

New Poetry by Ricardo Moran: “ABBA-1975” and “On the Street”



TAG EVERY WALL / *image by Amalie
Flynn*

ABBA-1975

Abba's lyrics, like water
shot from La Bufadora,
mingle with volcanic steam
from metallic pots of corn.

And the scrape on my knee
from chasing the seagulls
bleeds, but does not hurt.

On this Sunday, the ocean breeze slips
in gossip between vendor stalls
as young men in speedos walk past.
Tables of silver bracelets tap my eyes
and ABBA's Spanish melody
carries on my tongue
before any English syllable
ever arrived. Before the summer ended
when it tore me
from the sands of Ensenada
to a desert north of the border,
to a land with tongues
unfamiliar and stiff.

And now when I fall
chasing my shadow, my ABBA

lyrics cannot permeate
foreign soil. Cannot stop the pain.

On the Street

Run naked through the streets
and shout, "Make love to me!"

Tag every wall in a turf war
with quotes from the palatero,
from the child who yearns for love,
from the gay son who hopes his father
will welcome him,
this time.

With your sharp and fast tongue, mesmerize
passersby as they get caught in the gunfire
of stanzas and sonnets,
popping the air.

Bellow on the street corner
of how love abandoned you,
how your life is empty,
how you aborted your dreams.
And every day it rips into you
of every opportunity you threw away.

I want that on the wall.
I want all the pain and hurt
to get out of bed, to grab that bullhorn
and run naked through the streets.

New Nonfiction from Rob Bokkon: “The Last of the Gonzo Boys: P.J. O’Rourke, War, and the Evolution of a Political Mind”



“We hear the Iraqi army is systematically blowing up buildings in downtown Kuwait City. If the architecture in Kuwait resembles the architecture in Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi army will have done one good deed, anyway. As soon as the Iraqis have all surrendered, let’s send them to New York and let them take a whack at Trump Tower.”—P. J. O’Rourke, February 25, 1991

On February 15, 2022, Patrick Jake O’Rourke shuffled off this mortal coil owing to lung cancer. If P.J.’s general demeanor was any indication, this probably left him pissed off and in need of a drink. It certainly did me.

Who was P.J. O’Rourke?

P.J. O’Rourke was a dick.

“Gadfly” isn’t really evocative enough. He fulfilled that function, but it wasn’t his only schtick. “Curmudgeon” isn’t right either, even though he tried a little too hard to be one, especially as he got older. But curmudgeons don’t like anybody or anything, and P.J. had more than his share of joie de vivre. “Dick” pretty much sums it up—that one guy with an attitude problem and a drinking problem and possibly a coke

problem, who says outrageous shit after his second bourbon that pisses off the whole room, and after the third one has everybody roaring with laughter.

He was a dick. But he was *our* dick, goddamnit.

And he was one hell of a writer.

At the risk of showing my age:

Back in the Grand Old Days of Print Media—in the misty, forgotten, sepia-toned era that is the late '80s and early '90s—everybody, and I mean everybody, read *Rolling Stone*. If you had the least pretension to musical hipness, you read *RS*. Your ex-hippie parents read *RS*. Your Atari-generation older siblings grew up on it, so there were always copies lying around the house. If your high school library was hip enough, they had it; college libraries *always* did, and so did record stores. We read it, we talked about what we read, we argued over the music reviews, we cut pics out to hang on our dorm room walls. It piled up under the coffee table, it stacked on the backs of toilets. It was everywhere.

Rolling Stone was fucking cool back then, too. They reviewed shit you'd never, ever have heard of otherwise, especially if like me you grew up in a rural coal-mining area of the Upland South. My friends and I pestered the poor long-suffering employees at Disc Jockey in the one tiny mall in Owensboro with increasingly strange requests for shit we'd heard of but couldn't find in the bins, we kept lists of shit we wanted to hear in our pockets to offset the dread phenomenon known as Record Store Amnesia. Buying music was a big deal back then and we spent enormous amounts of the disposable income that we used to have so much more of on it. It was a feedback loop; read *Rolling Stone*, go to record store for shit you'd read about in *Rolling Stone*, buy the new *Rolling Stone* while you're there, repeat. And it wasn't just the music. They had great pieces on the entertainment industry, politics, global

affairs.

But the really, really good times came when there was a P.J. O'Rourke article gracing the issue.

I've lost count of how many people have stared me down and said "YOU like P.J. O'Rourke? You, Rob BOKKON, Marxist and identity politics asshole and general leftist menace, actively buy his books?" Yeah, I do like P.J. O'Rourke. He's a great writer, he's funny as fuck, and he's also wrong about almost everything and often heinously offensive. Do yourself a favor and don't look up anything he ever wrote for *National Lampoon*. In fact, most of what was in *National Lampoon* is virtually unreadable to modern audiences and that's probably a good thing—they were never as funny as they thought they were, and that whole "shock comedy" thing is mad lame anyway. That's not to denigrate their impact culturally or whatever, but a bunch of white boys yelling the n-word because they can is not revolutionary and it wasn't then either. I dislike all of PJ's views on Marxism, not least because they're facile and, well, silly; I dislike his views on American imperialism; I especially dislike his defenses of capitalism, which are based on a grade-school understanding of economics and amount to not much more than the "get rich while you can" ethos of Gordon Gekko or Patrick Bateman. There's also the casual racism and sexism, which is to be expected from a Boomer white male straight Republican.

With that all said: I have rarely laughed harder than when reading P.J. go off on one of his tangents, especially when the target is his own party (which is frequent) or matters of foreign policy, with which he was well acquainted as an on-the-ground reporter, for ABC Radio, *RS*, and the egregious *American Spectator*. And his writing is valuable as historical documentation, of a particular political attitude that has vanished from the American intellectual landscape. Much, I

would argue, to the detriment of that landscape.

I'm no big fan of "the discourse." I don't really regard engagement with today's right-wingers as a useful or healthy activity. We have nothing in common other than citizenship, and I know that no amount of pleading on my part can convince anyone to stop being a terrible person. That falls firmly under the category of "personal development", and people who think the government shouldn't provide us with clean water but should have the authority to arrest LGBT+ people for existing are not, generally speaking, capable of much in the way of soul-searching. (You're free to disagree with any of these statements as long as you know that you're wrong.) I could give less of a shit what some KKK member in Indiana thinks of the economy or Black Lives Matter or socialism, because A: I already know what he thinks and B: what he thinks is shitty, so having a "dialogue" is going to benefit no one at all.

P.J. O'Rourke, of all the Republicans in the world, really just wasn't like that. Sure, he was a plutocrat-fellating asshole and a warmonger and an apologist for the worst economic system the world ever created, but he would flat-out tell you that he was all those things and then smoke a joint with you. Hunter Thompson didn't suffer fools gladly. Hunter Thompson liked P.J. So did Jann Wenner, the publisher of *Rolling Stone* for many decades, who's hardly what you'd call a right-wing ideologue. And so did a lot of (in those days) liberal kids like me who found reading P.J. a delicious sort of crime, the thrill of the forbidden making the humor even more sharp.

We saw ourselves in P.J., even if we didn't like what he had to say. He was a pure Boomer, but his attitude was so much more like that of Gen X: question everything, have an attitude about it, say what's on your mind. Be bold. Be very wrong, if you have to be, and then take the time to examine what you were wrong about. But above all, *say something*. If something annoys you, bring it up. Be the squeaky wheel. Be the gadfly.

Stir some shit up.

And stir shit he did. Liberals hated him (probably because he turned that laser gaze onto the silliest aspects of American pseudo-leftism and proclaimed them to be exactly what they were); conservatives hated him too. He thought Reagan was a dunce and Bush Sr. an affable goofball who stumbled into all his political successes (both of these facts are categorically correct); he hated, but *hated*, the Drug War and called it out for its waste of public dollars and its human consequence, to say nothing of its impact on our civil liberties. As P.J. saw it, no strict constructionist could defend the unlawful search and seizure that was drug testing, nor the Fifth Amendment violation of self-incrimination it virtually guarantees. "Jail will screw up your life worse than a whole Glad bag full of daffy dust," he wrote, acknowledging something we're just now starting to talk about, the failure of the punitive system to address *anything* meaningful about drug use in America.

Imagine a Republican saying THAT now. Imagine a Republican questioning the importance of the prison-industrial complex. Fuck, imagine a Republican questioning anything his own party did.

And that is why P.J. was the last Republican on this planet with whom I would have, willingly, shared a whiskey. Because he didn't think the government needed to fuck with your private life. He didn't think there was anything particularly noble in politics or politicians in general, and regarded the cultish worship of people in the public sphere of government as both perverse and un-American; he didn't think people in a democracy were obliged to bow to anybody in particular, regardless of whether that somebody was JFK or Reagan. Plus, he is, to date, the only person to describe a landscape using the words "blood and diarrhea" in an article on American foreign policy, and that takes a certain amount of style. Audacity, anyway.

And nothing in this world succeeds like audacity. As P.J. himself might say, just look at Congress; right there you've got 535 people who work six months out of the year (maybe) for six-figure salaries, and the chief qualification for their job is saying things very loudly. Not only when they're right, but *especially* when they're wrong. Even the reasonably good ones have a huge dash ofchutzpah, or they wouldn't be in politics. P.J. famously called Congress a "Parliament of whores" in the early '90s. I would argue that this situation, post-*Citizens United*, has only gotten worse.

The current debate on members of Congress and their ability to trade stocks is also extremely germane to his basic point: public servants enriching themselves at the public trough at public expense are not good for the Republic. He was right about that. He was often right. He was more often wrong. But somewhere in all this, there's a grain of something gone; that center we all hear about, the "core values" we're all supposed to share, the general idea that maybe, just maybe, we could in fact all get along again if we just sat down and talked. But that was before QAnon, and anti-vaxx nonsense, and people who think the Earth is flat actually being elected to Congress (something P.J. used to joke about a lot). It may sound like I'm spreading the blame around equally here, and to some degree I am; the Democrats are largely useless. But they're not the ones who got us to this point, and the liberal silliness P.J. so often derides ain't got a patch on the festering pile of batshit crazy that is the modern Republican Party. P.J. thought book burnings were bad and wanted you to be able to snort all the coke you want. Marjorie Taylor Greene he wasn't.

"She's wrong about absolutely everything, but she's wrong within normal parameters."—P.J. on why he voted for Hillary over Trump



Original artwork for this essay by artist Tom Law at moreorlesanimation@gmail.com

Speaking of coke: If you like Dr Hunter S. Thompson, you'll like P.J. It's the same basic thing; gonzo journalism, the writing of a serious piece as though it's a work of fiction, Truman Capote's nonfiction novel concept writ large (writ small?), the whole world filtered through *style*. A rejection of bland reportage in favor of commentary, a flat exposure of the lie of objectivity, an embrace of the good things about writing in English. Just because it's news doesn't mean it can't be fun. There would never have been a Jon Stewart without gonzo journalism, nor a Colbert, nor a Jon Oliver, nor an Anthony Bourdain. There's something very true about it. Something honest. No bullshit other than the author's bullshit, which is a given when you write anything; when the reader *knows*, intimately, that what they're reading is opinion, they're much more likely to pay some attention to the content of what you say.

