# Book Review: Lauren Hough's 'Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing' and Sari Fordham's 'Wait for God to Notice'

*"I was like an inept spy pretending to be American based on movies I'd watched and books I'd read."*

— Lauren Hough, 'Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing'

*"In 1984, we would arrive in Texas, and we might as well have been aliens."*

— Sari Fordham, 'Wait for God to Notice'

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In Lauren Hough and Sari Fordham's recent memoirs, human life reads like a series of parallel universes. Both authors' families moved, globally, for religious motivations, many times when they were young: Hough grew up in seven countries, while Fordham lived in Uganda as a child, then Texas, Georgia, and, later, South Korea. The religions here are not exactly the connection (though in each author's case, religion is arguably their first culture, their first universe). Hough grew up in an abusive cult called The Family (Children of God), while Fordham's Adventist family was close-knit, loving, and devout.

Rather, the connection is Hough and Fordham's attunement to the many different worlds of their lives, which they navigate from very young ages: observing, skirting the edges, shifting their behavior when necessary. Hough and Fordham both describe the shock and dance of trying to match these as they are moved from place to place, culture to culture.

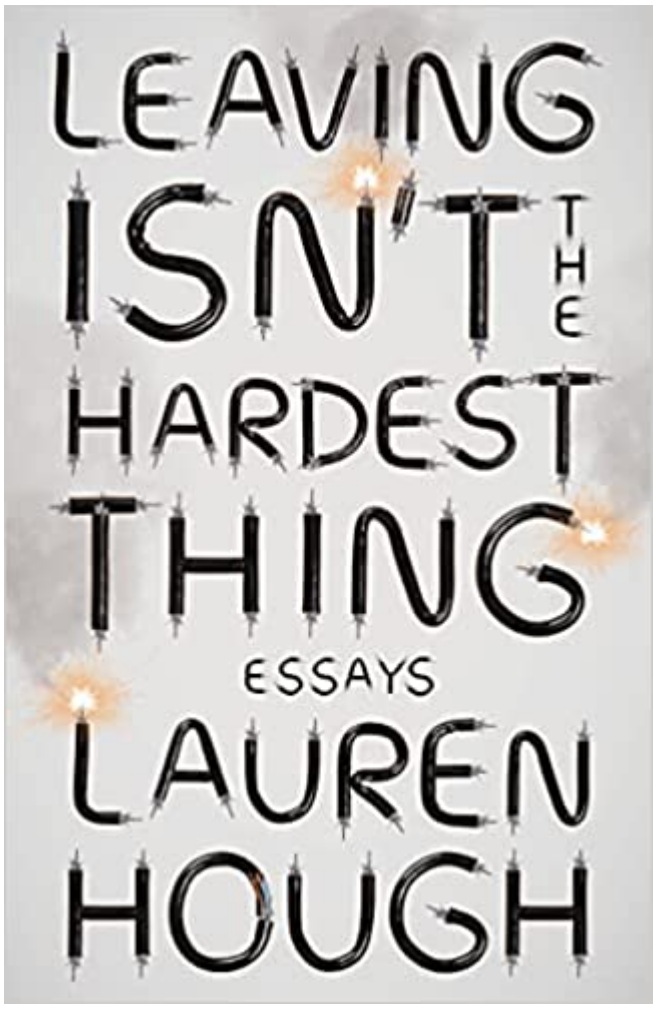
Their memoirs beg the question: Are we the same people we are now as when we were young? Are we the same people when we have changed lifestyles, allegiances, mannerisms, attitudes? How much choice do we have in how we become who we are?

Both Hough and Fordham have a complex understanding of what it means to be sometimes lonely or left out, peripheral, wondering; excluded or bound by place or newness or religion, by politics or sexuality or ethnicity, or by whatever power structure is currently in place; to be thrown at the world in various ways that are sometimes neither fair nor wholly deterministic. These two beautiful memoirs are deeply moving, funny and observant and sometimes very serious, but always attuned, and always stunningly, openly, thrown.

1. **“Where Are You From?”:** Lauren Hough’s ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’

Lauren Hough opens her memoir with a lie. Or, rather, with the lies she tells other people when they ask where she is from. They can’t place her accent, her manners.

*If you ask me where I’m from, I’ll lie to you. I’ll tell you my parents were missionaries. I’ll tell you I’m from Boston. I’ll tell you I’m from Texas. Those lies, people believe.*




Where Hough is “from,” at least in one sense, is an Apocalyptic cult called The Family (formerly Children of God), where the Antichrist was a constant imagined presence and children were passed around for sexual “sharing nights” with adults. For Hough, who never fit in with the expectations of the cult (gender and otherwise), this was a source of shame, fear, and resentment. She was once badly beaten for not smiling. These are some of the milder details, and many are very sad.

This – the cult – is an important fact about her. But it is not the only fact.

She’s also empathetic and funny as hell. (“Sometimes all you can do is fucking laugh.”) She is a champion of the underdog. Her attention to the ties that bind people – spiritual belief, escaped religion, the military, terrible jobs, homelessness, family, love – runs throughout the book. When Hough finds a

novel in Barnes & Noble which lists in the author bio, “raised in the Children of God”:

*You’d have thought I was a closet case buying lesbian erotica the way I carried that book…I had to buy three other books just so it wouldn’t stand out.*

Upon escaping the cult, Hough joins the Air Force. The thing is, she is a self-admitted “closet case” in more ways than one, and this is under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (which, in retrospect, sounds like it could have been a name for her cult). Eventually, after “Die Dyke” is written on her car and then her car is set on fire, *she* is the one expelled under Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.

It’s grossly unfair. It’s also not entirely surprising to anyone associated with military culture.

*I thought I’d find something in the military. I’d wear the same uniform as everyone else. They’d have to accept me because I was one of them. I’d find what every book I read, every movie I watched, told me I’d find friends and maybe even a sort of family, a place where I belonged.*

*But all I’d done was join another cult. And they didn’t want me any more than the last one had.*

*

After leaving the Air Force, Hough is temporarily homeless, sleeping in her car. Her caring and fiery passages in defense of the working poor and the unhoused, replete with her trademark lush cursing, are refreshing to read.

