

New Nonfiction from Jon Imparato: “You Had Me at Afghanistan”

“I was lying in a burned-out basement with the full moon in my eyes. I was hoping for replacement when the sun burst through the sky. There was a band playing in my head and I felt like getting high. I was thinking about what a friend had said. I was hoping it was a lie. Thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie.” –Neil Young

k.d. lang’s voice carries the Neil Young lyrics on a mellifluous ride; notes keep swirling up as I crash to the ground. I’m clutching a wet dishcloth as if it were a rope, thinking about what a friend had said, and I was hoping it was a lie. I’m staring at the fringe tangled on my terracotta-colored sarong and my beaded anklet. I grab the heavy sweater I am wearing over my tank top to cover my face as I sob. My skin is the darkest it has ever been from traveling in five Asian countries during their summer. Being thrust into cold, rainy weather frightens me. I want to be back in oppressive heat. I am thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie. I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means the unspeakable.

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I am a radical on sabbatical. I have been working as the Artistic Director of the Lily Tomlin/Jane Wagner Cultural Arts Center for ten years. When I asked my boss for sabbatical, I was shocked when he said yes. I’m taking three months off from my job. I started out in Thailand, then Cambodia, Laos, Hanoi. (Or, as I like to call it, HanNoise. It is a city without a moment of silence, a never-ending cacophony of traffic,

people, and blaring intrusions of sound.) My final destination is Bali. I have learned on this trip that most of the travel agents have never left the town or village they live in. But for some reason I think I can trust this father-daughter team. The daughter insists I call her Baby, and she calls me Mr. Delicious.

When I arrived in Bali, one of the first things I was told was that my name, Jon, meant "delicious" in Balinese. I had just come from Cambodia, where I gave a piece of my heart to a man whose long name I had a hard time pronouncing. At one point he was joking and said, "Just call me Delicious and I'll call you Mr. Delicious because that is what we are to each other...delicious." We had a brief four-day affair, a travel affair; they are so transitory and carefree, no one expects anything except the momentary pleasures.

A young girl at the travel agency loves that my name means delicious, and she thinks this is hilarious. When I tell her it also means toilet in English, I then become Delicious Toilet.

"I think you like me, Mr. Delicious, I think you do." "I like you fine, Baby; I will like you even more if you can get me onto a remote island." Baby keeps flirting with me and asking me if I like her. She is oblivious to the fact that I am gay, and her flirting seems just to be on autopilot. Her flirting is learned; nothing about it is organic. Baby's father is watching his daughter flirt. He is in on the game; all he wants is for Baby to make the sale. We are all in on the game; everyone is trying to get what they want. Nonetheless I find myself charmed by Baby. All I want is a quiet island where I can write and stare at water while I do a slow brain drain. Both Baby and her father have assured me that I will be on a quiet, peaceful island, with a bungalow on the ocean.

I want to be face-to-face with the ocean. I want a wave confrontation. I take an hour boat ride and arrive on an

island across from Lombok, Gili Trankang, right next to Bali. This is an island with seven hundred people, no cars, no motorbikes, and no police. This is not a lush resort but a Rasta party island. Visitors are met at the dock by tuk-tuk carriages pulled by very sad horses. There is poverty here, you just can't escape it. The power goes out several times a day, hot water is never guaranteed, and most bungalows have saltwater showers, very strange to the skin. Imagine someone has spilled a margarita on you and rinsed you off. My bungalow is attached to an open café with a bar painted a bright red-orange, sunshine yellow, and a deep green. The stage faces the most beautiful turquoise, sea-green ocean. Yet trash is piled up on sandbanks. You must turn your head toward the beauty, and there is plenty of it.



I am hanging out, having lunch with the reggae band and staff.

They are quick to tell me that I will do very well on this island because it is filled with beautiful women. I nonchalantly say that I am gay and hope there are also lots of beautiful men. Suddenly I can feel the chill, as if a hurricane's gust of wind suddenly changed direction. Some of them are cool, but many of them are not. I quickly learn that most of the people on the island are Muslim. I have been in the accepting bliss of Buddhists and Hindus, so for the first time I need to keep a low profile about being gay. In all these travels, this is the first time that I have encountered any homophobia. The Rasta world is full of wonderful male affection—everyone calls you his brother, yet there is a homophobic and sexist element to the Rasta world that can't be ignored. It is ever-present and inescapable.

Of course, it takes hours for my room to be ready. Ganja is king here; everyone is stoned and moves at a snail's pace from the herb and the heat. They have two speeds: slow and stop. I get in the water, and I have arrived! This is the ocean I have longed for: crystal clear, warm in a way that requires no adjusting to the temperature, the color is spectacular, and it feels like flower petals on my skin. I have arrived...yet I am not happy. I miss my New York friend Roberta something awful. She longs for water like this too.

We have always shared the ocean in a deep way; when we met, we found as many ways as we could to spend time at the ocean, and I want her here with me. I want to be stupid and silly with her, laugh and splash. The ocean floor is filled with mounds of pure white coral; you can scoop it up with your hands and have little pieces of coral rain down on you. Roberta would freak. The absence of my friend is stinging. I scoop up empty water and pour it over my head as I cry, my sobbing face plunged into the ocean and staring at the coral floor. I remember that I always take a while to get my footing on my first day in a new country. I'm thrilled to get an email from a friend I met in Cambodia, named Mags. Mags is seventy-two.

She has short-cropped, maroon-purplish hair. Her hair spikes up like an eighties rock star. She wears long, flowing dresses with wild prints and tons of large jewelry from her travels. She is from Queensland, Australia. She moved to Phnom Penh, in Cambodia. Mags checked into the gay hotel where I was staying. She convinced the hotel owner to let her live there. The only woman in a gay hotel where she holds court. We exchange our lives over scotch by the pool, and instantly we feel great love for each other. Everyone calls her Mum. Her daughter, Morag, will be arriving in three days. I can't wait for them to arrive on this magical island. This lifts my spirits and just knowing I will soon have some friends on the island is a comfort.

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I am at a place called Sama Sama. It means "same-same" but also signifies that we are all just a little bit different, but everyone is the same and welcomed. The Rasta band is really good, and there is a huge dancing-drinking-smoking scene going on. They play mostly Bob Marley covers. They tell me it is the happiest music on earth. Yet I am in my room, I am not happy. I am trying to read or do some writing, but the sound of the band is deafening. I'm mad at the happiest music, mad at Baby and her dad for sending me here, mad at feeling like an outcast, mad at the world. I finally give in and say to myself, "Get out of this bungalow and just embrace this bizarre scene."

I'd made friends with one of the bartenders, named Zen, that afternoon and he seemed cool. I sit down at the bar and drink my scotch with all this Rasta joy bouncing and swirling around me. I am certain I am the only gay man on the island and feel like I don't belong, like an island unto myself.

Suddenly, one of the most beautiful men I have ever laid my eyes on sits next to me. He is straight, no question about it. He is trying to get the bartender's attention. I shout, "Hey,

Zen, can you get my buddy a drink?"

The beautiful man says, "Thanks for the hook-up." I learn he is from Canada. The best people I have met on my journey who aren't native are Canadians. They are open and sturdy. I will refer to my friend as Huck for reasons I will explain later. We start talking and within a few minutes the conversation is off and running. Our ideas, opinions, and insights are crashing in on us like the waves a few feet away. This guy is smart, insightful, and profound, and we are in deep, exchanging who we are with each other. We talk politics for a good part of the conversation: He can't stand Bush; Sarah Palin is an unquestionable joke—his views are so liberal. I tell him I often feel like I am what is left of the left, an old Lily Tomlin joke. He laughs and says he feels my pain. About an hour into the conversation, he hits a curveball in my direction that almost knocks me off my seat. He tells me he is a soldier on leave from Afghanistan, and he goes back to war in a few days.

Traveling around Southeast Asia, you can talk to people for the longest time and, unlike in America, they don't ask you what you do. Your work doesn't define you. I would never have thought this beautiful, sensitive man was a soldier. That information seems so incongruous to the man I am talking to. I am so thrown and confused by this news. I turn and say, "Okay, let's break this sucker down." Like an archaeologist, I keep digging. Who is this guy?

Our conversation goes deep and wide, fast, and furious. It moves with speed and intention but always with grace. We close the bar; he is now even more fascinating to me. It is 4:00 a.m. and I assume I am off to bed. Huck turns to me and says, "Here is how I see it. We are not done with this conversation, and I am not done with you. Let's go get some weed and smoke a joint on the beach and talk until sunup." I tell him I am so there.

As we walk on the dark dirt road, following the sad horses' hoofprints, Huck says, "Where do you think we can score some weed?"

I point to an old man in his eighties with a Marley Rules T-shirt selling bottles of scotch, cigarettes, and Pringles. "I guarantee you he is our best bet."

Huck turns and says, "Come on, little buddy."

"Huck, I feel like Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*. Why are you calling me that?"

"Oh, it's too late, that's who you are. I like calling you that."

Scoring takes all of five minutes. Huck returns with this sneaky smile on his face. "I not only got you enough weed for the week that you're on this island, but I also got you papers and a lighter."

I turn to him and say, "If you are trying to get down my pants, you had me at Afghanistan."

Mind you, at this point I have not smoked weed for eight weeks, and this is the first time on my trip I even feel like getting high. We sit by an ocean lit by beach lamps that keep the waves sea-green while the ocean further down is a deep blue-black.

Huck and I continue to share our lives, and I learn that he had an epiphany in Afghanistan that has transformed him. After 9/11 he felt a deep need to fight against the Taliban. Canada never went into Iraq nor would he. But fighting the Taliban was something he felt he had to do. "Little buddy, this is the way I see it. I'm young, strong, and capable. If not me, then who? I don't know how else to say this, but I had to go; it is my destiny. Believe me," he said, "it is that complicated and that simple." I don't know if I agree with him. All I know is

that I want him to be safe.

Now he sees how wrong the war is. Huck explains that we are fighting a losing battle. We will never build the army this country needs. He has developed a deep affection for some of the Afghanistan children, and he no longer thinks it is right to kill anyone. He is hoping for a replacement assignment where he could leave combat and become a search-and-rescue expert for the Canadian Army. Every now and then I just burst out, "God, you are beautiful!" He lowers his head, blushes, and says thanks. In return he says, "God, you are great."

He knows I'm not coming on to him; it's clearly beyond that. Yet my appreciation for his unquestionable beauty must be proclaimed from time to time. He proclaims how great I am in return, and we laugh.

Neither one of us had known this island existed, and we have no idea how we ended up here. It was never on either of our trajectories. Our conversation just glides from one thought to another. I will show him L.A., and he will show me Canada. We talk about books, his girlfriends, my boyfriends, the demise of the Bush administration, the hope of Obama, saving lives, and living them.

While we talk the night into day, the full moon stares us down, right in my eyes. It is a bluish- gray moon that looks as if a prop person hung it between two island trees. The sky begins to turn ever so slightly into its morning yellow as the moon seems to be replaced instantly by the sun. We both have the reggae band playing in our heads. Mine is tossing around over and over a reggae version of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." Huck's is "No Woman No Cry." We joke that we will have the Sama Sama reggae band playing in our heads for weeks. As we say good night, he tells me he will be getting an enormous tattoo tomorrow and asks me if I would stop by the tattoo shack with the huge orange hammock on the porch.

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Lying in bed, I had been feeling sorry for myself. I have just spent five days at a gay villa, and I am longing to be around my gay brothers. I feel resentful of the homophobia I know is coming at me from many of the straight men. The last person I ever thought would rescue me from that state of mind is a straight Canadian soldier.

I stay up trying to write a short story about the encounter of Huck and Jon. In the morning I finally go to bed at 9:00 a.m. because my encounter with Huck has my mind reeling.

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I race over to the tattoo shack around noon. My feet can't get me there fast enough. I want to be with Huck and yet am baffled by the intense urgency I feel. It has been gray and cloudy morning, but as I pick up my pace, the sun bursts through the sky shouting and waving hello, and I can't wait to let the water feel me again.