This is why smart people like shit like *The Daily Show* and stupid people watch Fox News. If you *know* you're consuming biased content, and act accordingly, at least you're thinking. If you consume biased content, and either don't know it's biased or, worse, defend it as unbiased, then you're doing the opposite of thinking. P.J. hated stupidity. He hated Trump. He held his nose and voted for Hillary Clinton because, as he said, "She's wrong about absolutely everything, but she's wrong within normal parameters." This would have made sense to Dr Thompson. It was, for a Republican, a very gonzo thing to do. It was...well, it was honest. And it added to the rich narrative thread that was P.J.'s life. At this point, he was a darling of NPR, a regular on *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me*, every Democrat's favorite Republican, the snide funny dude on your radio while you made lunch on Saturdays, if that's your sort of thing. His previous persona must have been shocked, but his

capitalist soul liked the checks, so I guess it worked out, even if his bread and butter came from publicly-funded liberal media.

Imagine Lauren Boebert being on *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me*. Imagine Lauren Boebert on any quiz show at all. Fuck, imagine Lauren Boebert in high school academic team. Actually, don't do that, because that exact scenario is coming soon to a dank conference room near you, now that the GOP has discovered books exist and are doing their level best to do something about that.

P.J. at War

☒ *"Wherever there's injustice, oppression, and suffering, America will show up six months late and bomb the country next to where it's happening."*

P.J. was no stranger to world conflict. He'd been in Lebanon in 1984, in Seoul for the 1987 election of Roh Tae Woo that ended decades of authoritarianism. In '89 and '90, P.J. was assigned to cover the (often premature) collapse of various Communist regimes in Central America and Europe for both *Rolling Stone* and *American Spectator*, along with a few other global hot spots that were in turmoil outside of the realm of Marxism. There's a lot to like here, a lot to laugh at, and a lot of head-shaking. He advances the cause of the modern conservative narrative "liberals = socialists = supporters of totalitarianism", which is both silly and contains one small element of truth: the liberal-to-socialist pipeline is a thing, as anybody who started out as a James Carville Democrat and wound up a red-flag-waving socialist can tell you. (Author waves enthusiastically at the audience.)

Regardless of his silliness and eventually incorrect predictions about the "death of Communism", the articles were good. They took us to places that, as P.J. said, "the United States only cared about if we got our dope from them." The

crowing over the defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 is amusing in hindsight, given how long Danny Ortega has now been President of Nicaragua and also given the continuing Pink Tide in South and Central America. But the piece on Paraguay was particularly good, acknowledging as it did that U.S. allies in the Dirty War were also super-comfortable with Nazi expatriates and connections with apartheid South Africa, and flatly stating that our Cold War ally had tortured its own citizens. P.J. said that was a bad thing. He acknowledged U.S. complicity in bullshit, which wasn't even the focus of the article. He just said it and moved on. At the time of publication, it was barely noteworthy. Now it's revolutionary. P.J. wasn't always right, but he was consistent. He hated what he hated and he liked what he liked, and he didn't approve of torture. He didn't like it when Stroessner did it in Paraguay and he didn't like it when Saddam did it in Kuwait and he didn't like it when we did it in black sites. Conservatism once had limits.

Imagine, if you will, those days. Imagine conservatism with self-examination. Imagine conservatism being, well, conservatism.

The way I see it, it's a pretty philosophy on paper, but it never works in the real world.

"H00000-AH!!!", as the Gulf troops say."

In 1990, Saddam Hussein, perpetual ally/enemy/focus of American Middle East foreign policy, invaded Kuwait, and very shortly the United States wound up in its first proper shooting war since Vietnam, since everyone knows Grenada and Panama don't officially count. Whatever, this was big, and more importantly it was on TV, and a bunch of people I know and you know were fucked up by it. It led directly to our continuing policy of interventionism in a region that was

better left alone or influenced by diplomacy. It led to Bush Jr. and Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and twenty fucking years in Afghanistan and more dead civilians than anyone knows how to count properly, and a bunch of American kids with lifelong PTSD and wounds that won't heal. It led to Bill Clinton bombing Iraq, on average, every two weeks of the eight years he was in the White House. It led to the attitude that perpetual war was the norm, not the exception.

Maybe it is. Maybe we can't function without it now. But in 1990, it was a fun new conceit and it didn't involve the Soviet Union, so we were fairly convinced it was an adventure that wouldn't precipitate The Big One. I guess it depends on what your definition of The Big One is. Regardless, ABC Radio (of all people) sent P.J. to the Middle East as a war correspondent on the strength of his global reporting of the last couple of years, and *Rolling Stone* decided to get in on the action too with print columns, and thus we got a *Rolling Stone* view of American foreign policy in the Bush years. Which is a weird sentence, no matter how you parse it.

P.J. was on the ground for most of the war, and his writings on the subject are still poignant, still relevant as a document of a time when the USA was in its ascendancy and the Soviet Union descending into chaos. We were flexing our global muscle against someone who'd been an ally as recently as two years ago; we were enforcing the Carter Doctrine; we were giving the finger to the planet, and weirdest of all—*almost no one objected.*

As P.J. said, "There don't seem to be a lot of celebrities protesting against this war. New Kid On the Block Donnie Wahlberg did wear a 'War Sucks' T-shirt at the Grammy awards, but that's about it. In fact, I've heard that Jane Fonda has decided to maintain public silence on the subject of Desert Storm. Getting Jane Fonda to be quiet—this alone makes fighting Iraq worthwhile." It's a cheap shot for P.J., an easy, misogynistic swing at a conservative target of ire so

predictable that it should be beneath his notice, but it's worth mentioning for a reason. The complete defeat of anti-war ideology in the US in those days was a very real thing, replaced by what P.J. called "kick-ass patriotism" and a general belief that what we were doing was just. P.J. certainly believed in the cause, but he also thought the whole thing was absurd and was happy to point out exactly how:

"You may wonder what the job of a Gulf War journalist is like. Well, we spend all day broadcasting on the radio and TV telling people back home what's happening over here. And we learn what's happening over here by spending all day monitoring the radio and TV broadcasts from back home. You may also wonder how any actual information ever gets into this loop. If you find out, please call."

P.J. traveled through Jordan, Syria, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and wound up in Kuwait City just before US and coalition forces arrived, but after the Iraqis had trashed the place and headed for home. He embedded with troops (another first for that war) and got shot at, nearly arrested more than once, had Scuds lobbed at him and very nearly blew himself up when he, lit cigar firmly screwed in the side of his mouth, opened up an Iraqi demolition booby trap consisting of a pile of RPGs and a grenade with the pin out. Although he later said the most dangerous thing he did throughout the whole war was cook spaghetti sauce on a camp stove on the Hilton roof with his flak jacket off, because the Kuwaitis took that opportunity to celebrate the US victory by firing "every available weapon in the air, including the .50 caliber dual-mount machine guns on the Saudi and Qatari APCs...Finally, a Brit and a veteran of the Special Air Services could stand it no more and leaned over the roof parapet and bellowed at the trigger-crazed Kuwaiti merrymakers 'STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT! PUT THOSE FUCKING GUNS AWAY AND GO GET A MOP AND A BROOM AND CLEAN THIS COUNTRY UP!'"

"Peacenik types say there would be no war if people truly understood how horrible war is. They're wrong. People don't

mind a little horror...but everybody hates to be bored and uncomfortable. If people truly understood how much sleeping on rocks, how much eating things rejected by high school cafeterias, how much washing small parts of the body in cold water and how much sheer sitting around in the dirt war entails, we might have world peace after all."

✘ *Kuwait City after the Iraqi withdrawal. "It looked like all the worst rock bands in the world had stayed there at the same time."*

Here's the thing about P.J.

P.J. opened your mind to the possibility that ideologies could be fluid. That you could believe a thing and maybe later change your mind. That you could evolve. He had.

A self-confessed "peace weenie" and "liberal goofball" in the '60s, P.J., like so many others of his generation, made the rightward swing in the late '70s and landed, not so much in the Reagan camp, but at some outpost of his own building, an ideological stronghold somewhere between classical liberalism and drug-legalization libertarianism, with a hearty dash of that countercultural anti-authoritarianism (and of course the dope) still firmly in the mix. He wasn't tidy, in fact he could be absolutely all over the place and even self-contradictory. Good thinkers often are. Great writers usually are, because they say what they're thinking when they're thinking it and often live to regret it later.

Here's why that's important, at least to me: P.J., in his rejection of his former principles, gave me the courage to take the step away from moderate centrism and to embrace the leftist principles that truly evoke my core beliefs. I stopped caring about where people wanted me to be and reached out for the things I thought were right. It's messy here sometimes,

and it pisses people off. (Lord knows P.J. would think I was a weenie or worse. He would also be pleased that I don't care.) But it's mine. I thought it through, I stood up, I said something.

As I write this, Russia has invaded Ukraine. The world situation is dire in a way it hasn't been in decades. Putin is rattling the nuclear saber, Zelenskyy is making himself into a world media icon, Ukrainian grandmas are becoming social media darlings by cussing out 18-year-old conscripts on video, there may or may not be thermobaric bombs dropping on civilians and nobody knows if the Ghost of Kyiv is real or not, but damn, it's a story of kick-ass patriotism. And all over the world, people are standing up, people are saying something, people are trying to make a difference.

I just wish P.J. were here to give us his take. I wish Anthony Bourdain was here too. The world needs cynicism and humor, but also basic decency and compassion, when the shit gets too real. Oh, they'd probably hate each other, but I'd pay real money to see the two of them shout at each other over whiskey and cigars on CNN. Wherever you are, Gonzo Boys, we could use a dose of your realness right about now.

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O'Rourke, P.J. *Give War a Chance*. Grove Press, 1992.

O'Rourke, P.J. *Holidays In Hell*. Grove Press, 1988.

O'Rourke, P.J. *Thrown Under the Omnibus*. Grove Press, 2015.

New Fiction from Steve Kiernan: “War Ensemble”

Holding Dick Cheney’s shotgun is not exactly how I thought I’d be spending my time when I joined the Marines. It was summer of ’06 and the meatgrinder of Iraq was going full-tilt. President Bush had gathered all his advisors and generals and a host of other ne’er-do-wells at Camp David to come up with a strategy to unfuck the war. You’ve probably heard of it. The Surge. I’m sure whatever white paper commando coined the term was very proud of themselves. Anyway yadda yadda blah blah you get the picture. I was stationed there at the time as a security guard. Our biggest threat were angry Code Pink moms.

The morning of the big arrival I was called down to First Sergeant’s office and told my orders to an infantry battalion had come in and I’d probably be in Iraq within a few months. Now, normally this was the best news a Camp David Marine could get, I’d finally get out of this chickenshit assignment and get to do what Marines are meant for, what all my friends from bootcamp had been doing for the past two years. I was twenty and dumb and had naively requested these orders a few months prior, had eagerly awaited to hear back as I went through the same groundhog day routine of six hours on duty and twelve hours off, over and over, staring at nothing but trees and fucking duty rosters. My gung-ho attitude changed however, when I received news of Cody, my bunk mate from boot camp. He had been killed just a few days earlier when his Humvee got ripped apart by a massive IED somewhere outside Haditha. He was the first person I really knew to get wasted and I remember feeling suddenly ashamed of my excitement and eagerness and the orders in my hand grew heavy with consequence and complicity. Processing this was too much for

my twenty-year-old brain to handle, so I did what any Marine faced with a complex emotional dilemma would do; I tried to ignore them.

That's the headspace I was in when all this went down.

Now let me get to the big visit.

VIPs wouldn't arrive for a few hours, but Secret Service advance teams were already setting up shop around the facility and we had begun standing up all the extra guards a presidential visit requires. Hoping to keep myself distracted I hid in the React Room with a squad of Marines fully kitted out in body armor, M4 rifles, ammunition, smoke grenades, night-vision goggles, hell, even an M240G medium machine gun. We were watching *The Notebook*.

