Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Spotlight on MilSpeak and Middle West Presses

Major publishing house enthusiasm for war, mil, and vet-themed books has noticeably waned in the past few years, but two small presses, MilSpeak Foundation and Middle West Press, have emerged to fill much of the void. Between them MilSpeak and Middle West have recently published a remarkable number of interesting titles by new and established vet and vet-adjacent authors: MilSpeak published six titles in 2022 alone, with more coming this year, while Middle West has been nearly as prolific. The energetic output reflects the passion and vision of MilSpeak and Middle West's current executives, Tracy Crow and Randy Brown, respectively, both veterans and accomplished authors themselves. The vet-writer community is something of a subculture and vet-writing is something of a genre, but subcultures and genres require material manifestation. In this regard, MilSpeak and Middle West are carrying far more than their fair share of the load by publishing so much mil-writing. Frankly, their presence, let alone their accomplishment, within the contemporary war-writing scene has been a blessing. We are lucky to have them.

Tracy Crow is a former Marine and college writing instructor whose memoir *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine* and craft-guide *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Memoir* are well-worth pursuing. As good as these books are, I'm even more struck by Crow's publishing vision and eye for talent—she seems motivated by recognition that there is a surfeit of talent in the war-writing community that is underserved by the publishing industry. I first met Crow in 2018 at the War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air

Force Academy, which featured an astonishing number of contemporary vet-and-mil authors. Crow may well have been recruiting, for a number of authors present at the conference have since been published by MilSpeak or have books on the way.

Randy Brown, aka "Charlie Sherpa," is also a contemporary war-writing plank-holder, early-on offering war-writing commentary on his blog Red Bull Rising and frequently organizing panels at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference. In those early years, Brown was still in uniform in the Iowa National Guard, with whom he later deployed to Afghanistan post-service as an embedded journalist. Along the line, Brown stood-up Middle West Press as an outlet first for his own writing. Soon came his poetry volume *Welcome to FOB Haiku* and then *Twelve O'Clock Haiku*, as well as the vet-writing anthologies *Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War* and *Our Best War Stories.* Later came titles by other vets and fellow-travelers, with an emphasis on poetry, and more vet-centric anthologies.

I recently asked Crow and Brown to answer a short set of questions about their enterprises, and each responded fulsomely with shrewd and entertaining responses. Their stories offer lively insights into military press publishing and each is packed with guidance for aspiring writers. Crow answered each of my questions as I proposed them, while Brown composed a narrative that riffs on my questions. Read them below, please, and join me in saluting their efforts:

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Interview with Tracy Crow, President of MilSpeak Foundation

When you became President of MilSpeak, what was your sense of its potential? What was your vision for it?

My vision for MilSpeak is constantly evolving. In 2017 when I became president, my vision was limited to relaunching the Foundation's dormant writing workshop component. I'd already been leading workshops for women veterans and women military family members when MilSpeak's founder, Sally Parmer, a retired, disabled Marine Corps veteran, encouraged me to merge my workshop program with the Foundation's. A year later, we secured the Foundation's first grant, which was from Wounded Warrior Project® for the funding of two weekend writing retreats for women veterans and family members that could accommodate 200 participants and 11 faculty, each of whom was a vet or spouse with creative writing teaching experience and published books.

But Sally's vision when she founded MilSpeak in 2009 had included *two* components—writing workshops and book publishing. Her retired status had afforded her the time to manage both from 2009 to 2013, and MilSpeak's titles from this era are still available on our archived website and on Smashwords. In 2020, I received an unexpected, generous donation from a friend who had seen me lead workshops and wanted to fund

others; when I suggested we use her donation to relaunch the Foundation's publishing component, she was overjoyed to do so, and has been actively involved ever since as our CFO.

In 2022, MilSpeak released 6 books in paperback and ebook formats, and will release 5 in 2023, and at least 4 in 2024. Meanwhile, we continue to offer writing workshops, mostly online since the start of the pandemic.

Today my vision for the Foundation is so much larger than I'd dared to dream in 2017. Using Graywolf Press as a model, I hope to evolve MilSpeak Books and our newest imprint, Family of Light Books, as presses recognized for their artful efforts to explore and elevate our understanding of human consciousness.

What are the rewards of being a small-press publisher?

The rewards are numerous. The greatest reward, however, is being able to say yes to a writer with a meaningful, high-quality manuscript who has felt marginalized and shut out by other traditional publishers, and then the collaboration with that writer from copyediting to cover design, and beyond. Our team of freelance editors and designers work hard to ensure our authors enjoy every aspect of their publishing experience.

What catches your eye in regard to proposals/drafts submitted to you for possible publication?

While MilSpeak publishes books authored by veterans and family members, not all our books are *about* the military or even mention the military. Our mission is to support the creative endeavors from within our community, period. However, the quality of the manuscript—and I'm referring to everything from sentence level writing to use of sensory language, pacing, character development, and a narrative arc—determines whether we'll make an offer.

We've published an excellent coming-of-age debut memoir by

Norris Comer, a military family member, who spent his first summer after high school graduation salmon fishing in Alaska, and earned a lifetime of lessons. His memoir, *Salmon in the Seine: Alaskan Memories of Life, Death, & Everything In-Between,* has received so many awards this year I've lost count.

Another family member, Karen Donley-Hayes, reveals the heartbreaking story in her debut memoir, *Falling Off Horses,*of a friendship that began in high school over a mutual love for horses that survives numerous falls, a rollercoaster of love losses and triumphs, and finally, a heartbreaking diagnosis of a fatal illness.

Navy spouse, Samantha Otto Brown, author of the debut memoir, *Sub Wife: A Memoir From The Homefront,* lifts the curtain on nuclear submarine life, revealing how she and fellow wives keep themselves afloat during the occasional excruciating silence during their husbands' sub deployments.

Amber Jensen, wife of a National Guardsman, reveals the loneliness of pregnancy when her husband is deployed to Iraq, and the marital strains for a couple when a loved one returns from deployment, forever changed, in her debut memoir, *The Smoke of You: A Memoir of Love During & After Deployment.*

Our new imprint, Family of Light Books, has released a brilliant young adult novel, *American Delphi,* by military family member M.C. Armstrong, in which his main character, fifteen-year-old Zora Box, sets out to discover the true history of her family, including her father's secretive military mission, and finds herself at the center of an activist movement with international hashtag status following the tragic death of her best friend, a trans-teen. The Greensboro, North Carolina, Library selected *American Delphi* for its summer reading program, and Kirkus Review described the book as "An intriguing kaleidoscope…compelling….An engaging story of current events and social justice for teen

readers.”

And of course we’ve published books written by veterans about the military experience, such as Lauren Kay Johnson’s memoir, *The Fine Art of Camouflage,* about her service in Afghanistan as a public affairs officer, Kevin C. Jones’s short-story collection, *Collateral Damage*; RLynn Johnson’s debut novel, *Cry of the Heart*; and Jennifer Orth-Veillon’s collection, *Beyond Their Limits of Longing: Contemporary Writers & Veterans on the Lingering Stories of WWI.*

What have you learned about trying to market war-and-military themed books? What do books about war-and-military themes have to offer a general reading public?

As for the actual marketing, MilSpeak supports its authors and their releases as best as our financial and personnel resources allow, but we’ve also discovered that the most successful approach *for us* tends to follow an organic unfolding. I can’t say enough about the unwavering support from the military writing community, and this includes military publications as well. Our authors have also appeared on local television programming, podcasts, book clubs, book fairs, etc.

From a business aspect, MilSpeak boosts the success potential of its releases by offering the same wholesale discount to retailers as the large traditional publishers offer, and the same return policy for unsold books. Not many small presses can do this if they’re profit driven. As a nonprofit, everything from our sales after paying royalties to our authors gets earmarked for the publication process of another book by a veteran and family member.

I’ve been closely examining the cross-generational impact of military service for more than a decade now, especially the impact of combat service on families. My sincere hope is that human consciousness will more quickly evolve toward conflict

resolution that never includes war, and so our books tend to reflect the lesser known, yet gut-wrenching, aspects of how and why our world mindset seems trapped inside a warmongering matrix.

What MilSpeak titles are forthcoming? What is exciting about them?

In the fall, we're releasing two novels:

Releasing October 15 is *The Waiting World*, by Andria Williams, author of *The Longest Night* that earned a starred Kirkus Review, and that Entertainment Weekly described as "A stunning debut." In *The Waiting World*, Andria takes us back to the era just after WWI, and explores the seedy underworld of an American business tycoon, and that of his two Irish servant girls and their chauffeur-friend who are intent on forging a life on their terms, no matter the risks.

Releasing November 15 is *Changelings: Insurgence,* a captivating science-fiction thriller by Navy veteran and Cal Poly Pomona professor, Liam Corley, who shares that he drew from his experiences as a humanities professor and his overseas deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq to portray a futuristic world with a potentially harmful outcome for humanity *if* it eliminates what makes it truly human.

Spring 2024, we're releasing three titles—*The Celdan Heresies* (a fantasy) by Megan Carnes; *Shoalie's Crow* (a young adult novel by Karen Donley-Hayes); and *Hills Hide Mountains* (a novel) by Travis Klempan.

Fall 2024, we're releasing a collection of essays and poems about a family's cross-generational military service, *The Indignity of Knowing,* by University of Tennessee-Knoxville professor, Amber Nicole Albritton.

Randy Brown on the history and vision of Middle West Press:

I started Middle West Press as a sole proprietorship in 2003. I had been editor of a number of national Better Homes and Gardens-brand “how-to” newsstand magazines, and I continued to provide freelance writing, editing, and editorial project-management services to that sector, while also pursuing a graduate degree in architectural studies. My architecture thesis involved something you might call cultural-terrain analysis. Emplacing an object of public art as grit in the community oyster, to see what develops.

In 2008, my family and I started preparing for a deployment to Afghanistan. I was an Iowa National Guard citizen-soldier with one previous overseas deployment. Preparing for war, my daytime Army job involved internal communications and organizational lessons-learned. It wasn’t public affairs—although I often worked alongside the Public Affairs officer and NCO—but the brigade commander kept asking us all for ideas on best-practices and -policies regarding soldiers’ off-duty blogs and social media. The Internet was the Wild West back then. Sometimes, I didn’t know what to tell him.

There weren’t any training manuals, so I started my own off-duty blog under the pseudonym “Charlie Sherpa.” The exercise was equal parts “learn by doing” and “ask forgiveness, not permission.” People still call me “Sherpa,” particularly in veteran circles. It helps people find my published work. It

also helps differentiate between my efforts as a veteran-activist, and as a for-hire writing and editing professional.

