

New Review from Brian Castner: Malcolm Gladwell's "The Bomber Mafia"

Why did Malcolm Gladwell write a World War II book? The bombing campaign over Europe and Japan is hardly his typical beat: Cliff-noting TED talks for the MBA crowd. Where's the investment edge here?

It's an obvious question that Gladwell addresses in the opening Author's Note. *The Bomber Mafia* is not so different than his other books, he says, because it is about "obsessives," "my kind of people." The topic is no less than "one of the grandest obsessions of the twentieth century." Join him, for "I don't think we get progress or innovation or joy or beauty without obsessives."

Which I think we can all agree, if nothing else, is a completely bizarre way to open and frame a book about killing millions of people with air strikes.



The Bomber Mafia was my first chance to experience the Gell-Mann Amnesia Effect with Gladwell. You know the phenomenon, if not the name. [Michael Crichton described it this way](#):

"You open the newspaper to an article on some subject you know well. In Murray's case, physics. In mine, show business. You read the article and see the journalist has absolutely no understanding of either the facts or the issues. Often, the article is so wrong it actually presents the story backward—reversing cause and effect. I call these the "wet streets cause rain" stories. Paper's full of them. In any case, you read with exasperation or amusement the multiple errors in a story, and then turn the page to national or

international affairs, and read as if the rest of the newspaper was somehow more accurate about Palestine than the baloney you just read. You turn the page, and forget what you know.”

Turn the page on Gladwell—the self-proclaimed reviser of history, who helps us see and understand the overlooked and misunderstood—and what do you find? It wasn’t until he wandered into my area of expertise that I appreciated the extent of the shallowness, so to speak.

My first encounter with him was *Outliers*, which in classic Gladwell fashion promises to explain sociological events with a surprising counter-intuitive twist. Why are rich New York corporate take-over lawyers Jewish? Why are 40% of professional hockey players born in January? ([They’re not.](#)) The book stuck with me because I had a young son obsessed with hockey; should he just “give up” because he wasn’t born in the right month?

Gladwell calls *Outliers* a how-to guide, but always dissatisfyingly so. I can’t change my son’s birthday. And even if you accept his case for why Jewish people from the Garment District born in the 1930s were destined to become highly successful attorneys, he never explains how the individuals themselves did it. Why one poor boy in the tenement and not his friend? Why one hockey player born in January and not another? One gets the sense that the answer may undermine Gladwell’s thesis and so is left out, or, more conspiratorially, is revealing of other Big Ideas that Gladwell has less interest in exposing, such as the [false meritocracy](#).

I am not a sociologist or a sports psychologist, so I can’t tell you the failures in Gladwell’s arguments in *Outliers*. But as a former Air Force officer, I know a fair bit about the service’s history and culture, and so I was curious what would happen when he took on a subject I knew.

My conclusion is this: Gladwell is right about Air Force pilots being obsessives, but completely wrong about the object of their desire. Which is surprising, because if anyone should be able to understand amoral perfectionists, it's a wanna-be Tech Bro like Gladwell.

*

Before I go further, a relevant admission: I tried to write a Gladwell book once. Or, more specifically, I had a book proposal that several editors said would be more successful as a Gladwell book. Meaning, crush the narrative inside a big unifying theme that obliterates nuance but provides more reader satisfaction, that simplifies reality into an easily digestible 220-page pill with a plain white cover. "Gladwell on IEDs" or "Gladwell on Modern War." This was the editorial feedback.

My second book, *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, was this book. The only vestige of the Gladwellian feedback is the biz-speak ubiquitous white cover. Any airport bookstore patron can tell you that a white cover with a single centered object says this is a book with easily digestible ideas.

But the Big Idea in my book—that my friend Matt Schwartz had died because he was targeted by the Taliban individually, just as the United States fights the "War on Terror" by targeting individuals as well—was really always more about personal pain than an objective critique of American SOF policy. My friends died and lost arms and legs and so instead of writing a revisionist counterfactual I wrote about grief and suffering, which are not really business seminar topics. That Matt's death was premeditated murder, and not just random violence, was confusing, and more hurtful somehow. Working with the right editor, I eventually found the unifying theme, but never the hubristic clarity. And without an application for corporate America, my Gladwell cover did not have the effect my publisher's sales department hoped.

Gladwell's Big Idea in *The Bomber Mafia* is that in the 1930s and 40s there was a deeply moral initiative by a small group of pilots at the Army Air Corp's Tactical School in Montgomery, Alabama called the Bomber Mafia. Their secret plan was to "make all that deadly, wasteful, pointless conflict on the ground obsolete" by strategically bombing key pieces of enemy infrastructure, forcing them to surrender. This "dream" is embodied by two men, the flawed true-believer Haywood Hansell, and the hardcore Curtis LeMay who betrays the cause and falls to the "temptation" of winning World War II through the indiscriminate firebombing of Tokyo.

It goes without saying that such a fable ignores plenty, including most of the people in said mafia who worked on the doctrine and were responsible for its conception, implementation, and later revision. For example, Gladwell makes much of the fact that to prove the efficacy of precision air strikes LeMay led an exercise bombing US Navy ships in 1937, while ignoring that Billy Mitchell did the same thing to prove the same point, but sixteen years earlier, in 1921.