At the tattoo shack there is a guy with the longest dreads I have ever seen dangling through a hammock, as if long, black snakes were sweeping the old wooden floor as the hammock sways back and forth. The tattoo artist is older and seems as relaxed as a human can get. Some obscure Tracy Chapman song is playing on a radio. Huck must have told the guy in the hammock that a friend was stopping by because he just points his finger to the back room. Huck is lying on the bed in just his swim trunks. He tells me he is getting really scared because this is going to take about four hours and it's going to hurt. He is clearly freaked. The design is huge and will be on his left side, a place where people rarely get them. The tattoo artist tells him to be patient and to expect a lot of pain. In twenty-three years, he has never given anyone a tattoo of that size in that area. "It is all bone," he keeps muttering and shaking his head. "It is all bone."

I grab Huck's leg and say, "Okay, Huck, here's the deal. Do you really want this tattoo? If you do, I will hang out and keep you company. I am a really good nurse."

He nods yes, then mutters, "Stay, please." I become the tattoo nurse. I run back to my bungalow and get him some pills that will help him sleep. I make sure he drinks a lot of water, buy him Pringles (they are everywhere). I buy a fifth of scotch, tell him funny stories, put cold towels on his forehead, and basically make sure he is okay, documenting the ordeal with my camera.

The tattoo is of a devil-looking serpent coming out of the ocean. This image gives me chills. As the serpent with its sword rises, a huge splash of water hits the air. The other half is some sort of angel figure carrying a torch of glowing light. He told me it was his personal reckoning of the good and evil inside himself. The never-ending reminder to himself...that he chose to kill. He is utterly motionless. The tattoo artist is amazed, as I am, at Huck's perfect stillness during four hours of intense pain. I think to myself, this is a soldier's story. He understands all too well what a false move can mean. He knows how to be a statue or risk being killed.

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Later, over lunch, I interview him for a short story I plan to write about him. I ask him for examples from combat when he had to be that still or it could cost him his life. He tells me not long ago he was searching a burned-out basement for weapons. He heard footsteps above and hit the basement floor. As he was lying there, he knew that if anyone heard him, he would be dead. It was a soldier's strength. The determination I witnessed during those four hours while he was getting his tattoo was staggering. I learned once again that the will of the human spirit is indomitable.

The tattoo shack has a back room behind the tattooing room with a mattress on the floor. The room rents out for ten dollars a night. Huck is turned on his side, eyes closed; the drugs are working. The tattoo artist was taking a break to eat his lunch. The door opens and a beautiful, young, blonde woman who reminds me of Scarlett Johansson walks in, says her name is Daliana, and she wants to rent the back room. Then she looks at Huck, looks at me, and whispers, "He is so hot." I laugh and agree. She tells me she is from Canada, and I tell her, "Don't rent that room, you can do better." Huck turns and says, "Canada, where?" Canadians love meeting other Canadians. I tell Daliana to meet us later at Sama Sama to party.

The moment she leaves I can see Huck is having a really hard time keeping it together. The tattoo artist says, "Get ready for round two," with this ominous tone in his voice. Huck's body isn't moving, but his face tells me he is in severe pain. He turns to me and says, "You are a lifesaver. Do you realize you are saving my life? Do you get that, little buddy?"

I say, "Huck, saving lives, come on. That is what we talked about last night. Isn't that what this new friendship is all about? You went into the war to kill and had your epiphany that you are here to save lives. Now you have to stop calling me little buddy; it is way too Gilligan on this island." He shakes his head no. He flashes me that look that says don't make me laugh; it hurts. I tell him about John *Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It's one of my favorite books, and I have reread it on this journey. I explain that it is a book about the Vietnam War, God, the act of killing, and destiny. I think it's an important book for him to read. I know it will speak to him.

He told me the night before that he thinks one of the reasons we've met is so I can help him read novels again. I will send him off with this book and hope it has a deep effect on him.

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I am at a café on the dock with Huck and Daliana, who has become another amazing friend from good old Canada. She has also spent time with Huck. I've played matchmaker and set them up for the night. They share their own moments of exchanging their lives. We can hear the boat coming into the dock, dropping off new guests. About fifty people are walking down to the main sandy road. I hear someone yell my name. It's Mags wearing the brightest orange dress. It looks like the sun is walking towards us, giving new meaning to the word sundress. To her right side is her beautiful daughter Morag. People always tell you their kids are beautiful, but Morag had a casual effortless beauty. Everyone introduces themselves and they join us for a cold drink. Huck only has about ten minutes until he has to get on that boat, the boat that would begin his journey back to war. Daliana and I are both heartbroken to see our soldier off. As he gets up to leave, I hug him, kiss him on the cheek, and tell him how special he is and that he is the best, most unexpected surprise on my journey.

I am crying. Hard. My dad is a Korean War vet and had to live through the horrors of that war. Several bullets pierced various parts of his body while parachuting into combat. The first five years of my life were spent in and out of VA hospitals in Brooklyn, New York. My ex-lover, James, was in Vietnam and has had to deal with the horrors of exposure to Agent Orange. I have a lifetime of connections to vets. It suddenly occurs to me that I have never met anyone serving in this current war.

I start to worry about Huck's safety and think, Okay, gods, you have played with me enough, and it has been great fun, but now PLEASE turn your eyes to my friend. Play with him and keep him safe. If he comes out of this, he could do so much good.

Even thinking the word "if" scares me. Yet his bags are packed and he's ready to go...and I can't control what I can't control. I can only say to my friends on this island: Don't say a prayer for Owen Meany; say a prayer for my new friend Huck. I

tell Huck I want to write about him on my travel blog, but I need to make sure he is cool with what I write. I show him the first entry, and he blushes and said, "It's all good; just change my name." It's the weed. He asks me not to use his name and I tell him I will respect that. I say I am going to call him Huck because I just read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for the first time. He looks puzzled and asks why. I tell him that Huck was a character who initially can't see his compassion for Jim, the runaway slave, as a man, as a human being. But on that raft, he sees him as a man with a full life, finds out he has a wife and kids, and instead of getting him killed, he saves his life. The epiphanies seemed to coincide.

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I'm back in Los Angeles, and after three months away I could be walking on the moon. The cold weather hurts, the wet rain has no heat in it, and I am a stranger in a strange land—my own.

I can't sleep so I roam and putter around my home like a visitor getting acquainted with his new surroundings—a sixth country. Lorraine, my oldest and dearest friend since I was fourteen, has come to see me. She is a tough, smart, gorgeous Italian woman. She has the biggest eyes, brown, almond shaped, and everyone even strangers remark about them. I regale her with stories about the magic that happened. I go on and on about Huck and tell her she will die when she meets him. We are watching the Super Bowl and screaming about one of the most magnificent touchdowns in football history.

My cell phone rings. When I check the message, it is Daliana, there are five messages. She tells me that she needs to talk to me and not to mind her voice, as she has a cold. I tell Lorraine that it was not a "cold" voice but a crying voice. I mutter, "Lo, I'm scared; Lo, I'm scared." I frantically check my email. She has sent a message saying to call her anytime,

and she needs to talk to me.

We shared our love for Huck like two schoolgirls; this must be about him. Lorraine tells me to go into the living room and call Daliana.

When she picks up the phone, I yell “tell me he is okay. Tell me he has no legs. I don’t care if he can’t see, just tell me his brain is intact, tell me he is alive!”

She cries hard. The death cry, the hard, searing cry of sudden loss.

I say, “You got the information wrong somehow. It’s a lie!”

Through her deep sobs she keeps saying, “He is gone, our friend is gone.”

I fall to the floor and feel grief and political rage collide head on. Like two boxers smashing each other’s brains out, each blow numbing the other.

My friend was killed by a roadside bomb. The term almost sounds friendly, “roadside” seems so harmless. I am thinking about what a friend had said: *I was hoping it was a lie.*

I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means Huck, it means Sean.

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Imparato: “You Had Me at**

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Suddenly, one of the most beautiful men I have ever laid my eyes on sits next to me. He is straight, no question about it. He is trying to get the bartender's attention. I shout, "Hey, Zen, can you get my buddy a drink?"

The beautiful man says, "Thanks for the hook-up." I learn he is from Canada. The best people I have met on my journey who

aren't native are Canadians. They are open and sturdy. I will refer to my friend as Huck for reasons I will explain later. We start talking and within a few minutes the conversation is off and running. Our ideas, opinions, and insights are crashing in on us like the waves a few feet away. This guy is smart, insightful, and profound, and we are in deep, exchanging who we are with each other. We talk politics for a good part of the conversation: He can't stand Bush; Sarah Palin is an unquestionable joke—his views are so liberal. I tell him I often feel like I am what is left of the left, an old Lily Tomlin joke. He laughs and says he feels my pain. About an hour into the conversation, he hits a curveball in my direction that almost knocks me off my seat. He tells me he is a soldier on leave from Afghanistan, and he goes back to war in a few days.

Traveling around Southeast Asia, you can talk to people for the longest time and, unlike in America, they don't ask you what you do. Your work doesn't define you. I would never have thought this beautiful, sensitive man was a soldier. That information seems so incongruous to the man I am talking to. I am so thrown and confused by this news. I turn and say, "Okay, let's break this sucker down." Like an archaeologist, I keep digging. Who is this guy?

Our conversation goes deep and wide, fast, and furious. It moves with speed and intention but always with grace. We close the bar; he is now even more fascinating to me. It is 4:00 a.m. and I assume I am off to bed. Huck turns to me and says, "Here is how I see it. We are not done with this conversation, and I am not done with you. Let's go get some weed and smoke a joint on the beach and talk until sunup." I tell him I am so there.

As we walk on the dark dirt road, following the sad horses' hoofprints, Huck says, "Where do you think we can score some weed?"

I point to an old man in his eighties with a Marley Rules T-shirt selling bottles of scotch, cigarettes, and Pringles. "I guarantee you he is our best bet."

Huck turns and says, "Come on, little buddy."

"Huck, I feel like Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*. Why are you calling me that?"

"Oh, it's too late, that's who you are. I like calling you that."

Scoring takes all of five minutes. Huck returns with this sneaky smile on his face. "I not only got you enough weed for the week that you're on this island, but I also got you papers and a lighter."

I turn to him and say, "If you are trying to get down my pants, you had me at Afghanistan."

Mind you, at this point I have not smoked weed for eight weeks, and this is the first time on my trip I even feel like getting high. We sit by an ocean lit by beach lamps that keep the waves sea-green while the ocean further down is a deep blue-black.

Huck and I continue to share our lives, and I learn that he had an epiphany in Afghanistan that has transformed him. After 9/11 he felt a deep need to fight against the Taliban. Canada never went into Iraq nor would he. But fighting the Taliban was something he felt he had to do. "Little buddy, this is the way I see it. I'm young, strong, and capable. If not me, then who? I don't know how else to say this, but I had to go; it is my destiny. Believe me," he said, "it is that complicated and that simple." I don't know if I agree with him. All I know is that I want him to be safe.

Now he sees how wrong the war is. Huck explains that we are fighting a losing battle. We will never build the army this

country needs. He has developed a deep affection for some of the Afghanistan children, and he no longer thinks it is right to kill anyone. He is hoping for a replacement assignment where he could leave combat and become a search-and-rescue expert for the Canadian Army. Every now and then I just burst out, "God, you are beautiful!" He lowers his head, blushes, and says thanks. In return he says, "God, you are great."

He knows I'm not coming on to him; it's clearly beyond that. Yet my appreciation for his unquestionable beauty must be proclaimed from time to time. He proclaims how great I am in return, and we laugh.

Neither one of us had known this island existed, and we have no idea how we ended up here. It was never on either of our trajectories. Our conversation just glides from one thought to another. I will show him L.A., and he will show me Canada. We talk about books, his girlfriends, my boyfriends, the demise of the Bush administration, the hope of Obama, saving lives, and living them.

