

# New Fiction from Thomas Mixon: “Strong Feelings of Sympathy and Horror”

☒ A little stoned, on the screen porch facing the invisible grunts of New Hampshire spring peepers. Something night, something woods, something long sleeve. Lou looks down into mostly darkness. They can barely see the plaid pattern. One of Alex's, figures. You can swear off a person, but still wake in the middle of the night wearing her damn shirt you swear you didn't go to bed in. You can be a person, listening to thawed frogs, little creatures literally frozen the month before, and only hear her voice, though it's been two months since she's been gone, only taking half her clothes.

The two of them made it through the pandemic, the election, Lou's own thaw, cracked egg, the fucking whirlwind of body and mind and for once in their fucking life not having to deal with it alone, coming out stronger on the other side, all those cliches. Alex going back to school, Lou moving north for her, buying a house neither could afford separately, making fun of the debt, together, making fun of work, leaving work, making fun of the Olympics, fuck you Intel, fuck you AI, fuck you 2032, working off a little laptop in the forest, tall trees on all sides swaying in the wind like they're bound to fall, but they don't, or, OK they do sometimes, but not on the house, far away. The turbulence of the 2020s transitioning to perpetual hurricunt of the new decade, tyfool, all puns but no groan, Alex gone.

Gone over such a stupid thing, compared to everything before. Lou gives the finger to complacency, somewhere in the nearby vernal pools, with one hand, undoes the buttons on Alex's flannel with the other. They open the door and throw the shirt into the yard. Half-dressed and shivering, they root around in

the dark for the rest of their ex's wardrobe, tossing pants and hats out the windows. Living up here, can't even have a proper blowup scene, end of a dirt road, no chance of anyone driving by and wondering why the mess. Had they broken up in Mass, they could have given the suburbs the expected show. But no, they were fucking bulletproof, made it through everything, only to lose it after all the hard things. Now it's all soft things, mud, rain, hurt by flannel, hurt by others' smiles, smiling back, pretending to everyone at their new job that they are this quirky and fun kid who happens to be in their mid-thirties. It's cool. Yeah, I love New Hampshire. No, not born here. Why'd I come? You all have the best maple syrup. Change the subject. Hey, look at my new piercing!

#

The unicopters paused over the New Hampshire State House, longer than planned. There were just under 200 in the sky, hovering quietly above the gathered, applauding, crowd. They had left from Hanover that morning; another crowd, a set of speeches, the procession of the chosen students, standing before the doors of each aircraft as they opened automatically. June, the semester had just ended, the passengers mostly undergrads heading home. These models could make it safely to Michigan, to the west, the Carolinas, down south; all autonomous, all single occupancy, electric, and irritatingly plastered with Live Free or Die, on the sides.

That they had to pass over the State House first, before scattering to their destinations, was ridiculous, political, unnecessary. The design had come from two Dartmouth grads; for years they had tried to get the state to invest, no luck. New Hampshire only kicked in a little bit, at the end, once it was clear these things were special, were getting buzz. The state stamped their motto at the last minute, so the football field still reeked of paint, as everyone waved the unicopters off.

Downtown Concord was a mess of closed streets and temporary

grandstands, so Lou drove in from the east, parked in a strip mall lot across the Merrimack River, and walked along the Route 9 bridge toward the ceremonies. They wished they had a hat, even one of Alex's, lost to the forest; it was hot and stupidly muggy. They wished their camera worked; their phone was cracked and stupidly old. Mostly they wished they could have thought of a good reason not to attend. They were not, and had no desire to be, a real journalist. But, they had forty pages of magazine to fill by end of summer, and this little show was sadly the biggest thing in New Hampshire.

At least since the legislature passed the latest round of abortion restrictions, at the end of their spring session. A month ago, GOP clowns barely containing their glee, emboldened by the new governor, leaning in to the fucking circus mentality of the campaign, egging on the protestors, begging for a pie in the face, wearing chunks of banana cream on their foreheads for days, defiance kink, ringmaster high. The opposition did their best, showed up, filed lawsuits. But it wasn't looking good.

Lou passed a small band of them, protestors holding signs, snakes in the shapes of uteri, Margaret Atwood-inspired bonnets, homemade everything. The demonstration was being kept far back from the festivities; even most of them stopped chanting, when they saw the first of the copters take its place downtown, waiting with the clouds, for the others.

A small square past Storrs Street. Eagle something? Atrium? Umbrellas, brick, a good enough view of the sky without Lou needing to push further on, close enough to the action.

Of course, in retrospect, it was still too close. The swarm of machines dipped in unison. Just a little bit; the cheering turned to one collective gasp. Then faint clapping again, as they all ascended back to their original altitude. Hmm, didn't think that was part of the program. Lou tried to check their phone; stupid thing, too slow. Then the things dipped again,

but seemingly at random. The little vessels jerked groundward, then back up. Something wasn't right. No one was clapping anymore.

The Republican Speaker of the House found a microphone, started asking people to remain calm and – wasn't able to finish his sentence. The unicopters started plummeting, on the crowd, on the State House, on the street. There were explosions, fragments of bone and tar, screams. Lou was knocked down some steps as the crowd ran. They dragged themselves as far as they could to the side, under the lone umbrella that hadn't yet been overturned. They covered their head and heard the parade of impacts, all down North Main, panicked footfalls of those separated in the confusion, survivors moaning and circling tragedy in real time. They stayed down until someone (a medic? not in uniform) shook their arm. Lou swatted the hand away, limped past people running in all directions, until they reached the highway, crossed the median in a daze, stupidly, and sat with their back against the guardrail, facing away from the disaster, toward the river.

#

By the time their leg feels good enough to cross the bridge back, they've forgotten which lot they've parked in. To Lou, it seems at least an hour must have passed since the mayhem, yet firetrucks are still streaming in, the echoes from shouts and glass breaking still bouncing off, one can see even from the river, an unrecognizable downtown.

It may as well be a different country, the other side of the Merrimack, though. Plenty of cars in all the lots, people walking into stores. Lou's got the vague sense they should call someone, but no names pop into their head, let alone a string of digits. They follow a family into Books A Million, hypnotized by the group's normal gait, the unfazed parents, the unpretentious children.