But a short book only has room for a few characters, a hero and a villain, plus a few cherry-picked anecdotes disguised as the discovery of something new, the surprise of the "overlooked and misunderstood" papering over the messy reality. *The Bomber Mafia's* small pages, large font, and conversational tone are noted in every review, but it bears repeating: this book should appear on creative writing syllabuses at colleges all over, as a cautionary case study in the major differences between writing for the eye and the ear.

The idea that the strategic bombing campaign of World War II in Europe and the Pacific is overlooked is laughable on its face – few campaigns have been discussed at greater length, or in more detail. Presumably Gladwell has written his book because he believes we misunderstand the campaigns, then, and the misunderstanding is the deeply moral nature of the effort.

Reviews at [The New Republic](#) and [The Baffler](#) have thoroughly discussed the repugnancy of this view. Say what you will about the military necessity of strategic bombing, it should be beyond question that killing millions of civilians as a by-product of that bombing was immoral. Gladwell is not interested in considering how the ends may or may not have justified the means.

Instead of discussing Gladwell's ethical stance, I'd like to address his central conceit: was the Bomber Mafia motivated by morality? Were their intentions pure? Were pilots and leaders animated first and foremost by a shining ethical ideal while planning and executing one of the most harmful events in absolute terms in the history of warfare?

Here, not only does Gladwell misunderstand how events unfolded, he misunderstands the part that speaks to his supposed greatest strength as a journalist: corporate organizational culture. The Air Force, dominated as it is by pilots, has a distinct culture from the other branches. To Gladwell, the precision daylight bombers are early Silicon Valley pioneers, just trying to make the world a better place through scientific advancement.

Whether Gladwell misjudges all Tech Bros, I cannot say. But at least he misunderstands pilots. Precision daylight bombing is not a moral undertaking. It is an amoral obsession with perfection.

Pilot culture is about never making mistakes while operating in extremely complex situations. When a mistake is made, and a plane crashes, investigators will spend hundreds of pages documenting every error and failure. The goal is absolute perfection at all times.

In *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, I wrote about this culture, through the eyes of an F-15C pilot named Evil. He explained to me that being a pilot is about tactical thinking.

“First breaking a problem down into its component variables, and then solving the equation repeatedly as each variable changed second by second: ... air speed, heading, altitude, missiles, gun, radio, radar, wind speed, direction, cloud ceiling, the Cons, restricted airspace, wingman’s location, wingman’s heading, target, tactics. Double that number to consider the enemy’s equivalent of each. Computing and computing and computing every second.”

Relentless problem-solving and obsessiveness, according to Evil, permeated everything. “It’s why our wives hate us. We are all competitive, and we all try to make everything perfect,” he told me.

Missing a target with a bomb is not primarily a moral question, to this culture. It is a mistake. It is inefficient. Unprofessional. Flawed. Culturally, precision daylight bombing was an opportunity for pilots to maximize their equations. A greater chance to be perfect.

In the Cold War, the search for the perfect bombing campaign expanded, from a strategic theory to the entire reason for the Air Force’s existence. At its heart, the Air Force’s main goal is to fight and win wars all by itself. Small wars are distractions from this purpose. The Air Force exists to win the Big One, all alone.

Being able to win a war solo is still fundamental to the Air Force identity. It’s why the Air Force became a separate service, why it so jealously guards its budget and chip-on-its-shoulder heritage. On a basic level, the Air Force believes that everything the Army and Navy might do in Big One will be secondary to the main fight. Evil told me once that he trained his whole professional life for the first hour of fighting over Iran and the first 24 hours over Taiwan, in which he needed to be no less than perfect.

In the decades after World War II, the service worked to

develop the technology to win the perfect campaign. TV-guided weapons, then laser-guided, then GPS-guided, and now automated weapons that synthesize information and guide themselves. As the Cold War turned hot in Vietnam, the leadership of the Bomber Mafia gave way to the Fighter Mafia, as the best pilots and top leaders followed the action. But as fighter pilots took over key leadership posts in the Air Force, the pursuit of perfect precision remained.

And so the Air Force has never really gotten the war it wanted. In the last 80 years, it has come close twice: Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. All military objectives achieved from the air, no messy boots on the ground during the fighting, only for the boring stabilizing afterwards. Not the Big One, but almost a Perfect One.

In the late 1990s, when I was studying to become an Air Force officer, I read serious articles in academic publications, like *Airpower Journal*, that predicted the end of ground combat had arrived. Airpower had finally lived up to its potential, specifically when led by the Air Force, which allowed the Navy a few sorties as a goodwill gesture. As late as the Winter 2001 issue, the last pre-9/11 edition, authors were still writing articles with titles like "[Airpower versus a Fielded Army: A Construct for Air Operations in the Twenty-First Century](#)," about strategies for the Air Force to defeat enemy ground forces singlehandedly. There is a certain wistful tone. Yes, the Air Force existed to strategically crush the enemy's overall will to fight, but they could tactically destroy soldiers too as required. Air Force weapons were so precise, the scalpel so sharp, they could slice off fingers individually as well as carve out the heart, just tell them where to start cutting.

