

New Poetry by D.R. James: “Surreal Expulsion”

New poem by DR James: Surreal Expulsion

New Poetry by Steve Gerson: “Our Prayers”



TEETH MUZZLE SPIT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Our Prayers

where are the shields
/we need/
to stop the blast
of bullets Glock
and AK
assaults?
that overwhelm the blue
in our veins?
that enter our brains our
schools the bodies
of children with unicorn
backpacks?
that enter
our workplaces inundated
with anger our streets
with late-night drivebys?
church service blood spattered
bibles shredded
commandments torn
as if by raptor teeth
muzzle spit?
while senators say
our prayers are with you?

**New Fiction from Kirsten Eve
Beachy: “Soft Target”**



For Sallie.

By Picture Day in November, Sophie had perfected the downward stab and counting to twenty. She clenched her soft fingers around her rainbow pony pencil, raised her fist high, and then smashed it down on the practice balloons, barely wincing when they popped, scolding when they escaped. The other children rallied to bounce stray balloons back to her desk. She got *thirteen*, *fourteen* at last, and from there it was an obstacle-free trip to *twenty* with her peers chanting along. She hadn't yet mastered our *Go* protocol for intruders, but neither had a handful of the general education students. However, Caleb could shout *Go* instantly and often got to the Rubber Man first, tackling its knees to disable the joints. Jazzmyn was the most formidable of all the students; when the Rubber Man dropped from the ceiling, she'd grab my scissors on the way and disembowel it in two slashes.

Picture Day is tense for second-graders, with the boys trussed up in buttoned shirts, the girls eyeing each other's frilly

dresses, and the lunch cart loaded with chocolate pudding and meatballs with marinara. Caleb endlessly adjusted his bowtie and Jazzmyn fretted over a smudge on her yellow pantsuit. But Sophie was thrilled with her rustling crinoline and the biggest blue bow that anyone had ever seen. When they lined up for their scheduled foray to the library for pictures, she sashayed to the end of the line, tossing her cascade of red curls and humming softly, off-key. Todd was the only one left at his desk, digging out torn pages and broken pencils—looking for one of the pocket treasures I pretended not to notice, his tiny plastic dinosaurs. Sophie called out, “Todd, we go now!” and jabbed her finger at the spot in line behind her, right beneath our Superstar of the Week bulletin board where a large-as-life photo of Sophie scowled at flashcards, surrounded by an array of exploding stars.

Todd pretended not to hear her. They used to be the best of friends, building tiny dinosaur colonies in the sandbox and sharing their turns to feed our guinea pig, but then his mother met Sophie at the Food Culture Festival last week, and he had ignored her ever since.

“Come on, Todd!”

He turned from his desk at last and jostled into the line in front of Sophie, muttering something that I didn’t catch.

It must have been bad, because Jazzmyn decked him. Fist to his cheekbone, she sprawled him right out on the floor, then loomed over him with her fists on her hips, her face resplendent with fury. “We don’t use that word in this class,” she shouted. “We don’t use that word ever!”

“Jazzmyn!” I swooped in to inspect the damage. No nosebleed, and his eye was intact.

Jazzmyn burst into tears when she saw my expression, then collected herself enough to run to the sink and wet a paper towel for Todd’s swelling face. Ms. Jackson, my morning aide,

logged into our classroom portal to open an incident ticket.

By this time, Sophie had flung herself to the floor beside him in a swirl of yellow and white skirts. “Todd, you okay? You okay?”

Todd finally caught enough breath to begin howling.

“He’ll be fine,” I told her. “Go with Ms. Jackson so I can take care of him.”

Ms. Jackson gathered up Sophie and guided the children down to the library for the scheduled pictures, and then I buzzed the office for security clearance to walk Todd to the nurse. He still whimpered and clutched the towel to his eye. Jazzmyn came, too—she’d be wanted at the principal’s office.

We escorted Todd to the clinic, and then I steered her toward the main office. She stopped me outside Melkan’s door with a hand on my sleeve. “I had to do it,” she said between sobbing breaths, and then leaned in to whisper, “He called Sophie a *tard*.”

That word, in all its forms, is banned in my classroom.

“Jazzie,” I said. “You can’t hit another student, ever. Not even when they say something horrible. It’s your job to protect each other.”

Jazzmyn nodded once, quickly, her lips pressed together. My policy is to not have favorites, but I loved Jazzmyn for the meticulous care she took of everything: wiping the crumbs from her bento boxes with a paper towel, coloring every millimeter of the day’s vocabulary coloring page with crayons—even the bubble letters and the background spaces—and persisting with practice drills until her form was perfect.

“Will they call the cops?” she asked, almost keeping the quaver out of her voice.

“No.” She may be Black, but she’s only seven years old.

“Will I get suspended?”

If Todd’s mother raised hell, Jazzmyn could get expelled, but I didn’t tell her that. “Let me talk to Mr. Melkan first,” I said.

“If I get suspended,” said Jazzmyn, “I will never get into Wellesley.”

Melkan buzzed me in then, so I was spared the need to answer. I entered his lair while Jazzmyn perched in the center of a chair in the reception area, fists tucked together in her lap.

Melkan liked to carry gallon-sized promotional mugs from gas stations. That day he stirred half a dozen scoops of protein powder into his 64 ounces of coffee while I explained the situation.

“She’s out,” he said.

“Please,” I said. “Todd used a slur against Sophie, and Jazzmyn responded instinctively. She won’t do it again, now she knows what she’s capable of. Review the surveillance tape. Her aim was perfect. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“We shouldn’t give her the chance to do it again,” said Melkan, but he was already clicking through the surveillance queue, intrigued. The walls of his small office were lined with large-screened monitors, barely leaving room for his collection of ultra-marathon numbers, the plaque declaring Stoney Creek Elementary last year’s Hardened Target Regional Winner, and the AR-15 hanging over his office door.

“Plus, her first quarter grades are off the charts. We need her here next week for standards testing,” I said.

“You need a genius around to offset Sophie Clark. That child can’t even count to ten. You chose her for your class. You

worry about the test scores.”

I kept quiet and let him watch the video. He winced when the punch, replayed in slow motion, sent Todd flying in a smooth arc to land on the floor, where he bounced gently—one, two, three times. Melkan looped the video and leaned in closer.

At last he turned back to me. “Her aim is flawless.”

“They’re the best group I’ve had. Jazzmyn is so good—have you looked at the Rubber Man logs? They took him out in 12 seconds last week.”

He looked impressed, then doubtful. “That’s impossible. Just number two pencils?”

“Jazzmyn had my scissors. She punctured all the vital pockets single-handedly.”

“You started second graders on teacher scissors?”

“Just the ones who can handle it, if they want to stay in from recess to work. Just Jazzmyn and Caleb.”

He swiped through the logs, comparing our performance to the other second grade classrooms. We were leagues ahead of the others.

“Sure you aren’t inflating the reports a bit?”

“No, sir. You know it’s automated.”

Melkan leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, and nodded to himself. I hated it when he looked thoughtful. Hated it. Something new, something ill-considered, something downright stupid was likely to result. With lots of fanfare.

But he just buzzed the nurse and asked her, “You examined the Lawrence boy?”

“He’s here now, sir.”

“His eye okay?”

“No permanent damage.”

He rang off. “We’re done here, Campbell. Send Jazzmyn in. I’ll talk to her. No recess for the rest of the quarter, but keep training her on the scissors.”

It was much better than I expected.

“But if the Lawrence boy’s mother complains...” he warned.

“I know. But I hope we can avoid a suspension. It would break her heart.”

“We’ll see.”

He actually smiled as he waved me out. I almost felt neutral about him as I left the office and gave Jazzmyn a departing pat on the shoulder, but then I remembered what he said about the test scores, and Sophie.

Sophie, short, round, and wise-eyed, had established herself as the small Mayor of Stoney Creek Elementary by the end of first grade, high-fiving everyone all the way down the hallway with her soft hands. However, she was in danger of becoming a mascot. She’d been pushed out of her class for longer portions of the day as the year went by, and by the end of the year was brought out of the resource room only for feel-good forays into the mainstream classroom. Melkan gave her a nominal placement in my class, but insisted she would do better spending most of second grade “in a more supported environment,” especially given the rigors of the new programming. I argued that there was no better support for her than the examples of her own peers. Her parents agreed, and they had a lawyer.