Sgt Zak walked in and flipped on the lights, producing a round of boos and shouts as we shielded our eyes in the windowless enclave.

"Be quiet, you frickin' snakes." He was standing in front of the TV and holding a clipboard and though he was only 5'6, he knew how to take up a lot of space.

"Oh come on, sarnt!" Dave, who told dubious yet colorful stories of his time as a pool-boy in Daytona, was visibly upset. "Noah and Allie were just about to rekindle their love after he rebuilt the old house!"

"Love can wait."

More boos. Someone threw their hat. Sgt Zak ignored them.

"Okay, morning announcements. Trailblazer will be arriving later this afternoon at 1520, soon followed by the press corps. Other cabinet members will be arriving periodically from 1600 to 2000, so be prepared for several LZ Ops."

Trailblazer, of course, being the president's Secret Service

codename. All the Bush family and most of the higher-up cabinet officials had codenames—usually some dumb reference to the person's character or interests. In Bush's case, he loved mountain biking.

"Also, Angler," that's Cheney, "will be arriving at 1000 and I've been told wants to squeeze in some time at the skeet range. I'll need one of you to go out with him as Range Safety Officer."

A bit of context: maybe you remember but Cheney had just recently shot a friend in the face with a shotgun while out quail hunting. He said it was an accident.

The banter died down as all of us in the room suddenly found something very interesting to inspect on our uniforms and gear. I started picking at my name tape, which was coming unstitched on one side. Travis got up and walked for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Sgt Zak said.

"Some rich white guys want to go out and shoot guns and you expect the one black dude to go out there with 'em?"

"Ah dang, good point."

Travis opened the door and left the room.

"Come on, you guys are usually fighting over the chance to get some close-up time with VIPs."

"You know he just shot a dude in the face, right?" I said.

There was a round of agreement, but Sgt Zak just crossed his arms.

I thought I might slink out of the room like Travis, seeing that I wasn't even on the react team and in no mood to entertain the powers-that-be, but I got the sense that was a one-time deal. My chances were probably better staying grouped

up with everyone else, a united front.

“He ain’t even on react, send him.” Dave said, pointing at me.

Despite his amusing eccentricities, Dave is foremost an asshole.

“Gosh dangit. Dave, give me a mag.” Sgt Zak didn’t wait and instead ripped open a velcro pouch and took one of Dave’s loaded pistol magazines. He then picked up the hat that was thrown earlier and began unloading the bullets into it.

“Ah what the fuck, sarnt?” Dave protested.

Sgt Zak then pulled out a sharpie from his pocket and drew a black X on one bullet.

“Each of you take a bullet without peeking, whoever gets the X gets to RSO for Angler.”

He came around with the hat and we each did as we were told.

You can guess where this is going.

“You got the X!” Dave laughed, again pointing at me.

The rest of them were laughing too. There’s nothing more amusing to Marines than seeing one of their own suffer.

“Yo, make sure you wear your glow-belt out there.”

“Nah, wear like five fuckin glow-belts.”

“Yeah, sling ‘em around your chest like Rambo.”

“Nice knowin ya, dude.”

“Rest in pieces, bro.”

Obviously, this did not improve my mood. The idea of shooting anything felt strangely perverse given the context of what Bush and the cabinet were there to do. One would think the

moment demanded a sober retrospection of all that had led to the clusterfuck they had gotten us into. I remembered when Cody and I got smoked by our D.I. after getting our wisdom teeth pulled because Cody had the gall to let blood drip onto the quarterdeck. He kept whispering "I'm sorry" over and over to me through gauze-filled cheeks while doing endless mountain-climbers. I wondered whether he had been buried yet, or if he was still at Dover getting pieced together for his parents. Maybe, had I taken Sgt Zak aside and confessed all of that to him he would have let me off. He probably would have. But I couldn't. Duty, pride, toxic masculinity, whatever you want to call it, held my mouth shut as I eventually got voluntold for the assignment.

So anyway, there I was, holding Cheney's shotgun and contemplating my life choices. This is something one does a lot in the military. It's actually the first thing one does in the military. But at this particular moment, I was tallying up every decision I made that brought me to signing those enlistment papers, which I had thought was the Right Thing, but now know to be the Wrong Thing, so if I could go back and change one of those decisions I would have ended up doing the Wrong Thing instead of the Right Thing, which would have actually been the Right Thing and not the Wrong Thing, but if I had done the Right Thing I know I would have felt bad for not doing the Wrong Thing and would then convince myself that the Wrong Thing was the Right Thing and I'd be right back to doing the Right Thing and I'd still end up standing at the skeet range holding Cheney's shotgun.

Angler was forty-five minutes late when he finally rolled up in a golf cart with the presidential seal glued onto the front it like some perverse, snub-nosed, boomer Popemobile. One of his aides was driving and brought the cart right up to the firing line, past the sign that read "No Vehicles Beyond This Point." One look at him told me this was headed for a worst-case scenario. I shit you not, despite this being a skeet

range overlooking a perfectly manicured and level lawn, and with no reason to leave the covered and shady confines of the firing line, Angler wore his full hunting regalia. Now this is summertime Maryland, the temp was hovering around 92 degrees and about a million percent humidity and here he was in rubber galoshes, Mossy Oak camouflage pants and shirt, and a hunter orange shooting vest with a dozen different pockets and pouches. And he was drinking a healthy three fingers of whiskey from a glass in his left hand.

"I'll take that," he said and grabbed the shotgun from my hands.

One step at a time, I told myself.

"Sir, I'll be your Range Safety Officer for today."

"Yes, yes, I'm quite familiar with range safety rules," he said without a hint of irony. "Let's get this show goin,' all the morons will be here soon and I wanna get some shooting in before they're all running around getting in the way of everything. Lord knows there's been god damn enough of that lately, ain't that right, Quincy?"

I assumed he was talking to the aide, who looked exactly like his name, but Angler neither looked back at him nor waited for a response.

"Where those shells at, son?"

I pointed to a nearby table where I had neatly stacked several boxes of shotgun shells. He opened a few and began filling his pockets until he was satisfied with the amount of ammo on his person.

"I say 'pull' and you release the clays."

I couldn't tell if he was asking or telling, but the long, thin smirk that never met his eyes told me it was the latter, and so I grabbed the remote.

"PULL!"

The violence of his voice shocked me for a moment before I pressed the button, sending two white clays sailing through the air in a long and slow parabola. He shot them both cleanly, so that they exploded into little white puffs.

"I told ya, Quincy, I told ya." He turned back to the table on his left and grabbed his drink. He had the shotgun cradled in his arm and it waved wildly with his movements, flagging everything behind him, including Quincy.

"Sir, please keep the firearm pointed down range," I said as sternly as I dared.

"Oh don't worry my boy, it ain't loaded anymore." He took a gulp of whiskey before adding, "We're the only ones out here."

Witnessing Angler in person was growing more difficult than I had anticipated. This man, I thought with a growing anger that continues burning to this day, would very likely be deciding my fate over the coming days, had already decided on so many others'. This man with his stupid fucking smirk, a ridiculous orange vest that bounced up and down in time with every nasally laugh, his halitosis, this man who kept referring to himself as Angler, would send us all to our fucking doom, killing and dying. And we let him do it.

We went like that for a while, him shouting "PULL!" and me pushing the button. He never missed a clay. And before you ask, yes, the discrepancy between his so-called "accident" and this impressive display of accuracy was not lost on me. Quincy even came up for a turn once Angler began to slow down, the alcohol finally reaching him. It was obvious Quincy had never held a weapon in his life, and Angler was taking a little too much pleasure in watching him fumble with the shells. When he did fire the gun he flinched hard and put a nice shotgun blast into the ground about ten feet in front of us, sending a dinnerplate sized divot into the air. Angler loved that.

Needless to say, the lanky wasp didn't hit a single clay.

Cheney had finished his drink and had switched to smoking a stubby cigar, the smoke of which kept invading my nostrils and causing me to sneeze in fits. He thought that was funny too. I suffered through this until Cheney—apparently bored—held out the shotgun in my direction, and instead of waiting for me to grab it, just let go, sending me scrambling to reach it before it hit the ground. “Why don't you go ahead and take a few shots” he told me. Now, like I said, I was in no mood for shooting and in-fact considered anything more than somber contemplation a violation of some ancient trust between soldiers and leaders, and more importantly, me and Cody. And plus, pretty soon there'd be dozens of staffers and other officials of varying power and stature wondering around like so many walking monsters and I wanted to get the hell outta the kill zone, maybe hide out with the react team and The Notebook again.

“Thank you sir, but as RSO my job is to ensure safety. Can't do that and shoot at the same time.”

“Why not? You'll have the gun.”

He had a good point, but again, I wasn't in the mood for it, and plus, protocol dictates that we just supervise, try and stay in the background as much as possible. And then I got to thinking that if some officer happened to drive by and see me he'd think I was intentionally getting too friendly, and then he'd start wondering why some idiot corporal was out here shooting and rubbing elbows with Angler when it really should be him and that's just not fair because rubbing elbows with the big-wigs was exactly the reason he used up two good favors to get this assignment and how was he supposed to wrangle that cushy job and promotion to major or colonel if he didn't have some god damn connections and names to drop at parties with other officers who would be silently comparing him and his social status to all of his colleagues gunning for the same

promotion and said cushy job and that if he didn't get them then he would have to give up on this ill-fated career that his father warned him against and end up going to law school or getting his MBA which was what his father wanted him to do all along but that he didn't think he was ready for because he just barely made it through Penn State as it was and he wasn't exactly what you'd call intellectually minded but neither is that god damn corporal and he sure as shit didn't need to build up a rolodex so just what the hell does he think he's doing?

I politely declined.

Cheney then stuck a box of shells in my hand.

"Shoot the god damn shotgun," he breathed up into my face.

I was only an inch taller than him but I made sure he noticed every bit of it. He didn't care. I couldn't give in, not to him. I was afraid of what might happen if I did, though I didn't know why. I'd love to get all poetic and revisionist and say it was my guilt over Cody's death driving me, but it was more than that. It felt celestial. All I know was there was something telling me to resist, refuse. Someone had to say, No.

I stretched myself taller and looked down into his pale colorless eyes and he laughed.

And all my feelings of resistance evaporated.

I took the shotgun and loaded the shells. "PULL," Cheney yelled for me, and I fired. The two white clays landed softly in the grass, untouched. I missed.

Humiliating, I know. To fast forward a bit: after I was mercifully done with Cheney, I ended up back in the react room. And because I apparently hadn't learned my lesson from the last time I needlessly hung out there, Sgt Zak again

voluntold me for another assignment, this time as a road guard checking IDs of people trying to get to Aspen. Fun fact: The cabins and buildings aboard Camp David are named after trees, which I rather liked, to be honest. Dogwood, Eucalyptus, Redwood, Sequoia, Willow, Birch, Walnut etc. Aspen was the presidential cabin where POTUS and his family lived while they were here. It was also where all the important meetings would be taking place. I doubt you want to hear about me standing at the end of Aspen's driveway for a few hours, so I'll fast forward some more.

After standing at the end of Aspen's driveway for a few hours with not a soul to come by, save the occasional Secret Service agent, a man in khaki slacks and a blue polo came striding towards me. He was older, seventies perhaps, and looked vaguely familiar to me, but only in the sense that all old white men tend to be. He wasn't wearing any badge, so I stepped in his path and asked to see some identification, my one responsibility. "I don't have time for this," he said, waving his hand dismissively. He tried walking around me. You could say I was still smarting from earlier but his self-importance annoyed me and when he got close I grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back in front of me, it didn't take much effort. He fucking exploded.