That the enemy would put their hands in their pockets, or hold hands with children, never seems to occur to the grand strategists; this is a perfectionist pursuit, not a moral one.

*

Gladwell provides no primary source evidence that the Bomber Mafia generals themselves saw precision bombing as a moral undertaking. Instead, he provides quotes from two modern historians, Stephen McFarland and Tammi Biddle, as proof of this belief. (There is no bibliography, and according to the notes the book is based on interviews with eleven people.)

And yet the evidence that the Bomber Mafia were obsessed with perfection rather than morality is to be found in the book itself. LeMay, a dyed-in-the-wool member of the mafia, eventually dismisses the strategic bombing plan as nothing but late-night grad school discussion, calling it "trying to find something to win the war the easy way, and there ain't no such animal." LeMay was cold-blooded in balancing aircrews lost versus bombs on target. He counts percentages of cities destroyed, as later generals would do body counts in Vietnam and "AFRICOM assesses four terrorists killed" press releases about drone strikes today. When he talks through the details of his tactics, how they kept trying different methods, practicing take-offs in the fog, changing formations so all his pilots flew in straight over the target (even Robert McNamara later called him "brutal" for doing it), Gladwell sees a moral stalwart rather than someone focused on continuous improvement. Later, Gladwell quotes Conrad Crane, the former director of the US Army Military History Institute, who calls LeMay "the Air Force's ultimate problem solver." But also, "he was one of those guys that, if you gave him a problem to fix, you didn't ask a whole lot of questions how he was going to fix it." Correct, and also hardly someone engaged on an ethical crusade. It is someone doing the best he can with the tools he has.

The American general Ira Eaker, in selling his bombing plan to Churchill, says that if the British bomb at night and the Americans by day then "bombing them thus around the clock will give the devils no rest." Biddle tells Gladwell that it is

“very odd” that Arthur “Bomber” Harris of the Royal Air Force (who bombed at night) and Eaker would become such good friends. But it’s only odd if you think the Bomber Mafia was about signalling virtuous behavior rather than achieving success.

If Gladwell had chosen other quotes by those characters, the case is even stronger. Yes, LeMay is famous for saying he would bomb his enemies back to the Stone Age. But even that same Ira Eaker, [briefing President Truman in June 1945](#), about the upcoming invasion of Japan, said that he agreed with General George C. Marshall that “It is a grim fact that there is not an easy, bloodless way to victory in war.”

The ugly truth is that LeMay was not “tempted” to do a bad thing, in the firebombing of Japan. Neither temptation nor salvation were on the table. Rather, the perfectionist simply saw firebombing as the best amoral option, the best solution to the problem. LeMay isn’t cruel, he’s indifferent. And ultimately, the Air Force continued LeMay’s problem solving mindset to fix, ironically, the process he had derided as “the easy way.” As the technology has gotten better, “the easy way” has remained the goal.

Gladwell writes as if the way history happened is the only way it could ever have been. That any attempt to imagine another historical path is to misunderstand an inevitability that only he can explain. By providing the counter-intuitive “revisionist” version of this history, he aspires to sound doubly convincing. My new explanation is air-tight, he implies confidently. A Calvinist dressed up in a pedantic sociologist’s clothes.

Jewish people in the Garment District were destined to run law firms and LeMay would inevitably fall to temptation. Hansell was too pure to succeed, LeMay too gruff to stay true.

Couching the bombing campaign in terms of a tragic character

flaw, rather than a choice, makes Gladwell's offhand descriptions of the firebombing itself more grotesque. Nothing more than the cast-off by-product of one of his obsessives. It's jarring and incongruous. Is this truly a moral issue, or just a bad business decision, as he would cover in his other books? Gladwell engages with the actual horror of war as he would a quarterly loss report, and yet even manages to praise the actions in the end. Japan surrendered and gave LeMay a medal in 1964. Maybe it wasn't lost profit after all? Maybe the firebombing was an investment that paid off.

*

Gladwell ends the book with a chatty roundtable of current Air Force generals at the Chief of Staff's elegant home on Fort Myer, Virginia. From the quotes provided, the journalist Gladwell was seemingly asking such hard-hitting questions as "Tell me again how great airpower is," a continuing of his tendency to go to the leaders of organizations to find out what it's like to be a peon.

After listening to the generals brag about the precision of today's weapon systems, Gladwell concludes "Curtis LeMay won the battle. Haywood Hansell won the war."

Which is more than simply confusing and factually incorrect. It also presumes that Hansell didn't just "win" the ideological battle within the Air Force, but that he was objectively correct as well.

Air strikes are regularly cited as a swiss army knife solution to seemingly every international problem, from Yemen to Afghanistan to Ukraine. Last July, during anti-government protests in Cuba, [Miami's mayor floated the idea of bombing the country](#).

Which is why it is noteworthy that Gladwell never asks this basic question: what is the evidence that strategic precision bombing works? He cites no cases, either positively from

Kosovo or negatively from, well, anywhere else. A la *Outliers* and the illusions of the meritocracy, this is perhaps not the kind of question Gladwell tends to ask of his obsessives.