She became, as I hoped, the heart of our class; she would

applaud when we finished with the subtraction workbook activity for the day, and the rest of the class got into the habit, too. They also caught on to her victory dance each time they vanquished the Rubber Man, with lots of stomping and fierce whoops and high-fives. The children competed for the chance to help her with her counting bears and sight words, and sharpened their own reflexes as we drilled again and again with her, *Danger, Danger, Go!*

Parents, however, were thrown off by Sophie. Inclusion was still new. When we were growing up, the special kids were always kept in a special room, ketchup counted as a vegetable, and anyone could walk right through the front doors of the school.

The week before Picture Day, two mothers took me aside at the Food Culture Festival, each to whisper that her son called Sophie his best friend, but she hadn't realized until just tonight who Sophie was. "I mean, Leroy hadn't said anything about how she was different," said the first, over her Crock-pot of Mac 'n Weenies.

I could see the story writing itself behind Leroy's mother's shining eyes, how her son had befriended a little Downs girl, and wasn't he such a big-hearted hero?

"It's such a good thing for Leroy that Sophie took him under her wing, isn't it? He's too timid for almost eight. She's really helped him to break out of his shell." And it was true. I explained how Sophie coaxed him to scale the peak of the climbing structure in our reinforced play yard. I doubted that Leroy even ranked in Sophie's top five friends, but I was glad she made him feel at home. "She's quite socially advanced," I said.

But Todd's mother, one of the West Coast refugees, reeled me in over her quinoa tabbouleh (labeled free of gluten, genetic modification, dairy, and cruelty) and asked me to encourage

her son to play with different children: "It's sweet that she likes him, and I'm glad he doesn't mind playing with a girl, but now I see that she's not the best playmate for him. You know we don't want to stunt his social development while he's adjusting to his new life. He needs strong children he can look up to."

I wound up to give her six different pieces of my mind, but by the time I had organized and prioritized them, she had already pulled Todd out of the circle of kids gathered around Sophie for an impromptu *Danger, Danger, Go!* drill and was steering him over to Caleb's parents to arrange an advantageous playdate.

Maybe Todd's mom wasn't always like that. I heard she escaped the Siege of San Francisco in a pontoon boat, in the bloody days after the Repeal Riots, telling Todd they were going on a picnic. I heard her husband didn't make it out, and she told Todd they got a divorce. You hear a lot of rumors these days. It's hard to know what's true.

After the Food Culture Festival, Todd stopped playing with Sophie or even high-fiving her. He took the long way around the room to get to his desk each morning. Her eyes followed him, but she didn't say anything.

When I rejoined my class at the library, picture-taking was almost over. The students were making faces at the photographer, well over the initial wariness they have of strangers in the school. We often remind them that people with visitor's badges have been screened for safety, but then we tell them they need to be alert to the behavior of every adult, even the trusted ones, because madness has no method.

Sophie clambered up onto the photographer's stool, but instead of giving her signature crooked-toothed grin for the camera, she just stared. Her face was still bloated from crying.

“Come on down, Sophie,” I said, and let her initiate a hug so that I could wrap my arms around her. “Now what is it?”

“Miss Campbell,” she snuffled, “Todd okay? Todd hurt bad?” She rubbed her snot-nose on my sweater.

“He’ll be okay,” I said. “The nurse is taking good care of him.”

I had her wipe her eyes and nose and convinced her to try one more smile for the photo—then told the photographer we would hold out for the make-up day. When the line of students entered the hallway to our classroom, Sophie waved and took off in the opposite direction, towards the clinic.

“I go see Todd,” she said.

“No, Sophie. You don’t have safety clearance. Time to go back to class.” I took her arm.

She narrowed her eyes and shrugged away from me. I hadn’t seen that look before. Sophie’s first grade teacher had complained to me that she was unmanageable, “a real handful,” a dropper. I’d never had trouble; I got to know Sophie, so I knew what she needed: warnings about transitions, a clear routine, and as much praise as the other children. Sophie had never dropped to the floor to resist my suggestions, but now, watching her stubborn face, I had an inkling of how that might happen.

“Miss Campbell, I really need to go see Todd.” A nine word construction. I’d tell Speech later.

I got clearance for an unscheduled trip down the hall, and Ms. Jackson took the class to Bathroom Access to prepare for lunch.

Sophie greeted the nurse with her usual high-five, then tiptoed to peer around the curtain that divided Todd’s cot

from the rest of the room. "Todd, you okay?"

I followed her. Todd was sitting up, holding a cold pack to his eye. He looked at Sophie, opened his mouth, closed it, and then rolled over to face the wall, drawing up his knees in a fetal position. I would talk to him about what he called Sophie later. That wasn't the Todd I knew. I loved how Todd chatted all through the morning gathering with Sophie, and giggled over his pocket treasures and armpit farts with her, and how he remembered to check the guinea pig's water every morning—until this week. Avoiding Sophie had made him downright sullen.

Sophie confronted the nurse. "Where's Todd mom? He need his mom."

"Can she come for him?" I asked.

"I left a message. He'll be fine. No lasting damage, but that eye might not be back to normal for awhile."

"Make-up day for photos is Monday."

"His face is going to be a lot of interesting colors by then."

Todd's mom would love that.

"Well, send him back to class if he gets bored," I said. "Or if you need space."

"It's quiet so far. But rumor has it Melkan's bringing in a gator this afternoon. I might need to clear the beds."

"So early in the year? Are the fourth-graders ready?"

"Maybe just a rumor."

Sophie just gazed at Todd's forlorn back. She didn't care about the gator, maybe didn't even know what the Gator Drill was. This is what Sophie cared about: The colony of salvaged pencil stubs in the back of her desk. Being ready to dance

when the music started. Salisbury Steak day. Laughing at Todd's fart jokes.

"Time to go, Sophie," I said, and buzzed for clearance to enter the hallway.

She bent over the cot and tucked something orange into the fold of Todd's pinstriped elbow. "Todd, come back soon."

"He okay," she told me confidently, watching for the green light above the door.

Todd peered around the curtain at her, but she didn't notice.

Jazzmyn returned in time to be kept in from recess, and Caleb opted to stay in for practice. She drew me aside while he practiced switching grips on the teacher scissors, and whispered accusingly, "You said they wouldn't suspend me!"

"I didn't know." Todd's mom must have called at last. "How long?"

"Two whole *days*. Mom was supposed to pick me up right away, but she couldn't because there's no one to watch Grandma, and Mr. Melkan said he was busy this afternoon, and his assistant said she couldn't have me crying in her office all afternoon and they sent me back here. *Without even a safety escort.*"

If I would have had the chance, I would have explained to her how lightly she'd gotten off, and how Mr. Melkan and I were impressed with her work and doing our best for her. She was a rational child, and that could have been the end of it for her, but I didn't have the chance, because the nurse buzzed Todd into our room. Apparently, Mrs. Lawrence could give Melkan an earful about Jazzmyn, but didn't want to pick up her son off schedule.

Jazzmyn had the grace to look embarrassed at his entrance, as

did he. Then she shrugged. He made a half-hearted fart sound with his armpit.

“Come on, Todd,” said Caleb, hailing him over to my desk.

“Okay,” said Todd, and pulled out his newest treasure to show Caleb. “Check this out! An orange pachycephalosaurus!”

Caleb gave an appreciative dinosaur roar, Todd made T-rex hands, Caleb made his own, and they sparred ineffectually with their shortened arms. Then Todd asked, “Whatcha doing in here?”

“We’re gonna practice with the teacher scissors.” Caleb swiped them from my desk and demonstrated a slash hold. “Ms. Campbell, can Todd do it, too?”

“Why not?” I said. “I think you’re ready, Todd.” He had made astonishing progress in his few months at our school. This would give him something to feel good about. I would pull him aside later to talk about Sophie. “Now, remember, these stay on my desk at all times, except—”

“I know,” said Todd, reaching for them.