When they see a photo of the newest iPhone on one of the magazines, amongst the periodicals, they get the bright idea to look at their own phone. Still unsure who to dial, Lou tries someone named Mary it looks like they tried to call fourteen times this morning. Line disconnected, odd. They then pick a name at random from their contacts, Lionel. No luck either, but wow the guy's timbre is soothing, on his voicemail. Lou's lucky it's one of those long ones, where the person must be wonderfully eminent, conscientious, and leaves a ton of info, who else to reach out to in case of something urgent. Considerate, beautiful. They are murmuring into the device, mindless appreciations, without hearing the beep, not realizing they are leaving a message.

They see someone wearing a "Tamra" name badge, in a Books a Million polo, watching them with concern over the racks.

"Excuse me, where is Lionel."

"Lionel? Are you lost?"

"It's just, he's got a, very sonorous."

"There's no Lionel working here."

"Tamra though, that's a pretty name..."

And then they pass out.

#

Smell of burnt coffee, Bates Motel cushioning. Must be in the cafe section.

Lou shifts from slumped to sitting, unnecessarily dusts themselves off. Tamra is holding a phone.

"There's no need, I'm fine."

"Er, you fainted."

"I haven't eaten." Lou blinks, scans the cafe menu without taking in the words.

"I wouldn't," Tamra warns. "But, water."

She's back in second, somehow, with a glass of mostly cubes, and a little piece of paper.

"What's that?" Lou asks, chewing the ice.

"From the community board." Tamra hands them a card. "If you need it."

Lou reads aloud. "Crisis Center of Central New Hampshire."

"You can use my phone if you're in trouble."

"I was, it was." They look around for a TV. It's a cafe, not a sports bar, so. "Are we, under attack?"

"OK I'm definitely calling the police."

Lou scoffs. "I think they're busy."

Tamra hesitates, puts the phone away, looks out the front window. "It's awful."

"Yeah, I slept bad before, so, this will be fun."

"Wait, you were there?"

"Barely, I was lucky."

"Um you look like shit."

"Um yeah it was a fucking horror show."

"Sorry, I mean, sorry. You just, I wasn't sure."

"If I looked like shit?"

"No, you do."

"Thanks."

"You kept saying something about Lionel."

Nice voice, Massachusetts, Cultural Council. Ah, all coming back now. "Someone I used to work with."

"Yeah. I thought like, abusive boyfriend, and..." Tamra trails off.

"Not quite, or, never."

"You're not in trouble?"

"I think I just strained, pulled something."

"Or, you know, PTSD."

"Time will tell, Tamra. I'm Lou."

"I already know. I'm crazy."

"Crazy like clairvoyant crazy?"

"Almost. I remembered your septum piercing."

Lou lifts their hand to their nose. Barbell still there, no tearing.

"Where?"

"Aren't you, working at *NOM* now?"

"Interesting, it's, not that big a publication..."

"I flip through every page of every magazine we get."

"Is that your department or something?"

"Nope, just control freak type thing."

Lou tries standing. Nope. "Do you still have a copy?"

"Blah, it was last month, so no," Tamra says, sitting down. Finally.

This is nice. "That's OK," Lou says, instead.

"You don't have one?"

"I do, plenty. I was just going to tear my photo out."

"What! You looked cute."

"It's insane, that they'd do a profile on me."

"I think sweet, you looked cute."

"I was just *supposed* to be the tech grunt, website content."

"K, you already get a promotion then?"

"Sort of. The Editor, she just, up and left."

"For real, forever?"

"Absconded to Massachusetts."

"Smart lady."

"Mary, yeah, that's who Mary is."

"You're doing that mumbling thing, again."

"You said I was cute, two times."

"You were, are."

"Sorry. I'm mad with power." Lou stands, stable enough.

"I like it."

"I don't. I think I'm the new Editor."

When Lou leaves, they're still holding the Crisis Center card, Tamra's number penned on the back.

#

The details on the malfunction are released within days. It may not be a malfunction. A young postdoc fellow at Dartmouth, Cindy, is being held in federal custody. Suspicious syntax in her code, an unusual amount of commented sections. She says it's poetry. But officials are wary. They have avoided releasing anything thus far, but today a few sections were leaked to the press.

*nh failure / experiment that only ends / with everyone  
pretending / autonomy means just for men*

*sycophants pull down / their pants to check who's hardest /  
whose dick swells most for hurting girls / who's the best bad  
bill / filer the granite state / has yet to spawn*

*i wish the adamantine beasts / below the flying blades / meet  
some sunny day / and crushed concrete / is indistinguishable /  
from their meat*

Oof. That last one. Sounds damning, but, what does Lou know about verse?

They are looking up the word "adamantine," when the first submission comes in. It arrives from the contact us link on NOM's website. Lou still doesn't have access to all Mary's folders, inboxes, and has been dreading getting a complaint via the generic comment box, or a question they have no idea how to or if to respond to.

The submission's not a complaint. It's, more poetry. From someone "South of Manchester but with a White Mountains ethos."

*They say calamities insist*

*The weakest parts of us*

*Fall from our souls*

*And leave remaining*

*Only our best*

*To wrest the metal*

*Back in place.*

*This time, we rest*

*Only when our roads*

*Sparkle with a diamond*

*Shine, and we remember*

*Them, the blessed,*

*Who gave their lives*

*Without knowing why,*

*So we could attest*

*To undivided spirit,*

*Present, stressed,*

*Yes, but unbroken.*

Lou is thinking, that was, sincere? Then they get another submission. And another. Some with real names attached, others anonymous. Lou wants to write each back, make sure they know they're writing to a quarterly mostly food magazine. But, they make a new folder on the desktop, arrange them by time received, start playing with the layout, for a few, just in case.

By the end of the week, they have more than enough to go cover to cover. It would be a departure, but Mary's run a few pages of poems before, when no new restaurants were opening, when the magazine couldn't feasibly do another feature on the same

corn maze or apple orchard it had already covered extensively, multiple times during previous seasons.