She eventually finds an apartment with her friend, Jay [also military discharged for “homosexual admission”]. It has only one bed, which they must share, and the gallows humor is off the charts:

*All I cared about was that we had a door and a roof, a*

*bathroom….I had a home. It was hard at first to focus on anything but that relief. But you can't share a twin bed past the age of ten unless you're related or fucking. Jay's an aggressive cuddler. I'm an unrepentant snorer. There wasn't even room to build a pillow wall between us. So after a few sleepless nights of his telling me to roll over and my trying to shove him just hard enough to get him away from me without throwing him onto the floor because I thought the hair on his legs was a mosquito, we headed to Walmart. The cheapest air mattress was $19.99. But in a stroke of genius, we found a five-dollar inflatable pool raft in the clearance section of sporting goods. It's probably a good thing we bought it. Anyone hoping to stay afloat in a pool would have drowned.*

Jay, whose shift at the bar ends earlier, claims the bed. Hough gets the raft.

*

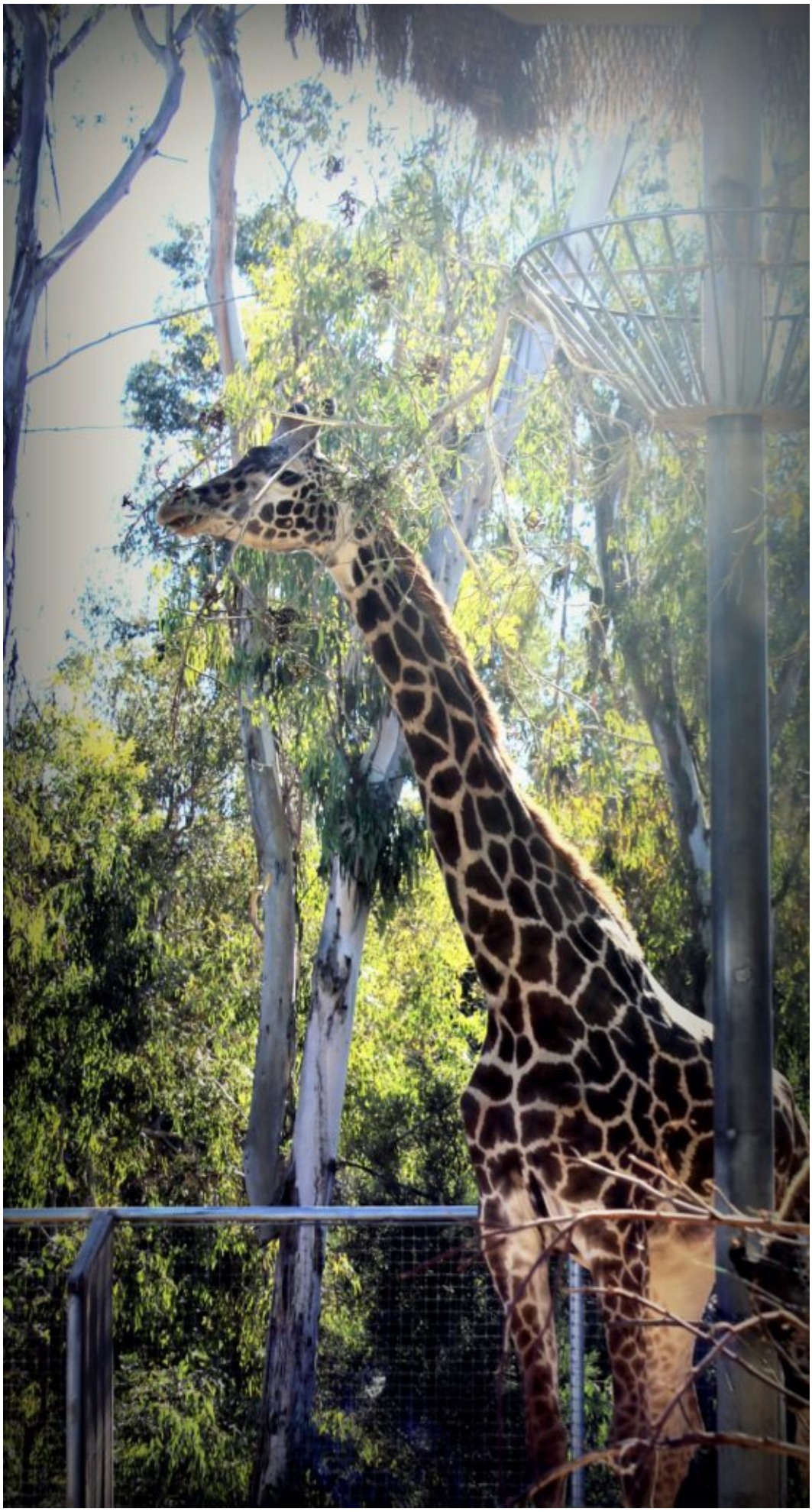
'Leaving' made me wonder, then: What does it mean to be "defiant?" Hough has experienced defiance in every form: early on, defiance of herself; defiance of authority; defiance on behalf of other people who need it. This may be one of the most cohesive threads running through her personality as presented in 'Leaving': a keen attention, almost an instinct, for the way people are forced to duck and hide, reveal themselves, band together, survive. She's had experiences with power structures most of us would not want.

"I was going to be normal," Hough vows, once she's on her feet, with a steady job as a bouncer and a home of her own. She is out of the cult. She has joined the world of what The Family had called the "Systemites."

But one day, traveling through Texas and suddenly curious, she decides to go back to the Texas site of the original cult. It's an incredibly lovely, lonely scene.

*If anything remained of the old buildings, I couldn't tell*

*from the fence line….[But] the fence was all wrong. …[It was] black steel and eight feet tall. I was busy staring at it when a family of ibexes with their twisted antlers bolted out of a mesquite clutch. That’s not a sentence found in nature. Then I looked up. Towering above us all stood a single fucking giraffe, probably wondering why the trees wouldn’t grow tall enough to chew. You’re not supposed to identify with a fenced-in giraffe that doesn’t belong in Texas. I rolled to a stop and stared at the poor animal, awkward, lonely, and completely fucking lost.*



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I don’t want to spoil the very last scene of the book, which is so gorgeous I teared up typing it out to a friend. It’s set back in Hough’s cult days and involves a wonderful, visually beautiful act of youthful defiance among a group of children. You cannot help but cheer them on: *Defy* it!

Lauren Hough’s ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’ is a glorious, raucous, fuck-you to anyone who has abused their power, and a love letter to those who have endured it. That is where she is from.