“Start with the downward stab,” I said. “Just like you do with your number two pencil, but you hold it like this.” Caleb helped him adjust his fingers.

Jazzmyn stared at us for a moment, then slouched over to her desk.

“Do you want to help, Jazzie?” I asked.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” she hissed at me, then put her head down on her desk.

She was still glowering that afternoon after story time, when we took a break to practice Go reflexes, my own innovation on

the usual training. In case of an event, I wanted each one to be confident enough to shout "Go!" Jazzmyn is usually the first one to shout "Danger!" when I pull a colored ball out of the practice basket, but she watched stonily as I lifted the green one into sight.

"Danger!" shouted Adam.

"Danger!" chorused a dozen other voices in response. Not Jazzmyn's.

The children held their breaths, ready.

I threw the green ball to Leroy. "Go!" he shouted, before it even touched his fingers.

"Excellent response time!" I surveyed the class, looking each student in the eyes in turn. "That's what I want from each one of you. Remember, if you are the one closest to the threat, everyone else will get ready, but they will wait for your signal. We'll lose precious seconds if you aren't ready to yell 'Go!' Remember Peoria."

I pulled out a purple ball. "Danger!" they all shouted, then giggled when there was no answering call.

Natasha recovered first. "Danger!"

Most of them hovered over their seats, their hands eager to catch the ball. Sophie, in the front row, was bouncing up and down. I dropped the ball on her desk. Sophie loved to holler a good, clear, "Go!" Still, it took her about five seconds to register that this ball had landed on her desk, to wind up, grab it, thrust it into the air, and shout "Go!"

The other children clapped politely, because they loved Sophie, but we all knew we would have been dead by now in the case of an event.

"I'll come back to you in a few minutes, Sophie," I said. "Be

ready.”

I turned to the rest of the class. “You’ve seen the news. We all believe that we’ll be the lucky ones, that it can’t happen here. Well, it can. And if bad luck comes our way, it’s up to us to make good luck. Good reflexes make good luck.”

I passed the orange ball to Todd.

Blue to Casey.

Pink to Jazzmyn, who couldn’t help but catch it and shout “Go!” Her reflexes are too good to sulk.

I pulled out the yellow one.

“Danger!”

“Danger!”

I slammed it down on Sophie’s desk. Her eyes went wide, and after barely a beat, she shouted, “Go!”

The room erupted in cheers. Even Todd joined in. “Go, go, go!” Sophie chanted, for good measure, waving the yellow ball above her head.

“Okay, balls away! That’s enough for today.” I passed the ball basket. “Check your pencils, and make sure they’re sharp. The Rubber Man hasn’t dropped today, and you never know when you’ll need to be ready.”

“Or where he’ll fall,” added Caleb, testing his pencil point.

“That’s right,” I said. “He might fall right next to you. We’ll be depending on you to shout Go!”

Half a dozen children glanced apprehensively up at the ceiling, then lined up at the pencil sharpener. Jazzmyn stalked to the end of the line. “Miss Campbell?” she snapped, raising her hand.

“Yes?”

“When will we get to have a real intruder?”

“Never, I hope, but if you’re prepared, you don’t have to be afraid.”

“Will they have a gun?” asked Todd.

“They don’t have to. They just have to pose a danger. That’s why you have to look. That’s why you have to agree as a group that they are dangerous.”

“But most of them have guns. All of them I’ve seen on the news,” Todd persisted.

“Why can’t we have guns?” Caleb asked.

“Guns are for grown-ups,” I explained.

“Who decides that?” asked Jazzmyn, resharpening her pencil until the tip gleamed. “Oh, right. Grown-ups.”

“Yeah,” said Todd. “Why can’t we just get rid of guns?”

I said, per my contract: “People want to be able to choose to have their guns, children. It’s what we call a fundamental right.”

Jazzmyn turned from the pencil sharpener to stare at me calmly. “Grown-ups are the real danger. All of them.” She pointed straight at me. “Danger!”

Like a kid in a pool, answering “Polo” to her “Marco”, Caleb sang out a confirmation, “Danger!” and reached into his desk.

The children balanced at the edge of their seats, gripping their school supplies, unsure. I was standing right next to Sophie’s desk. She took it all in, looked at me, almost past me, and then her eyes widened and she shouted with glee, with pure delight, “Go! Go, go, go, go, go!”

And the children swarmed, pencils raised.

It was a gator. It took me far too long to realize that Melkan had deactivated the locks in our classroom door and ushered in a gator behind me. Gators are primeval and scaly and horrible, and they do not belong in a second-grade classroom. There's a reason that they're the only large animal approved for child defense drills. No one feels sorry for them. As it twined past my desk and then, when the wave of children broke upon it, scrabbled across the carpet in a desperate bid to escape, I just stood and watched. In my defense, they didn't train second-grade teachers for the gator drill at the time. It wasn't expected. By the time I remembered that I should be using my greater body weight to incapacitate its thrashing midsection, the children had neutralized it. It wasn't dead yet, but pinned and winded, and twitching as the children caught the rhythm of the stabbing. Sophie finally found her own sharp stub of a pencil and stood at the periphery, pencil raised, looking for an opening. Jazzmyn darted in and out between the other children, stabbing, testing methodically for weak spots. McKenzie anchored the end of its nose. Caleb, pinning the gator down at the base of the tail, shouted, "Someone go for the eyes! Go deep! Get the teacher scissors!" Todd had already snagged them from my desk and was gouging the gator's flank.

"Get the eyes! Get the eyes!" the other children hollered at Todd, making way at the head. With the lateral thrust we had just practiced at recess, Todd blinded the gator in one eye.

Sophie shrieked and applauded. "Go, Todd! Go, go, go!"

Todd turned, grinning, to see her teetering at the edge of the melee, the only child without something to do, and waved her in. "Get in here, Sophie!" he shouted, and wrapped her fist around the teacher scissors.

“How?”

“Down, like your pencil, right at the eye.” The other kids leaned further away from the head. A broad stain of blood was spreading across the carpet, and the gator was barely twitching anymore. “Sophie! Sophie!” shouted the children as she raised the teacher scissors.

Her first blow bounced off the bony socket and tore down the gator’s cheek, but she was already raising the scissors and got it square in the eye on the second blow. She kept going.

“Sophie! Sophie! Sophie!”

Eventually it dawned on them that the gator was dead, and they fell easily into the Rubber Man victory dance, stomping and whooping. Sophie flung the scissors up in victory, and the wicked points of them lodged in the ceiling tiles, where they stayed, and she slapped Todd so hard on the back that he stumbled across the gator’s body.

The children giggled and shouted, giddy with victory. Everyone high-fived Sophie. Sophie high-fived everyone. But one by one they fell silent, looking at what was left of the gator. Not much, really. “I thought it was bigger,” said Caleb. I had, too. It looked shrunken, there in the spreading pool of blood, its scales torn. The only formidable thing about it was the stench of blood and feces. With its clipped claws and the duct-tape muzzle around its jaws, it had never been much of a threat. Hardly six feet long, it couldn’t have weighed much more than I did.

“Did it hurt?” asked Todd, finally.

I found it hard to answer.

Jazzmyn said, “It was going to die anyway. It was a nuisance and was going to be culled. My sister is in fifth grade, and she says they give the gators drugs so they don’t feel pain.”

She wiped her bloody hands on the lapels of her yellow jacket. The hems of her pants had soaked up four inches of red, and the rest of the suit was splattered with gore.

Bruce from maintenance buzzed in to clear up the remains, and I ushered the class down the hall to Bathroom Access, where they took turns silently signing in to wash their hands. There was nothing to be done about their Picture Day clothes, hanging in bloody tatters of khaki and tulle. The nurse came by to apply butterfly strips to the deepest scratches. And then the children gathered around me in the authorized holding area to hear what I had to say about the drill. Our stats: 3:07 from release to probable death, twelve broken pencils, four cuts requiring bandaging, one pencil puncture wound.

