saw on the wall, Corey Jr.

The baby had been with his mother and her boyfriend the night he died. His mother called Big Man and told him to come to the hospital. He assumed his son had fallen, broken a bone or something. When he reached the emergency room, baby Corey's mother just looked at him. The look in her eyes told him it was worse than he thought, much worse. Something deep had happened, something bad deep. Then she told him: Baby Corey had shot himself in the head while she was in the shower and her boyfriend slept. Big Man went off, shouting and yelling and hitting walls. Two security officers held him. They told

him Corey Jr. should be OK. Big Man thinks they just wanted to calm him, but they only added to his confusion. Even if Junior is OK, he thought, he won't be the same person. He was shot in the head. Something's going to be missing. Something won't be right. Alive or dead, Big Man will have lost his son.

He called John and they met at the ministry, prayed, and talked. That was good as far as it went but Big Man needed something more. Counseling wasn't going to work. He stayed in his house for three months crying and smoking weed to ease his mind. Every time he thinks about his son he breaks down. The boyfriend is in jail for drugs. When he gets out there's no telling what Big Man will do. One thing's for sure: He'll want him to explain how a two-year-old lifted a pistol and shot himself.

Big Man has spent his entire life in the Village. His father was in and out of prison. He had two mothers, his real momma and an auntie who treated him as her own son. When he needed them, they took care of him. His father did his part when he was out. Big Man hears from him but doesn't need him now that he's grown.

He was about six or seven when John and Dolores established the ministry. His family was living just down the street. Big Man wondered what they wanted, these two white people. They helped him and other kids but once he was grown there wasn't much more they could do. No one, even John and Dolores, can tell an adult how to behave. They help families meet their needs but people will always have wants too, and when Big Man wanted something and Light of the Village didn't have it, he snatched it.

He counts on his fingers: at fourteen, he did a year in juvenile. Got out for three, four months and went back in for another year. Went back again when he was seventeen, got out at eighteen. Went in once more at twenty-three, got out at twenty-four. Most of it for selling drugs. But was never

arrested for distribution, just possession.

John and Dolores would visit Big Man in prison and John would ask him what he planned to do to be a better person when he got out, and Big Man always answered, I'm going to change. But he never did. He meant what he said, but once he hit the streets his mind moved in an entirely different direction. What made sense in prison no longer applied.

He and another dude got into it about a girl one time. The girl told Big Man she was with him and then turned around and told the dude he was her man. The dude saw them together one day and thought Big Man was trying to backdoor him. He pulled out a gun and Big Man drew his. Look, I'm going to put my gun down, Big Man told him. I ain't trying to go there with you about no girl. I didn't know you were talking to her. The dude put up his gun. You right, he told Big Man.

Sometimes Big Man wonders what would have happened if he had started shooting. Where would he be now? Where would the dude be? Would they even be alive?

Big Man likes to wash cars and do construction projects with a friend he met in prison. He does other things to make money but that's not for me to know. He wants to buy an eighteen-wheeler and travel state to state delivering whatever. See a little of the country and get out of the Village but he can't conceive of living anywhere else. How do you leave everything you know? he wonders. If he could go back in time, he'd graduate from high school, enroll in college, and be a nerd. But it's too late for that. He doesn't think he'd fit in. He's smart but he doesn't believe he has the kind of intelligence necessary for school. If he flunked out, people would know and that would affect their opinion of him. He'd have to assert his pride and that would result in a shooting. He can avoid all that by not going. However if he could get an athletic scholarship, he'd sign up for college today. But he'd have to be good. He was once but not now, too fat. If a coach told

him, You work out, you can play football, he would do that. Get your body back in shape and in six months we'll let you play sports, he'd be on it. But that won't happen. No one will say that to him. He is who he is: Big Man. That's how people know him. They look up to him. He's respected. Who would he be outside the Village?

Big Man has dreams of homeboys dying, and then they die for real. Like a guy everyone called Dirty. Big Man dreamed about him getting shot and two months later someone killed him. He has dreams of getting shot himself. The bad stuff in his dreams comes true. He wishes he could leave the Village. He wishes he could stop dreaming.

Dolores is pleased I met Big Man. Just the other month he dropped by the ministry. She hadn't seen him for she doesn't know how long. John was out. Big Man offered to take them to lunch and he would pay for it. In all their years in the Village, no one had ever offered to treat them to a meal. Anywhere you want, Big Man said.

He was blown away that they had bought a house across the street. The house, Dolores explained, would be for kids who need a place to stay. Two or three—not many—and Dacino would live there to provide supervision. Big Man told her she needed to establish rules: Don't let them listen to rap music with bad words. No violent video games. No girls in the house. Bible study should be mandatory and held every day. Rules should be posted on the wall.

He asked Dolores if she could help him apply for a commercial driver's license. Yes, she said. Whatever you need to do, let's do it.

Big Man told her that at Christmas he bought bikes and passed them out to children. When he hears of someone in need, he helps with food and a hotel room. Big Man, Dolores thought, wanted her to know he was doing good things.

John pulled up and they joked about a time when they treated Big Man and some other kids to a buffet at a Golden Corral restaurant in Mobile. Big Man was about ten. He took an entire chocolate cake and brought it back to the table. What are you doing? Dolores and John asked. They were so embarrassed. Big Man could have cared less. He sat down and started eating the cake. We can't take you anywhere! they said.

Big Man laughed at the memory, a soft kind of laugh, almost shy. Dolores still saw the boy in him.

You're always welcome here, she said.

As he left, she had no idea when or if she'd see him again. She knew the rumors about what fueled his lifestyle. His money didn't come from selling candy, and she worried where that could lead.


Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

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In many ways, Dolores feels she has been training to do ministry work since she was a child. She and her family lived across the street from their parish church in Las Cruces, New Mexico and she went to Mass with her family every Sunday and attended all the holy days of obligation. Before she met John, Dolores had considered becoming a nun.

She hates the idea that people think of the Village as a place to avoid. To her the families here mean more than the crime that makes the news. A person can know God and still grapple with temptation, she believes. She sees the person behind the gun. They are friendly and funny. They struggle, grieve, and yet survive. It amazes her how they persevere and look out for one another.

Her memories of each child that has passed through the

ministry fulfill her. She has laughed with them, held them, taken them on field trips. The kids thought they were so tough in their little life jackets when she and John drove them to a waterpark one summer but when they saw the surging waves, the uncertainty of the water, they hesitated. Big tall boys wearing inner tubes laughing and screaming and dancing as the water lapped their feet. Kids being kids. Those memories remain among her most precious. She can see each child as they were. Like Big Man. Like Mayo. Just before he died, Mayo saw Dolores arranging a tent for a ministry event. Miss Dolores, do you need help? he asked. Yes, I do, she answered. They put up decorations and laughed, and as they laughed a boy came up and said another boy had brought a play gun onto the property, something John and Dolores did not allow. Mayo said, I'll talk to him. He took the boy with the gun aside and in a little while the boy approached Dolores and apologized. A few weeks later, Mayo died.

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In a hall outside the room where Dolores and I talk, twenty-eight-year-old Jesenda Brown mops the floor. She said good morning to Dolores earlier. It's the professional thing for her to do, she believes, greeting her employer. For three weeks the ministry has been a mainstay of Jesenda's startup, Jesenda's Cleaning Service. She established a business page on Facebook to attract customers. People have called, not many, some. She has a few regulars now and intends to get on Angie's List to attract more. Then she thinks she will be super busy. She needs a car to get around and hopes to buy one in a couple of weeks. Her year-end goal: to earn $2,400 a month. A cleaning business makes sense. She was always neat. Her life did not have much order as a child but she kept the spaces she occupied tidy. When she was on the run from foster care, she would clean the apartment of a boyfriend. Why not use that skill to earn a living? Her motto: maintain stability through responsibility. A bumper sticker slogan she repeats as if she

had sat through a self-empowerment seminar but thought of it herself. She plans to buy a house in two years and get off Section 8 rental assistance. She doesn't want her three children to struggle as she does. If she provides them with stability, they can go to college and beyond. She considers her life a success because she has survived this long when many other people she knows have not. She can offer her four-year-old son and two daughters, seven and five, a future. All of them live with her; each has a different father. That doesn't bother her. People, she understands, may disapprove. They will say what they will and that's fine. She doesn't care what anyone thinks. It's her life, not theirs. Her son stays in day care when she works. Sometimes her seven-year-old cleans houses with her.

Jesenda works at the ministry twice a week; she has known John and Dolores since she was a child. In those days, everyone called her Nay-Nay after Sheneheh Jenkins, a character that comedian Martin Lawrence created and voiced on his 1990s sitcom, *Martin*. Her happiest childhood memories revolve around the ministry. Light of the Village gave her access to another world, like she wasn't in the Village anymore. Before the ministry's summer program and the field trips, Jesenda and her friends threw rocks at abandoned houses and busted out streetlights late at night. Things, she knows now, they had no business doing.

She grew up in Prichard. Her mother died from a stroke when she was eight, and her father passed a few years later from a massive heart attack. They both had high blood pressure, drank, and used drugs. After her mother died, Jesenda lived with an aunt on Eight Mile, a stretch of road named for its distance from Mobile. Living with her aunt wasn't bad but it wasn't good either. Jesenda wanted her parents but they were gone and she didn't understand why. Her mother had problems but she was the best mom she could be. Her father may have been a crack addict but he took care of her. When her mother

passed out, he made sure Jesenda was fed, bathed, and ready for school. He told her not to use drugs. He didn't follow his own advice, but he recognized his mistakes and she loved him for it.

One morning when she was in the seventh grade, Jesenda got into a fight with a boy on a school bus. He said something nasty about her hair and they had words and began hitting each other. Jesenda was a fighter. She even had a fight at Light of the Village years later when she struck her oldest child's father with a stick. To this day, John will ask, Hey Nay-Nay, you still got your stick? And she replies, I don't carry my stick no more, Mr. John, I carry my broom and mop. I'm doing my cleaning now. Oh yes, she reflects, she was a fighter. Even though she has changed, people remember how she was, and she was bad. She was horrible. She was a mean, little bitty something who didn't take nothing from nobody. She didn't care. Life was hard without her parents.

The bus fight landed Jesenda in the James T. Strickland Youth Center in Mobile. A court appointed social worker supervised her in foster care. Her foster parents were good people but they expected her to follow their rules. You have to be at home by seven, they'd tell her, but she'd come in at nine. You're not my momma. You can't tell me what to do, Jesenda would snap.

Sometimes she would get a home pass to visit her aunt. When it was time to return to her foster parents, the social worker would come to the house, knock on the front door and Jesenda would dash out the back. The social worker would eventually catch up with her and lock her down in Strickland. Eventually she would be placed with another foster family. Jesenda went back and forth between Strickland and foster care until she turned eighteen and aged out.

She believes in herself and in the people of the Village. They aren't always killing each other. Still, Jesenda would not

choose to live here. The Village is no place to hang out and chill. As rebellious as she was, Jesenda could not help but notice how her foster families lived a different life. They knew peace and calm. She doesn't want her children to grow up amid chaos and violence and experience the kinds of losses she has. Her brother James was shot at twenty-three. Mayo was the uncle of her oldest daughter. A bullet took her friend Demetrius Brown, but he had also killed somebody. You live by it; you die by it. Her nephew Xavier, better known as Buckshot, killed her cousin George, whom everyone called Boo Face. Jesenda doesn't know how or why that happened. Got into it with each other and let it go too far and forgot they were family. Jesenda received a phone call from her aunt. Hey, Buckshot killed Boo Face. She rushed to the hospital in disbelief. She still can't believe it. She has dreams of Mayo, Xavier, Boo-Face, and of her family, James and her mother and father, all of them together again. All she can do is cry and pray to God, because no one else can fix it.

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A lean young man with a self-deprecating smile stops at the ministry. As a child he fed his grandmother's goats and forever after became known as Billy Boy. His pregnant girlfriend sits in the car of a friend who will drive her to a doctor for a checkup. If they have a girl, Billy Boy thinks he will name her Nola. He can imagine her bad little self getting on his nerves. So he thought, Nola, for no you don't.

Billy Boy sees Jesenda walk out of the ministry and calls her name.

Girl, I just came from D block and I just seen your name on the wall of this empty house. It said, Nay-Nay and Shana.

Where? Jesenda asks.

At the end of a house.

I don’t know what house you talking about.

Dolores pulls up and parks.
You look happy, Billy Boy tells her.

Yes, I am.

OK, OK, he says. You’re in the game.

I decided I’m not dealing with my hair anymore so I got it cut.

Good look, good look.

Thank you. So you’re here because your girlfriend needs a ride?

Yes ma’am, but she found one.

Oh good. Who is your girlfriend? Do I know who she is?

You haven’t met her yet. Nobody has.

OK.

Brianna’s her name.

Pretty name. Is that her there?

Dolores turns and faces the car where Brianna sits and waves.
Hey, Brianna.

Brianna looks up. Billy Boy gives a nervous laugh. He has three children, ages ten, four and two, in state custody. He needs to find a nice little apartment and a job to persuade the court to give them back to him. Their mother is in trouble over drugs and Billy Boy has been in and out of prison. It doesn’t matter what kind of a job. Billy Boy’s good at whatever. More of a handyman type of guy, for real. He enjoys lifting and moving stuff. An active job that would be good, something to tie him up all day. In 2019, Billy Boy had work

with a company that installed tents and booths for fairs and concerts but then the tailgate of a truck fell on his right hand and Billy Boy lost the job. He received temporary disability, and hasn't worked since. He supposes he'll have to apply for a job somewhere outside of the Village. Ain't no jobs in Prichard.

He believes he could earn big money as a rapper. Cats around here know he has talent, but he doesn't trust studios. A producer might get his lyrics, give him a little money, and make a fortune. Billy Boy doesn't have time for those types of games. If produced right and orchestrated right, his raps would be a success. His words provide him with a chance to tell his story, and the streets can vouch for its authenticity.

Billy Boy will turn twenty-eight in a few days. A lot of years, man, a lot of years, for real. Maybe not for the pretty people but for him and his homeboys, yeah, a lot of years. By pretty people, Billy Boy means suburbanites who have no knowledge and in many cases no interest in dudes like him. He doubts any of them would be surprised to see their twenty-eighth birthday. They're much too judgmental, he thinks. Billy Boy believes they can learn from him. John and Dolores, they know. They came to Alabama Village because they understood not everybody has a lot of money. In the outside world, the universe of pretty people, when someone falls, they panic. Unlike Billy Boy and everyone he knows, they ain't used to not having. People in the Village know struggle. They were raised on struggle and not having. If they fall they know how to pick themselves up and live by scraping bottom, because the bottom has been home for a long time. This right here, the cuts, teach survival. The people who are up now should come down to where Billy Boy lives and learn something about it. He can show them how they can make it without nothing and how they can be hungry and see another day and get on with little. Little is good. That's a good day to have little. If you got

little then you got something, and something is better than nothing. One day, the pretty people may ask for his help. They might be so far down they'll need to sleep in an abandoned house with no roof. He can teach them how to persevere without power, without water, without plumbing, for real, or anything to piss and bathe in. It's no big deal. Make it through that and anything above it will feel better—feel like you're kicking back with the big dogs. He wishes the pretty people would open their hearts and try to understand him. He is so curious about them and what they do. Just their normal life, man, for real. Do they go fishing with their kids? Do they wake up every day with their entire family and not find that strange? What is it like to assume you'll wake up the next day, that you'll even have a next day? Billy Boy doesn't know anyone who has that kind of peace. A typical day for people Billy Boy knows would be: Get your guns, get your dope; not, OK honey, I'm home, what's for dinner? Just a day or two around people like that would be different. To be a child growing up with all the trimmings, Billy Boy would have loved that. Like a fantasy, man, that kind of love. Year after year he would have celebrated his birthday and received gifts and taken it all for granted. Be tripping just thinking about it, for real.

In jail, he would make his own birthday cake. He took a honey bun, two Reese's peanut butter cups, some M&M cookies, and put it all in a bowl, mix in water, milk, heat it, and watch it rise. A cup of noodles on the side, and that was his birthday. Maybe he could work at a bakery. He wants a new pair of shoes, a nice pair. People crowd him. His kids, this new baby, his girlfriend. A new pair of kicks would lift his spirits. They'd help in a job interview too. People would look at his shoes and think he was sharp. Billy Boy turns to Brianna. She watches him. He prays really hard to be successful. He doesn't want to make any more mistakes.

*

Dacino: Early for you, Billy Boy.

Billy Boy: What you talking about? Rained last night.

Dacino: I know.

Billy Boy: Warming up.

Dacino: Around five o’clock it’ll get cold again.

Billy Boy: They say it’s going to stay warm.

Dacino: You know how it is down here. Be warm, at five it be cold.

Billy Boy: I want to get me a bike, man. Spandex, little gym shorts. Skinny tight kind.

Dacino: I thought you wanted shoes.

Billy Boy: Doing it all, man.

Dacino: Where would you ride?

Billy Boy: No where. I’d have a picture of it on my phone. Just to show everybody I got one.

Dacino: Ride with it on top of a car.

Billy Boy: Just for show. Me and my bike are going out.

Dacino: Tell some dude, Let me see your bike, man.

Billy Boy: And never bring it back. I got you, man. Just for an hour.

Dacino: And don’t bring it back.

Billy Boy: Come back all the wheels are gone.
Dacino (imitating Billy Boy): Man, it didn’t have tires when you gave it to me.
Billy Boy laughs.

TWO

On a Tuesday evening, John picks up children for the ministry's after-school program. They'll play games and have about a half hour of Bible study. He drives beneath I-65 into a neighborhood of small brick houses with peeling, white trim. Bare bulbs illuminate empty porches. He turns into a housing project, parks outside a home and beeps.

Here's Morgana, Cortney, and Shalanda, he shouts at two girls hurrying toward the van, shoulder packs bouncing off their backs. What's up, Bo?

What's up, Bo? they shout back to him.

What're you drinking, bo?

Orange juice.

A little OJ. What you up to, Shalanda?

Watching YouTube cartoons.

They clamber into the van. Shalanda finds a zip-close bag with half a sandwich.

There's food back here.

We'll throw it away, John says. I tried to clean it up for you all. What kind of food?

It's a mushed something. It stinks.

We'll throw it away. Where's your grandmother?

She's not coming today. Not feeling well.

She OK?

OK.

Let's roll.

John starts driving

We have to pick up Jerome and a few others, what do you think? he asks.

Good.

OK. That’s a good attitude.

Mr. John?

Yeah, Bo?

Rosa Parks didn’t want to move on the bus, Shalanda says. We learned about her in class today. Was she and Martin Luther King friends?

No, Courtney answers.

Yes, Morgana says.

They were partners in the fight for civil rights, for sure, John says.

Rosa Parks was sitting down and a white person wanted her seat and Rosa Parks said, No, I’m not going to move out of my seat, Shalanda continues. You better go back there, white person, because I was here first and that is right because she was there first.

