

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Fallujah-Korengal/Korengal-Fallujah



In my blog Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature I rarely reviewed memoir and non-fiction. I also tried to promote stories about war other than those by infantrymen and stories about war that encompassed more than the battlefield.

In Strike Through the Mask! I've expanded my reach to address memoir, non-fiction, and actual events. In some columns, including this one, I have also begun exploring stories of fighting men and women in combat.

Two locations dominate the Iraq and Afghanistan "booksphere." In both cases, the locations were scenes of intense fighting. In Iraq, it's Fallujah, particularly the Second Battle of Fallujah, which was fought in 2004. For Afghanistan, it's the Korengal—the river valley and surrounding mountains in Kunar province that featured some of the biggest battles of Operation Enduring Freedom and arguably the longest, most sustained effort by Americans to fight the Taliban.

The Second Battle of Fallujah saw a large combined-arms force, led by Marines, fight insurgent house-by-house through a city known for its many beautiful mosques. In the Korengal, US forces, led by the Army, strove to rid a remote, mountainous region of Taliban fighters and Taliban influence on the local populace.

Fallujah and the Korengal each generated a large number of memoirs, non-fiction accounts, and in the case of the Korengal, movies. Judging by the numbers they seem to be the

places where the fighting that mattered most in the Global War on Terror took place. What do I mean by “matter”? Here I’m not thinking about strategic importance or overall mission success-or-failure, but in terms of geographically-centered experiences that seems to have deeply impressed themselves on veterans, interested commentators, and reading audiences. By this point, the very names Fallujah and Korengal inspire a certain reverence, as if any story told about them is sure to be momentous.

On my bookshelf, I have the following books about the Second Battle of Fallujah: Bing West’s non-fiction account *No True Glory*, Nathaniel Helm’s biography *My Men Are My Heroes: The Brad Kasal Story*, David Bellavia’s memoir *House to House*, and Alexander Saxby’s memoir *Fallujah Memoirs*. Elliot Ackerman’s *Places and Names* also describes the author’s experience fighting in Fallujah, where he won a Silver Star as a Marine platoon commander. Interestingly, I don’t know of a novel that portrays Marines and soldiers fighting in Fallujah. And though there are several documentary movies about Fallujah, it has not yet been portrayed by Hollywood, as far as I know. A movie based on *No True Glory* starring Harrison Ford was once announced, but seems to have never been made. Still, the opening lines of Saxby’s memoir illustrate the allure of Fallujah:

I’ve been told you never forget your first time. Your first kiss, your first love, your first car. My first time overseas was an experience that I will never forget. I experienced something that many people only read about in history books. The Second Battle of Fallujah is a watershed moment in my life. It serves as a frame of reference for many memories; before Fallujah and afterward.

Regarding the Korengal, for non-fiction I’ve read Sebastian Junger’s *War*, Wesley Morgan’s *The Hardest Place*, and Jake Tapper’s *The Outpost*. I’ve watched the movie based on *The Outpost*, as well as Junger’s *Restrepo*. I’ve read Ray

McPadden's memoir *We March at Midnight*, and also Medal of Honor winner Dakota Meyer's memoir *Into the Fire*. This list might be expanded by inclusion of books such as *Lone Survivor* about special operations in Kunar in the early years of Operation Enduring Freedom. The novels *And the Whole Mountain Burned* by the aforementioned Ray McPadden and *The Valley* by John Renehan are coy about actually mentioning the Korengal, but it seems clear both are either set in or inspired by the Korengal. The dust-jacket blurb for *The Valley* reads:

Everything about the place was myth and rumor, but one fact was clear: There were many valleys in the mountains of Afghanistan, and most were hard places where people died hard deaths. But there was only one Valley. It was the farthest, and the hardest, and the worst.

Scholars tell us that such places of lore and implication are tightly bound up with their geographical and physical setting. The idea is that the significant events were fated to take place on sites that lay waiting through the centuries for historical amplification. However that may be, the sense of the material look of Fallujah and the Korengal greatly impressed themselves on the participants who fought there as the right-proper backdrop for the events that subsequently unfolded. This heightened sense of possibility is reflected in the prose written by combatants.

Elliot Ackerman, in *Places and Names*, writes of Fallujah: *We are four kilometers outside of Fallujah, the city of mosques: a forest of minarets rising from kaleidoscopic facades, all mosaicked in bursting hexagonal patterns of turquoise, crimson and cobalt.*

Roy McPadden, in *We March at Midnight*, describes his first encounter with the Korengal: *A six-hour voyage brings us to the maw of the Korengal Valley, a gateway of rock into more rock. Slicing out of the mountains here is a protean stream of the same name, which in spring and early summer is a ribbon of*

whitewater fed by a massif of twelve-thousand-foot peaks. By summer's end, the peaks are naked of snow, and the stream slows to a dribble. I am no lover of rivers, only a field commander who has to cross them.

Later, McPadden writes: *Of all the provinces, I shudder at the word Kunar, for its black heart is the Korengal Valley. I harbor secret thoughts of a collision with it and confess that in this interlude of life, the valley has grown into a phantom of gigantic proportions.*

As the quotes suggest, the upshot of this author-and-audience interest in Fallujah and the Korengal is that both places now resonate with higher orders of meaning. Through what one scholar calls “the complex alchemy of nature, history, and legend” books and films about Fallujah and the Korengal participate in a “collaborative process of creating significant places by means of story.” In other words, there are the things that actually happened in Fallujah and the Korengal, and the “textualizing” of spaces by which they have assumed prominence in veteran and public memory. The geographic “spaces” of Fallujah and the Korengal have become hallowed “places” that dominate and even define the two separate theaters. As a result, other places and other narratives struggle to command attention.

I know this is true in regard to Afghanistan. My own deployment to Afghanistan taught me that the Khost-Paktika-Paktia region was home to much fighting and many events central to the American story in Afghanistan. Those who fought in Kandahar might say much the same thing. But Khost and Kandahar do not loom large in American thinking about Afghanistan, and other provinces where Americans deployed such as Herat and Zabul even less so. Stories about those places just plain don't excite readers as much as do those set in the Korengal. They fight uphill to assert their importance.