"How dare you touch me," he said with a disgust so genuine it bordered on self-parody.

"No unauthorized personnel past this point."

"Are you dumb or something?" By the look on his face you'd think I had a dick growing out of my forehead.

"Of course I'm authorized, I'm the god damn SecDef!"

That's right it was Don-fucking-Rumsfeld! As soon as he said that I recognized him, and yes, I know, as a Marine I should have recognized Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense, his picture did hang in every one of our offices, after all. But,

to be fair, I had only ever seen him wearing a suit and glasses, neither of which he had on then, and neither did he have his usual entourage of aides trying to keep up with him. Anyway, fuck that guy.

“Get out of my way, I have meetings to get to.”

He tried shoving past me again but I held him in place. Even though I recognized him I remembered Sgt Zak, “check IDs and badges.” My failure to stand up to Cheney had put me in a work-to-rule kind of mood, and I told Rumsfeld that I couldn’t let him past without some identification. This did not go over well.

“Listen here you dumb grunt, I am your Secretary of Defense and I am ordering you to let me pass.”

“Do you have identification to prove this, sir?” I was feeling myself a bit and let it show. I was also thinking of Cody again and wondering if his Humvee had been properly armored.

“I don’t have to show you anything. Do you not recognize me? Call your commander up right now.”

“He’s busy, sir.”

“I said now!”

It was then that Sgt Zak drove up in a golf cart, doing his rounds checking on all the posts.

“Tell me you outrank this imbecile,” Rumsfeld said, nearly running towards the cart.

“I am the Sergeant of the Guard, yes. Is there a prob—”

Rumsfeld cut him off, “I want this moron relieved of duty! He assaulted me and refuses to let me pass.”

Sgt Zak looked at me with a “Is that true” kind of look.

I shrugged. "He's got no ID or security badge."

Rumsfeld nearly choked.

Zak looked exhausted—being SOG during a visit is no rose garden after all, having to coordinate with half a dozen different agencies and staffs.

"Let him pass, Corporal."

"Cant. No ID. Goes against the General Orders."

"I don't know what sort of incompetent operation you run here, Sergeant, but you can guarantee I'll be speaking to your commanding officer about it." Rumsfeld knew he had won.

"I'm ordering you to let him pass, Corporal." Sgt Zak said, emphasizing my (lower) rank.

Now I'll say here that I love Sgt Zak, he's a good guy, but I fucking resented him in that moment. There were rules for a reason. Guidelines we were supposed to follow and adhere to. I'd be failing my duty if I were to allow Rumsfeld to just walk around them and it pissed me off that I was being told to do just that. I clenched my fists and stared hard at Rumsfeld, but I had done all I could. It wasn't enough, not even close, but I had to let him pass.

Sgt Zak relieved me after that. Told me to go back to my room and get my head straight before my shift tomorrow morning, it's been a stressful day for all of us, he said. My room was the last place I wanted to be, though. I couldn't just lay down and stare at the ceiling, Cody and my orders and Iraq all floating around my head with nowhere to hide. I wanted to unthink. Ignore everything, pretend I could go back to a few weeks ago when everything was clear and not complicated. Before the inconvenience of Right versus Wrong, when duty still granted a sense of agency in the face of the inevitable. Even now, more so even, I wish that were possible. I skipped

my room and headed over to Eucalyptus where there was a bar and pool tables and a small arcade. Sometimes that's enough.

Golden-Tee was my game of choice. You know, arcade golf. There was something soothing in the way you had to roll your hand over the big white ball on the controller, how, if you were good enough, could get the perfect backspin for Pebble Beach, or hit just the right angle on the doglegs of Torrey Pines. I wasn't the best player, but I had been marching my initials up the leaderboard since I had arrived at Camp David. The one legacy I'd leave behind.

Anyway, I was two strokes in to the fifth hole at TPC Sawgrass when someone elbowed me in the ribs during my swing, causing me to slice into the woods. I turned around ready to cuss out the offending asshole when I came face-to-face with Trailblazer himself.

Of fucking course.

"Nice swing there, hoss," he says in that long-practiced drawl of his, like we all don't know he's a fucking WASP from New England. And then do you know what he said?

And this is no shit, but he says "How bout we play a game? They've had me in meetings all day and I'll be damned if I don't need some relaxation." I was done with this shit. Should have just stayed in my room and sucked it up, faced my emotions head on, or at least pretend I could ignore them. Or read a fucking book. Anything other than falling into the same traps with these fucking guys. To be humiliated over and over, to be used and discarded. Like Cody and the countless other wasted youth of our generation—American or otherwise—to get churned up in the political machinations of the feckless elite, selling our sacrifice as something heroic and victorious rather than the pointless political capital it truly is. Yes, that's right, I said it. Every death was meaningless. Past, present, and future. And before you start

calling me cruel, defeatist, or un-American or whatever, remember that I was there. Witnessed it all first-hand.



To the extent that any of it meant anything is completely limited to whether you survived or not. Some of us did. A lot of us didn't. Of course, we're at fault too, which is honestly the most angering part of this whole fucking mess. We can't escape our own complicity in the things we did, the things we wished for, the things we allowed to happen. None of that excuses those at the top, however, and I'll continue to vent my fucking rage for it all towards them, the most deserving. I thought it took years for my anger to show itself, long after my first deployment, but retelling this story now I can see it manifested much earlier.

Now listen fucking close because this is what I've been building to. Cheney, Rumsfeld? Fucking appetizers for the main course. Absurdity injected into the veins. So absurd it can only be true, and that's no shit. Here it is:

I stopped playing right away, not bothering to finish the hole, and headed for the door.

"Sorry, sir, but I need to get some sleep before my shift in the morning."

He grabbed my shoulder, stopping me.

"Now hold on their, honcho. I could really use something to take my mind off all these damn dreary meetings I been in all day."

"I really have to sleep, sir."

"Am I gonna have to pull rank here?" He laughed. "Come on, son. Join me in a game."

That spark came back. That feeling from earlier with Cheney.

Maybe it was the drawl, or his buddy-buddy good-natured attitude, but something told me to push back.

“Let’s play.”

Bush ordered a Frito Pie from the bar and then picked out which course we would play. He chose one of the computer-generated maps where each hole was a Frankenstein collection of memorable hazards, greens, doglegs, and fairways from the various PGA courses. He called it an even playing field, which I assumed meant that he thought I had memorized all the real-life courses, which I had.

The first hole was a narrow but straight par-four with a sloping green. We both drove the fairway easily and ended up just short of the rough that sat between fairway and green. I decided to lay my next shot onto the green down-hill of the hole. There wasn’t much green there, so I had to be careful with my backspin, I didn’t want the ball rolling back into the rough. I thought of trying to lob my ball over and letting it roll down toward the hole, but I was afraid of hitting it too far and landing in the bunkers behind the green or again, have too much backspin and watch it roll right past and into the rough. So, I played it safe. Everything went according to plan; my ball landed right where I wanted it, and I made a firm, but smooth four-foot putt for a birdie.

“Not bad there, sport,” Bush said.

I allowed myself a knowing smile. It was a challenging, but fairly routine shot and putt to make. Nothing you’d brag about back at the clubhouse over beers, but still a solid display of knowledge and skill.

Bush was up and I figured he’d go for the same safe play. I didn’t expect his short game to be as good, but he could at least make par. Instead, he hit a high arching shot over the hole, landing at the top of the green. The ball rolled downhill straight for the hole, picking up speed until it hit

the cup and bounced three or four inches into the air and came right back down. An eagle.

“You’ll have to do better if you wanna beat me, chief,” he said, nudging me again with his elbow.

His Frito pie arrived and he took a big spoonful before quickly spitting it out and blowing out his mouth.

“Hot hot hot!” he said, a string of melted cheese dangling from his chin.

I had to beat him. There was absofuckinglutely no god damn way I could allow myself to be humiliated by this asshole. It. Wasn’t. Going. To. Happen. This was where I’d make my stand. Like the fucking Spartans at Thermopylae. Gandalf and the Balrog The Alamo. I got down into a proper fighting stance behind that big white ball and pressed the button for the next hole.

The battle that ensued was an epic on par with the greats of Marine Corps legend. And like those battles many of the details have since been lost to history—and traumatic brain injury. I can tell you that Bush pulled ahead early, and for a while the issue was in doubt. My short game became inexplicably bad as I put my ball into bunkers and rough and even a water hazard. But Bush had his slip ups, too, and I managed to keep within five strokes. By the third hole, the other Eucalyptus patrons had begun to gather round and it didn’t take long for sides to form along strict class lines. Political appointees, staff members, and officers were all Team Trailblazer. Bar staff, along with my fellow enlisted; soldiers, sailors, airman and Marines; stood on the side of the righteous. The cheering was quiet at first, respectable golf claps, oohs and awes, but devolved into near chaos during the back nine as insults were traded, bets made. At one point, an NSC staffer and Navy Seabee stepped outside to settle an argument, returning bloodied and shirtless minutes later. The

biggest shit talker was Bush himself, never missing an opportunity to jab my ribs and point out a failed wind consideration or improper club choice. I remained quiet. Focused. I made no fancy shots, but also never repeated a mistake, and slowly caught up one birdie at a time.

By the final hole we were even. Bush had finished his swings and putts, making par. I was on the green, one twelve-foot putt away from a birdie and the win. The room was silent. I approached the console.

The bar door burst open then and we all turned to see Angler stride in visibly annoyed.

“God damnit, George, do you know what time it is in Iraq right now? We have to get back to the matter-at-hand.” Cheney said.

“Don’t get your panties in a wad, Dick, my game is almost over.” Bush replied, gesturing towards the console and me.

To my surprise, he recognized me.

“Ah, look who it is,” Cheney said, smirk on his face.

This was it. That earlier feeling of resistance that had been simmering all game suddenly rose to the surface again. It was more intense this time and I felt it give me strength, felt my body fill with the force of something cosmic. This fucking subconscious primal instinct told me that this, this was the most important thing I’d ever do, that I had to hold firm no-matter-fucking-what, that I wasn’t just doing this for myself but the whole god damned human race, and this moment right now would change the fate of fucking planets. I thought of Cody and myself and the nameless other thousands whose fates were not theirs and I got down behind that white ball and rolled it back and then forward with my palm in one smooth motion and the golf ball marched forward towards the waiting maw of the cup and it marched and marched with the curves of the green and it slowed and then slowed some more until it reached the

edge of the cup and teetered into oblivion.

The crowd erupted and someone was shaking me, congratulating me. “New High Score” flashed across the screen and without hesitating, I entered Cody’s initials. I turned back toward Bush and Cheney, triumphant and defiant.

They both smiled and shared a look between them as if they were gods among mere mortals, and laughed.

New Fiction from Jillian Danback-McGhan: “Allied”



James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket, 1874

I met the Lieutenant at a diplomatic reception at our embassy. Carrying papers which issued weaponry to his nation’s military, I passed them to my contact – a pock-marked General whose eyes glittered when he seized them. Having done my duty as military attaché, I grabbed a drink and contemplated my exit.

That is, until the Lieutenant lured me to him with a smile; his fiery green eyes blazed over cheekbones sharp as blades. He served in his nation’s military police, which his father now led. A young man burning with the promise of his own bright future. He touched my arm as I spoke about my role at the embassy and the room grew hazy. *To our countries’ partnership*, he said, raising his glass for a toast. Then the

band started playing. He extended his arm to invite me to dance.