That’s true, John says.

And then white people got angry and she got arrested.

Hank Aaron, we read about him too, Courtney says.

He grew up in Mobile, John says. He’s from Thomasville.

He played baseball.

He was good. He had made a lot of inroads. Progress, let’s call it progress, John says.

Like Rosa Parks he had to take a stand to make things for the better. You guys learned a lot.

I learned about math and science, Morgana says.

Sounds like you guys did pretty good today.

I got all Bs, Shalanda says.

I got all As, Morgana says.

John stops at a squat house shadowed by trees.

Hey, Bo! John shouts to a boy running toward him.

*

The late afternoon turns into evening and Baldwin Drive descends into shadow. John drops the children off at the ministry. Collapsing houses sculpt the gathering dark. If these disintegrating homes could talk, they would tell stories. The old people say voices cry out from graves lost to the woods. Jamel, he was a Lacey. He got shot. Boo-Face got shot. Boo-Face was a Davis. Bam-Bam got killed. Big Terry too. Red, she died. Last name, Robbin. Everyone called her Red although her hair wasn't red. She's gone all the same. Just got sick and died. Detoria got shot in the head. Dorian's boy, Sean, got killed. Someone shot him by a church down there on Telegraph Road. It's sad. The list goes on.

*

John walks the perimeter of the ministry, hears the children laughing, keeps moving slowly, holding a walkie-talkie to communicate with staff inside. His gaze flits between buildings. His shoes scrape against stones. He never knows who might drop by or what their mood will be, agitated or friendly. Better to assess the situation outside away from the kids. He compares Light of the Village to a forward operating base. Over the years, he and Dolores have established codes:

broken arrow means gunshots in the area, Mike Tyson means a fight. Hand signals too. Fingers shaped like a phone receiver means call 911. The codes resulted from an encounter one afternoon in June 2015 when a man convicted of murder and just released from prison drove to the ministry under the mistaken impression John and Dolores were holding his daughter.

The man's name was Franklyn. The girl had been adopted after her mother died of a drug overdose while Franklyn was in prison. No one told him. He rolled up to the ministry with his sister and a friend and her baby. They told him his daughter was at the ministry because her mother had used its services. John was inside with about one hundred children enrolled in summer camp; Dolores was outside. Franklyn got out of the car, walked toward her and put his finger to her head in the shape of a gun

Where's my motherfucking daughter? he shouted.

I don't know where she is. Dolores said, trying to stay calm, but her heart raced. She worried he might hit her. He continued shouting, shaking like he would burst through his skin. John heard the commotion and hurried outside. Franklyn spun around and faced him.

I want my child! he demanded.

John raised his hands for calm.

We don't know where she is, dude.
I want my child!

Man, you got to chill out.

John had a crazy kind of wish for Franklyn to clock him with a solid right hook and end this. Instead, Franklyn stormed back to his car and opened the back door. John followed. He saw Franklyn reach for a revolver. John had few options, none of them good: Fight, but with two women and a child in the car,

that wouldn’t end well; run, and risk Franklyn shooting at him and at the ministry and the children inside; or keep talking.

Dude, we don’t have your daughter.

A woman named Tyra Quinie who had been studying for her GED certificate rushed outside and started shouting at Franklyn. He cussed her out and leaned into the car for the gun. John glanced at Dolores and their eyes locked and he gave her a well-this-is-it look. The thought comforted him. He stood in the presence of God, his wife, and the ministry—everything he had devoted his life to. Whatever happened, he belonged here.

We’re going to get through this, Dolores told herself. It will be OK, but she knew it might not. It will be OK, she told herself again. She dialed 911. When she got off the phone, she shouted, The police are on the way!

Franklyn jumped in the car and slammed the door. He cussed out John and sped off just as the children wandered outside. Unaware of what had happened, they began playing. John watched them. He felt OK. He hadn’t panicked, had stayed focused. A group of volunteers, however, left and didn’t return.

Later that afternoon, a brother of Franklyn’s called John and put him on the phone. He apologized. The two women, he said, had told him John had his baby.

OK, John said, let me stop you right there. The police are looking for you. You’re out on parole for murder. Chill out, go to the police, and we’ll come by and see you.

Franklyn turned himself in. When John and Dolores arrived at the Prichard Police Department, a detective told them that if they pressed charges Franklyn would probably do fifteen years. He cried and apologized when they met with him. He had been played by people spreading rumors about his child, he said, and one of the women in the car egged him on. John and Dolores

believed him. He had a manila folder with cards from his daughter. He had brought it with him because he assumed he was going back to prison.

No dude, it’s all good, John said. If we can help you get a job, whatever, come by and we’ll see what we can do.

John and Dolores have seen him twice since. They said hello and nothing more. John believes that if someone commits a crime they should be punished. Throw away the key, he gets that. At the same time, inmates need to be helped when they get released. Because they will get out. Franklyn had nothing. His daughter was gone and no one had told him. John and Dolores took the brunt of his anger, understood, and forgave him. Then the three of them moved on.

*

Tyra Quinie thinks God told her to rush outside when Franklyn pulled up. She hadn’t heard a thing, just looked up from her desk and decided to take a look. Because John and Dolores believed in her, she thought of them as her parents. Her father was mostly absent from her life and her mother was around but stayed to herself because she was deaf. Tyra relied on and trusted John and Dolores in a way she never did her parents. When she saw Franklyn yelling at John, she lost it. Franklyn called her all kinds of names but Tyra didn’t care. If you’re going to hurt Mr. John, you’re going to hurt me first, she had yelled.

Tyra had met John and Dolores years earlier when she worked at a Prichard gym, now closed. Many of the children she supervised participated in the ministry’s programs. One day, Tyra dropped by looking for two sisters. Their mother had died of AIDS and Tyra had not seen them at the gym for a while, but she knew they ate breakfast at the ministry. One of them, Shadderias, later died from a drug overdose. Her picture hangs on the memorial wall.

The Lord spoke to Tyra as she parked outside the ministry that day. She knows how that sounds but she's not asking anyone to believe her. She believes it and that's what matters. Tyra, God told her, I want you to get your GED. She was about twenty-seven and could barely read. Dolores and John told her: You can get your GED. You can do this. Dolores was adamant: If you don't try, then you don't want it. All you got to do is try.

Dolores helped Tyra study. She took the GED test but failed by eighteen points. However, she aced the reading portion. Undeterred, she took it again and passed. Then the Lord told her, I want you to go to college. Tyra told John, I don't know what it is but the Lord says I should go to college. I guess you're going to college, John said, and she did. These days, she works at Amazon. She trains and supervises drivers.
Tyra does not live in Alabama Village anymore. When she was eighteen, her family moved here from the Orange Grove projects near downtown Mobile. Orange Grove was rough but not as rough as the Village. Life is real in the Village, no joke. When Tyra first came to the ministry, the memorial wall held only one photo. Now look at it. Forty-three. It's sad. More photos will go up, she has no doubt, but hers won't be one of them. She has all that she needs, not much but enough, and she doesn't mess around. Many families in the Village have much less and therefore they have nothing to lose. That's one reason for the violence.

Tyra has seen plenty of people shot. She saw her best friend shoot another man in front of a convenience store. Nothing she could do but step back, run for cover, mourn the loss, and cry for the ones left behind. Don't be naive, John taught her, and have faith in God. Sunday is the most important day of the week for Tyra. She attends Bible study and renews her faith. Then she goes home and lives the best life she can. Many people in the Village have repented. They grew up and quit playing. No one knows what path someone will take. The boy

with a gun might become the man kneeling in prayer. No one should give up on the Village. Look at her. She learned to read. Who would have thought?

*

The death of a young man named Yellow was the first killing to insinuate itself in the lives of John and Dolores after they came to the Village. But they only sort of knew him. Certainly not well. The loss of another young man, Mook, left a deeper impression. They had watched him grow up. When they first came to the Village, they ran into him and some other kids. As they talked, it started raining and they all dashed under a porch, gray storm clouds scudding above them. Mook took pleasure showing them around. He was mild mannered but he was into drug dealing. Over the years, his temper began to tilt toward hot. He died after a former girlfriend told him she was with another man in the Roger Williams housing project in Mobile. Mook drove there and confronted him. They fought to a draw and Mook left. The man got a gun and called Mook, daring him to return. He did. The man had locked the door so Mook pulled the air conditioning unit out of a window and crawled inside. The man shot him.

The violence also can take bizarre, darkly humorous twists. Like George and the muffin. Sounds like a children's book doesn't it? John says. George was always out there a little bit and he had made enemies. One afternoon a sedan drove through the ministry playground, and the two men inside started shooting at George. He ran behind a house holding onto a muffin. The shooters sped through in minutes, if that long. George peeked out from around the house and smiled, his gold teeth flashing. He had not dropped his muffin. It was a good muffin, he said. That stuck with people. George and the muffin assumed the status of folklore. A few years later, he moved to Florida. Not long after, his charred remains were found in a car.

Joseph Torres killed a man at fifteen. He had been involved with the ministry since he was a child. Like Mook, his moods ran hot and cold. If Joseph liked someone, he liked them 100 percent and would do anything for them. But if he disliked someone, he ignored them; they didn't exist. He knew how to take charge. If he saw kids fighting he'd stop it through his presence, by the way he carried himself, without speaking a word.

One night in 2008, days before Christmas, Joseph, his friend Johiterio, and a third young man whose name John does not remember, stopped at the ministry and said they wanted to be rappers. Joseph asked for money to buy shoes. John and Dolores didn't have as much cash as the boys needed and they got angry.

We're going to go make music, they said, and stalked off. They didn't hear from Joseph again until April 25, 2009, when he shot forty-two-year-old Benjamin Henry on D block. Benjamin didn't live in the Village but he knew people there. Joseph, Johiterio, and according to court documents, a third teenager, Antonio Hall, assumed Benjamin had money to buy drugs and decided to rob him as he sat in his car. Joseph approached the driver's side carrying a sawed-off shotgun. At some point he blew a hole in Benjamin's chest. He and the two other teenagers fled. Joseph would later claim the gun had misfired.

John heard about the killing from a couple in the Village who had volunteered at the ministry. Two of your boys killed a guy, they said, Joseph and Johiterio. *Two of your boys,* John repeated to himself. OK, whatever. Dolores was stunned. She would not have been surprised if Joseph had been stopped for selling weed, but murder? What happened? she asked herself. What went wrong? What had they missed?
Later in the day, Joseph called John.

Hey dude, John said, we need to talk.

Yeah, Joseph said.

They agreed to meet at the ministry that evening.

First off, how are you doing? John asked him.

I screwed up, Joseph replied.

Let’s pray, John said.

He noticed Joseph wasn’t scared. He had never been one to show fear. What remorse he felt he kept to himself. He seemed more upset that he had ruined his future.

What do you think God wants you to do? John asked him.

I think I need to turn myself in, Joseph said.

You know what that means?

I do.

You want to turn yourself in now?

Yes, they’ll blame someone else and I did it.

John suggested they call his family. An aunt asked John to take Joseph to the police.
In 2009, a judge sentenced Joseph and Antonio to twenty-five years in prison. Joseph broke down and apologized to Benjamin’s family and his own; Johiterio, who had been on his cell phone when the shooting occurred, received three years. Police arrested him soon after his release for violating parole. His sentence that time: twenty-five years.

John keeps in touch with Joseph. They talk by phone on Sunday mornings.
What’s going on? I hear him say in one call. You’re still in Easterling Correctional Facility? You know it’s been crazy down here. There’s been shootings all over the place, you heard about that? Going back and forth right now. Hopefully

things will tap down a little bit but yeah it’s been kind of nuts. Going on for a little bit. How’s COVID? Gone through the place or no? No, that’s cool. Hope it all goes away so we can get back to normal. I’m glad you called. We have to work out a visit. We’ll try to work that out. It’s pretty up there. I know to you it looks the same but we like it. We can travel up there. OK I’ll let you go. We love you, Bo. Holler at you.

John understands people may wonder how he can say, I love you, Bo, to a murderer? He saw the autopsy photos of Benjamin with a hole in his chest. He saw his mother leave the courtroom because she couldn’t look at the pictures. Benjamin had a life. John makes no excuses for Joseph. Punish him, yes, he has no problem with that, but he sees no downside to showing him love. He doesn’t know a perfect person, however that might be defined. It’s not about second chances. It’s about chance after chance after chance. Only death closes the door.

*

Betty Catlin talks to her incarcerated son, Johiterio, every other day. She puts money on his books. One day at a time, prayer and faith, Betty tells me.
She was born in Mobile but her family moved to the Village in the early 1980s after her grandmother passed and the family took over her house. Her mother used drugs and spent much of her time on the street. Her father drank and lived with his mother. In those days, Alabama Village had stores and houses on every block. She used to go to dances at the same gym where Tyra Quinie once worked. She remembers a 7-Eleven and a convenience store called Bert’s. A hamburger stand took up a corner behind Two Dragons, another convenience store, and a laundromat. Betty moved around Prichard. She lived on Blount Drive, Colby Street, Fayette Street, and Dallas Street. At fifteen she had the first of five children. If she could go back in time, she would tell herself to wait. Just wait, girl, but she didn’t. Only so much she can do now. Looking back don’t change what’s done. She talks to young people. Hey, come

on here and let me holler at you. You ain’t got no business hanging out like this. She pulls them aside and gives them something to think about. Other mothers look the other way: She ain’t my child. I don’t care about her. But not Betty. Somebody’s got to care about them, otherwise they’ll be pregnant and become mothers way too soon and then they’ll see how hard life can be. It ain’t about not having enough money. It’s about wondering every day if your child will come home. Their fathers are out and up to no good. It’s the mothers who get the calls. One night, Betty’s phone rang and the girlfriend of her son Carlos told her he was dead. Betty’s heart dropped so far down she couldn’t feel it beating but the girlfriend had been mistaken. It was actually another young man who had died.

The sound of gunshots terrifies her. She was at her mother’s house around the corner from where Mayo lived when he died. She looked out the front door and he was dead at his mother’s house. He had a beautiful smile. He could be loud. Boy shut up with all that noise in there! Mayo would laugh. She couldn’t help but think: That could be one of my sons.

Betty knows how people judge families in the Village based on no evidence at all. Like Miss Mandy. She’s sick now but back in the day everyone called her the Candy Lady. Children would go around the corner to her house and come back with all kinds of sweets. People joked she must be receiving kickbacks from dentists. There was also Miss Tooty. Her real name was Claudia. She also gave out candy.

Betty used to hover about the neighborhood behaving like everyone’s mother. Even though she lives in Mobile now, kids still come around especially during the holidays. They know she can cook and love her greens, macaroni, ribs, dressing, beans, roasts. Whatever she makes, they’ll eat.

Most Sundays, Betty makes breakfast at the ministry. Eggs, sausage, and grits. She also prepares meals for events. She’s

known John and Dolores a long time. She remembers when she first saw them. They parked their car, got out, and in minutes had all these kids, Big Man, and a bunch of others hanging around. If children liked them, they got to be all right, she remembers thinking. They stopped at her house and introduced themselves.

In August 2013, Betty studied at the ministry for her GED certificate. By that November she had passed the test. Now she hopes to save enough money to buy a house and leave it to her kids so they have something they can call their own. She works as a cashier at the Springhill Quick Stop in Mobile from noon to six. She earns minimum wage and puts aside what she can.

Betty likes her neighborhood in Crighton in the north part of Mobile. It's a little more restful than the Village. She still hears gunshots but less often. In the Village, it was every day. Or there would be fights. Everybody wanted to meet in a field and have at it. You all bring your problems over here and we get all the heat, she scolded them. Look at these older people on their porches trying to relax. They ain't paying no bills to look out over a field and watch you fools fight. Girls with their children in their boyfriends' cars watching them go at it like it was a basketball game. Scar their children for life. Betty shakes her head. It's no wonder children turn out as they do.

THREE

Throughout his life, John has found guidance when he needed it most. He was born in Dallas and moved to El Paso at a young age. At fourteen, he enrolled in New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell and completed high school and two years of community college. He grew close to its chaplain, Vernon Edmondson. Kind and approachable, Edmondson always had a smile on his face. He encouraged his cadets to read the Bible as a book of stories and not as a weighty tome. Take it, go off by yourself, he told them. The book of John is a good place to

start. He brought doughnuts to Bible study, a nice touch but for John and the other cadets, Edmondson's willingness to spend time with them meant much more. He walked the students through the Bible story by story.

The institute gave John structure. He lived in a spartan, three story barracks and learned to be responsible. He joined the boxing team, the only white kid on it. The coach was Black, his teammates Hispanic. He connected with people whose lives were very different from his.

John earned a commission in the US Army. After he completed his undergraduate degree, he earned a Masters in Business Administration and took a job in a jewelry store in Las Cruces, New Mexico where he met Dolores. They married in May 1994, a week after Dolores had graduated from college.

About a year into their marriage, they moved to San Antonio and John returned to school and earned a second master's degree, this one in healthcare administration. He and Dolores volunteered with Prison Fellowship, the world's largest Christian nonprofit organization for prisoners, former prisoners, and their families, and they also joined Angel Tree, a fellowship program that provides holiday gifts to children from their incarcerated parents. In addition, they helped with after-school and outreach programs, and facilitated Bible studies in housing projects for Victory Gospel, a Pentecostal church that offered help to the very poor. The compassion of its pastor, Donny Banks, and his wife, Jackie, impressed them. They did not criticize homeless addicts for their drug use or require them to attend church. Instead they offered help without condition, and they were always cheerful.

In 1997, John accepted a job with the Mobile Infirmary Health System. He and Dolores remained involved with Prison Fellowship and Angel Tree. In December 2001, they began leading Bible studies in the Queens Court apartments, a

housing project, after a six-year-old boy had been killed and a Prichard police officer wounded in an ambush authorities called retaliation for the shooting of three young men by undercover officers. When Queens Court closed in May 2002, John and Dolores began looking at other impoverished neighborhoods around Mobile where they could establish a ministry. By the time they drove through the Village, they had seen most of the city's housing projects but nothing had clicked. The Village did. The vacant houses and overgrown lots and dark streets spoke of a desperate need.

In the following days, weeks and months John and Dolores walked through the Village speaking to families. If we started a ministry here what would you want? they asked. Children told them they wanted a place to play and people to take them on field trips. The adults were more subdued.

Yeah, they said, that would be good for the kids.

Inspired by John 8:12, *Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life,* John and Dolores named their ministry Light of the Village. With help from a South Carolina ministry, they turned a crack house into a church, plugging gaping holes and shoring up the collapsed roof on the only building they could find that had a clean title. It's pretty messed up, one man told them. Another man agreed. Yeah, but the rafters are OK. You won't be here more than a couple weeks anyway. But John and Dolores kept coming back from their home in Bay Minette, about forty miles away. Once a month became once a week. Once a week became every day. Every day became twenty years. John and Dolores stayed.