Taken together, books and movies about Fallujah and the

Korengal accrue a momentum and logic of their own. To have fought in those places is one thing, to tell a story about them is another, and to read about them is another. The relation of stories to actual events and stories to other stories are both dynamic and reifying, with the underlying themes and structures of the events and narratives reverberating in odd correspondences. Events and description of events are related by layers of meaning that transcend simplicity. An event casually mentioned in one narrative become central in another; some events are examined in prismatic detail in multiple accounts. One story begets another, and though individual narratives may differ, together they constitute a distinctive collective memory and pattern of thinking about their subjects. To participate in the story-telling flow either as a writer or a reader is to further instantiate their legendary status. Doing so implicates the author and reader in the enterprise not so much of truth-telling as myth-making.

The objection, or fear, is that the men and women who fought in either Fallujah or the Korengal have accrued a superior wisdom predicated on what's been termed "combat-gnosticism": their participation in events gives them wisdom not available to the rest of us. If anything, though, each new narrative about Fallujah or the Korengal now has trouble transcending conventional themes and takes, adding only the idiosyncrasies of personal experience. As a quote from a reader of one of the books mentioned above puts it on Amazon: "30 different people, 30 different stories." Some of the narratives emit a self-important aura, or verge on romanticizing death and carnage. But it is also true that each new story-telling variant piques the interest. And why not? The textual hegemony of Fallujah and the Korengal is not salutary in all aspects, but it is by now very real. I know there will be more books about these places, and I know I'll read most of them. If conditions ever permit, I would like to visit Fallujah and the Korengal in the company of veterans who fought there, or the journalists and

historians who have written about them, and listen to their stories on the ground they took place.

The quotes from academic sources came from the following scholarly studies of links connecting geographic places, historical events, and narrative memory:

Nile Green, *Making Space: Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India* (2012): “booksphere” “textualizing space”

Virginia Reinburg, *Storied Places: Pilgrim Shrines, Nature, and History in Early Modern France* (2019): “complex alchemy of nature, history, and legend” “the collaborative process of creating significant places by means of a story”

Hulya Taflı Duzgun, *Text and Territories: Historicized Fiction and Fictionalized History in Medieval England and Beyond* (2018) was also consulted.

James Campbell, in “Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry” (1999) argues that critics buy too readily into the idea that literature about war reflects “a separate order of wisdom.”

New Poetry by Abena Ntoso: “Dear Melissa”

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New Poetry by Luis-Lopez Maldonado: “Virus Como Chocolate” and “Pancho Villa, Cesar Chavez y Luis Lopez Madonado”

New poetry by Luis-Lopez Maldonado: “Virus Como Chocolate” and “Pancho Villa, Cesar Chavez y Luis Lopez-Maldonado”

New Fiction by LN Lewis: “Her Boyfriend Felipe”



“You must really like mango.”

The girl lifts them, one, two, three, and puts them in the paper bag, but it’s me she is looking at. Sort of. One eye fixes on me and the other eye wanders off to the side as she faces me across La Florcita’s counter from behind jars of sticky Mexican sweets.

“Who doesn’t like mango?”

“I’d rather have flan.”

"I hate flan. Kools hardpack, please."

She rings up the cash register and then glances at the debit card. "Ten dollars. Sonora... Vayo. Qué lindo."

Shudder. Everyone but my mother calls me Sunny.

All dramatic, she turns and points to the wall behind her, covered with business cards, calendars, and head shots of Becky G and Khaldoun Younes because, güey, estamos en Hollywood. Next to an autographed 1990s J-Lo is a poster of two boxers facing off: "LUJAN vs. VAYO."

"Are you related to this Vayo?"

"Ay, que feo. Jamás."

"No, not the bald one. The one with the curls!" she calls after me as I stroll out the jingling door into the evening. Over the sound system of passing Explorer roars Sekreto, I hear hoots, laughter, and someone hollering over the bass line, "MARICÓN!"

No, not even close. And if you are screaming that at me, you are lucky you're moving at forty miles per hour.

When I get home, I toss a mango at my sister Ana Belen, stretched out on the yellow living room sofa, grinding at her laptop, and make my way into the kitchen, sweeping aside fronds of a hanging fern I want to rip down and throw in the trash. A couple of plants are nice, but Ma has a jungle in here. She adds a stalk of windowsill fennel to frying pork chops as I wash a mango and ask, "Want some?"

La Doña Esperanza Pinel Molina is smaller than any of us, but out of all of our family, she's the one you really would not want to fight.

"We eat in a little while. Save it for dessert."

"I can't wait." I slice my mango, salt it, light up a Kool, and head out to the garage. My nephew Javier stretches out on the lounge playing Fortnite, and in shorts, shoes, and sweat, Felipe works his speed bag. All I see is a blur as his fists punish the Everlast.

"Can I have some?" asks Javier.

"Get outta here with that smoke," orders Felipe.

"Ay, the one with the curls!" I simper and then slouch in a raggedy lawn chair by the back steps, enjoying my cigarette and letting Javier finish the mango as I check notifications on my phone.

I have the same profile pic from high school, back when I had just one eyebrow piercing and long, black hair. I looked like a total digit. Jeannie Morales is having her third baby, dammit, and Nita Cartagena has been accepted into the accounting program at UC Northridge. Then I notice a "friend request" from some Milagros Toboso. Her profile pic is not even full frontal; it actually is a profile. I realize who it is and burst out laughing.

"FelipeSonoraJavier, come and eat!"

2

"Sonora, hi!"

Suddenly I am seeing this girl everywhere. Here she comes around the corner of MLK and Normandie, trailing alongside me like we are friends.

"Soy Milagros de la bodega."

"Hey."

"Did you get my friend request?"

"Quit calling me Sonora. I answer to Sunny. And I have

hundreds of friend requests, so it will take a couple weeks to get to you.”

She looks at me steadily, blankly, like a cow, staring me down with her one good eye and her off-kilter vibe. “Okay, Sunny. Tell Felipe I said hi,” she calls and, I swear, almost skips away.

“Yeah. See you around.”

The 757 bus pulls up, and it is packed. I’m jammed up against a fat guy in a Lakers jersey, a woman gripping two Jons grocery bags, and four chavas with fierce eyebrows and more piercings than me, then I transfer to a westbound 2 that lumbers from Barrio Aztlán to Thailandia through Little Armenia to Waspworld, I get off at the Sunset Five Theatre on Crescent Heights, and I nod to Mikela and Garrett on my way to the ladies’ room.

