

New Fiction from Ulf Pike: "Title and Price"



Art by Gordon McConnell. ON THE ROAD, photomontage and acrylic on canvas, 24 x 48 inches

It was not rare to see horses on Main Street when I was growing up in this town. I was spindly and spry then, when distances were calculated by how much jerky and water to pack, when the idea of pocket-sized computers was still the realm of science-fiction, the same stuff as teleportation devices and alien invasions. Around the house an intricate network of deer trails canvased the woods like a sense of smell. I'd run them through the sagebrush and chokecherries, shivering in the shade of dense lodgepole pine stands. Still panting, I'd knock on a neighbor's door and ask a mother if her child could go to the river.

We'd walk miles in our minds, finely-tuned to the snapping of dry branches in the needle-cast, summoning to our soft skin the possibility of predators emerging with the warmth of a late spring day. The distant sound of swift water rushing over boulders always made us start running.

Rays broke on the surface and scattered as if through a fractured emerald onto the slick stones below, shimmering off the scales of large trout and made hazy where their tails whipped up a cloud of fine silt, spooked by our careless approach. In the deeper pools heated by afternoon sun there was no place for our bodies to know their own boundaries. It was a richer kind of air through which every motion rippled to the bank and returned to us, but slower, expanding.

Where the May and June runoff cut the bank from beneath a large cottonwood its roots reached exposed like tentacles into the water. By mid-summer we could entwine our arms in them and float on the surface cutting the gentled current with our heads as we looked to the bottom and into the shadows, hoping the fish might not mind our company and maybe even glide along the length of our bodies. We would bask on the smooth, day-baked stones, let the sun dry us, scratch the sand from our scalps and feel clean, even a little magical walking home.

In late summer my father would wake me before dawn with his large hand on my shoulder, the smell of coffee drifting in behind him. A quiet blue light through the trees laid our shadows down before us on the trail, fishing poles sprouting from our heads like antennae. Sleep still in my eyes, I imagined being led to the river by some dreamed extension of myself, one who might rather do anything than trick a fish into swallowing a hook just to turn it back to the current, stunned and bleeding. Tearing barbs from their mouths and throats then holding them like trophies while they mouthed the air was a suffering I learned to fold into layers of pride. I'd ask why we didn't keep them and was told there was no need.

The temperature dropped sharply near the river as soon as it could be heard. My skin raised with the chill and my heart sank to hear my father's pace quicken. He inhaled the cool morning into his nostrils with pious vigor. Later, looking upstream, he welled with pride to see my pole bowed down to the weight and fight of a large trout. He laughed and shouted, "Fish on!" as he made his way toward me with the net in his hand.

I knew they were Cal's boots stomping around on the hardwood. His restless energy vibrated through the floor and into my head. I gathered my jacket back into a lumpy pillow and tried

to fall asleep again. He opened the front door then stomped back, smacking me on the head as he passed with the rolled up newspaper he had retrieved then trumpeted the first few notes of reveille through it.

Every minute or so, just as I started to doze off, he'd loudly clear his throat, pick up the paper by either side and *pop* it as if to freshen the news before smoothing it back down on the table. I squinted with one eye and leered at him across the room with all the hungover evil I could conjure. His hair was cow-licked where his head had finally come to rest after the long night of drinking and dancing, embellishing war stories, and doing whatever we thought those stories gave us license to do.

Every couple of weeks it seemed we began making feints into blackout territory, each night a fresh chance to regain the thrill of courting death and going *once more unto the breach*, as Cal liked to call it. Empty bottles stood gathered together on the table. From my floor's-eye-view they looked like a city of glass buildings. I remembered Cal upending one then musing woozily to it, "Thank you for your service," as he added it to the skyline. I remembered dancing wildly to Louis Prima and an almost inhumanly beautiful, dark-haired young woman yelling at me and storming out into the snow—*Oh, Marie! Tell me you love me*. I let out a long dramatic groan and rolled onto my back.

"Where'd she go, Cal? Where's the girl of my dreams? The love of my life?"

Even when he wasn't reading the paper he never really listened to anybody. He ignored me and started reading out loud: "At 3:36 a.m. a woman reported a nude man at Main Street and 3rd Avenue jogging with a hammer and chanting..." In the seven years I'd known him, reading the police blotter had become something of a ritual, one which required coffee to be fully appreciated first thing in the morning. I reminded him of this. He told me to get up and make it myself.

“Wouldn’t go in there barefoot,” he added without looking up from the paper as I pulled myself off the floor.

“Why not?”

He scoffed.