For a second there, when Sophie gave the signal, I actually thought—no, I won't say it. It was a foolish thought. The children would never. At least, not to me. What we were doing was a good thing. They knew it. We were giving them a way to protect themselves. A chance to fight back.

When I was sure my voice wouldn't shake, I congratulated them. "Pretty good work. That gator bled out in under three minutes. But you'll have to do better. If it had an AR-15, at least fourteen of you would be dead by now."

They nodded soberly, but in the back Jazzmyn whispered, "My big sister's class finished the Gator Drill in five minutes, and they were best in the school."

I made myself smile then. I would wait until later to remind them that they could have flipped the gator over to quickly access its vitals. "You're right, Jazzie. This class is good. This class is the best. I am going to have that gator made into a purse."

And I did, although there wasn't enough skin left on the gator to make a purse bigger than this little coin clutch. I keep it in my pocket still, and in it, right here, is the stub of a rainbow pony pencil that Sophie gave me the day she was promoted up to the middle school, ecstatic and resplendent in another blue bow.

"For luck, Ms. Campbell," she said, patting my cheek with one soft, gentle hand.

"We make our own luck, Sophie," I said. "You of all people should know that."

You see how sharp it is?

**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 Carol Everett Adams: “Rabbit Trails”



THE TEXAS DUST / *image by Amalie Flynn*

RABBIT TRAILS

in the Texas dust. We're flat in the dirt

so we can poke around down there with a long stick,
while above us bullets fly and children

hold up their honor roll certificate shields.

You say blankets are the answer,
and backpacks and better officers and armed teachers

and doors that shut like Vegas vaults to keep your money safe,

keep your money safer than my child.

I forgot what we were talking about.

“All. art. is. political:” An interview with Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales

Our two featured poems for the month are selections from Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales’s anthology, *Pulse/Pulso: In Remembrance of Orlando*. Here, WBT editor Andria Williams interviews the two editors about this unique, gorgeous, and necessary passion project. As Morales describes,

The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.

ANDRIA WILLIAMS: Roy, one entry point into this discussion might be to start with your 2016 poem, [“Restored Mural for Orlando.”](#) The poem is beautiful and gutting. You have a masterful way of building the emotional investment with each turn, opening with the shooting itself, and then moving into a fond, pragmatic, and even tenderly humorous portrait of your family on vacation in Orlando. On that trip, you reflect that Orlando is where kids go to “fantasize about the childhood [they] didn’t have;” you’re surprised by the sight of your mother on a rollercoaster (“because she’s always been ashamed of her weight”), and note somewhat humorously that your

parents ended up “buying a timeshare by mistake/ not really by mistake...”

As a non-poet but a fiction writer, I was simply impressed by the way you allow the “character” of yourself to guide us through the poem, which somehow, almost counter-intuitively, increases the intensity.

Can you talk a little more about the myth of Orlando for you, as a child, and how this mythos worked its way into your thoughts about the tragedy?

ROY G. GUZMÁN: First of all, thank you for your generous reading of my poem and, as a fiction writer, for noticing these rich aspects about the poem. I think one of the most important things I had to negotiate during the writing this poem was my position in all of this. I kept returning to that image of the club, to the colors, to what the victims and survivors might have been wearing, to the sounds. Those sensory details invited me into that space, but I had to figure out what I’d be doing in the reimagining of that space. I had to turn the gaze on myself. That is when a lot of these autobiographical details suddenly became important to my approach to the poem. I had to honor the victims and I had to be as clear as possible about my relationship to Orlando. As someone who grew up in Florida, I was affected in so many ways.



Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Roy G. Guzmán.

The mythos of Orlando was important for me to talk about. I can’t remember how many times my friends and I would just drive up from Miami and stay in a hotel and do all kinds of stupid things. Most of us were teenagers. I probably went to Orlando a few times before I even set foot in Disney World. The timeshare event affected my family and me greatly. I’d just gotten my first job out of college and I wanted to treat

my parents to something meaningful. I remember being in the info session for that timeshare and running all kinds of figures in my head to possibly work out this possibility. Obviously, I was naive and the people running the info session took advantage of that with false promises. Till this day my mom tells my stepdad and me that she never wanted to sign that contract, that we pushed her to. And she's right.

2) AW:

In "Restored Mural for Orlando," you write:

"I am afraid of attending places
that celebrate our bodies because that's also where our bodies
have been cancelled / when you're brown & gay you're always
dying
twice"

What was the particular importance to you of publishing an anthology – specifically of Latinx and LGBTQ+ writers – about the shooting?

In their poem "straight partner of ten years and anyone else," Nicole Oquendo writes,

"do not erase my grief. there is a galaxy of this
spreading out inside my chest."

Did you feel that the stories, the grief, of members of your community were not being heard in the aftermath of the shooting?

RG: We were totally not being heard. We still aren't. It's appalling how that's always the case when tragedies affect marginalized communities. Again and again we see scholars and researchers build careers out of Black and brown pain, and whatever money they make hardly ever makes it back to our communities. This year, for instance, marked the second anniversary of the massacre. Instead of promoting queer and

trans voices of color that responded with care and tact, most of the writing community decided to promote another cis white writer and what they've written about others' pain or how they want to make the world a better place. I'm tired of this pattern. It's enough to make me feel cynical. But we're told to shut up and be grateful we're still alive. That's what the writers in this anthology are trying to resist.

MIGUEL M. MORALES: Pulse affected us all in ways we'll be discovering for years to come. QTPOC weren't being heard before the shooting, in the aftermath, or even today. But just because we aren't being heard doesn't mean our voices aren't out there.

QTPOC communities across the country immediately felt connected to the shooting because so many times we've been relegated to the occasional "Latin Night" and even then, those spaces are filled with others trying to exoticize or fetishize us. No matter how comfortable we try to make those spaces, we are still being policed, attacked, and victimized. But through it all, we always – *always* – have each other. Honestly, it hurt to see so many commemorations of Pulse exclude our voices but we did what we always do, we buried our dead and made our own space. That's what we wanted to convey with *Pulse/Pulso*, we have each other.

3) AW: Miguel, I know that you grew up in Texas and worked as a migrant farmworker beginning quite early in your childhood, that you lead writing workshops for farmworkers in Missouri and Kansas, and that you're also an accomplished poet and fiction writer. Can you talk about how you initially connected with Roy to work on the Pulse/Pulso anthology, and about your own passion for the project?)



Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Miguel M. Morales.

MM: I followed Roy on social media, but we didn't interact

much. Not long after the Pulse shooting, my friend and poetry sister, Sarah A. Chavez, asked if I knew Roy because he had a piece about Pulse that was going viral on the internet. It was "Restored Mural for Orlando" and I didn't even finish reading it before I sent him a message thanking him for the piece. We began chatting and I shared with him how I wished someone would put together an anthology of brown queer voices responding to Pulse. That's when he said a press approached him about doing that very thing. He said he was wary because he wasn't sure how much he could commit to it because he was in school. But, like me, he wanted something to happen. I'm not sure who brought up the collaboration first but it was obvious that we were meant to work on this together.

Many of us endured sustained losses of loved ones during the AIDS crisis of the '90s. Some of us have never come to terms with those losses. I didn't want that to happen with Pulse. All I could think about in those first hours and days after the shooting were of the names of the victims. I wasn't prepared for how similar they would look and sound to the names of people I loved. I had to do something even if it was simply to encourage/nag/beg action from more accomplished Latinx writers. As with most forms of activism and leadership, it didn't come down to big names. It came down to us.

Everyone in this book stepped up when presented with the opportunity to honor the victims. Each of us relied on family, friends, and strangers for help. The enduring legacy of Pulse and of the lives lost is not of grief but of gratitude for the communities that sprung up across the country in the aftermath. The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.

4) AW: I love the variety of the poems in Pulse/Pulso; some are quiet and sad; others, like Maya Chinchilla's "Church at

Night," has moments that I would love to hear performed out loud ("Queerly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life...") How did you decide how and where to place the pieces? Did an order reveal itself as you were editing, or was it more like fitting puzzle pieces together at the end?