So let's instead ask a similar question on the book's own terms: what is the evidence that strategic precision bombing is more moral? Or that it simply kills fewer civilians?

[Azmat Khan's reporting in the New York Times](#) has put to bed the lie that the American-touted bombing campaigns spared civilian lives. Rather, officials denied civilian casualties, or failed to investigate, to ignore the true cost. Khan reported that one American official broke down when he realized that though the US had seemingly taken great pains in precision attacks in Raqqa, and the Russians had no such precautions in Aleppo, in the end both Syrian cities were utterly destroyed.

"Eventually I stopped saying that this was the most precise bombing campaign in the history of warfare," the official said to the *New York Times*. "So what? It doesn't matter that this was the most precise bombing campaign and the city looks like this."

The Russians purposely target hospitals and chicken farms, the Americans accidentally hit them; either way, the results are the same.

And is it not results, measured quarterly, that are most important to Gladwell's MBA readers?

In many ways, contemporary Russian attacks in Syria and Ukraine are closer to what the American World War II generals actually wanted in their bombing campaigns: both precision and impunity. The ability to target a hospital, hit it precisely, and get away with it. Modern American generals enjoy immunity in other areas. Drones strikes, on average, [kill ten times more civilians than attacks by manned aircraft](#), and yet have a reputation for precision and cleanliness, and thus largely,

[until recently](#), get a pass by the general public.

Are precision strikes a moral way to win war? Not yet. Strategic bombing campaigns remain bloody, messy, often ineffective, and still of arguable necessity. This ambiguity is difficult for even experts to handle, and Gladwell's entire *raison d'être* is not to write as an expert but as an amalgamator of expertise. *The Bomber Mafia* isn't an honest or earnest look at what experts have written and thought about America's air campaigns during WWII. In the end, the book's central flaw resides at the core of Gladwell's supposed greatest strength. The Gell-Mann Amnesia Effect predicts sociologists and sports psychologists would say the same for his other books.

New Poetry by Doris Ferleger: “Praying at the Temple of Forgiveness,” “Internal Wind,” Driving Down Old Eros Highway,” and “Summer Says”



TURNING EVERYTHING AROUND / *image*
by *Amalie Flynn*

Praying at the Temple of Forgiveness
for Zea Joy, in memoriam

Last Monday you threw yourself,
your body, dressed in red chemise,
in front of a train.

It was your insatiable hunger
for a more tenderhearted world,
your husband said at Shiva.

Now no one will get to see
what you saw from inside
your snow globe where you lived,

shaking and shaking,
breaking into shards
of ungrieved grief, unanswered need.

I will remember
how tirelessly, with your son,
you worked to help him turn

sounds—coming through the implant
behind his ear—into speech,
speech into understanding.

Everyone will remember
how you skipped across the dance floor,
waving pastel and magenta scarves,

and prayed to angels.

O, dear Zea, your human bones
thin as the bones of a sparrow—

the way you could fold
your body to fit anywhere.

Rest now. You have succeeded.

INTERNAL WIND

When you died, our son
became *my son*; I watch
through your eyes

and mine how he lifts
his whole body into
a long accent à droite,

arms taut, wrists impossibly
rotated back, fingers and toes
also pointed back

to all the hours, years
of practice in turning
everything around.

~

Over the hollow
you left, our son stretches
his fingers across

frets and strings
in C minor,
Bach's Etudes

the way you taught,
the way you closed
your eyes, nodded, satisfied—

our son will remember.

~

Remember how
he watched you deep-
breathe into yoga postures?

Now his own focused flow
heals what Western doctors call

tics, quiets what Eastern doctors call

internal wind. Listen
how our son calls
to his yoga students

what he learned
at your knee: *Effort
brings the rain—*

of grace.

~

When our son and I argue,
I feel homeless, divided,
until I remember how you

and I took turns massaging
his neck that ached from its day's
staccato singing—

~

Sometimes I can see his tics
as flawless, meticulous,
a body expressing itself

with perfect diction.

DRIVING DOWN OLD EROS HIGHWAY

Me, in my Q50 with its hot flashes and warning beeps,
heading toward Sweet Desire, New Jersey, where my love,

soon 70, will woo me with mango, melt the mushy pulp
in my mouth—or perhaps he naps.

You, CeeCee, painting the walls pink in the tiny house in

Pullman,
recently moved in with your old college flame, coming so
easily

against his new ceramic hip, just the friction of it. You say
your pelvis never quite fit with anyone else, including your
soon-to-be-

ex-husband of 30 years. Me, with a G-spot suddenly. A rainbow
of chaos tunneling through me when his fingers find it and
flutter.

And long live the reckless tongue. The old-fashioned clit-kind
of climax. Like a young planet rising. Oh, how old and greedy
I am

for that whole-body wave and chill and quiver and release.
You, purposely avoiding that whole-body wave of shiver,

as it reminds you of your ex's dogged insistences.

For your 60th, your daughter gifted you with a mini vibrator

on a rubber ring for your index finger. A *sex-thimble*, you
joke.