We whirled around the room for the rest of the evening, drunk on wine and each other's flattery, our uniforms askew. Embarrassed by the curious looks our cavorting attracted, I turned my head when he moved in and received his kiss on my cheek. He looked wounded.

I leaned back and laughed.

Ten years later, I saw him again. My children fought on the floor as I read the paper and, lured by an article about protests in his country, spotted him in an accompanying photo. He had no name or insignia on his riot gear, but his helmet and protective mask fell askew: I saw fiery green eyes and cheekbones sharp as blades. A Kevlar-clad man standing among burning barriers. Clouds of teargas bloomed in the background and made the image look hazy.

Had the papers I carried issued him the weapon he held his hand? *To support our countries' partnership?* With an extended arm he directed the assault.

Across from him stood a young woman holding a cardboard sign. Other protestors slumped behind her. They looked wounded. Shards of glass scattered around the woman's feet and glittered on the pot-marked pavement. She turned her head to receive a kiss from a rifle stock on her cheek. The impact forced her backwards and jolted her mouth open.

As if she were laughing at me.

New Poetry by Michael Carson: “Politics”



BLAME OUR BRUISES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Politics

Every 20 years or so boys dress up
And kill each other for fun.
It's the way of the wrack of the world
The wind of our imagination and our love.
To blame our costumes for our beauty
Is like to blame our bruises for our blood.
The chime is what drives us, what ticks
Our tock forward to the next spree.
The foreshortened humiliation,
The immaculate imprecation,
Is neither what we fear or what we covet.
Man is. Rats are. Take what you can
While the day is rough
Move lengthwise into the past
And blame god for never enough.

New Nonfiction: “Underground” by Mark Hummel



Hands at the Cuevas de las Manos upon Río Pinturas, near the town of Perito Moreno in Santa Cruz Province, Argentina.

Picture taken by Marianocecowski (2005).

In my childhood, television was a great unifier, for there existed a limited choice of three television networks, discounting PBS. But even if we were watching the same programming, television had begun to shape and change all of our lives—and our democracy—for the Vietnam War was broadcast into our homes every night as was the coverage of Nixon's downfall and resignation. Politics reached beyond the nightly news and entered drama and comedy. Programming like *All in the Family* provided a shrill echo of conservative politicians in its portrayal of bigoted Archie Bunker as he faced an America that looked, in his eyes, nothing like the one he had known before. *M*A*S*H*, a laughter-heavy depiction of an army surgical unit set on the frontlines of the Korean War began airing in 1972 and offered a not-so-subtle editorial about the folly, politics, and dehumanizing effects of the real war still raging in Vietnam.

Hogan's Heroes, an altogether different slapstick television-vision of war with no pretense of condemnation, ended the year before *M*A*S*H* began. That it is a regular presence on Nick-at-Nite and in YouTube videos offers a sure sign I'm getting old. The comedy held a vision of a time when enemies were still identifiable, choosing as its setting a prisoner-of-war camp in Nazi Germany. Written and released within an America that emerged as the savior of Europe, it broadcast clear allegiances. My own childhood fascination with *Hogan's Heroes* had little to do with bumbling Colonel Klink and "I see NOTHING" Sergeant Schultz and the other Nazis made to look like incompetent fools. My interest was with the hidden tunnels and the secret underground chambers dug by Allied prisoners. I was fixated on Colonel Robert E. Hogan, the obvious star, in his leather bomber jacket and perfect hair (and on all those busty blond turncoat spies he seduced). The show started in 1965 and lasted two years longer than US involvement in the actual war it spoofed.

The era of its airing goes back. Back before we knew Bob Crane, who portrayed Hogan, was a sexual misfit, back long before someone murdered him, way back before they made a movie about him. You know about all that, right? Those underground stories, that Bob Crane was obsessed with pornography, watching it and making it, recording his sexual conquests over women for posterity, even laying soundtracks over his videos? Crane was murdered, bludgeoned with his own tripod in his Arizona condo in 1978. After his death, the details of his surreptitious life began trickling out, as did the videos in which he documented his sexual conquests dating to the days of *Hogan's Heroes*. Many of his secrets only became widely public in 2002 with news stories accompanied the release of a biopic titled *Auto Focus*.

Today we might shrug at a television star proving to be a misogynist and sexual deviant, but such behind-the-scenes information was kept strictly behind-the-scenes in those days. No hot-mics or soundbites. No cable channels or 24-hour news cycles. News, like entertainment, entered our lives on a decidedly different trajectory in those days. There was no such thing as streaming services or binge-watching. You showed up at your television at 7 PM on Sunday because that's when *The Wonderful World of Disney* aired. As a child I could never have imagined a Disney streaming platform or that they would own sports and television networks, no more than I could imagine funny, handsome, smiling Bob Crane was a sexual deviant. There were no television or internet radio venues for future presidents to discuss their wealth, ex-wives, or sexual interests. That sort of talk was kept strictly in the underground. And discussions of global pandemics weren't yet the plotlines of movies, the metaphors of Zombie apocalypses on our television screens, and certainly not our lived reality. We hadn't yet fractured into political divisions you identified by where you received your news. We didn't air our beliefs or our dirty laundry to a network over social media. In those days, if you wanted to avoid the lives of those

beyond your neighborhood or ignore world events, you didn't need to construct an underground bunker, for the network gatekeepers already provided cover. I suppose entrance to the right Manhattan cocktail parties, Senate offices, or newsrooms would have gotten you every manner of uncensored stories, but public spectacle on a grand scale seldom appeared under the bright lights.

I've been thinking about going "underground" for years now. Maybe it's a sign of aging and reveals a nostalgic longing for a childhood where I dug a lot of underground forts and passed exorbitant hours playing in my parent's crawlspace. Or perhaps it's a reaction to the daily surrealism of life during a global pandemic, when the desire to "stick one's head in the sand" becomes something approaching literal and has resulted in a lot of Netflix. Or maybe my underground thoughts have been brought on, much to my bewilderment, because America has survived a president who was so locked inside his own nostalgic yearning for the era of his youth that he built a political agenda out of it.

My own nostalgic longings are, like most things, complicated. I turned twelve in 1974. At twelve I reached an age when playing with model tanks in a dirt crawlspace was beginning to seem uncool. Which is also to say that I had reached an age where I had begun to care what might pass for "cool," if there is such a thing in junior high. I was also awakening to a wider, above-ground world, which largely entered my consciousness through television. I read a lot, but I wasn't the sort of twelve-year-old who perused *The New York Times*, and I stuck to headlines in the paper I delivered, *The Cheyenne Tribune*.

The above-ground world mostly entered through snippets from my father's ritual of watching the ten o'clock news, though like most kids at twelve, I'd have a hard time finding synthesis in

the relationship between my experiences and what was broadcast into our family room. I grew up in Cheyenne, Wyoming, a place remote enough and small enough that it offered, and suffered, insularity. Reality, and the outside world, crept in mostly through our televisions and newspapers. With the benefit of hindsight, I can now see that in the isolation afforded by living in Wyoming—and in those pre-globalization, pre-internet days you could be quite isolated—the social tensions of pro-Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War arrived years later than elsewhere in the nation. What might take an hour to arrive from the coasts now might take a year or more then. Yet Cheyenne, apparently, was not isolated from realities like economic woes, and the 1973 – 1975 recession arrived right on schedule. In my narrow experience, local economics were manifested in the 3rd floor of our school being condemned, so the building could not accommodate the entire student body. As a result, my first year of junior high was defined by our school operating on a split schedule where half the school attended between 7:00 AM and 12:00 PM and the other half from 12:00 PM to 5:00 PM. I was on the afternoon shift, which meant athletic practices took place at the high school (also condemned) in the morning and riding the bus home from school in the dark on winter days to deliver newspapers by flashlight.

In 1974 a new school building opened. The atmosphere of fresh paint and new carpet and a functioning cafeteria were marred by locker searches that frequently turned up weapons and a near daily early dismissal due to bomb threats. Delayed incidents linked to war protests and backlash against national civil rights organizing were fueled by a community within an almost entirely homogenized state that found unexpected diversity in its schools through the presence of the children of airmen and airwomen with skin tones decidedly not white. Unfocused, misplaced anger and confusion had fueled the broader tensions also resulted in riotous skirmishes in our city's schools and something akin to perceived class wars

sparked between the children of educated professionals and those of blue-collar workers. There were frequent fights, often at scale. Mostly there was more threatening than fighting, and typically I hightailed it for home, now in walking distance from the new school. I no longer had to wait for a bus, which is where most of the trouble happened, when insults were hurled and fights erupted.

The world that entered my twelve-year-old world through the television screen was every bit as contentious and bleak. 1974 was the year Richard Nixon resigned. A year later, Saigon would fall and the last American troops would retreat from an unethical war. My dad regularly took his turn waiting in around-the-block lines to put gas in the family Buick.

The 45th U.S. president turned twelve in 1958. I suspect that he may have never pumped gas in his lifetime. The year was marked domestically by escalating tensions from court mandated school integration and racist responses. The Supreme Court ruled in *Cooper v. Aaron* that fear of social unrest or violence, whether real or constructed by those wishing to oppose integration, did not excuse state governments from complying with *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Popular culture in 1958 mostly cast misogyny and racism as harmless and conformity as patriotic. The following year our future president would be sent away to boarding school. Based only on his self-confessed adult habits, my guess is that he watched a good deal of television as a child. What I am certain of is that, like every twelve-year old, he believed the world revolved around him. The difference? He never stopped behaving like he was twelve.

Forgetting the narcissism, the hyperbolic tweets, and the actions that led to his two impeachments, the closest thing to a coherent political vision the 45th president (or perhaps that

of his advisors) articulated is a vestige from the middle of the last century, a simple-minded view of lapsed American greatness best conveyed in his "American Carnage" inauguration speech:

This vision of America is derived from a uniformed backwards glance that neglects a great deal of economic and technological transformation and that is inextricably intertwined with misogyny, racism, and convenient, actionless patriotism. With unidentified and unexamined nostalgia guiding political action, we entered a geopolitical fantasyland where down is up and anyone who disagrees is cast aside as un-American or lying. The promise that a nation could unilaterally disentangle the complexities of a global economy that American capitalists seeking cheap labor largely constructed is laughably naïve. It is a promise that emerges from a nostalgic view held by someone born into wealth, specifically wealth originally derived from charging poor people rent. Who wouldn't like more American made products or better paying jobs that don't require an education or patriotism where you only have to wear a lapel pin, stand for the national anthem, and send someone else off to war? Easy right? Like reality TV easy. If instead we recognize the inherent complexity of living in an age where everything is global—marketplaces, resource allocation, human migration patterns, climate change, viral transfer—the intellectual demands are exhausting. Safer to listen to the guy at the end of the bar and nod along complacently. Safer to go looking for subterranean refuge.

I expend directionless energy wondering if our culture can be repaired. Is it possible to reeducate multiple generations with the critical thinking skills required to distinguish truth from lies? To distinguish nostalgia from history? Can we again learn what it means to participate in a civil society?

It would be so much easier to dig a big hole and hide.

I should likely go searching for non-political explanations for my current underground obsession. After all, I'm clearly guilty of my own nostalgia, whether my politics originate in it or not. Could my desire to withdraw be as simple as not sleeping well? It's true that I have been awakened by "upside-down" dreams prompted by Netflix addictive viewing of *Stranger Things* and *The Leftovers*. Or is there a through-line present here as well? Is a desire for a return to an older vision of America real or imagined?