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John and Dolores attended a Baptist Church when they first moved to Alabama, although they didn't restrict themselves to a denomination. When they started Light of the Village, John

wondered if he should study theology but his pastor dissuaded him. For what God has called on you to do, do you think the kids care about a degree? No, John agreed. That settled it. These days, John considers himself a layperson who practices his faith. If someone had to put a finger on it, he would say that he and Dolores are evangelicals. They take the Bible and go verse by verse, story by story, allowing it to speak for itself. They don't push it. They don't cram it. Anyone can come to the ministry. Faith or lack of it has no bearing. John and Dolores are not selling a product. John recalls a young man named TJ. He wasn't a product.

TJ rarely spoke. John heard him say six words if that. A little, shaggy black dog followed him around. TJ couldn't read so he asked Dolores to get him a recorded version of the Bible. He'd sit outside the ministry with his dog and listen to it.

John and Dolores may have been one of the last friendly faces TJ saw before he died in 2008. They had just given him a Christmas present, a pair of sneakers. Here's your gift, John said. Merry Christmas. We'll see you Sunday. TJ was shot in the head minutes afterward. John thinks someone playing with a gun probably killed him by accident. Everyone he knew liked TJ.

His death disturbed John. He thought he should have given TJ more of his time. You're one of the last people he saw and all you could say was, Merry Christmas, see you Sunday? he reprimanded himself. Then he reminded himself that TJ had been at the ministry for years studying the Bible. In his own way, he had been talking to God up until he died. The realization didn't deaden the pain but it provided perspective and a dose of humility. This wasn't about what John should or should not have done. It wasn't about him at all. It was about TJ and his faith. He had not died alone. Still, John thought he should try to be a little less rushed with people. TJ's death was a reminder of the fragility of life in the Village.

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When John hears the *pop, pop, pop* of a gun, his mind flashes with questions: Where's this going? Is it someone just testing his weapon or something worse? After twenty years in the Village he has not grown used to the violence and doesn't want to, but he works with so many children who have. He recalls one April afternoon in 2014 when he picked up the Darrington brothers—Jesse, Jeremiah, and Jerel—in Gulf Village for an after-school program. Jeremiah got in the front seat. Every kid wants the front seat. Cindy, their mother, came outside, spoke to John, and left just as two men running between houses began shooting at each other. A driver behind John jumped out of his car and ran and John couldn't back out. He reached over to push Jeremiah's head down, but the boy was already on the floor as were Jesse and Jerel. John counted thirteen shots. Then the shooting stopped. Wind stirred, silence. Jeremiah sat up, broke out a juice box, and stuck a straw in it.
OK, he said. We can go now.

*

John arranges for me to meet with Jesse at the Whataburger in Saraland, not far from where he and his brothers live with their grandmother. I buy Cokes and we sit in a corner. Sunlight shines our table. Jessie watches me, fingering his plastic cup. He is soft-spoken and serious. A smile flashes across his face when he recalls a good memory but I sense a wariness. He is waiting for us to get through the small talk for the painful questions he knows I'll ask about his mother. She was killed when he was seventeen.

Jesse grew up next door to the Village. He would walk through a hole in a fence to see his friends there. At five, he got involved with the ministry. His mother told him, There's a program where people will help you with homework and feed you. Young as he was, Jesse was skeptical. It was not that common to see white people in the Village or anywhere nearby, but

John and Dolores held a six-week summer camp and it was fun, and it didn’t take long for the color of their skin not to matter.

Every morning before school, Jesse’s mother made him and his brothers read a chapter from the Bible. It could be any chapter. The point was to start their day with God’s word and stay focused despite distractions. Jesse encountered many distractions. He never knew what he’d see when he left for school. Before he reached his teens, nine people had died in front of his house. Once, he hadn’t even left for school when he saw a man on the ground bleeding from a gunshot wound. His mother and a neighbor tried to stanch the blood but he died. Jesse stayed in the moment. There’s a dead man in the yard. I have to finish breakfast. I have to go to school. I have to catch the bus. He learned to smother his shock. The feelings would eat him up otherwise. So much dying. Even his brothers, they stopped feeling. They slept through shootings.

His mother understood the dangers and kept the boys in the house as much as she could. She told them to think about what they wanted to do when they were older. Avoid the lure of fast money, she warned them. Jesse promised her he’d enroll in college. He started thinking ahead to the next day, the next week, the next month. Even now as he talks to me he considers what he wants to do this afternoon. He doesn’t know why he thinks this way. To stay out of trouble, maybe. He has homeboys and cousins who try to lure him into the streets.

C’mon, get in the car, Jesse. Let’s do this, let’s do that.

Nah, man, I’m good.

Jesse’s father did not involve himself with the family, and Jesse has seen him only a few times. He thinks his father’s absence forced him to become a man and assume responsibilities sooner than he otherwise might have. Unlike many of his friends, Jesse has no children. His mother and grandmother

warned him against having kids unless he was married and had a job to support a family. John and Dolores told him, Don’t slip up.

He pauses, drinks his Coke and watches me. I’ve run out of small talk. I take a sip from my glass. Setting it down, I flip to a blank page on my notepad. Then I ask the question he has been waiting for: Tell me about your mother, I say, and what happened.
A day doesn’t pass when Jesse doesn’t think of her, he begins. He speaks of her to anyone who asks to keep her name alive and in his heart. Cindy Denise Darrington. Everyone called her Miss Cindy. She loved everybody. Didn’t matter who you were. Anyone could walk into her house for a meal. She loved to cook. People would fight over her fried chicken. She helped people get off the street. Jesse can name a handful of people who lived with them until they got right. When he was young, his mother helped a homeless lady with a few dollars and encouraging words. The words impressed Jesse. Or maybe it was how she said them. Firm but loving. Don’t give up. Hang in there. Something like that. His mother would ask John to help someone if she could not. Hey Mr. John, I got so and so in my house and they need this and that. What can you do for them? She knew she couldn’t assist everyone so she turned to him. Some people took advantage of her, but Jesse’s mother believed that no matter their sins everyone deserved love.

She died the night of December 1, 2017. That evening, he lay in his bed chilling. Jerel warmed food in a microwave. Jeremiah slept. No one outside, no backfiring car exhausts. A quiet night. Then Jesse heard a bang inside the house and his heart jumped. He leaped to his feet and ran toward the front door, and Jerel slammed into him running from the kitchen and knocked Jesse down. Jesse jumped up and Jerel fled into Jesse’s room and dropped in a corner below a window, shouting, Momma just got killed, Momma just got killed. Jesse raced down the hall and saw a man she’d been seeing point a gun in his

direction, and he fell. He thought he had been shot but he had only slipped and he leaped back up and ran to his room, closed the door, and pushed a dresser in front of it. Jerel sat crouching in a corner. Then Jesse remembered Jeremiah. He moved the dresser, opened the door, crept out, and peered into Jeremiah's room. He was asleep. Jesse tried to catch his breath, to slow the banging of his heart. He walked down the dim hall and stopped. He saw his mother on the floor, eyes open, blood pooling. The man was gone. He had no call to do this, Jesse told me. His mother never hurt anyone. She had fed this man, run errands for him, been intimate with him. Jesse learned later that the man had left the house and turned himself in to the police. People say he was on drugs. That doesn't mean anything to Jesse. High or sober, he should not have murdered his mother. Jesse's voice trails off. He turns back to his drink.

And now? I ask him.

Now? Jesse repeats. Now?

He and his brothers will continue living with their grandmother. They love her and help her clean the house and tend the yard. At night, they talk to one another to stay strong and keep it together so their feelings don't boil over and explode. That can happen. The murder of a mother can make her children lose their minds, mess with their brains in some type of way. When people get mad they don't think, they just do. Everyone has the strength to hold on. It's up to them to maintain or lose control. He and his brothers hold on.

When Jesse graduated from high school, he enrolled at Coastal Community College just as he had promised his mother. He wants to transfer to Auburn University and major in engineering. He needs to earn money first. Auburn won't pay for itself.
Some of his classmates don't know about the Village, but it's never far from Jesse's thoughts. He has flashbacks of the night his mother died and tries to subdue the trauma so he

doesn’t go crazy. His brothers have bad dreams. Anyone who thinks about something real hard, of course they’re going to dream about it. Everyone has nightmares.

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Morgan Carnley, a ministry staff member, takes a break outside. I join her. A few men stroll by and we listen to their low laughter, muted chatter. After they pass, I ask Morgan about Cindy. I was home in Mobile when I received a text from John that Cindy had been shot, she tells me. She remembers what she wore, a red flannel shirt and blue jeans, and her hair was up. I have to pray now, she thought, for Cindy and her children. They’ve been thrown into a whirlwind. All of them are doing as well as can be expected, she tells me. Jerel went through a rough patch where he rebelled a little.
It can be so challenging working with these kids, Morgan continues. At a recent Bible study with a group of teenagers, she said women should not have children outside of marriage. That hit a nerve. Not one child in the room had parents who had been wed. How does she express herself without sounding accusatory? How does she raise uncomfortable topics? She has worked with these kids for fourteen years. When she considers that they come from generations of single mothers and absent fathers, she feels overwhelmed.

Morgan grew up in Enterprise, Alabama, about 160 miles east of Prichard. She majored in music at the University of Mobile. In the fall of 2007, during her freshman year, a college friend invited her to lead a music class at Light of the Village. Morgan had no idea Prichard existed. It’s hard now to remember what subsequently drew her back. The kids, she thinks. How they thrived with just minimal attention. John and Dolores too. Their quiet yet determined belief in their mission. But it was difficult. She didn’t understand street slang, had never experienced the kinds of losses the children had. She doesn’t recall feeling shocked but she assumes she was.

Morgan hopes that the children will find an alternative to violence. Not getting shot. Not committing a crime. Making a choice to leave the street. Those feel like achievable goals. Then perhaps college, a job and a two-story home. For the next generation, or the generation after that.

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Dacino thinks Jesse has it pretty together. Sometimes he's weird, but who isn't? He stayed in school, that's good. Funny how he controls his anger. No one knows why Miss Cindy's killer did it. In the house, in front of the kids. That was shocking even for the Village. It just happened and he turned himself in. Miss Cindy was cool. Everybody knew and liked her and her boys. She was always at the ministry on Sundays. Dacino suggested to Jesse he see a counselor but he played it off like he was busy. Probably doesn't want to talk about it. He might be waiting on the right trigger and not even know it. Just happens and he goes nuts and shoots someone. That scares Dacino.
Dacino recently moved into the house across from the ministry. It has new hardwood floors, sliding doors, a living room with a fireplace. Huge kitchen and three bedrooms. A washer and dryer too. And new furniture. Dacino has never, and he means never, lived in a house so nice. He still can't get used it. He won't sit in the living room because he doesn't want to break anything. He has such a large bed, he jokes, rolling to the other side is like exercise.

Dacino had his own apartment and a job until the COVID-19 pandemic. He has worked since he was a kid. As a boy, he cut grass. When he reached his teens he cooked at Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen in Mobile. At seventeen, he moved to Spanish Fort for a job at a movie theater. On his first day, the boss lady asked him, Do you know what you're supposed to be doing?

This, Dacino said, indicating the broom in his hand. Cleaning. I read the job manual.

Nobody ever reads that, she said, and promoted him to cashier. Over time he became shift leader and then manager. He stayed on for six years until he accepted a job with the Wind Creek Casino in Atmore. Three years later, he became the manager of Premiere Cinema in Spanish Fort and worked with an older woman named Rosie. Then COVID struck and Dacino lost his job and apartment. He couch surfed between among three of his sisters, sometimes sharing a bed with one of his nephews, and volunteered at the church to fill his time. One day, Dolores asked him, Why don't you work for us? Come back tomorrow. Dacino assumed she was joking and didn't return.
I thought you were going to work for us, Dolores said when she saw him again.

You were for real? Dacino asked.

The next day, he showed up.

Dacino would never speak to John and Dolores when he first started coming to the ministry. He wasn't shy; he didn't trust them. They'd leave, he assumed. Every other church group had. Black, white, it didn't matter. They left. No way were these white people going to stay. Why're they doing this? he wondered. What do they want? How long is this going to last? Dolores approached him when it was just the two of them, and then he had to talk. Dang, this lady's going to want to talk to me, he thought. He never disrespected her but he did laugh a lot in her classes, goofing with other boys. Dolores would pull him aside and look him dead in the eye, a smile on her face. She never got loud or mean. You know what you're doing, Dacino? Do you want to be disruptive? She wouldn't speak another word until he answered. She'd wait. And wait. And wait until he finally spoke. He knew he'd, better have the right answer or she would look so disappointed he would want to cry.

These days, alone in the house after work, Dacino sometimes wonders what kind of parent he would be. He had a son when he was twenty-two, Dacino Jr., but he died. Dacino was young and

dumb, in the moment, and then just like that his girlfriend was pregnant. He vowed that unlike his father he would be there for his son.

A week before the baby was due, his girlfriend traveled to Jacksonville, Florida, to visit family. She called Dacino one afternoon and told him she had passed out and had been rushed to a hospital. The doctor told her the baby had a faint heartbeat. What do we need to do? Dacino asked. I need to stay in bed and chill, she told him. The next day, Dacino Jr. was stillborn. Dacino didn't know what that meant until he asked one of his sisters and she told him.

Dacino took the death hard. Angry at the world, he didn't want to talk to anyone, including his girlfriend. The baby was so small. Had he lived, Dacino probably wouldn't be working for the ministry because he'd require a bigger salary to support a family. His child would need attention, and he wouldn't have time for ministry kids. The money needed to study physical therapy would be spent on his family. Tragedy happens for a reason, he decided. It took him a long time to reach that conclusion and even longer to accept it.

Many of his homeboys have kids. They speak to their children but they don't take them out or live with their mothers. They'll say, These are my kids, and that's it. Dacino doesn't think having a child has anything to do with status. If they can sleep with a girl they will, and if she gets pregnant, oh well. It's not about the number of kids who are born but the number of girls they sleep with. They live for the moment because life can be that short.

Dacino doesn't want children now. He sees his sisters with all their kids, how they can get stressed running them around, and he thinks, I don't need to take that on. He has his hands full at the ministry. Those kids, man, they can be so bad. He's OK giving them back to their mothers. But he would have loved his son. He carries a photo on his phone of Dacino Jr. swaddled in

white cloth. The baby's mother got married. Dacino talks to her from time to time. He's happy for her.

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Evening. Wilson Avenue, Prichard. Dacino cruises, no destination in mind, just driving, thinking. The walls close in sometimes being alone in the house. Darkened storefronts stand in the shadowy glow of streetlights. Building a new Popeyes, Dacino notices. And a new car wash over there. Wasn't there the other day. Tony's Car Wash. Back in the day, Tony was always drunk. Morning and night he was full. In 2008, he told John and Dolores, I got to kick this life. The next day, they put him on a bus to San Antonio and Victory Gospel Church. He stayed ninety days and renewed his faith in God. Now, he has his own business. Twenty dollars a car, no charge for vacuuming.

There's Fry Daddy's, a restaurant. Order today, get your food tomorrow. That's how slow they are. Fry Daddy's and Fat Boy's restaurants nearby. They're not bad. Dacino turns onto U.S. Highway 45, a road that runs from Prichard into Saraland. There's another car wash. Next door, Dacino sees the store where he first saw a man shot to death. My Boy's Food Market it's called now. His stepdad made him ask people for money. No one will give a grown man money but they will help kids. Dacino hated it. He felt so embarrassed.

FOUR

I move in with Dacino the second week of my trip to better experience the Village. As night approaches, a pale light illuminates the porch. I see the dim outline of one of Mr. Arthur's signs. Wandering around, I notice many more: *Praise God; Holy Spirit I have you; Let It Shine, Lord*; *Wow, God Is Intense*. Any number of his signs fill the road to Restoration Youth Academy, a closed juvenile bootcamp in the Village that shelters a homeless man, sixty-three-year-old Tommie Bonner.

Since I once worked with the homeless, I decide to meet him. I take a road to the cracked drive of the academy. Shoulder-high grass and weeds shroud the buildings. I walk past a charred school bus covered with vines. Corroded ammo casings litter the pavement. The air left a bitter taste.

I shout, Tommie Bonner! several times before I hear a hoarse reply, Yo! A concrete walk leads through chest-high shrubs to a one-story building where I find him standing on a landing.

You made it, he says, as if he had been expecting me. Stroking his gray goatee, he runs his other hand through his thick hair. A worn black sweatshirt and two long sleeve knit shirts cover his narrow chest. He watches me wipe sweat from my forehead.

We'll get another frost in two, three days. It's coming, he says. Then you'll be wishing you was hot. Not summer yet.

He adjusts a clutter of pots that hold the rainwater he uses to wash dishes and points to a bare patch of ground he's cleared to plant onions and watermelon. He should have waited until June. It's just March now. Frost will kill them, he says.

Tommie discovered the bootcamp by chance. One night in 2018 he had stopped in a field to sleep. About two in the morning it started raining. Crawling out of his sleeping bag, Tommie got on his bicycle—something he found, doesn't know the year but he knows it's old—and started riding in no particular direction seeking cover. Through the rain, he saw the square shaped buildings of the academy. He rode toward them and has been here ever since. Took him a minute to clean out the large room he now calls home. He moved mountains of debris, mostly broken ceiling tiles, and piled them in a hall where they remain today, a testimony to his labor. Then he swept and swept, dust pluming around him, until a blue carpet emerged. He hung plastic sheets where there had once been walls for

insulation.

He has a sleeping bag and a mosquito net inside an oblong tent. Like crawling into a coffin, he jokes. He shows me a radio. As long as he has batteries it will provide him with company. He'd be talking to himself without it. A firepit lined with aluminum siding takes up one corner where he also keeps rodent traps. He gets rats, big ones, and hears them in the walls. One of them walked into a trap about three in the morning. Tommie didn't get up. Hours later, he kicked out of his sleeping bag and checked the trap but it was gone. Must've been a huge rat to run off with a trap.

I'd be back out in the field, I tell him.

Tommie laughs. You've never been in the rain with no place to stay.

Fishing calendars cover one wall. The owner of a hardware store in Chickasaw gave them to him. The calendars help conjure up good memories. Tommie loves to fish. He once caught a barracuda in the Gulf, not a great eating fish and the big ones have a lot of mercury. Same with tuna. The bigger they are the more mercury they carry. He has caught redfish, a good eating fish. Croaker, too, a better eating fish. He likes sheepshead almost as much. He snagged one the size of a plate years ago, a big son of a gun.

A grocery basket holds wood for cooking. Tommie won't burn treated wood; the fumes knock him out. One window provides light and overlooks his vegetable garden. He used to see rabbits but hasn't seen one in five months. Coons, possums eat all the trash, he says, and scare away everything else including dogs. All the birds have left too. Won't be long before someone comes and hauls the burned bus for scrap and then it, too, will be gone.