RG: The organization of the anthology felt very natural in how it came together. As we accepted pieces, we'd add them to a file. I remember mixing a lot of these pieces and not thinking much about order. What was interesting is when Miguel and I came back to the document, months later, and found that somehow the order we'd put the work in worked. We came up with a lot of reasons for why Chinchilla's "Church at Night" would go where it ended up and, for instance, why Chen's work appears where it does. I'd like to believe something greater than us helped us with that order.

MM: I don't remember us officially having to plan out the order, much less have a disagreement on the pieces we selected. It's easy for editing teams to agree on which pieces make it into a collection. What really tests the team is when they come to pieces on which they disagree. I was waiting for us to have that disagreement but it didn't happen. I think that's because we stayed focused on honoring Pulse and while there are some pieces I wish had made it into the collection, I'm extremely happy with what we curated.

From the beginning, Roy and I worked to have our submissions include new, emerging, and established QTPOC voices. We worked even harder to make sure those voices filled the anthology. Of course we had to examine those terms because someone like Joe Jimenez is seen as emerging but many of us in the community know Joe as an established voice. And since we put out the call in 2016, some of the people who submitted have since become important and emerging voices. We also included writers who have never submitted work anywhere. Including them was essential to the tone of what we wanted to reflect. I'm so

proud of everyone who submitted work whether it made it into the anthology or not. They all helped shape *Pulse/Pulso* into what it is.



5) AW: Julia Leslie Guarch's poem, "Shh. Shh. Be Quiet" uses the last text messages of victim Eddie Jamoldroy Justice, sent to his mother as he hid from the shooter in a bathroom. ("Mommy I love you./ He's coming. Im going to die.") The effect is brutal. But such messages have also become familiar, as one public shooting after another rocks the US. How do you think Orlando fits into the larger discussion of gun violence in this country?

MM: It is clear that so many of us, especially QTPOC, are not safe living our lives, telling our stories, dancing in clubs, shopping, walking, driving, standing, sitting, praying, laughing, or breathing. Gun violence is the focus of so many these days due to the immediate and imminent threat of death that it poses, and it should be. We have to shut that shit down. Gun violence is violence.

The Pulse shooting is just another example, though a rare and extreme one, of the violence queer people, especially queer/trans people of color, face daily. Violence against us is dismissed by the authorities and eventually even by ourselves. Trans women are being slaughtered. Our vulnerable queer youth and queer elderly face violence and threats by those who are supposed to take care of them. We are targeted for sexual violence and other forms of sexual assault that go unreported, unacknowledged, and unrecognized.

In some places queer people are not legally safe in our workplaces or walking down the street or using a public restroom or in our homes. And even in the places where we are legally protected, we're still not safe.

I am not attempting to dismiss the loss of the 49 lives and the injuries of the 53 others that happened on June 12, 2016. I'm saying that our survival is much larger than gun violence. If we only focus on bullets, we ignore the beatings, the bashings, the bullying, and hundreds of other ways the blood of LGBTQIA+ people is spilled every moment of everyday. Ignoring these forms of "everyday" violence gave permission to perpetrate the violence that happened at Pulse.

6) AW: Roy, in an interview in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, you have said, "[Intersections of identity] are something that unfortunately in the U.S. [do] not get to exist simultaneously. Either people want you to wave the immigrant flag and that's it, or wave the student flag, or wave the poet flag, and a lot of institutions prevent people from having all these different identities coexist. And for me it's like, because I exist, I exist already within all these different identities."

Can you speak a little more about this? Do you have any insights into how this problem might have developed, and whether any progress is on the horizon?

RG: Thank you for bringing me back to what I said in that interview—for which I remain grateful. I just got back from a research trip in Honduras, so a lot of what I experienced there is going to speak to how I respond to these particular questions. I find that a system built on colonization, classification, surveillance, torture, and power is going to want to control and stratify identity. Although I noticed these problems in Honduras, in a place like the United States, where people care so much about individuality and wealth, you can't have layers of gray. Complexity isn't valued because American society wants the world to speak only American English. Privilege isn't recognized when people obfuscate different levels of hardship. Something that gives me lots of joy is seeing Black women, for instance, run their own successful businesses. But immigrants, at least those from

Central America, are still treated like disposables. Our laws continue to see us as barbaric, social leeches, and unable to govern ourselves. The progress I want to see happen has truly yet to come.

7) AW: Miguel, you had a fantastic poem, "This is a Migrant Poem," a couple of years back in Vol. 29 of *The Green Mountains Review*.

"This poem is a gift of a strong back, of sturdy legs, of silence, of patience.

And a never-ending work ethic
a never ending work ethic
a never ending work of ethics."

We are, as a nation, failing to deal ethically with people trying to enter this country, and now are being led by an administration that seems obsessed with and increasingly hostile to immigrants altogether. Can you talk a little about your understanding of the "zero-tolerance" policy, the effects you've seen? Has it been hard to keep writing and making art in a national climate that's this openly hostile, or do you feel that the hostility has always been there and it's only the openness that has changed?

MM: I grew up in Texas but I live in Kansas. While the first is a border state, the second acts like it is. They are remarkably similar in their geography and in their approach to immigration and to those they regard as "others." Kansas is one of the states receiving migrant children forcibly separated from their parents at the southern U.S. border. Like any other community we are doing our best to keep eyes and ears on these children, hold each other up, and push back against those who advocate for this monstrous policy and shame the cowards who keep silent.

Because hate and hostility have always been there, and will

always be there, the Latinx community has learned to pick and choose its battles. Though now we're facing what we thought was far behind us – emboldened, willful, vile ignorance and an increase in extreme anti-brown violence. As an artist, it's hard to find the moments to create in this environment. But I came of age in the AIDS activism of the 90s and that oppressive, destructive, and deadly time gave us some of the most powerful and creative moments in queer history. That's the challenge Latinx artists, and all artists, face in these exponential series of crises. We're also learning to embrace our anger and our rage. We're channeling it into something positive.

8) AW: Miguel, in a 2014 blog post, after the Ferguson riots in St. Louis, you wrote

“... there is... beauty in pain. We ... have a gift and sometimes that gift requires sitting in our pain, processing it, and putting it through the artist's lens.

It means taking what's inside our hearts, inside our heads and on our tongues and putting it in words, on canvas, or in clay – that's our ability, our gift. It's our super power. In doing so, we can help others process their feelings. We can stand as examples to young people on creative ways to deal with these difficult emotions that make so many turn to, and live in, rage or to simply shut down.”

I'd like to close with [both of] your thoughts on what it means to write with a political consciousness. What does political art achieve when it is doing what it does best?

MM: All. art. is. political.

People who say otherwise speak from a place of invested privilege where their politics are so deeply inherent that their positions are seen as default and apolitical. Those individuals are deluding themselves and desperately want to

conscript you into any and all efforts sanctioning that delusion.

For me, art has the most impact when it meets and merges with activism. As artists, we are tasked with holding a mirror up to society. We reflect its darkness as well as its beauty. Right now, in this moment, we have an abundance of both. Every artist strives for the apex of creativity. We are there. We are standing in a vulnerable sacred space that comes along once in a generation. We just have to be bold.

RG: I've been writing poetry consistently for about 6-7 years, though I've been reading it for much longer than that. Most of my first poems primarily came from restlessness and a need to heal. I'm not sure how much has changed for me since. I think the best art operates between imminence, urgency, and compassion, as the works in this anthology claim. However, I strongly believe that any kind of embodiment must begin away from the page. If you are not doing the work your words claim you do, then it's hard for that work to connect with readers. It's hard for you to even connect with what you're talking about. I'm not implying that fiction writers engage in fiction because they themselves can't do the work urged by their words; on the contrary, the best fiction does not come from the "best gaze" but from the best embodiment of those words. You can't claim community if you've never provided community for others. If we are saying that all art is political, what we are also saying is that our words carry all kinds of responsibilities and possibilities.

One time I met with author Jeanette Winterson and she said that anything she writes, regardless of the genre, is an extension of herself, a preoccupation she wants to unpack, the self wanting to grow and learn.