I ended up not deploying to Afghanistan. Got the word about 10 days before Mobilization-day. I retired instead. However, I eventually went to Afghanistan on my own, embedding as civilian media with my former unit. That story became an essay, and has even been re-told in comic book form (*True War Stories*, Z2 Comics).

In 2015, I registered Middle West Press as a limited liability corporation in the State of Iowa, and expanded business operations as an independent book publisher of journalism, non-fiction, and poetry. Poet Lisa Stice joined us as an associate editor in 2023. In the past, we've also had the pleasure of working with guest editors such as the *Line of Advance* journal's Christopher Lyke, and Steve Leonard—the creator of the military-themed DoctrineMan!! cartoon.

We call ourselves a "micro-press"—we publish only one to four titles annually, and our projects can be driven as much by intellectual curiosity and artistic exploration as by potential profit. Our bottom line: We like to complicate and enrich readers' insights into the people, places, and history of the American Midwest—and the U.S. military.

What's the connection between "military" and "midwest"? Both are often overlooked by ivory tower academics, big city publishers, and others who seem to have their own pre-conceptions about what being a Midwesterner or veteran must mean. The truth is, not all veterans are "heroes." Neither are all veterans "broken." Reality is more center-mass than those tropes; reality is equal parts sublime, mundane, and human. To paraphrase Walt Whitman: We contain multitudes.

Veterancy shouldn't be flyover country—a place viewed from 40,000 feet every November 11. War poets—a term that can include veterans and mil-fam and anyone else willing to do the

work—can short-circuit expected narratives with amazing, everyday insights into hurt and loss and growth and reconciliation. I've often said that every U.S. citizen has a connection with the military, even if only as a voter and taxpayer. The fight for hearts and minds and empathy for what it means to go to war is out here. In the hinterlands. In the boonies.

Middle West Press published our first book of poetry for the same reason Sherpa started a blog: Learn by doing. Once we learn how to something—and to do it well—we try to teach others. The Army would call it "lessons-learned integration." In 2022, I tried to capture the philosophy in a short prose-poetry-memoir, *Twelve O'Clock Haiku.*

(Another lessons-learned tie-in: After the unit returned from Afghanistan, Middle West Press also worked with my former brigade public affairs colleagues, compiling and publishing a 668-page organizational history titled *Reporting for Duty: U.S. Citizen-Soldier Journalism from the Afghan Surge, 2010-2011*.)

Since 2015, we've serendipitously developed an expertise in curating and promoting "21st century war poetry." Many of these soldier-poets—but not all—are rooted in the American Middle West. Each collection we publish is intended to disrupt stereotypes of what it means to be an American veteran, or to be a member of a military family. After all, we're not all Navy SEALs and American Snipers. Some of us are F-16 pilots. Or Navy Corpsmen. Or Coast Guard mustangs. Or Army logistics soldiers.

We use poetry to build bridges of mutual empathy and understanding, between "military" and "civilian" audiences. Every poem is a conversation.

Our collections usually comprise more than 50 poems. In considering manuscripts, we look for unique voices, life-

experiences, and perspectives. We also like to see lots of chewy intersections and contradictions within a poet's veteran-identity. People are not just uniforms, after all—they are parents, spouses, hikers, professors, nurses, etc.

From a business standpoint, poetry books provide low-stakes opportunities for experimentation. We are a traditional-model publisher; in other words, we pay our authors—they never pay us. We don't fund our operations via submissions-fees or "contests." We don't ask our authors to pimp their friends and families for pre-sales. And, when we publish, we use Print-on-Demand (POD) technology—wherever it is sold in the world, a copy of a book is printed only when it is purchased. That way, no one ends up with 500 extra copies sitting in a garage or basement.

Our starting goal with poetry books is to sell more than 100 copies. Because we run on bootstrap-budgets, that covers most everything but editorial labor. Our poetry books are priced to be accessible: Usually about $12 recommended cover price.

With our first books, we ended up doing more than break-even, and we've been able to replicate those successes a number of times over. By the end of 2023, we'll have published 13 individual poetry collections, as well as anthologies of military-themed prose, poetry, and non-fiction.

Our poetry books are eye-catching, award-winning, and best-selling. One forthcoming collection is by a U.S. Navy Reserve intelligence officer, who also teaches American literature. One is by a U.S. Army veteran of Iraq, who now also writes gritty (and funny) crime fiction [Liam Corley, who is mentioned above by Tracy Crow]. A third is an Army veteran of Afghanistan—she's a divorced single-parent who recently gender-transitioned, after years of sobriety and therapy.

Our books can be found on the shelves of such places as the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, the Dean F. Echenberg War

Poetry Collection at the University of Texas-Austin, and even the Library of Congress.

We're particularly excited about an anthology forthcoming this November, *The Things We Carry Still: Poems & Micro-Stories about Military Gear*. Showcasing the work of approximately 60 war writers, the book will also feature a set of 10 discussion topics and writing prompts inspired by the book's content. The foreword is written by Vicki Hudson, a former U.S. Army officer who advocated dismantling "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policies.

We've got some crazy things planned for 2024 and beyond. For example, Middle West Press recently opened a call for a "Giant Robot Poems" anthology that will engage themes related to culture, war, and technology. Everything from Predator Drones to R2D2. We're also conceptualizing a potential first call for an anthology of short war fiction; it would likely be organized around a particular geographic or genre theme.

I continue to volunteer as poetry editor for the national non-profit Military Experience & the Arts' literary journal *As You Were*—a post I've held since about 2015. Editor-in-Chief David Ervin and other editors work hard to make that publication a welcoming, inclusive space. It's a great market for war-writers who are just starting to explore their stories on the page. They love working with established writers, too.

Middle West Press also underwrites a community of practice called The Aiming Circle (www.aimingcircle.com), a resource for writers who regularly engage military themes and topics. Our coverage helps writers identify potential book publishers, literary journals, academic publications, and other markets for their work. The Wrath-Bearing Tree is one of our most-recommended literary markets.

So that's a quick history of Middle West Press: Grit in the oyster. Learn by doing. Then teach others. Along the way,

build bridges and disrupt stereotypes.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Middle West Press: http://www.middlewestpress.com/

MilSpeak Foundation: https://milspeakfoundation.org/

Full disclosure: I have an essay in the MilSpeak anthology Beyond The Limits of Their Longing and another under consideration for an upcoming Middle West anthology.

Fiction by David Abrams: “Thank You”

Thank you Thank you for your service Thank you for going Thank you for coming back Thank you for not dying Thank you for taking the bullet, the mortar round, the shrapnel that is making its way to your heart by micromillimeters every year Thank you for eating that god-awful food gritted with sand so we don’t have to Thank you for eating Thanksgiving dinner on a paper plate Thank you for living in a metal shipping container for the first three months until they got their shit together and built proper housing for you and your men Thank you for driving a Humvee without armor while ambassadors and visiting senators and country music stars were going around in bulletproof SUVs Thank you for carrying a gun for slinging it across your body for wearing it like a heavy necklace that, after the first week, you hardly noticed was there Thank you for the magazine of bullets you polished every night Thank you for dripping with sweat Thank you for leaving your wife for eighteen months Thank you for telling your children you’d be back before they knew it Thank you for punching the walls of your shipping container Thank you for your bruised knuckles Thank you for screaming Thank you for crying quietly in the porta-potty when you thought no one was listening Thank you for enduring the stink and heat and filth of that entire year-and-a-half Thank you for writing back to that fifth-grade class when all you really wanted to do was sleep after a hard day of walking Thank you for looking through the tear-blurred sights of your rifle Thank you for crying over the dead Thank you for the sucking chest wound Thank you for the partial loss of your leg Thank you for your blood caught in a sterile metal tray shaped like a curled cheese puff Thank you for hating and killing Muslims Thank you for the hard clench of your jaw Thank you for thinking of us back here in the United States of Amnesia going about our war-free lives Thank you for our amber waves of grain purple mountains majesty bombs bursting in mid-air Thank you for Fox News and the pretty girl who reads the headlines Thank you for the freedom to fill my lungs so I can howl across the bandwidth of Twitter Thank you for this Big Mac and this Whopper and this Domino’s pizza Thank you for

almost dying in order that I might live to gain another twenty pounds and then Keto myself back to normalcy two years later Thank you for the chance to marry Kevin S., to fuck him, to bear his two children, and to file for divorce when I was through with all of that Thank you for giving me the freedom to move from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon Thank you for my Golden Retriever Thank you for my God-given right to enjoy the rain Thank you for my new breasts and the blue pill which cures my erectile dysfunction Thank you for infomercials and the operators who are standing by Thank you for this cigarette and this beer and this fried pork rind Thank you for the chance to uncork this ’41 Cabernet and eat this Bernaise-smothered filet Thank you for the three Starbucks in my neighborhood Thank you for *American Idol* Thank you for my amazing Amazon Kindle Thank you for the Mall of America Victoria’s Secret Dippin Dots The Gap Best Buy and the weight of shopping bags that turn my fingers white Thank you for my Prius and the $3.34 per gallon which fills it Thank you for giving your blood for my oil Thank you for leaving and returning Thank you for limping through the airport on your half leg Thank you for that little American flag sticking from a side pocket of your rucksack (long may she wave) Thank you for your smile on a stiff upper lip and the way you tried to conceal your limp by swinging both legs in equal cadence like you were in a Sousa march Thank you for catching my eye Thank you for allowing me to stop you on the concourse Thank you for taking this stranger’s hand Thank you for saying You’re welcome No problem Glad to do it.

The original version of “Thank You” was published in F(r)iction Magazine in 2015.

New Fiction by Cory Massaro: “Gran Flower”

I fill the big bucket with soap and water and start heading across the field. It’s early on a Sunday and Gran Flower will want his solar cells cleaned, which they say isn’t really necessary, but Gran insists it helps. So I have woken up early and am hoping to reach Gran before he starts screeching and

riling up the crows.

I pass through our low, flat garden plot. It used to be a marsh, and the rain still feels free to run downhill and stay awhile. From there, I head up the dusty northern hill, under the checkerboard shade of its acre-wide awning, half solar panels to farm the sun, half glass to keep the dust dry so we can farm that too. Then, descending the hill, I reach the desiccated riverbed fringed with crusty little succulents, which is where our property ends and the Gibsons' begins. Gran wanted to be set up there last Sunday so he could spend the week swearing about them, the Gibsons, his synthetic voice cracking and popping at max volume, then—I imagine—going silent with awe the moment he saw a quail. The Gibsons don't even live there anymore; the Government removed them decades ago. Gran knows that, but I think he just likes the solitude and the quail and a place to say "motherfucker" where the Holy Father can really hear him.