The question still remains, is sincerity enough? There are some obvious bad ones, but the majority seem, just fine, maybe a little trite, but how original can you be about a bloodbath that's captured the entire country's attention? Lou could get away with this, devoting an entire issue to these remembrances, these little poignancies, in honor of everyone injured or dead. Lou needs to get away with this, they've got literally nothing else. Accounts locked, Mary missing; shit, this is really how it is.

They send an email to the lawyer representing Cindy, why the hell not. Maybe she'll elaborate on her leaked lines. Certainly not expecting an exclusive, her freshest criminal justice metaphors, not to *NOM*, at least. But, Lou's thinking of a front cover. If they could get permission to use something from the villain (plaintiff...) herself, that would definitely get some attention, sell some ad space for the fall.

They make a call. Tamra answers.

"I was wondering how long you'd take."

"Tell me everything you know about poetry."

#

Turns out, not much. But, Tamra suggests an outing. Flyer she's seen tacked to the Books a Million community board, picture of a peace sign, open mic night in Warner, thirty minutes north or so, at a cafe called Warless, local poets promised.

Warner, interesting. Lou may not be a reporter, but some easy searches show that's where Cindy grew up, graduated high school from, a decade ago. If she wasn't being held in federal

prison, who knows, maybe the kind of place she'd hang out, congregate with rural creatives, farm type beatniks.

While Lou's driving up there, Lionel calls.

"Please tell me you are not still in New Hampshire."

"I am still in New Hampshire."

"Come back to civilization, Lou!"

"Don't you know I'm very important now."

"How bad was it?"

"Twisted ankle. Lots of smoke. Things I can never unsee."

"Jesus, Lou. I really thought, when Alex left."

"I'd rather not say, the mortgage, a lot."

"Mass real estate is insane."

"Yeah I'm stuck here. Got a date, though."

"Hot damn! Go get em, tiger."

"Tyger, tyger, burning bright..."

"Impressive. All the readings I invited you to."

"I know. I'm late to the game."

"Poetry is very serious, Lou, not a game."

"I'm headed to an open mic night, right now."

"For your date?"

"Yeah, work maybe, too."

"Good luck, have fun."

"If I need some like, line break, advice..."

"You call me. You call me if you need to escape south, also."

"I did call you, your voicemail saved me, I think."

"I'm not kidding. Your state is devolving."

"They just copy Texas, Alabama, we'll get a heads-up."

"Do you think that kid fucked with the code?"

"Fuck if I know, Lionel. I wouldn't blame her, though. Is that OK?"

"Suffering aside, in a vacuum, lots of people would agree."

"New Hampshire's worse than devolving."

"Seriously I know some well-off jerks, love to have you, however long Lou."

"New Hampshire's a fucking hole, a black hole, it for real sucks in all the loonies nearby, your state, the Berkshires aren't all Tanglewood and roses."

"I know, there's a new gun shop, down the road from the Norman Rockwell museum."

"Idiots in Vermont, idiots in western Maine, pent up rage from worse people in better states than mine, who come here, to fulfill their worseness."

"I pray for women, every day."

"Gonna take more than prayers, Lionel."

"Amen. Have a fun time tonight."

#

Warless Cafe is attached to the back of the town's Unitarian Universalist church. Lou meets Tamra outside, little hug, both squeeze onto a bench near the order counter. Inside, the place

is packed, mostly because it's small, probably thirty people or so. Lou's steadying their coffee as the barista keeps walking past, delivering drinks. Tamra's balancing a BLT on a plate, on her lap, it falls, she lets out a big sigh and eye roll.

They talk briefly between poets reading elegies very similar to the ones Lou's received since the tragedy. Maybe it's the setting, this unsubtle conscientious objector vibe in here, lots of protest photos on the wall, that makes each recitation feel tired. Like, how terrible how terrible the wounds, but also how strong how strong we must be, we must not meet violence with violence, we must acknowledge the pain, but seek counsel with our better angels.

You know. No details of the shards of glass and human flesh bouncing past the bystanders' faces. Where's the poem like that? For sure, it would kill the mood in here, but Tamra already seems bored. Maybe Lou's paying too much attention to the acts? They try to ask Tamra about the bookstore, or her life, or anything. Is she still mad about the BLT? Wasn't this her idea, what else did she expect from a small town? Lionel wouldn't be caught dead in here. It's nothing great, but again, it never promised to be, the cafe name is a bad pun, should be a warning, right off.

Lou's about to suggest maybe they go out for drinks, real drinks, somewhere else, instead. But then the barista passes them again, delivering nothing but himself to the microphone stand. He's about to speak, puts a finger up, behind the counter briefly, dims the lights, giddily reappears. A ham, yeah, so Lou's expecting something very melodramatic. But the guy starts performing a, poem? Something, from memory, or he's making it up on the spot. It sounds, a lot like Cindy. Bits about the hopelessness of men, how they're the dregs, some strange metaphors involving sediment, gathering up useless matter, setting it ablaze. It doesn't make a ton of sense, it contradicts itself. It has hushed the crowd. Even the what-

seems-to-be regular knitting club clique near the back, stop their work, listen.

The barista excoriates the state. Begs for annexation from Canada, Mass, New York, anyone. He speaks of his hometown and the shame, the shame of still being here, and strangely the people here, in this very hometown, are nodding their heads. At the end, he references Cindy's last name, in a long list of names, of those working towards disMENbering the status quo, misquotes her leaked code:

*anyone defending / autonomy for men / is good as dead / already*

When he's done, the lights go back up, it's intermission, Joan Baez on the speakers. He thanks the other barista, is about to make someone a latte, does a double take. He walks right up to Lou, bends down, peers close at their face, rummages through the book rack near the entrance, comes back to the bench holding the previous month's pages of *NOM*.

"Please don't do a feature on us."

"Jesus, if I knew a nose ring would, do this."

"I beg you. The food is terrible."

"Wouldn't know, you knocked my date's sandwich over."

He appears to notice Tamra for the first time. Gives her the once over.