Changed into my red Sunset Five uniform, I step out of the stall to face the mirror. In my stance, I jab advance, jab retreat, rocking a rhythm and breaking it up like Felipe is always talking about, mixing high hits to the skull with low blows to the solar plexus. Some lady enters, sees me, and quickly backs out, slamming the door behind her.

Milk white with forehead zits and spiky, green hair; two left and one right eyebrow stud; ear gauges, a septum ring; and two full sleeve spiderweb, tarantula, and skull tattoos that made Ma cry, the poster child for “Don’t Fuck with Me” glares from the mirror. Crush that. Time to go bland and corporate, to fade away to nothing but a voice repeating: “I Want It All, theater seven on your right. Enjoy your film.”

3

Ana Belen waits for me in her Toyota Tercel at one a.m.

“You look tragic.” Blue circles ring her big, brown eyes.

"Thanks. Four hours O.T."

"Why can't Felipe pick me up?"

"You know why. Date with Elena."

"Getting banged again? He has a match in two weeks. Fighters are supposed to save it for the ring."

"The only one thinking about a ring is Elena. The one she wants on her finger."

We unlock the back door quietly to not wake Ma and Javier. Foraging in the fridge and checking my phone, I see yet another "friend request" from esa mema. Alright, you asked for it.

She replies almost instantly: Hey!

Wassup

Good. How are u?

Just got off work. U r persistent. Something on ur mind?

Just want to say hi 2 u & 2 ur brother

u seem so interested in him

No response.

He always talks 2 me about girls if I know a lil bit more bout u I could drop ur name

Thats so nice I was born in Torreon

face 2 face Can I come over?

now?

yes

its late

do u want to meet him or not

A half-hour later, I'm waiting on the threadbare carpet outside her apartment as she undoes at least eight locks to open the door. Her hair storms above her flowered nightie.

"Mi tía, she's at work, but you can't stay long. Just an hour, OK?" I nod solemnly. "Let me get you some flan!"

"I don't really... Sí, gracias."

We squeeze past a worn, white dresser into a tiny room that could belong to a twelve-year-old girl. A quilted, yellow blanket sprigged with flowers covers a twin bed; a zebra, lion, and mint green rabbit sit on the pillows, and family photos cover the walls. Jesus in soft focus with long, blond curls and a perfect goatee presides over it all.

After settling on her bed, I taste the flan. Warm vanilla and velvety rum fill my mouth, and I actually moan. Milagros grins and nods. "Do you know what this reminds me of?"

I'm so busy savoring another spoonful I don't even answer.

"A kiss."

"You've had a kiss." It isn't a question, just a mocking statement.

For the first time, I see something close to anger in her eyes.

"Yes, I've had kisses."

"And who did you kiss?"

"A boy I knew in school."

"A boy? How old are you?"

"I'm nineteen. How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-one. Felipe's twenty-three. And he ain't no boy."

There is a lost look on her face.

"You can tell me anything. I'm his sister. And I can tell you what he likes. When he comes home from a date, who do you think he talks to?" We scrape our empty saucers with our spoons.

"So, what does he like?"

"Why should I tell you? You know all about it, right?"

"I just want to be sure."

"He hates it when girls kiss with their mouths wide open, like some big, dead bacalao at the fish market."

She laughs, but I say, "Serious. He likes a nice, tight kiss. With just a little bit of tongue. Like this."

I lean in, take her square jaw in my hand, and pull her mouth to mine. She freezes a moment then squirms.

"Ey. I'm twying to show yooo." I suck on her lower lip until her mouth slowly opens. After a long moment, she backs into the stuffed animals, one eye staring at me, the other eye taking in family photos, her palms outstretched, pushing air.

A stack of The Daily Word sits on her night stand. I pick one up and leaf through it. Her cheeks mottled, she stares down at her folded hands.

"He likes that?"

"Yeah. If you can do it right. And..."

"What?"

"You have a really nice body, but you need to..."

"What? I need to what?!"

"I don't know... The way you dress... Get up." She faces me, shoulders hunched, feet splayed.

"Don't you have anything sexy?"

"I'm not 'sposed to. I'm born again."

"Well, he's into sexy. Let's see what you've got."

We peer into her closet at elastic-waist skirts, t-shirts, and mom jeans. I shrug and say, "You better work on that kiss."

5

"Mi tesoro..." A marine glares at us from a picture frame. Milagros' nightie is hiked up, and her panties wrap around her ankles. My jeans are wadded up on the floor, and my sweatshirt shields the innocent eyes of her stuffed animals. "Sí, sí, mi amor, sí..." she shudders and sighs. Her eyes flutter open, the right, dull and aimless, the left, dark yet bright, and gleaming at me. She curls into a ball and whispers, "Tell me a secret, and I'll tell you a secret."

"What kind of secret?"

"A secret about Felipe."

"He snores like a pig."

"I don't believe you."

"Well, that's the truth. OK, my turn."

"What does he look like when he's sleeping?"

"Like everybody else when they sleep! He sleeps on his back with his mouth wide open and drool running down his chin. That's why he snores so bad."

"What does he dream?"

"The last dream he told me about was an earthquake. He's

terrified of them. If we get hit by some little 3.5, he's a basket case for a week. My turn."

"My uncle dropped me," she says.

"Huh?"

"My uncle was carrying me. He dropped me, hurt my eye. By the time they realized something was wrong, it was infected."

"I'm sorry...Was this your first time?"

Her eyes flicker shut as she burrows down in the blankets. "My aunt will be home soon..."

I step outside under a lavender sky. It is still too dark to see my shadow. Pulling my trucker brim low, I look up at the windows but can't tell which one is hers.

6

Tonight, Felipe is idling his '98 Corvette in front of Sunset Five.

"Look who's here. Lover boy."

"Hey, I need a night off. She's wearing me out."

"Ay, pobrecito."

Felipe swings left, away from Sunset's colossal billboards and late-night traffic. "You been a little busy too. Where you been going at two, three in the morning?"

Shrug.

"I know you think you're muy chingón, but you're asking for trouble wandering around all hours of the night. Can't you hang out at more civilized hours?"

"I work."

"Then party on your days off. En serio. If we get some call about you from the emergency room, Ma will have a heart attack—"

"Lay off me."

We ride down Western in silence until: "You ready for the fight?"