While we talk the night into day, the full moon stares us down, right in my eyes. It is a bluish- gray moon that looks as if a prop person hung it between two island trees. The sky begins to turn ever so slightly into its morning yellow as the moon seems to be replaced instantly by the sun. We both have the reggae band playing in our heads. Mine is tossing around over and over a reggae version of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." Huck's is "No Woman No Cry." We joke that we will have the Sama Sama reggae band playing in our heads for weeks. As we say good night, he tells me he will be getting an enormous tattoo tomorrow and asks me if I would stop by the tattoo shack with the huge orange hammock on the porch.

*

Lying in bed, I had been feeling sorry for myself. I have just spent five days at a gay villa, and I am longing to be around

my gay brothers. I feel resentful of the homophobia I know is coming at me from many of the straight men. The last person I ever thought would rescue me from that state of mind is a straight Canadian soldier.

I stay up trying to write a short story about the encounter of Huck and Jon. In the morning I finally go to bed at 9:00 a.m. because my encounter with Huck has my mind reeling.

*

I race over to the tattoo shack around noon. My feet can't get me there fast enough. I want to be with Huck and yet am baffled by the intense urgency I feel. It has been gray and cloudy morning, but as I pick up my pace, the sun bursts through the sky shouting and waving hello, and I can't wait to let the water feel me again.

At the tattoo shack there is a guy with the longest dreads I have ever seen dangling through a hammock, as if long, black snakes were sweeping the old wooden floor as the hammock sways back and forth. The tattoo artist is older and seems as relaxed as a human can get. Some obscure Tracy Chapman song is playing on a radio. Huck must have told the guy in the hammock that a friend was stopping by because he just points his finger to the back room. Huck is lying on the bed in just his swim trunks. He tells me he is getting really scared because this is going to take about four hours and it's going to hurt. He is clearly freaked. The design is huge and will be on his left side, a place where people rarely get them. The tattoo artist tells him to be patient and to expect a lot of pain. In twenty-three years, he has never given anyone a tattoo of that size in that area. "It is all bone," he keeps muttering and shaking his head. "It is all bone."

I grab Huck's leg and say, "Okay, Huck, here's the deal. Do you really want this tattoo? If you do, I will hang out and keep you company. I am a really good nurse."

He nods yes, then mutters, "Stay, please." I become the tattoo nurse. I run back to my bungalow and get him some pills that will help him sleep. I make sure he drinks a lot of water, buy him Pringles (they are everywhere). I buy a fifth of scotch, tell him funny stories, put cold towels on his forehead, and basically make sure he is okay, documenting the ordeal with my camera.

The tattoo is of a devil-looking serpent coming out of the ocean. This image gives me chills. As the serpent with its sword rises, a huge splash of water hits the air. The other half is some sort of angel figure carrying a torch of glowing light. He told me it was his personal reckoning of the good and evil inside himself. The never-ending reminder to himself...that he chose to kill. He is utterly motionless. The tattoo artist is amazed, as I am, at Huck's perfect stillness during four hours of intense pain. I think to myself, this is a soldier's story. He understands all too well what a false move can mean. He knows how to be a statue or risk being killed.

*

Later, over lunch, I interview him for a short story I plan to write about him. I ask him for examples from combat when he had to be that still or it could cost him his life. He tells me not long ago he was searching a burned-out basement for weapons. He heard footsteps above and hit the basement floor. As he was lying there, he knew that if anyone heard him, he would be dead. It was a soldier's strength. The determination I witnessed during those four hours while he was getting his tattoo was staggering. I learned once again that the will of the human spirit is indomitable.

The tattoo shack has a back room behind the tattooing room with a mattress on the floor. The room rents out for ten dollars a night. Huck is turned on his side, eyes closed; the drugs are working. The tattoo artist was taking a break to eat

his lunch. The door opens and a beautiful, young, blonde woman who reminds me of Scarlett Johansson walks in, says her name is Daliana, and she wants to rent the back room. Then she looks at Huck, looks at me, and whispers, "He is so hot." I laugh and agree. She tells me she is from Canada, and I tell her, "Don't rent that room, you can do better." Huck turns and says, "Canada, where?" Canadians love meeting other Canadians. I tell Daliana to meet us later at Sama Sama to party.

The moment she leaves I can see Huck is having a really hard time keeping it together. The tattoo artist says, "Get ready for round two," with this ominous tone in his voice. Huck's body isn't moving, but his face tells me he is in severe pain. He turns to me and says, "You are a lifesaver. Do you realize you are saving my life? Do you get that, little buddy?"

I say, "Huck, saving lives, come on. That is what we talked about last night. Isn't that what this new friendship is all about? You went into the war to kill and had your epiphany that you are here to save lives. Now you have to stop calling me little buddy; it is way too Gilligan on this island." He shakes his head no. He flashes me that look that says don't make me laugh; it hurts. I tell him about John *Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It's one of my favorite books, and I have reread it on this journey. I explain that it is a book about the Vietnam War, God, the act of killing, and destiny. I think it's an important book for him to read. I know it will speak to him.

He told me the night before that he thinks one of the reasons we've met is so I can help him read novels again. I will send him off with this book and hope it has a deep effect on him.

*

I am at a café on the dock with Huck and Daliana, who has become another amazing friend from good old Canada. She has also spent time with Huck. I've played matchmaker and set them

up for the night. They share their own moments of exchanging their lives. We can hear the boat coming into the dock, dropping off new guests. About fifty people are walking down to the main sandy road. I hear someone yell my name. It's Mags wearing the brightest orange dress. It looks like the sun is walking towards us, giving new meaning to the word sundress. To her right side is her beautiful daughter Morag. People always tell you their kids are beautiful, but Morag had a casual effortless beauty. Everyone introduces themselves and they join us for a cold drink. Huck only has about ten minutes until he has to get on that boat, the boat that would begin his journey back to war. Daliana and I are both heartbroken to see our soldier off. As he gets up to leave, I hug him, kiss him on the cheek, and tell him how special he is and that he is the best, most unexpected surprise on my journey.

I am crying. Hard. My dad is a Korean War vet and had to live through the horrors of that war. Several bullets pierced various parts of his body while parachuting into combat. The first five years of my life were spent in and out of VA hospitals in Brooklyn, New York. My ex-lover, James, was in Vietnam and has had to deal with the horrors of exposure to Agent Orange. I have a lifetime of connections to vets. It suddenly occurs to me that I have never met anyone serving in this current war.

I start to worry about Huck's safety and think, Okay, gods, you have played with me enough, and it has been great fun, but now PLEASE turn your eyes to my friend. Play with him and keep him safe. If he comes out of this, he could do so much good.

Even thinking the word "if" scares me. Yet his bags are packed and he's ready to go...and I can't control what I can't control. I can only say to my friends on this island: Don't say a prayer for Owen Meany; say a prayer for my new friend Huck. I tell Huck I want to write about him on my travel blog, but I need to make sure he is cool with what I write. I show him the first entry, and he blushes and said, "It's all good; just

change my name." It's the weed. He asks me not to use his name and I tell him I will respect that. I say I am going to call him Huck because I just read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for the first time. He looks puzzled and asks why. I tell him that Huck was a character who initially can't see his compassion for Jim, the runaway slave, as a man, as a human being. But on that raft, he sees him as a man with a full life, finds out he has a wife and kids, and instead of getting him killed, he saves his life. The epiphanies seemed to coincide.

*

I'm back in Los Angeles, and after three months away I could be walking on the moon. The cold weather hurts, the wet rain has no heat in it, and I am a stranger in a strange land—my own.

I can't sleep so I roam and putter around my home like a visitor getting acquainted with his new surroundings—a sixth country. Lorraine, my oldest and dearest friend since I was fourteen, has come to see me. She is a tough, smart, gorgeous Italian woman. She has the biggest eyes, brown, almond shaped, and everyone even strangers remark about them. I regale her with stories about the magic that happened. I go on and on about Huck and tell her she will die when she meets him. We are watching the Super Bowl and screaming about one of the most magnificent touchdowns in football history.

My cell phone rings. When I check the message, it is Daliana, there are five messages. She tells me that she needs to talk to me and not to mind her voice, as she has a cold. I tell Lorraine that it was not a "cold" voice but a crying voice. I mutter, "Lo, I'm scared; Lo, I'm scared." I frantically check my email. She has sent a message saying to call her anytime, and she needs to talk to me.

We shared our love for Huck like two schoolgirls; this must be

about him. Lorraine tells me to go into the living room and call Daliana.

When she picks up the phone, I yell “tell me he is okay. Tell me he has no legs. I don’t care if he can’t see, just tell me his brain is intact, tell me he is alive!”

She cries hard. The death cry, the hard, searing cry of sudden loss.

I say, “You got the information wrong somehow. It’s a lie!”

Through her deep sobs she keeps saying, “He is gone, our friend is gone.”

I fall to the floor and feel grief and political rage collide head on. Like two boxers smashing each other’s brains out, each blow numbing the other.

My friend was killed by a roadside bomb. The term almost sounds friendly, “roadside” seems so harmless. I am thinking about what a friend had said: *I was hoping it was a lie.*

I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means Huck, it means Sean.

New Poetry by D.W. McLachlan: “Tanana River” and “The Heaviness of Age”



THE RIPARIAN ZONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Tanana River

We followed your Hilux along the riparian zone,
a green snake blooming through the desert brown,
when you met in secret like lovers, and the way you
hugged each other in greeting showed an intimacy
I didn't particularly want to consider at that moment.

The second before the Hellfire splashed down, you
looked into the sky, and I still wonder if you thought
it was a sign from god, but when your world went
black I think it must have confirmed your suspicions.

My first full memory was standing on a grassy shore
watching my father catch a salmon in the Tanana river.
And I can still see the coil of the fly line snapping silent
and how it unfolded and laid out onto the silty sheet.

There was something above elegance in those motions
as the salmon breached, and I saw the slick of its back
as it stretched the surface, the rippling kick of its tail,
and then it shot back down, the line gave, my father's

back bent, the line went in, went out again.

As a modest crowd grew slowly along the muddy banks watching my father race up and down the shallows, it seemed to me that he was going to pull up a demon straight from hell, and I remember the shouts and jeers when my father finally dragged the salmon on shore.

And I remember my commanding officer's laugh when half of you was dragged gently under a shade tree. I remember the grip on my shoulder as he told me that it was a damn good job, a fuckin' good job. I remember the way his boots rested on the desk, and how he donned his number twenty-four hat, and how he drank his coke, turning his attention to the NASCAR race circling on the other screen. I remember the way the other man laid you back, how he talked to your body under that shade tree. I still to this day wonder what he was telling you.

I was scared when I stepped close to that salmon, dancing and darkening the dirt with wet slapping flops, its mouth opening and closing, sucking in nothing. The great gibbous black mirror of its pupil asking for something, something that I knew I couldn't give. I felt small and shameful in that goggle-eyed stare, so I picked up a long stick and gouged out its eye.

The Heaviness of Age

Sometimes in my dreams the world is covered in sand and I wonder why no one cares. I can feel it in my sheets as I sleep, in my mouth and crusted in my eyes. I kick and brush it away, but it's never gone, and the sand always returns. But no one cares and they act like they don't see it. Why is it then that I'm treated so funny?

The custodian on my floor looks like a man

we tracked down and killed in Helmand province.
The custodian on my floor thinks I'm racist
because I avoid him and never look him in the eyes.
I have to sit in my chair to get over the nausea sometimes.
He once told me I'm not gonna bite you and laughed
and I laughed and I asked him about football
and then he walked away, and I took my fifteen minute
break to step into the utility closet and cry.

I don't even remember why we killed the man.
I don't remember anything but the face
That's mostly all I remember now.
His mouth blood black and tongue lolled in a dog pant.
And I don't know why we had to take pictures of them all.
It'd be much easier if they hadn't taken the trouble
to fly out there and take their god damn pictures.