A meth head named David used to live in one of the buildings behind Tommie. He's been gone now for a minute and Tommie

doesn’t miss him. He believed in Satan. He had written, *I love Satan* on the walls. All night long he was in and out, in and out. Weird, man. Satan didn’t teach him to clean. He lived worse than a pig. It was a good day when David left and the devil with him.

Tommie shows me an office he uses as a prayer room. A crucifix and a picture of Jesus hang on the wall. Lying in his tent one night, Tommie heard the Holy Spirit tell him: Build you a room to pray, and he did. Every morning, before he does anything else, he stops in his prayer room and reads the twenty-third Psalm. *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want/He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters/He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake/Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me/Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over/Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*.

After his prayers, Tommie rides his bike to collect cans. He makes about thirty-seven cents a pound. In the evening, he smokes his room to discourage bugs. He sits in the warmth of the airy heat looking at gathering shadows before he douses the fire. He does not want the flames to attract the wrong people.

He has grown used to the sounds of gunshots at night and the noise no longer bothers him unless bullets strike close to his room. A bullet pierced six stucco pillars outside his door one time. Bam, bam, bam. Tommie dropped and rolled against a wall. Then the shooting stopped. A lot of people tote guns. He wonders how they afford them. Bullets ain’t cheap. Big guns too: .357s, .44s, and others like machine guns.

Tommie was born in Choctaw County way up Highway 45 a good

three hours from Prichard. He and his mother stayed with her father. They moved to Crichton, Alabama, in the early ‘70s. In his mother’s final years, Tommie lived with her and worked as a maintenance man, painting and installing pipes. One evening, he returned home and his older sister asked, Where you been? I found momma on the floor. She’s been like that all day. Tommie quit his job to care for her. When she died, he drifted from one temporary job to the next.

A white guy he knew from Daphne, Alabama, told him he needed someone to watch his own mother, eighty years old. Why don’t you stay with her? he suggested, and Tommie agreed. She lived in a trailer and he moved into an RV nearby. She had rare plants, the names of which Tommie no longer remembers. At least she said they were rare, and she owned twenty-five little dogs, Chihuahua-like things. She wasn’t the cleanest lady. In the evenings, they would drink a little wine and she’d smoke a cigarette surrounded by dogs and plants and talk him to death. Her son-in-law, however, didn’t like the idea of a stranger staying with her and Tommie left. It only takes one person to ruin a good deal.

I ask him if he has noticed Mr. Arthur’s signs. Ray Charles could see those signs, he tells me, they’re everywhere. He thinks he may have met Mr. Arthur. A Black guy big on Jesus stopped him one day and gave him fifty dollars. Just up and gave him the money and kept going on about Jesus.

I’m blessed, thank the Lord, I’m blessed, he said.

Pray for me, Tommie asked him.

I will, brother, the man said. Pray for me too.

Tommie never saw him again. He stretched that fifty like a rubber band.

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Dolores tells me she worries about Tommie. She wonders what he does for food, how he keeps warm in the winter. He doesn't seem to want help. She enjoys talking to him. He's very sweet and polite and appears at peace. One time he had trouble with his bike and she and John replaced a tire. When he stops and checks in, she gives him food. Mostly she tries to be kind and offer him company.

She hopes Big Man will drop by again. Was he going to call them about going out or were she and John supposed to call him? She can't remember. Big Man was always a good kid but the streets exerted their pull. He wanted money for shoes, outfits. Every holiday he'd ask, Miss Dolores, can we get me an outfit, get me these shoes? He wanted to leave a store wearing new clothes. The Fourth of July was not about fireworks or cookouts but walking around in a fresh outfit. Big Man never outgrew that.

She remembers when he called John about his son, Corey Jr. She doesn't think he understood what happened. She doubts he asked himself how he might have contributed to the situation. Every young man she knows in the Village believes they love their kids. She doesn't blame them for not trying harder. They never had an example in their own lives. They don't know about birth control, something Dolores chides herself for not emphasizing more. She doesn't believe they have kids so they can be eligible for higher welfare benefits. They may do some things with the wrong motive but who hasn't? They live lives different from what most people know.

Now, Jesenda dotes on her children. Dolores remembers how she used to be. Jesenda could fight and she would fight. Once that switch turned on, good luck turning it off. Nothing could stop her. She has come a long way. She exudes joy and Dolores is so proud of her. Jesenda is smart, always has been. People don't mess with her.

Cindy, Jesse Darrington's mother, could not have been more devoted to her children. She wanted her boys to receive an

education, but she also allowed kids into her house who sold drugs and had dropped out of school. Her home became the center of all this junk. Jesse and his brothers had to navigate all that, the different guys she dated, and not good guys either. Jesse would say, I don't like them. Dolores never understood why she let just anybody in. She was so nice, too nice. She couldn't say no and do what was best for her. But she loved her children and they adored her. No one questions that.
Dacino has traveled far. He was always polite. Quiet, but polite. His stepfather, a wiry skinny man, didn't really like John or Dolores. She remembers when she first saw him with Dacino and his brothers. Dolores asked if she could get them water. Their stepdad said yes and then let them play with the other children. He could be nice in a condescending way. Dolores put up with him so Dacino and his siblings would come back. Dolores has no doubt Dacino will be a great physical therapist. He is compassionate, committed, and disciplined.

I ask her about Mr. Arthur. He was a gentle soul who professed a deep faith, she replies. He died in 2020 and she misses him. He loved God but he drank until he was intoxicated and then he beat himself up for displeasing God. He had a huge heart but he was torn. He told Dolores he wanted to do better but his alcoholism held him back. He was a big, balding man, about six feet one, but not heavy. What hair he had he tied into a braid. His expressive eyes danced with joy or drooped with sorrow depending upon his mood and the amount of alcohol he had consumed. He could fix things and helped out at the ministry. He dropped by and swept and mopped according to his whims. He would arrive in a good mood or walk in weeping. Dolores would take him in a room, give him Kleenex, and they would talk and pray. He spread the Gospel with his signs. It's almost impossible to drive through the Village and not see one. Dolores wrote what he wanted to say and he'd copy it onto a board with markers she provided. It amazed her how many he put up. He used discarded boards he found in the woods. In the

fall and winter the bare branches holding his signs declared his faith. *Oh, Lord, I'm Coming Home*. When he died in 2020, Dolores believed he did.

Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

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Billy Boy stops at Mr. Arthur's house on Hale Drive and walks around he porch to a back door. The swollen wood sticks and he tugs on the knob with both hands until it opens. He knew Mr. Arthur well and likes to hang out with older cats like him, guys in juke joints. Chill, drink-a-shot-or-two type of guys. Mature kind of dudes. Billy Boy doesn't worry about them. They won't go off into nonsense and shoot their friends. Billy Boy prefers them to younger cats. Mr. Arthur's house became one of Billy Boy's go-to places. If his family couldn't find him, they knew where to call.

Mr. Arthur and those older dudes were drinkers. Outside of the juke joints they put down the wine, man. Started early and didn't bother to eat. Billy Boy used to get on Mr. Arthur about that. Whatcha doing, Mr. Arthur? I know you ain't got no wine in your hands. Not at no eight o'clock in the morning. Mr. Arthur made Billy Boy mad, killing himself like that.

Sometimes Mr. Arthur burned trash in a barrel outside of his house. Billy Boy would warm his hands and then walk inside without knocking, just give a shout, Hey, Mr. Arthur! He used to watch him put up his signs. That was all he did. Hammer and nails. Real old school. Signs everywhere, man, like weeds. He put one on a tree in his front yard where a young woman died. *O, yes, Jesus loves Detoria.* Billy Boy knew her. Some guys started shooting and she got caught in the crossfire and dropped as if a hand rose out of the earth and yanked her down. That was a very bad day, Billy Boy says. Three people were wounded and Detoria died.

Billy Boy feels Mr Arthur's presence. One of his rooms has a desk and a lectern where he'd preach to whoever dropped by. A deer head stares out from its spot on a wall, cobwebs laced around the dusty glass eyes. In the dark kitchen, a rusted can of cranberry sauce stands alone on a warped shelf, the oven lost in a corner, the cabinet doors shut. Billy Boy walks down a hall, the sound of each step filling the house. Dark suits and a hanger full of colorful ties crowd a bedroom closet. A dresser stands beneath a mirror. Sheets and blankets cover a bed as if just made. The smell of mildew hangs heavy as fog. Only thing missing is Mr. Arthur. Billy Boy takes a couple of shirts and jackets. They'll go to waste if he doesn't. Mr. Arthur would want him to have them.

Sitting on Mr. Arthur's bed, Billy Boy looks out the bedroom window at the backyard, sloppy with water from a recent rain. He remembers how thunderstorms flooded streets when he was a boy. He'd drag an old mattress from a trash pile and do somersaults into the water and play for hours. The sight of garbage brings Billy Boy home, makes him feel like an eight-year-old again. Much of the trash, he thinks, doesn't come from the Village. Contractors who won't pay to use a landfill instead treat the Village like a dumpster. To Billy Boy it's beautiful. He can hear his scrawny boy's body splashing in the water, smell the stink of it and the odor of the funky mattress on his skin. He felt a kind of freedom. If he had an opportunity to go back in time and put it on camera and record it, he would. This is where he came up, amidst all this garbage, and felt joy.

A homeboy, Sean, died in the yard next to Mr. Arthur's house. He had wandered around to the back and saw some guys he did not like. They felt the same toward him and started shooting and Sean ran and fell beside a trash can. As he bled out, people say he called for his mother, and the guys who killed him are dead now, too, shot. What goes around comes around. Mr. John has a photo of Sean on the memorial wall. Another

homeboy got killed on First Street not far from Hale Drive. He said something to a dude that the dude didn't like, *Bro what you say*? and the dude had a big ass gun and shot him. Billy Boy didn't see it but he heard the shot and was ready to throw down. If there's going to be a war me and my homeboy are going to win the war, he thought, but that's not how it went. Homey died; war over.

Billy Boy knew another homeboy who died in front of a convenience store, Two Dragons. He tried to shoot a dude but his gun jammed and the dude turned around and shot him. That was the first of many deaths Billy Boy witnessed. A bunch of dudes chased another friend and shot him when he tried to jump a gate. Not too long after that, Billy Boy got together with two homeboys. They got carried away teasing each other; the joking started getting personal. Went from laughter to serious malice. Emotions got involved and then bullets flew and one of them died. After so many years of killing, Billy Boy has no expectations. He was exposed to death early before he knew what death was. Before he knew the word for it. He wonders when it will be his turn. He has been involved in a couple of shootings but no one died. So many of his homies have been killed that Billy Boy's like, I know I'm coming. Y'all make some room for me in heaven because I know y'all're all up there and there ain't no place else for me to go because I know I'm coming. He has reached a point in his life that he can't make friends because of the love, man, because he loves so hard. He's afraid he'll lose them. He tries to put restraints over his heart, hold back on the love and not feel. He keeps to himself. It's too late in the game to play.

Billy Boy thinks that if people fought like the old guys did back in the day, the shootings would cease. But if a dude doesn't know how to fight, what're they going to do? They got a reputation to uphold. Imagine a guy with diamonds in his mouth like Big Man all beat up from losing a fight. He wouldn't be able to ride around all falsey like that without

people laughing at him. So now when he throws down he reaches for a gun. No one says, Hey, man, remember when we went to school together? Remember when we played basketball at Light of the Village? No one says any of that. They shoot.

Billy Boy leaves Mr. Arthur's house. Knee-high grass brushes against his pants as he walks through an empty lot, flies scattering. He considers himself a backstreet mover and prefers paths and alleys in and around the Village instead of streets. Safer. If he sees somebody he doesn't know, he worries, drops down to a crouch, watches. Don't too many people move off the main roads. If it's an older dude, cool, but a young cat will make him paranoid. Why's he out here? What's he up to? Billy Boy has learned to be alert. Anything he sees that doesn't feel right or look right or feels out of place arouses his suspicions.

Billy Boy was born in Sacramento but moved with his mother and grandmother to the Village when he was five. His grandmother was from Mobile and he presumes she wanted to come home. His father stayed in California but called every so often. Hey, his father would say, I'm going to mail you fifty dollars tomorrow then Billy Boy wouldn't hear from him again until the next time he offered to send money. His mother used drugs and would leave him alone in the house. I'm going out to eat, she'd say, and he wouldn't see her for weeks. But he'd die for her. Even though she wasn't there for him, she's still his mother.

He relied on his grandmother, Miss Annie Marie. She was a sweet old lady and gave him what she had even if it wasn't much. By-the-book kind of lady. She made sure Billy Boy attended school and showed respect. Chores and keeping the house right. She was big on house cleaning. One time a lady made her so mad she tried to fight her from a wheelchair. Billy Boy laughs. Miss Annie could act crazy, man. Billy Boy called her momma. She died when he was ten and Billy Boy moved from one aunt to another. He dropped out of school at thirteen

and began hanging out with older cats and learned to sell drugs. Use your instincts, they told him. Follow your gut. Hesitate, you die.

When Billy Boy turned fourteen, the police busted him with a gun a friend had given him, a .22, little thing. Watch your back, his friend had told him. Don't let nobody do nothing to you, you feel me? The police took him to Strickland. His mother and father didn't attend his hearing. A judge sentenced him to the Lee County Youth Development Center where he served thirty days. Since then Billy Boy has been in prison three times: in 2012 and 2014 for robbery and in 2016 for robbery and assault.

He did not steal because he needed money. Sometimes he would have a pocket full of cash and still rob someone. The thrill drove him—and his anger. Billy Boy has a temper. Today he keeps that side of himself chill. Someone would have to physically assault him for it to kick in, but his anger scares him because he gets hot pretty quick. He copes through prayer. All he does is pray. Its' not on-top-of-a-roof praying, but it's prayer. He prays for his safety, his family's safety. He prays to God that he has the wisdom to identify danger. When he was in jail, he prayed with other guys. They had faith to a certain extent but too many of them lost it when they got out. The world of faith ain't the world of the 'hood. Billy Boy tattooed a cross between his eyes. Every time he looks in a mirror he sees it as a reflection of his love for God.
Billy Boy feels the weight of the spirits and ghosts of the dead, like Sean and another homey, Cyrus. Billy Boy and Cyrus were like brothers. They protected each other. Watch-my-back, watch-your-back kind of love. One time as he sat in a car with Cyrus, a dude pulled up next to them and gave them a troubling look. Damn, Billy Boy thought, there might be some shit, and cocked his .45, but nothing happened and Cyrus pulled off and cruised to a Burger King. At the drive-through, they asked for two Whoppers. Billy Boy reached into his pocket for change

and nicked the trigger of his gun. Boom! The bullet went through the floorboard and into the right front tire.

We got to go, Billy Boy said.

Hell no, I want my food, Cyrus screamed at him.

Man, these people are going to call the police.

Not before I eat, Cyrus said.

They bought their food and limped off. The police never did catch them. Those kinds of stories, Billy Boy says, become legend in the Village.

He had a dream recently about playing basketball with Cyrus. Then he dreamed about Sean. He asked him how death felt. Chill, Sean said. Billy Boy has been dreaming about dead people since he was little. He spoke to prison counselors about his dreams but they told him they couldn't provide the help he needed. After a while, Billy Boy embraced his dreams. They remain the one way he can still see dead friends, and they feel so authentic. In one dream he wanted to warn Cyrus he would get shot but he didn't want to upset him. So Billy Boy stayed quiet and then, as in the real world, Cyrus died.

*

John and Dolores have known Billy Boy since he was a child. He always had a mind of his own and wanted to be seen as a hip, cool dude. However, people in the Village watch his actions more than they listen to his words. He doesn't command their respect. They see he doesn't work or take care of his kids. He has to change his life before he can be a role model.

That's the sad part, John tells me. Billy Boy knows what he should be doing. He talks about it but he doesn't follow through. John and Dolores have sent Billy Boy to several job programs but he always walks out. It's tragic, really. Billy Boy is bright and has insight. His observations about people

can be spot-on. John recalls one afternoon when a preacher approached the basketball court behind the ministry. Guys from all over Prichard were playing. The preacher said, Stop. I want to share the word of God with you. Bow your heads. Who here wants to go to heaven? The players looked at John and he nodded, indicating they should do what he asked in the hope he'd leave. The preacher led them in a prayer of repentance. Billy Boy shuffled next to John. What do you think? John asked him. Is he leading them to Christ?
He's not leading them very far, Billy Boy said.

When Billy Boy was eighteen, John spoke by phone to his father in Sacramento.

I'm ready to be a dad, his father said. Send me a picture of him.
John did.

Oh he looks great, his father said in another call. He gets that from me.
John and Dolores bought Billy Boy clothes, had a big send-off for him at the ministry and drove him to the Mobile Bus Station the next morning at eight o'clock. Fifteen minutes before departure, his father called.

I don't need him right now, he told John. Better stop him.

John told Billy Boy. Billy Boy shrugged. Disappointed, yes, but not surprised.

FIVE

On a Thursday night, Billy Boy hangs around the ministry. He talks to Dacino and follows him to the house across the street, where John sits on a porch swing. Dacino tells him Billy Boy wants to buy shoes for his birthday.

How you going to buy shoes without any money? John asks him.

I don't know, man.

How much are the shoes?

Eighty dollars.

C’mon, Dacino you know you’re flush, John says.

Who?

You.

Man, I don’t have it. I’m going to stand by the dumpster and smoke a cigarette.

That’s where your money’s going.

John looks at Billy Boy.

What’s going on, Mr. John? he asks.

I’m getting ready to go pick up kids for the after-school program. What have you been up to?

Walking around the Village. It’s my birthday coming up. Kind of special to me.

Yeah, I know, but here you are.

I ain’t in no trouble.

That’s a plus.

I got nowhere to stay. I need a room.

You going to hang out while I figure out something for you, Billy Boy?

Yes sir.

I’m going to pick up the kids now.

Billy Boy walks behind John to a van and gets in with him. John backs onto Baldwin Drive. Billy Boy stares out a window. The night sky dances with stars.

Somebody got killed last weekend, he says.

Been a little shooting today, yeah, John says.

Got to be careful at nighttime. It's crazy. Do a lot of shooting from the bushes. After my birthday, I'm going to go out of town.

Where?

I don't know. Somewhere. Anywhere. Start over. Be something positive. I need work.
A birthday is a good time to get a new direction.

That's what Miss Dolores says. She gave me a good talk today. She'll tough-love you, man.

John picks up the children and drives back to the ministry. He gets out and the children follow. Billy Boy stays by the van. Minutes later John walks out and calls to Dacino.

I got a hundred bucks. That should handle the shoes. I'll tell him and then you want to run him up real quick to the store?

If it wasn't his birthday, I wouldn't do it.