"What? The one with you?"

"Commerce Casino, güey."

"Yeah, I'm ready. Bobby Cole, a kid from Dallas. Twenty-two years old, just moved up to welterweight."

"You seen him fight?"

"'Course. Me and Jorge saw him beat Luis Aragon at Quiet Canyon, and we been watching his tapes. Jorge knows his trainer, Sammy Wilkins. Says Sammy's pushing him too fast. You hanging out tonight?"

"Simón. Take a left here."

Felipe drops me off at Milagros' building, sighing as I get out and head up the walk.

"Just because you look scary don't mean you are scary. Cuidado."

7

"Could you bring me a picture? A picture of him from when he was little?"

"Milagros..."

We snuggle under her comforter and sip chocolate by the glow of her crucifix nightlight. I feel like I have gone back in time to the third-grade sleepovers with my best friend,

Cassandra Murphy, until I was banished from her home for giving her a kiss.

“One picture. He must have been an adorable bebé.”

“He was a creep. My nephew Javier is cuter than he ever was.”

“Brother, mother, sister, nephew. You make me jealous.”

“Of what? Look at all the family you have.”

“Just pictures on a wall. I haven’t seen them in years. Only Fulvia cares. Never mind. I’m going to have my own family. A boy and two girls. We’ll name the girls Carina and Alicia.”

The crucifix nightlight fades to black, and Milagros rolls over, tumbling from the bed into free fall. She’s falling so fast that galaxies speed past her. Mr. Krantz, my senior year astronomy teacher, strolls over to me. “Vayo, what’s on the left?”

“A red dwarf star.”

“And how do you know that?”

“It’s brighter than a nightlight.”

“Thank you, Vayo. Extra butter with that popcorn.”

I roll over in bed, and sunlight tickles my eyelids. Beside me, Milagros is babbling, “¡Dios mío! Get up!”

We leap out of bed, fumbling for clothes and stumbling over each other.

At the front door, she turns to me. “Sonorita, I read in La Opinión Felipe has a fight coming up.”

“Are you sure?”

“Next Friday. We could go together.”

“He wouldn’t like that. It’s too violent.”

“Ask him, beg him. Don’t forget.”

I open the door to a key held in mid-air by a stocky, gray-haired woman who hops back and nearly screams.

“Tía Fulvia! Sonora, this is my aunt Fulvia—”

“Sonora. Mucho...gusto...” says Fulvia. She edges past me, hangs up her jacket, and sits down wearily in the Lazyboy, pulling off her shoes. “Your friend is here at this hour?”

“We’re going to church. Early service.”

Fulvia reassesses me. “Muy bien. But you can’t go dressed like that, mija. I have a faldita you can wear.” She grimaces at my Timberlands. “And maybe you can fit my shoes.”

8

“Thanks be to God for the gift of love. Love as varied as the flowers in a garden, as seashells on a beach...”

In Target Mary Janes, a long sleeve blouse, a head scarf, and a skirt, I hunch in a folding chair, hoping nobody recognizes me. The pastor, short, pink-faced, perspiring slightly, smiles at the handful of women, one old man, and kids scattered in the half-empty rows.

“The love of your friends, your brothers and sisters, your father, and God knows, your mother...” the pastor drones, and I can instantly feel Ma and Pop sitting a few rows behind me. The last time I attended church was my confirmation at Holy Family, and when I finally got out of there, I turned cartwheels in my white dress in front of the cathedral steps. Ma found out that Pop cut me a deal that if I got through confirmation, I wouldn’t have to go to church anymore, and she didn’t speak to either one of us for a week.

“Love is His greatest gift, and we glorify Him by giving and accepting it...” For a second, I think it’s me he’s looking at, but no, he’s beaming at Milagros, who is snuffling and heaving sighs. His sermon, like every sermon I’ve ever heard, is half right. Aren’t we supposed to give love equally? I always loved Pop best.

June two years ago, not long after I got fired from Target, I came home to an empty house and decided to celebrate with a blunt in the backyard. I had barely lit up when Don Juan Luis Vayo Gomez rounded the corner. In his orange dockworker vest, the mustard hardhat in one hand, he sat down next to me and started in on: what do you think you are doing, why are you wasting all your potential, you are so smart, you are so talented, you are throwing it all away, that stuff ruins the brain, it messes up your memory—

I was so annoyed and bored that I just dropped: “Did you know I’m a lesbian?”

He said, “Yeah, I guess I knew that” and went right back to Just Say No, then finally eased up and started telling his old time L.A. stories: Helter Skelter, Ruben Salazar, The Clash at the Hollywood Palladium, growing up with his brothers and sisters and his cousin Esme, who he said I kind of favor.

By August, he was gone. An accident on his way to work.

If they could see me in church dressed like this, Ma would give one of her little smirks, and Pop would laugh his ass off.

Kids yell and run, and their mothers fold up chairs and stack them against the wall as the fluorescent lights go dark. Milagros says, “Let’s say hi to Pastor Gil.”

He is greeting worshipers at the door and blushes when he takes her hand. “Milagros! So good to see you.” He gives my hand a soft squeeze. “Welcome. We hope you come again.”

We head up Denker Avenue, and I look back to see Pastor Gil staring after us, confused and hungry, until a cantaloupe-shaped woman shakes his arm, demanding his attention.

9

“Padre celestial, venimos a ti...”

In a Commerce Casino dressing room, we hold hands as Ma prays, her eyes closed behind her glasses. She wears her violet dress and silver lucky star pin.

Elena’s eyes are also closed. My eyes travel from the stiletto sandals on her flawless feet, up her slim, caramel legs, to her shimmering, orange minidress. I hate her. Ana Belen and Ma don’t like her either. They always give her identical, fake smiles.

“Thank you for blessing Felipe with talent and discipline, Señor. Guard him and guide him...”

Ma and Ana Belen hold Felipe’s hands. They haven’t been taped yet. Thick, short-fingered, with gleaming, half-moon nails and heavy wrists, they are formed from the same molten bronze as his abdominals and biceps. Ana Belen cut his hair and trimmed his goatee. He looks handsome and somber. Ready to go to work.

Jorge gives my hand a squeeze. I like Jorge. He won the IBF middleweight title in 1996. His hair has gone silver, and a huge scar forks from his scalp through his right eyebrow, but he’s still got that rugged fighter’s body.