I get to the property line, and there's Gran just where I left him.

From behind, Gran Flower looks like an aluminum sculpture of a sunflower. He has a long metal stem which sticks into the ground, and about five feet up, big metal leaves curl outward and upward. Hexagonal solar cells tessellate on the leaves' upper surface; it is these I'll need to clean.

As I walk around to face Gran, his head comes into view. It's his own human face from before he was a Gran, cast (I assume faithfully) in metal like Agamemnon's death mask. His head emerges from among the petals, as though they were a high starched collar and he a count.

"Hi, Gran," I say.

WHO ARE YOU? comes the scratchy monotone of his synthesized voice. He's probably filled up the tiny thumb drive stuck behind his head. Swearing at the Gibsons and God and country

occupies a surprising amount of writable memory. He’s probably dumped unimportant stuff like who I am, who anybody is now.

I take a solid state drive from my pocket. This one’s much more capacious but nearly full just the same: eighty of a hundred petabytes. “Just a second, Gran. Don’t be scared.” I remove the small drive he’s currently using and swap it out for the other. Eighty petabytes of Gran Flower, the Gran that tells me stories, the Gran I went to the city and the museum with. My Gran.

GUHGUHGUHGUH SSSHIIIIT SHIT SSSSSSHHHHHIVER MY STAMEN, goes Gran. He gets glitchy when I swap drives since I am effectively replacing a bit of his brain.

“I’m here to clean your solar cells,” I say.

OH BEES OH BEES OH NO OH OH OH NO OH JONAS, he says, WEREN’T YOU HERE JUST AN HOUR AGO?

~

Gran Flower would be my sextuple-great-grandfather. He was among the first wave of Grans, or at least the first after the program became public.

A group of scientists had found some birds living in the most uninhabitably toxic places on earth, these big landfills full of old phones and computers and batteries. Places where the temperature reached 45, 50 Celsius all year round, and the ground was so acidic you could never go barefoot. The people had to wear masks and hazard suits and take pills, and their hair still fell out when they hit thirty.

But somehow the birds were doing fine—thriving, even. The way pigeons and rats live off human cities’ heaps of garbage, and not just live but live large, this one species of crow had found a way to turn people’s insistent fuck-ups into vitality and food.

So the scientists did the logical thing and caught a bunch of the crows and cut them open. The birds' brains were all in various stages of conversion to metal. So they cut the brains open too and discovered that the metal was forming these perfect replicas of the nervous structure, down to little conductive nanotubes where there had been axons and dendrites.

Then they started experimenting on people. It was about two hundred and fifty years back, Gran Flower says. Nobody knew why all of a sudden there were so few homeless people. The poor and desperate just started disappearing off the streets, out of the campers they lived in, out of the factories and warehouses they worked in. People thought the president must be doing a great job, the economy improving, all that. But really some corporation was just plucking people up and taking them to labs to feed them bits of old laptops and see what would happen. And eventually that same president, who was president for life and had already had all his organs replaced three times, disappeared also.

The government held a candle for him and somehow installed an interim president. Then, five or six years on, the executive office called a press conference. Gran says everybody watched on the Internet as three secret servicemen wheeled something out on a hand cart under a giant purple mantle. They brought it out and stood it up and whipped off the mantle and revealed the likeness of the president, standing nine feet tall and made of titanium. A big POTUS golem affixed eternally to a podium.

When the golem started to speak they realized it was really him, it was President Gran as he came to be called, and not a sculpture or robot or art stunt. He explained the Gran technology and said we had finally achieved immortality, "we" being wealthy and powerful people (but he made it sound like the United States of America), and "immortality" being innately desirable. Then a bunch more Grans came out on stage under an aurora of flags as coronets blared. Some were carried

or pushed, and some walked under their own power on weirdly-jointed metal centaur limbs. They were all these old rich guys, CEOs and the like, whose disappearances over the years had garnered various degrees of conspiracy-theoretic attention.

President Gran served as head of state for thirty more years that way. My Gran says he went crazy after that—REAL CALIGULA STUFF. When President Gran declared himself a pacifist and a socialist and an environmentalist, the Senate realized he was too far gone and voted to impeach, then melt him down. They then released a series of commemorative dollar coins, made of titanium and bearing his image.

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I'm cleaning Gran's solar panels and explaining to him that it's been a year since we last loaded this version of his memory, not an hour. He says it's disorienting when somebody swaps out his writable memory, like waking up from one dream into another. But he understands why I did it. The last time I left him with a full memory like that, he raved for a week straight and could barely string together a sentence by the end of it.

I'M GLAD YOU LEFT ME ON THIS SPOT, Gran says. THIS USED TO BE A RIVER, AND THE GODDAMN GIBSONS LIVED ON THE OTHER SIDE BUT THEY KEPT TO THEIR OWN, AND IT WAS PEACEFUL DOWN HERE BY THE WATER. THE DUCKS USED TO SPEND SUMMERS HERE, DUNKING THEIR BILLS UPSTREAM TO CATCH GUPPIES UNDER THE SHADE OF THE OAKS.

There's not a tree for kilometers in either direction now, but I believe him.

~

Grans choose how their bodies look. Or, more often, their families or caretakers or lack of money choose for them. In Gran Flower's time, they couldn't efficiently compress neural

structures to digital memory, so a Gran would only be able to remember new things for a few hours or so. This meant their minds were basically static: they could hold a conversation, but eventually they'd start to forget how the conversation had begun, and who you were, and hey why were you talking to them anyway?

Gran Flower hadn't been able to afford the procedure; it was a benefit for military service. He'd been in The War for a long time: central Asia, then eastern Asia; then all over Europe; then putting down dissidents in unquiet cities throughout the U.S. But it was all The War. He got a leg and an arm blown off, so while he was becoming a Gran—doing the breathing exercises, reading the books, feeling his body and brain ossify—he designed his floral body plan. And once he was metal and his internal organs were useless, the family took him to a metalworker who forged his torso and remaining limbs down into a stem and welded the leaves on.

We went to Chicago once, Gran and I, to visit my mom's side of the family. They had owned a few properties there in the city, and had been pretty well-off from landlording, enough that my great-great-great grandmother had been able to become a Gran. Gran Sticks, they called her. She had been really into video games. Of course now we don't have "games" as such, just massive virtual worlds that you have to remind yourself every few minutes aren't real. But in her time, you sat in front of the computer with a controller or a brain shunt. So that's what Gran Sticks does. She plays games on a computer so antiquated the family can barely find parts for it.

That side of the family's down to just one house now. They rent half of it to make a little cash and live huddled in a few rooms downstairs. You can hear Gran Sticks cackling at all hours in the singsong tones of her cutting-edge voice synthesizer as she blasts away virtual Communists, Fascists, extraterrestrials, insects, or disgruntled workers. The family wipe her memory once a week and delete her games' saves, too,

so they don’t have to buy her new ones.

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WHAT ARE WE PLANTING THIS YEAR? Gran asks.

I’ve explained to my version of Gran the dust bowl, that we can’t plant much anymore, how it’s mostly a solar and sand farm. “We’ll have okra, and some wild cherries, black-eyed peas, nopales.”

THE CROWS WILL BE WANTING TO GET AT THE CHERRIES, I EXPECT, says Gran. SET ME UP THERE FOR THE WEEK; I’LL SEE IF I CAN’T SCARE ‘EM OFF.

Even after two hundred years of dust bowling, and climate change, and droughts, Gran still knows how to work the land. And I think he enjoys playing scarecrow.

I pull his stem up out of the ground and strap him across my back, into a kind of bandolier I’ve made for this purpose, and start walking.

~

That’s how I got Gran to Chicago on our trip—I carried his long, light body. I hitched a ride in the bed of a pickup truck from the farm to the train station with Gran balanced on my crossed legs. On the train, I leaned him against the window, and his metal nose tapped the glass as we bumped over rail ties.

Walking the streets after our visit with Gran Sticks, I kept Gran Flower in the bandolier, slung diagonally across my back. The sidewalks were full of people and Grans of all shapes. Somebody had placed their Gran in a baby stroller, a smooth little eggplant of a Gran with an artfully etched face. A pair of Grans across the street terrorized the sidewalk in wheeled go-cart bodies, their heads mounted like hood ornaments. An old man held hands with a humanoid Gran and rested his head on

the round chrome shoulder. The pair trundled along aristocratically, careless of the impatient crowds.

We didn't head back to the train station immediately but checked out the natural history museum, where they had an exhibit about human evolution. I walked Gran down the line of taxidermy and animatronics, from rhesuses to orangutans to gorillas, bonobos and chimpanzees, Neanderthals and Denisovans. Finally us, "us" being humans who haven't become Grans.

At the end was an art piece consisting of two busts: a furious-looking chimpanzee and a surprised, wilted-looking old lady. The chimpanzee wore glasses with an archaic, silver chain around the frames, and he stared the old lady down. The old lady wore a plastic tiara.

In front of the art stood a placard outlining an evolutionary theory. It talked about how, sometimes, evolution works by lopping segments off an organism's life span or adding new ones. How maybe humans were just chimps that never grew up all the way. "Neotenous apes," the theory was called. It noted that most other mammals stop being so plastic and tolerant and apt to learn after a certain age. They get set in their ways, like an old dog you can't teach new tricks to.

I peeked over my shoulder at Gran, his stem crossing my back like a greatsword, his petals nearly poking me in the eye. Sweat soaked my still-flesh ape back where the stem pressed into my skin. Gran was a bit languid in Chicago, the weather being so cloudy and he being so solar-powered. But I thought maybe this metamorphosis into a sleepy, near-deathless Gran was like humans' next stage of life, the one we neotenous apes were missing. Like old dogs who can't learn new tricks but somehow know when their human has a seizure, or that an earthquake's coming, or not to trust the guest you've invited home. We won't all reach that stage. Unless I get rich like Gran Sticks, or go to The War and manage not to die like Gran

Flower, I'll live a few short decades as an unfinished mammal, sweating and stinking and never setting in my ways.

~

I arrange Gran in the bandolier and take him to the cherry orchard. He's facing backward and telling me bits of family history as we pass.

THAT'S WHERE WE SET UP THE STILL; OH, THE PARTIES WE'D HAVE AND THE MOONSHINE FLOWING TILL SUNUP, Gran says, AND AUNTIE STERN'S FIDDLE COMMANDED OUR FEET TILL THE DEVIL BANGED A BROOM ON HELL'S CEILING.