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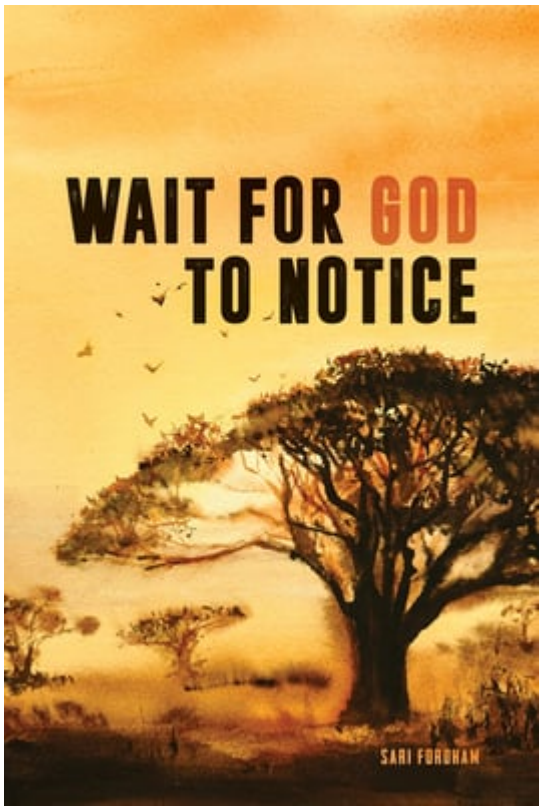
2. **“What are you doing here?”: Sari Fordham’s ‘Wait for God to Notice’**

*In South Korea, where I had once lived and where Sonja [my sister] still lived and worked, we were known as ‘You Fordham sisters.’….Sonja’s husband added to the mantra. On long trips in the car, he would sigh, ‘You Fordham sisters and your stories,’ and we would realize we had spent long hours passing familiar narratives back and forth. The stories began like this:*

1. *Wouldn’t Mom have liked this?*
2. *Remember that time in Africa?*
3. *We were such outcasts in the States, such nerds.*

*The last was the most developed narrative. It was the one that started us laughing. It is not difficult to spot a missionary – there is something about the hair, the dress, the earnest eyes. We had all that and more. We were the kind of missionary children that other missionary children found uncool. When we stepped into our respective American classrooms, we never had a chance.*




When she is very young, Sari Fordham's family moves to Uganda, where her father will serve as an Adventist minister. Her Finnish mother, Kaarina, packs up the two girls – Sari and her older sister, Sonja – and they fly halfway across the world to meet him.

As missionary kids it is, obviously, a religious childhood (Fordham's young friends, bored on the Sabbath because games aren't allowed, sneakily devise a game of Bible Freeze Tag, in which, unfreezing each other, they recite a Bible verse: "'Jesus wept,' we shouted. 'Rejoice in the Lord always,' we shouted"). But it is by all accounts a loving one, within a close-knit family, in which her parents are genuinely concerned for the people they serve.

First arriving in Uganda, however, the Fordham sisters feel their visual difference acutely:

*The children darted forward in ones and twos, laughing. How could anyone be as drained of pigment as we were? They touched our skin and held tentative fingers toward our hair….The children stared at us, and Sonja and I stared back.*

Soon, being children, they settle in. They play with the other kids. Fordham chronicles the lush, often fun, and occasionally terrifying moments of her Ugandan childhood, where snakes drop from the trees, fire ants climb over her sleeping infant body until her parents follow the trail and notice; and where in an airport, guided by her mother's careful calm masking enormous fear, they have to shake hands with Idi Amin.

One of my favorite passages (indulge me) is an example of Fordham's riveting and lyrical writing – as well as a lovely insight into memory, and how we claim our own life events – when her mother, who has been reading *Animals of East Africa*, takes them to see the hippos:

*The water stirred with hippos…Adult hippos can't swim. They walked along the river's floor, occasionally propelling themselves to the surface…Those on the bank seemed to hitch up their trousers and haul themselves up. In the distance, there was snorting and flashing of teeth. The river boiled around two or three angry hippos – it was hard to know – and then the water and the vegetation settles as they resolved their differences. The hippos moved up the bank, a hippopotamus migration, and they stood, majestic, on the shore.*

*This is how you would remember: you took a picture. You would later have something concrete to hold onto. That hippo would be yours. You could make as many copies as you liked, and you could show people. See, this really happened. You would have tangible proof. And you would own something magnificent.*

*

After Idi Amin's violent rise to power ("soothing" widows of the disappeared on the radio by telling them their husbands are not dead, they must have just run off with another woman), missionary families are forced to leave the country. And so the Fordhams head home.

But where is home?

At first, it is Texas. “Boys fidgeted in their jean jackets, their legs draped across the aisle. *We are Texas men*, their posture said. *Who are you? And what do you want*?”

Fordham’s account of her sister Sonja’s first day of seventh grade is so tender it is almost hard to read:

*She was wearing an outfit our mother had bought in Finland, an outfit too sweet to wear without irony. Sonja looked as if she had just stepped off a Swiss Miss box.*

*…She stood in the doorframe for just a moment, but it was enough for her to have an epiphany: Everything about her and her Care Bear lunch pail was terribly, terribly wrong.*

*…She was so silent that as the day progressed, her classmates began to believe she was mute. They would ask her questions* (Can you talk? Do you understand English? Are you retarded? Do you think Steve is cute?) *And she would look away. During Texas history, her teacher forced her to read aloud from the textbook, and when she rhymed* Waco *with* taco*, she could hear the whispers…She ate lunch in a bathroom stall.*

Siblings, sometimes, claim one another’s stories as their own. Or at least feel for them. Perhaps memory is permeable, and definitely shareable. You can make as many copies as you like. *Remember that time in Africa?*

“We were like a family of polar bears plodding across the savannah,” Fordham writes, in an interesting corollary to Hough’s giraffe story. “We didn’t belong. We didn’t belong in Texas.”

*

The Fordham sisters persevere, first in Texas and then in Atlanta, where the family settles.