"I may have saved you from diarrhea, for real."

"Refund, apology?"

Tamra is standing up, is adjusting her bag as she gives a weird wave.

"Soooo I should be heading back."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'll call."

"Um OK."

She leaves. The barista sits down next to Lou, who is still processing the goodbye.

"That's some shitty customer service."

"I'm not kidding, the bread's stale."

"I kind of do now, wanna write something."

"This is me, imploring you."

"We're technically a lifestyle publication..."

"The owner, he's delusional, cheap."

"...with merely a heavy focus on food."

"So *NOM*, like Not Only Meals?"

"North of Manchester."

"That's classist as fuck."

"You're rude as fuck."

"I'm Zeke, I'm sorry, where's your friend?"

"My date, probably blocking my number."

"Could be worse, in federal prison."

"You know Cindy?"

"Know her? We were practically the same person."

"So you should be locked up, too?"

"Maybe, if anyone would publish me."

"That why you never left home?"

"Low blow. I did move out, last year."

"You stayed here, though, in town."

"Yeah. Cindy was always way smarter."

"She's on trial for conspiracy."

"Wait here."

Lou shouldn't. Zeke seems like a tool, Tamra's stormed off, they already have enough material for the fall issue, last thing they need are angry musings from a semi-eloquent hick.

What Zeke brings back to the bench, though, aren't poems. They're pictures. The first ones he pulls out he says aren't the best; it's Cindy being presented with medals, trophies, in various auditoriums, in her teen years.

"She was, is, a genius. Math bowl, debate, spelling bees."

He shows Lou more. The good ones. Photos of Cindy writing in the hallway of some school building, head down, in a notebook. Apart from the awards photos, and a few with her laughing next to an awkward looking younger Zeke, she is alone. She is jotting down something furiously, or gazing off into a distant space. She is walking her dog in the dark, lost in thought. She is in her car, arms straight out, but chin thrust to the roof, exasperated. She is someone New Hampshire was bound to lose, one way or another. She is presented first place ribbons, pinned to her by quote reasonable men, who denounce very obvious evils, like the Confederate flag, but who then, since they are so quote reasonable, take their self-assessed moderate cred, and come up with quote sensible voting restrictions, laws for female bodies, lower taxes to make the schools quote earn their place in the community. They were going to lose Cindy. They have her in custody, but they've lost her.

#

The state loses Lou, too, shortly after Zeke gives them the albums.

They accepted the photos, the good ones, decided to scrap the poem content, publish a whole issue with portraits of Cindy inside. They left Warless, Warner, tried to call Tamra, had no luck, emailed Cindy's lawyer again. Zeke swore he had permission, owned the copyright, everything was taken with his camera, but Lou wanted to make sure.

A week went by, nothing from the lawyer, simplistic texts from Tamra, she saying no no all is good, just busy, maybe in a couple weeks? The New Hampshire Legislature, in a special session held in honor of their fallen colleagues, doubled down on the abortion law, no exemptions for incest, rape. Then, they passed a real Rumpelstiltskin of a state terrorism bill, everyone who read it said it couldn't pass federal muster, everyone who didn't read it chanted its talking points, loved it, considered it law already.

The lawmakers must have directed the state troopers to their positions, as well, comprehensive strategy, scary version of safety. Lou hadn't been keeping up with the local news. They were stressed, they were picturing overturned cars as they showered, as they slept. They were out of weed.

Down to Massachusetts, since it *still* wasn't legal in New Hampshire. As they crossed from Nashua to Tyngsboro, they noticed the brown and yellow Dodge Charger, not hiding at all, parked right behind the *Bienvenue!* Lou assumed they were being paranoid, pulled into the gas station instead, but sure enough the state trooper pulled out, as soon as the first NH plate to leave the dispensary did, crossed over the border, lights on. Oh fuck that. They tried Methuen, same thing, even goddamn Salisbury, little beachbum Salisbury had a cop on the north side of Lafayette, ready to pounce.

They couldn't go more east, the ocean, didn't feel like going more south, so headed back towards Concord only to collect their things and call Lionel, to ask for his wealthy friends' numbers.

#

A little stoned, in the basement of a retired college president's harborfront villa, Boston, board member of the Humanities something. Lou gets an email from Cindy's lawyer. No, the defendant does not authorize any use of her writing or likeness, for any popular culture publication. Furthermore, the defendant has no idea who any person named Zeke is, strongly advises that any purportedly consensual images be immediately destroyed. Anything less than full cooperation will result in...

Lou zooms in on the photos, the ones with Zeke and Cindy together. Shit, of course those are photoshopped. Of course they almost went to press with the collected works of a stalker as their total content. Of course they try Mary again, line still disconnected, decide to leave a rabid voicemail on a completely rando person's number.

They could reinsert all the mediocre poems, still make the printer's deadline, but they draft something for *NOM's* website, instead.

The resignation is not necessary, will not be read by many. Lou types up their account of the devastation. It lacks sentiment, dwells on the lone umbrella left to them to shield their body, their head, from debris. They work themselves into a sweat, remembering. They take off their shirt, it gets stuck on their septum piercing. They yank the cotton and accidentally rip the ring out. It bleeds, it hurts, Lou curses, Lou cries. Lou takes a picture of their own, uploads the wound underneath their homepage statement. They google "great disaster" and find this, from a 1912 *New York Times* op-

ed:

"...the hundreds and hundreds of people who have sent us verses about the loss of the Titanic...may be moved to share our own wonderment at the audacity they showed in attempting to deal with such a subject. For very few of those hundreds and hundreds of people had any other excuse for trying to write, other than the fact that the great disaster had excited in them strong feelings of sympathy and horror. They all took it for granted that, being thus moved, their verses would give poetical expression to their emotions."

And then, below the picture of their inflamed nostrils, they list the names, actual and fake, of every person who sent the magazine some stanzas. Just the names, no comments about or excerpts from their work. They close their laptop, dial Alex.

"Why are you calling me." No pleasantries, icy. She left in winter and forever wrapped the season around her.

"We're both on the mortgage," Lou says, throwing up in their mouth a little.

