New Review: Michael Carson on Kevin Honold’s Our Lady of Good Voyage

CROATOAN: A Review of Kevin Honold’s *Our Lady of Good Voyage* (Orison Books, 2024).

Kevin Honold’s *Our Lady of Good Voyage* begins in an unnamed Ohio town populated with German ghosts. The Germans, the children and grandchildren of once prosperous immigrants, all elderly now, move through the streets incuriously, “lacking the imagination to move on.” Joe, the novel’s reluctant protagonist, pulls his squad car over and tries to help one of these living ghosts but ends up giving her two dollars and advice to buy some lozenges. As he drives off, he realizes that despite “a common language,” he once again “failed to trade a single piece of worthwhile information.” “I may as well be a god damn ghost,” he thinks.

Joe’s childhood friend does not have time to be a ghost. Kenny believes that Mary, the mother of God, comes to him in dreams with a crown of stars and the moon beneath her feet and wants Kenny to visit her in what the Aztecs called the center of the moon, and what we, today, call Mexico. He believes that the devil is a miracle that has created the illusion of our self-centered world (“lovelier than a thousand Sistine Chapels”) and only the act of a journey, a pilgrimage, can save us from this first miracle with a second. He believes that the voyages of Captain Cook and Intuit hunting practices are as real and as present as the toilet pipes he and Joe repair after high school. He knows that all is sacred, all always alive, and that we, unlike ghosts, have a choice to see this or not.

But Kenny is gone, and has been for ten years. He haunts the edges of Joe's muted days, appearing shoeless in crowded city streets, preaching his vision to empty train cars, leaving the final message of the vanished Roanoke settlers (CROATOAN) graffitied in drainage ditches. Joe circles the flickers of this ebbing fire in his squad car, these hints, only sure of one thing: that Kenny, his best friend, failed at everything, but that failure itself somehow legitimized the undertaking. "Anything else was not worth the time."

The novel's other chapters take place on the road, in memory. Joe and Kenny make their way down from Ohio toward Mexico. They drink with a man with his head caved in on a bus, hitchhike with a suicidal veteran, violate the Missouri law of being poor (and from Ohio), escape an apocalypse-obsessed family cult in Louisiana, and hop trains with immigrants across Texas. The immigrants smile but nod off at Kenny's story. They are too exhausted to hear the end, how he and Joe will find Mary outside Mexico City and beg her to reveal the truth, and this truth, her love for them, and their love for her, will make it impossible to deny the sacredness of every living thing. Border Control disappears the immigrants. VA hospitals and jails disappear the drunks. Churches and homes warm the faithful and the righteous and those who never leave home. It is difficult to say who the ghosts are here. Kenny tells us the devil most certainly is not one. We should love the devil, he confides to his fellow inmates in a Missouri prison, for "if we don't love him too, the work will forever remain unfinished…I see him every day."

Joe smashes a scorpion during his tour of duty in Somalia that follows their pilgrimage. He uses an oil barrel three times to crush it, and it does nothing spectacular, just stops moving. "Damn, killer," says another soldier. Joe does not believe in God or that this world can mean anything more than it is. He sees only the humiliated and the humiliation. He signs up for the military because in a world that is all ghost, deployments

and war become un-ghostly, a quickening, bloody heart in a waste of gray. They have been raised by exhausted and unhappy men with repressed memories of brutal World War 2 campaigns. But the pride of that rare past, of being someone else once, keeps their uncles and fathers alive to themselves in a world that has moved on. Joe sees this. He is smart enough to know that it is nice to have done something, to go somewhere, to be someone, at least once. And the military pays for school now, they say.

We all have a bit of Joe in us. It's all sad. It's all a loop, nonsense, a slow fading away. Don't be too curious. Don't look too far outside the electric light. Suck it up. You don't know what's out there. Keep your head down by pretending to hold it up. The is is the is. Stay alive. And we do. We survive for so long. Thousands of years. Whole eternities. Look at us! Examine our cities, our "brief golden clusters suspended in the night" and the armies of creatures crossing silently through the fields and trainyards around and within them. "The dead never hurt anybody," Kenny tells Joe during a training exercise with the moon above them like a spider's egg in the naked, winter branches. "It's the other ones we have to worry about."

Then Kenny almost despairs. He says he can hardly remember Her anymore. He warns Joe that "forgetting is the only death…Evil is everything that dims and obscures and wears away the gift for remembering." Joe says, no, "Evil is time itself. Time is what takes everything away." Kenny's eyes go bright (brighter) with tears and hugs his friend. "You have been listening. Now I know. Thank you." Joe does listen. We do listen. Even if we pretend that we don't. Some say that's all ghosts can really do. Some say that only ghosts believe in time because they are trapped in the idea of it. Others—like me—say that novels as true and wise and joyful as *Our Lady of Good Voyage* prove Kenny wrong. There will *always* be people among us who remember, ergo nothing ever dies, and there is no evil,

despite the best attempts of the righteous and incurious to make us believe otherwise.

But enough with the ghosts. In the book's final pages Joe, a child again, runs away from a snapping turtle that a group of boys have stomped to death, back to Kenny, off the path, somewhere in the woods. They spend hours "contriving little ships from bark and twigs, binding the planks and timbers with long green grasses." They make a fort out of some old logs and beg for food from the local bakery. They work like devils to create a home that is not a home thanks to Kenny's mom, who provides them somewhere safe to come back to, to return to after their long difficult pilgrimages, in Ohio, and Mexico, and Africa, searching for the mother of God the world over. They complete their project. They look out from their fort with immense human satisfaction. "Neither deadlines nor schedules concerned them, not the world's troubles, and the long days led away, in gratuitous succession, to the very vanishing point of time, which was inexhaustible as air, and warranted as little concern."

You can buy *Our Lady of Good Voyage* at Orison Books.

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.

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