Dacino looks at him. John shrugs. Does he just write Billy Boy off? Say, I don't want you around here anymore? John doesn't see how that would help. Enabling, the textbooks call it. It's easy to sit at home and recite academic rules of social work about what should and should not be done. In the field, that is much harder to do. John deals with people, not words on a page. They aren't canned goods with a shelf life. Billy Boy certainly isn't the only one. Many people see the ministry as an ATM. John tells them to text him. It's a lot easier than listening to their spiel: How are you, Mr. John. So glad you guys are here. John doesn't need the small talk, the false praise. Get to the point: What do you need? The manipulation is so obvious. He gives them what they want. It gets exhausting saying no all the time. At some point he'll cut

off the spigot and Billy Boy will leave angry, hurt, and confused but not surprised, and that's sad too. It's just shoes. A fleeting moment of happiness. Why not? Enabling. That's a good term. John supposes it applies to him.

Go get you a birthday gift, he tells Billy Boy and hands him the money. Dacino will take you. Then we'll deal with finding you a place to stay.

Billy Boy looks at the ground and runs a foot over pebbles. He takes the money almost self-consciously, perhaps a little ashamed, without looking up.

Ya'll going to make me cry, he says softly.

I don't know about that.

Thank you, man.

Alright, Bo.

I love you, Mr. John.

We love you too, you know that.

*

John walks through the Village early the next morning. He strolls behind the ministry and crosses a highway to the Donut Shop. On his way home last night, John noticed it was packed, the green juke joint filled with cars, the empty homes around it frantic with activity. Trap houses, people call them, places to stash drugs. No one steals because someone would rat them out and lethal repercussions would follow. Quiet now. John thinks he should call the Donut Shop something else. A donut shop never closes. Sure feels closed now.

What's up Bo? John shouts to a man peering out the door of a ruined home.

He doesn't answer. A dog barks.

John walks through the Donut Shop to other neighborhoods. The wind stirs, the air damp but warm, sunlight poking through clouds. A stop sign on a street named Madison Avenue carries graffiti: *PA for Life*. John thinks it means *Prichard, Alabama, for life*. Like a prison sentence. There had been houses all the way through here at one time. Nothing now except the rusted frames of stolen cars.

He walks to Big Man's house, a gray trailer home with a small front yard. He's up and busy, everyone coming around. Cars out front for only one reason. Got to get it. Early bird gets the worm. Big Man holds a shoebox where he keeps his money, or so rumor has it. Rides around with it too. Doesn't leave it at his house, a precaution against burglars. He leans into the passenger window of a car. After a short moment, he jogs into his house.

What's up? John calls out to him. It's early, Bo, too early to be up.

Big Man glances at him without expression.

John, Dolores, and Big Man

Dude, I like those pants. I gotta say, you looking good, Bo.

A kid named Elijah lives with his grandmother around the corner; another boy, Daniel, nearby. He'd come to the ministry with Elijah. Elijah's aunt brought them but Elijah hasn't been around for a good while. Maybe because of COVID; John doesn't know. A dude named Diamond Dog lives not far from here. He serves as the Village mechanic.

John keeps walking. He remembers the early years of the mission. He and Dolores were suspect then. Everyone was friendly but people did wonder about them. After twenty years, a few still do. Other people, too, wonder. Some of them think he and Dolores want to save souls and charge their egos. If anyone thinks they drive home at night feeling empowered, they

don’t know, they really just don’t know. More often than not John feels deflated. It sucks, caring about people who self-destruct. Sucks big time. So many people have died.

It should be me up on the memorial wall next, he has said more than once in Bible study. At fifty-six he is much older than the young people staring back at him but he knows the chances of him dying before them remain slim. An argument over a girl, or someone feels insulted, a robbery gone bad, or something equally tragic and stupid will result in death. John feels immense joy and immense sorrow, most days not in equal measure. He and Dolores stay focused on the mission: Show love, hope, and faith. Let the Bible speak for itself, see who it touches. Listen, encourage. Be consistent and genuine. Tell the truth in a kind way. Don’t condemn or judge. Help in whatever way possible. Come back. Be consistent. Be present.

John relies on scripture, 2 Timothy 4:5: *But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don’t be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you*. He tells anyone who will listen, If you feel compassion for something, don’t ignore it. Explore it. You don’t have to go all Mother Teresa and run at full speed but you can investigate it. What do you feel compassion for? Search for it, embrace it. What moves you? The answer, he believes, is a gift from God.

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Postscript

On March 12, 2021, two days after I left the Village, I received a text from John: *Very sad news this morning. Apparently Big Man (Corey) was killed this morning*.

The shooting occurred in the Donut Shop about ten o’clock. He was shot in his red Dodge Charger R/T. Dacino called John. Dolores heard the ring and thought, Oh, crap. She saw by the expression on John’s face that someone had been shot. He drove

into the Village, Dolores stayed home. She usually doesn't go to murder scenes. At that point all she could have done had been done. Big Man was in God's hands now.
Everybody liked him, even the person who witnesses alleged shot him. This person some say hung out in the Donut Shop as much as Big Man. He stopped at the ministry every so often to wash his car and John would talk to him. He was wounded on Hale Drive one year and John visited him in the hospital. His vital signs were crashing more from panic than the seriousness of his wounds, and the doctors asked John to calm him. He was pleasant like Big Man. His kids participated in the after-school programs. No one knew the why of it. It may be that Big Man broke up a fight between him and another young man. It may be that Big Man said something that humiliated him. That's all it takes, injured pride.

The Donut Shop turned into a ghost town. John wondered who would fill the void.
In some ways, John told me, Big Man's death was a story that has been told many times, only every retelling is different because each person is different. He was more than a statistic, more than a number. When John thinks of Big Man, he sees the boy who snagged a cake from a restaurant buffet. He always had a young face, a kid's smile. John can still see his hurt when he talked to him about his son. Are you at the church? Yes, John said. I need to talk to you. Sure. Big Man had just come from the morgue and looked bewildered. How does a two-year-old shoot himself in the back of the head? he asked. He was upset, his pain palpable. The ministry was the one place he could let down his front and be Corey instead of Big Man, a grieving father, exposed and vulnerable. Just the other day, John told me, when Dolores took some children home, DT, a young man who had been shot four weeks earlier, flagged her down. Leaning on his walker, he showed her his wounds like he was baring his soul.

I recalled my conversation with Big Man as we sat together in

the same car he would die in. At one point, I asked him what people should know about him. He said he was a good person. Not a perfect person but a good one. Friendly, kind-hearted. But he would not let anyone disrespect him. He had a bad temper, he admitted, but believed he had it under control. I told him I thought it spoke well of him that he had sought out John after his son died instead of retaliating. It seemed at that moment, no matter how brief, he had sought an alternative to violence. Big Man stared out the windshield, his right hand resting on the wheel.

Maybe, he said.

New Review from M.C. Armstrong: Diane Lefer's 'Out of Place'

I can't stop thinking about Dawit Tesfaye, an FBI agent in Diane Lefer's excellent new novel, *Out of Place*. Shortly after 9/11 and the launch of the Global War on Terror, Tesfaye, along with his partner, Daniel Chen, are sent by the Bureau to investigate a laboratory in the Mojave called the Desert Haven Institute. Like many of the scientists he interviews at DHI, Tesfaye does not quite fit into the simple monolithic identity categories that suddenly demarcate the cultural landscape of what many now have taken to calling The Forever War. Like Dr. Emine Albaz, a Turkish Jew who "abused her security clearance regarding US nuclear technology" and just happened to be married to a "jihadi captured on the Afghan-Pakistan border," Tesfaye challenges the reader to care about someone who is not white or a young adult. More than this, and unlike Albaz,

Tesfaye is not a suspect in the War on Terror but is instead part of a new movement within the national security state that simultaneously employs diversity while deploying these diverse forces all over the planet to snuff out a predominantly non-white bogeyman. *Out of Place* may well be the most profound fictional meditation I've encountered on the emerging phenomenon some call "intersectional imperialism."

One of the great pleasures in *Out of Place* is traveling all over the world with Lefer's characters and savoring granular renderings of Iran, India, Mexico, and that cosmopolitan state where so many countries converge: California. *Out of Place*, far from a narrow treatise on race and terror, is also a thoughtful story about science and cosmopolitanism and people like Albaz who actually think about concepts like cosmopolitanism: "Careful now," the scientist says to herself. "[S]he was not a rootless cosmopolitan—that old slur against Jews. She was a cosmopolitan who loved her roots." Lefer, reminiscent of authors like Don DeLillo and Michel Houellebecq, affords her characters a fully imagined adult life, replete with interests in science, politics, music, philosophy and sex. One is tempted to describe *Out of Place* as a novel of ideas.

And perhaps it is, but that descriptor, like "cosmopolitan," often comes with a burden, the suggestion that in novels of ideas character does not count and place is a chore. Although Lefer's cast is large and her concern with caste sometimes trumps her fidelity to scene, I was moved by her empathy and dazzled by her ability to web together so many languages and voices, including those of scientists, musicians, programmers, and Zoroastrians. *Out of Place* is a novel that aims for both the heart and mind and I admire that ambition. But, to mix metaphors, it is walking in the shoes of Tesfaye, just after the attacks of 9/11, where I most powerfully feel the arrow of

Lefer’s compass.

Tesfaye is mixed. “He’d been born, he’d believed for years in what was now Eritrea, but it hadn’t been a country then, and later he learned he’d been born in a refugee camp and there were so many stories, so many lies, he wasn’t sure over which border, if any, or where.” When I was traveling through Iraq as a journalist in 2008, I remember encountering a noteworthy number of Eritrean guards posted at the dangerous outskirts of “coalition” bases. Was this a coincidence, all of these black bodies guarding these predominantly white compounds? This is intersectional imperialism, the weaponization of identity politics by the foreign policy establishment, a term first defined by Alex Rubinstein. Connected to “securo feminism,” “rainbow capitalism,” “woke imperialism” and the Intelligence Community’s recent “digital facelift,” intersectional imperialism is a term that is increasingly used in new media environments to caustically describe the contemporary Democratic Party and its strategic use of figures like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Pete Buttigieg to maintain an imperialist status quo. But as Lefer’s return to the attacks of 9/11 reminds readers, this all began a long time ago. It was Cheney and Bush that sent Colin Powell to the United Nations to argue for the invasion of Iraq. Meanwhile, as America’s dominant political parties evolved their cynical use of diversity to combat the crisis of democracy, working-class immigrants like Tesfaye were forced, every day, to choose a line of work in an increasingly globalized national economy. So how does the reader feel when Tesfaye does the bidding of a police organization whose home office still bears the name of J. Edgar Hoover, the man who sent the hit down on civil rights leaders like Fred Hampton?

Perhaps more than a bit torn.

Perhaps, like all of us, Tesfaye is not simply one thing. Lefer constantly challenges the reader’s readiness to impose monoliths, binaries, and judgments. Maria del Rosario

Saavaedra Castillo, one of the DHI scientists, in a conversation with a cartel boss named “El Chato” (who seems interested in repurposing Maria’s research on parasites), describes how snakes can sometimes serve as a “paratenic host. Paratenic means being the intermediary in the life-cycle.” Not only did I feel my vocabulary expand as I made my way through Lefer’s book, but I also experienced a growing sense of awe at the symbolic unity she had achieved through all of these characters and the eleven government “files” she uses to structure her story. In many ways, Castillo, Chen, Albaz, Tesfaye, and all of the other figures who orbit around DHI are paratenic, particularly when it comes to the ways in which they are used by their host institutions and the people all around them.

In light of America’s recent withdrawal from Afghanistan and the conversations about LGBTQ+ rights that emerged during the exodus, Lefer’s novel seems timely. This is a book about the people who do not fit into the dominant narrative of The Forever War. A striking number of Lefer’s characters are single or alienated from their spouses. The DHI, with its intersection of science and desert, seems to attract this lonely and roaming profile, the descendant spirit of nomads, bedouins, and pioneers. But Tesfaye is a noteworthy exception. His story is bound not just to the FBI, with its secure funding (in contrast to DHI), but also to a fellow Eritrean refugee named Gladys. “Glad,” Tesfaye’s wife, as her name suggests, is grateful to be in America, away from the country that was not exactly a country, the place where, as a child she had received a clitorectomy from a number of men who used “a broken bottle” for the task. Her husband “couldn’t bring himself to enter her where she was scarred. They held each other at night. He caressed her with hands and lips and tongue, seeking anywhere on her body where she might feel pleasure.” Even here, in the American home, far from the maps and territories of war, Lefer’s character struggle, mindful, like their author, that the body is a country of its own.

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Out of Place *will be published September 13th, 2021 and is available here or wherever books are sold.*

New Nonfiction from Rob Bokkon: “Betrayal at Blair Mountain”

There were 10,000 of them. Boys fresh back from the war in France, middle-aged guys who fought in Cuba with TR, and old men who’d only ever handled a rifle to shoot squirrels and rabbits. They were country boys from the hollers, both black and white, they were Italian and Polish, Hungarian and Slovak. Some had lost fingers, toes, or arms fighting the Kaiser. Far more had lost them underground mining coal. Every one was lean from months of starvation rations and mad as hell. And they had nothing to lose. They had lost their jobs, they had lost their homes, they had all been condemned as radicals and communists (and to be fair, a good many of them were). All of this because they’d had the audacity to demand a day’s wage for a day’s work, paid in American currency, cash on the barrel head.

They marched under many banners: the flag of the UMWA, regimental banners from the Great War, an occasional Gadsden flag, but the most common was simply Old Glory. The ex-doughboys brought their old uniforms out of storage and pinned

on their medals, but most wore overalls, shirts that had once been white, and old work boots. The real uniform was simple: a bright red bandanna tied around the neck, red for socialism and the union and the blood of the miners. Such a little thing, a piece of cloth, yet it could get you shot down like a dog on the streets of Mingo and Logan Counties. In the company towns, the mine operators' wives had started calling the insurrectionist coal miners "red necks" (*sic*) and the miners quickly appropriated the name for themselves: The Red Neck Army.

The Red Neck Army marched together toward death, arrest, ignominy, unemployment and poverty, ready to take it all on for the right to unionize. For the right to be paid in United States dollars instead of coal-company scrip only accepted at a coal-company store. For the right to live somewhere other than a pineboard shack owned by a coal operator, who took the rent out of your pay for the privilege. For the right to assemble on the streets of their hometowns, unsupervised by armed guards who listened in on every conversation, who harassed their wives and sisters and daughters, who sometimes shot up the storefronts for fun.

They marched for the rights they were promised in the Constitution. Together they represented the largest armed uprising since the Civil War and the largest labor disturbance in the history of the United States.

Between the miners and their goal were a mountain, all the guns in the world, an army of trained thugs bought and paid for by big business, and the might of the United States military.

And chances are, you have never heard of any of it.

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This essay is not intended to be a full analysis of what happened at Blair Mountain. Rather, it is a meditation, if you

will, on what Blair Mountain meant then and means now. It is an examination of why the story was buried for so long and why it is so important again, and why it will continue to be resonant as a post-COVID America reckons with the issues of labor and wealth and the rights of the working class.

The history of the labor movement in the USA goes back to the 1840s or before, and is fraught with tales of heartbreaking injustice, illegality, and immorality. The right of working people to organize for better wages and safe treatment should never have been controversial, but from the very beginning, business owners derided labor organizers as foreign-born agitators, malcontents who came from abroad to destabilize our American way of life, Reds and anarchists and, later, "Bolsheviks" once that word meant anything to American ears. (The same rhetoric is used today to describe Antifa protestors, BLM activists, and anyone at all who is brave enough to suggest that we might do things differently.) From the Molly Maguires in the Pennsylvania driftmines of the 1870s through the Pullman workers' strike in the 1880s, the Colorado coal miners' strikes of the early 20th century to Blair Mountain in 1921, organized labor was opposed at every turn by big business, the government, and the rantings of the popular press.

And yet the labor movement grew and grew. The American worker was often literate, and read voraciously; books became cheap in the late 19th century and newspapers and magazines cheaper, and the works of Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, and Eugene Debs passed from hand to hand or were read aloud on shop floors for the benefit of those who could not read. Socialist journals and newspapers abounded; West Virginia alone boasted three socialist weeklies by the early 1920s, and the cities of the Northeast had hundreds. None of that, of course, was as important as grassroots organizing, and thousands of union organizers spread out from the coalfields of Pennsylvania and the stockyards of Chicago and the steel

mills of Ohio to spread the good news, risking their livelihoods and their very lives to do so.

Their sacrifices were often in vain, and not only because of the beatings they received from sheriffs' deputies and armed guards. Many workers were too afraid to join the union, or believed it was some foreign plot, or had accepted the bosses' mythology that if they kept their heads down and worked hard, the magic of rugged individualism would one day make them rich too. Yet the union organizers were able to recruit enough men to be a complete nuisance to big business, which reacted with increasing fury as the decades passed. Joining the union would get you fired, then it would get you thrown out of your company-owned house, and after a few years one of the collieries in West Virginia came up with the idea of the "blacklist": any miner who had signed his name to a UMWA card would never work again.

They had that power, because in West Virginia, the mine companies virtually owned the state and its government. Fifty years after its independence from slave state Virginia during the Civil War, the Mountain State arguably had less freedom than anywhere in the country. Mining towns were armed camps, patrolled by private detectives known as "gun thugs" who controlled every aspect of daily life. They worked closely with local police departments and sheriffs' offices to ensure that order, as the mine owners determined it should be, was maintained at the end of a rifle muzzle. All of the land had been bought up decades before by either the coal companies or the railroads that serviced the collieries, and what they didn't own the timber companies did. The miners were forced to live in company housing, which consisted of pineboard shacks built without insulation or even properly painted, so that the boards would pull apart and let in drafts after just a few months. Sanitation barely existed; the miners' outhouses were built over the same creeks where they were expected to gather their water for cooking, washing, and drinking, so outbreaks

of typhoid and cholera were common. When petitioned for septic tanks or even better outhouses, the mine companies blamed the rampant disease on the “filthy habits of the miners” and did nothing, evicting families who had lost their breadwinners to the disease and hiring new people brought in from the Northeast with promises of a luxuriant lifestyle and ample pay (both of which were flat lies). The work was brutal and dangerous, and mine safety regulations, such as they were, flouted regularly or ignored entirely.

Red Jacket Coal Camp, West Virginia, 1920s

The day of a typical coal miner started at 4 AM, because a miner’s shift was sunup to sundown. It was dark when they went into the mine and dark when they came out. The miners ranged in age from 13 to 70 or older, if the elderly could still swing a pick or shovel coal. Prior to the child labor reforms instituted by Teddy Roosevelt, there were many boys as young as five working in the picking sheds, spending twelve hours a day sorting slate and other impurities from the coal as it came out of the mines. Boys of ten could go into the mines with their fathers, since their small size allowed them to go into “low coal” tunnels of 18 inches’ height or less. It should be noted that more unscrupulous companies continued to utilize child labor well into the 1920s in open defiance of the law, a practice that only ended definitively when FDR came into office. Within the mines, conditions were horrific. No breathing apparatus was available, so the miners were forced to inhale every particle of rock dust and powdered coal they encountered. Ventilation fans kept the air circulating but were often allowed to break down and remained unfixed for days or weeks; the heat in the mines often climbed over ninety degrees Fahrenheit and each miner had to rely on a canteen carried on his belt for water.