I think about that often. How do we want to grow? What are we consuming? When will you be ready to give back?

New Poetry from Nicole Oquendo and James A.H. White

The following poems are reprinted with permission from the anthology [*Pulse/Pulso: In Remembrance of Orlando*](#) (Damaged Goods Press 2018), edited by Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales.

to be born

by Nicole Oquendo

my spine is queer, curved enough
to hold me up while the news bends
and sways us. every day we die, and
one day it will be me, though statistically,
according to these headlines,
it's more likely to happen soon.

but there's new life to look forward to.
last year, my family taught me how
to press my chest and sculpt my own form.
i make love now by giving and taking in equal measure.
my brothers and sisters and those in between
see me standing next to them, signing all of my names.



Stained Glass

by James A.H. White

Fifty—the number of years my mother has lived. The number of paper clips currently interlocked in a small tin bucket on my work desk. According to motivational speaker Gail Blanke, the number of physical and emotional ties you should throw out of your life in order to find it again.

Some say many of them knew each other. It's often like that in our community. It's often like that in a nightclub. We recognize each other. There's no darkness dark enough to interrupt that.

The Orange County Medical Examiner's Office, with assistance from Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System, identified, notified, autopsied (if needed) and released all bodies to next of kin within 72 hours of the incident. That is, all but one victim, whose father wouldn't claim his gay son.

Phonesthesia is the term for sound symbolism, or, relating shapes to sounds. I see shame played like tetherball, see it shaped like the tennis ball as it flies, bound, around that metal pole, hear it on the slap of the child's open hand or deeper-chorused fist. I see shame falling on that victim's burial like the kind of rainstorm written into movie scripts—dark and heavy. I think of it registering unfairly on

the faces of the closeted's
families when they saw their loved one's body and recognized
it for the first time.

An installation at Chicago's Contemporary Art Museum featured
a row of bodies lined
across a gallery and blanketed by white sheets that peaked at
the noses and toes hidden
but assumed molded beneath. A girl nearby says it all makes
her sleepy before she falls
to the floor and pretends to sleep—like the dead. On the
morning of the shooting, I
think of my brothers and sisters inside, not lined but
scattered, sleep I imagine made
clearer to the young as something much nearer, perhaps much
whiter.

I break down hearing about the group that hid in the bathroom
but were found then
fired on, a couple in a stall injured not only by bullets but
shrapnel from the wall and
door. Suppose the bathroom stall like a closet. Do you
remember huddling? How about
holding onto yourself beneath a traditional Jibarro straw hat
or flower bonnet? How
long did you wait before the car horn outside announced it had
come to take you out
dancing?

It's All So Familiar; It's

All So Heartbreaking

Today, November 24th, 2015, Jason Van Dyke was charged with  first-degree murder in the slaying of Laquan McDonald in Chicago, Illinois. We all should be charged for the same thing. I won't argue with anyone who wants to call Jason Van Dyke a bad apple, but the problem is larger than that.

The problem—the problem that led to the death of Laquan McDonald—extends to Jason Van Dyke's police department, whose officers allegedly went into a Burger King and erased the surveillance video. It extends to the Mayor's office and to the State's Attorney's office, who were dilatory in bringing charges. It extends to our legislatures who have shielded our law enforcement officers with cloaks of qualified immunity, impunity, and legal invincibility. It extends to our courts, all the way up to the Supreme Court, for eviscerating the Fourth Amendment rights of the citizens.

The problem extends to each and every single one of us who wants to claim citizenship in a democratic republic.

Laquan McDonald is on all of us.

We are a society. We have a culture. We share a nation. We call ourselves the *United States* of America. We pride ourselves on our democratic ideals. We claim exceptionalism. Equal protection under the laws. A government of the people and by the people. Just as we as a nation cannot absolve ourselves for the slaughter of innocents overseas when we send our troops to war, we can't abdicate our own responsibility for the death of Laquan McDonald or any of the others unjustly harassed, abused, or murdered in our name.

All it takes to file criminal charges in this country is probable cause, a bar so low in our courts that if it were not so tragic it would be laughable. It took over a year to charge Jason Van Dyke with first-degree murder despite the fact that

clear video evidence showed far more than probable cause that he committed first-degree murder when he opened fire on a juvenile, a teenager who was moving away from him, a kid who made no threatening gestures toward Jason Van Dyke. He opened fire and he kept firing. Laquan McDonald fell to the ground and Jason Van Dyke kept firing.

It was memorialized in video. Evidence exists. Probable cause exists. As a society, we should be expected to seek justice for whomever was responsible for the death of Laquan McDonald. But we didn't. We delayed, and justice delayed is justice denied.

It took 400 days to charge Van Dyke in the shooting of Laquan McDonald.

Jason Van Dyke gunned down Laquan McDonald on October 20th, 2014. A judge, in response to a journalist's Freedom of Information Act request, ordered the video of the shooting released to the public by November 25th, 2015. 400 days.

400 days have gone by since Laquan McDonald breathed his last while he lay bleeding in the streets from sixteen bullet holes, with all the bullets being fired by one sworn to *uphold* the law and *protect* and *serve* the public.

400 days. The State's Attorney, she's an elected official. She's a politician. The video had been requested by the public for a year. When the courts finally forced the city to release the video of the slaying as unrest continued to grow, she waited until the day the video was released to press charges.

#BlackLivesMatter –Laquan McDonald's life mattered.

If Laquan McDonald had been arrested for shooting and killing someone, if the roles were reversed, he would have been put in jail and charged as soon as the courts were open for business. He would have been denied bail. He would have been assigned to an overworked public defender who could not possibly be

expected to provide effective assistance of counsel with the immorally low funding and staffing in the public defender's office. Laquan McDonald would either be coerced into pleading or he would have a mere formality of a trial before he was sent to prison or death row. No one would blink, because that is how our country operates. That is the status quo.

Instead, Jason Van Dyke is a white police officer who has a thin blue line to erase video tapes for him. He is a white police officer who has the strongest unions and political lobbies behind him. He is a white police officer who works in the executive branch of our government, hand in hand with the attorneys responsible for charging decisions and prosecutions. He is a white police officer who has 400 days to prepare a defense, to prepare his family, to practice those magic words, "I feared for my life." He is a white police officer who may have never been charged in the first place if a journalist didn't fight for that video to be released, who may have never been charged had that video not forced the hand of the State's Attorney in her own self-interested political game.

We are all complicit; we are all responsible for change.

Plenty of people will spill words indicting Jason Van Dyke, but plenty of right-wing racists will instead blame the victim and say that if Laquan McDonald weren't a "thug," if he had just followed the directions of police, if he had just not committed any crimes in the first place, he would still be alive. Their logic will rest on the idea that anything short of unflinching obedience to the State, anything short of complete purity of spirit (and skin) deserves the sentence of death with no trial.

Plenty of people will blame a police culture that encourages officers to shoot first and ask questions later, yet plenty of others will write op-eds about a non-existent war on police.

Plenty of people will march in Laquan McDonald's memory to

honor him and to protest the sad truth that our government—and thus, the majority of our citizenry—cares less for the lives of black people and other people of color than it does for the white majority, yet many will point to the red herring of black on black violence.

Plenty of people will scream out in anguish because they aren't heard when they say, "Black lives matter," but—sadly—plenty of people will scream out in anger and denial to drown them out. Plenty of people will miss the point entirely; and to protect their own fragile psyches, to continue living in denial, or to maintain their own status quo, they will cry out, "All lives matter."

It's all so familiar, and it's all so heartbreaking. So many words will be spilled about the blood we continue to spill, and most of them will be pointing the finger at someone else. So few will hold up a mirror and say, "How am I complicit?" The truth is, we are all to blame.

We live in a culture of fear in which we demonize "the other." We live in a culture of violence in which we use guns in misguided efforts to solve or prevent our problems. We live in a culture in which we are at war with each other—black lives vs. blue lives, liberals vs. conservatives, extremist evangelicals vs. everyone, and the list goes on.