Much later, in college and strolling across the spring campus, Fordham is thrilled to be mistaken for a non-missionary kid:

*A man known as ‘the preacher’ appeared. ‘Don’t be an Eve,’ he said as I declined a pamphlet. He walked beside me, ‘Jezebel, Jezebel.’ I quickened my stride, my mouth a scowl, but inside, I felt pleased. He hadn’t seen the earnestness that Adventism and my missionary childhood had drawn onto my features. I, Sari Fordham, was fitting into a public university. ‘You’re traveling to hell, missy,’ the preacher shouted at my back.*

*

Much of ‘Wait for God to Notice’ is devoted to Fordham’s mother, who died far too soon from cancer; a fascinating woman both resilient and fearful, who traversed continents but would not drive at night, could not keep a secret, was fascinated by the weather. The ultimate belonging is within our families, though we may resist it. “You’re just like me,” Fordham’s mother tells her, to her occasional teenage disgust, and it’s a double-edged comment, both a compliment and a rebuke, or maybe a caution. But it is also a powerful sharedness, and one can’t help respecting the fact that, through all of this, Fordham’s mother must have felt like an outsider, too. She had also lived many lives.

*

Perhaps what Hough’s and Fordham’s memoirs make most meaningful is that there doesn’t need to be a strict divide between our past and present lives, or our relations to the people around us. These will never touch up completely anyway. There is only so close we can get to that, “you’re just like me.”

“We knew her best of all,” Fordham says after her mother’s passing. And maybe that is the important thing, impossible but not entirely sad: to try to know other people as well as ourselves, not in the false divisions of difference but in the joy of it. It might be that when it comes to who we are, the only choice lies in this trying.

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Hough, Lauren. Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing. Penguin Random House, April 2021.

Fordham, Sari. Wait for God to Notice. Etruscan Press, May 2021.

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# New Fiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: “Love Engagement”

Noor and his wife Damsa moved to Paris when the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Twenty-two years later, after the collapse of the Taliban, they returned to Kabul and rented a house with a large backyard in District Ten on Taimani Street. Withered red, blue and white roses grew beside a bare concrete wall and geckos perched between the thorns, immobile, alert, leaping at the slightest disturbance into the branches of a poplar. Fallen leaves from the tree curled on the faded tiles of a cracked terrace. One afternoon, while he was watering the roses, Noor met his neighbor, Abdul Ahmadi, and invited him for tea.

Right off, Abdul noticed Damsa in the kitchen without a burqa. She looked him up and down without a hint of self-consciousness. Another woman stood beside her. She wore a burqa and turned away when Abdul glanced at her. Damsa carried tea and a plate of raisins and cashews on a tray and sat with Abdul and Noor and lit a cigarette. Abdul could not believe her behavior and turned to Noor. Noor shrugged.

It is no problem for a woman to smoke and sit with a man in Paris, he said.

Don’t apologize for me, Damsa snapped.

I was not apologizing for you.

Yes, you were!

Turning to Abdul, she scolded, You are stuck in the old ways.

Abdul’s face reddened with anger but he remained quiet. He closed his eyes as if the darkness would remove Damsa from his sight.  When he opened them again, he ignored her and asked Noor about the other woman. Was she his second wife?

No, Damsa answered and laughed.

I spoke to Noor, Abdul said.

Yes, and now I am speaking to you, Damsa said. She is my friend from long ago. We were in school together.

We are not in France, Abdul said, trying to control his temper.

Yes, but you are in our home, Damsa replied.

Please, Noor said.

No, don’t please me, she snapped.

When neither Noor or Abdul spoke, Damsa continued: The woman’s name was, Arezo. She was still not used to the idea that the Taliban were gone and she could now show her face to men. Slowly, slowly, Damsa said, she had been encouraging Arezo to relax and trust in the new Afghanistan.

Abdul understood her hesitation. He still had a long beard and wore a salwar kameez. His friends told him to shave but his mind did not switch off and on like a lightbulb. One day, the vice police were measuring his beard, the next day his friends were waiting for barbers to shave theirs off. It was all very sudden and as unbelievable as Damsa’s behavior.

Excusing himself, Abdul returned home. He lived alone. During Talib time, when his father arranged for him to marry the daughter of a close friend, Abdul fled to Pakistan. The idea of marriage scared him, especially to a girl he did not even know. He had rarely spoken to any girl and never without an older person present. He had vague memories of playing tag with girl cousins in the back of his house when he was a boy but after he turned ten or eleven his father told him to play only with boys.

Abdul refused to come home until his father relented and promised not to force him into marriage but he did not speak to Abdul again. He moved around him like a detached shadow behaving as if he did not exist.

A tailor who owned a small shop in Shar-e-Naw hired Abdul as his assistant. When he died, Abdul took over. Then al-Qaeda attacked the United States and the Americans came. In the days and months that followed, Abdul would sit behind the counter of his shop beside a sewing machine and stare at the busy sidewalk traffic, incredulous. Young men strode by in blue jeans and button up shirts with bright flower patterns, much of their pale chests exposed. Girls wore jeans, too, and high-heeled shoes, and the wind from cars lifted their saris and they held the billowing cloth with both hands and laughed, their uncovered faces turned toward the clear sky, sunlight playing across their flushed cheeks. Abdul struggled to absorb all the changes that had occurred in such a short time.

One day a year after they had met, Noor called Abdul and told him Damsa had died. She had awakened that morning, stepped into their garden, lit a cigarette and dropped dead of a heart attack. He found her slumped against a wall, a vine reaching above her head. Abdul hurried to his house. When Noor opened the door, Abdul embraced him.

Well, now I can watch American wrestling shows on TV without Damsa telling me it’s entertainment for boys, not men, Noor

said. I can play panjpar[1] with my friends and she won't tell me I'm wasting my time.

Two months later, Noor stopped by Abdul's shop with some news: his nephew, the son of his older sister, had become engaged. But it was not a typical engagement. He and the girl had decided to marry on their own. Their parents had not been involved.

My nephew calls it a love engagement, Noor said.

Their fathers do not object? Abdul asked.

No. Now that the Americans are here I think it is OK.

Noor left and a short time later Arezo walked into Abdul's shop and asked if he would mend a pair of sandals. She gave no indication that she recognized him. She still wore a burqa but she had pulled the hood from her face. Her hair fell to her shoulders. She would not look at Abdul directly but he noticed a smile play across her face when he spoke.

That night, as he got ready for bed, Abdul thought about Arezo. He wondered what it would be like walking beside her in public as young men and women now did. Just thinking about it kept him awake. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of them on a sidewalk together, their fingers almost touching. Then he leaned into her face and pressed his mouth against hers. As their lips touched he woke with a jolt.

Night after night Abdul had this dream. He always woke up

after he kissed her. Eventually he would fall back to sleep and dream of Arezo again until the dawn call to prayer stirred him awake. Then one night the dreams stopped. He woke up feeling her absence, his head empty of even the slightest impression of her. The next morning, Noor called.  His voice broke. He sounded very upset. He asked if he could come over. Yes, of course, Abdul said. When he let him in, he was shocked by his friend's sunken eyes, his unkempt hair and disheveled clothes. His lower lip was cut and swollen.