The work itself was wretched, taking a toll on the human body

that cannot be imagined by the modern reader. All rock was dug by hand, with a pickaxe, often by men laying on their backs in tunnels two or three feet in height. Blasting of the coal face, done with dynamite, was an inexact science and cost many a miner a finger, a hand, his life. Once the coal was freed from the rock it had to be shovelled by hand into the mine carts with great care to ensure that no bits of slate or other non-coal matter were included. Roof-bolts, that kept the millions of tons of rock above from burying the workers, had to be hammered into place overhead. And the natural dangers were myriad.

The “black damp”, a buildup of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and water vapor, had no smell and could asphyxiate the unwary in seconds. Other gases were wildly flammable and could ignite from nothing more than the lamp on a miner’s helmet or a struck match, exploding and filling miles of tunnels with a firestorm that few survived. Rockfalls were common, especially in areas where the miners had extracted all the coal from a seam and were closing the face by removing timbers for later re-use.

After enduring all this and far more than we can list here, the miner would emerge into the night, black from head to foot, aching in every joint, knowing that he had to be back at work in eight hours, knowing that there wasn’t enough food to eat at home, knowing that his home was too hot or too cold or falling down, knowing that he had one day off per week to look forward to, knowing that he was being paid not a daily or even an hourly wage but by the tonnage of coal he had loaded that day. The going rate in 1921 for a non-union miner was 57 cents a ton.

And yet, sometimes, you didn’t get paid at all.

The coal came down from the mine in cars drawn by mules (automation was slow to reach the innovation-resistant coalfields of West Virginia) to the coal tipple, where

“checkweighmen” would examine it for impurities. If a single piece of slate or rock, no matter how minute, was “found” in the car, the checkweighman marked it off and the miner received nothing at all for his work, to offset the company’s “inconvenience” in removing impurities from the coal. This practice was regarded as not only legal but also perfectly fair by the mine owners and their well-paid friends in the West Virginia state legislature and the Governor’s Mansion.

This was the life of a miner. This was the life that the union and any sensible person could see was unfair, unkind, unsustainable and unworthy of perpetuating. Yet the mine owners insisted that they were benevolent men. Did they not provide their workers with housing? Did they not provide them with food? Did they not pay them wages for their toil? Some of the more “enlightened” companies even organized baseball teams for the miners (since they weren’t tired enough on Sundays) and gave them the use of company swimming pools and even libraries, with carefully selected reading lists, of course. The press were more than willing to repeat the mine owners’ propaganda, portraying them as enlightened, educated men of breeding, offering the hand of kindness to the “primitive, backwards folk” of Appalachia, who were “near-morons” unable to survive in the modern world, and who should be grateful that they weren’t ekeing out an existence farming tobacco on a hillside somewhere.

If this sounds extreme and unbelievable, the reader is invited to explore press coverage of labor disputes from the era, and will discover that the examples given here are mild. When labor agitation flared, the calls for brutal crackdowns and strongarm tactics from papers as storied as the New York Times or the Washington Post occupied prominent front-page space, and were read by millions. Especially in the years of the first Red Scare in Wilson’s last years in office (1918-1921) the rhetoric directed against working people and their aspirations was appalling.

And yet, membership in the union continued to grow. By 1920, the last bastion of completely non-union mining in the state of West Virginia lay in its extreme south, in Mingo, Logan, and McDowell counties. The vociferously anti-union sheriff of Logan County, a prominent Democrat by the name of Don Chafin, had been on the coal companies' payroll for years and had sworn that no organizer would ever walk the streets of "his" county unmolested. It is important to note that prior to the days of FDR, both of the major parties were reliably anti-union except when it suited them; Woodrow Wilson's Department of Labor had forged a convenient alliance with the UMWA for the duration of WWI, and then promptly turned on them as soon as coal production was no longer vital to make the world "safe for democracy".

When the powers that be arrested hundreds of miners in Mingo County without trial or warrant in 1921, the UMWA had finally had enough. Further inflamed by the murder of pro-union police chief Sid Hatfield at the hands of Baldwin-Felts detectives on the very steps of the McDowell County courthouse, the Red Neck Army began to coalesce just south of the state capitol at Charleston. Armed with rifles mostly obtained through legal means (UMWA members were encouraged to join the NRA), the Red Necks marched for Mingo, determined to unionize Logan County on the way. They sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as they marched, changing one line of the chorus to "And we're gonna hang Don Chafin from a sour apple tree, our truth is marching on".

They never got anywhere near him, of course.

Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin, 1920s.

Don Chafin had thousands of volunteers, scabs from the mines, Baldwin-Felts gun thugs, and newly minted "deputies", all armed to the teeth, spread out along a twelve-mile-long

perimeter ridge across the top of Blair Mountain on the border of Logan and Boone Counties. He built barriers and dug trenches just like the ones the doughboys had faced in France. He had surplus Lewis guns from WWI emplaced everywhere. He had private planes armed with nail bombs and gas shells, a generous donation from the governor of Kentucky. He had the United States National Guard and the Army Air Corps and a chemical weapons unit on reserve. (These last were never used, but do not forget that Warren Harding's government was more than willing to deploy these resources on its own citizens.) The miners fought valiantly for five days, until the National Guard was deployed. Unwilling to fire on United States soldiers in uniform, the Red Neck Army finally disbanded and turned in its weapons for a promise of safe-conduct out of the region and of no further prosecution afterwards, which the mine owners promptly ignored. Hundreds were arrested in the weeks following the battle, thousands more would never work in the mines again, and the UMWA in West Virginia was completely decimated. Blair Mountain was an act of bravery. And it was a complete failure.

Not until 1933 would UMWA membership recover to pre-1921 levels.

*

This isn't just history for me. This is personal.

My father, who passed away last year at the age of 94, was a lifelong UMWA member from Logan County, West Virginia, where the climactic battle of this forgotten story took place. Gazi Bokkon was the son of Hungarian immigrants, drafted out of high school in 1945, was a coal miner for decades, and then a federal mine inspector. He used to refer to his days in the Mine Safety and Health Administration as his "civil service" and was just as proud of that as he was his years on Saipan with the SeaBees in World War II. He'd been in the UMWA since his first day on the job and he remained an active member his

entire life, faithfully paying his dues until he died. Growing up, there were always histories of coal mining and the union on the bookshelves, coffee-ringed copies of the United Mine Workers' Journal on the tables, a little ugly statue of a slouched miner in his helmet and coveralls carved from a piece of coal on the mantelpiece. My older brother worked in the mines, and my brother-in-law, and a bunch of my uncles and my cousins and the fathers of half the kids at my school, and my dad's best friend that lived next door, and most of the men with whom we went to church.

Machine gun nest on Blair Mountain, Sept. 1921

The only reason any of those people earned a decent wage and were able to own houses and take their kids on vacations was the union. For the ones that were born before the 1940s, they had all grown up in poverty and seen their own lives transformed by their ability to organize, to negotiate for better wages and better working conditions, to have the power to stand up to King Coal and demand what was due to them. Because make no mistake: the coal companies are unscrupulous, immoral, unethical, corrupt, and without the least shred of decency. They have always been that way and they will never, ever change. With the exception of the industry's acquiescence to FDR's labor reforms, they have steadfastly opposed any and all measures that would provide the slightest modicum of improvement to the livelihood or safety of their workers. This is all a matter of public record and is not, in any sense, a matter for debate. The only thing that has ever stood between the people who do the actual work of coal mining and the people who fatten themselves on that labor is the union.

For all the good it has done. Since the days of Ronald Reagan, the government has been either openly hostile or indifferent to organized labor, with even the Democratic administrations half-heartedly trying to undo the systemic damage that began

with the breaking of the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 and providing very little in the way of gains. Republican governors and state legislatures have successfully used the rhetoric of rugged individualism to sell their constituents on "right-to-work" legislation in dozens of states, leading to an inherently hostile environment for labor. Massive corporations like Walmart spend tens of millions of dollars per year on blatantly illegal anti-union messaging in their training, for which they are rarely cited or fined. Kroger, the famously unionized grocery store chain, recently hired Trump's former Secretary of Transportation, the notoriously anti-union Elaine Chao, to its board of directors. (You may recognize her as the spouse of the equally anti-labor Senator Mitch McConnell.)

When Dad was born in 1926, the events depicted herein were recent memories, raw and unresolved. The union was still illegal. Don Chafin, the quintessential devil of Blair Mountain, had only stepped down as sheriff two years before. And yet, the Battle of Blair Mountain was not discussed. It was not taught in school, it was not acknowledged by a single roadside marker, it was not brought up at all except as a matter of local lore. Stories of the Mine Wars were shameful things, to be whispered about over a shared jar of moonshine when you were absolutely sure the mine guards or the sheriff's deputies weren't around.

By the time Dad went into the mines, after WWII, things had changed. FDR's Fabian socialism brought in the unions and gave them full recognition. John L. Lewis and his pro-business centrists had taken full control of the UMWA and thrown out all the "radicals" in the name of "Americanism", rewriting history to suggest a bland and bourgeois union that had always existed, a union free of Reds and Wobblies and anarchists. Better to pretend that miners had always been model citizens; better to pretend that a Red Neck Army of miners had never taken up arms and marched 10,000 strong against the forces of law and order. Blair Mountain faded away from legend to myth

and from myth to rumor and finally to nothing at all, save in the memories of those who were there.

By the time anyone cared again, most of the voices had gone silent. Serious scholarship on the Mine Wars and Blair Mountain didn't really take off until the 1990s, when the few surviving members of the Red Neck Army were old, old men. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Appalachian historians and historians of labor, the situation today is very different.

The 100th anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain is being celebrated as I write this. There are dozens of books on the subject. And yet, the Mine Wars remain an obscure footnote to American history.

The reasons for this are many, and they are not due to casual neglect or a poor understanding of history. They are because of deliberate erasure. This essay is being published on Labor Day weekend; the very institution of Labor Day in the United States is a sham, held on a day determined by the Federal government instead of on May 1, International Worker's Day. (That day is "Loyalty Day" and "Law Day" in the USA. Imagine celebrating either one.) May Day is of course too socialist for the USA, too closely connected with the actual Marxist roots of labor. And it must be said that unions in the USA have been all too willing to go along with the ruse; for generations, the myth of the polite bourgeois union has grown so pervasive that right-wing, politically conservative supporters of capitalism have been and remain enthusiastic union members, more than happy to enjoy the benefits of organizing while opposing everything labor ever stood for. No one wants to talk about the Wobblies, who were instrumental in getting us the things we hold so dear like the eight-hour workday and the weekend; no one wants to talk about the anarchists, who started the whole national conversation about labor with the Haymarket Riots in Chicago, and no one at all wants to talk about socialism, that dirtiest of dirty words in the American political discourse, yet labor comes from and is

defined by its socialist roots.

As for Blair Mountain itself, a few years ago Arch Coal, who owned most of the land comprising the battle site, sued the federal government and won, getting the site de-listed from the National Register of Historic Places. Their reason? They wanted to mine it. Using mountaintop removal, a rapacious technique that involves clear-cutting all the trees, blasting away all the layers of the mountain from the top down until the coal is exposed, dumping the resultant debris in the nearby valleys and streams, and then leaving the mess once the coal is all gone. Thanks to the efforts of historians and the UMWA and other labor activists and a good many environmentalists, in 2018 the site was restored to its status on the National Register and is safe for now. But the mere fact that the coal operators, all these years later, were more than willing to literally erase history in search of more profits, should tell you all you need to know about a business that has forever been dirty and will always be dirty.

Lest the reader be left feeling hopeless, things are changing. More and more young people are learning the history of labor in the United States. More and more people view direct action and strikes favorably. More people quit their jobs in the first quarter of 2021 than at any time since figures have been kept on the subject. Even without marked growth in organized labor, a sort of “soft revolution” is taking place. The American worker took advantage of COVID to network, to reach out for better opportunities, to decide that they were no longer going to accept poor wages and worse treatment. The current “labor shortage” is anything but; it is, in fact, a wage shortage. People are fed up. They know from experience that their workplaces, especially in anti-union “at-will” states, will fire them for less than no reason, and they are unwilling to extend their loyalty to those who do not offer them the same consideration. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we must learn again to listen to the

American working class, because if we do not hear them when they ask politely, we will certainly hear them when they start to shout.

Solidarity Forever.

“Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living.” —Mother Jones

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New Poetry by Sam Cherubin: “Don’t About Not,” “Mermaid Tavern,” and “Emerald Inula”

SUN HOLDING ME / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Don’t About Not

If I can’t or think
do it like I’m doing now

a beach
sun holding me

I am holding space
not space itself

not looking
being

gathering toward me

sun’s filaments

fluidity
            is all I need

Mermaid Tavern

A night-wind touching bare backs lying down
and bare arms spooned across my bed, in blue
light dreaming over skin, light-fingered sparks
of seaweed, dendrites rippling through the room.

Scales rubbed against smooth sheets, in silver
puddled water, a smell of open
ocean, roseate tips of waves, our hips’
undulations, in my body’s rhythmic memory.

Emerald Inula

i.

Apples in Schiller’s desk, Balsam of Peru, rockrose,
rose alba, Helichrysum Everlasting, *Immortale*.
Why can’t this be enough?

ii.

Dried petals staining the pages.
Attar of cells breathing sun.
Flesh never accepting, but aching.

New Nonfiction by John Darcy: “Hypothermia”

The email takes me to a link that takes me to an article displaying two mugshots. The mugshots take me back to winter. It was a southern snow day, at least five inches of accumulation and more flakes still falling. It was 2014. I believe weather records for the region were broken. I believe it was a Thursday.

In my mind the day has a mirror’s shine, everything reflective. The ground stretched out in a pureness of white, like one great flattened pearl in the sun.

We were not supposed to be out. Ft. Bragg was closed. I was junior enlisted at the time, a Specialist, twenty years old, a team leader in charge of a fire team within a Reconnaissance, Surveillance, and Target Acquisition Squadron of the 82nd Airborne Division. Mostly this meant paperwork. I never did get used to jumping out of airplanes. I never fired a shot in anger.

The 82nd is famed and storied, of course. Sicily, Normandy, Panama, Fallujah. Its mission statement boasts an ability to deploy anywhere in the world within eighteen hours. Often it’s referred to as America’s 9-1-1. And yet the base was shuttered and training halted for a few inches of snow.

Well, not all training was halted. We were out there in the snow.

We were lacking in cold weather gear but the Captain wouldn’t hear it. Our unit’s forefathers fought the Nazis without coats or gloves at the Battle of the Bulge; sometimes without boots or even bullets. Protests about weather were certainly blasphemous, possibly heretical. But the temperature was

starting to dip toward the upper teens. And it was a wet snow, dense with a chill that leeched through our uniforms like a reverse blood-brain barrier, totally porous. These camouflage uniforms, of a digital pattern now retired from service for their failure to blend into any environment, were made of a mystical material that sweltered you in heat and froze you in the cold.

I was close with our platoon leader for having served as his radioman before my promotion. I told him maybe a third of the guys had the proper gear, and this was a situation likely to turn hairy and soon. He concurred, and together we got a fire going. Hypothermia lingered on the horizon like a sunset, and all of us knew it. He told me the Captain would keep us out here as planned.

One of my soldiers was back on base and quarters-confined with a staph infection. To fill some other equally random staffing issue, the empty slot in my team was filled by Private Underhill. He was a SoCal kid and five years older than me. Whenever he wasn't in uniform, he wore a flat brim hat etched with some variation of the Oakland Raiders logo.

After the platoon leader and I got the fire crackling, I went back to check on my guys. They looked frosted but generally okay. They liked to curse me for cluttering up and weighing down their packing lists, but today they were grateful, and I felt like a father finally vindicated for making his family arrive six hours early to the airport.

Underhill, prone in the snow, as a last-minute addition to my team did not have any of that same gear. Water draws heat from the body four times faster than air of the same temperature, and he was dripping, drenched. His teeth chattered with a strange music. We'd been out there almost twenty hours. His face was a glossy blue.

At the extreme ends of body temperature, motor functions begin

to fail. Underhill spoke like an Adventist in tongues. There are videos online of non-English speakers acting out what an English conversation sounds like to those not fluent. They are uncomfortably strange clips, these sort of auditory illusions, like an Escher sketch for the ears. You can feel your brain almost literally stretching out to make sense of the nonsense, so close is it to being discernable. That was how Underhill sounded. And worse than the meaninglessness was his face, serious and concerned. A face that seemed absolutely certain of his speech, awe-struck that I appeared unable to understand.

I stripped him naked but for his boots and wrapped him in my poncho——not promising, but it was the only dry item I had. I got one of my guys to collect his gear, and we started back toward the central staging area where I'd met with the platoon leader, and a fire awaited. It was maybe not quite half a mile. I was maybe not quite certain that Underhill would make it.

With the base closed, there was some hiccup in getting a medic to the scene. Underhill, now in dry clothes and around the fire, was still stammering a stream of incoherence. There are stories of people so infected by cold that, when they finally draw near to a fire, they end up singeing themselves in their desperation for warmth.

I tasked one of my guys with making sure Underhill didn't topple into the fire.

I told the platoon leader I'd never seen hypothermia, real hypothermia, before. He said that neither had he. I said I didn't know how long he'd been like that, how far along he was. I told him this was my fault for not making frequent enough rounds with my guys, which was true.

The platoon leader said we've got to get out of here. He said the Captain was on his way, having heard the call for a medic

over the net.

When I check on Underhill, his fingernails are a color I cannot describe.

The Captain arrives with a medic, who goes to Underhill directly. I hover close to the Captain and the platoon leader, a First Lieutenant. It was like eavesdropping on my parents arguing, and I remember thinking that simile at the time.

> *If we can't train in the snow, how are we supposed to fight in the snow?*
>
> *We don't have the gear, sir. It's not that they didn't bring it, but that it was never issued.*
>
> *I'm looking for some intestinal fortitude from the guys.*
>
> *The base is shut down. Sir, I think we're approaching a bad situation.*
>
> *We've only had one man go down.*
>
> *Tell me how many need to get hypothermia before you end this, sir. Tell me what your number is, and when we hit that number I'll call you. Tell me what your number is.*

It was a clash of two commissioned tectonic plates. Hearing a Lieutenant address a Captain that way seemed like a glitch in the simulation. It was the immovable object of care for the troops versus the unstoppable force of military authority.

I was preparing myself to freeze to death so I could spite the Captain. I would have done this for my platoon leader.