We live in a culture in which we voice outrage over the blood spilled in our streets, in our movie theaters, and in our schools; yet, we do nothing about it. We live in a culture in which we are all given one vote, we are all given voices, and we continue to either not use them or we waste them to maintain the status quo. The status quo is not acceptable.

My heart absolutely breaks for Laquan McDonald and for his family. And my heart breaks for us all.

Matthew J. Hefti is the author
❑ of [*A Hard and Heavy Thing*](#) (Tyrus
/ F+W) .

The Racist Arguments For, Against Gun Control

Gun violence is deeply entrenched in America. Chances are, if you've spent any time outside the Upper East Side of Manhattan in the last 30 years, you've been touched by gun violence personally—someone you've met or know personally has been hurt or killed by guns. It's a problem that affects us all.

It's also a complicated problem, in the sense that the two groups of people who are most enthusiastic about the issue are the ones making certain that nothing happens to change the status quo. On the one hand, you have on the right the numerous NRA-member, 2nd Amendment-quoting survivalists, who think that far from the US needing gun control, what the US needs is more guns, everywhere. These people are dangerous. On the other hand, you have a smaller but equally vocal group of people on the left—the precious, very-well educated shop-at-Whole-Foods-for-their-vanity-illness types—who think that the only people who should have guns are the police and the military. These people are dangerous.

And both groups may be racist.

The 2nd Amendment, which provides for a “well regulated

militia” was written with several things in mind. One was an organic, community-level response to attacks by hostile states and nations. Another was attacks on colonists at the peripheries of U.S. territories by Native Americans (then called “Indians” or “Natives”) who often disputed settlements (for understandable reasons). Another was the prospect of a tyrannical government arising in America itself—a guarantee provided to each State against the possibility of a large entity destroying the small, at a time when that seemed more plausible and immediate than it does today.

One of the most important considerations at the time, well documented in other publications, was the fear that slaves would gain access to guns, enabling them to organize a rebellion. As time went on, this concern diminished in the North (where they did away with slavery and indentured servitude in favor of more benign methods of employment, such as wage slavery and the systematic exploitation of immigrants in factories). Meanwhile, demographics made the problem (from the politically-dominant White population’s perspective) much more immediate in the South. There’s a fairly convincing argument to be made that the tradition and legacy of gun ownership in the South is tied directly to fear of a massive racial uprising.

So when the NRA people say they want guns to protect themselves, they’re saying they want guns so they can *feel safe*. The legacy of that feeling of safety in the South is tied directly to slavery, and the worry that a large group of angry black people—dslaves, or, in today’s parlance, former slaves / criminals / thugs—would come after white people. The only way to protect oneself from that fear—the only way to be *safe*, according to this way of thinking—is to own guns.

On the extreme of the progressive position, the urban, largely northern “nobody should have guns except the military and the police” advocates of gun control, racism is more benign, but based on the realities of life-as-it-is, undeniably present.

This group, typified by intellectuals like *The New Yorker's* [Adam Gopnik](#) are operating on the same basic assumptions as their southern and Midwestern countrymen—they want to be *safe*—and the best way to be safe from gun violence, according to this small but vocal group, is to take all the guns off the street, absolutely prohibit them from personal use, and only permit them to the military and police.

While the military is [about as white as the population](#) – the combat branches, officers (the leaders and the ones with the guns, so to speak), and senior officers are disproportionately white. Most of the police are white, also [disproportionately so given the populations they patrol](#). So when the extreme left says “the guns should be in the hands of the police and military,” actually what they’re saying—whether they’re conscious of this or not—is that they feel *safe* with the military and police they have, and that those people should have guns. That is, they feel *safe* when the people in authority have guns, as long as the people in authority are just like them.



On the other hand, while there are black advocates of better gun control, their idea of gun control rarely includes a more perfectly-armed police force and military. Their idea is—like that of most of the left, many moderates, and centrists on the right—simply that guns should be more difficult to procure, to keep them out of the hands of mentally unstable or those with criminal tendencies. It’s difficult to imagine a less objectionable idea: guns are available and restricted like cars, with various permutations to handle different types of weapons.

In summary, citizens who believe that nobody should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who believe that everyone should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who maintain that while it should be more difficult to have guns, law-

abiding, mentally sound tax-payers in the United States of America should have access to them do not exhibit any explicit or implicit racial biases, at least when it comes to this issue.

On Gun Violence and the Second Amendment

America has a problem with violence, and specifically gun violence. This is a fact, not an opinion, and is confirmed with a glance at the statistics, backed up as well by abundant anecdotal evidence. On any given day or week I can cite the latest example of the most publicized gun shooting or campus massacre. This week, for example, three Muslim students studying dentistry at the University of North Carolina were shot in the head execution-style by a gun-loving lunatic and “second amendment rights advocate” apparently because of an argument about a parking space. It’s hard to see how the presence of guns in situations like these do not escalate arguments into tragedies. For every absurdly awful example we hear about like this, there are dozens more happening the same week that do not even appear on the news. Gun deaths, for the first time ever, have just passed car accidents as the single most common cause of death in America. There have been at least 107 school shootings since the 2012 massacre at a Newtown, Connecticut elementary school (source [here](#)). There is, on average, one mass shooting incident a week in America, and this type of killing is only represents a small percentage of the overall number of gun killings. America is by far the most violent of the developed and rich countries, and is one of the most violent even among all countries. There are so

many gun deaths that they are literally impossible to keep track of. After the Newtown massacre, the online magazine *Slate* attempted a thorough [crowd-sourced project](#) to keep track of every single gun death in America in real-time. Not only did it prove overwhelming, but they quit after tracking over 11,000 gun deaths in a year, which are only about one third of the estimated number. Including not only murders but also suicides and accidental shootings, there are 30,000 gun-related deaths in America per year, an astronomical number which is highest in the world by a long distance. Are we supposed to assume that it is a completely unrelated fact that America also has the highest number of guns, and guns per capita, in the world—somewhere around 300 million guns in a population of 310 million—almost one gun per every man, woman, and child in the third most populated country in the world. We have often heard the dismissal of such figures by gun activists and lobbyists with quaint slogans like “guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” That such a facile line could gain traction and still carry weight with many people shows the depth of the gun problem in America. To those who love guns and defend the right to bear arms, I would encourage you to hear me out. After all, the violence that plagues America is most likely to happen to those who have guns (as this [other article](#) in *Slate* also shows).

The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is commonly believed to mean that every individual has the right to own any and all type of firearm he so desires. As we know, this law was written in the late 1700s in a new country with a dangerous frontier and a weak central government, and where the latest firearm technology was the long rifle. It is not difficult to understand that the maintenance of personal firearms was allowed for defense against Indians and also to ease the financial strain on the small federal government which did not even have a standing army yet and would hope that state and local militias could procure their own equipment at their own expense. Anyone who thinks that the

right to bear arms can somehow protect individuals against government tyranny, one of the main interpretations of the 2nd amendment, is living in the past. The differences between 1790s America and 2015 America are many, but they include the the presence of well-armed local and state police, National Guards, the most well-equipped military in the world, and a countless variety of federal intelligence, spy, and investigative agencies. No citizen can hope to have a fighting chance against such an array of centralized force of arms, and I think we have to assume that America is fairly secure in its borders and its democratic system of government; it is this that has to be appealed to for grievances and rights, not the fact that you carry a rifle or handgun. Anyone who thinks that the short line of text which calls for a "well-regulated militia" to mean, in the 21st century, the limitless right to stockpile highly lethal rapid-fire rifles with armor-piercing bullets and concealed handguns with enormous magazines probably missed the point. Even if I agreed that an endless supply of guns and bullets were necessary for self-defense against criminals or a potentially tyrannical government (which I don't), I would still at least hope for some serious limits and controls on who can buy guns and where. No such controls exist on the federal level, and each state has different laws and regulations, few of which are very strict (and if one's state has stricter regulations, by chance, there is no obstacle whatever to going across the state lines or using the internet to get any weapons you want and need).