A child still visits me at night.
I see him sitting at the edge of my bed
He's always looking away, out the window
and when my wife wakes up
and asks: what's wrong?
I tell her nothing, it's just a bad dream.

But he's not a bad dream,
he doesn't deserve that epithet.
I sometimes want to hold him like I hold my son
when he feels betrayed by the world.
I like giving that feeling of love and security.
I'd give it to him if I could.

I see paintings of heaven
and I never see any children in the paintings.
Where are the children?
Homer has no children in his underworld.
Just indifferent or spiteful adults.
Sometimes I think it must be the heaviness of age
that allows us to sink down and rest.

New Interview from Larry Abbott: Suzanne Rancourt on Poetry, Myth, Nature, Indigenous Life

Suzanne Rancourt's new book of poems, *Old Stones, New Roads* (2021) builds on the work of her two previous books (*Billboard in the Clouds*, 2014, and *murmurs at the gate*, 2019). She dedicates the book to her grandmother, Alice Pearl, "who told me stories of where each stone came from that she used to build the hearth at the camp on Porter Lake." The "old stones," the stories, link past to present, and are both literal and symbolic, representing not only one's personal past but also the psychological markers of family, relationships, art, history, culture, and heritage. In the same way that Alice's stones are laid and build, "braided," to create the hearth, Rancourt's poems create a braid of the natural world and the human world, memory and the present, and myth and history. The "old stones" are also the poems from her earlier work that create a pathway to the present and the future.



The first poem in the collection, "Tunkashila" (which means grandfather in Lakota), links the natural and human worlds. As a child, Rancourt "becomes" an eagle as she climbs a white pine, going further into the sky: "I climb to teetering ethers/I stretch as mist/along the silver thread thrown down from the heavens." As the poem ends she hears her mother and father calling her name, and "my grandfather/calling." The connection to nature is also revealed in "Cyclops Fermata." As Rancourt prays she observes the animals around her and recognizes a symbiotic relationship with them: "We listen to one another even when everyone goes silent/for the hawks who wait for me/to place fingers in my mouth and whistle back."

In "When the Air is Dry" from *Billboard in the Clouds* Rancourt writes "these memories are distant/yet as shadows leak through pine needles,/ . . .they continue to seep . . . through my mind/into my children's lives." Memories are not compartmentalized and bracketed, but bear, in both positive and negative ways, on the present. Memories of childhood experiences and family relationships go hand and hand with memories of trauma and loss. She develops this theme in "In My Mother In Me" from the new collection. She recalls some familial details about her mother, but more importantly shows how deeply her late mother's presence is embedded in her and the family: "You are in the bowl of consciousness everyone feeds from/at family dinners, birthdays, and wakes./You are in my heart and hand that grips the sword."

In one of the best poems from the new collection, "Ode to Olivia, Mumma, and Me," she develops similes based on personal memories to express recognition of the "jolting screech" of death: "ceased engines from pistons thrown/or the menacing zing of circular saws at Grampa's lumber mill/stopped solid by hardwood knots" At the same time she understands that "My dreams/Mum's dreams/are a place where this one moment/is all moments/an electric arc of connections . . . "

Myth and place are also central to Rancourt's work, where ancient regions bear on the present. She locates some poems in Greece and weaves myth with her sensations and observations. In "Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay" she writes: "More ancient than these chiseled stones/spit forth from the annals of Khaos—I remember and return— . . . "

Methana, a Greek town on a volcanic peninsula, holds special import. Poems such as "Leaving Methana" and "The Shores of Methana," where "A Poseidic wave draws love from my chest," use place to connect their ancient stones to new roads.

Similarly, in "Voyage," she imagines a return to primal beginnings: "I would slip across cold waters to warm shores/archetypical images of real lives, hardships

fossilized/in the caves of Innis nan Damh rumbling/in the hollow rib cage of the oldest known cave bear skeleton . . .
" The imaginative memory takes her to Ullapool and Achadh Mealvaich and "braids me with the Norse Moors of Scotland."
She ends:

*I would go there again as my ancestors
Travel gulf stream waters to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia,
Where the Red Paint people curled into the shape
of an ear to earth we listen
as our ochre painted bodies—our blood painted bodies
return to life*

The poem is a way to show a reciprocal relationship with her ancestors. For Rancourt the myths and stories of Greece and Scotland shape her life in the same way that indigenous myths and stories shape that life. Rancourt, like Whitman, "contains multitudes." The interlaced braids of one's existence, Rancourt suggests, should not be unwound, for to do so would make a counterfeit of life. Her poems remind us that, as much as we might wish, we are not just "of today" but are the living legacy of the "braided stones" of our past and will become a "braided stone" for the future.



I discussed some of the poems with Rancourt. That conversation follows.

LARRY ABBOTT: What is the importance of Greece and Greek myths, like in the poems “Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay,” “The Shores of Methana,” and “Akhelios Comes to Shore”?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: Everything! My need to travel is about collecting all the parts of me while honoring all of my ancestors, experiences, and the sense that maybe this isn't the first time I've lived through these experiences. The poems you mentioned are layers of memories, experiences, and sensations that aligned in one moment of enlightenment and from that emerged the poems. For example, in “Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay,” there is a real, physical place that I go to in Greece, called Methana, for the natural volcanic, outdoor, sulfur baths. Methana is technically not an island, however, the land bridge is barely a two lane road. Thus, it holds its own identity which hails its support for Sparta – back in the day. There is this phenomenon referred to as “collective consciousness,” which can feel like a *deja vu* experience or a slight vibration or recognition that may not make sense but is quite real. Methana does that for me and by giving myself permission to bathe in this resonance, healing can occur in my recognizing a familiarity or kinship or existence or “I've been here before.” The Greek spelling of “Oya” is “Oia.” It is pronounced “EE-yaa.” It is this literal sound of the name that aligns, in a calibrating manner, cultures, my own lived experiences, metaphors, temperament, traits, and ancestors. My family has a history of lightning. My three military enlistments. Three marriages. The role and strong attributes of Oya (Santeria) in my contemporary life are significant. The cover of the new book is a photo of the altar at Acropolis Oya, which is a real place. As a writer, a witness, I gave myself permission to feel this place and its power. At times, overwhelming, but nonetheless what emerged were the alignments of emotions,

memories, and “aha” moments that as writer I crafted into this poem. First, the initial write to allow the synchronicity to emerge naturally, organically. Then, I allowed the poem to inspire and guide further research. War is as ancient as the beginning of time and thus warriors are equally ancient. And if war and warriors are as old as the beginning of time, so is PTSD, and so is the need for healing, and so is the migration to sacred springs and sulfur baths and to bathe in waters that Spartans had bathed, to walk to the Acropolis Oya to the altar stone and spring to overlook the bay, well, that’s pretty damn powerful.

In “The Shores of Methana” the tone and imagery create the in-between space where I, as a simple human being, am easing into the power of place. Wherever we travel, for whatever reason, a significant part of understanding history, people and culture, is “feeling” the environment, the power of place. It usually takes me a bit of time to “settle down” enough to ease into to place. Listening to the space, employing spidey senses, or dowsing – whatever you choose to call it – is step one. Giving yourself permission to acknowledge any recollections, memories, while taking note, literally, where in your body you feel this is significant. Self- forgiveness is a biggie in my world, and in the world of survivors’ guilt along with the “should’a, could’a would’a” shit. Healing takes time – lifetimes.

Regarding “Akhelios Comes to Shore,” on trans-Atlantic flights I always carry a small journal with me. I simply free write. I take note of sights, sounds, smells, gestures. It is good practice, in general, leading to spatial awareness, situational awareness. Later, I’ll go back and see what emerges. There is a lot of truth in the world of absurdity because truth can definitely be absurd. I gave myself permission to honor the tone of this poem’s narrator. The poem was inspired by a real person on a very long trans-Atlantic flight. I let the poem sit for a bit and then out of

curiosity I wanted to know if there was a Greek deity that was a shark. And guess what I found? Akhelios. And guess what? People make billions off wars.

LARRY ABOIT: "Ode to Olivia, Mumma, and Me" is one of the best poems, with strong similes. There is a merging or weaving of past and present: "this one moment/is all moments." Can you discuss the poem?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: Time, and its concept, isn't just a singular, linear event. Perhaps for folks whose vagal system has not been awakened by threats of death and other trauma intensities that flip sensory systems on, or people who have not experienced death in what some refer to as Near Death Experiences (NDE), perhaps life is one-dimensional. For those who have experienced the scenarios previously mentioned, "time" and "life" are multi-dimensional with layers of events occurring synchronistically. Western medicine, for the most part, doesn't acknowledge this perspective. My Indigenous, cultural perspective, elders, and traditional ceremonies do. So did Einstein. The line you sight is a line describing the moment where a calibration clicks in. These moments can be disconcerting. They are fleeting and an individual can begin to "chase them." Don't do that as the present moment is gone. Instead, acknowledge, to the best of your ability, in a mindful manner, to the best of your ability, what that "aha" sensation literally felt like in your body. Focus on that for a moment. This poem was indeed inspired by the dream described in the poem. This is a non-fiction poem. In my culture, dreams are powerful. Write them, sing them, dance them, paint them – people need your art, need to hear that their experiences are not isolated. Remember – lifetimes of wars equal lifetimes of warriors equal lifetimes of PTSD, grief, comradeships, unified purpose, service, loss, moral dilemmas and needs for healing. Pay it forward by sharing your experiences in an honest manner. Be authentic. Be yourself.

LARRY ABBOTT: In “Voyage” what is the Scottish and Red Paint People connection?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: This poem is another true-events-and-facts poem where in my travels I am not only honoring all of my ancestors, but in so doing I am regrouping the scattered fragments of my identity, humanness, and personhood. The poem addresses the synchronicity of overlaid time and events. Again, some of these natural experiences can be disconcerting. However, the Northwest Highlands are naturally mystical and that’s where I actually was, physically hiking the land. This poem speaks of my ancestors and tribal clans from Scotland. Keep in mind, that the waters of the Northwest Coast, Scotland, are Gulf Stream currents that carried ancient peoples back and forth all the way into Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Maine. Their use of ochre in burial rituals is also connected to the constellation Cygnus, as well as the Milky Way. Seafarers were keenly knowledgeable in the areas of navigation by stars. A voyage can be lifetimes. All my ancestors are of warrior class. Navigating the home journey can be rough. For me, understanding where I come from clarifies my forward motion. I am never alone and my ancestors are always present.

LARRY ABBOTT: What are the “humming strands of DNA” in “When Your G String Breaks”? Native and European heritage? Any other poems along these lines?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: The Vibration Principle. Quantum Physics. Hair carries DNA. Among Indigenous people hair is especially sacred and is only cut in rare circumstances. It has always been, and continues to be taught, that hair connects us to our ancestors and that long hair is special. I was prohibited from cutting my hair in Basic Training, MCRD, Parris Island. I’m grateful for that. This poem was inspired by my actually needing to change the strings on my 12 string guitar because, yes, the G-string broke. Literally, the strings looked like long hair draping over the body. I gave myself permission to

use all of my senses, to feel, remember, and to simply free write. This poem was not written in one session. I would let it season and then go back in to further explore, do more free writing, even when the surprises surfaced. Because the guitar is a vibrational instrument, the metaphors emerged naturally. As a writer, I researched various science fields for language that fit both the concrete and abstract metaphorical aspects. DNA is a code in the most microchip data concept imaginable. It is an ID, a tracking device, storing our personal history record; constructed to make certain we don't truly lose ourselves; every single cell of our physical body carries this information. Our bodies remember everything, and whether we cognitively acknowledge those memories or not, our bodies do. Thus, being in places, doing particular things, "awakens" memories. For healing purposes, where we go, what we do, and with whom we travel, matters. There are some places I have an aversion to.