Together we intone, “Amen.” Elena shrink-wraps Felipe until he peels her off to speak with Ma and Ana Belen. Jorge leans toward me.

“What’s up, killer?”

“Same ole same ole.”

“You’re wasting time, Sunny. You could go places.”

“I am going places.”

His gold tooth winks at me. “‘Same ole same ole’ ain’t going nowhere. You got it, mija. You got that power, ese ánimo—”

“What are you two whispering about?” asks Ma.

“How lovely you look tonight, Esperanza.”

“I see right through you, Jorge,” Ma snaps.

Felipe shows me his fists. “See this? This is scary.”

I roundhouse him in the bicep, he slugs me back, and we file out to let him get ready.

“Ohmygod, what a crowd,” says Elena, flipping her hair and swiveling in her seat to see who is scanning her. “Mrs. Pinel, you are so brave to watch Felipe fight.”

“I’ve just come to see my son win,” Ma says coolly.

“And what’s so brave about that?” Ana Belen seconds, crossing her long legs to give Elena a better view of her three-hundred-dollar Jimmy Choo slingbacks.

The announcer, from center ring and from two enormous, overhead screens, calls, “In this corner, in the green trunks, weighing in at 162 pounds, from Dallas, Texas, is Bobby ‘Cold Cash’ Cooooooooooooooooole!”

Café with a little leche and baby-faced, Bobby Cole salutes the crowd. A chorus of boos rises, and behind us, a woman shrieks, “Pinche MARICÓN – you FUCKER!” In triplicate, Cole shrugs and strolls to his corner.

The camera pans back to the announcer. “And in this corner, in the black trunks, weighing in at 168 pounds, from Los Angeles, California”—The crowd roars—“is Felipe ‘El Verdugo’

Vayooooooooooooo!”

On the big screens, Felipe’s heartbreaker smile crossfades to the titles: “SUNNY’S MESSED UP LOVE LIFE – MÁS PENDEJADAS POR SUNNY,” accompanied by a soundtrack: “Sí... sí, mi amor...”

Felipe and Bobby Cole smack gloves and back off, crouching behind their fists. “Así... así... Cuando tú me tocas así ... si suave... por favor...” whimpers Milagros. Felipe opens up with a high and low jab. Cole dodges, jabs, and sends a low, lead hook that bounces off Felipe’s forearm block. But up on the screens, there I am, on my knees, between her thighs, contemplated by the serene gaze of Jesus. “Me vuelves loca...” The neat, textbook moves have stopped, and Felipe and Cole thrash each other until they stumble into a clinch. The referee pulls them apart.

“Sí, FELIPE!” screams Elena. “Ay, Felipe...” moans Milagros. Suddenly I’m on my feet, trembling.

“Don’t ever call me that again.”

Felipe throws a jabjab and a high cross that Cole evades and answers with a lead shovel to the gut. Milagros looks up, dazed, her eyes more unfocused than usual. A high hook drills Cole in the ear so hard I feel the pain. We are all on our feet, hoarsely screaming. A man roars, “MÁTALO!” Kill him.

Cole staggers then drops behind a shell, his head and upper body barricaded by his forearms.

I imitate her whimper of “FelipeFelipeFelipe!” and then: “Felipe doesn’t even know who the hell you are.”

He backs Cole from ring center with a jab-feint-cross-shovel-hook. Cole does a Sugar Ray sidestep, and then slams back with a brutal, low, rear hook to the ribs.

Milagros struggles up from the tangled sheets, her right eye drifting further right and the left one blazing at me. “He

loves me. And I'm going to see him at that fight."

"You can't do that."

"You're going to stop me?"

"Mami, there's nothing there! Forget it!"

"¡Put a marimacha!" I grab my jeans as she spits curses. "¡Sí, que se vaya, chingada!"

"Oh no," breathes Ana Belen.

On two screens and in center ring, Felipe reels, blood pouring down his face. I didn't see what hit him, and apparently, neither did he. Ma's hands clutch the armrests, but her face is almost as expressionless as Bobby Cole's as she watches Felipe topple to the ground. Everyone says my brother gets his hígado from Pop, but Pop was a softie. That rock hard core comes from Ma.

I am yanking my sweatshirt over my head when Milagros tackles me, sobbing, "I'm sorry, por favor, perdóname, Sonora, Sunny..." I shove her away and straighten my clothes. I can still hear her calling, "I didn't mean it, I didn't mean..." when I shut the door.

10

I show up at Eddie Romero's at 5:30 sharp. The converted warehouse is painted sea green, and walking inside is like diving into a vast aquarium. Dior Sauvage, sweat, and Lysol float in the air. The evening crowd jumps rope, crunches sit-ups, pounds bags. A blue-haired chava curling free weights slides me an icy glance. Jorge is watching Felipe and some guy I don't know sparring in one of the rings.

"Mucho mejor. I'm seeing some focus now. Tomorrow, same place, same time."

Felipe turns and stares. I'm in shorts and a tank top, carrying a head guard, chest protector, and gloves, and my eyebrow piercings are gone.

"I'm going to be working with Sunny," says Jorge. "She wants to get serious."

Felipe gives me a hard look. "Yeah...? Mind if I watch?"

"Go ahead."

Walking home later that evening, we cross MLK, chugging ginseng sodas. I wait for the lecture, but all he says is, "What took you so long?"

"I thought you'd be pissed."

"Me? It's your life. Since when do you care what I think?"

"Ma won't be happy."

"Yeah, Ma's another story."

"You think you could tell her?"

Felipe starts laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"I wanted you to tell her I'm moving to Jorge's ranch in Eastvale."

"Where? Why?"

"Middle of nowhere. That fight was a disaster. I need to focus, and I can do that better at Jorge's."

"Esperanza Pinel Molina is going to lose her mind."

As we round the corner, we see Ma, Ana Belen, and Javier in our driveway. Felipe lets out a low whistle. Milagros is draped over the hood of his Cherry Lifesaver '98 Corvette.

She is candy too: Strawberry Jolly Ranchers, Red Vines, Atomic Fireballs, Red Hots. Her breasts peek over the crimson neckline of her cheap, silk dress, and she wears a black eye patch. A china platter of flan rests on one crossed thigh. Felipe frowns at her.

“Mami, what are you doing on my car?”