I stepped into a pair of Cal’s beat-up cowboy boots by the door and walked to the kitchen. It looked like a grenade had gone off. Cabinet doors were splintered on the linoleum or dangling from their hinges, the breakfast table and chairs laid upended surrounded by shards of bottles and dishes. In a corner the coffee machine was in pieces, all of it soaking in pools of wine. My eyes rolled over the scene turning up little flashes of memory. My stomach began to turn. I knew what had happened but I asked Cal anyway.

“*You* happened, you crazy bastard. You went dark as the devil.”

I was locked inside my skull again, where Cal’s voice echoed absently like some tired machine switched-on and abandoned. I remembered a dream-like space where time and gravity unfixed themselves and there was nothing to give my body shape but vague, immovable objects where the waves crashed; where I wanted wild and inexplicable things; to catch a rattlesnake, kiss it on the mouth, grip it by the jaws and pull it over my head like a balaclava. I wanted to vibrate. To hum and rattle into pieces.

Cal and I would jog from downtown calling cadence like the ghosts of soldiers, released to haunt everyone’s dreams on those snowy, sleeping streets. We would call on the emptiness to recognize us, to embrace us as its own: *Mama, mama can’t you see...what the Army’s done to me?* We’d wake up and drink coffee and read the paper like we’d aged a hundred years overnight.

Cal said we needed to quit blowing money on hangovers and buy a couple horses already. I could usually count on this train of thought after a night of dragging our drunk bodies around town. "All my old tack's just gatherin' dust in my aunt's barn. Bet she'd probably cut us some slack on a couple geezers. Get us started anyway. Get us outta this shithole and into the wild anyway." He'd dream us there and try to convince me it was what we were put on earth to do. That one cool morning we'd saddle those horses and disappear like phantoms into some blue shadowland, as if somewhere just beyond the horizon a paradise was waiting to be reclaimed. "We'll sell everything and just go. What's the song say? *Rob the grave of the setting sun.*"

He'd *pop* the paper as if to set it all in motion. I'd go along, too sick and tired to pretend like I had a better idea. Not to say he didn't have something. Cal had vision. If anyone did, he had the drive to turn back the clock, or if not, at least smash the damn thing and start from scratch. He accused the world of trying to pull one over on him, trying to wash his brain clean of some ancient instinct. He knew better though. He could see it all happening right before his eyes. And he'd be damned if so-called *progress* was going to catch him sleeping. He'd roll a fat joint and lay on his back on the hardwood floor, blowing clouds of smoke at the ceiling, picturing exactly how he was being screwed out of his destiny.

In a sterile, over-air-conditioned conference room Cal pictured a three-point-plan written on a dry erase board. He could hear the *whisk* and *thwack* of an aluminum pointer striking the whiteboard under each number as a buttoned-down agent eyes one of the many pale faces around the table. "One," said the agent with detached authority, "Disenfranchise." Cal saw him swat the board under the next word, scan and lock eyes with a different face. "Two," he shouted this time, making his

victim pucker and quiver, "Romanticize." Then a *thwack* and a new face for the third and final pronouncement: "Commodify."

The room nodded in obedient assent. "It's that simple, men. If it ain't broke don't fix it." He then led them in a three-count, swatting each word down the list for punctuation and lastly under the slogan written above them all, which they uttered in solemn unison. I heard Cal's voice before I walked in. He was laying on the floor, chanting at the ceiling: "*Kill the Cowboy, save the boots!*"

When Cal came home from areas he often referred to as the "wild west," he felt everything harassing him, closing in on him, telling him he was too late. "Too many goddamn people on this earth. *Zombies*," he'd correct himself, "and their kiss-ass little cyber-lives; big-money buyin' up the whole goddamn valley, pricin' out *real* goddamn people; fuckin' movie-star wannabes turnin' working ranches into playthings..." He'd work himself up and have to roll a joint. Though he would never admit it, he was paralyzed with fear. He saw the way of his father and grandfather, his birthright, the way of the cowboy "going the way of the Indian," as he put it. He laid on the floor throughout the day exhaling thick clouds at the ceiling and rubbing his temples. Images of conspiracy and betrayal loosened and drifted from his mind. *Like Judas*, he thought, feeling suddenly a new, special kinship with Jesus.

He pictured a resurrected Christ clinching a thin cigarillo between his teeth and squinting through the shadow of a sharp, felt brim. He saw the hand of God drawing the cold, heavy steel from his holster as he considered a man in a business suit kneeling before him, shielding the sun from his eyes. Arrayed in that righteous light, thumbing back the hammer and tenderly touching the muzzle to the man's impure lips, Jesus smiled—Cal smiled. "Kiss *this*," they said.

When I came home I burned my uniform with all its ribbons and badges. Made a ceremony of it and everything. Cal considered it an act of treason and shunned me for months. But, for better or worse, I was bound to him. And him to me. Without Cal's kind of animal sensitivity and callous justice, I might not have made it home at all.