LARRY ABBOTT: What is the importance of these specific places, like in "In the Regions of High Metamorphism"?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: First off, I found the similarity between amygdaloidal and amygdala fascinating. One references the geological phenomenon creating vesicles that form in igneous rock, or cooled lava, and the latter, references the almond-shaped part of the brain significant in regulating fight, flight, or freeze emotions and survival responses. Of course, metamorphism is changing the shape of things. I had to travel far from certain environments to change something, to heal something, to appreciate something. For me, to set out of chaotic conditions, I was drawn to Methana. I stood inside a volcano's lava tube. I gave myself permission to feel with my body, to receive a vibration, perhaps, to give myself permission to live, to heal, to receive life while honoring who and what I am as a human being. High Metamorphism.

LARRY ABBOTT: "Swan Dive" a concrete poem. I don't recall you've done others like this.

SUZANNE RANCOURT: I mentioned the constellation, Cygnus, also known as the Northern Cross, earlier. It is significant for navigation. This poem also asked of me as a writer to have a shape. It is a poem about letting go of the various types of control that keep memory doors shut, compartmentalized and finally, feeling safe enough to open them. We white-knuckle our shit as though we're the only ones who have had certain experiences and while no two people have the identical experience, it is also true that as human beings we can relate through emotional context. For example, most humans have lost a loved one to death. We can find areas of common emotional experience when we are honest with ourselves. This takes courage and often times, proper support. This poem for me is a type of resolution that finally I feel I have explored all my nooks and crannies of shit and, finally, I'm o.k. with knowing where I've been because I'm here now. Something about the sulfur baths washed clean many haunts.

*

Old Stones, New Roads, Main Street Rag Publishing,
www.mainstreetrag.com

murmurs at the gate, Unsolicited Press,
www.unsolicitedpress.com

Billboard in the Clouds, Curbstone Press/Northwestern University Press, <http://nupress.northwestern.edu/>

See also:

Rancourt's [website](#)

[*Native Voices: Indigenous Poetry, Craft, and Conversations*](#),
ed. by CMarie Fuhrman and Dean Radar, Tupelo Press.

New Fiction from Moe Hashemi: “Javid”

We buried Javid on a gloomy Friday morning in late December, shortly before Ali was gassed on the battlefield. All the guys from the eleventh grade attended the funeral, most of the teachers too.

Later that day at the mosque, Javid’s dad, a well-groomed, bearded, middle-aged man who sold rosaries and prayer stones to pilgrims, stood at the podium with an Abrahamic disposition and gave a speech about how proud he felt as a father to offer a martyr to God and to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution and how much Javid cared about both.

*

I had known Javid ever since the second grade. I still remember our first conversation when he approached me timidly and asked why my old eraser was so unusually white and clean.

“My baby sister grabs it whenever I’m not looking and she licks it clean.”

“Wow!” he said and walked off pensively looking at his dirty eraser.

The next day he came to class with his eraser all nice and clean:

“Look what my baby sister did to my eraser!”

He didn’t have a baby sister. I could picture him licking his eraser for hours.

*

No matter how hard Javid tried to blend in, he stood out like

a bad stitch in a Persian rug. He was too scrawny for his age and always wore a buzz cut and clothes that were either too small for him or too large. One year, he became the butt of jokes when he showed up to school in early September in ugly blue winter rubber boots with conspicuous large white dots. The boots were a bit too big for him and made loud farting noises with every step he took. He pulled his pant legs as far down as he could to cover the boots and walked like a geisha to diminish the noise, but this just made him look even more awkward.

*

Javid was an easy target for bullies. They called him Oliver Twist, played pranks on him, locked him in the school bathroom, hounded him on his way home and pummelled him hard. But, the bruises he received from the bullies were nothing compared to the ones he brought from home; he never complained or talked about his bruises. He seemed to be able to take all insults and injuries with a rueful smile and move on.

*

His undoing though was his unfeigned innocence. Mr. Nezami, aka "Mr. Psycho," was our disgruntled science teacher. He was a vicious, paranoid man in his early forties who thought the world was after him, so he went after his students.

"Javid! Read out the passage! Page 45, Plants."

Javid opened his book and started reading.

"Although plants can respond to certain stimuli such as light by turning towards it or by opening their petals and leaves, they do not have nerves or any equivalent system to feel or respond to stimuli such as pain."

At this point Javid fell silent and looked kind of lost.

"Why did you stop? Go on," snapped Mr. Psycho.

"Sir! Does this mean that if people kick trees and break off their branches, the trees don't cry inside?"



The whole class burst into laughter at this; Mr. Psycho strode menacingly toward Javid.

"Are you mocking me, kid?"

He twisted Javid's arm and pulled him off the bench, then slapped him hard a couple of times on the back of his shaved head, and kicked him out of the classroom.

*

Once we got into comic books, Javid found a passion. He didn't own any comics, but he managed to borrow some from the few friends that he had. At first, he became infatuated with Captain America and drew the superhero's pictures on all his notebook covers, but Captain America lost some of his glory once Javid became acquainted with Rambo.

*

In those days, the Iran-Iraq war was at a stalemate. The two sides had lost lots of manpower and they were desperate for recruits. Iran's Revolutionary Guards would visit high schools and show action movies like *First Blood*, tell tales of valour and glory on the battlefield, and then try to sign up as many kids as they could. As long as you were fifteen or older, all you needed to join was a consent letter from your father or your legal guardian.

*

Ali, who was the oldest kid in our class, as he had failed and repeated a grade, was the first to sign up. His older brother had joined the Basij paramilitary militia before him and had been dispatched to the battlefield, so Ali's father was reluctant to let his second child join. Ali forged his dad's signature, and then taught Javid how to do it as well. Ali was hoping to go to seminary school after graduation and he was a true believer in martyrdom and going to paradise. Javid, on the other hand, signed up for the love of guns. He wanted to get a big machine gun and kick ass like John Rambo. Perhaps, he fantasized about taking all that pent up rage inside him and blasting it at enemy soldiers.

*

I visited Ali at the hospital a few months after Javid's funeral. He had been poisoned with mustard gas during the Battle of Faw Peninsula. He had hideous blisters all over his body, was blinded in both eyes and had irreversible lung damage. There was a breathing tube taped to his nose. He asked about school. I told him about our classmates and the pranks we played on teachers. I also told him how Mr. Psycho had ended up dislocating a kid's elbow, and had been fired; he had eventually locked himself in a hotel room, swallowed all his meds and died.

"Lucky bastard! I wish I could go that easy," He wheezed.

"You'll be fine," I lied and tried to change the subject, "Tell me about Javid."

"We took our intensive training course together. Javid had a real talent for marksmanship. He finished at the top of our class. The night before we were sent to the front, he was so excited that he couldn't sleep." Ali burst into a fit of coughing. He continued talking after a long pause, "We were taken to the front in a military truck. Javid was among the first to get off. An Iraqi sniper was waiting in ambush and started shooting at us right away. Javid took a bullet in the chest and was gone, just like that! He took the blow and moved on to paradise. That's the way I'd imagined I'd go."

He paused again, breathless, his sightless eyes staring up at invisible entities beyond the ceiling.

"In a way, I also feel sorry for him," Ali murmured, "after all, he didn't get to fire a single bullet at the enemy."

*

Ali died the next June after a hard battle with cancer right around the time we were graduating from high school. He was buried in the same plot of the cemetery as Javid, among the throngs of other fallen soldiers.

I visited both their graves one last time before I was drafted. I placed a small picture of Rambo on Javid's grave and one of a blind angel on Ali's. I left the cemetery wondering what others would put on my grave.

New Poetry by Tony Marconi: “Song of the Roadway Door”



WE AND MACHINES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

...three hundred miles,
 ahead the road more visible
 as the land dissolves in the pink light
 of almost dawn

you sit beside me,
 eyes fixed and restful on my face,
 offering hot coffee from a thermos
 while the farm news
 breaks morning music
 on a local station

i could be here forever,

moving toward an unfamiliar place,
held by speed and the vibrating engine,

touched by the warmth of your breath

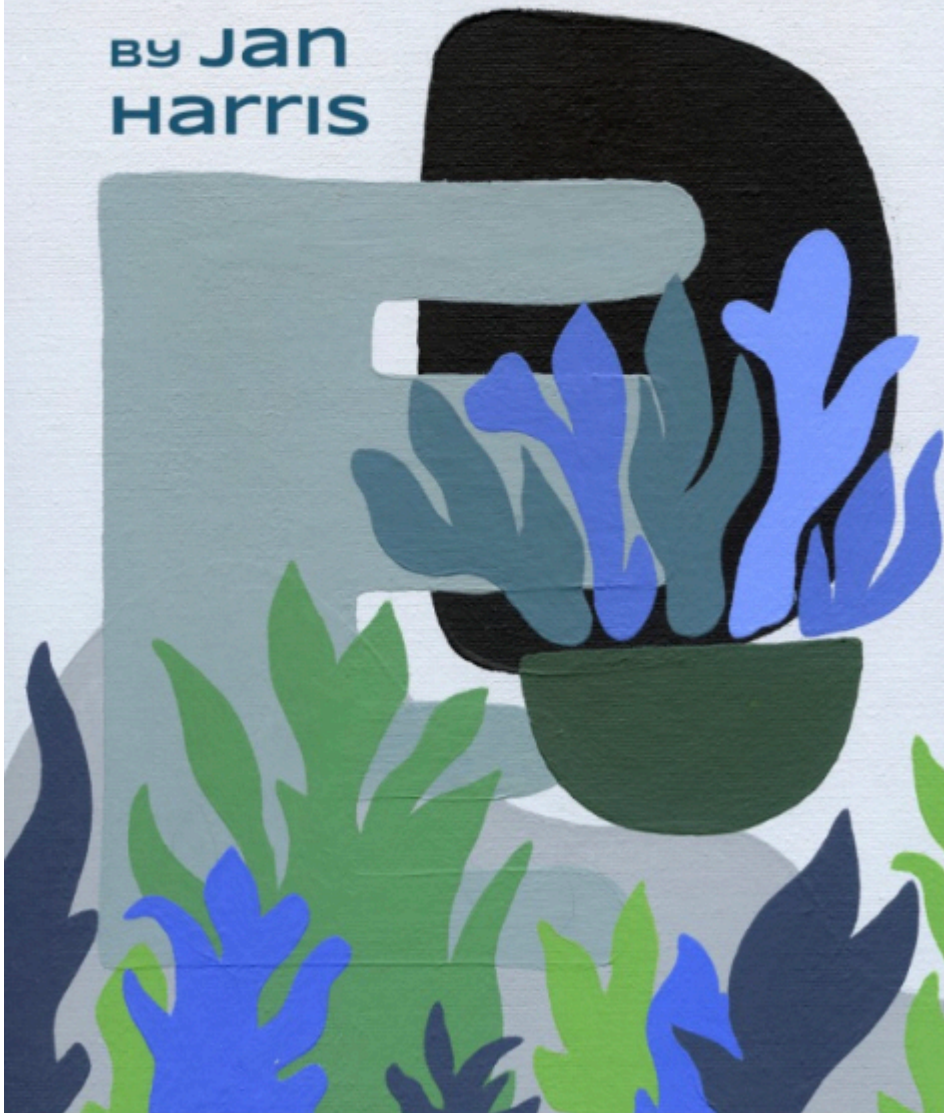
i could be here forever,
even as day turns into twilight;
you borne lightly on sheets stiffly cleaned,
wrapping your strength within, around mine;
prepared for tomorrow's miles

we and machines;
only we moving, moving;
i could be here forever...

New Review from Amalie Flynn: Jan Harris' "Isolation in a Time of Crisis"

ISOLATING ONE'S PRIORITIES IN A TIME OF CRISIS

BY Jan
Harris



The poems in Jan Harris' *Isolating One's Priorities in a Time of Crisis* are about the apocalypse.

Or after.

What happens after.

&

After the apocalypse happens. After the world cracks like an egg.