A Dodge Charger swerves around the corner and blasts past us. A chorus bellows, “Aaaaayyyy SEXY! VEN R-R-R-RICA! WAAAAAH!” Milagros tosses her head, and a black flag unfurls.

“Look, get off my car. You’re going to scratch the paint.”

“I brought you flan. You like flan?” she purrs.

“Yeah. Please get off my car.”

Milagros plunges a finger into the creamy, golden pyramid, draws it out, and sucks it clean. Felipe watches with a crooked grin. I am dissolving like a half-eaten Tootsie Pop.

11

Around the table chime sighs and cries of pleasure. “¡Qué bueno!” “¡Sabroso!” “This is so good...”

Milagros gestures toward the eye patch and whispers, “Do you like it?”

“Uh yeah I yeah—”

“Muy sexy, mami.” Felipe gives Milagros a smoldering wink. Her cheeks flame as a fist clenches my heart.

“I know not everyone likes to share recipes,” ventures Ma.

Milagros blushes like a virgin on a botánica candle. “I would love to give you my recipe. I have so many. I love to cook.”

“You are lucky,” says Ana Belen, licking her spoon. “I can’t

cook to save my life.”

“But she can cook to end a life,” cracks Felipe.

“Mom, tell her about the time you started the kitchen on fire!” Javier guffaws, and they join him.

“Cállate,” snaps Ana Belen. Javier does quiet down as he studies the eye patch, and then blurts, “That’s so cool. Where’d you get that?”

“Don’t be rude,” warns Ma.

“No, it’s OK ... Did you hear about the big, 2016 earthquake in Mexico?”

The left eye gleams, turns heavenward, lowers, and drops a tear. Her hands press to her heart and flutter around a story of martyrdom: her rescue of an infant cousin in a collapsed building, a falling beam knocking her unconscious, the injury of her eye. She lifts her hands in a benediction, and I almost expect to see stigmata.

“Tía Fulvia says I am Milagros de verdad.” They all chuckle.

“Let’s go for a walk,” I order.

“Oh, this is so nice. Let’s just have more flan.” She doesn’t even look at me.

“I’ll go with you,” says Felipe, and Milagros bounces out of her chair. She glows, I burn, and Felipe is his usual cool, calm self as we step into the night. Palm trees line our street of faded apartment buildings and Sweet-Tart colored bungalows. Kids race past on scooters.

“Isn’t it a beautiful night?” sighs Milagros. I could choke her.

Bad Bunny rumbles from Felipe’s pocket, and he reaches for his phone. Scanning the text, he pulls his face into a mask of

woe. "I've got to run. Previous engagement. Ladies, I'm going to ask for a rain check. Nice meeting you, mami."

Milagros stands on tiptoe, leaning after the disappearing Corvette like it pulls her with an invisible cord.

"We could walk to Café Tropical, get some coffee."

She glances at me with that one miraculous eye. I could be a stranger telling her the time.

"It's late. I better get home. I'll check you tomorrow. 'Night, Sunny."

She sashays off, head high, hem fluttering, stilettos clikclikcliking away from me. Halfway down the block, she passes the Nieves brothers playing dominoes on their porch. They wolf whistle and "Aaaaaaayyy..." At the corner, she turns left and disappears.

What else can I do? Like any lovesick pendejo, I follow her.

New Fiction by Gordon Laws: "Make Their Ears Heavy, Shut Their Eyes"



I know a deaf man who was once shopping in a general store. A stranger in town was also in the store, and he observed that the deaf man made no movement in response to sounds or voices and hence the stranger discerned he was deaf. The stranger asked the clerk for a pencil and paper and, upon receiving

them, wrote, "Can deaf people read?" He approached the deaf man and held up the paper for him to read. The deaf man was incensed at the stranger's ignorance. He wanted to take the pencil and paper and write back, "No. Can you write?" But the deaf man had no hands and instead rolled his left eye and walked away.

Do you know how Tiresias lost his sight? One myth says that Tiresias stumbled upon Athena bathing and saw her naked, and she struck him blind. Other myths say that Tiresias was turned into a woman for seven years and experienced pregnancy and childbirth. Some people say that Tiresias saw the truth and it was so overwhelming that he went blind. I suppose you will remember that Oedipus Rex ground out his eyes once he learned the truth of his deeds and was forced to admit that Tiresias's explanation of his life was correct.

Did you know that the original Cyclopes were three brothers, each with just one eye? They were master craftsmen with their crowning achievement being the creation of Zeus's thunderbolt.

For the man so loved his country that he gave his firstborn son that whosoever believeth in Lincoln would surely perish

and have everlasting life.

I was there when Lincoln dedicated the cemetery. It was hard to hear in the back. That land is consecrated and sacred now. I did not bury my boy there. I dug him up from a local farm, put him in a casket a local guy made, and brought him down to the rail station to ship him home.

I am a moulder. Or I used to be a moulder. Or actually, I am still a moulder but now have no hands and cannot mould. What is a moulder, you say? Do they teach you nothing nowadays? I create the moulds used in metalworking. That is, I used to . . . before I lost my hands. Fortunately, I am a man of means. And my children help support me.

In the town where Lincoln gave the speech, the town where my boy died, there's a large fellow. Name of Powers . . . Solomon Powers. Some men break rocks. Other men cut stone. Solomon Powers is a stonecutter. You have seen his work if you have been to the town. He cut and laid the stones at the entrance of the big cemetery on the hill, the one where they buried all the boys. Except my boy. They didn't bury him there. Mr. Powers is a marvelous stonecutter and a first rate gentleman.

The town was full of people when I came to pick up my boy. He let me stay at his place for free even though he could have gotten money for it. Said he wouldn't dream of charging anyone who had sacrificed for the Union. We sat up together all night talking about our trades—cutting stones and making moulds. He is a fine stonecutter.

You know that fellow Key who wrote the poem? The one about the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air? Did you know he had a son named Philip? Did you know that son had an affair with Congressman Dan Sickles's wife? Old Sickles loved to see the prostitutes in Washington, D.C., but he sure was protective of his wife who was half his age. Did you know Sickles shot Philip to death for cuckolding him? Sickles got off, but he didn't stay in Congress, so you know where he wound up? In the army. You know where he went with the army? To that town where Lincoln gave the speech. Know what happened to him there? A bursting bomb blew his leg off. See? All roads lead to Gettysburg, and everything comes full circle.