We put it behind us, both desperate for an old kind of familiarity, even if a false and decidedly immoderate one. I had developed lofty ideas of self-deconstructionism, that I was somehow dismantling something broken inside my head. And I did truly believe this. But after a couple bottles of wine it became tiresome and all I had was bleary aim at something near pleasure. I could at least hit the present moment, it being a pretty big target. In it I surrendered to a sense of time and gravity backing their screws out of my bones. Every motion seemed fluid, intuitive, rippling out from my body toward some mystical integration, but ultimately retuning a kind of lazy hypnotism—the kind of magic you long to believe but also loathe for the weakness that longing betrays. That was the general, dull ache of it. Things that could never truly be, maybe never were at all. Out of place. Out of time. But we soldiered on through the illusion, allowing the selves we remembered being to manifest friction for traction.

It was a Friday night. Every Friday night art galleries on main street opened their doors and offered complimentary wine to anyone who entered so long as they pretended to care about the stuff inside. Cal and I used to make it our duty to impose and make sure that no wine went to waste. We filled and refilled plastic cups as if hydrating for a mission. Once loose enough, we'd liberate bottles from the table and walk

around with them, standing in front of Western landscape paintings, probing the air for volatility.

"Me. Oh. My," Cal would say, adding a little whistle. "A damn sight better than the real thing, you ask me. Who in his right mind would ford that river horseback in *real* life? You know there's rattlers in there will swim right in your saddlebag and take a nap, and you never even know it till you reach in there happy as an idiot for the wineskin...then fffft, ffft fft...," he struck my forearm, shoulder then the side of my neck with his fingers as fangs, "It's goodnight, Irene, goodnight."

I'd hum and turn the price-tag, speaking with a degree of dismay, "How could you live with yourself knowing someone else walked out of here with this beauty?" Then feigning a scan of the gallery for someone to talk to, I'd say, "I must have it."

The night would go on like that until we reached a kind of critical mass, finally just walking out the door, bottles in hand, whistling, humming, leaning into a kind of warning buzz.

Some mornings after a night of unraveling Cal and I would meet in a coffee shop to spool back into the form of something socially acceptable. We'd read the paper at a corner table and psychically loom. The walls were almost always hung with big glossy photographs of wildlife. Under each photo was a little wooden placard with a title and price. Above Cal's head was a photo of a herd of bison. Hungover and slightly nauseous, I sipped my coffee and stared at it osmotically.

I looked down at Cal. His head was lowered to the paper. Not moving his eyes from an article he took a sip from his mug and made a sound like he was expelling steam.

"Did exactly what I knew they would," he said without looking

up, after a minute going on, "Abandoned their tanks and guns...*our* tanks and guns...burned their uniforms and ran away like babies from the boogeyman." He loudly folded up the paper in disgust and stared off toward the front windows. "You can lead a horse to water," he said to himself, raising his mug again. "Fucking cowards."

I looked up at the photo then down at Cal. Nothing mattered all of a sudden. I felt the urge to throw my coffee in his face, walk out and never think twice about anything ever again.

Cal had his visions. I had mine.

The feeling surged then dissolved. I looked back up at the photo and imagined us just out of frame sitting our horses, Cal's eye laid down the barrel of a rifle. Very near us the photographer stood aiming his camera down the slope. Cal tested the wind then reached to make adjustments to his sights as the photographer made adjustments to his camera. Seasons altered when I blinked. The river valley below flashed white and frozen then vibrant and lush, full of grazing bison, then hazy red as if lit by a smoke-veiled sun.

Cal spun his horse a half-turn then kicked up his legs and spun his body the opposite way. He laid his barrel across the horse's hindquarter, lowered his body behind it and wrapped his legs around the horse's neck. Chinning a mocking glance at the photographer then looking down at the heard, he wagered he could shoot more of them. They both squinted with one eye, fingertips poised.

I couldn't discern the explosion of gunpowder from the snapping of the shutter. They were simultaneous and unmitigated. Cal seemed to levitate above his horse, purring with the recoil and instantly, expertly retracting the bolt with the meat of his palm, extracting each cartridge with a shimmering *ting*, then racking the bolt forward, slightly

adjusting his aim and firing again. His zeal was as lethal and endless as his ammunition. The stampeding herd was swallowed up in a cloak of dust but Cal continued shooting, now indiscriminately, wildly into the cloud until finally spinning on his haunches back riderwise, sheathing his rifle and trotting down the slope.

Streams of blood merged into pools, gathering momentum through dirt for the river, then dripped viscous over the bank and into the current, carried down-valley, frothing over boulders and swirling into sun-warmed eddies. Our horses emerged on the other side as if dipped up to the withers in rusty oil. We made camp atop the opposite plateau.