Splits apart. The crushed eggshell membrane and how.
Covered in fluid yolk we emerge blinking –

*we pass clement evenings foraging among the wreckage
of shop local boutiques and chain drugstores
(Season's Greetings)*

we observe

*long vacant cities teeming with rats and pigeons dark seas
replete*

*with giant jellyfish we do not live in an elegant age
(Mass Extinction)*

&

The apocalypse has already happened in Harris' poems.

Some humans survived –

*in the day-glow light
our old skin cells flake
off and drape across, the zoysia grass
(Marauders All)*

Born again into this.

This fallout world.

And the scale of destruction is ecological –

*ours is an age of salination
desiccation an interminable heat
(Mass Extinction)*

&

I am reading Harris' poems now. In this dystopic America.

A hellscape of.

Toxic religiosity. Evangelical Trumpism. Bigotry and brutal police.

Global war and fiery planet.

Pandemic plague. The lack of air. How when the virus inhabits lungs.

We flip the bodies over.

On their bellies like fish. How one woman survived but lost half her upper lip.

From the tube and pressure. Of being facedown for months.

That missing chunk of flesh now.

This fever dream wasteland nightmare America or how we find ourselves.

You and me. How we find ourselves.

Still alive.

&

I write to Harris, saying –

These poems are about COVID, right?

About Trump?

&

Because *how*, I think.

How can they not be?

&

But Harris did not write these poems about COVID or Trump.

She wrote them after the 2018 Kavanaugh hearings.

They are about surviving sexual assault.

&

Harris tells me –

I guess I've always been thinking about the end of the world. You know I had this Southern Evangelical childhood – very rapture focused. Then, when the Kavanaugh hearings were happening, I was appalled, obviously, and as a survivor myself, I kept thinking about who gets to speak.

&

Harris' poems are about the apocalyptic devastation of sexual assault.

And the disappointment of unrequited rapture.

About waking up in a destroyed world. How we piece it back together.

Or declare it broken. And live in it somehow.

&

She says –

I kept plugging on and thinking how do we survive, like in the sense of what do we do with our days, our shames, our broken hearts. How do we open to what's next?"

&

And yet poems are alive.

Each sentence with words like organs.

How syllables are cells.

How once written.

Poems are alive.

&

And for me. Harris' poems are about.

The Kavanaugh hearings and the assault by a nation that did not care.

Would not believe women. Women who said *this happened*.

And these poems are about.

About what has happened since.

A presidency that assaulted truth and science and equality and the environment.

War. And a virus that has assaulted the globe. Leaving over four million dead.

So far.

&

Because what is apocalyptic can be plural.

How apocalypses are multiple and countless.

Intensely personal and collectively shared.

&

Harris' poems are full of hydroponic lettuce, half grown, empty cul-de-sacs.

Broken call boxes and a rapture that never comes.

Because after disaster there is always aftermath.

Where what is left is left.

&

I met Harris in graduate school in Tuscaloosa.

Where I came and left as bones.

How I almost disappeared and yet.

I remained.

Graduated and moved to New York City where.
After that summer I would stand on a corner and watch a plane
hit the Twin Towers.
Or how they fell.
And how people jumped and fell and died.
And how somehow. Somehow I survived.

&
How existing is this.
The same as not disappearing.

&
Harris' poems acknowledge those lost –

*we saw that some us had been separated
from themselves and their reintegration
into the whole was not a possible outcome*

*we could not replace their inner vacancies
we could not estimate the size of their lonesomeness
or fill them with vanities of optimism and hope
(Post-Apocalyptic DSMV)*

&
But Harris is focused on survivors.
The sheer magnitude of what it takes to survive –

*when we look at the frontier we know we can survive
deep in us the memory of arid plains and savannahs
solacing us through our hard scrabble expansion
(Episodic Memory)*

&

How survival is plagued by loss –

*our sorrows are beyond counting and lie scattered around us in
the radon dust covering
our planet's irradiated surface
(The Average Mean)*

Loss of a world –

*when the worst was over the
marauding tribes settled down we started migrating
back to where we had come from we walked through
shells of suburbs and condo communities
(Radio Silence)*

Loss of how it was –

*and who could have imagined this cold
there is no more joy and no time for
simple pleasures like strawberry jam and
the other ways we spend our time
(After the Sun Goes Out)*

Loss of readiness.

How hard it is to move forward.

Or go on –

*we are prepared for what we will encounter
so long as it resembles all we left behind
(Time and Duration)*

&

But how meaning can persist.

Found in permeated rock, like radioactive isotopes –

our predicament has freed

*us from the oppression of quarterly
target goals bike commutes having
three children whose monograms
match on all their school accessories
(A Handbook for Resilience)*

&

In 2004 I reconnected with Harris. I called her and told her a
baby.

How I was pregnant. Or how she said *I didn't know you wanted
to do that.*

&

Motherhood is seismic. It is a series of explosions real and
imagined.

The world hot lava active. How my entirety is only this.

Calculating risk and trying.

&

Now there is a pandemic.

In the morning my one son bikes to school wearing an N-95
mask.

My other son is homebound. He cannot leave the house because
the world.

Is not safe.

How he is disabled by his disability but more.

The disregard of others to wear a mask or get vaccinated or.

Do whatever it takes to end this.

&

And I know Harris does not have children.
But I found motherhood in her poems.

&

There is the fear of it –

*we cannot know what evolutionary biologists will call this
age we cannot know which of our offspring will survive
at night we count them and wonder which one will it be
we search their sleeping faces for resilience we are looking
for a future we will build with what we have left
(Mass Extinction)*

How motherhood is a fear.
Fear of wondering if they will.
Will survive. The desperation.
Of wanting them to survive.
And how ravaged this world is.
Apocalypse world we are giving them –

*the limits of our perception much like our
children's refusal to believe us when we tell them that
limes grew on trees and
how succulent limes were tree limes and all the luscious
things belong
elsewhere they are ancient remnants of a forgotten
anointing
(Chrismation)*

Or how mothering in the aftermath is hard –

*we are finding our way back to fellowship but it is perilous
practice
to release our fear and allow our offspring to wonder in the
garden
to watch their precious DNA drip away when they are pricked by
thorns*

(Cognitive Flexibility)

&

Harris' poems speak to a collective mothering. Parents or not.
That we do. Do in this world. Especially one ravaged and torn.
How we are all connected. Connected by care or our lack of it.
Connected by our fear and yet love.
That overlap –

*we too are motivated by the vectors of love and fear
we live in the Venn diagram between them
each of us entwined in their corresponding sway
(Cognitive Flexibility)*

&

In Harris' poems there is the loss of a promised rapture –

*yet despite all our
fixations on the last days we never imagined
the whistling sounds of radio-magnetic grass
on abandoned golf courses
(Eschatological Ruminations)*

How –

*we cannot indulge
these reckless hopes of deliverance the earth
is indeed a globe whose elliptical orbit barrels
us toward infinity and even though it rends our
hearts to confess it no rapture is coming to save us
(Eschatological Ruminations)*

&

And the loss of rapture in Harris' poems feels symbolic.

Of what it means to survive.
How it can mean being left behind.
Left behind by a religion or rapture or savior.
The belief that someone or something will save you –

*the
whole time we dreamt of a superhero
who was coming to save us every night
we would warm our bread by the fire and
lather it with strawberry jam as if to say
we are not afraid of the hypothetical dark
(After the Sun Goes Out)*

And –

*at one time we all believe like this that
our lives would tumble on and then when
no one was paying attention in a fanfare
god would intervene
(Eschatological Ruminations)*

Or, how –

*some flirt with believing in providence but we cannot tarry in
those illogical
assumptions
(The Average Mean)*

Because.

What holds this universe together is something else.
Or nothing. Nothing else –

*we muster our resources unsure
of our end our final ablation an offering for the black
holes who
hold our universe together
(Mass Extinction)*

&

Ultimately Harris' poems are about us.
How disaster connects us –

*Our lives ran parallel until we met in the knot of disaster
(Many Worlds Theory)*

They are poems about who we are and what we do.
When we wake up in the aftermath of disaster –

*Our intertwining presented two alternatives
1. to collapse everything and begin again
2. to recognize the limit of universes
(Many Worlds Theory)*

&

How we survive. What we build. How we move forward.
Beats as the heart of Harris' poems.
Whereas rapture is unrequited and reckless, the answer seems
to be love –

*in the latter days we have embraced an enigmatic
vocation we stand in abandoned cul de sacs and
radiate love
(Exclusion Zone)*

How –

*although it is hard labor
we stand in cul de sacs point our chests towards
discarded mc-mansions and their derelict hedges we
begin to oscillate with the intractable surge that vibrates
between our ribs love pulsates with a ferocious
diffraction like the nuclear fallout that is still releasing
(Exclusion Zone)*

Harris admits –

*we cannot know if our work changes
anything
(Exclusion Zone)*

And yet –

*rumors persist that deer and
foxes have returned to Chernobyl's exclusion zone that
wildflowers crowd its meadows and in the shadows
green things begin to grow
(Exclusion Zone)*

&
Isolating One's Priorities in a Time of Crisis ends with hope
–

*we know that something is there because we
feel it breathing against us reaching past twilight's
consciousness
(Modern Homesteading)*

How it –

*whispers that we too must
die and death will be sooner than we know
(Modern Homesteading)*

How after the apocalypse.
We can find hope.
How there is light in the aftermath.
Light within us and each other.
How it radiates out in this new broken world –

yet we
*will be braver than we think because the light inside
is the light outside and it's already shining around
us as we begin to inhabit a world we had known but
waited for this moment to discover waited to*

*catch our breath before plunging into that white
burning we call existence
(Modern Homesteading)*

&

Harris' powerful collection is a testament.
To destruction and what remains.
How to rebuild the city of oneself.
How to make meaning out of the meanness of existence.

Her poems offer hope.

That maybe. Together.

We can survive.

New Fiction from Damion Meyer: "Reverse Process"

Five days ago at morning PT, Nate wasn't in formation. Everyone assumed he was at sick call, and we did our workout without him. But when he didn't show up for first formation after breakfast, tensions rose. He hadn't checked in at sick call, he wasn't assigned to any special details, and his roommate Specialist DiNofrio said he didn't remember seeing him after the previous afternoon.

"Check his room," Sergeant Martinez told us.

Dino and I followed Specialist Remington across the quad from the company building to the barracks. Remy was on CQ, so he was responsible for the large ring of key dupes. At five-one,

he looked like a kid playing soldier. With the four-inch key ring jingling at his belt, he looked like a soldier playing janitor. I smiled briefly at the thought, but then we were in the barracks, up the steps, and at Nate and Dino's room. Dino opened the outer door with his key, and after a full minute of searching the ring, Remy found the right dupe and unlocked the inner door to Nate's room.

The room was clean and organized, and at first nothing seemed amiss. His bed was made, the floor was free of clutter, and his TA-50 gear was stacked neatly in the closet. He hadn't packed his duffels yet, but we weren't leaving for a few weeks. Plenty of time to get ready.

"Anything missing?" Remy asked.

Dino shrugged mechanically. He was always so stiff, like he was on guard duty every second he was awake. Being a good five inches taller than my six-one, it made him look a little like Frankenstein's monster. "I don't know," he said, "I didn't really come in all that much. He was closer to Winch than me."

"How 'bout it, Winch?"

I felt around the room with my eyes, not sure what I should be looking for. All of his stuff appeared to be there; there were plenty of clothes in his drawers and on the hangers in his closet. Even his cell phone was there, resting in the charging cradle on top of his dresser. I was about to say that nothing seemed wrong, but then I opened the drawer of the nightstand next to the bed.

"He's gone," I said. I pulled the key ring out of the drawer, with the keys to the room, his duffel padlocks, and the lock for his Humvee's cargo compartment.

"What?" Dino said.

"Car key's missing." The car I sold him. The car he said he

just wanted so he could get around when he was by himself. The ugly piece of shit sedan that I made even uglier with the orange spray paint that he took off my hands for fifty bucks just a week earlier like he was doing me a favor.