The whole beating, thematic heart of the collision is best illustrated in William Styron's short novel, *The Long March*. It's a forgotten little novella that I stumbled into after I left the army. It depicts the clash between the hero, Captain Mannix, and Colonel Templeton, the villain who orders his

reserve Marines, out of shape after being suddenly recalled to duty over escalations in the Korean War police action, on a sadistic and pointless thirty-six mile forced march.

The march takes place the night after a training accident——a mortar round shot short, equally meaningless——leaves eight Marines dead. My own unit's time in the shivering snow came three days after a jump fatality occurred over Salerno Drop Zone outside of Ft. Bragg. A gruesome scene, a friend who was there told me. He used the word decapitated. Four American soldiers would be killed in Afghanistan throughout January 2014.

Captain Mannix, the obvious stand in for William Styron, confronts the hell of absurdity in a similar manner as the protagonists of Styron's contemporaries: but unlike Jones's *From Here to Eternity*, or Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Styron banishes all attempts at redemption through suffering and violence, of meaning through war, of clear-eyed stoicism in the face of the absurd. "None of that Hemingway crap for me," Mannix says to Lieutenant Culver, the book's narrator.

The tragedy of the story, of course, is that Colonel Templeton is forever destined to win——even when the Colonel himself falls out of the forced march. Mannix, who steps on a nail in the march's early miles, suffers through on the fuel of his unceasing hatred for the Colonel, even as the nail shreds his foot to a bloody scrap. A few miles from the finish, when the Colonel catches sight of Mannix's blood-sodden boot, he orders the Captain into one of the recovery vehicles. Mannix refuses. Again the Colonel orders, threatening court martial. Again, Mannix refuses. The Colonel places a hand on the pistol at his hip. Still, Mannix refuses.

Styron describes Mannix in those moments as "the man with the back unbreakable…lost in the night, astray at mid-century, in the never-endingness of war." The tragedy for me, as I sat there saturated in snow, was that I hadn't yet read of

Mannix’s futile struggle with the Colonel. As I watched my platoon leader argue with my Captain, soldiers far better and braver than me were being asked to die seven-thousand miles away so that the soldiers who’d died before them didn’t die in vain. Others commit war crimes that will later be pardoned by the president. I thought the situation in which I found myself, as well as the situation abroad, still possessed the capacity for a just conclusion. I believed the unstoppable force of the Captain’s authority could be reasoned with, pleaded with, swayed. But this belief would become something I would look back on, marveling at how very little I knew about the world. I wouldn’t understand until I read Lieutenant Culver say of the fictional Colonel and his march, that my Captain was beyond judgment, because “he was a different kind of man, different enough that he was hardly a man at all, but just a quantity of attitudes so remote from [the] world that to hate him would be like hating a cannibal, merely because he gobbled human flesh.” There was no exit, no alternate paths diverging in a snowy wood. Everything Colonel Templeton and my Captain embodied, the whole sluggish wheel that turned for the express purpose of turning again, was so far beyond my comprehension that it might as well have come from another planet.

But this was all meaning I created in hindsight. In the wet expanse, that freezer of snow where the leaf-shedded trees jutted up from the white like mutated limbs, I focused on keeping my team’s temperatures up. It would be many years before I began to free myself of Mannix’s Hemingway crap. I fall victim to it still.

A second truck arrived, with a second medic, who soon whisked Underhill off. The first medic told me there was no doubt that I saved Underhill’s life. That before my speedy intervention, Underhill was nearing a point where his body would have no longer been able to correct its inner thermostat. At the very least he would have suffered what the medic called a traumatic

cerebral event. To have saved a person's life——possibly, probably, most likely——at the age of twenty. It felt to me like no small achievement. To have saved a life that——certainly, absolutely——should never have been endangered in the first place? This seemed, somehow, even more significant. A kind of mortal déjà vu, the sort of moral underpinning that always nagged at me, later on, when faced with the trolley problem in ethics classes; that is, in the simplest terms, why did all these people need to be in harm's way?

———

The article's mugshots paint a picture and a cruel one. After the army, after college, after my father fell ill, suffered, and passed away, I was living in the mountains of Virginia. A slanting summer rain fell in sheets outside my window as I read. I remembered meeting Underhill's wife when a group of us went out to dinner before my discharge. But in her mugshot she seemed changed——straight hair shortened and tinted bright red——as if the night we met she'd been wearing a disguise. Underhill looked the same, though, and I felt that I could almost hear his brain-chilled babbling.

All of the charges are felonies. Battery of a minor. Child abuse inflicting serious bodily injury. Conspiracy.

There are a few other local news bulletins. Bail set at $150,000. The infant son on a ventilator at UNC Chapel Hill, critical but stable. The four-year-old daughter, mercifully, already recovered from her injuries. The *Fayetteville Observer* quotes a police report of this girl saying she was hung upside-down until "red stuff" came out of her nose. Another says she was so afraid of Underhill that, long after her rescue, she would wet herself at the mere mention of his name.

It's skin-chilling stuff, grizzly. I scour through the sixth, seventh, eighth page of the search engine results. I can't

find any subsequent articles about the married couple's sentencing, even now, four years after their arrest. As if they'd been whisked out of sight in the very same manner as the medic truck saving Underhill from the cold.

The whole scene really does present itself as a sort of one of a kind trolley problem made just for me. What I don't mean to do is impose an ex post facto morality. Underhill had been a friend of mine, awkwardly unfunny with his rehearsed punch-line zingers, a quality that endeared you to him instantly. And with this comes a certain feeling of being tricked, had, swindled into camaraderie by some cunning master of sociopathy.

It's the sensation, even now, of being the neighbor interviewed on the nightly news, who never could have seen it coming.

In a way it makes me feel a troubling exclusion from myself, a split-screen personhood in which each side communicates with the other. One hemisphere says stop, enough, what could you have done, it's a horrific thing but the guilt is fake, or worse, the inserting of yourself into a tragic story that should be centered on what those two children faced, and what they will have to face, as they grow up haunted by a life tinged early with unspeakable trauma; because what could you have done, let him freeze? Let him topple into the fire you made? You couldn't have let him die even if you *had* known, which means you ought to stop creating a moral quandary where none exists; how many times do you think you've held the door open for a murderer?

This hemisphere is my own personal Mannix. Righteous and reasonable, always seeing through the fray and telling me the truth in no uncertain terms.

And yet. If this is my Mannix, that makes it the doomed hero, a voice who can't alter its own fate any more than it can turn

iron into gold.

Because the other side of the screen, that other hemisphere, sings a far simpler tune: you saved a man's life and that man went on to torture his children, and something is owed for that, regardless of whether you understand what it is. Responsibility proves boundless. My own personal Colonel, who speaks inside my skull-sized kingdom with a voice oddly reminiscent of my Captain, issuing order after order inside my brain's confines with the volume fully cranked. The unstoppable force of some echoing and illusory guilt that forces me to march ever onward, further and further, with a pack whose weight never stops increasing, a march for which there's no chance of rest or respite in sight.

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Growing up in Nebraska, where I lived at Underhill Avenue as a kid, we had a small, hardcover book not unlike a pocket bible that concerned itself with famous coincidences and wild convergences of fate and fluke. Kennedy's secretary. The final recorded fatality of the Hoover Dam's construction being the son of the first recorded fatality, deaths separated by fourteen years to the day.

One of the anecdotes in this book of strange happenings took place as the Civil War was beginning to subside. On a train platform in New Jersey in the early days of '65, a man watches his train approach as others watch his face, stunned to be in the presence of a celebrity. His name is Edwin Booth. Considered America's greatest actor, he would go on to be seen as the most acclaimed Prince Hamlet of the 19th century. When the train pulls into station and bodies begin to flow from the doors, Edwin sees that a man has become caught at the far end of the platform. Edwin hustles to the man as the train begins to breathe the steam of impending motion. He manages to free the stranger, saving his life. Edwin learns some months later, after a friend sends a letter commending his swift action,

that the man on the platform was Robert Todd Lincoln, oldest son of Abraham Lincoln. The whole affair was said to have given Edwin solace after his brother, John, assassinated the president.

There is, I learned, great solace in reading about other of occasions of blind, incomprehensible chance. Because without other wild strokes of chance, all of these curving occasions and flashes of happenstance threaten to create a worldview in which the universe is constantly arranging itself in purpose-giving shapes, constantly formulating patterns and events which set me at center stage. And to believe in a universe like that, where the infinite cosmos align themselves through chance of circumstance to inform and elucidate me, to create my meaning——that's a nasty business. Having company in coincidence helps me avert my eyes from the arrangement of events that took me from Underhill Avenue to Private Underhill's random assignment to my fire team and his unforgivable crimes that were, in some secondary respects, facilitated by my actions, which extended his life. From plucking Styron's novella off the library shelf, a total coincidence, and having the book flood over me with snowy meaning. Or this: A year and a half after the snow, on the same Salerno Drop Zone where the gruesome training accident took place, myself and a man I didn't know saved the life of one Lieutenant Pedilla. We'd all jumped from the same airplane. A gust of wind on the drop zone screamed up to inflate Pedilla's parachute upon landing, dragging him ragdoll-like over the shorn grass, and preventing him from unhooking himself as the paracord risers lodged around his neck with tension. The man I didn't know chased after the billowed chute to smother it, while I launched onto the purple Lieutenant to jostle the cords free from his neck. I came to know Pedilla afterwards. I met his wife and kids. They live in Miami now, I think. Happy as happy can be.

This, however, is me waving a wand at the karmic tally, trying

to cook its books. Because the voice of the Colonel makes it clear that the internal ledger is no palimpsest. There are no revisions here. It is often said that the paths of life are winding, but this is a misconception. There is only one direction. Only the painfully straight route of a forced march.

How dearly I would like to be the Mannix of this story. To be the man with the back unbreakable. But against the flow of all my striving, I find myself dominated by the Colonel, by my Captain; bogged down inside the villain's view and ruled by an unswayable voice completely immune to reason. What would Mannix do in the face of such bewildering randomness? He'd keep walking. He would understand that the searing pain in his foot, or in his soul, or in his heart, was nothing more than passing show. No sensation can last forever, even if it insists, in its screaming immediacy, that it will. For Mannix, there is no chance. Only what should be done. And it is in Mannix's knowledge of those things which should be, which could be, and which didn't need to be at all that I find, if possible, solace. There is a kind of quiet grace in accepting the world as it is without sacrificing, in that most idealistic corner of your mind, the thought of how it might be. What if I hadn't saved Underhill's life? Well, what if the Captain hadn't put his life at risk in the first place? It isn't that these questions have answers. They don't. It's that, should I find myself some bright, snowy day not even bothering to ask them in the first place, then I know that something sinister has taken hold; that, without introducing the proper moral checkups, I might be on my way to becoming the Colonel.

And as far as the Colonel goes, I have little doubt that, faced with an event whose randomness made him question his place in the world, he would try to kill it.

I spoke to my mother on the phone a few days back. We were reminiscing about the Nebraska house on Underhill Avenue. It

was the quickest of corrections. Wood, she told me. Not hill. Underwood Avenue.

New Poetry from Alison Hicks: “I Took A Walk With A Friend” and “Untitled”

AWAY INTO SEA / *image by Amalie Flynn*

I TOOK A WALK WITH A FRIEND

Instead of starting a poem

I told her about my son’s first semester
As long as he’s home & happy & in one piece, she told me

Worry squeaked out my sneakers onto wet pavement
The rest dissolved with the pitcher of margaritas

Though it was wet & rainy
I did not get a headache

Married for thirty-four years
We selected the movie about divorce

By the time we finally got to watch it
He fell asleep

The book was about a friendship that started in graduate school
I skipped ahead to the parts where she snorted OxyContin

Didn’t want to think about graduate school

But stayed up reading the juicy parts anyway

Personally, I blame the recliner

UNTITLED

The sea is a room without walls. It spills, falling over land. Land shears away into sea,
rooms echo with spills and falling walls. Walls are powerless in the war of land and
water, swells uproot trees, sweep cars, shopping carts, diamond necklaces out to sea,
rooms of plastic ingots drifting down. The sea has room, gathering spoils from falling lands.

(UNTITLED is included in Hicks' new book Knowing Is A Branching Trail, winner of the 2021 Birdy Prize and forthcoming in mid-September from Meadowlark Books.)

New Fiction from Adam Straus: "ANA Checkpoint"

Sergeant Reiss insisted on giving a full patrol order every time we left the wire. I thought it was overkill, but I didn't mind as much as some of the other guys. Haggerty especially was always going on about how it was a waste of time. It's not like there was anything else to do, but he was obsessed with efficiency. Back in Twentynine Palms, he had a million little projects he would work on in our barracks room during the endless hours we spent waiting to be told what the plan for

the day was, waiting to be released in the afternoon, waiting to deploy. While I'd sit and play video games like a normal person, he'd try (and fail) to learn foreign languages, do hundreds of pushups, and pace like a maniac. Haggerty just couldn't accept that some time wasn't his to spend.

On deployment, he had the bunk above mine in our squad's platform tent. Inside, there were six other racks and a beat-up TV that the guys we relieved had left for us. Outside sat a generator that sometimes coughed exhaust into the tent. Our stained sagging mattresses had been around since the war started, and I could feel the bedframe's springs under my ass as Haggerty and I sat side by side on my rack, taking notes while Sergeant Reiss briefed.

"Fuckin' simple shit tonight, gents," he began. "We're going to depart the east ECP, swing by the ANA checkpoint on Highway 1, and return via the airfield. Orientation remains the same. We've still got Little to our east, the highway to our north, Big just past that, and fuckin' nothing to our west and south. Weather tonight will be clear, with 6% illumination…"

I copied down all of the meteorological data, along with the same enemy situation and the same friendly situation that had held true for the previous three months of deployment. I wrote word for word "the Taliban are active throughout Washir. I expect them to mass to fireteam size in order to carry out hasty ambushes if they are alerted to our presence" and "the ANA maintain checkpoints along Highway 1. At night they are often high or asleep, so we can't count on them for help. 3rd squad will be on QRF and they'll be able to reach us within 30 minutes." I glanced over at Haggerty's field notebook. All he'd written down was "ANA checkpoint, Highway 1." In his defense, that was all any of us really needed. We'd already done this exact same patrol at least ten times.

Sergeant Reiss read off our mission statement ("On order, 2nd

squad interdicts the Taliban in the vicinity of Highway 1 in order to deter enemy activity and strengthen our partnership with the Afghan National Army") and walked us through the patrol route, using empty cans of dip to signify our vehicles on a mockup of the surrounding grid squares he kept in the middle of our tent. He finished by listing all the frequencies to program into the vehicle's radios (the same frequencies we'd been using the whole deployment) and telling us the succession of command, in case he went down. Sergeant Reiss asked for questions. There weren't any.

"Alright. Check your shit, then get some sleep. We're pushing out at 0200 so I want everyone at the vehicles by 0130."

The brief over, we turned to personal preparation. My pre-patrol routine was automatic: I kept my kit staged in the same spot, with my rifle hung from the same bedpost and my boots pointing the same way with one sugar-free RipIt (the caffeine equivalent of two cups of coffee) stashed in each of them. Everyone had their own way of getting ready, from the rosary Schumacher prayed to Doc Warrington's habit of jerking off before bed. Whatever it was, we'd all had plenty of practice, and 30 minutes after Sergeant Reiss' order ended, the squad racked out with our alarms set for 0100.

*

Everyone killed their alarms on the second or third ring. We got dressed and kitted up in silence, each set of bunkmates in an island of light from the bare bulbs that hung from the canvas above our racks. I chugged one of my RipIts and pocketed the other, in case I started nodding off later. The center of the tent was still dark.

February nights in Helmand are cold as fuck, and we shivered underneath our flaks and kevlars during the five minute walk to the motor pool where our up-armored MaxxPros sat waiting. Haggerty and I took our seats in the back of vic one, with

Sergeant Reiss in the passenger seat as vehicle commander, Donahue driving, and McClellan in the turret.

Our interpreter Aziz was already in the vehicle. He rolled with our fireteam, but he never came to Sergeant Reiss' briefings. He'd already been working out of our FOB for nearly two years. His job was to sit inside the vehicle, get out when Sergeant Reiss told him to, repeat whatever shit Sergeant Reiss and the Afghans were trying to say to one another, and then get back in. He was older, with bifocals and flecks of gray in his well-trimmed beard, and he wore a knit sweater under his castoff flak. He looked like a college professor.

Like Aziz, Haggerty and I didn't have anything to do until we got to the checkpoint. There, our job was to get out with Sergeant Reiss and Aziz and make sure none of the ANA shot them in the back of the head. An implied task was to not get ourselves shot either.

While Sergeant Reiss got comm checks with the operations center and requested permission to depart friendly lines, Haggerty bent towards my jump seat and motioned for me to lean in.

"I think Gabby's cheating on me."

"Are you serious?"

"I mean, I'm not 100% sure. It's just little things. Like I saw on her Instagram story that she was at a party on Saturday night. When we talked on Monday and I asked her what she'd done over the weekend, she said 'nothing.' And the other day some dude commented on one of her photos. I asked her who he was, and she said it was one of her cousins. But I remember her telling me like six months ago that all of her cousins are girls. My point is, why lie if there's nothing going on?"

"Fuck, dude. Do you know anyone she's going to school with who could keep an eye on things for you?"

“The only people I know there are her friends, there’s no point asking them.”

“Fuck. I don’t know what to say.”

I really didn’t. But I did know that Gabby was a junior at UC Riverside. She had two older brothers that she got along with well, her parents lived in Palm Springs, she was majoring in biology, she wanted to be a doctor someday, and she played on the club volleyball team. She was tall for a girl, she almost always kept her hair tied back in a ponytail, and she wore the same floral perfume as my sister. Gabby chewed gum constantly, which made kissing her taste like spearmint.

Haggerty knew all of this too, except for the fact that I knew any of it. He turned to our terp.

“Aziz, you’re old. You got any girl advice for me?”

Aziz laughed. “I am maybe not the best to ask. My wife, I have not seen her in more than one year. The Taliban came to my house and said they would kill me next time I come home. So she tell them I’m already dead. Now, she pretends to be a widow until I make my three years and get our visa. Then, both of us go to America.” He wiped his glasses on the sleeve of his sweater. “I still send money home and we talk on the phone. So that is maybe my advice to you. Call on the phone and send money.”

“Goddamn Aziz, you always keep it heavy.”

He shrugged. “You ask me, this is what I tell you.”

We fell silent, listening to the low throb of the MaxxPro’s engine as we left the FOB. Our route took us through what used to be the largest American base in Helmand. We’d turned over most of it to the Afghans, and our perimeter was now a square postage stamp in the corner of their envelope. The Afghans manned the outer fence, sort of. In between our walls and

theirs was a wasteland of materiel: Old canvas tents, rusted out vehicles, coils of barbed wire protecting nothing, long-empty concrete bunkers. The Afghans had taken anything worth the effort years earlier, when the American tide had first receded. All that was left now were the equivalent of tidal flats, wide expanses of dust reeking of dried piss and rotted wood.