What's wrong? Abul asked.

Noor did not answer. Abdul made tea and they sat on the floor of his living room. After a long moment, Noor sighed and began talking. Two days ago, he spoke to his nephew. What is a love engagement? he had asked him. It is the most beautiful thing, his nephew replied. Why do you ask? Noor told him he had fallen in love with Arezo. Sometimes, accompanied by her father, she would stop by his house with food. Damsa would want to know you are taking care of yourself, she would tell him. Noor could not stop staring at her. He wanted to speak to her father about marriage. No, no, his nephew said. That is the old way. You must ask her yourself.

With his help, Noor composed a letter. He told Arezo he did nothing but think of her all day. When he watered the roses, when he walked to the bazaar, when he had tea. *I want you to be my wife*, he wrote. His nephew shook his head.

Be humble. Ask her if she would accept you as her husband.

Noor did as he suggested and signed his name. His nephew delivered the letter. The next day, Noor woke up and found a note from Arezo's father outside his front door.

*Noor Mohammad*, the letter began, *Arezo loved your wife Damsa as a sister and continues to respect you as her husband. You are like a brother to her. She cannot feel anything more for you without betraying Damsa. In the future do not talk to*

*Arezo again. I, as her father, Haji Aziz Sakhi, insist upon this*.

Noor walked to his sister's house and beat his nephew, slapping him in the face until the boy's father threw him out. Noor stormed off to Arezo's house and pounded on the door. No one answered. He paced on the sidewalk until nightfall. Then he went home but his frustration was so great he was unable to sleep. This morning, he returned before the sun had fully risen and stood impatiently across the street. As a dry, lazy heat began spreading across the city, he saw Arezo walk outside with an empty sack and turn toward the downtown bazaar. Noor followed her. When she went down an alley, he called her. She stopped and looked at him. The hood of her burqa was raised and he saw her face, the uncertain smile creasing her mouth. He grabbed her and kissed her. She stiffened in his arms, tried to shake loose from his grip and bit his mouth. He stumbled back and she ran, the burqa inflating like a balloon as if it might lift her into the sky.

*

When he finished talking, Noor stared at his tea. After a moment, he looked up at Abdul, stood and let himself out without speaking.

Abdul followed him to the door. As he watched Noor enter his house, Abdul thought of Arezo. He hoped Noor had not scared her from his dreams. He would never hurt her.

[1] *A card game popular in Afghanistan*

# New Nonfiction from M.C. Armstrong: “J.F.K. Revisited: Through the Looking-Glass”

I write this review of Oliver Stone’s new film during the most bizarre month in America since the January of the Capitol riots and the de-platforming of Donald Trump, a president who promised to release the final government files on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This November, a subculture of Americans known as QAnon gathered in Dealey Plaza. During the same month that Khalil Islam and Muhammad A. Aziz were exonerated in the 1965 murder of Malcom X, QAnon held vigil in Dallas, Texas. The Q crowd sang Michael Jackson’s “We Are the World” as they awaited the resurrection of President Kennedy’s dead son, JFK Jr., at the site of his father’s murder. I think it’s fair to say that what the stories of Q and X tell us, at the very least, is this: America has a problem with truth-telling.

Enter Oliver Stone and *JFK Revisited: Through the Looking Glass*. I locate Stone’s film squarely in the camp of the lawyers, experts, and citizen-journalists who worked tirelessly to absolve Muhammad and Islam. Stone’s argument in this revelatory documentary, is that Lee Harvey Oswald may also be innocent. Aligning himself with the facts revealed by unredacted government documents from the 1990s, as well as the conclusions of the 1976 House Select Committee on Assassinations, Stone argues that President Kennedy was murdered by a CIA conspiracy. Whereas Trump and his supporters may have indeed *attempted* a coup d’etat on January 6, 2021, Stone argues that the CIA performed a successful coup on November 22, 1963.

Stone brings the receipts when it comes to proving what he calls the "conspiracy fact." *JFK Revisited* is structured around two parts. The first part, narrated by Whoopi Goldberg, offers a devastating and compelling forensic analysis of the murder. This segment alone is worth the price of admission. The second part, narrated by Donald Sutherland, invites viewers into the "why" of the murder and reveals, through the voice of Robert F. Kennedy's son, that on the day after the assassination in Dallas, the attorney general's first reaction was to call the CIA and ask if they had "conducted this horror." Of course, five years later, RFK himself would be gunned down in Los Angeles during his run for president.

The structure of the first part is chronological and goes something like this: Here is a vision of America in 1963 just before the assassination (we begin with President Kennedy's famous commencement address at American University, known to some as the "Peace Speech"). The summer is then followed by

the fall and the first eyewitness accounts of the murder. Then comes the story of revision, the eyewitnesses to a shooter from the famous “grassy knoll” suppressed or ignored as Lyndon Johnson places Allen Dulles, former director of the CIA, in charge of the investigation into the murder of the man who fired Dulles. After briefly recapitulating Dulles’ findings as detailed in the Warren Commission and giving voice to the dissenting members of that body (like Senator Russell Long), Stone follows that dissent as it builds into the 1970s and culminates with the American public witnessing the murder for the first time on national television when Geraldo Rivera asks the African American comedian, Dick Gregory, to narrate the killing as documented by the home movie known as “the Zapruder film.” Without citizen-journalists like Abraham Zapruder, it is quite possible that America, to this day, would still be under the spell of the Warren Commission.

Echoing the rhetorical power of Gregory and Rivera, Stone and Goldberg together tell the story of how Stone’s own dramatization of the murder, the 1991 movie, *JFK*, catalyzed renewed public interest in the assassination. Just as Rivera’s show helped create momentum for the work of the House Select Committee, so did Stone’s Academy Award-winning movie inspire a fresh release of JFK files during the Clinton administration. It is through these unredacted primary documents and from the testimony of experts like Cyril Wecht, former president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, that Stone constructs the strongest part of his argument: the refutation of the “magic bullet theory.” As part one concludes, Stone reveals that the chain-of-custody on the magic bullet was broken. He shows a future American president, Gerald Ford, altering evidence. He gives voice to three women witnesses from the Texas School Book Depository who were systematically suppressed from the public record. But perhaps, more important than anything, through this people’s history of the Kennedy assassination, Stone demonstrates that there were, beyond a reasonable doubt, more than three shots fired that

day in Dallas. And as members of the Warren Commission themselves knew, if there were more than three shots, than there was more than one gunman and, thus, a conspiracy.