I didn't watch a great deal of television as a child, growing up in a time and place where my friends and I had the freedom and safe environment to play without supervision and the space to explore. There were family television rituals that united me to other kids of the same era of course: *The Brady Bunch* on Friday nights, *Emergency* on Saturdays, *The Wonderful World of Disney* and *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* with requisite popcorn on Sundays. Outside of that, there wasn't a lot of connective tissue to kids from elsewhere. Wyoming was a place so foreign and typecast by most that when my family traveled on summer vacations, kids I met in motel swimming pools would ask if we rode horses to school. Their vision of the West I lived in was more formed by *Gunsmoke* than textbooks or Yellowstone vacations. Of course, I knew no more of their homeplaces than they did of mine.

When winter forced my brother and I inside from the prairie, much of it was passed in our crawlspace. Perhaps inspired by *Hogan's Heroes*, we spent a lot of time excavating under our house in the weak light of a sixty-watt bulb. My best friend and I used the tailings of our excavations as a play space for our painstakingly constructed, authentic reproduction plastic model World War II tanks. The Americans and Brits on one side of the crawlspace dug in with complex forts constructed under the dirt with scraps from dad's table saw, while the Germans positioned the big guns and long-range

tanks on the ridge we'd piled against the foundation wall. That pretend World War II of our imaginations was a war we could manage, a clearly delineated war that bore little resemblance to the Cold War we lived daily and never understood or the Vietnam War played out on our TV screens and in our draft board chambers, a tidy war studied in our history books when the enemy wore distinguishing colors and marched under a swastika, not the nebulous, endless "war on terrorism" of our current age.

I was a cold war kid all the way. Not just by historical era but by virtue place. Cheyenne, Wyoming is the home of Warren Air Force Base and the headquarters for the Strategic Air Command, that wing of the US Air Force charged with control over the nation's nuclear warheads. Many of my classmates' fathers were officers who managed the bureaucracy of nuclear missile movement and maintenance. Growing up, we were told that Cheyenne was Soviet target #2, just behind NORAD in Colorado Springs where an incoming nuclear onslaught would be tracked. NORAD inhabits a bunker scraped out of a mountain (eerily named Cheyenne Mountain) and refashioned from concrete and steel.

We lived among daily reminders of nuclear presence in the long, white semi-trailers passing on the interstate pulled by blue USAF semi-tractors. As a teenager I crossed beyond the posted "No Trespassing by Order of the United States Government" signs and chained gates to explore an abandoned Atlas missile base in the inky blackness of a Wyoming prairie night. We were made to understand that the nuclear missiles and their command had been placed in our midst precisely because we lived in the middle of nowhere—as if one could have a serious conversation about minimalization of causalities in a nuclear firestorm so vast it would literally alter planetary climate. Perhaps the mental instability of our leaders in that age simply took a less overt form than we have come to expect today.

How did one find victory or freedom in a nuclear holocaust or in a political war of competing ideologies? No wonder we needed the predictability of Colonel Hogan. When our teachers directed us in nuclear raid drills, wrangling us from classrooms to interior hallways where we were instructed to sit against walls with our heads resting on our knees, we longed for Hogan's tunnels and our crawlspace. We weren't foolish enough to think the earth offered sufficient protection from a nuclear blast but it seemed a far sight superior to our teachers asking us to assume the position.

With *Hogan's Heroes* I grew up on images of Lt. Louis LeBeau popping his head out of the ground beneath the guard dog's house or lifting an entire shrubbery beyond the prison camp fence. My brother and I had big plans for just such a tunnel. We figured we'd leave from an entrance hidden in the crawlspace, tunnel under the front foundation, and come up in an immense Golden Elder. It was the only damn thing that seemed to grow in the dry, wind-ravaged arctic zone called Wyoming. The tunnel was going to be a thing of beauty. Deep, clean, and precise. We envisioned it clearly. We'd sneak out of the house at will—down through the basement, through the furnace room, through the small hatch door into the crawlspace (that too-small door dad cursed whenever he bent his 6'4" frame to retrieve a storage box each time mom wanted to change seasonal decorations). Through the crawlspace and through the bare stud wall to the other side where dad had piled all of the dirt from his excavations when he'd had the bright idea to dig out all of one side—a chamber twenty feet long by fifteen feet wide—digging it down three feet and leaving a dirt shelf along the entire perimeter where he could stack the boxes of ornaments and Easter baskets and out of fashion clothes. We'd slip between the bare studs, duck through to the other side, our own beloved dark chamber where we had to kneel or literally crawl over the excavated dirt, down into our secret fort through the tunnel, through the bush, and into freedom.

Never mind that there was a door to the back yard next to the furnace room, unattended, unlit, a direct path to the world beyond. Never mind that we had no idea where we'd go if we did sneak out. Never mind that, had we succeeded, we would have, inevitably, passed the time asking, "What do you want to do?" and responding, "I don't know; what do you want to do?" that mantra a rerun of pre-adolescent summer afternoons. I'm talking about that in-between age, those years when we were too "cool" to play guns ("You're dead." "No, I'm not, you missed me.") or cops and robbers on our bicycles. The age before we found beer and Mad Dog 20/20 and weed and girls. Never mind that our parents were entirely trusting and we lived in a safe place where we could venture into the prairie for whole days of play, stay out until after dark all summer playing kick-the-can or flashlight tag with every kid in the neighborhood. Never mind the back door. The tunnel would have been so much cooler.

We got as far as digging the "secret" fort that we proudly showed our father from the distance of "his side" of the crawlspace, shining our flashlights into its depths. Unfortunately, these excavations were permanently interrupted by my brother discovering girls.

Left to my own devices, the tunnel idea was more forgotten than abandoned and, for a time at least, the new mound of dirt created by our previous industry grew of greater interest to avid model tank builders than the rather grave hole, particularly once my next-door neighbor and I discovered the simulated bombing realism accomplished by rock throwing, the effects of matches on plastic models, and the excitement generated by tin foil basins buried beneath the dirt filled with lighter fluid. Eventually the hole gave way to more construction on an American tank compound and filled to a point where it marked the "no man's land" between Allies and Germans, a soil fought over for years but oddly never crossed by either army, likely in part due to the fact that the G.I.s

eventually discovered nurses (more evidence of Allied superiority over Germans, who never once threw a party). Colonel Hogan would have admired our imaginative industriousness.

Like the fort and the tunnel, the tanks, dozens of them, all carefully hand-painted and laden with tank tread, gas cans, shovels, sandbags, additional armor plating, and long aerial antennas melted from the thin plastic strips that held the model parts, were abandoned. How we had labored over these weapons of war, ironic given that we were circled by weapons with firepower beyond imagination and our fathers attended service club luncheons alongside the warriors of Strategic Air Command. We built tanks, we could have reasoned, not missiles, as if one means of killing had moral superiority over another, or as if we were oblivious to the ways the world had transformed in the years between the war we carried out under our house and the one our fathers watched on the nightly news. I should have had the consciousness to understand the dangers of such a blasé vision of war as acted out in our play, for my father had landed on Normandy and fought through Central Europe. That is the risk of looking backward as entertainment rather than a living history. We'd constructed models with precise engineering, forgoing their function, a mistake common to engineers the world over.

Having gathered dust for two or three years—and the crawlspace offered nothing but gritty dust that embedded into the plastic in a manner superior to what any airbrush artist could accomplish—we had created artifacts rather than toys or weapons. I remember the day my next-door neighbor, now sixteen, rang the doorbell where he waited with a big cardboard box. “Hey, man,” he said. “I thought I should probably get my tanks.” On the way out he asked, “Want to party tonight?” We'd stopped our underground play. My brother had submitted his draft card. There now existed a thing called HBO, and it ran dirty movies.

There are any number of euphemisms for the word "underground." It often refers to things that are "clandestine" or even "subversive," the usage bringing to mind spies or secretive groups. We use the term loosely to reference those who go into hiding, referring not just to the actions of fugitives on the lam but also to psychological remove from the broader society such as we encounter in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and the narrator's descent into ennui. Often the word underground is included in the monikers of those committing the act of "speaking truth to power" as in an underground press. And frequently we apply the word to "things nearly present in plain sight but not acknowledged." The early punk band The Velvet Underground took their name from a documentary-style book of the same title by Michael Leigh that depicted wife-swapping and kinky sex beyond the white-picket fences of suburbia.

I cannot speak of euphemisms for "underground" when writing about a World War II television comedy without speaking to its starkest inverse, for of course the French Resistance movement to German occupation was dubbed "the French Underground." Courageous but otherwise ordinary French citizens combatted the Nazis with intricate intelligence networks, underground newspapers, guerrilla warfare tactics, and escape routes that aided Allied soldiers and airmen trapped behind enemy lines. Americans cut from a similar cloth included members of the Underground Railroad, that network of abolitionists operating in secrecy to secure the freedom of the enslaved.

The lesson both groups taught us: When fascists rise to power, as when capitalists enslave humans to generate labor, those driven underground become the clandestine activists tasked with restoring social justice.

The men and women of the French Underground took actions to try and save lives, to preserve freedom for a future generation. My father was among the Americans who landed in France to ensure their actions and sacrifices were not empty. He, like the men he served alongside, guaranteed I could spend a childhood with the liberty to waste my time watching *Hogan's Heroes* and digging in the dirt.

What freedom we had! The prairie was our second home. One summer my brother risked ruining our father's lawnmower when he embarked on an enterprise of prairie development. The baseball diamond came first. Next, he mowed a football field, clambering through gopher holes and spitting rocks like a machine gun. (Note: the prairie, despite all clichés and claims stating otherwise, is decidedly not flat.) His most ambitious effort: a nine-hole golf course. The greens (rougher than the roughest rough on the municipal course) featured hand-sewn flags and buried tin cans. Like in the crawlspace, we dotted the prairie with underground forts. We played on and under the prairie while boys a few years older than us—Strats, we called them, we civilian kids in an Air Force town—passed long shifts just miles away under that same network of grass roots babysitting lethal nuclear payloads. We played while young men died in Vietnam. Some of them died infiltrating the vast network of underground tunnels the Viet Cong used to launch deadly attacks and to ferry lethal supplies.

Exercising our freedom, we spent a summer jumping bikes out of the abandoned basement excavation of someone's dream home. They'd never gotten beyond digging the huge square hole. Soon it was crisscrossed with hardened bicycle trails at every possible angle. We'd charge down one side, dropping steeply off the edge, pedal hard up the opposite side and on up where they had moved the tailings from the excavations, the fill mounded to make the steep sides of the once-wanted basement taller, more dangerous. There we would shoot off the tops of these manufactured jumps and take to the air.

I won't say that hole abandoned by some over-extended builder was our inspiration, for maybe it was *Hogan Heroes* that gave us the idea, but digging forts was as regular a part of our summers as spear grass wars. It was mostly my brother and his friends who built the forts, and mostly, the younger kid-brothers were stuck on the outside wanting in. They started small, one room chambers with a single entrance, small enough that a single sheet of plywood was sufficient for a roof. Get the plywood in good and deep, pile it with soil, and within a year the prairie would reclaim the gap. Soon they learned they could dig deep enough to leave the prairie above intact, reinforcing the span overhead every few feet with scavenged 2 x 4s rather like the preserved gold mines every Western kid visited during weekend trips to the surrounding mountains.