"We had an agreement."

So did we, Lou wants to say. "I left, I'm never setting foot in New Hampshire again."

"Good, don't blame you."

"You must know someone in real estate."

"I'll get on it, this weekend, Lou."

"Handle it, everything."

"That's fair, thanks."

"Just take care of it Alex." Also, I still love you, but better to be all business, aloud, and romantic on all the silent frequencies, where it doesn't count for shit.

“Fine, Lou, but I’m not splitting –”

“And don’t ever call me again.”

“What? You called me –”

They hang up. Another edible. They ruin the retired college president’s towels. They make good on their word; in the future, they don’t so much as cross the Ipswich River. Cindy is found guilty. Zeke moves back in with his parents. Tamra takes off for Burlington. Lionel passes away, respected and loved. There’s another attack, another draft. Warless in Warner goes up for sale, is turned into a tanning salon. Unicopters become ubiquitous, but are called something else, and look different. Amateurs write banal but mostly harmless rhyming couplets. A few idiots are prosecuted for incitement. Many idiots are not prosecuted for upholding the “law,” denying human rights because a bunch of doofs wrote down their discrimination and got some other doofs to sign it. The UN is ignored. The Supreme Court’s expanded, but it doesn’t go well, it gets worse. A lot is ricocheted, lobbed through the air without much force, returns stronger than anticipated. A lot of people don’t like this, a lot do.

On the next major anniversary of the sinking of the ship, the *New York Times* reprints the op-ed Lou found. With every tragedy, more and more of us investigate our mood, as if that mattered. We pencil our enthusiasm, wonder how a thing could happen, wonder at the pieces put together, afterward, as if our words were stone, and supported anything, except their own created tension.

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# New Nonfiction: Review of Christopher Lyke's "The Chicago East India Company"



Gravitational lensing – as half-remembered from an article I read years ago, as confirmed courtesy of a recent Wikipedia dive – takes advantage of the presence of massive objects to shape the path of light coming from objects on the far side relative to the viewer. A sufficiently large star, for instance, could be used by Earth-bound astronomers to “see” far beyond what they otherwise could by bending rays of light coming from distant bodies. The basic physics behind the principle was known to Newton and Cavendish, and a multinational effort just after World War I confirmed many of Einstein’s theories about gravitational lensing. It may be our best bet for obtaining direct visual evidence of habitable exoplanets in other solar systems.

Christopher Lyke’s The Chicago East India Company (Double Dagger Press) is a sufficiently large star. A collection of short stories and vignettes based both on the author’s time in uniform and career as a teacher, the book takes on a refreshing and encouraging role, despite the sometimes-laden and harrowing subject matter of surviving combat and finding purpose in a bureaucratic education system.

I’ll return to the “sufficiently large star” concept in a moment.

The writing throughout TCEIC is, as one would guess, taut and clean, in the sense that there are no wasted words or characters or stories. There’s a physicality that guides the collection, present in spare but efficient vignettes – whether

character portraits like “Canton” or meditations on events as in “Another Ginger Ale Afternoon” – but on full display in the longer pieces like “Life in the Colonies,” which amplifies the corporeal experiences of a jungle excursion by examining the personal and political context surrounding it. The sensory descriptions also ground what could be otherwise ephemeral introspection, and this balanced duality continues throughout the book.

In “These Are Just Normal Noises” the monotony of a foot patrol drags on for more than four pages but the writing never falters. Not a word is unnecessary in building to the tension of the impending incident. Every description – of the “kohl-lined eyes and dyed-red beards” on the men and women encountered in the village, or the “riverbed...the tall grass that covered the ground...the ditches and small stonewalls” – seems at once familiar and extraordinary. The connection back to the world entices, but endangers:

We pulled them from thoughts of Chicago and the L and the weekend festivals that they were missing. A soldier remembered the way a girl had spoken to him and how she seemed cool and like the river that glided through the valley below him. We pulled them from this and back to the mountain, to a path or a rocky outcrop at which to point a gun.

We know it’s coming, right? The ambush, the firefight, the attack – we’ve seen this before. The description continues, though, hard and unrelenting, and the agony of a withdrawal delayed by wounded vehicles and drivers, another couple hundred words detailing the by-now familiar yet still deadly blow-by-blow, but “It must have been only a minute since the fight began.” We feel that minute stretched over two pages and the exhaustion weighs heavy on us.

A similar burden falls on our shoulders when we read “Solon,” perhaps the most memorable story in the book. An unnamed

teacher – though likely the same man whose travails we've been following the whole time – ventures from the demanding and unfulfilling classroom to the football field, coaching a team of students unaccustomed to winning and not far removed from the soldiers he once served alongside. Hopes are raised, then tempered; this is no Hollywood story of a team defying all the odds, though the growth and depth of the kids is much more realistic. Dreams are dashed, not by death but by an injury sufficient to upend what would be, in a scene meant to inspire, the rags-to-riches career of the honest and likable young Darnell. The teacher unspools, seeing the players set beside soldiers set against football players from his own suburban youth in Ohio, and spins out of control:

...he knew that the team he was coaching was bad, and that it wasn't their fault. They were in a system that prevented them from being slightly more than terrible. And if it were a movie maybe an emotional director would have the poor kids win. But in reality, if they played one another his boys would probably get hurt...He didn't blame the suburban boys, they didn't hate the city boys, they just knew they'd beat them to death and wanted to, because they wanted to beat everyone down. That's what they were trained to do, and bred to do, and would do. It wasn't malice so much as inertia. They'd smile uncynically and help our boys up after cracking their ribs.

I found no morals here, because every time I tried to connect the Ohio players to Afghanistan or the Chicago players to the insurgents or reversed the roles or asked *Who would be who in the war zone* the futility of that line of questioning stopped me. War is not football, football is not war, but both deserve our attention for their consequences.