Recent peer-reviewed scholarship from Josiah Thompson (*Last Second in Dallas*, University of Kansas Press, 2021) supports Stone's forensic analysis. This achievement of taking the story of the Kennedy assassination from "conspiracy theory" to "conspiracy fact" cannot be understated and could not have happened without a people's movement, a subculture of JFK researchers dedicated to discovering the truth. Much like those committed to the exoneration of Muhammad and Islam, this community has worked tirelessly over the span of decades in the name of justice. *JFK Revisited* is a tremendous democratic accomplishment, especially considering the ongoing obstacles of state propaganda in collaboration with corporate media partners. What remains uncertain, however, and what constitutes the weaker part of Stone's film, is the "why" and the "who." I wouldn't blame viewers who walk away from the two-hour version of *JFK Revisited* still hungry for answers.

Stone claims Kennedy was killed because the thirty-fifth president wanted to end the Cold War and went behind the CIA's back to broker peace with Russia and Cuba, among others. Stone, a veteran of the Vietnam War, argues through a host of primary documents, that Kennedy wanted to end the war in Vietnam, not escalate it like his successor, Lyndon Johnson. However, if the second part of the film doesn't convince you that a war-crazed CIA was behind the conspiracy, perhaps Stone's soon-to-be-released four-hour version will more thoroughly address that question. Or perhaps the "why" and the "who" will continue to evade the American public until this country has a leader with courage. Donald Trump was not that president. He did not keep his campaign promise. He caved to CIA appeals and refused to release the final JFK files. Maybe Joe Biden, who often poses with a bust of RFK in the Oval Office, will be that man. Early in his career, Biden often

talked about the legacy of the Kennedy brothers and the tragic consequences that followed out of their murders. As late as 2019, Biden went on the record to talk about the way the assassinations of “the late 70s” still haunted the political landscape. Journalists had to correct Biden and remind him that these murders took place in the 1960s. But Biden, at the very least, seems to know that President John F. Kennedy, like his son, is dead. *JFK Revisited* will not be able to convince QAnon supporters that Kennedy and his son are never coming back. But for that small silenced minority of Americans who still read and don’t think of truth as some kind of joke worthy of air-quotes, Stone’s documentary just might do that thing that our post-truth culture seems algorithmically designed to prevent: It might just change your mind.

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# Interview with Navy Veteran and Artist Skip Rohde, by Larry Abbott

Skip Rohde was an officer in the Navy for twenty-two years, with four submarine deployments and service in Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Bosnian peace-keeping operations in 1996. After retirement (as a Commander) he attended the University of North Carolina at Asheville and received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting in 2003. He opened a studio in Asheville and became a full-time artist. After five years of civilian life in 2008 he was tapped by the State Department to go to Iraq for eighteen months as a Program Management Advisor to manage reconstruction programs in country. He then went to Afghanistan in the fall of 2011 for a year to again help the citizenry with government and business management. While in

Afghanistan as a Field Engagement Team Advisor he sketched the faces of various individuals, like merchants, local officials, and elders during meetings, which led to some eighty drawings and pastels in the *Faces of Afghanistan* series.

These works are now in the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History. He has said about these works, *"For an artist, these people are fabulous subjects. They have wonderfully unique faces, great dignity, passion, and expressiveness." Rohde returned to the States in 2012 to resume his career not only as an artist but as a teacher and mentor to young artists.*

His oeuvre is diverse, but one of his primary interests is the human face. In addition to the Afghanistan series he has a series of portraits of men, women, and children. To him, faces

are revelatory and can uncover the truth of the person's experiences and disclose their inner lives. He feels that faces can reveal the individual's story and has noted that he draws and paints people "to tell their stories. Not mine." The Model in the Studio paintings follow up on this interest by depicting figures in various poses. The Stories and Mysteries series go in a bit of a different direction, although the human figure is still predominant. "The Three Primary Graces" references Greek mythology. "Aftermath" shows an apparently carefree young woman in a summer dress walking on a dirt path with a destroyed city in the background, while "The Conversation" is ironic in that there is no conversation portrayed. With echoes of Hopper, a woman sits in a chair in isolation, aloof from those around her. He has said about these paintings: "Stories come to me from all sorts of people and places. Sometimes they are very real: the actual people involved in the actual situation. Other times they may come from something I need to say on my own. And sometimes, I don't know where the hell they come from. But they do."

Many of these works capture a moment of human emotion that resonates beyond the canvas.

Although he feels that the works in the Twisted Tales series lack relevance, I would argue that although the paintings are a "moment in time" they are far from mere curiosities of a bygone era. Ann Coulter is still a presence in contemporary culture (for good or ill). Although the reputation of George Bush has been somewhat rehabilitated in the eyes of some, he is still responsible for the Iraq War, and the aftereffects of that war are still being felt today. I would also argue that Karl Rove's legacy of divisive campaigns is responsible for state of politics today. He is also a commentator on Fox News so his "philosophy" is not a thing of the past. And Dick Cheney? Well, avoid duck hunting with him. In "Pleasantville" and "Ma Petite Femme" the presence of guns as a normal and essential part of American society has more bearing today,

perhaps, than in 2008.

In the former work, the smiling family of dad, mom, son, and daughter (and dog) pose happily in their suburban backyard (with razor ribbon strung on the property's fence) holding M-4's. In the latter, the painting looks like an advertisement for a high-end handbag("Fine Leather Accessories") but in place of the purse is an M-4. There is also ironic juxtaposition in some of these works. "American Style" could be a postcard image ("Let's Go!") as it depicts a snazzy red 60's coupe with a snuggling man and woman out for a cruise. In the near background, however, is a burning tank, and further back there appears to be smoke rising from a bombed-out city. Similarly, "American Acres" depicts the entry to a gated community ("A Halliburton Development") with an American flag on the massive stone wall with "No Trespassing" prominently posted on the padlocked gate. However, behind the gate is the Statue of Liberty, inaccessible, co-opted and for sale by Bush and Company to, presumably, the highest bidder.