We crossed this nothingness and reached a small guard post with a metal arm blocking the road, the main entry control point for the Afghan base. Beyond was Afghanistan. The real Afghanistan, not the FOBs on which most Americans spent most of their time. To be fair, in our armored vehicles and flaks we were basically tortoises who took the FOB with us like a shell. Still, beyond the ECP was something closer to reality. A small Afghan in tattered camouflage trousers and a yellow t-shirt that glowed under the shack's lights jumped up from a plastic chair and lifted the arm for us.

"MANANA!" McClellan yelled from the turret. Sergeant Reiss was big on making us say "thank you" to the Afghans. He was kind of a boner about counter-insurgency stuff. The way I saw it, if saying "please" and "thank you" was all it took to win this war, we would've been out of here fifteen years earlier. But it couldn't hurt, I guess.

No matter how many times I'd done it, I still got a bit of a rush from leaving the wire. Even though there was no real difference between the desert we'd just crossed and the desert we now entered, there was something unmistakably different on the north side of that guard post. An undercurrent of electricity ran through the air. We were out and about in Helmand Province, Afghanistan; anything could happen. It could be the last ten minutes of our lives and we might not even know it. I straightened in my seat and craned my neck to see out the MaxxPro's portholes. I could just discern the outline of a cluster of mud huts some 800m distant, the hamlet we called "Little" (to distinguish it from "Big" on the other

side of the highway).

Even outside the wire, Haggerty couldn't keep Gabby off his mind. He whispered now, having gotten bitched out by Sergeant Reiss plenty of times for talking about bullshit on patrol. Haggerty was saying something about how he didn't want to waste his time, and if they were going to break up, they might as well do it sooner rather than later. I pretended to listen, muttering that if that was the case he shouldn't date anyone he wasn't going to marry. But the truth was I couldn't keep Gabby off my mind, either.

I remembered sitting across from her at a table in the back corner of a bar, comparing the fake IDs we'd used to get in. Hers was from New Jersey; it was a joke between her and her cousins (yes, they were all girls) that they'd used the same uptight single aunt's address in Cherry Hill for their fakes. Mine was from Minnesota, a hand-me-down from one of the older mortarmen. It'd cost me $100. Gabby's had run her five times that, and it was laughably bad. But a perk of being a girl that looks the way she does is that bouncers could give less of a fuck whether her ID is any good. So we'd both gotten into this bar, a fifteen minute walk from her dorm and a two hour drive from my barracks. I'd insisted on making the trek, partially to be a gentlemen and partially on the off-chance she'd invite me back to her place. After a round of drinks, she was laughing at my jokes and leaning towards me while she compared our IDs side by side.

"This doesn't even look like you," she laughed.

"At least it looks like an ID. Yours looks like one of those fake permission slips kids try to make where they sign their mom's name in crayon, saying they were late to school because their dog escaped or whatever."

"Oh come on, it's not that bad. It worked, didn't it?"

We mostly just joked back and forth like that. It wasn't one

of those epic first dates you read about where the couple talks until dawn and gets married as soon as the courthouse opens the next morning. But we didn't hate being around one another and she was seriously cute, both of which are big wins whenever you meet someone off a dating app. Still, we only had two beers, because I was driving, and there can't have been more than an hour between our awkward "nice to meet you" hug and when I settled the tab.

The part I think about the most is the last twenty minutes or so, beginning with when I asked to walk her back to her dorm. It was the sort of thing I thought grown men were supposed to do. The entirety of my experience with women up to that point consisted of a long-term high school girlfriend and a handful of one night stands in San Diego; I didn't know how to handle a real, no-shit date. But walking Gabby back to her place felt right, and she agreed at least enough to have me along.

I still had some vague idea of fucking her, but as we traced the leafy edge of her campus, it became more like a fantasy than something I could be doing within the next hour. I felt like I was carrying a priceless Ming vase in my hands, and the only thing on my mind was not messing it up. Not tripping on a crack in the asphalt and splitting my face open, not saying the wrong thing, not pushing too hard too fast.

When we reached the stone steps of her dorm, Gabby paused, looking down at her feet. My heart pounded in my ears and I found myself breathing hard, like I'd just run the half-mile from the bar to her place.

"Well, thanks for the drinks. I had a nice time."

I don't think I said anything back; I just kissed her.

Normally, driving up the hill to Twenty-nine Palms is the most depressing shit in the world. First the road weaves between these angry-looking mountains, and then for the last half-hour civilization slowly fades away until you find yourself in Two-

Nine, a town with a “Hundred Miles to Next Service” sign on its far edge. But for once I didn’t mind the desert. I was blissed out, my truck’s engine wailing to maintain 85 MPH going uphill. I thought I’d found an oasis with Gabby, I really did.

In a different desert, far from the smooth asphalt of Highway 62, we turned off the gravel access road leading in and out of base. Our command didn’t want us driving on the Ring Road itself. The shoddily constructed highway could barely handle the weight of our vehicles, and the few long haul truckers who kept Afghanistan’s economy running hated having to slow down for our convoys. At Sergeant Reiss’ direction, Donahue eased our MaxxPro onto a washed-out dirt path that led to the Afghan checkpoint we were visiting. As we bounced along, I could hear the occasional truck fly by on the highway 200m to our north.

The checkpoint consisted of two buildings, a new guard shack made of corrugated metal reinforced with sandbags and an old, abandoned mud hut that the Afghan soldiers had claimed as their hooch. Our squad seamlessly brought the three vehicles into a tight 360 degree security perimeter between them, forming a peace sign if viewed from overhead. Donahue lowered the back stairs, and Haggerty, Aziz, and I walked out to link up with Sergeant Reiss and head inside.

I dropped my night vision goggles down for the short walk. Our NVGs worked by magnifying ambient light, but it was a new moon, and with no light to magnify, I could barely make out where the buildings ended and the sky began. Looking up, though, I could see all of the stars that were normally too dull to be visible. I thought of an old Incubus song I’d liked in high school: *The sky resembles a backlit canopy, with holes punched in it… I wish you were here.*

I pulled my NVGs up and off my face when we arrived at the guard shack. The four of us stepped inside and were greeted with the overwhelming smell of hashish. An Afghan soldier sat

on the floor, reclining against the sandbags that lined the wall. His back was to the highway.

“Salaam aleikum,” Sergeant Reiss said, placing his hand over his heart in the traditional Afghani greeting. The Afghan nodded and smiled. He didn’t stand or gesture for us to sit. Sergeant Reiss told Haggerty to post up just outside the door. He’d brought both of us because there were supposed to be two ANA soldiers inside.

With his own knowledge of Dari exhausted, Sergeant Reiss turned to Aziz to translate. They made small talk with the Afghan, discussing how cold it was outside and how much traffic had been coming by on the highway. The purpose of the checkpoint was to deter the Taliban from moving around freely on Highway 1, but short of stopping every vehicle and ripping it apart to search for weapons, there was no real way to do this. The actual value added of this particular spot was to serve as a bullet sponge, drawing attackers away from the larger base half a mile to the south. This guard shack was a reincarnation of one that had been leveled by a vehicle-borne IED a year and a half earlier. The Afghan seemed to accept this, replying to Sergeant Reiss’ questions with the tired air of a man who knows his answers don’t matter. Or maybe he was just stoned.

Sergeant Reiss eventually cut the shit. “Aziz, ask him why there aren’t two guys in here. Tell him we know they’re supposed to have two guys in here.”

Aziz and the Afghan went back and forth in fast, lyrical Dari. The Afghan punctuated his sentences with a series of shrugs and flicks of his hand.

“He says it is because two of their men are home on leave,” Aziz explained. “They were told to be back two days ago but they could not travel because of violence. At the checkpoint, they do not get a replacement and now only four are here. If

they have two awake all night then there is no time to sleep."

"Alright, whatever." Sergeant Reiss shifted his shoulders under the weight of his flak. "Ask him all the oversight questions. You know, last time he was paid, last time he got leave, last time one of his NCOs came out here to check on him, all that shit."

While Aziz and the Afghan talked, I continued to scan the room. Besides a ceramic bong, the only other furniture was a chamber pot. Thankfully, it was empty. The walls were lined with sandbags stacked up to waist height. A light machinegun stood on a fixed post, pointed out along the short strip of dirt road that led from the checkpoint to the highway itself. It wasn't loaded. Belts of ammunition sat coiled in a rusted can on the floor.

Aziz finished with the Afghan and turned to Sergeant Reiss. "He says they were paid last week but not enough. I do not know if this is true or if he just wants more money. They have not seen any of their leadership in two weeks. He says it is because they are with the operation in Marjah right now. And he has not been home in six months. He is from the north, near Mazar-e-Sharif he says, and he wants you to know that there, the people are very good, but here, in Helmand, they are very bad."

Sergeant Reiss nodded. "Alright. Tell him we say thanks for his time or whatever. Let's get the fuck out of here."

We said our goodbyes and filed out the door. I went last. The Afghan stared up at me from the floor, and before I turned to leave, he flashed a toothless smile. I waved back awkwardly and closed the door behind me.

Haggerty was waiting for us outside. "Sergeant, are we going to go over to the other compound?"

"Nah, they're just sleeping in there. No point in waking them

up.”

“Good to go, Sergeant.”

Donahue saw us coming and dropped the stairs. We took our seats and began the drive back to our FOB. While the vehicle turned, I looked out the porthole and caught a glimpse of the Afghan highlighted through the checkpoint’s window. He was standing up now, but instead of watching the highway, he was watching us drive away. I thought to wave again, but he had no way of seeing me in the dark.

“Anything happen in there?” Haggerty asked.

“Nah. You see anything?”

“One of the guys from the hut got up and took a shit, like, right outside. That was it.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah. I got some good thinking done, though.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not gonna break up with Gabby.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, what’s the point? I’m over here. There’s nothing I can do about it. I guess it’s nice having someone to talk to. I’ll see what the deal is when we get home.”

“I feel that.”

“It’s not like I have any other options, you know?”

I told him I did. I hadn’t chosen to end things with Gabby, either. We’d actually made plans to hang out again the weekend after our first date. She was going to take me to a house party off-campus. I wondered what she would introduce me as.

Friend? Acquaintance? Something else? We'd be drinking, obviously, so she probably didn't expect me to drive back to Twenty-nine Palms that night. I hadn't told any of the guys, not even Haggerty, because I didn't want to jinx anything.

But then one of my seniors decided he wanted to go to LA that weekend, and he voluntold me to stand duty for him on Saturday. Gabby was busy Friday night, and I would be in the field the following weekend. So we had to slow our roll for two weeks.

And then two weeks turned into forever. It was day three of the field op we went on the week after I had to stand duty. Our platoon had some downtime between shooting all day and shooting all night, and a bunch of us were hanging around on our packs. Haggerty was bragging about this girl he'd been talking to on Tinder, an absolute dime he said, and he passed his phone around so we could all admire her profile.

It was Gabby. I didn't blame her for that; I still don't. We'd only hung out once, it wasn't like we were exclusive. And I know that's how the game works, that you have to keep your options open until you really commit to someone. I just felt weird about the whole thing. Which is why I tried to change the topic every time Haggerty brought her up after that, why I made a point of being at the gym while he got ready for their first date, why I avoided hanging out with them on the weekends once they started seeing one another, and why as far as Haggerty knows Gabby and I have only met each other once.

The one time he knows about was impossible to avoid. She came to our farewell before we deployed, and I obviously had to be there, too. The parking lot cordoned off for our goodbyes was pure chaos. Some of the wives were bawling, a bunch of over-tired toddlers were running around, and guys were trying to chug final beers without their leadership seeing.

Haggerty, of course, insisted I meet Gabby. I followed him to

where his truck was parked. I realized that, for the moment, I was more nervous about seeing her than deploying. She seemed at ease, though, sitting on the tailgate, chewing a stick of gum and kicking her feet in the air.

“Gabs, this is my roommate Joey that I told you about.”

A flash of recognition crossed her face. Having had more time to prepare for our reunion than she had, I covered for her by introducing myself and saying I’d heard so much about her. The three of us made small talk, trying to focus on anything other than the fact that Haggerty and I were potentially heading off to our deaths and that the last time I’d seen Gabby she’d been running her hand through my hair while we made out.

Our platoon sergeant saved us from any further conversation, shouting with his gravely former drill instructor’s voice that we had two minutes to get on the fucking busses.

“Well, you two keep each other safe over there, ok?” she said, voice quivering.

We both nodded. I took the hint and boarded the white prison-style bus to allow Gabby and Haggerty a private goodbye. Somehow, I managed to resist the urge to spy on them through the window of the seat I’d claimed. Haggerty seemed shaken when he sat down next to me.

“You good?” I asked.

“Yeah, man.”

And then the bus lurched forward and we were gone. Gabby stood in the middle of the crowd of crying women, waving goodbye until they melted together and vanished behind us into the desert. I thought to myself that I’d see her again at our homecoming.

*

The same Afghan with the yellow shirt let us back into base, but this time we took a hard left along the fence line. Sergeant Reiss refused to take the same route out and back, so even though we were inside the Afghan wire, we had to take a dog leg by the airfield. Our FOB was too small for anything bigger than an Osprey to land, so we still relied on the Afghan flight line for most of our troop movements. They were supposed to have a guard posted 24/7, but as we drove by, the tarmac was empty. A random assortment of runway lights blinked on and off. The control tower was chained shut.

“You see anyone, McClellan?” Sergeant Reiss asked.

“No, Sergeant.”

“Fuck it, let’s just head back to the FOB.”

Donahue reversed our MaxxPro onto the muddy road that skirted the perimeter of the airfield and turned towards home. I caught myself starting to drift off, but I didn’t want to drink my second Rip-It this close to the end. Instead, I smacked myself in the face twice, hard enough to make my eyes water, an old stay-awake trick I’d learned in boot camp.

“Are you alright?” Aziz asked me.

“Yeah, just trying not to fall asleep.”

He laughed. “Yes, I know you do not want to miss a second of this.” Aziz spread his arms wide to encompass the MaxxPro, the checkpoint, all of Helmand Province, the whole country, the whole war.

*

It was almost dawn when we got to the tent and dropped our flaks with a collective groan of relief. Sergeant Reiss told us to hang out for a minute while he went over to our platoon commander’s hooch to debrief the patrol and get some word on what was next for us. While he was gone, I brushed my teeth

with a water bottle and got into my sleeping bag, ready to pass out the moment we were allowed to. By the time Sergeant Reiss returned ten minutes later, I was struggling to keep my eyes open. He said we were going to the same checkpoint on our next patrol, departing at 2200 that night. I rolled over and went to sleep.

New Poetry from Amalie Flynn: “Married”

MARRIED TO A MORNING / *image by Amalie Flynn*

For twenty years I have been married
to a morning. Of blue sky that stretches
and pulls across me like water filling up
a suburban swimming pool. The pit that
formed a hole. The bodies falling down
as if bloodless dolls instead of kneecaps
and muscle shins and thighs hot fingers
letting go of metal or chests and ribs an
artery that runs down the length of a leg
like a hose cheeks that hold in teeth and
tongues jaw and soft palates or a brain
inside of a skull. How the sky was full of
bodies so many falling thoughts fell down
or how the word *land* crashes and breaks
breaks and breaks apart on impact. How
the day still drowns me.
Today my husband is crouched in our
garden calves flexed. Today I reach out
and I run my fingers across broad fields

of skin between the shoulders. Shoulders
of my two sons. And I know.
How I know beneath.
We are bones.

New Flash Fiction from Mary Doyle: “Triple X”

It’s zero-three hundred and I’m yanked out of a sleep so deep I wake thrashing and fighting like a marlin at the end of a hook. It takes me a minute to figure out why. Then the sounds of raw, unrestrained sex slap me further awake.

The anger flashes immediately but I try to reign it in, to give it a minute to dissipate. I’m in such shocked disbelief at what I’m hearing, the offending noise so wrong, I’m hoping someone will come to their senses and the problem will correct itself.

When that doesn’t happen I toss and turn. The volume is disastrously high. It bounces around the tents, reverberating throughout this end of the camp. I begin to think they’re doing it on purpose.

I lay there, my fury building. Should I?

“Oh my god,” a woman a couple of cots down from me mumbles, turns over, slamming a pillow over her head.

That’s it. I have no choice. I’m the senior non-commissioned officer in my tent. It’s my duty.

I shove my bare feet into my boots, throw on my grey hoodie with the four big letters spelling Army on the front. I stomp

over to the tent next door and pound on the flimsy excuse for a door before storming in uninvited, strafing them with my senior-leader glare.

“Turn that shit down. NOW!”

They turn to face me. They are shirtless, in shorts, sweatpants, t-shirts and flip flops. All of them wear the shock of interruption. One dives and fumbles for the remote.

Oh yeah. Oh baby. Harder, harder, and the rhythmic slap of naked skin on skin weakens. The seams of the sharp night air, ripped open by the echoes of the graphic sounds, slip back together across the camp.

They are Scouts, just returned from patrol. Defiant, young boy-men who glower through ancient eyes. They hate me right now, but too bad. They are soldiers. They respond to my authority even though I’m not wearing any rank and my bed hair probably looks horrific.

I take a second to look at each of them, memorizing their faces. Three are huddled over a poncho spread out on the floor, a disassembled SAW laid out where they were cleaning the complicated weapon, piece by piece. Two others are leaning over a bucket, scrub brushes in one hand, their other arms shoved almost elbow deep into mud covered boots. Another one is standing in front of a small mirror hanging from a nail on a post, his bald head covered in shaving cream, a plastic razor in his hand.

Not one of them is sitting in front of the small TV in the corner with the built in VCR.

They follow the lead of the man I assume is their sergeant. Those that aren’t already, stand slowly, arms folding behind their backs, going to parade rest, further proof of their

submission to my will.

I’m working to keep the anger in my voice now. Exhaustion, physical and emotional, feels like a cartoon anvil on a rope hanging above us, the rope fraying, all of us in danger of being crushed by it. I have no idea what they have done, what they have seen this day.

“I live next door. There are ten women in that tent,” I say. The gruff rebuke sounds genuine to my ears, if a bit forced.

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Keep it down now.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

I turn my back on them and walk out. My boots feel like bricks as I kick them off and climb back into my rack, deflated. The mumbled ‘*thank yous*’ that drift to me through the anonymous dark don’t lesson the buzzing in my head.

The clock glows zero three twenty. Behind my heavy lids I see them staring at me. Young men flattened by fatigue, with eyes as rusted as the spent casings they’ve left behind in their work.

A guilt dagger in my gut makes me want to curl into a ball, but the metal sides of my cot won’t allow it. I throb with unleashed emotion. Grief? Regret? I don’t know. Whatever it is, it tastes sour.