I am trying not to think about average memory formation rates. How many megabytes per minute are filling that drive, the one that holds my Gran. How many more times I'll be able to talk to him like this. When the drive fills, that's it, and I don't have anywhere to back him up to. He'll start babbling and swearing as virtual neurons half-overwrite each other. And I guess I'll have to delete this bit of him, the memory of Chicago and the museum, and introduce myself again: "Hi Gran. You don't know me; I'm your great-great-great- …"

We reach the orchard and I plant him. I wipe away a tear. SWEATING SO MUCH? DON'T TELL ME THAT LITTLE WALK WORE YOU OUT, BOY. HA. HA. HA. WHEN WILL I SEE YOU NEXT?

"Soon, Gran," I say, as I remove the solid state drive.

OH NO OH OH OH NO, he says.

New Poetry by Todd Heldt: “This Is A Drill, This Is Only A Drill” and “Suffer The Children”

ACTION IS PRETTY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

This is a drill. This is only a drill.

They voted to abolish history.
There had been no commercials.
We didn’t know which wrong to fear most,
and nobody got the joke.
When the polls ran out of ballots,
somebody hurled a beer bottle
through a church’s stained-glass window.
Peace officers deployed
pepper spray for the white kids
and bullets for the black.
You should expect to see things
like this in democracy. Because
the cost is always
what the market will bear.
We all went home or to jail,
or to hospital or morgue, grateful.
America in action is pretty,
the Blue Angels swooping in for the kill
as spectators cheer from the beaches below.
We don’t even know who we are fighting.
Someone is crossing himself.
Someone is crossing the border.
War is just how we learn geography,
and someone scaled a wall
to pick your corn. Good people
are unarmed and
defenseless in church,
and no one will tell us straight
which group of not us we should bomb.

Suffer the Children

12000 kids in detention
300 shot dead in their schools
200 bombed by drones
the ones we don’t know to mention

and the ones the future will starve
my two who are safe in their bedroom
who cry when they are scared

New Poetry by Justice Castañeda: “There Will Be No Irish Pennants”

PRESSED AND WITHOUT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

There Will Be No Irish Pennants

“Discipline organizes an analytical space.” [1]

Field Day & Inspection.

Windows shut blinds open half-mast. Sinks will be bleached, faucets are to be pointed outward, and aligned. The toilet paper roll will be full. The shower handle will be left facing directly down towards the shower floor. Waste basket will be empty, cleaned out with no stains or markings, set between the secretary and the window, where the front corner meets, farthest from the door.

Beds will be made showing eighteen inches of white; six beneath and twelve above the fold. The ends will be neatly tucked at a 45 degree angle. One pillow will be folded once and tucked in the pillow case.

A shoe display will be at the foot of the bed and will consist of one pair of jungle boots, one pair of combat boots, go-fasters and shower shoes, in this order. All laced left over right.

Each lock will be fastened on each locker and secretary, all set to ‘0.’

Inside one wall locker, hanging up there will be: one all-weather coat, one wolly pully sweatshirt, one service ‘A’ blouse, two long sleeve khaki shirts—pressed with the arms folded inward, four short sleeve khaki shirts, three cammie blouses, two pair of green trousers, three pair of cammie trousers, and one pair of dress blue trousers, in this order. All shirts will be pressed and buttoned up. All trousers will be pressed and folded over. All clothing will hang facing

right. All hangers will face inwards, separated uniformly by one inch. On the shelf inside the locker, starting at the inner most edge, there will be six green skivvy shirts and three white skivvy shirts—folded into six-by-six squares, six pair of underwear folded three times, six pair of black boot socks, folded once.

The markings will be last name, first name, middle initial, stamped on white tape, no ink spots or bleeding. All collared shirts will be marked centered on the collar; on all trousers and belts on the left inseam, upside down so when folded over they read right side up. On all underwear markings will be centered along the rear waistband. On all socks markings will be on the top of the left sock. All covers will be marked on the left inner rim.

On top of the wall locker covers will be placed, from left to right as staring at the wall locker, one barracks cover with service skin, one piss cover, one utility cover—pressed and without Irish pennants.

Irish pennants are not permitted.

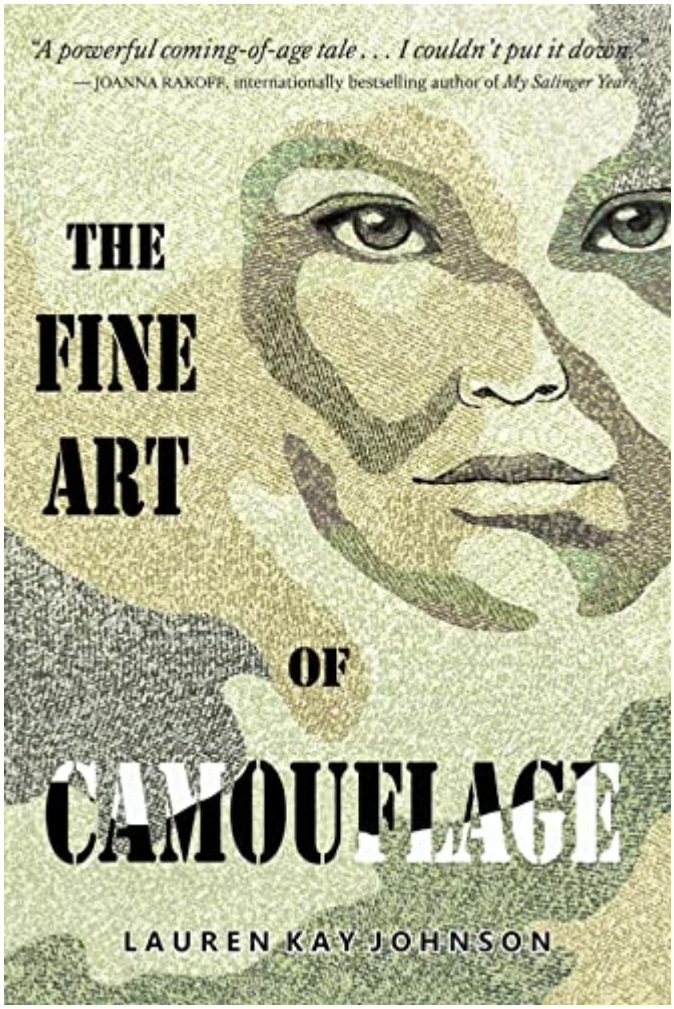
Stand up straight. Arms to your side, thumbs along the seams of the trousers, shoulders back, chin up. Heels and knees together, with feet pointed outwards at a 45 degree angle.

Eyes. Click.
Ears. Open.

Attention.

[1] Michel Foucault. Discipline and punish. 143
[2] Two faucets in each barracks room.
[3] Irish Pennants are loose threads or strings coming out from the stitching.

New Review from Larry Abbott: Lauren Kay Johnson's "The Fine Art of Camouflage"



Camouflage can exist on a number of levels. There is the basic military definition of disguising personnel, equipment, and installations to make them "invisible" to the enemy. There is the idea of blending into one's surroundings to be unobserved, hiding in plain sight. There is the connotation of pretending, concealing, falsifying. One could add that there is also self-camouflage, where one pretends or conceals or falsifies to others and even the self. These latter connotations are more relevant to Lauren Johnson's *The Fine Art of Camouflage*. Indeed, her epigraph is a quote from Bryce Courtenay's *The Power of One*: "'*I had become an expert at camouflage. My precocity allowed me, chameleonlike, to be to each what they required me to be*.'" The book follows the familiar three-part pattern of going to war, being in country, and coming back home. The twenty-five chapters in five major sections, utilizing copious flashbacks, interweave all three phases of her military experience, along with the gradual peeling away of self-camouflage leading to a more truthful vision of self and others.

Lauren Johnson comes from a line of familial military service. Her grandfather, his two brothers, her mother's father-in-law, and her mother, all served. When Johnson was seven, her mother deployed to Riyadh in December of 1990 as a reservist Army nurse in the first Gulf War. These months were a time of uncertainty and stress for the young Lauren. She feels emotionally disconnected and, of course, worried about her mother's safety. However, when her mother returns in March of 1991 "the world was whole again." It seems as if everything has returned to normal: "Then, gradually, the Army faded into the background again, one weekend a month, two weeks a year. The blip, Desert Storm, followed us all like a shadow, not unpleasant, but always there." Her mother would give Veterans' Day talks at local schools, and Johnson felt immense pride about her heroic mom. However, what Johnson did not recognize at the time was her mother's struggle to re-integrate into "normal life," the camouflage her mother wore psychologically

upon her return: "She didn't discuss her terror at nightly air raids, or her aching loneliness, or her doubts about her ability to handle combat. I didn't know she carried trauma with her every day, . . . I didn't understand her earnestness when we made a family pact that no one else would join the military, because one deployment was enough." Later in the book, her realization of her mother's war experiences comes again to the fore: "I saw the infallible hero that I wanted to see. I saw what I was allowed to see; because we needed her, and because she knew no other good option, Mom spent twenty years swallowing her trauma."

Eleven years after her mother's return, during Johnson's senior year in high school, that pact is nullified by 9/11. Upon hearing news reports that day she writes that "Something inside me awakened" and she feels "a latent patriotism, the subconscious pull to serve, like my grandfathers had before me, and to emulate my hero, my mom." She takes and passes a ROTC exam and eventually signs a contract to be become a cadet during her four years in college. After graduating as an Air Force 2nd lieutenant she has a month-long post to Mali. Finally, in 2009, after three months of training, she deploys for a nine- month tour to Afghanistan. She is optimistic about the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) objectives, working with locals and actually helping people. At the same time, she is torn, because going to Afghanistan "felt like a betrayal . . . because part of me . . . wanted nothing more than to be a good daughter." The theme of split emotions is one of the major motifs in the book and reflects the idea of camouflage, putting a positive spin on a less than ideal situation. In one email to her family she raved about her living conditions at FOB Gardez in Paktia Province, but she also admits to herself that "Other details, like the knot corkscrewed around my stomach and the choke hold of fear on my mind, I left unsaid." Similarly, she also fears that, despite outward appearances and newly-minted rank, she would not measure up: "I was afraid I wouldn't be good at taking or giving orders, that I

would fail, somehow, as a military officer, and in doing so I would betray my family history."

The book actually begins in May of 2009 while Johnson is undergoing three months of training at Camp Atterbury in Indiana to prepare for deployment to Gardez. She is an Air Force public affairs officer, a self-described "desk job chick," now armed with an M9 and M4. As a member of a PRT headed for Paktia she is not expecting combat, but the team has to be prepared for any eventuality. In this particular exercise she has to clear a village. The exercise ends on a mixed note: as she charges into a plywood room a "bomb" of pink paint explodes and covers her, leading to her new nickname, Combat Barbie. Even though there is laughter and a hint of humiliation in this result, at the same time the incident was a catalyst, giving her a sense of accomplishment: "When I charged into the room, I looked professional and confident, like I belonged. And for once since arriving in Indiana, I didn't feel out of place. I didn't feel like a displaced Air Force desk officer, or a city girl, or even a woman. I felt like a soldier." Her feelings of achievement and optimism in pre-deployment training will gradually give way to doubts about her role and what exactly the mission in Afghanistan is all about.