The other stories – “No Travel Returns”; “The Gadfly”; and the title piece – contain just as much depth of characterization and breadth of plot, maybe even more so. As readers we recognize the central character – sometimes first-person

narrator, sometimes third-person participant, even as a literal bystander in “Western and Armitage,” when he spends less than a page delivering a gut-punch and denouement at the scene of a traffic accident – that Lyke inhabits and uses to bring us along on a journey that doesn’t end. “None of it ended,” he says in protest to the idea that stories need resolution. But compared to many combat or redeployment stories about the hopelessness of such an idea, I feel like there’s something to look forward to here.

TCEIC arrived at an opportune time for me as a writer. Full disclosure: Christopher Lyke founded and runs Line of Advance, a military- and veteran-focused literary website that has hosted much of my work, and even more work from many other writers. LOA sponsors the Col. Darron L. Wright Award for military and military-adjacent writers. They’ve amassed enough groundbreaking and stunning writing to publish Our Best War Stories (Middle West Press), with hopes for a second volume. LOA has been a great and generous home for my own writing, and I was excited to read more of Lyke’s own work, if only to see into the mind behind a mainstay in the vet writing constellation.

Getting civilians to care about “The Troops” has been far easier than getting them to care about veterans. Wave a few flags, drop a few parachutists into a football game or two and they will stand for the anthem and mouth the affirmations they’re expected to. It’s American tradition – dating back to the Newburgh Conspiracy, the Bonus Army, and burn pit legislation – to celebrate war and forget the vet.

The writing in TCEIC embodies an antidote to that malaise, not in building overly optimistic bridges across the civil-military gap, but in reminding those of us in the vet writing communities that this kind of storytelling still matters, and will continue to matter. As major combat deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq fade in the general consciousness – if it were ever really there, short of jarring news announcements –

and attention shifts elsewhere, spaces like LOA and books like The Chicago East India Company serve to focus our efforts. The longevity of a website that allows for creative expression gives hope. The straddling of worlds in TCEIC – connecting the experiences and people in a combat zone miles and years away to the experiences and people in contemporary and ongoing America – gives us that sufficiently large star. We can use its presence to bend the light and see habitable planets beyond the terrestrial profusion of “typical” war stories, the kind you see in Hollywood if at all, and imagine literary planets where authors with military memories can explore stories beyond combat, can continue “writing things that aren’t just bang bang stories,” as Lyke puts it in an interview with Phil Halton, and maybe one day bring along a few of those civilians to populate these new worlds.

*The Chicago East India Company* by Christopher Lyke is available for purchase [here](#).

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## **New Poetry from Tanya Tuzeo: “My Brother, the Marine;” “My Brother’s Shoebox;” and “My Brother’s Grenade”**



WAR HAS DONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

**my brother, the Marine**

the recruiters come weeks earlier than agreed—  
arrive in alloy, aluminum with authority,  
military vehicle blocks our driveway  
announcing to the neighborhood  
they've come for a boy here  
who will have to go—  
though he sits at the top step  
and cries

i follow them,  
strange convoy to Staten Island's hotel  
where all the boys are corralled—  
farmed for war, becoming weapons  
of mass destruction  
when before they picked apples  
at family trips upstate

a hotel lobby—last stop before using lasers  
to blow off golden domes,  
silence muezzins in the crush  
of ancient wage and plaster—  
Hussein's old siberian tiger left thirsty,  
watches other zoo animals  
being eaten by the faithful—  
just like a video game

i clamp onto my brother  
beg him not to go, we could run away  
he didn't have to do this—  
recruiters quickly camouflage me,  
am dragged outside—my brother lost  
did not say goodbye  
or even look at me.

### **my brother's shoebox**

the room across the hall is inhabited again,

home now from another tour  
like sightseeing from a grand canal  
where buildings are art  
and storied sculptures animate street corners—  
my brother returns a veteran.

i want to remember who this person is,  
or at least, find out what war has done.

he leaves with friends to drink—  
that is still the same,  
later tonight  
he might howl at our parent's window  
or jump on my bed until the sheets froth,  
uncaring and rabid.

but i don't wait for him to come home  
and begin searching the room  
that is his again.

it is simple to find  
where people hide things—  
a shoebox under his bed  
that wasn't there all these years  
furrowed by sand  
and almost glowing.

i open to find drugstore prints,  
rolls of film casually dropped  
for a high school student to develop—  
silver halide crystals take the shape  
of shattered skulls  
goats strung and slit  
a school made of clay  
blasted in the kiln of munitions  
"KILL ZONE" painted across its foundation—  
each 4x6 emulsion a souvenir  
of these mad travels,

kept to reminisce and admire.

### **my brother's grenade**

my brother's room in our family vacation home  
has embossed wallpaper, indigo or violet  
depending on the light that filters through the mountains—  
and his grenade in the closet.

i saw it looking for extra blankets,  
thought it was an animal resting in eiderdown  
kept by my mother in one of her tempers  
but it didn't move  
and so  
i picked it up.

inhumanity held beneath iron's screaming core—  
a pleasant weight,  
like the egg i threw across the street  
detonating onto the head of boy  
who said i kissed him but i didn't,  
is it like that for my brother?—  
fisted mementos of thrill?

seasoned by cedar sachets,  
neatly quilted metal shimmered as i turned it  
forbidden gem, his holy relic—  
i placed it back in the closet and began making dinner,  
said nothing.

the slender pin preserves this household  
where our family gathers  
unknowing a bomb is kept here—  
my brother roasts a marshmallow  
until it catches fire, turns black,  
plunges into mouth.

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# New Poetry from Sam Ambler: “Gnats” and “Made Him Strong”



OUR STRUGGLING LIMBS / *image by*  
*Amalie Flynn*

## GNATS

Evening fire sparking over Sutro's rim,  
igniting cirrus dragons drifting away from the sun.  
Jules and I, enthralled.  
Sitting placid on the stoop outside our home.  
Cuddling.

They swarm out of the alley from behind.  
Catching us. Latching hold onto each  
of our struggling limbs.  
Like gnats they buzz: “*Faggots!*”  
Stuff socks in our mouths.  
Drag us to dark playgrounds, the depth of sandboxes.