When we returned to the company area, Sergeant Martinez reacted poorly to my suspicions. "What the holy fuck, Alpha team?" His bellow reverberated from the walls of the squad room. The rest of second squad discreetly slipped out of the room, leaving me, Dino, and Remy to face his wrath alone. "We're in the desert in three goddamn weeks, and you let him go AWOL?" He looked at us, his eyes moving from one face to the next hungrily, the eyes of a predator.

"Any ideas where he'd go?" His eyes settled on me, and he gave me a look like he wouldn't be happy no matter what answer I gave him. I looked at Remy and Dino, but they were intent on staring at anything but me or our squad leader. Alone against the world, I could only shake my head in reply.

He drew in close and bent down eye to eye with me. "Find him," he said. "You're team leader, Sergeant, this is your job. Find your soldier and bring him back." Then he pushed past me and out of the room.

Now, as I reach the set of three small concrete steps that lead up to the front door of Nate's mom's house, it opens, and she comes out and stands on the porch. She's a short woman, but she's almost as wide as she is tall, an imposing presence there on the stoop, blocking my way. She's breathing heavily and her face is an angry pink, though I can't tell if it's due to anger or a lack of exercise for the last fifty years. She folds her arms over the massive shelf of her bosom and says, "What do you want, Winch?"

"Looking for Nate," I say.

"He's on post."

“No, he’s gone a few days now.”

“Don’t know nothing ’bout that,” she says. “Last time I heard from him, y’all were getting ready to leave.”

I take a step toward her, relishing in the crunch of a particularly dry leaf under my left boot. “So he hasn’t called you?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer, just looks over my shoulder and says, “What the hell are they doing?”

I turn around and see Remy and Dino standing next to the car. They’re both smoking and Dino is doing his best to block Remy from hitting him in the nuts with the back of his hand, David annoying Goliath. Remy must get a shot past Dino’s defense, maybe taps the tip, because Dino suddenly turns and punches Remy above his right eye, knocking the cigarette out of his mouth and down his shirt. Remy laughs as he puts one hand to his head and pulls the shirt away from his body, billowing it to allow the butt to fall to the ground. Probably best to turn the conversation away from their stupidity. I turn back to Mrs. Browning and say, “I don’t allow smoking in my car.”



“Uh huh,” she says. “What do you want with Nate?”

An incoming call sets my phone vibrating in my pants pocket.

The buzz is loud and annoying, but the phone is semi-new and I'm still not sure how to silence it without pulling it out. I do my best to ignore it and say, "We're leaving in less than a month."

"Think I don't know that?"

"I know you do, I'm just saying he needs to come back before we leave."

She pushes her arms away from her chest and flings them in my direction. Her face left pink and is rounding the bases toward a deep magenta. "Maybe he doesn't want to go back anymore," she says. "Maybe he did enough time and wants to stay home now."

"It's not up to him. He's gonna be in even bigger trouble."

"Yeah, well maybe that's okay. If he's in jail, he don't have to go back."

"No," I say, shaking my head, "they'll just send him over like nothing happened, and when he gets back, then they'll send him to jail. And while he's over there, they might decide to garnish his wages. I know he helps you out whenever he can." We both look at the fading house, note its chipped paint and worn siding, the piece of cardboard duct taped over the broken basement window. Her eyes tremble a bit, and I know that I've reached the part of her that could help me. I hate doing this, hate laying guilt on her. If she were my mom, I'd be completely ashamed. But she's not my mom, and this is the only thing I can do. It doesn't last long, though, as she quickly closes me of.

She says, "He's not here, I haven't heard from him, and I want you to leave him alone." Then she turns and begins to retreat back into the house.

Before she closes the door completely, I say, "If you do hear

from him, could you tell him to call me?" As the lock clicks, I wonder if she heard me.

Back in the car, I pull my phone out of my pocket and see I missed a call from my mom. I delete the notification and toss the phone into the console next to my seat. Later. I can't deal with her right now. I've got my own shit to worry about.

Dino says, "No luck?"

I just shake my head. "What's with the grab-ass?"

"Just messing around," Remy says, holding an unopened Sprite up to his new shiner.

Anything to keep the mind off what's coming.

*

When I tell Sergeant Martinez that we haven't found Nate yet, he says, "What the fuck, Winch," and walks away, his fists clenching and releasing. Hopefully it's not my throat he's imagining crushing between his fingers.

The three of us sit against the wall at the back of the squad room. I feel like we're marshaling our energy for another mission. What we're doing isn't difficult, but it's exhausting, just trying to put ourselves into Nate's shoes and think about how to find him. I wish that he'd call, say, "Hey, Winch, how's it going?" like we just saw each other this morning.

Then I'd say "Been better, been worse," and we'd all have a good laugh and he'd come back and we'd be able to continue getting ready to deploy. But my phone remains silent in my pocket, and we remain silent in our chairs.

Other members of third platoon walk past the door and look in on us, spectators viewing the massive blunder that has been my week. I hear my name, Nate's name, other things. "Fucking

second squad," someone murmurs.

Lunch time rolls around and Remy and Dino want to go get something. I tell them I'm good and watch them leave. Food won't help me right now. Sometimes lunch gets in the way. But then I remember how I met Nate at lunchtime in this very room, three years previous.

I was fresh out of Basic, didn't know anyone. Sergeant Martinez showed me around the company area, led me from office to office, introduced me to anyone he could find. Faces and names blurred together and I got lost trying to keep up with what my new squad leader was telling me. I was sure it was important, but nothing was penetrating.

He left me in the squad room filling out forms and reading field manuals and SOPs. I said hello to people who came in, told them who I was, where I was from. Some were cordial, some were indifferent. I was the new guy, the fresh meat, the cherry. I hadn't been anywhere with these guys, and they didn't know me.

At lunch, three specialists came in and sat at one of the other tables. None of them looked at me, or acknowledged my presence. They were having a heated discussion about action movies and who their favorite actors were and for what reason. At one point, someone said something that I agreed with, and I tried joining into the conversation, attempted to make a friend or two, but they simply looked at me for a moment before continuing their discussion without me. I felt like a cricket in the corner, an annoyance that was easy to ignore.

Movement at the door caught my attention, and I saw another soldier motioning to me to come over. I got up and passed the three soldiers and their conversation and met the PFC with Browning on his name tape. "Yeah?" I said, not expecting much after my previous encounter.

He leaned in and said softly, "Fuck those bitches."

I wasn't entirely sure what he was talking about, and I'm guessing my face said so.

He nodded to the three at the table and said, "Don't worry about them, they're assholes. If you don't have a tab, you're nothing to them."

"What?"

"Look at their shoulders."

I looked, and sure enough, all three had Ranger tabs at the tops of their left sleeves.

He pulled me out of the room and walked away down the hall, with me following close behind him. "I call them tab toadies," he said. "They hate it, but I don't give a shit. If they want to do something about it, they can fucking try it. I choked out Stephenson last year in combatives training, and I know I'm a better boxer than Mitchell."

I hadn't said anything yet. "You haven't said anything yet," he said.

"Thanks?" I managed to get out.

"No problem, that's what I'm here for." He reached his hand across his body as we walked. "Name's Browning, Nate. One each."

I shook his hand. "One each?"

"Yeah, like in an inventory, you know, 'Cot, four each, rucksack, three each, Browning, one each.'" I must have still looked confused. "Don't worry about it," he said. "You doing okay?"

"It's all a little much."

"Been better, right?"

"Yeah."

He nodded. "But it's been worse, too, I bet."

"I guess," I said. We walked out of the building. "Where we going?"

"Lunch. You like sushi?"

"Um, yeah?"

"Too bad, we're getting burgers." He walked faster, and I did my best to keep up. And that was what we did for a while. He'd move fast and I'd try and keep up. I learned a lot from Nate about a lot of things, and it helped me to get better at my job, become a better soldier, a sergeant, a team leader. Eventually I was the one moving fast, staying in the lead, though he never tried to keep up. Nate's pace was whatever he chose, not what was chosen for him.

We went to war together, bled together, lost friends together. Both of our fathers died within months of each other, and we each comforted the other's mother. Nate got married before our first deployment and I was his best man. He got a divorce after we got back, and I was there with him in the bowling alley, throwing balls down the lane at stand-in ex-wives, ten at a time, all wearing white. Both of us had the other's back. I knew I could count on him for anything, because I would do anything for him if he needed it.

Sergeant Martinez comes back into the room and towers over me. "Find your guy yet?"

"No, sergeant."

"Sitting here's probably not the best use of your time, then, is it?"

"No, sergeant." I stand up and walk to the door, but he stops me.

"The CO wants the car brought in when you find Browning, for the report. Go." He makes a shooing gesture with his hands, and I leave.

My phone buzzes in my pocket again. A text: "Come by for lunch, if you want. Luv u, mom." I realize I can eat, so I leave the building and send a text to Remy and Dino saying I'll meet them later to continue the search.

*

I yell hello as I enter my mom's house, but she doesn't answer. It's noon and the washing machine and dryer are running downstairs. My mom has done laundry every Friday at noon since I've known her. The smell of fabric softener wends its way through the vents in the basement, filling the house with lavender. Every time I come here, I'm reminded of how nothing in the barracks smells this nice.

I'm rummaging in the fridge when Mom comes up the stairs, an overflowing basket of freshly washed towels balanced on her hip. "Here," I say, and take the basket from her and set it on the kitchen counter.

"Thanks, sweetie." She pulls a washcloth out of the basket and blots her forehead and the back of her neck. She's going through menopause and recently she's been breaking out into cold sweats at random moments. She's just in her forties, too young for this, I think. I wonder if it's because of me. I know it is.

She says, "So what's new?" and smiles, but the strain around her eyes tell me that it's forced, that she's not happy. I don't want to upset her, but I can't lie to her. It's not how I was raised. I tell her all about Nate disappearing and my search for him.

"Can't say I'm surprised," she says. "You've all been through so much, I can't imagine going back would be something you'd

all be willing to do.”

“Yeah, but if anyone were going to quit out, I just wouldn’t have pegged it to be Nate.”

“Why, because he’s so masculine and strong?”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just—” I break off. What was my reasoning? Just because he said he was ready to go back, and he was jumping up and down when we got our orders? Did I actually expect him to be completely truthful about his feelings? I have nothing, so I say nothing.

“You could do it, too, you know,” she says quietly.

I must have been zoning out, because I’m not sure what she means, and I tell her so.

She doesn’t look at me when she says, “You could leave, like Nate. Find somewhere to hole up ’til the deployment’s over.”

“No, I can’t.”

Her face goes stern, like it did when I got in trouble as a child. “Why not?” she says, hands on her hips.

I don’t know what to say. Emotions and reasons and excuses jumble around in my head, like a load of clothes in the dryer, round and round. “It wouldn’t be fair.”

“Fair to who?”

“To everyone.”

“It’d be fair to me.”

“I mean everyone else,” I say. “All the other guys.”

“What do they have to do with it?” Her voice is starting to take on a plaintive pitch.

Crying isn’t too far off, but I can’t stop now.

“It wouldn’t be fair that I’ve been over there twice now, and nothing happened to me, and everyone else is coming back with scars and missing limbs and PTSD, and I’ve seen the same shit and I’m completely normal, and I don’t know why. Why don’t I get to be in pain like them? I don’t know how to help them because I can’t understand them. I need to understand!” I can’t keep it together and I start to sob. I think she is going to cry, but I beat her to it and collapse into her arms. She’s a foot shorter than I am, and a hundred pounds lighter, but she supports my weight easily. She was made to support my weight. It’s what she does.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it and let myself be held. I try to imagine the insistent buzzing as white noise, like what I might have heard in the womb. Something to calm me, to protect me against the noise of the outside world. Except this noise is the outside world, and I don’t have the option to ignore it any more. I pull the phone out and through the glossy blur of my tears I see Nate’s mom’s number on the screen. I take a deep, shuddery breath to try and rid myself of emotion, and press the answer button.