For example, she writes an op-ed and a commentary about the August 2009 Afghanistan elections ("I commended the success of the Afghan security forces and the bravery of the voters"). In the back of her mind she seems to recognize that there was a discrepancy between the successful appearance of the elections as presented in her articles and the reality of what actually occurred: fraud, violence, desertion by the Afghan security forces. Her generally rosy view was countered by Thomas Ruttig, an observer for the independent Afghan Analysts Network. In his response he calls her articles '"plain propaganda.'" She writes that in September of 2009 she disagreed with his assessment but, she adds, "In April 2010, I

agreed." This is the start of her questions about her role in the mission to "win hearts and minds."

Another incident illustrating the dissonance between "good news" and reality involves an elderly detainee who is being compassionately released and sent home. She looks forward to interviewing the man, with coalition forces radio DJs, because he could be "an ally in our information war." He could speak to local citizens about the merciful Americans and tell how thankful he was for his release. However, the man is not the terrorist she expected but an old man who did not know why he was originally detained. She admits: "And all I felt was pity." The interview turns into a disaster and the public affairs team has to edit out awkward details from the interview. Johnson later writes a blog post which puts a positive spin on the incident by writing that the "detainee spoke kindly of his treatment," adding "that his eyes 'were also thankful,'" but admits that "I don't know if it was a conscious lie. . . . Mostly, though, I simply wanted that line to be true. . . . More importantly, I needed the line to be true for myself."

In October 2009, around the time of her 26th birthday, she helps prepare for a visit by the American ambassador (who never shows) by diverting resources and personnel to give the appearance of safety and progress ("For the ambassador, we flipped the notion on its head: our security mission was to *create* an illusion"). In addition, there was a communications failure in attempting to develop a media training session for government officials. She takes the brunt of the attacks on this failure. Gradually, as the negative incidents, blaming, and finger-pointing cascade she concludes that her duties were becoming more and more meaningless at best, counterproductive at worst, "the claims [the PR team were making] were starting to feel exaggerated, the efforts sleazy." The title of chapter 14 succinctly represents her outlook on "the mission": "F*#K."

Part Four/chapter 16 opens in spring 2013 after she is well out of Afghanistan. But as she watches *Zero Dark Thirty* with a friend she flashes back to December 2009, the deaths of CIA agents at Camp Chapman, which puts a chill of paranoia, loss of trust toward Afghans, and anger on Gardez. In January, 2010 threats escalated, including a possible suicide bomber at Gardez and mounting civilian casualties. She tells, in an extended sequence in chapter 18, "The Fog of War," of a joint U.S. and Afghan raid to capture a suspected insurgent. Unfortunately, three civilian women, one pregnant, were killed, and initial reports blame the Taliban for the deaths. However, as the story unfolds, certainty turns into ambiguity. As the possibility arises that American troops were culpable, she has to produce euphemistic reports: "I hated the way the words tasted coming out of my mouth, and how easily they came, even when I fought against them. I hated that there was nothing I could do but tap dance, stall, and repeat hollow command messages." She is in a continual psychological battle between telling the truth and loyalty to the mission ("Even when my emotions ran counter to the tasks of my job, duty always won out"). She continues: "A new kind of fear stalked me too. Maybe I was not only not changing the world for the better; maybe I was actually making it worse. What if my IO messages, radio broadcasts, and media talking points—all promoting support for the war, the American military, and the Afghan government— what if those messages sent ripples. And what if, on either side, people got caught in those ripples. And what if people died. My job isn't life or death, I'd always told myself. But what if it was?" As the chapter ends, though, she cannot bring herself to tell the truth, writing "I still wanted to be a good officer."

On March 2, 2010, replacements arrive at Gardez, she departs a week or so later, and after nine months in country arrives in Tampa, and 18 years from her mother's deployment reunion she re-unites with her family. Hovering in the background, though, is a sense of alienation. She writes that the first two weeks

back, before returning to PA at Hurlburt, were “a period of numbness . . . driving aimlessly around town . . . my brain lingered in Afghanistan.” She is caught between two worlds and unable to reconcile either. She is hit hard by the deaths of friends, two by car accident in Scotland and two by a plane crash in Afghanistan. While earlier she was able to emotionally distance herself from death, she is now haunted by the faces of the dead: “Now, faces swam like holograms across my vision. Ben, Amanda, the seven CIA agents, the pregnant Afghan woman, the seventeen Fallen Comrades of Paktia Province.”

She takes a short trip to Seattle as a “lifeline” but receives orders to South Korea. She faces a dilemma: report, or decline the orders and finish her military career. She chooses the latter, and “would be a civilian by Christmas.” She also learns that U.S. forces were responsible for the deaths in the Gardez raid. This information, among other factors, begins her downward spiral into depression, excessive drinking, and PTSD. When she returns to Florida she decides to get help. The counseling seems pro forma and she does not immediately return for a second session, although the counselor does recommend that Johnson talk with her parents about her experience. Her “confessions” are the first step in regaining control of her life and stripping off the camouflage: “Talking to my parents was a catalyst for a conversation that would go on for years to come: an open discussion with my mom and often my dad, sometimes my siblings and grandparents, about our wars: how they’d affected us, all the ways they were different, and all the surprising ways they were the same.” She also realizes that “War, I was starting to understand, was part of my inheritance too.” Another step she takes is to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College in Boston. Her writing has appeared in a number of newspapers, magazines, and journals, and in the anthologies *Retire the Colors*, *The Road Ahead*, and *It’s My Country Too*.

In her Epilogue dated August, 2021, she writes of the traces that PTSD left on her: "In many ways, my brain has spent the eleven years since my deployment withdrawing from Afghanistan." She adds: "Still, the military always bubbled under the surface." This included a dysfunction marriage to an Army veteran. It takes her five years to get her "bearings."

As the book ends the "bearings" seem to have held: she is remarried and has two-month old twin daughters. But images of Afghanistan still cast a shadow. The year she became a mother was the year of the withdrawal. Reflecting on her daughters she recalls photos of Afghan children being handed over from their families for evacuation. She writes, "I try to wrap my head around the kind of desperation that would lead a parent to surrender a baby." She wonders if her life took a different turn would she be standing on the tarmac of the Kabul airport; perhaps she would be interviewing heroic Marines and writing uplifting press releases. She wonders if she could, or should, dissuade her daughters from following in her military bootsteps, and she wonders further about the young Afghan girl she met eleven years ago, and her musings speak to the unreconciled questions raised by "the mission": "She must be a young woman now, likely with children of her own. I hope she experienced a glimpse of the brighter future we promised. I worry she is among those seeking refuge, and that she may not find it." Have the promises, and the hopes, been fulfilled? There is no way to tell. But there is a lasting truism: wars are never over.

In 1939 Vera Brittain, in her notes to "Introduction to War Diaries," ponders her World War 1 experiences as a nurse and how those experiences affected her post-war sense of self. She writes: "For myself to-day I feel sorrow no more; my grief is for those I have known & loved who were cut off before their time by the crass errors of human stupidity. I can only give thanks to whatever power directs the seemingly unjust and haphazard course of human existence that I have survived the

sad little ghost of 1917 sufficiently long to know that the blackest night – though it never ceases to cast its shadows – may still change, for long intervals of time, to the full sunlight of the golden day" (16). Over eighty years later Lauren Johnson echoes this sentiment in "War and Peace of Mind," one of the final chapters in *The Fine Art Of Camouflage*: "In the eerie quiet, I thought about the ripples I sent in my IO job, imagining them joining with other ripples sent by other naïve soldiers and aid workers, feeding a tsunami that swept across the country, swallowing people like Ben and the seven CIA agents and the pregnant Afghan woman. I couldn't close my eyes without seeing their faces, or conjuring other nameless faces yet to be swept away." Yet she also speaks, if not of Brittain's "full sunlight of the golden day," of a dawn that can dispel the darkness of Afghanistan, depression, and PTSD.

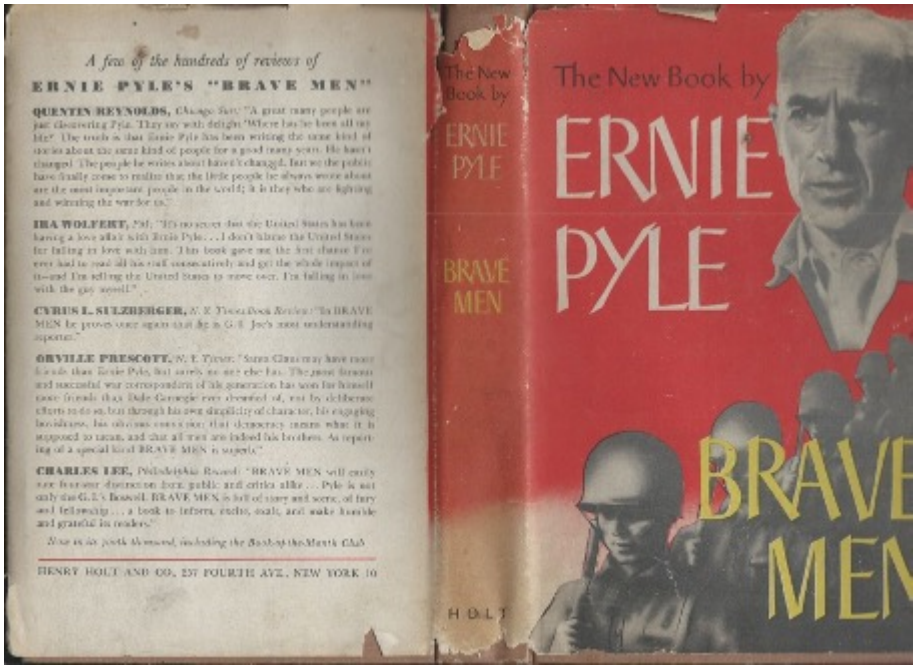
The Fine Art of Camouflage by Lauren Kay Johnson, Liberty, NC: Milspeak Foundation, 2023.

Website: https://laurenkayjohnson.com/

Brittain, Vera. *Chronicle of Youth: The War Diary 1913-1917*. Ed. by Alan Bishop and Terry Smart. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982.