Fists in our faces. Cleats. Blood. Pipes.  
Bone splinters under their boots.  
Cold chains gird my torso. Handcuffs biting wrists.  
One yanks my hair back:  
“*Look what happens to motherfucking queers!*”

They rip Jules' pants apart. Jules' teeth buried in cotton.  
Fingers splayed, broken. Knees popped out of sockets.  
Ass opened.

Laughing. Noses dripping.  
One forces my eyelids like a glassless monocle.

Jagged bottle crammed past Jules' sphincter.  
Jules passing out.  
Leather circling around. Beating shafts of meat.  
Ejaculating on Jules. Laughing.

Jules coughing. Crawling.

As they flit past his sod-bed,  
Jules swats at gnats.

## **MADE HIM STRONG**

From an early age, he knew he was not, could not be,  
like other boys. He was fine with that. It made him strong.

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# **New Nonfiction from Patricia Contaxis: "Luminous Things"**



It is late October and the season is turning. The morning chill is not the surface cool of fog, the chill you feel in summer here at Point Reyes National Seashore, but the deeper cold of coming winter as the hemisphere tilts farther from the sun, a cold that settles in to ground, rocks, trees, and your body. I am on Trail Patrol, carrying my usual pack and a radio strapped to my hip belt.

Volunteering for Trail Patrol with the National Park Service was a gift to myself, to celebrate my coming retirement. For sixteen hours each month, I rove the park freely. My pack includes supplies for visitors in need—extra food and water, a

medical kit, everything needed for an unexpected night out—and I'm trained to warn against hazards they may not realize. The park calls this preventive search and rescue. I'm also encouraged to share my continuing education as a naturalist, which the park calls interpretive work. I might explain leash laws to a visitor with a soft start-up, an offhanded invitation to view, say, the small, camouflaged snowy plovers nesting in the sand above the wrack line. When a dog tears through the nesting area, it destroys the nests. When a plover is frightened off-nest, it won't return and the chicks won't hatch. Over time there won't be any more plovers. On a good day you can see the light turn on in a visitor's mind.

I've only had to use my training in wilderness first aid once on Trail Patrol, to recognize that a horseback rider, who was diabetic and nine miles off piste at the end of the day as the sun was going down, needed rest, water, to stay warm, and have some food available while I drove into town for help.

My assignment each shift is to choose a route through these seventy-one thousand acres of wonder: a peninsula of coastal ridge jutting out ten miles at its widest point, bordered by wild beaches; a hot spot for migrating birds; home to wild, free-roaming tule elk, to bobcats, and one shy mountain lion. As I wander the actual landscape, an internal world opens to me, maps itself onto the wild and familiar terrain of Point Reyes. And on this particular day, I am forced to take account. At the trailhead I call in my location and planned route. The radio squawks back: "Copy. Have a good day."

\*

In the slanted morning sun, I walk through a corridor of orb weaver spiderwebs. Beaded with dew, they glisten and wink at me as I pass. I feel charmed, delighted by them. Then I climb the first rise, noting the effort it requires, and feel the first frisson of fear. Twice in the last few years, an episode of exhaustion has overtaken me while hiking, as if someone

pulled a plug and all my vital energy drained. Both were brief. A drink of water, a bit of food, and they passed. But these are not things I felt in my younger body. Walking the long, deep quiet of Point Reyes, I feel more alone than in my usual daily life, a solitude that harkens to a much bigger, far longer solitude.

I enter a valley whose steep walls prevent me from hearing the ocean on the other side of the ridge. Within the valley sound is amplified. My boots thudding on the rutted, hard-packed trail remind me of a saying both chastening and reassuring: You are not the only pebble on the beach.

Rabbit, raven, spotted towhee, and quail. A downy woodpecker, vociferous and hardworking. Rounding a bend, there is a gorgeous, healthy coyote. A big one, close to fifty pounds. Coyote sightings this close up are not common in the park, in my experience. In three decades I have only seen coyotes from my car as they slinked across the road ahead of me and disappeared into underbrush or foraged in a field far from the road. This one has staked out a gopher hole, snout down, back curved, still as death. I wait and watch. The coyote leaps into the air and pounces, missing its mark. It swings its head toward me. I could feel that I am seen. A chill. Sharp intake of breath. And then it faces forward, trots away so swift and smooth, it is as if it were skating.

In late morning I climb the rise that will take me out of the valley and begin the long descent to the beach. I have warmed up through the morning's hike and acclimated to my pack. I feel loose and strong. A thought surfaces that I am deep into the park, hours away from any possible rescue, which is true, factual, but not imminently relevant. I take a moment to check my surroundings in case my intuition is ahead of a situation I haven't completely registered. But I see no actual danger. I keep walking.

I decide to note my fears as I would note thought and breath

while meditating. I list them as they float through my mind:

~ I'll meet a dangerous human. (Possible.)

~ I'll be stung by a bee and go into anaphylaxis. (I carry an EpiPen.)

~ My hip or back will go out, and I won't be able to walk.

~ I'll stumble and break a leg or arm.

~ I'll fall down a cliff.

~ I'll choke on my sandwich, and no one will be with me to squeeze my diaphragm and blow it out. (This one made me laugh at myself a little.)

~ My heart will give out.

There it is. My father did not live to be my age. He died of a broken heart. Stroke. Heart attack. Years of heart disease claiming his every breath. I was twenty when he died and have lived most of my life without him. But his decline haunted me, and as I approached the age at which he died (he was sixty), some subtle thought line worked its way out, as if entering a narrows in a small skiff, the disturbance of the waters increasing, my grip on the gunwales tightening. And then I was through. Slight disorientation from a future foreclosed to the usual unknown: bright, hectic, and sweet.

Still, something lingers. The visceral shock—unfathomable, really—held in the body that we are here and then we are not. I am sixty-three now. I'm retiring. I'm happy. I'm writing and playing music. I am in love. My father was none of these. The radio squawks, a ranger calling dispatch to check a license plate and VIN number before issuing a parking ticket.