My son's wound was in his back. The fellows in his unit assured me that he did not have his back to the enemy. They think a piece of a bomb bursting in air might have gotten him. My son was at the Angle, the place they say was the High Water Mark of the Confederacy. There was a cannonade by the Rebels before the big charge. It could have been one of those bombs. Or it might have been later during the charge. Maybe even a

Union bomb when they were shooting close range as the Rebels crossed the stone wall. His mates don't remember. It's all a blur. But his back was never to the enemy.

The day after Lincoln's speech, poor Mr. Powers had a terrible tragedy at his house. There was an orphan boy living at Mr. Powers' house. He was learning to be a stonecutter. A fellow who was visiting found a shell on the battlefield, and while handling it near the young man—Allen, I think, was his name—the bomb went off. Poor Allen got a big piece in the stomach. That's what they tell me, anyway. He died in just a couple of minutes. Mr. Powers was so kind about it—he buried young Allen in his own family plot up on the hill where they didn't bury my son. It's hard to know where, though, because he doesn't have a stone yet. Maybe Mr. Powers will cut him a special stone. Allen was thirteen, they tell me.

You remember Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus? You remember that he saw a light and heard the voice of Jesus, and after, he was a new man with a new mission and he took a new name—Paul. Do you remember that he was also blind for a while after and stayed that way until Ananias taught him the truth and then scales fell away from his eyes and he was baptized? That all happened because Paul was a chosen vessel of the Lord.

The last thing I remember seeing before my right eye went dark was a bright light. Brighter than words can describe. Sometimes, I have dreams of seeing that flash of light, and in my dreams, I try to stop time and, with my good eye, stare into it and see if there are any figures there. And I wait and listen. If Jesus is there and wants to tell me that I am kicking against the pricks, I want to hear him. The last thing I heard before my hearing went was, "Sir! Excuse me, sir! Mister!" I am still waiting for the rest of the message. But I guess someone would have to write it out for me. Except in my dreams where I can still hear.

My son George is buried in the Briggs family plot. in the Mount Moriah Cemetery in Philadelphia. He gave his life for me, for you, and for all our country. The government will make a stone for him if I ask them, but I haven't yet. He was at the fulcrum, the tipping point of the war, the place where everyone says it could have gone either way. I would like him to have a stone grander than anything they could conceive. I would like to carve it myself, but I have no hands and besides I am not a stonecutter. Or at least, I am not a stonecutter like my friend Mr. Powers. I would like Mr. Powers to make the stone for my boy. Maybe he will be able to after he does the stone for young Allen.

Going through an amputation is not so bad. You don't feel it. They give you chloroform and make sure you are mostly asleep. Then they give you laudanum after to manage the pain. Eventually, it heals up and seems mostly natural. Sometimes you still think you got your hands, though. I mean, sometimes, I go to pick up something and wind up hitting my stubs against the object because I have forgotten I don't have hands. Sometimes, I swear, I feel pain in my hands, the sort of ache that would come after a long day of work.

Jesus was a carpenter. They put nails through his hands. That has to be worse than amputation. He showed people the scars after he rose. I don't see why he should have scars. Why does he have to prove anything to anyone?

My younger son, Oliver, is a curious lad. Not curious in the sense that he is strange. Curious in the sense that he wants to understand everything. That little fellow at the Powers' house, Allen . . . he and Oliver are the same age. Were the same age, I guess. Oliver was obsessed with all things army while his brother was in it, and when word reached us that George had died, Oliver vowed to become a soldier and avenge his brother. I tried to tell him it doesn't work like that. There are hundreds of thousands of men. You shoot four shots per minute. Tens of thousands of men also shoot. There are rockets and bombs and shells going across the sky. You can't know who killed your brother. You can't kill everyone on the other side. They might get you before you get any of them.

When I went out to the Schwartz farm to find George's remains, I found an unexploded shell. I wanted to bring it home to Oliver. I wanted to show him how these bombs work. I wanted to explain how pieces of it go flying every which direction. I wanted him to know that a piece the size of a nickel can kill you if it gets you in the back. That if it gets to your lungs, your lungs fill up with blood until you drown. That's what I wanted him to know.

Do you realize how sacred it is to be a stonecutter? The name *Peter* means *stone*, and Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Mr. Powers cut rocks upon which the gates of the cemetery are fixed. They will probably stand for all time—at least longer than you and I will live. Daniel said he saw a stone cut out of a mountain without hands that would roll forward and fill the earth. It was God who cut that stone. And that stone smashed every kingdom on earth.

That fellow that accidentally killed young Allen . . . he hit the shell against a rock to try to get the stuck fuse out of it. See, he wanted to make sure it was safe for when he showed it around to people, like his kids. I think about that mistake all the time. All the time. Even the gates of hell cannot prevail against a rock. And a rolling stone will smash all kingdoms.

One time, in one of my dreams about the light, I was staring deep into it with my left eye and I saw a man clothed in white robes. He motioned to me to come to him. He sat on a large throne. I advanced slowly, and I started to kneel, but he said, "No, come here." I walked over to him. He held out his hand. I took it. He placed me on his knee, and he said, "You are also my son. What would you like to know?"

I said, "I want to know the message in the light. Whatever you want to tell me."

"Do you want the truth?" he said.

"Yes. I can bear the truth. Let me not be like Oedipus or others who cannot. Test me."

He nodded. His smile was soft. He said, "I want the best for you, my son. But the truth is it pleases me to bruise you. I will put you to grief."

I think that was just a dream. I am still waiting for the true voice from the light.

New Review by Michael Gruber: “The Myth of the Clean Air War”



A review of Kimberly K. Dougherty's *Airpower in Literature: Interrogating the Clean War, 1915-2015*

One of war's most pernicious myths is that new technology will not only hasten its outcome but lessen its brutality. Paul Fussell describes this delusion in the first pages of his text *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, where he recounts American propaganda images from the 1940s showing “the newly invented jeep, an elegant, slim-barreled 37mm gun in tow, leaping over a hillock.” Such “agility and delicacy,” Fussell contends, conveyed the impression that “quickness, dexterity, and style, a certain skill in feinting and dodging, would suffice to defeat pure force” (1). Subsequently, as World War II began, “everyone hoped, and many believed, that the war would be fast-moving, mechanized, remote-controlled, and perhaps even rather easy” (1). The muck, grime, and hellish attrition of Guadalcanal, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, the Hurtgen Forest, and Anzio testify to the contrary.