Our older brothers were the real engineers. The best forts became ours by inheritance. Our own creations were puny and unimaginative. It was our brothers who had built the fort we were awed by, a fort we only gained rare entrance to by special invitation. Our imaginations made it grander in our minds, just as the activities we imagined they carried off in our absence grew roots in our reverent daydreams. We assumed they held secret rituals, maybe were members of secret societies. Certainly, they must have taken girls down there, and girls were still a mystery to me darker than a fort under the prairie with candles extinguished.

But one fort surely must have lived up to our mental excavations. They'd dug three rooms, linked by curving narrow tunnels. It had a distant, protected entrance and a secret escape hatch. (We'd all spent enough time catching gophers and snakes to understand why, at minimum, you had to have a second, secret entrance.) The entrance was covered by a plywood scrap, the kind of weathered board you were required to check under anytime you were in the prairie as a likely source of snakes. It opened onto a long, sloping tunnel that forced those entering to crawl on their elbows. The largest

room could accommodate four adolescent boys, and they'd dug a long bench into one wall, rather like dad's dirt storage shelf in the crawlspace. The walls had carved niches to hold candle stubs. Illuminated in the flickering shadows, prairie grasses and sage dropped roots penetrating the ceiling in fibrous tangles. The air was heavy with the rich scent of clay, and the walls were cool to the touch and revealed the smooth spade marks of construction. The excavation tailings were piled to obscure the entrance and emergency exit and were soon overtaken by the weedy growth of a hungry prairie. To stand at the neighborhood fringes and look into the distance you could never know what lay beneath the grass. Surely, some adults must have wondered where those heads of kids disappeared. Or did they? This felt like a different time when kids were free to roam outside the company of adults, a time when I might worry every day that a Soviet nuclear missile was likely to conk me on the head but I never once worried about being abducted.

Within a year of being old enough to have succeeded minimally with my own fort digging, my brother and his friends shifted interests and passed boredom torturing snakes. Their engineering abilities turned to manufacturing execution devices—snake guillotines and battery-powered snake electric chairs, snake death by fireworks ingestion, that sort of thing. We dug in their absence, quickly learning that the real fun, rather like our model-building, was in the construction. Once completed, no matter how ingeniously engineered, a fort quickly became little more than a hole in the ground.

At some point that summer something else shifted too. I don't know if my brother and his friends were all assigned *The Outsiders* for English class or if the crowding and tensions that had yielded protests and marches and incidents of Molotov cocktails at their high school sparked them, but the neighborhood suddenly divided, and those boys living south of Harvard Avenue formed one kind of gang and those north

another. They spent half a summer in two packs, one group of rabid mongrels pursuing the other in random courses across the prairie, over the abandoned golf course and up Boot Jack Hill and down across the rooftops of forts both groups had apparently forgotten. There were frequent fights. Maybe it was some other kind of turf war to which I was naïve and they represented a preamble to the tribalism that infiltrated my junior high and that continues in politics today.

The division that happened in my small neighborhood broke roughly along the same economic lines that we experienced in the larger outbreaks of violence that happened at school, or to be more accurate, the perceived differences in economics. The world was chaotic and school mimicked the chaos. I wonder what gaps in our education remain because school was so often dismissed because someone had called in an anonymous bomb threat or a disgruntled classmate pulled the fire alarm. The bomb threats, like the rumors that reached the teacher's lounge, resulted in frequent locker searches. Those consistently produced knives and homemade weapons. We knew something serious had shifted when, near the end of the 1974 school year, a locker search produced gun.

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On the days I'm not reaching for a shovel, I find myself thinking about Mr. White, the neighbor every child feared during my Rutgers Road upbringing. Mr. White—and no, I am not making that name up—lived at the end of our block where a dirt road intersected our paved street. Everyone in the neighborhood referred to road as “the alley” when really it was the demarcation line between our odd little neighborhood—six blocks named after universities bordering the interstate—and the Wyoming prairie. The alley led directly to the new junior high and offered a quick escape route home. School represented real danger, featuring a population harboring a communal misplaced anger that shadowed that of its parents. The only dangers the alley posed was an open trench

being dug for a sewer line, a mean dog that broke its chain with regularity, and unsolicited rebukes from Mr. White.

Mr. White was the neighborhood misanthrope. He made it his business to enforce his strict code of how the world was supposed to behave. The warnings he issued through his front screen door to "Stay off my grass!" were shouted with the venom of taunts at a 21st Century political rally. The signs he posted announcing the unwelcoming terrain of his lawn were written with an incendiary tone, like Twitter tweets lobbed from the safety of cyberspace. The wire he strung taut between green metal fence posts where his front yard met the alley was a visible reminder, a message more than utilitarian barrier.

In sixteen years as his neighbor, I never recall seeing a visiting car fill his driveway. I only knew there was a Mrs. White because she, on rare occasion, answered the doorbell when I collected monthly payments for my newspaper route, a required action that inspired foreboding. From the porch, I glimpsed their living room, which felt like observing a diorama—furniture attired in plastic slipcovers and a console television dating to a previous decade. When Mr. White answered the doorbell in a tank-style t-shirt, he grumbled complaints, remarking when the newspaper had been late or that the fat Sunday edition arrived with too much noise, despite his being one of two houses on my route where, rather than throw the paper to the door—with a precision of which I was proud—I laid the paper on his porch.

Clearly, I either place too much blame on or give too much credit to Mr. White when I recall his yellow house and his uninterrupted lawn and then try to make sense of our bifurcated democracy. My elderly mother assures me that Mr. White—Herb, she reminds me—was a perfectly nice man, one who hosted milk-can suppers and did body work on neighbor's cars, although she does add, "But I can see why children would have thought he was mean." I'm sure she is right and there were

other sides to him. But then I must also recall that all of my friends were decidedly afraid of my mother, and not without reason. As with Mr. White, had they come to know her in her fuller complexity, they may have had a more nuanced opinion.

Perhaps, like too many of my fellow Americans, I've become guilty of seeing all events through a warped lens. Who might Mr. White have proven to be had I shown the maturity and courage to shake his hand and engage him in a conversation? Mr. White is long dead. I can't go back in time and try to find the man beyond the transactional exchanges we had when I was a boy.

The neighborhood boys, whether north or south of Harvard Avenue, were united against Mr. White. Perhaps if we could have focused on a common enemy, we could have avoided the tribal divisions that emerged. Or perhaps not. It's entirely possible that the divisions that occurred in our neighborhood, like those that brought such turmoil to our school, was rooted mostly in boredom. In the endless downtime between the neighborhood campaigns, the northern boys would sprawl, listless, across our front yard or spar with one another like dueling dogs. If I hung around them for any time at all, some scrawny high school acquaintance of my brother would test me by picking a fight, which was a mistake because I fought ferociously and without logic, having spent a lifetime fending off the abuses of an older brother. I secretly looked forward to such fights because my brother seemed to like me better after I put one of his friends on his back. But I never joined in their prairie campaigns. My best friend and I had our own battles awaiting us in the crawlspace, a domain that had become totally our own.

As soon as driver's licenses settled into our brother's back pockets, the gang wars, at least on the home front, ceased, though the trouble seemed to worsen for the boys living south

of Harvard and several became real criminals and then convicts. Our brothers' interests shifted. The prairie forts were ours if we wanted them. We entered them on a kind of unspoken dare, like crawling through the drainage tunnel that connected our neighborhood and a borrow ditch near the elementary school on the other side of the interstate. The forts seemed more dangerous, more primitive now that lack of use had fostered thicker spider webs spanning the tunnel entrance and little cave-ins where there were finger holes of penetrating light.

I remember going to the big fort when I was fourteen. It was night and the only light we carried was a cigarette lighter. My tank-building best friend and I had found a nearly full pack of Marlboros on the street. Sucking on someone else's cigarette, sitting, cramped, in the dark of an underground fort dug into the prairie, the talk of girls and parties and high school, I remember thinking I had passed into something. It seemed only a matter of days later when Mr. Johnston bulldozed the fort. The bulldozing felt like a violation, but we'd never liked Mr. Johnston in the first place, didn't trust his son even if he was part of my brother's group, and didn't have any interest in rebuilding. An era had passed. I felt late to the party. In fact, the party had ended. Growing up into the above-ground world felt exciting and scary at the same time, yet even in the midst of change, I was aware that I would not be allowed to go back in time or return to ignorance.

Of course, the fields we played in as children are now lost too, the prairie soil no longer violated by kid's forts but dotted everywhere by the penetrations of actual basements. The prairie has succumbed, like every other part of America it seems, to suburbia, and this little part of Wyoming now-paved over, strip-malled, homogenized-looks exactly like ten thousand neighborhoods in California or Florida. Except for a

lack of trees, which stubbornly refuse to grow, the curved streets that make up the place now are lost in place and time. Along the way someone purchased the slowly refilling foundation hole where we jumped our bikes and built their home, though I couldn't identify which house used to harbor this playground, just as selecting the house that stands atop what was once a fort would be little more than an educated guess.

In the years since we have watched the end of the Cold War be replaced with terrorist attacks and nuclear power plant disasters. We have seen the weapons hidden in the Wyoming prairie grow in payload if decrease in number. We still don't know what to do with the waste of the missiles we have decommissioned. We have seen Bob Crane murdered, and now we have watched as celebrities do the killing. Increasingly we elect celebrities and billionaires rather than statesmen and stateswomen, mistaking television figures for leaders and reducing democracy to a popularity contest.

The crawlspace in my parents' home is still there, of course (sans tunnel), for so long as the house exists, the crawlspace exists. My parents lived in the house until they were eighty-seven and eighty-six before moving to an apartment where they had help available. It was only in the final couple of years living in their home that dad finally stopped managing to contort his tall frame sufficiently to retrieve the artificial Christmas tree and its boxes of ornaments.

I have owned two homes of my own with dirt crawlspaces, and while I used them for storage, my primary ventures into them were for mechanical repair or to retrieve the recycling bin every two weeks, for I had built a chute from the kitchen for that purpose. My children showed no interest in the crawlspaces, finding them dirty and scary.

The home where we raised our children had no crawlspace. It featured a finished walk-out basement. We bought the home, in

large part, for the natural light that warmed the basement nearly as well as the main floor. Yet I regularly fantasized about building a secret chamber. I imagined breaching a foundation wall through the garage and under the deck. I wasted good time thinking how I'd dispose of the dirt. I thought about the engineering required to make such a chamber stable. I imagined disguising it, hiding it behind a sliding panel, a secretive entrance to a chamber dug deep into the earth, awaiting my return.

Perhaps that longing arrived out of fear, a desire to escape adult responsibilities rather than a wanted return to the play places of my childhood. Looking backwards is nearly always self-delusional and messy. Memories typically appear purer than the actual times recalled, as if we must filter out the less-pleasant parts of our past, the sadness and embarrassment, in order to move forward into the future. I suppose it is human nature to be nostalgic for the past. We all want to believe times were simpler "then." Yet I would argue that humans have a unique capacity for viewing the past through forgiving lenses or, at the very least, with the full benefits of hindsight that allows us to create documentary style versions of times gone by, events now neatly in context, relationships one to another entirely clear rather than suffering the murkiness of real time. We are all capable of self-deceit. Perhaps that is how we survive, as individuals and as a species. Perhaps it is a biological imperative, something akin to how women's bodies are able to mitigate the memory of childbirth pain. The alternative, to see only the hard times or the ugliness of the past, is a journey into despair.