New Review from Rachel Kambury: David Chrisinger's "The Soldier's Truth: Ernie

Pyle and the Second World War”



The War of Little Things

A review of David Chrisinger’s *The Soldier’s Truth: Ernie Pyle and the Story of World War II*

“I’ve got something I want you to have,” Grandpa Art told me, apropos of nothing, “wait here.” Pre-double knee replacement, it took him some time to climb the stairs to the second floor of the moderately chintzy two-story house he shared with his wife, my Grandma Jo, in Delaware, Ohio. My dad—their eldest—and I had flown out from Oregon for 4th of July weekend that year, a rare trip to his home state for a visit with the grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

A deeply awkward teenager at the best of times, I was also deeply uncool at 15-16, and as such I had no issue leaving home if it meant getting to spend time with my only living grandfather. It certainly wasn’t a hardship: Arthur Kambury was a delight to be around. He was always quick with a funny

story, a fascinating family anecdote, or a jazzy riff on his old trumpet. He loved to entertain people, especially family. His laugh was infectious, and I can still hear the whistling sibilance of his S's when he spoke.

Our love for each other was born out of our relationship as granddaughter and grandfather, naturally, but it was deepened by our shared interest in World War II history. Unlike a lot of the men I'd already encountered in my young life who'd questioned, even interrogated, my sincere interest in the war, Grandpa Art never so much as blinked. It would be years before I truly understood how important that steadiness was to me, and how profound an expression of love it was on his part.

When he returned from his sun-drenched office on the second floor, soft shoes chafing against low-pile oatmeal colored carpet, Grandpa Art was smiling. Coming to a standstill in front of me at the dining room table where he'd left me in eager anticipation (what kid doesn't love getting a present from their favorite grandparent?), he barely paused to catch his breath before holding out his gift to me.

"A book!" is what I think I said. Probably, since that's my usual reaction to such a gift. (Honestly, I think my obsession with books is hereditary.) Grandpa Art certainly loved them. And I could tell he loved *this* book, if only because it was already so visibly worn, and it was one of the few books he ever gifted me—knowing, perhaps, that I wouldn't need a lot of help growing my own personal library over my lifetime. But the way he handed it to me, the way he held my shoulder for a moment after, the way he talked to me about it, felt like I was being given the one book he thought I needed to own *now*, that he needed to give me himself, before I followed this path of study, however informal, any further.

Wrapped with librarian-level precision in crystal clear cellophane, the faded remnants of the brick red first edition hardcover dust jacket were still easy to read. The pages

inside were yellow with age and probably smoke from my grandpa's four-decade, four-pack-a-day smoking habit; the text was printed in columns of two, a hallmark of books printed during the war.

I was most struck, however, by the face on the cover looking over my left shoulder: Below a broad bald dome haloed by cotton whisps of white hair (features, I immediately thought, that closely resembled my own grandpa) was the disembodied head and neck of a middle-aged man who wore a furrowed expression of consternation above a thin-lipped open mouth, hovering large over a shadowy line of American soldiers, their helmeted heads dipped low, stretching backwards, shrinkingly, until they seemed to fall off the edge of the jacket and into space itself.

This was my introduction to Ernie Pyle.

***

Years after Grandpa Art gave me his first edition wartime copy of Pyle's bestselling *Brave Men*, I jumped at the chance to receive a galley of David Chrisinger's latest and, in a breathless ask to my fellow WBT editors, to write about this remarkable travel-memoir-meets-biography about that whip-thin chain-smoking Hoosier who told America as much of the unvarnished story of World War II as he humanly could (and as much as the war department's censors would allow).

A prescient and engrossing story, Chrisinger intricately weaves moments of memoir and hard journalism with incredibly granular and well-rendered studies of Pyle's life, the parts of war he witnessed, and the people he met, knew, and loved. This is history writing, which means these are rigid threads—I can begin to imagine the author caning a chair—and Chrisinger maneuvers them over and under each other with enviable deftness.

More importantly, he prioritizes them correctly: on the

biographical relief map of the home front(s), mountains, valleys, and beachheads ("bitchheads," as they were at times called by American infantrymen) of Ernie Pyle's dynamic life, Chrisinger's crisply written accounts of his own travels across North Africa and Western Europe rests like carefully laid cling film, transparent (this is a fairly straightforward narrative structure) but strong (I couldn't put the book down, and not only because of personal bias).

Here, the author operates in the true spirit, as I understand it, of Ernie Pyle. He offers us a portrait, flawed and faceted, of a "middle-aged travel writer without any experience covering combat, the military, or foreign affairs."

A man—nothing more, nothing less.

Ernest Taylor Pyle was born in Dana, Indiana in 1900, a farmer's son; neither of Pyle's parents had more than an 8th grade education. A shy, bookish child among small-town sharecroppers, his world was comprised almost entirely of humble individuals on the blue-collar scale; grandiosity, one could argue, was not in his vocabulary. In time he picked up the grease pencil and began wending his way up and down and all around the United States, befriending "pilots…outside Washington, DC…lumberjacks in the Pacific Northwest…bellhops and bartenders…" many of whom would one day be fighting in the war Pyle reported on.

By the time Pyle stepped foot on Algerian soil, he had spent most of his life churning out slice-of-life columns for the local paper, a skillset that would serve him well on the frontlines and would make him the correspondent Americans came to trust most during the war. "It was his familiarity and kinship with 'unimportant small people and small things,' as a writer for *Time* put it in the summer of 1944, that would suddenly become enormously important to millions of readers when the American involvement in the war began."

Indeed, it was Pyle whose "version of the war…became the version America chose to remember." Some of Pyle's contemporaries were quoted referring to him as "more of a propagandist" than a journalist, "a public relations man [who] sold a story about the war that omitted more truth than it espoused."

But to the folks back home with family overseas, reports about generals and machinery and troop movements—the cold, hard facts of war—meant almost nothing. To them, Pyle's approach to describing the war, "not the mode of strategic overview, but that of moral intuition" was far more valuable. As the author writes, "Americans at home needed [Pyle] to explain the war to them, and what life for their sons and husbands was really like. If those who made it home were ever going to find some semblance of peace, Pyle realized, the American people needed to be able to understand why their boys froze at the sound of trucks backfiring, why the smell of diesel or copper transported them back to some shell-pocked battlefield, why they were coarsened and reluctant to talk about all they endured. It was the least they could do."

Of course, no biography of Ernie Pyle the man would be complete without the woman at the center of his life. Geraldine Elizabeth "Jerry" Siebolds, Pyle's relationship with her, and their fascinating dynamic, rightfully takes up as much space in the book as Chrisinger or Pyle do. Many of the letters quoted throughout seem to be from those Pyle wrote to Jerry while overseas, and they feature some of the most transparent writing about the war coupled with some truly sweet expressions of love and devotion.

References also abound to what could be considered affairs, but in the context of Jerry and Ernie's relationship take on the shape of what we now might consider an "open" marriage. Jerry struggled with severe mental illness (most likely a form of bipolar disorder), a kind I personally recognize all too well, and Chrisinger does a fine job of depicting it here

without judgment. (I was moved to see the author include a note in the frontmatter mentioning references to suicide in the book; he also provides the relevant hotline(s) for those readers who might need them.)

Pyle himself only ever seems to express despair over Jerry's health and discusses the other women in his life with her freely. They share in each other a depth of love and mutual respect that seems impossible to maintain, because it is—with Pyle constantly overseas out of his immovable sense of obligation to the "goddamn infantry" and Jerry's alcoholism and drug abuse combined with her mental illness, the pair openly acknowledge in multiple letters that their relationship seems doomed no matter how much they wish it were otherwise. They divorce; they stay together. Ernie writes about war because he must, but also because it pays Jerry's medical bills, which he also must do because he loves her more than he hates the war. The fame that comes with his columns is indulged only barely so that she never lacks for anything, including round-the-clock in-home care and multiple visits to psychiatric hospitals and sanitariums.

It's a fraught, destructive relationship, but one that is also full of love and respect and understanding. In the hands of a lesser writer, it'd be all too easy to reduce Jerry to a troublesome housewife, a thorn on the stem of Pyle's upwardly mobile rose, but Chrisinger understands that nothing is further from the truth, and the truth is abundant in the countless letters the couple sent back and forth to each other. It's also in the letters Pyle wrote to the others in his life, including his editor, his friends, and his few but cherished lovers: Pyle was a deeply loyal, loving man, who could be both to a fault, and his relationship with Jerry was as inextricable as his relationship to the war. She supported him in his pursuit of telling Americans the truth about the war even as she spiraled out in his absence, and she held the fort back at their home in Albuquerque, New Mexico as long as

she could, and when she couldn't, he supported her in turn.

It's Jerry who, in "a letter Ernie would never receive," expresses the sentiment that so many other Americans felt toward the correspondent: "I am thankful for whatever it is that has made me feel through the years that as long as you were somewhere, nothing could be completely wrong—or hopeless."

The two most important relationships in Pyle's life, his wife and his war, have equal airtime in *The Soldier's Truth*, and the book is an even more remarkable accomplishment for it.

Indeed, *The Soldier's Truth* further adds to my theory that some of the best war history writing isn't written by greyed British historians or the generals who spent their war miles behind the line, but by people who, like Pyle, have lived their lives close to the ground, or in some cases, in a foxhole a few feet below it. The bulk of my personal library that is just war history is comprised of [a not inconsiderable number of] books written by individuals exclusively about individuals. Both philosophically and in practice, I leave the minutiae of things like artillery technicalities, troop movements, combat tactics, and top-brass politics out of it—as much as is possible, anyways. Because the "underbelly" of war isn't the underbelly at all, but the whole damn digestive system: it's the people who fight, and the people who die, and the people they leave behind.

The reason we remember Ernie Pyle, and the reason I suspect my grandpa gave me that copy of *Brave Men*, is because Pyle understood this fact better than anyone. Better than any other correspondent reporting from the ETO, anyways.

So, if you've ever wanted a "worm's eye view" history of the North African and European Theater of Operations, *The Soldier's Truth* is your book. Put another way, speaking as someone who edits this stuff for a living, *The Soldier's Truth*

is a phenomenal example of the hybrid memoir—a book that roots a big subject in a personal narrative—at work. It is a course correction, the kind American classrooms desperately need, to say nothing of the general adult reading public. Perhaps most importantly (to me anyways), it's a book that does what all genuinely good books with good writing in them do: it makes you think, and it makes you feel. It's the kind of writing Pyle became famous for, became beloved for, the kind of writing we remember even after the fighting has long since ended.