Sex over 60 seems unseemly to talk about, CeeCee,

but it seems more ungrateful to say nothing at all.

You and I speak of what our mothers couldn't give us.

Daily I pray at the temple of Venus.

SUMMER SAYS

Pay attention to
your heat, your survival—
the tree rooted in your garden

is a sequined vernacular, a cashmere sweater.

Because nothing matters in the end

but comfort and the bending light.

Summer says, I will be the room you die in.
You will dream, neither of regret,
nor in the language you were born into.

A stranger will comb your existential threads.
You had thought, for instance, humans
were gerunds or harps bent

on playing in a diner that serves
black coffee and hard donuts.
You ask, *What is the past?*

What is it all for?
Summer says, The wound of being
untaught. Says, hungry.

Says, the cypress is a hospice,
says, falter, falter, falter,
bloom bloom bloom—too soon

a pall will keep you company.

New Poetry by Mary Ann Dimand: “Earth Appreciation” and “Lusting, Stinting”

New poetry by Mary Ann Dimand: “Earth Appreciation” and
“Lusting, Stinting”

New Fiction from J.G.P. MacAdam: “A Sleeping Peace”

Author’s note: I arrived at this story after reading an article in Rolling Stone called ‘Highway to Hell: A Trip Down Afghanistan’s Deadliest Road’ and I thought, what if what’s happening in Afghanistan ended up happening here, in America? Would Americans finally “get it” then?

*

Sometimes the weariness in my bones was so bad it took near everything I had just to get out of bed in the morning. Captain Hernandez tapped on the front door at 0400. I was already packed and dressed. I slipped my nose out of Zachary’s doorway. His bedsheets were tousled and I wanted to tuck him back in, but I didn’t want to risk waking him. Let him sleep. I slid his door shut and turned the knob. Matt was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, as he was every Monday morning. He handed me a thermos of Klickitat Dark Roast.



photo: Andria Williams

“Thanks.”

“Text me every hour on the hour.” He hugged me close.
“Please.”

His beard was just the right length, not too scratchy. “Go back to sleep. Try to grab another hour or two before Zachary wakes up.”

“I’ll try,” he whispered in my ear and squeezed me closer.

Captain Hernandez tapped on the door again.

"Gotta go. Remember to ask Teacher Julie about Zachary's—"

"I'll remember."

"And you've got another doctor's appointment this—"

"I've got the home front covered, Charlie-Echo."

"Okay."

We kissed. Matt made sure I had my briefcase, bulletproof vest and everything else, then opened the door. The damp predawn air blew in with the sound of idling engines and Captain Hernandez's voice. "Morning, ma'am."

"Morning, Captain. Latest intel?" I knew Matt liked hearing the Captain's briefings. It was practically every other week that Matt was trying yet another prescription for his anxiety. None worked.

"Contractors for ODOT took an ambush on Saturday, trying to patch up that one crater near mile marker 270. No casualties. The hole's still there, though."

"Any IED's?" Matt stepped onto the threshold.

"Four, sir. EOD's taken care of them though."

"Maybe you guys mix up your route a little bit? Take one of the bridges across the river, or several, crossing back and forth."

Shaking my head: "I'm already leaving at the crack of dawn as it is. We'll take eighty-four all the way out."

Captain Hernandez agreed. Matt shifted uncomfortably; he didn't like being reminded that in a very real way he didn't know what the hell he was talking about. The Captain knew when to take his leave. "Clock's ticking, ma'am." He tapped his

watch and stepped his combat boots down the front steps.

I glanced back at Matt, hoping he wouldn't but knowing he would.

"I don't see why you can't just deviate your route a little. These National Guard guys don't know their ass from a hole in the—"

"Matt, honey, please. I gotta go."

"Why's the Governor making you do this? Plenty of other County Executives don't have to travel out to the sticks. In Baker, in Grant, in Malheur, in any of the eastern counties there's not even any county government left to speak of."

"You know why. There needs to be a government presence in Umatilla. It's the bridge. It's the dam. It's the interstate."

"I don't want to lose my wife to some goddamned—" I saw how much it took him to swallow his worries down. He couldn't help himself; he always grew so anxious right at the last minute. "I'm sorry, you gotta go."

"I'll see you Friday."

Matt nodded and sighed. "We'll be here."

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Zaniyah?"

"Yeah?"

"Text me, please."

Emails were already rolling in on my phone. Captain Hernandez was waiting, holding the armored door to my SUV open for me. "I'll text you when we make it past the Hood River base."

*

My phone scrolled with endless memos. Everything Umatilla County—population 43,696 and dropping—from road maintenance to school renovations. Reviewing and e-signing as much as I could in the back of my de facto mobile office, a hulk of an SUV outfitted with bulletproof windows and steel-plated undercarriage.

We picked up Muri, my counterpart in Wasco County, before taking I-5 to the I-84 interchange. Our order of movement was lead Humvee with a gunner and a .50 cal in the turret, my SUV, a second Humvee, followed by Muri's SUV, then a rear Humvee. We hit the interchange at a smooth 70 mph maintaining a strict 20-meter interval between vehicles.