The *Meditation on War* series is Rohde's most powerful. The eighteen paintings in the series depict various aspects of war, about some of which he says "I found that the quiet things are just as important as combat itself." Some show the effects of war on places, such as "The Wall, Gorazhde" which shows the side of a building, windows blown out, bullet holes in the bricks; in "Terminal" a bus sits by the side of the road, a derelict hulk; the lone building in the ironic "Welcome to Sarajevo" has its roof blown off Other casualties of war are more compelling with their human subjects. "Warrior" depicts a legless veteran in his Army uniform in a wheelchair looking at the viewer. Are his eyes asking us not to look away? The human costs of war are also shown in the diptych "You Don't Understand." On the left side of the canvas, a woman (girlfriend? wife?) stands with arms folded, looking away; on the right-hand side a seated soldier

in uniform (boyfriend? husband?) also looks away.


At first glance the painting might suggest irreconcilable differences with neither figure able to “see” the other. However, the soldier’s cover is in the woman’s frame, while he holds a piece of her clothing. Perhaps there is hope for mutual understanding?

“Lament” is Rohde’s most poignant piece in the series. An African-American mother cradles her dead son, still in uniform, who lies upon an American flag. Although the painting may reference the Iraq War the visual analogue to Michelangelo’s *Pieta* transcends a specific war to become more universal: a mother’s grief over her fallen son, the irreclaimable loss of life.

These paintings suggest that war doesn’t end with treaties and troop withdrawals, or end with dates and tidy proclamations. Instead, a son is dead, a mother suffers, and her suffering

will continue well beyond the official pronouncements about “Mission Accomplished.”

Rohde’s landscapes are at the other end of his artistic spectrum. These are usually unpeopled natural spaces of rivers, mountains, rural dirt roads, vistas, sunsets, and animals. There is a sense of calm and repose here that are counterpoints to the scenes of war and destruction, the dark irony of the *Twisted Tales*, and the anxiety and unease in numerous portraits seen in other work. “Clouds Over the French Broad River” has echoes of the Hudson River School with the billowing clouds of pink and white, while “Old Church on the Hill” recalls an earlier more peaceful time. Rohde calls these paintings “liberating,” *with “usually no carefully thought-out narrative, no ulterior motive, just the enjoyment of trying to capture the essence of a particular place at a particular time.”*

*This idea of particularization is important in a consideration of Rohde’s work. Whether an image be of war and its aftermath, or models in a studio, or faces, or scenes of nature, he grounds his images in a specific time and place while at the same time creating a sense of the universal.*

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**LARRY ABBOTT**: What was your military experience and background?

**SKIP ROHDE**: I went to Navy OCS in late 1977. After commissioning, I spent four years as a surface warfare officer. Then I transferred to the cryptologic community and had a wide variety of assignments: surface ship and submarine deployments, field sites, and staffs afloat and ashore. I was at sea during Desert Storm and later was part of the Bosnian peacekeeping mission. I retired in late 1999 with twenty-two years of service.

**ABBOTT**: How did that influence your work?

**ROHDE**: Some of the influence was obviously in military-related subject matter I'd say the biggest influence was in how I think and in how I approach a new artwork.  Twenty years of military life made me a very linear and logical thinker. The military has no time for ambiguity: it's "make it clear and make it concise." And that's how I tend to think about subject matter and how to paint it. I've had a difficult time trying to back off that approach and give viewers more room to find their own interpretations.

**ABBOTT**: What are you working on currently? *A Possible Future* is scheduled for Spring 2022.

**ROHDE**: There are several lines of work going on right now. I have a show scheduled for spring '22 with the working title *A Possible Future*, which I think is accurate but a terrible title and I'm wide open to suggestions. The theme is what this country might be facing in the future if we don't get our collective acts together politically, economically, and ecologically. Admittedly, it's a bit of a "Debbie Downer" theme, but one I think about a lot. The show will include paintings done over many years as well as some new ones.  Another line of work is that of wedding paintings. I'll talk about that more in a minute. And a third line are my

figurative works, some charcoal and pastel, others oil. Those are personal works, trying to capture a specific individual's personality, or capture an emotion.

**ABBOTT**: What is your art training/background?

**ROHDE**: My parents were very supportive and enrolled me in private art lessons starting in about the sixth grade and continuing through high school. During my first time through college, back in the 70's, I was an art major for a couple of semesters, but they weren't teaching me anything and I thought artists were just weird. I got a degree in engineering and went into the Navy. I continued to take classes when I could while on active duty. After I retired, we came here so I could study art at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. I graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, with a concentration in painting, in 2003.

**ABBOTT**: You also do commissions and "event paintings." What is your approach to these?

**ROHDE**: I've always done portrait and other commissions. About four years ago, I had a lady call me up and ask if I could be the live event painter for her sister's wedding.  I said absolutely, I could do that and would be happy to. Then I was immediately on Google trying to find out what the hell a "live event painter" was. I wondered if it was too cheesy or kitschy, or if I'd even like doing it, and whether it was something I really wanted to try out. So I did a couple of trial runs, making wedding paintings based on photos that I already had of the weddings of friends and relatives. I decided it seemed like fun, so I gave it a go, and now it's an ongoing line of business. Yes, it's kitschy, but it's also a celebration of one of the biggest moments in somebody's life. If I do my job right, this will be something that will hang on their wall for years, and be handed down to their children, and then *their* children, and in a hundred years somebody might be saying "that was great-grandma and grandpa when they got

married way back in 2021." That's a pretty cool thought. I do about eight or nine events a year. I turn down a lot more than that. If I do more, it will turn into a "job," and that will suck the life out of it.

**ABBOTT**: You seem to have great interest in the human form and faces, like in *New Works 2016-2021.* You've said they are "more than just simple figure drawings," maybe more "stories and mysteries."

**ROHDE**: It's all about people. I like talking with people and finding out about who they are and what they've seen and done. You can walk down the street and have no clue that you're passing people with some of the most amazing stories you'll ever come across in your life. Trying to capture some of that on paper or canvas is what really excites me. And yes, that applies to the wedding paintings, too.

**ABBOTT**: Related are the sketches *"Faces of Afghanistan,"* which depict the people you interacted with. How did these come about?

**ROHDE**: In 2011, I went to Afghanistan for a year as a temporary State Department officer. I was stationed in a remote district in Kandahar Province to be a "governance advisor." And no, I don't know anything about governance. Our mission was to help the local government and businesses to improve their capabilities to run their district and improve their lives. I was regularly in Afghan-run meetings as an observer, supposedly taking notes. Afghans have the most amazing faces. These are people who'd been in a war environment almost constantly for over thirty years, and who lived in a very difficult environment on top of that. So instead of taking notes, I'd often wind up sketching the men in the room. Sometimes I'd give the drawing to the guy I'd drawn. Maybe a little "diplomacy through art"?