But the real dilemma is, as with all things, how do we find balance? In this instance, how do we benefit from a more forgiving recall of the past without failing to learn from it? Can we carry fondness for the past without sanitizing it? We must heed George Santayana's famous warning, "Those who cannot

remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” What is that space between definition of nostalgia—sentimental longing—and its origin—acute homesickness? Balance requires distinction as well, that between sentimental longing held by the individual and denial of history carried by a collective. When entire segments of a population accept “alternative facts,” whether about an individual’s past or a shared history, the road for corruption is already paved. The distance between self-deceit and narcissism is not long.

Ruminating on *Hogan’s Heroes*, it is evident that nostalgia is certainly present in television writers’ rooms. It seems we have been caught inside a full-throated nostalgic return to the 1970s and ‘80s as material for artistic rendering for some time. There would seem equal measure of writers of my generation looking back to our shared formative years and the generation of our children examining times they did not live within, likely in an attempt to understand us. The former suggests writers of my generation are as guilty of referencing our past as those political leaders I have accused of longing for an idyllic vision from a previous era. But the latter suggests wisdom in a younger generation to act with intentionality about trying to understand something of how we have, collectively, come to arrive in our current age.

Among the better-known media projects set in the years formative to my generation’s worldview are: *Stranger Things*, where a group of adolescents encounter secret government projects and supernatural forces, set with an opening in 1983, and *The Americans*, where two Russian spies brought to infiltrate the US as a married couple try to steal enough American secrets to sustain a failing Soviet system, the series opening in the early years of the Regan Administration.

Of course, looking into the rearview mirror is also a phenomenon derived from familiarity—the desire to turn away

from contemporary events. Or at least a step sideways, like the long run of zombie television fare, which offers a rather obvious mask for the evil we feel present around us and what seems to many as a continuous creep towards end times. For we are living in an age with new sources of fear and new enemies. One cannot predict the nature or the placement of terrorist attacks. Moving, clandestine, ideological warriors are nearly impossible to identify and defeat. In the years since 2001, Americans inhabit a nearly invisible yet omnipresent fear of jihadist attack that has been a regular feature of life elsewhere in the world for decades. And in the United States, we seem to breed our own brand of terrorists with as much regularity as any jihad. We now reference horrific events by shorthand: Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland. To scan interactive maps identifying mass casualty event escalation from one year to the next is like watching a medical contagion take hold in a population. In the span of twenty-two years, we witnessed the obliteration of the Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City and savage machine gun fire into a concert crowd in Las Vegas. Those two attacks alone account for 226 innocent deaths. No wonder we are forever fearful when death arrives for our neighbors at church, in nightclubs, at work, and in school. If we associate the cold war with those most paranoid among us constructing underground bomb shelters, would we seem so insane as to wish underground retreat today?

For of course those fears that had some of our fathers and grandfathers stockpiling canned goods and batteries within concrete bunkers remain. The presence of nuclear weapons has only grown more tenuous. We have every reason to fear unstable governments. Just as we have every reason to fear a degrading nuclear arsenal in a place like modern Russia, let alone those lethal devices lost in the dissolution of the former Soviet Union that face internal corruption and jihadist assault. Our headlines are filled with the fear stoked by the emergence of nuclear capabilities in North Korea and Iran. Shouldn't such a world prompt all of us to want to dig a little deeper? After

all, the only country to have ever unleashed nuclear weapons on a civilian population were, in television terms, the “good guys.” Is it sensible to believe there won’t be other entities present on the planet willing to follow our example whether we label them enemies or allies?

Our current political climate would once again suggest that nostalgia does not breed intelligent insight to learn from our past. When we routinely elect those who spurn education and intellectualism, when we promote those who shun books, reject science, and disregard history (recalling that we now have elected those who openly embrace Q-anon to Congress), we fail to heed Santana’s warning. And when we choose to follow those who employ bullying as a method of wielding power, we abandon our values and withdraw from a vaunted history of social justice. The stakes could not be higher.

In my Wyoming circa 1974, the warring factions varied. Often it was the self-identified “cowboys” vs. the self-identified stoners. Sometimes, if we were capable of time travel, we might leap forward and find the divisions at a schoolyard fight would parallel the left and right so regularly at one another’s throats today. And sometimes, the divisions were remarkably clear between those of us willing to defend Black and Brown friends with our fists and those who attacked them because their “otherness” apparently incited fear.

The near future is being fashioned by divided politics forming two camps incapable of agreeing on rules for a game of Capture the Flag. One camp is rooted in a vision of a 1950s America that afforded unregulated pursuit of material gain without consequence and that envisioned a culture that was entirely patriarchal and homogenous. Its vision as emblazoned on red campaign hats suggests America is no longer great and that there was some past, perfect moment when it was. This simplistic vision of America never really existed beyond television fabrications. We do not live upon a *Happy Days* set any more than we ever have inhabited the world of *Leave It to*

Beaver.

While the 1950s may have given birth to Disneyland, NASA, and the Interstate highway system, it is also the period in which America enabled Joseph McCarthy, joined the Korean War, and authorized a CIA-orchestrated coup to return the Shah of Iran to power. It was a decade notable for, and in desperate need of, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the school desegregation of Little Rock. As suburbs grew and post-war home-ownership rates were sustained, one cannot reasonably believe that rates of spousal abuse, alcoholism, adultery, and other cancers that preyed on families were less common, rather they were more sequestered behind closed curtains and silence. I'm not arguing many social features haven't changed, even changed rapidly and radically in the decades since the 1950s, but I do steadfastly believe that we cannot truly long for something that never existed any more than we can watch reruns of *Hogan's Heroes* and accept it as an accurate, or even an alternative portrayal of World War II. Rather than longing for an uninformed nostalgic view of the past, why not work for the ideals represented in the Declaration of Independence?

Even if we can no longer identify facts when we depend upon social networks for our windows on the actual world, we can still possess enough critical thinking ability to discern what is reality. Or can we? Perhaps it is a worthy reminder that we elected someone to the presidency who entered American consciousness as a reality television "star." Would we ever have acknowledged him at all were this not the case?

Perhaps more to the point, are we at risk of no longer distinguishing between the fiction of dramatic television, no matter its historical setting, and "scripted-reality" television? It is not only the young who long for the idyllic lives and flawless bodies of social media "influencers." When I become so feeble-minded that I can no longer distinguish Colonel Hogan from Bob Crane, I will not just be someone to

dismiss as sad and irrelevant, I am likely either a danger or in danger.

Yet in the last years of the 1960s, the time of Vietnam and street battles for civil rights, when tie-die challenged IBM blue suits and red ties, is there a wonder we wanted the comfort and predictability of *Hogan's Heroes*? It was understandable, if dangerous, to fabricate a vision where those who had enacted the Holocaust were reduced to buffoons. Would we rather have a sitcom that shows the butchering regime Hitler created as dupes and simpletons playing out recycled plots or the reality of discovering Bob Crane's body after he was bludgeoned to death in his Scottsdale apartment among his sex tapes?

Maybe I have an unfiltered view of the past as well, yet I have faith that most television viewers in the 1960s could differentiate comedy from real history. I no longer hold such faith. We now inhabit a media space where we are "fed" news. Those news feeds are no longer objectively journalistic, rather they provide a specific viewpoint determined to fit our preconceptions as analyzed by algorithms so complex that only a tiny minority of the populace understand them.

Will you blame me if I long for the predictability of my childhood crawlspace?

Of course, going underground, as the characters of *Stanger Things* can tell us, is inherently topsy-turvy and possesses its own dangers. When the show takes its characters literally within the earth, they enter the "Upside Down," a bizarre, glowing, creepy, vine-filled underworld that harbors a literal monster that preys upon humans for its meals. As the audience for the show, viewers are challenged with the question: which is scarier, the upside-down world monster or the government that hides knowledge of its existence? Or, like any well-

plotted drama might ask, perhaps the real questions are: has the government, in its secrets, *created* the monster? and has it had a hand in creating the superhuman adolescent girl who might save us from it (the monster and the government)?

The entire plotline of *The Americans* creates a different kind of topsy-turvy, upside-down response in which we are likely to find ourselves rooting for Soviet spies and sometimes even aligning with their cause. It's a rather odd response to television depicting our old Cold War enemies infiltrating our culture and battling our government, stranger still in a time when we acknowledge that their real-world motherland has repeatedly subverted our democratic process.

There are reminders and warnings for us in both shows. When we live inside of history and technology that moves so fast that we cannot keep pace, when we participate—or don't—in politics that feel at once insidious and inept, when we encounter global events that require such sophisticated knowledge that we are made to feel overwhelmed and anxious, is it any wonder we may wish to go looking for holes to hide within? In an age when we have all been united by a virus's unwillingness to differentiate between us by gender or race, nationality or ethnicity, political affiliation or wealth status, why shouldn't we long to have identifiable monsters for our enemies and superheroes as our defenders? It gets quite confusing when we begin to cheer for murderers on television while encountering them more frequently in real life and when we wear masks as barriers to infection rather than to hide our identity.

Of course, my own nostalgia for a simpler time, a "wistful affection" dug into the cool womb of the earth, is folly, like all escapist thinking. I cannot pretend to be immune from recalling fondly a childhood where I was left to play with friends or within my own imagination from the time I left the house in the morning until my mom pulled the rawhide cord on the bell attached to the back of our house at sundown. Nor am

I not guilty of self-deceit or for wanting a return to a time when politics seemed simpler, communication less fraught with risk, facts were more readily identifiable and more frequently trafficked. The forts I construct today are the indoor variety, which are built alongside my grandchildren using an ingenious framework kit that allows construction of nearly any shape or size, but many of the blankets that cover the frame are handmade by those who passed before me, and the wonder and joy I see in my grandsons' eyes as they hold a flashlight to their faces when inside their creations is familiar and comforting.

But I have dug no holes, constructed no bomb shelters. I live firmly above ground. Mostly now I am reminded my current residence has a crawlspace only by the regular flush of the sump pump that indicates the snow is melting out of the mountains as spring nears or when retrieving the storage bins filled with toys for the grandchildren when they make an annual visit. Like their parents, when I invite my grandchildren to maneuver the wooden ladder and descend into the crawlspace with me to get their toys, they decline, the two-year-old declaring the space "scary." That is, I suppose, a normal reaction to the underground.

When I see old pictures of Bob Crane today, in nearly every image taken for *Hogan's Heroes*, whether screen shots or stills used for marketing, he seems to possess a sly smile, one best described as a smirk. In a 2002 article about the release of *Auto Focus*, *The New York Times* astutely recognized that "decadence and self-destruction make for the best kind of celebrity" and provided Crane mythical longevity his career would never have allowed him. Maybe I'm thrown off by the jauntily placed hat or the trademark Colonel Hogan bomber jacket, but I still find myself looking at that smile and within those laughing eyes and wondering what other underground secrets they hide.

New Poetry by Kevin Norwood: “Rabbits in Autumn”



THE LUSHEST GRASS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

RABBITS IN AUTUMN

Who will find our bones in a thousand years,
bleached and brittle under the unyielding sun,
scattered in dried grasses by feral dogs or vultures?

Who will hold such curiosities, not knowing
that we stopped here to kiss and murmur
that our love would outlast the moon and stars?

Who will hold our bones, never to imagine
that under the same sun, we once made love
on the lushest grass, under a sapphire sky?

In autumn, the fox lies in wait, hearing rustling
in the tall grass. Having eaten, the fox moves on.
There are no questions of why, or how, or when.

Smoke rises acrid in the air; the sun sets earlier
each day; the grapes shrivel on the vine. Time
is the fox; we are the rabbits. Please, hold me.