It is much easier to get a gun than a driving license, for example. One may argue that cars kill people too, and even in greater numbers (well, until last year when guns overtook them), so they should be regulated more. I am not arguing against regulations for cars and driving licenses – I'm perfectly happy with how things currently stand in that area; I am, however, arguing for more regulations and checks for guns. While the sole purpose of cars is a means of transport (which just happen to kill many people in accidents during

normal use), the sole purpose of guns is to fire high velocity bits of metal into other things, living and non-living, to kill and destroy them. That is quite a significant difference of purpose, and negates the argument about how "people kill people" or how a variety of other things are also used to kill people, intentional or not (such as knives, cars, baseball bats, almost anything you can imagine); the difference, of course, is that only guns exist solely to kill people and animals, while all of the other things have other primary purposes as functional tools of some sort. I may be able to kill a person with a knife if I happen to be a murderously-inclined person, but it would be much harder to kill many people with that knife before I was stopped, unlike with high-powered guns with endless ammunition. And by the way, I happen to have many knives for cutting vegetables, opening boxes, and other dangerous daily tasks, but somehow do not feel any danger in owning these tools. Let me relate an anecdote: exactly the same day as a maniacal young boy shot and killed 26 people in an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, a maniac with a knife attacked and injured 22 people in an elementary school in China. The attack in Newtown killed almost everyone who was shot, including mostly children, while in the attack in China, also involving all children, every single victim survived. This goes to show that while there will always be a certain number of crazed and murderous people around in any society, their murderous actions can be either very deadly or merely very disturbing but ultimately unsuccessful depending on the lethality of the weapons at their disposal. I think you can see that guns do, in fact, kill people. Lots of them. Nowhere as much as in America.

There are obviously good and bad aspects about any particular country, and America is no different. There are many great things about my country that I appreciate, but many things that I am uncomfortable with and ready to openly criticize, as is my right to free speech and free expression. I currently live in Italy, where my two young daughters were born. I

imagine a return to living in America sometime in the future, but one thing that truly stops me in my tracks is the incredible and horrifying number of school shootings, and the apparent ubiquity of violence in general. This is not normal in a supposedly advanced, rich, and “free” society, and it does not occur anywhere in Europe or any other developed country for that matter. At this point, I can still say that it is almost impossible for me to imagine going back to an America where my children would be enrolling in schools that could be attacked by a demented lunatic at any time. It is not normal and not satisfactory. It is unconscionable that there has been no new legislation from the U.S. Congress at any time since the 2012 Newtown shooting, not to mention 13 years earlier at Columbine High School, the first school shooting that showed up on people’s radar. At least after Newtown there was a huge public outcry and some initial movement on the issue, including the president saying that things must change immediately and there can be no more Newtowns. Well, nothing has changed, and there have been over 100 more Newtowns.

Here is another point of comparison: in Australia, in 1996, there was a mass shooting spree similar to the ones that happen in America every week, and 35 people were killed. The Australian government, with pressure and support from the citizens, passed a strict gun control law immediately after that incident and there have literally been no more mass shootings since then, gun homicides have dropped 60 percent, and gun suicides have dropped 75 percent. I doubt that the Australian people feel any less free for being thus safer than their American counterparts—in fact, the new laws, regulations, and a gun buyback scheme had the support of 85 percent of Australians.

That brings me to the point of freedom. America talks a big game about freedom, but actually there is so much talk about it that the word has basically become meaningless in most cases. We hear about people who actually want freedom to limit

other people's freedom, for example. When someone talks about freedom to have guns, I think about my preferred freedom from being around people with guns. Does someone's right to have a deadly weapon outweigh my right to not be threatened or killed by these weapons just by living nearby? That is what we are facing in America. The number of guns is so high, they are so widespread and easily obtainable by anybody, and the limits and even consequences for using them are so non-existent, that I would not feel safe returning to America. You may say, "Fine, stay in Europe, we don't need you here." For the moment, that is exactly what I will do. I feel no danger whatsoever of people with guns, or the possibility of school shootings, in Italy (I also have free national healthcare, but that's another story). Anyone who wants a gun can go through the proper procedures and get one legally, usually for hunting, but the numbers are minuscule compared to America. The gun-related deaths are, unsurprisingly, also miniscule. Sometimes there are other rich countries with a high number of guns that are compared to America—Switzerland, for example, or Israel. These countries still have less than half the number of guns per 100 people than America, and they are much more regulated, or, in the unique case of Israel, used for a de facto military-police state where large numbers of conscripted soldiers walk the streets with their rifles. Even with a large number of guns per capita, these countries have a much lower incidence of gun deaths than America. So is America, in addition to being absurdly awash in guns (remember, almost one for every man, woman, and child in a country of over 300 million), also more violent and willing to use these guns than other societies? There must be a cause and effect relationship, though it is hard to tease out exactly the effects from the causes, which probably both influence each other.

Humans are imperfect and sometimes violent, but when someone becomes enraged for some reason, it is going to become much worse and have the possibility to escalate quickly into a

deadly situation when there are guns readily available. Many gun owners think they will be safer, but I would argue that actually the opposite is true. A significant portion of gun-related deaths in America are due to accidental firings, even involving young children playing and killing a parent or sibling in a tragically high number of cases. There is a thought experiment in game theory called the Prisoner's dilemma, in which two prisoners receive different sentences based on if they betray each other or remain silent. If A and B betray each other they will each serve 2 years; if A betrays B but B remains silent, A will go free and B will serve 3 years (and vice versa); if A and B both remain silent they both serve 1 year. By choosing logically in one's self-interest the prisoner would appear to have the best chance of going free, but if both choose based only on self-interest it would actually be a worse outcome for both. The point is that cooperation and some sense of shared fortune or fate is often a better choice than pure self-interest. This relates to guns in the following way: it is commonly believed that having a gun makes one safer from harm, but if everyone believed this then the community actually becomes less safe. The more guns there are, the more chance for gun violence, as we have seen with the statistics I gave earlier. If some people make a choice to not own guns, and be apparently less safe, it will actually make the community as a whole safer. I choose to not own guns, and I think my stance does in fact support the overall safety of a community, though an individual with a gun may possibly be safer on his own.

Despite so much killing, and mass killing, why are there not new laws and restrictions on guns in America? One of the most shocking factors may be that the daily and weekly occurrence of gun crime, week after week, year after year, is often unreported, and when it is reported it has actually stopped being shocking to people. After all, humans can only take so much bad news before they inevitably start to tune it out and seek other distractions. There was a brief point of time

after Newtown in 2012 when many people were again awoken from their unconcerned slumber and the forces were aligned to actually discuss gun control in a real way and maybe even do something about it, but soon most people lost interest and the moment passed. This brings me to the firearm manufacturing industry and its powerful lobby, represented by none other than the National Rifle Association. This lobby is highly skilled at the art of forceful persuasion of politicians to not attempt any gun control law, nor even discuss it. The NRA is possibly the most powerful lobby in the country and has been relentless in stopping all attempts at making the country safer, despite increasingly crazed and heartless rhetoric from its leader Wayne LaPierre about personal freedom that would make Jefferson and Madison blush. The fact is, its not about freedom—when 30,000 people a year get killed by something we cannot say it protects freedom—but money. The arms industry is extremely profitable, to say the least, and it is obviously in their interest to insure that new customers continue to purchase new guns with no obstacles standing in the way of their profit. We see a similar thing on an even larger scale with the entire military-industrial complex, in which huge arms producers are always looking for the next war and the next huge government contract. With guns, the industry appeals to private individuals as well as state and federal agencies, police forces, and the military, which all need to constantly stay highly armed with the newest models and accessories. Local police across the country are more highly militarized than some of the army units I saw during two years in an actual combat zone in Afghanistan. When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Violence leads to more violence, and the guns flow only slightly more freely than blood. In this environment, paranoia reigns and people who already have guns or consider having them will be convinced that they need to get even more before the big bad government comes to take them away and limit their freedom.

America, get yourself straightened out. This violence is not

acceptable, and the people should not accept it any longer. People need to wake up and get involved. The cycle will continue until it is stopped. In the words of Johnny Cash, don't take your guns to town, son; leave your guns at home, Bill; don't take your guns to town.