**ABBOTT**: What were you concerned with in the *Meditation on War* series? I thought that “Lament,” “Warrior,” the diptych “You Don’t Understand,” and “Empty Boots” were extremely powerful.

**ROHDE**: The paintings you noted were all done around 2006-8. I started doing paintings about the Iraq conflict in 2005. This was early in the war and there was a lot of effort in trying to build up enthusiasm for going over there and kicking ass. It was “you’re with us or you’re against us,” questioning your patriotism if you thought it was a mistake (which it was). My intent with *Meditation on War* was to say “look, if you want to go to war, here’s what it means: people die or are mutilated, stuff gets destroyed, things go wrong, and it never, ever, goes to plan.” The paintings were based on my own experiences in Desert Storm, Bosnia, and military life in general. “Warrior” is a man who really has lost his legs. “Lament” is based on Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. Every military member who’s been deployed, especially to a hot zone, has lived “You Don’t Understand.” “Empty Boots” were my Desert Storm boots. The individual in “Saddle Up” was a Marine sergeant in the Au Shau Valley in Vietnam in ’67-68. I still add more paintings to this series whenever a particular idea comes to me.

**ABBOTT**: On the other end of the spectrum are the landscapes. What is your interest in these “unpeopled” spaces?

**ROHDE**: These are more relaxing than my people paintings.

They’re just paintings for the sake of painting, to capture a moment in nature, experiment with getting the effects of light while using paint, working fast while trying to get it done before the light changes and always failing. But that experience feeds back into my other paintings. So maybe it’s a form of painting exercises.

**ABBOTT**: What was the impetus behind *Twisted Tales*? There is a bitter edge to them, like “American Style,” “Pleasantville,” “American Acres,” “A Pachydermian Portrait,” and “Ann’s Slander,” referencing Ann Coulter.

**ROHDE**: Anger and sarcasm go together, don’t they? And where can you learn sarcasm better than from your military compadres? Most of those were done around 2005 when I was really angry about the country’s direction. I eventually had to stop.  To do those paintings, I had to get really pissed off and stay that way in order to get the emotion into the artwork. Plus, they were very much of a specific moment in time.  The “Pachydermian Portrait” was about George Bush and the Iraq invasion, but Bush has been gone for years and who cares anymore?  A lot of work went into each of those paintings and they aren’t relevant anymore.  In ’06, I decided to shift to something that was more timeless, about military life in general, and that started the *Meditation on War* series. Regarding “Ann’s Slander,” Coulter had just published a book called *Slander* (2002) in which she said that people like me were traitors.I took that very personally, so I called her out on it in paint.

**ABBOTT**: Any final thoughts on your art—where it’s been, where it’s going.

**ROHDE**: I’m very fortunate to be able to do what I do. I really am. I’m trying to follow the guidance that my parents instilled in me: to leave things better than the way I found them. I’m doing some paintings that are celebrations of great things, and some paintings that are cautionary tales, and some

that are just my own impressions of the way things (or people) are. Sometimes they turn out well.

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# New Poetry by Suzanne O’Connell: “Airport Luggage Carousel” and “Shipwreck”

IMAGINE GOLD DOUBLOONS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

**Airport Luggage Carousel**

A battered cardboard box

holes punched in the side
tied with frayed rope
lid popping up
plastered with masking tape, wrinkled.
One lone orphan
going round and round the luggage carousel,
heading nowhere.
Packed in chaos.
Full of soiled clothes
bloody Kleenex
unpaid bills
splinters
and Dear John letters.

This is what the last year has been.

So I imagine the contents differently.
I imagine gold doubloons,
a child’s drawing of a rainbow,
a coupon for a free fried chicken dinner.
Maybe a photograph of a family, at Christmas,
standing together on a hillside,
everyone wearing red and green,
the husband holding a puppy,
and Carol,
still alive.

**Shipwreck**

She sniffed my trenches,
turned away from the skin she made,
her own thick blood
flowing in my waterways.
Me, a vacant dwelling on the shore,
wearing swaddling,
drinking low-fat milk.

Oh, wire mother of the soul,
entertainer of strangers.
She of too many decibels,
too many bright colors,
passing macaroons to visitors
while I carved “I love Chris”
in the dining room table.

Find the fur coat,
find the hairdresser,
find the beach umbrella
find the wine coolers
find the plants in pots
resigned to death.

Little fish swim by her ankles.
Like me, they long for contact.
Mercy, the color of the sea,
never granted.
In that day, at that hour,
on that wretched beach,
she wanted an audience
but found only me.

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# New Poetry by Saramanda Swigart: “Reckoning” and “The Small I”

BY THE ROOTS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

**RECKONING**

don’t worry about me
i am not well but you’ve worried enough
my prosperity has a body

count—

this shielded flesh
conspicuous & allowed to be
balks at being back-

ground—

this mouth taught (without being taught)
it is clearest & loudest & purest
squirms when it must shut up & become

ears—

i do not know how to be ears
i know how to open my mouth monstrously
wide to spew & eat

words—

words are my birthright & we the
authors bulldoze other stories to rubble
so the Other trips over each foregone

conclusion—

i am trained to make murder invisible
but understories cling, bloody mine
with the dragged, sullied

bodies—

of those disappeared beneath my
own soft landing
we need other & better

stories—

speak please, whatever you have to say—
pull out this blighted story by the roots
& plant a new one, green, tender, & worth

loving—

**THE SMALL I**

this is my country

look
i overturn the junk
drawer of my

white/middle-class
life and take stock
rifling
i find i am not a capital letter anymore
first person singular has shrunk
wizened down
to that apple core i found beneath the car seat
last month
or that ivy there, brown and dead
because i killed it
the waxy leaf tree outside
the front door
(the city said we were its stewards
in a single-page note
in our mail-
box) my heart
brimming then
with the largesse of new motherhood
i thought i could
take on the health
of every tree
in California but
over the course of six
years the ivy became a cloak around
its trunk
then an embrace
then a stranglehold
until tree leaves thinned
i spent a long time
tearing up the roots
of that ivy
now it browns—
saved the tree but
ivy clings
a flammable bolus
around its midsection

and the small i—
how to locate i
when i
am both tree
and ivy?