I yawned and glimpsed the shadow of someone standing under an overpass. They were holding their phone to their face and tracking our convoy with it.

“D’you see that one, Captain?”

“I did, ma’am.” He commanded the convoy from the passenger seat. “Third lookout this morning.”

“They know we’re coming.”

“They always do.”

I suppressed another yawn and tried not to think about it, bending to my memos again, sipping my Klickitat Dark. Portland swirled by my window. Even at this hour the streetcars were running, bicycle lanes filling up, another day in the life of a great American city no doubt suffering its fair share of contested neighborhoods, crime, refugee-packed stadiums and smoke-filled summers where the air itself became an enemy to defend against. But the insurgency held little sway here. Portland, Salem, the coast and anything within artillery distance of the I-5 corridor was safe insofar as the National Guard continued to pour manpower and materials into defending it. As for any territory east of the Cascades, however, the

same could not be said.

The first couple hours of our trip sped by, the lead truck passing smoothly around the handful of semis still making runs into contested territory, the whole convoy flowing apace. The question, the one question that always gnawed its way into my brain every Sunday evening, before even waking Monday morning, before saying goodbye, hit me, once again. Why not turn back? It was the sight of the first military outpost atop Tooth Rock that brought the question on. The Tooth Rock outpost was, for me, the western entry point to the Columbia Gorge, the Cascades, thickly forested, magical, wet with ferns and moss, riven with canyons and waterfalls, a fairy tale place of my youth, a place to camp, to hike, to explore. But it wasn't that way anymore. Now, I saw only violence. The way the Columbia River had once upon a time blown a mile-wide hole through the mountains. The way the land was torn apart and uplifted, itself a testament to the hundreds of thousands of years of earthquakes and eruptions from the resident volcanoes at present asleep under their cones of ice.

Tooth Rock disappeared around another upthrust of rock. A spattering of headlights on the westbound lane, some people still commuting into Portland. Why not turn back? Herrera, the County Executive for Gilliam County, was not in the convoy. He called in sick, as usual. The Hood River CE, Jules, slept in a bunker in the base there. Sherman County's CE was a no-show, probably nursing a hangover, the stress of the job driving her to drink her way out and drink her way back every week, or so I heard. The only other county besides my own along I-84 was Morrow County. That was Henderson's territory, or had been. He boasted of being born and bred in Morrow County, knew the people and the hills like the back of his hand. He once said to me, "Zaniyah, just be yourself. Don't be the Governor's lackey. Don't be the authoritarian dictating curfews and martial law. Don't be the savior. Just be yourself, the girl from Umatilla. You're from Umatilla, right? That's why the

Governor appointed you, wasn't it?" He was right and he was dead. Insurgents ran a Corolla rigged with fertilizer and a suicide bomber straight into his SUV as he was leaving the compound down in Heppner, the county seat.

"We should have choppers."

"What's that, ma'am?"

"Nothing, Captain. Just thinking aloud."

Choppers were too scarce and expensive to fuel. The winds in the Gorge too treacherous for most aircraft, the weather too unpredictable.

The Bonneville Dam slid into view, its turbines and buttresses stretching across three separate islands. It was soon followed by the white-trussed expanse of the Bridge of the Gods which seemed to hover midair under a blaze of spotlights. A checkpoint searched vehicles before allowing them to cross. Why not turn back? Even this lake of a river fell dam-to-dam down to Portland and out to the Pacific. To travel east was to go against gravity. "I'm appointing you all to be my eyes and ears on the ground," said the Governor. "The mayors and county commissions elected locally, well, they're not what I would call cooperative all of the time, especially in the eastern counties." My phone vibrated with a new email from the Mayor of the City of Umatilla. His email was mostly a rant interspersed with all-caps saying that I did not have the authority to direct road maintenance, though they were state funds and the State Legislature explicitly directed CE's to monitor all state expenditures. I did not have the authority to make the curfew start earlier and end later. I did not have the authority to ration medical supplies or food aid. Mayor Pete even brought out the big guns, the telltale codewords and innuendo of popular insurgent threads, the language of which was now near ubiquitous across much of eastern Oregon. "It's only because of the Governor's MILITARY DICTATORSHIP via

stationing TROOPS in our backyard that YOU even survive your little trips out here!" Was that a threat? What else could it be, in times like these? "Where are you anyways?" he wrote. "Why aren't you in the office yet?" I replied with only an "En route. - Z." and pictured his face reddening at the screen. Why keep going? Why fight for people who did not want you to fight for them?

The interstate slithered its way between the dark river and darker upthrusts of rock. Exits were blocked off and closed. Corporal Barnes, ever the silent driver, clicked on the windshield wipers as the air congealed into a mist of rain. A prominent slab of rock jutted out over the right side of the road and when our headlights passed across it, I saw the message, we all did, could read those white letters spray-painted across the wet black of the rock plain as day. We Will Never Stop, We Will Never Tire, We Will Fight Until Our Blood Runs Dry.

No one said anything, hearing only my own voice in the back of my head repeating a question.

*

"What's that, sir?" Corporal Barnes pointed up ahead.