Her voice full of defeat and sorrow, Nate’s mom says, “Winch, I know where he is.”

*

When we arrive at the Browning family cabin fifteen miles into the country, the sun is sinking wearily below the horizon. The first thing I see is the car out front, that ugly piece of shit that I was glad to get rid of, not knowing what was going to happen. I’m still not sure why I bought it in the first place except that it was only three hundred bucks and I needed a car right away. I also don’t know why I thought it would be a good idea to spray-paint the fenders and roof orange, causing it to resemble an Iraqi taxicab. I park in front of it and block it in. I don’t expect Nate to try and run, but I’m not taking any chances. The three of us get out of my car and

slowly approach the cabin in a wedge. None of us are armed, and we're in the middle of the US, but we can't turn it off, that need to do what we were trained to do, to cover each other's asses.

The front door to the cabin yawns open to greet us. I step up onto the decaying wood porch and the smell of gunpowder hits me immediately. It's not a smell that you mistake for something else, especially in our line of work. I should hope for the best, that he was just out hunting, or he shot a wolf that wandered into the cabin, or he was spinning a gun on his finger like in the movies and it went off, harmlessly putting a round in the ceiling. But really, I know what I'm going to find. I pull my phone out of my pocket as I step through the doorway, because I know that in three seconds I'm going to be dialing 9-1-1. His mom thirty seconds later.

Except I don't, because Nate isn't dead. He's sitting in an armchair that might once have been covered in some sort of floral print but now looks to be suffering from a combination of mange, fungal infestation, and dry-rot. Next to the chair is a cheap folding TV tray, which holds half a six-pack, a pair of sunglasses, and a Beretta 9mm. Nate's fingers drum lazily along the pistol's slide, as though he's unaware of what it is, but I know that he can grab it in a heartbeat and do whatever he wants with it. I wave Remy and Dino off before they can enter the cabin, and they retreat back onto the porch and out into the gravel driveway. Now I'm alone with the guy with the gun. Smart move.

I look around the single room of the cabin. Not much in the way of furniture: an Army-issue cot on the opposite wall from Nate, a small rattan table, and the firewood rack. A handful of bullet holes trace a line in the floor in front of the fireplace and up the wall next to it. An empty beer can is in the fireplace with a matching hole through it. A second can is across the room, and though I can't see a hole, I know it's there. We don't really miss that often.

Nate's looked better. He's wearing the pants to his uniform, but just a white tank top. He doesn't look like he's shaved or even bathed the whole time he's been gone.

"How's it goin'?" is the only thing I can think to say.

"Not bad, you?" he says.

"Been better, been worse," I say. The third-platoon mantra sounds hollow in my ears, but I can't not say it. I need something to be normal here. Every second that the sun withdraws from the sky, Nate's face pulls a little bit more darkness from the air, like he's a photo being reverse-processed back into a negative. I motion toward the fresh wounds in the floor and wall. "Target practice?"

He shrugs slightly, or else the fading light is playing tricks. "Just fucking around."

I nod. "Yeah."

"What do you want, Winch?"

"I'm here for you."

"To bring me back."

I shake my head. "I'm here for you," I say again.

His fingers stop drumming on the pistol's slide. He picks it up, but he doesn't point it at me. "I'm not going back."

"Don't care. I'm here to make sure you don't do anything stupid."

He lifts the pistol to his head, scratches his temple with the tip of the barrel, almost lazily. "Can't really see you stopping me."

"Maybe not," I say. I motion at the cot behind me. "Can I sit down?" He waggles an affirmative with the pistol, and I walk

over to the cot and sit down. The canvas thrums as it stretches under my weight, the metal frame squeaks at the joints.

We just sit for a minute. There's no need for words at this point. My eyes move from Nate's face to the Beretta. He stares out the window next to the front door. I can hear Remy and Dino shuffling on the gravel outside. The smell of their cigarettes floats into the cabin with the darkness.

"Goddamn, I need a smoke," Nate says.

"Remy or Dino'll probably spot you."

"Tell 'em to bring me one."

I just shake my head.

I see pain in his eyes, sadness. He holds out his gun hand, palm up. "You think this is for you guys?" He sounds hurt, like I've betrayed him.

I say, "No," and I mean it. It's clear that he isn't planning to shoot me or Remy or Dino, that there is only one possible target in this room. "Give me the gun, Nate."

He shakes his head and pulls the gun back to himself. He cradles it against his chest. "Just leave me alone."

I stand up and take a step toward him. "Not gonna happen." I take another step. "Give me the gun."

He points it at my chest, the first direct threat he's offered since I came in, but we both know that it's a bluff. I take another step. "You won't shoot me." Just a few more.

He puts the gun to his head and pulls back the hammer. "I don't have to shoot you to stop you," he says. Now I do stop walking. I can't be sure this is a bluff. Nate's always been unpredictable. "Get out," he says.

"Why?"

"You don't want to see this."

I say, "There won't be anything to see. Give me the gun."

"Fuck off."

"Give me the gun." I take a hesitant step forward.

He yells, "Go away!"

"You know I can't." I cock my head and shout, "Remy, Dino, get in here." When the mismatch twins walk through the door, I say to Nate, "Now we're all here. You got something to show us, or are you going to give me the gun?"

His arm trembles, but he doesn't lower the gun. I take a more confident step toward him and put out my hand. "Nate," I say in a soft voice. "It's okay."

I'm not arguing now, I'm soothing, providing white noise against the world.

Another step. "We're here to help."

I'm three feet from him. I reach out and put my hand on his, on the gun. I don't pull at it, because neither the gun nor the decision to let go are mine to take. "We're here beside you." Remy puts a hand on Nate's left shoulder, Dino a hand on his right.

"You're here with us."

His arm drops. I slip the gun out of his hand and into my waistband as we all put our arms around him, and he around us. Four against the world.

*

Outside we stand in a circle, all of us smoking. I hate

cigarettes, but right now it doesn't matter. The other guys laugh at my hacking coughs, pat me on the back like I'm choking. It feels like I'm choking. I drop the cigarette and crush it against the gravel, my part done. Nate takes a long drag from his, and his face lights up red from the fiery ember before he flicks the butt toward the cabin and turns away. His gear is packed up in the trunk of the ugly-mobile, and we're ready to head back to post.

"Who's taking which car?" Nate asks.

"Yeah," Dino says, "I'm not riding in the dumpster cab."

Remy nods in assent.

"Can't we just leave it here?" Nate asks.

I shake my head. "CO wants it for the report."

"You gonna get in trouble for giving it to me?"

I shrug and say, "Fuck 'em." We both smile. "You and me in the shitbox," I say, "Remy and Dino, you're in my car, right behind us." They look overjoyed at this and I throw Dino the keys. As they get in the car, I say, "But no fucking smoking." They smile and close their doors. The stereo blares past the closed windows. They better not blow out my speakers.

"This really is an ugly fucking car," Nate says from the passenger seat once we're in and ready to go.

I put the car in drive. "Sure is."

We drive away from the cabin, a two-car convoy. The road winds around and through the small hills and ravines. It's slower going in the dark. I intermittently lose Dino and Remy in the mirror behind me as we curve along, hugging the guardrail that sits between us and a twenty foot drop. Then they're back for a minute or two until another curve separates them from my vision again.

"So what's gonna happen when we get back?" Nate says.

"Don't know. You weren't gone that long, they'll probably just dock your pay."

He doesn't say anything, just looks out the window.

"And Sergeant Martinez will want me to smoke the shit out of you."

He turns back to me and smiles. "If that's the worst that happens to me, I'll be happy." I smile, too, but I don't say anything. We both know the worst for Nate will be going back. I hope he understands that he won't be alone, that he'll have all of us with him. That slogan from a few years back is bullshit. Each of us isn't an army of one. We're all an army of brothers.

"So, seriously, what were you thinking with the paint job?"

I'm about to answer, when I notice something in the rear-view. I can't be sure what it is yet, so I slow down.

"The orange is all streaky. You could have at least used more than one coat."

There it is again. A glow in the mirror, Remy's face lit up red. "They're fucking smoking."

"What?" Nate turns to look out the back window, so he doesn't warn me about the whitetail buck that pops out from the trees in front of us on our left. I see it in my peripheral vision first, so I over-correct in surprise. I yank the wheel to the left, which sends the rear of the car fishtailing to the right. I spin the wheel the other way to compensate, but it's not enough and we simply drift along the asphalt, missing the buck by inches and hitting the curving guardrail broadside at thirty miles an hour.

The guardrail holds, but it can't stop the momentum of the

car. We spin over the rail and roll down the hill. We're both wearing our seatbelts, so we just dangle in the artificial antigravity as the world turns around us. I hear the car's repeated impacts with the ground, but it's muffled, drowned out by the heartbeat in my ears and the screaming. It sounds like I'm screaming with Nate's voice, or maybe he's using mine. Maybe the car is screaming, in anger or pain. It doesn't matter. I try and count how many revolutions the car makes, but I lose count at a million.

With a sickening crunch, we stop suddenly at the bottom of the ravine, right-side up. Nate and I just sit still, looking out the windshield. I can hear yelling above us. Remy and Dino. Are we all right? Eventually Nate and I look at each other, but neither of us knows what to say. Finally, he shrugs his shoulders and says, "Huh," and gives a small snort of laughter.

He's in shock. I watch as he opens his car door and hops out, apparently undamaged by our descent. He has to be in shock, massive blood loss is blocking the pain receptors. He doesn't know he's only got a few more seconds of consciousness. But he doesn't fall down. I don't see any blood. Maybe he's not the one in shock. I try to open my door, but it doesn't budge. It's me, I'm the one hurt. I'm paralyzed on my left side, and I can't do anything.

No. I can move my arms and legs, I can feel them. The door isn't opening because it's blocked by the large oak tree that we came to rest against. I unclick my seatbelt, slide across the seat, and fall out of Nate's open door onto the ground. Jagged rocks cut my hands as I land. I make it my feet, my legs wobbly, and lean against the car. Looking down at my body, and patting myself with my hands, I find no injuries. I'm okay. Nate's okay. Everything's okay.

Nate runs over and hugs me, laughing.

"Why are we okay?" I ask when I get my voice back.

"Who knows?" Nate looks up and I follow his gaze to see Remy and Dino picking their way down the hill. The road is twenty feet above us. We probably only turned over twice during the fall. Nate releases me and walks around the car, inspecting it like he's a claims adjuster. He kicks the tires and checks the glass in the side-view mirrors, both of which, somehow, survived the roll.

Remy and Dino make it into the ravine and come rushing over. "Are you okay?" Remy asks, his eyes saucers in the moonlight.

I punch him in the face, probably pretty close to where Dino hit him earlier. "Been better, been worse," I say.

He looks angry at first, but his face softens and I think he understands why I hit him. Dino points at Remy and laughs. Then Nate comes up, smiling, and knees Dino in the nuts. "Been better, been worse," Nate says. Dino groans at his feet, but the rest of us smile. None of this matters.

Nate picks up a softball-sized piece of granite and throws it through the rear passenger window of the shit-mobile. He finds a larger rock and smashes it down on the windshield once, twice, three times. With the third hit, he starts to laugh uncontrollably. He leaves the rock on the hood and searches for one even larger, laughing the whole time.

Remy, Dino, and I just look at each other, two of us in pain. Remy shrugs and picks up a rock of his own and chucks it at the passenger mirror. The mirror casing explodes. Dino pulls a knife out of his pocket and begins deflating the tires. Remy and Dino also begin laughing, echoing Nate's loud mirth at this wanton demolition.

I watch them destroy the car, smash the glass, dent the body panels, tear the upholstery. I close my eyes and listen to the crunch of rock against metal and feel myself relax. Laughter

and destruction fill my body and wall me off from the rest of the world. Right now, there is nothing but us and the car, a group of men wrecking something that used to have meaning. I don't know how long this will last.