\*

At noon I reach Coast Camp. A large group of high schoolers is

packing out after a week-long service project of trail restoration. They trudge in knots of chatting, bumping magnetism, edging me to the side of the trail. I seem invisible to them. I walk to a picnic table and slide my pack off, enjoy the lightness. I sit on the table, eating my sandwich while watching a dark-eyed junco flit from campsite to campsite. A song sparrow supervises from a post and then from an unused grill. The sun is directly overhead in a clear sky. I can feel its warmth on my arms and face and on my back, where it dries my park-issue khaki shirt, damp from carrying a pack all morning. After lunch I amble down a wide cut through the coastal bluff that leads to the beach. Halfway down the gentle descent is a broad-canopied eucalyptus with a rope swing on which my daughter played all the many times we camped here when she was a child. On the beach a wide wrack line tells the story of a stormy night. But the surf is mild now, a gentle lap followed by a longer, quiet interval. At the shore sound surrounds you, even the sounds of an easy tide and amiable breeze. Climbing back to camp, sound resumes its directional quality, comes at me from identifiable points, and the air around me feels different, heavier, ground-stilled.

The junco and sparrow have moved on, also the high schoolers. I have the place to myself, and I sit on the picnic table a while, gazing at an outcrop of sandstone halfway up the western slope of the coast ridge. It is enormous. Sections have weathered into shapes like ramparts and parapets, looking like a medieval castle. I can still remember the rush of joy I felt the first time I saw it, thirty-one years ago. It was 1987, the year my wife and I moved to the Bay Area. It was our first hike in Point Reyes. The castle loomed above us, standing alone, as it does, on a dry flank sparsely dotted with rubble and low scrub. We were on the upswing of a ten-mile loop from ridge to beach.

\*

The radio crackles, then falls silent. Sometimes the radio

helps me feel less alone, but sometimes it reminds me of how alone I am, how far from base, as I ramble into the peninsula. There are dead spots in the park, places where radio repeaters cannot penetrate. In the months following the death of my wife, I took to this landscape like the balm of Gilead. I was fifty-six years old and full of pent-up vigor that wanted to spend itself on these hills, quick-stepped and blind, all motion and breath. It was as if movement through this landscape would scrub my grief, rinse my hot, swollen eyes with the cool waters of wonder and awe and possibly, if ever again, promise.

In those days, not so many years ago, I walked fast. I pushed my thumping heart ahead of me to its limit. It was as if I dared it to break. "Go ahead," I might have said. "Try it!" I traveled light: an ultralight pack, a small bottle of water, my EpiPen, a map. Nothing like the pack I carry on Trail Patrol. Fear was not part of my landscape, inner or outer, then. I may have been too exhausted for fear, my shock and grief having wiped out a wide swath of emotional range. I was just doing everything I could to feel alive. I kept moving.

My mind cleaved, in the aftermath of my wife's death, into an altered, bifurcated state I both inhabited and observed. On the one hand, I was a small creature standing on the crust of an empty world in a vast, cold universe, completely alone, with a galactic wind whistling around me. On the other hand, it seemed the natural world had been lit from within, and I was transfixed by that glow evident everywhere I looked. I moved through the world—pushed myself through it, really—to keep seeing the next luminous thing. All objects sentient. All events sacred.

\*

The radio squawks again, another parking violation and also a call for maintenance to repair a utility shed near the lighthouse. I take up my pack and hike along the base of a low

escarpment. Soon I enter a riparian clutch, singular and unexpected, an oasis in this otherwise dry expanse of low coastal scrub. And then I am out along the exposed bluffs. I spot the red bandana of a northern flicker and watch it for a while. Further along a pair of red-tailed hawks hovers over the pale-blond hills, hunting. I stand still a long time, watching. They hover and dive, hover and dive. They pop up, glide, circle round, and return to the same spot. After a long, long time, they catch nothing.

A group of three hikers pass me. The women are in shorts and sneakers. The man carries a light day pack. They're in their late sixties, a few years older than I. Trim and fit, swift and chatty. They blow past me with cheery hellos and disappear over the rise.

The red-tails move south. Two ravens catch up to the hunting pair. They dog the hawks, fly over the hunting ground, circle out over the beach bluffs, and swoop in again. I stand in the shade of a tree and watch.

At the Sculptured Beach trailhead, I size up the path. It's a steep trail along a narrow drainage down to the beach. My companion on this particular day of Trail Patrol—inchoate fear—organizes itself into questions. What if I can't make it back up? What if I get hurt on the beach and the tide comes in? Are there bees?

I hesitate at the trailhead. I imagine how I would feel back at my car at the end of the day if I allow myself to get this far and then turn away out of fear. Turn away from something new. I have never been to Sculptured Beach. My radio has been quiet all this time. I am out of range.

I force myself to continue down the trail. It briefly winds down a scrub hump and then narrows precipitously through a cut in the coastal bluffs, a corridor with cliff sides that are sheer and very close. The trail becomes a section of rough

steps cut with long plateaus and inhumanly high risers. Turning sideways, I step down from one riser to the next. The weight of my pack forces a harder landing than I would like. I hesitate on one for a moment, for no reason, really, perhaps an intuition, when a terrible crash comes from my left. I freeze. Sudden as a lightning strike, something passes in front of me. It is too fast. I cannot comprehend. My mind is wiped clean. An explosion of fear racks my body. I feel as if I am inside an enormous bell that has been hammered. And then I see the three deer. They had leapt from the sheer cliffside on my left, onto the path before me, and then up onto the cliffside to my right. I could have touched them, they came that close. One after another. Pow! Pow! Pow! Having descended the cliff to my left, they could not stop and wait for me to pass. They committed. By chance, we crossed one another's paths at that very moment, a miracle in a world of a thousand trillion encounters. The deer bound up the cliff in a few jumps. Once near the top, they pause to look at me. Three young does. Tails erect, ears like radar saucers. One ear twitches.

My adrenalated body feels wispy, as if cool air were blowing through holes in my existence. I feel like a ghost. We stare at one another, having cracked open time. I laugh. When else had I seen such a thing? Joined by these three wild characters that are poised on the hillside, looking over their shoulders at me, we are line breaks in a poem, something sudden and new, cheeky and fresh in the seconds before leaping up and over the ridge top.