The sky was still black but for a rimming of cobalt. In the mountains across the river, in Washington state, the subtlest red sparks arced back and forth like a mini meteor shower. "Tracers," said Captain Hernandez. "One of our own out of Hood River."

We saw the glow of Forward Operating Base Hood River before we saw the base. The jade trusses of the bridge, too, popped out of the dawn, its floodlit reflection shimmering across the water. FOB Hood River sat on what was once a waterfront park. It was the operational and logistical hub of the entire Mid-Columbia region. The main employer, too. Our convoy slowed as traffic thickened and then crawled and then stopped

altogether, the line to get on-base overflowing onto the interstate.

Captain Hernandez yawned.

“Get much sleep, Captain?”

“No, ma’am. The baby woke up two, three times before I got up to leave. Hungry little guy. Tell me, when do they start sleeping through the night?”

“It takes a while,” I said, “but they eventually do.”

The town of Hood River sloped uphill on our right, broad yellow windows capturing the view, though more and more of those houselights never switched on anymore. Whoever had the means moved east. Ever since Town Hall was pipe-bombed people just didn’t feel safe anymore. That happened despite the nearness of such a massive base with its five-meter-high Hesco walls and thousand-or-so troops and reams of concertina wire and guard towers bristling with machine guns. Begged the question: how much did all this military might actually protect anybody? Still, I’d be returning to FOB Hood River before sundown to spend the night on a cot in a tent. I never expected I’d be sleeping four out of every seven nights inside of a bunker, but whose career ever goes according to plan? The cooks in the chow hall made omelets for everyone pulling midnight duty and for the rest of us who couldn’t sleep.

“There they are,” said Corporal Barnes. I was about to text Matt but stopped to stare out at the platoon of Humvees limping their way across the bridge. One had a cockeyed wheel and half its bumper blown off. Even from where we were on the interstate you could see the spiderwebs in their windshields, the smoke stains across their hoods.

*

Terraces of rock stepped into the clouds. White threads of

rain-born torrents wound off their green flanks and spilled onto the broken and tumbled basalt below. We rolled at a steady 55 mph. The trip always felt a little less perilous once the sun broke and I could watch the sides of the Gorge panning by, at least for a while. We sped through The Dalles, with its orange-trussed bridge and hydroelectric dam. Muri and one Humvee peeled off, taking the second-to-last exit. I texted Muri a good morning because I knew he'd be just waking up. He replied with a good luck.

I resumed my work: sewer repairs, budget shortfalls, a new zoning ordinance to prohibit illegal squatting. Another email from Mayor Pete discussing an upcoming committee vote to move the county seat back to Pendleton, an hour further east down I-84. Out of the question. A teleconference with the Governor, tedious logistics details for air drops to the Yakama and Umatilla Indian Reservations, their militias still holding their own, even regaining territory previously stolen by the insurgents who wanted access to salmon fishing hotspots. Then came another spray-painted rock outcropping. The Government Does Nothing For Us. Absolutely Nothing. Why could we not hire someone to cover those up?

"These cams have all been spray-painted," said Captain Hernandez. The entirety of the interstate was under surveillance, except when the insurgents managed to jerry rig one of those drones you could buy at Walmart and rig it with a can of spray paint and a funny robotic finger to depress the nozzle. "They'll be out till next week, at a minimum."

Beyond The Dalles traffic virtually disappeared. We passed the half-sunken remains of the Union Pacific train that had derailed last year, waves lapping at the sides of empty boxcars. Trains could use only the Washington side of the river now. But for how much longer? The Trunk Rail Bridge slid into view next. Its middle section was missing, it had been blown apart and sunken into the river, only twisted fingers of steel reaching through the air like two rheumatic hands

straining to grasp one another again. I was still half-listening to the Governor in the teleconference. “—strong intel that the infrastructure through the Columbia Gorge remains a top target. We must—” but I already knew what he was going to say. The carcasses of vehicles, both civilian and military, began to propagate across the shoulders of the highway like roadkill, just pushed off to the side, no time to get a wrecker out here to remove them. We groped our way around the blast crater leftover from a recent IED, then another crater, and another, then a few more hastily filled-in ones. “We must remain committed,” said the Governor. “We must keep moving, keep pressuring the enemy even if they’re people we grew up with, even if they’re family.”

The lead truck slowed and maneuvered around something like the tenth blast crater in a row. Corporal Barnes followed in its tracks. We regained a 45 mph speed and kept moving.

*

“Why’re we stopping?” The windshield filled with brake lights, more than you’d expect on a seemingly empty highway.

“Don’t know, ma’am.” We came to a dead stop. “I can’t see beyond those semis up ahead.” Captain Hernandez touched his hand to the mike on his throat. “Alright, TC’s dismount, drivers and gunners remain in your trucks. Let’s go see what’s going on.” The Captain got out. Three other soldiers linked up with him, everyone kitted in their helmets and vests. They locked and loaded before disappearing into the mingled glares of the sunrise and the red taillights up ahead. It was just Corporal Barnes and me. I slipped my own vest on though it didn’t fit well and the plates were heavy and the velcro scratched my neck. Other vehicles—civilian cars and trucks—began piling in behind us. Locking us in. Trapping us.