This myth is not merely restricted to land. Although the airplane has been deployed since the Great War, the enduring fable is that technology has advanced to such a degree that new airframes, because of their sophistication and speed and precision, will end wars quickly, cleanly, and with minimal loss. Such conceits show surprising longevity, being as old as the military use of the airplane itself, and have massive implications for aircrews, the bombed, and especially our beliefs about how modern wars are fought. In her text *Airpower*

in Literature: Interrogating the Clean War, 1915-2015, Kimberly K. Dougherty takes these beliefs to task. Her central aim is to contrast these beliefs with various portrayals of the so-called "clean air war" in war literature. In doing so, she puts forward a compelling argument that airpower is an enterprise that is not only slow, messy, and deadly, but has even greater unseen costs, and is spoken about in such ways that the true price of its deployment remains always cloaked in euphemism.

Ironically, Dougherty's "interrogation" is effective for its precision. She makes many keen observations about these unseen costs, noting that during war, for example, the bodies of air crews are often "hidden" from view by virtue of their manner of death, being incinerated or blown out of the sky, rendering their remains unrecoverable. Sometimes, these same air crews are presented as "becoming one" with their aircraft, such that what flies are not aviators but a kind of Frankenstein's monster that is half man, half machine. Another insight is that in the numerical tally of an air war's casualties, it is the number of aircraft shot down that seem to be given primacy over human casualties. She notes the long history of airpower's description by military planners and strategists as being "above" the earth, in the domain of the sky, giving it a kind of omnipresence, and where it also gains omniscience, as aircraft can purportedly observe battlefields in ways unavailable to the mere mortals constrained to the ground. All these mythologies, says Dougherty, conspire together to present aerial warfare as "clean," powerful, godlike, and unencumbered by the grotesque violence and terrain of traditional warfare.

Dougherty also makes much of "discursive distancing," which originally refers to a kind of Foucauldian rhetorical analysis that assesses how subjects are allegedly dissociated from hegemonic social systems through discourse, despite ostensibly being benefactors of those same systems. Basically, her point

is that the discourse surrounding the use of airpower contributes to its reckless mismanagement. Key to her exploration are two texts, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, which both provide "stunning portraits" of helicopters, "the machine perhaps most associated with the Vietnam War" (145). She notes that the helicopter enjoyed special intimacy with the troops they ferried, being close to the ground and slow, and as such "this intimacy, perhaps, makes it all the more important to separate human from machine, as the borderlines becoming increasingly blurred" (145), and as such they merit a special kind of profile about how the rhetoric of airpower contributes to its inevitable misuse.

But it is Dougherty's concern over this melding together of man and machine that is, in my opinion, the apex of the book, as it leads her to surmise that the rhetoric surrounding the deployment of airpower lends itself to certain beliefs about technology and its use in war. As Dougherty so capably demonstrates, the infatuation with "clean" airpower is naturally sourced in its innovativeness. The trajectory of this infatuation is an alleged "technological war prosecuted solely by machines, with no threat to one's own population" (145), where the human cost of war will have been supposedly entirely eliminated. This reflection becomes especially prescient when one considers the ongoing war in Ukraine, or the 2021 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the use of lethal drones have been notably effective. Additionally, so-called "drone swarms," theoretically composed of thousands of remotely controlled unmanned aerial vehicles, so designed to overwhelm enemy air defenses, have gained currency in the thought of future military planners, both in the West and with our foreign adversaries. While it is not hard to see how Dougherty's bone-chilling vision will manifest, given recent evidence, it is also not hard to see how her description of "clean" airpower's trajectory—that is, its culmination into a supposedly bloodless "technological war," fought primarily

with machines—will be anything but another fable in the sprawling compendium of historical fables that have always surrounded how “the next war” will be fought. Propaganda will continue to assert the next war’s supposed “cleanliness,” highlighting how new technological innovations eliminate the need for the pointless suffering of those archaic and barbaric wars of decades past, only for the “on-the-ground” reality to offer different evidence—that is, the evidence of tens of thousands of mangled corpses of 18, 19, and 20 year-old kids.

All being said, a natural rejoinder to this—which I admittedly found myself asking as I read this text—is “so what?” Is Dougherty’s counterargument really that we should not substitute machine for man, given the capability? Or that Dresden or Tokyo should not have been bombed because the Allies unfairly privileged the lives of its own service members over unarmed civilians? Should a future defensive war fought by the United States not privilege its own service members over the unarmed civilians of belligerents, given such a tragic choice? It seems ludicrous to demand that wars only be fought by one side unilaterally leveraging itself into a potential disadvantage. The Second World War in particular was an existential struggle between mutually exclusive and competing visions for the world, the role of the state, societal organization, and how natural resources should be utilized to serve those ends. It’s not hard to see how Dougherty’s musings feel like a luxury good given this environment.

But I suspect such a rejoinder misses the point. Dougherty’s point isn’t to say such things are right or wrong merely—it’s that wars are fought with elaborately constructed mythologies about the use of technology (such as airpower), and that military planners and service-members alike not only believe these mythologies, but sometimes even believe them despite knowing they are myths. The cost of believing in such myths is unimaginable brutality and the loss of life to millions of

people, as various truths are obscured or unable to be recognized because of the political nature of the war. The geopolitical environment of the Second World War, for example, not only made realities like the humanity of the enemy impossible to recognize, but exaggerated their costs and contributed to immense suffering both among the bombed and the bombers. Such calamity is worth recognizing.

On the more pedantic side, I sometimes found Dougherty's emphases and language distracting, if anything because she too strongly relies on the kind of intersectional analysis and related academic jargon that dominates contemporary humanities publications. In one section, she also provides a summary of the causes contributing to the Spanish Civil War that are laughably uncritical and overly generous to the Republicans and the Popular Front, which made me suspicious of her framing of other historical events. But these are rather nitpicky when her broader contributions are taken into consideration. Dougherty has ultimately produced a razor-sharp text that attacks the fictions we all too easily attach to the role of technology in warfare. In uncovering beliefs about airpower's "cleanliness," she has produced something worth celebrating.