Following Chrisinger across Tunisia, Sicily, mainland Italy, and France, we are taken on a vivid, emotional road trip across space as well as time: As I read scenes from the author's time in Normandy, I was transported back to the four separate occasions I've visited that particular battlefield, most recently in 2019 for the 75th anniversary of D-Day, when I stood on a bluff similar to the one Chrisinger describes here, one overlooking the long, snaking French coastline from Pointe du Hoc to far-off Sword Beach.

In Tunisia, the author's interpreter, Yomna, guides him as part of his tour of Kasserine Pass to a field of worn-down rubble that was once her family's compound. It had been destroyed during the war, she explains, but "we can't prove who did it, so we don't know which country [Germany or the US] to ask for damages." A few pages later, while sitting down for lunch, the author describes hearing what sound like far off explosions coming from the nearby Mount Chambi, which had become an al-Qaeda stronghold in recent years. "That's the army," Yomna tells him. "They must have spotted a terrorist."

It's the perfect encapsulation of my other theory, which is that most wars, especially one as big and all-encompassing and globally destructive and devastating as World War II, don't end. In many cases, the fighting literally never stops, but is instead taken up by younger and younger generations as the

older ones die out, or move up the ranks, or flee at their own risk. It's not hard to draw a line, however jagged, from Pyle's war to our own. Not if you look hard enough. The author himself draws the line all the way to the current war in Ukraine:

"War really was hell, no matter who told you different. But sometimes it was necessary, especially when some purported great power felt that its proper place in the world was to invade, conquer, and subjugate its sovereign neighbors because it had the power to do so, and because some intoxicating ahistorical claim to greatness that helped salve the humiliations wrought the last time the world went to war."

I think anyone who's read and genuinely appreciates Ernie Pyle's work as a war correspondent will appreciate the tack Chrisinger took with his approach to covering the man's life by retracing the long, arduous steps leading up to his death. We follow the author sweating, breathless, up mountains and quietly along sandy beaches in the middle of winter; we attempt to speak foreign languages and drink the local because it's what you do when you travel, especially when the local is three fingers of a truly unique '44 vintage, a "premixed calvados cocktail" some "enterprising residents…designed…which the Americans preferred to straight apple brandy."

It's the kind of detail Pyle would have loved (and a detail that literally made me shout, "You lucky bastard!" out loud when I read it).

Also to the author's credit is his understanding that while it's pointless judging historical characters against modern values, it behooves us who *do* write about those historical characters to point out their objective flaws regardless. In the case of Chrisinger with Pyle, the author does his due diligence in rendering the man honestly: Amid his worsening battle with what is now recognizably alcoholism, we see Pyle struggle with depression, his marriage, his resentful

relationship to the fame that brought in the amount of money required to care for Jerry during his long absences, and his toxic attachment to the war, itself.

In one of the last chapters of the book, we read some of Pyle's descriptions of the Japanese soldier and can easily recognize his renderings of them as being deeply racist; even after exposure to the enemy outside of combat, he struggles to adjust his thinking. "In Europe we felt our enemies, horrible and deadly as they were, were still people," whereas "the Japanese are looked upon as something inhuman." He would later describe them as "human enough to be afraid of us." Sentiments that are perhaps not surprising given the sheer amount of explicitly racist and xenophobic propaganda the U.S. put out during the war, let alone the fact that there were still thousands of Japanese American citizens being forcibly interned on U.S. soil in 1945.

In all, Chrisinger offers us a detailed, unsparing, and empathetic—but never pitying—biography of a man who had plenty of chances to turn the job over to someone else but chose not to, kept choosing not to, because to do so in his mind would dishonor the doughboys, both living and dead, who'd come to see him as one of their own.

The combat scenes Chrisinger renders throughout *The Soldier's Truth* embody this sentiment well. He relies almost exclusively on direct quotes and lines pulled from Pyle's columns, veterans' recollections, and postwar histories. Very rarely does he editorialize for the sake of it. But when he does, Chrisinger shines as a writer unto himself: One night in Italy, he writes, "The air bit a little. Not too sharply. The soothing sound of gentle surf massaging the sand was a comfort at first. Then, walking along the sea's dying edge in the melancholy winter light, I thought about life on the beaches during that miserable winter of 1944, about young lives snuffed out capriciously. After nearly a half mile of walking, it struck me that life at Anzio was not separate from death;

they were knit as tightly as the threads in a carpet.”

Or, in a beautifully restrained rendering of the first moments of the landings at Omaha Beach:

“As the first wave of landing craft drew close to shore, the deafening roar stopped, quickly replaced by German artillery rounds crashing into the pewter-colored water all around them. The flesh under the men’s sea-soaked uniforms prickled. That many of them would die was a matter of necessity. Which of them would die, exactly, was a matter of circumstance—and they knew it. So, they waited, barely daring to breathe.”

My favorite history books all have this in common: They all recognize, as Pyle did, that as ugly as war is, it is often marked by moments of the kind of exquisitely painful beauty that steals the breath from your lungs. Both should be written about in order to paint a more complete picture of what it is like to go to war. In Chrisinger’s case, these moments of beauty (his and Pyle’s blended description of flying over the Atlas Mountains at sunset comes to mind) are balanced, sometimes in the same sentence, with brutal renderings of men in combat or the aftermath of it that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

The author’s depiction of Jerry’s suicide attempt with a pair of scissors—a gift, he notes, from the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to Ernie years before—is harrowing, but not overly descriptive, as Chrisinger acutely understands the profound value of restraint when it comes to portraying such a thing on the page. (Jerry, a woman of wanderlust and immense intelligence and creativity, whom Ernie’s readers knew well as “That Girl,” died seven months after her husband did, of “acute uremic poisoning,” in November 1945.)

It’s only in the context of combat that Chrisinger lets the horror truly rear its head, and even then, he lets Pyle take the reins. In one of Pyle’s most famous columns, written in

the immediate aftermath of D-Day, he wrote: “As I plowed out over the wet sand of the beach…I walked around what seemed to be a couple of pieces of driftwood sticking out of the sand. But they weren’t driftwood. They were a soldier’s two feet. He was completely covered by the shifting sands except for his feet. The toes of his G.I. shoes pointed toward the land he had come so far to see, and which he saw so briefly.” Later that summer, he attempted to describe myriad scenes after battles had moved on from an area, drafting line after anaphoric line:

“From the scattered green leaves and the fresh branches of trees still lying in the middle of the road.

From the wisps and coils of telephone wire, hanging brokenly from high poles and entwining across the roads.

From the gray, burned-powder rims of the shell craters in the gravel roads, their edges not yet smoothed by the pounding of military traffic.

From the little pools of blood on the roadside, blood that had only begun to congeal and turn black, and the punctured steel helmets lying nearby.”

By the time he left Jerry for the Pacific, we understand that Pyle had reached a critical breaking point as a man and as a correspondent. Exhausted, sickly, stuck, and missing Jerry terribly but needing to be away from her, he oscillated between hyper-productivity and complete collapse regularly as he hopped, island-to-island, from Guadalcanal to Guam to Okinawa with the First and Third Marine Divisions and the 77th Infantry Division, among others.

Alcohol became a mainstay of Pyle’s writerly tableau—if he was at his typewriter, he was probably smoking a cigarette with a drink close at hand. “Not even the end of the war, not even victory and that last trip home, would be able to bring back

all the people killed or counteract the damage done to the war's survivors," Chrisinger writes of Pyle's mindset toward the end of his life. "By the time the unconditional Allied victory was within grasp, Ernie had come to believe that there was simply no way the war could ever simply be a story with a happy ending."

Indeed, one of the few detriments to a book about Ernie Pyle is knowing the ending at the start. The Allies win. Pyle is killed by a machine gun round to the head on the island of Ie Shima, during the Battle of Okinawa, in April 1945. In terms of narrative stakes, it's about as anticlimactic as you can get. Chrisinger, to his credit and to the strengthening of an already strong narrative, embraces this fact of his subject, and it results in what I would classify as one of the finest obituaries to come out of this or any war involving the United States—a piece of writing that not only exemplifies who Ernie Pyle was in life, but underlines the importance of him as a citizen correspondent among citizen soldiers.

"Pyle was embraced by enlisted men, officers, and a huge civilian public as a voice who spoke for the common infantryman," he writes. "With his traumas in Sicily, Italy, and France, he had, in essence, become one of them. After sharing so much of their experience, their pain and their purpose, he understood better than most how gravely war can alter the people who must see it and fight it and live it. He knew that many survivors would come home with damage that is profound, aching, and long lasting. It was a truth that he found hard or even impossible to communicate to his readers back home—and it's a truth that is still difficult and troubling now, all these decades later."

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One of the many downsides of losing loved ones when you're young, I realized recently, is this tendency to think of questions you wish you'd asked them in life but thought of too

late. “Staircase wit,” or *l’esprit de l’escalier*; that moment when you think of the perfect response (usually a pithy one) to the person at the top of the stair’s words only when you’ve just reached the very bottom.

I have plenty of these moments, on a very regular basis, and the worst ones aren’t the witty rejoinders I wish I’d lobbed at this or that rude person, but the questions I wish I’d asked my grandpa while he was alive. Most of them are questions I was never brave enough to ask, despite knowing deep down that he would have been incredibly generous with his answers; toward the end of his life, Grandpa Art shared with me, during what would end up being one of our last phone conversations, the story of him shooting the shit with some buddies one afternoon during his time stationed in India. “I walked away for a minute,” he told me, meaning of course it could have been hours, but time can make even the strongest memories a little fickle, “and when I came back, they’d disappeared. I found out later they’d been roped into going to the Pacific, and I never saw them again.”

The subliminal, ghastly horror of it was in his voice, so I didn’t feel an immediate need to ask how the memory sat with him. I was simply honored to at last receive a piece of my grandpa’s war story, the true one, not just the one he’d spent his life burnishing into a series of charming anecdotes about trumpet playing and beer stealing and shooting off rounds into the air because he was young and bold and far from home (the last two, of course, being closely related). Both are true, in their own way, but measured by Pyle’s yardstick, only one touches on what it was actually like for the average American servicemember to be anywhere in the world during the war. And like so many who’ve seen war, my grandpa kept the darkest truths of that experience close to his chest, because how could anyone begin to understand?