It all started coming back to me, flooding in like a waking dream. It had been over a year since the attack on my life but

an attack of another kind made it real again, made it now. Those woods were these woods. Thickets of gangly black oaks. Cloaking the multiple ravines the enemy used to ingress and egress. The insurgents knew that if they simply kept shooting at one portion of bulletproof glass at some point it was sure to fail. They prevailed. One bullet made it through, exploding stuffing out of my seat, missing my head by mere inches. Then the enemy broke contact, the sound of their four-wheelers fleeing into the hills. The bark of our .50 cal as they returned fire. Captain Hernandez shouting into two hand mikes at once. Me, just lying on the floor, touching my trembling fingertips to the side of my head, my temple, my ear, my hair—just to make sure it was all still there.

I realized I was doing controlled breathing like when I was in labor with Zachary, twenty hours in that hospital bed, Matt counting my contractions for me. I counted the seconds, minutes, until Captain Hernandez returned.

“Shit.”

“Ma’am?” said Corporal Barnes.

“Nothing, nothing.” I had only forgotten to text Matt. Texting him now. I’m alright, we made it past HR. Smooth sailing so—

“Another crater,” said Captain Hernandez, huffing back into his seat, slightly wet from the rain. He slammed his door shut, locked it. “Big one. Both lanes. Same one as last week. Contractors still haven’t filled it in yet.”

“They’re tired of getting shot at.”

The Captain ejected a bullet, catching it out of the air. “I would be, too. In the meantime both lanes are squeezing onto the shoulder to get through.”

“State patrol up there?”

Captain Hernandez only chuckled and shook his head.

“Figures.”

“It unfortunately does, ma’am.”

We waited, everyone’s mufflers chugging in place. Captain Hernandez peered up the cliffs looming over our righthand windows. He radioed Hood River. “Hot Rocks, this is Charlie-Echo-Six, over.” Garble in his earbud. “Requesting a UAV flyover on the high ground to my south, break. Our position is whiskey-mike-niner-four...”

I tried not to count the seconds ticking by on phone. Other vehicles were inching forward. Why were we still stopped? Not moving at all? I could smell myself I was sweating so bad, forcing myself to breathe in my nose, out my mouth, closing my eyes, unsure how much longer I could continue skating along the edge like this until—“Wake the fuck up.”

The Captain slapped the back of Corporal Barnes’s helmet.

Barnes snapped his head up. “Huh?”

“We’re moving.”

“Sorry, sir.”

It took a minute but we finally made it past the blast crater, its hole so deep and wide we could have fit our entire SUV inside of it. Then we were moving again and all I wanted was to take the next exit, turn around and beeline it back home. I wanted to be there for my husband, for my son. So what if these people wanted to deny election results? So what if they wanted to set up their own shadow governments and threaten, coerce, kidnap or kill their own elected officials? So what if they wanted to build shooting ranges and IED-making academies out in the pathless hinterlands? What difference was fighting them year after year after year ever going to make? Even once we arrived in Umatilla, I wouldn’t be allowed out of the SUV. Our convoy would roll straight into the Municipal Compound,

behind the blast barriers, and there I'd sit, stuck, working what I could until nightfall, unable to so much as steal a glance out of my office's sandbagged windows. I couldn't walk the streets, couldn't talk to people, and the people knew it. All they ever saw of me was my tinted silhouette as the convoy drove by. God knows it wouldn't have mattered. Even if I could meet them where they were, still there'd be that wall of suspicion, that resentment in their eyes. I knew it, heard it nonstop growing up, that bile, that bitterness, that anti-government propaganda tinged with racism, the whitewashing of history, the so-called patriotism of "real" Americans, and so long as the supply of guns remained unchallenged, so long as the schools suffered in these blighted depopulated areas where an eighth-grader in Portland on average possessed a higher math and reading competency than any high school graduate in Umatilla, so long as there remained an endless supply of disaffected white boys willing to shoot up a shopping center or plant a bomb in the road or runoff and join the rest of "the boys" to stick it to the government treading all over their rights, this war, this insurgency, was never going to end. But it had to, it had to end, the hate at some point had to stop. Because I couldn't stop. The convoy couldn't stop. Even as the interstate raised and the Gorge ended and a clear blue sky beckoned and the land smoothed into familiar expanses of tumbleweed and rabbitbrush, dry empty capacious lands, the dual bridges out of Umatilla sliding into view, I let myself hope. I let myself drift, reminding myself of why I could never turn back. Because just above the bridges, beyond the McNary Lock and Dam, maybe another hour's drive along the river, there was a spot where the sounds of traffic died away, where there was just the wind on the water, in the grass, and the feel of the rounded rocks under your galoshes as you stood ankle-deep in the blue, where my father had taken me when I was young and we had thrown our lines in and waited, waited for what felt like decades, till a fish nibbled and finally snagged upon the hook. I was going to take Zachary to that place, whether it be next year or two years or ten years from

now, he needed to know that place, a country, a land where things weren't violent or contested but resounding in its quietude, abiding in its own mysterious slumber, that waited for us if we'd only waken to hear its singing soul once again, a song of sleeping peace.