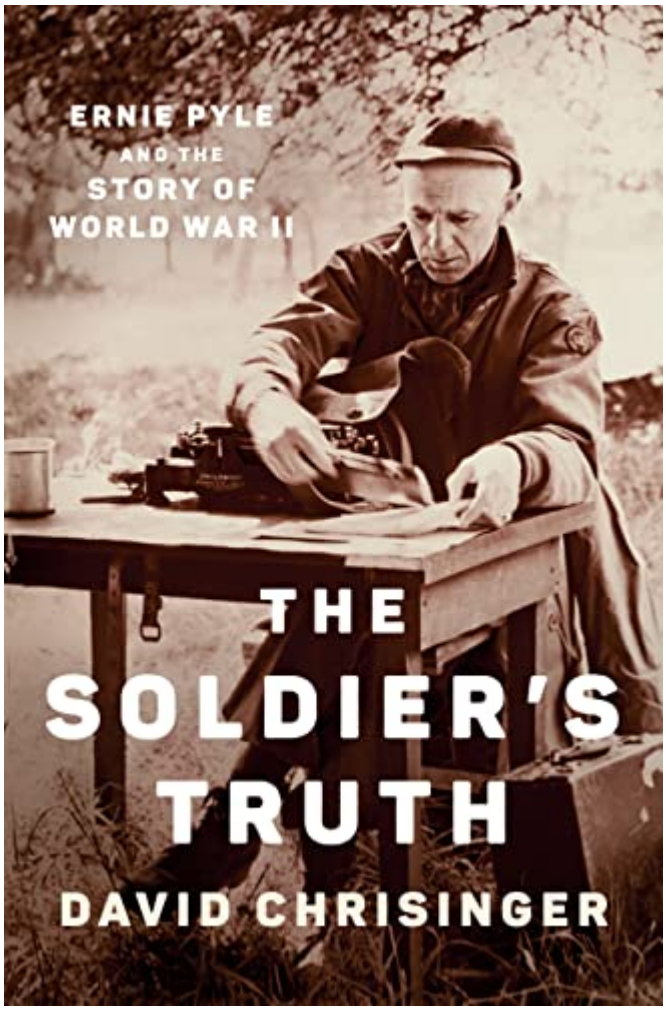
Somehow, he knew I would. In his absence I try not to punish myself for not trusting that more. But I do wish I’d asked him

their names, if he'd tried looking them up after the war; if he was scared about being sent to the Pacific, too, or if, like Pyle, he'd been resigned to it as a fact of his existence as a soldier in wartime. I would have loved to know how he felt when he found out Ernie Pyle died. If he, like Robert Capa, "drank himself stupid in silence," or if he picked up his trumpet and played "Taps" while his fellow soldiers stood at attention and saluted the horizon, in the direction they knew Ernie Pyle, "the rail-thin son of an Indiana tenant farmer," now lay dead.

Whatever he felt in the moment, however he mourned, perhaps it meant more to my grandpa that he'd found someone he could share Pyle with, even decades after the fact; they were both wordsmiths, after all, and war writers, ourselves a niche bunch, tend to recognize other war writers. Perhaps Grandpa Art giving me his timeworn copy of *Brave Men* was as much a gesture of that recognition as it was a lesson-by-proxy in writing about World War II, namely, in the only way that did it any justice.

As Pyle handwrote in his final, unpublished missive, a note found on his body before he was buried: "To you at home they are columns of figures, or he is a near one who went away and just didn't come back. You didn't see him lying so grotesque and pasty beside the gravel road in France. We saw him, saw him by the multiple thousands. That's the difference." Shadowed men all in a line, falling off the edge of the dust jacket.

Look harder, I now realize Pyle's face hovering above them seems to say: Do not look away. This is not a story with a happy ending. How could it be? It is a war story. Tell it anyways.



New Nonfiction from Laura Hope-Gil: “The Train”

We were staying in the youth hostel in Zermatt at the base of the Matterhorn and on a day trip to see the castle in St. Nicklaus. I was twelve and my sister fourteen. My period started the night before while we played foosball in the hostel's arcade. Starting your period at the base of the Matterhorn summons amazement, but my mom, surrounded by our backpacks she had emptied to do a laundry, handed me an inch-thick sanitary napkin with the simple instruction, "The tape goes on the panties." My father was in the room, standing between the bunk beds. He was stressed out. Mom was stressed out. They had a disagreement before on the hike to Pontrecina.

We each wore a distinct-color K-Way windbreaker. My father was red, my mother yellow, my sister green, and I was powder blue, always in the back. I had small legs. We walked with what felt like a mile between us, wending our way between unbelievably tall pines and all the silence in Switzerland. My sister said it is because Dad wanted another baby and Mom did not. What a

day to start your period. It was the end of my autonomy. Things were tense in St. Nicklaus. My usual efforts to get everybody laughing failed. The family had entire moods, and this was a dark one. My sister's hypoglycemia was at least yet in check, but I knew eventually she would eat a Toblerone, then, a couple of hours later, lose her mind. Now that we were in the region that appears on the Toblerone triangular box, things felt shaky.

Castles, for my sister and me, were a reason for travel. Yes, there were art galleries and Eiffel Towers and windmills, but we loved castles, especially the one in Montreux with its crypt and torture chamber and a hole from the gallows down to the rocks and waves of Lake Geneva. A terrible way to die and darkly intriguing. Just a meter or so away: the pillar to which Lord Byron was chained or about which he wrote the poem *The Prisoner of Chillon*. I didn't have the whole story yet. I won't say I didn't understand anything. I understood enough. In third grade I had found a brick in the basement of our Toronto home, and with a crayon I had written three words: *Daddy is dumb*. I'd tossed the brick back into the pile of bricks. One day soon after, my father found it and brought it upstairs.

"Did you write this?" he asked me.

"No," I said.

I had just earned my "writing license" at school, an actual document that meant I could write in cursive on my assignments. I took it to mean something more. We writers are supposed to downplay what we know and how we live, like it is some sad accident, like we do not know exactly what we are here to do. I knew exactly what I was here to do: to listen, to watch, to write about it. There was nothing else to do. The writing license did not come with a list of ethics or guidance on what we should or should not write. This was something we figured out on our own. I had written on the brick in reaction

to something my father had said or done. I had externalized my pain. This was a learning moment: you can write anything you want on bricks with a crayon, but you shouldn’t throw the brick back with the other bricks.

Thinking every castle must be as cool as Chillon, my sister and I wanted to see the castle at St. Nicklaus. We did other things that my father wanted to do, and my mother towed along in constant damage-control mode, forever appeasing him and ensuring that my sister and I were not entirely in danger. There were precedents of danger. In British Columbia he had insisted we take this long hike through Burgess Pass, where an avalanche had recently torn apart a valley. With instructions not to talk, we walked for two hours amid upended whole trees on a sea of shards of Rocky Mountain. We made it to our destination and back before midnight, but when you are in the Canadian wilderness, where bears happily steal honey from backpacks not strung up in trees, anything after sunset is late. He seemed happiest when he was risking our lives in some situation he created. All of this was his lifelong reflex to being a child in a Japanese prison camp in China. We failed him repeatedly. Nothing we did could reach that high of an infancy in barbed wire, bayonet, liberation by atom bombs. In St. Nicklaus, Switzerland, he decided he did not want to see Waldegg Castle. He wanted to go back to Zermatt and watch the Mistral windsurfers on the lake. He was thinking of trying it. Windsurfing.

My sister had not yet eaten a Toblerone so was complacent. I was less so. I really wanted to see the castle. I was a castle junkie. I wanted secret tunnels between chapels and courtyards. I wanted crypts, ossuaries, and carpets hung on walls. I did not know that Waldegg Castle was not a medieval castle but a baroque one, and that it was not in St. Nicklaus but a little way out. So I fought for it like it was Chillon and just around a corner. My father did not let me argue. A Great Wall had grown out of that one brick. There was no

returning it to the earth. No getting over it, such a small thing, so few words, eternal damnation. Standing in the street of this small town in the shadow of the Matterhorn, my father grabbed my mother's arm and led her away. We followed because we were children. He led us to the train station. I could not stand the idea of missing a castle. The train to Zermatt was on Gleis 1. We were right there beside it. The door opened. My father, holding my mother's arm and pulling her, got on the train.

"Get on the train," he said.

"No," I said.

"Get on the goddamned train." My mother pleaded with us with her eyes. My father glared at her for doing so.

The thing people who have not seen it do not know is that the Matterhorn is not a mountain like the other mountains around it. When we first arrived in Zermatt and disembarked from the train, my father had told us to look at it. The Matterhorn. I looked and saw a row of mountains with some clouds over them. I wondered what the big deal was and felt this massive wave of betrayal by the world that told me this was a spectacular mountain. I pretended to see it just so we could get to the hostel and rest.

"Look up," my father said.

"I'm looking," I said.

"Look up more," my sister said and placed her hand on my chin and tilted my head up. And I saw it, above the clouds, the wall of its north face, the sheerness and height I had seen on the Toblerone boxes my sister devoured and transformed afterward. It was everything a mountain on a chocolate bar shaped like it should be, a sight that makes you glad you can see, to behold it, to recognize it as something you have always known. It has been sold to you and you to it. Even when

you are taller, it will be forever taller, more vast, more imposing, and out of proportion than anything else ever could be. With my chin lifted, now forgetting I was tired, I was metabolizing wonder, awe, and, in a little way, terror because when we look at mountains, we are always both where we stand and at the top of them looking down at ourselves through its eyes, and we feel we could easily disappear with all the other small things in the world. When I was only three, the family had camped at Interlaken, and for days helicopters floated over us in search of a Japanese climbing team who had all perished on the Eiger's north face. The north face of everything was terrifying to me. It was what you got lifted off of after it killed you.

The train doors began to close, and our father did not step off with our mother. The door closed. The train left. We stood there in St. Nicklaus, wanting to see a castle but not realizing that our desires could so easily cause our abandonment. Not that we thought we could win, but we did think that he could concede. It was just a day in Switzerland. A holiday. It was a castle, something the children wanted to do. But that was incorrect. When he wanted to deny us something, he could. Control was altitude. He could come crashing down on us; we should have remembered.

Neither of us had any money, just our Eurail passes in little pockets around our necks with string. We learned that the castle is a walk from Solothurn, where we were not. It was afternoon. Our parents had left us in a town, although it had been noticeably clear to both of us that our mom thought Dad was bluffing since this was not normal parenting behavior. We would only catch on to how enthralled we had all been decades later when the entire world quieted down when he died. Yes, there were still wars and still starvation and every violation of human right imaginable, but they were not in our respective houses. That is a critical difference in how we perceive the world. My sister and I walked around St. Nicklaus in search of

some other castle. It did not make us friends. We had truly little connection. But on that day we had something. We were the daughters of something that could leave us if we said no to it. We understood that now. Standing in quite possibly the safest place in the entire world, on cobblestone, between white stucco buildings with high-pitched roofs and geraniums in the stained-dark window boxes, with tickets in our neck-safes to anywhere on the continent, alone, we understood.