I saw our fire spitting embers up at the night. I saw Cal's face warping through the flames, a mesmerized glimmer there. I saw him get up, walk to his horse and reach into his saddlebag for the wineskin.

I wanted to tell him he was nothing, tell him to swallow his tongue and get out of my head. But I drank my coffee and agreed. "Fucking cowards."

We rolled cigarettes and sauntered from one art gallery to the next, getting drunker, whistling and humming obnoxiously. Cal hurled a wine bottle like a grenade over his head and didn't look to see where it shattered. All glass started to pulse with fragility. From the street the galleries looked like snow-globes, I thought. We watched them sip their drinks and attempt to shake their evening into something special. Cal and I joined them. I overheard someone suggest that the price-tag dangling from a bison skull was "irrelevant, really." I laughed out loud. Everyone seemed to be laughing. I drank deeply from a bottle and laughed again. A laugh I hardly recognized.

From the sidewalk I peered back inside through my reflection

in the window, suddenly paralyzed. They swirled their cups. A weird light shifted through the window onto them. I saw a race of aliens discussing a different skull: "This," one said, cupping it like a wineglass, "this was one of the snow-globe dwellers. They were the first to be eradicated or relocated. They seemed to possess no memory nor useful skill to contribute to the re-cultivation of these once fertile lands." The alien swirled it and took another drink. "We were baffled, and quite frankly horrified, to see them building their settlements on the richest soil in the valley. Even worse, they hunted large creatures for the size of their crowns, not the yield of their sustenance. They tricked fish into swallowing hooks on strings that they might enjoy the suffering and fear transferred to their hands, just to rip the hook from their flesh and throw them back to repeat the ritual." Exhaling sharply then making a motion to drink but balking, the being continued, "In fact, we have discovered evidence that their economy relied heavily on these '*sports*,' as they called them." They all drank and another chimed in, "Where they got the food they actually consumed is another story entirely." Their long antennae wobbled as they shook their heads and sipped from their cranial vessels, "Savages, I tell you. *Real savages.*"

Apparently, there was one more gallery, though I couldn't really say.

The last thing I remember is standing in front of a hundred old machine parts—gears, springs, brackets—all tack-welded into the form of a giant bison skull. Its hollow eye-sockets glowed with electric lights timed to change every few seconds from white to green to red. I looked around and saw everyone taking photos of the sculpture with their phones then bow their heads. Their faces glowed piously, bathed in the light of their screens.

I saw them growing undead, praying as though from that liquid crystal had whispered a promise of immortality. I saw the ghost within it baiting them, desperate for them to vacate their own minds that it might take up residence and power there. I saw them offering their knowledge and memory, their lives as tribute.

I saw horses and a long, cold winter. I saw ribboned stacks of paper bills, photographs, paintings and furniture piled high in the center of a room. I saw fire in the floor, fire licking at the rafters. I saw blood rising to my skin in a vacuum ravenous for it, inhaling me as if for the marrow in my bones, as if to extract from my body that which my dreams had promised it.

I saw white then green then red.

The judge gave me my own private cell and some time to think about my life choices, as he put it. Miraculously, the only book I could get my hands on when the library cart rolled by was *The Death of Jim Loney* by James Welch. Jim Loney is my age, estranged from his community and going “gently insane” on his drunken descent toward “noble, inevitable self-destruction,” as one reviewer suggested. I had to laugh. I read it in one sitting. Then I cried. Simple tears at first as I reluctantly turned the final pages, feeling that the resolution would be far too costly. Then involuntary, spine-binding weeping to the edge of suffocation and back. An hour, maybe two, three before the waves subsided. Rolling over, I mouthed silent, unknown things at the ceiling, staring holes through it. I traced forms of animals on the naked cinder-blocks and wanted to die.

The night before I was released, I dreamed. I stood under bright stars at arms-length from a fire. I reached in with my hand and held it there, entranced by the impossibility of not

being burned. There was a metallic *clink* followed by a voice. "Will is fate," it said. I turned to see him bent to the ground with a hammer in hand. Around his wrists were manacles attached to a length of chain rooted in stone. He set the hammer to mark his aim then raised it above his head and swung it, sending the sound into the night and a splash of sparks to the ground. Without looking up he said, "Until it breaks," and marked his aim again. He punctuated himself with the slow but deliberate rhythm of a simple machine made to mark its own rate of function: "Will is fate..." *clink...* "Until it breaks..." *clink...* And on and on, chanting through the night.

I turned back to the fire and felt the memory of stepping into it. There was a vibration each time the hammer struck. The light began to pulse. A step closer brought a roar like waking up at sea in a terrible storm followed by a deeper vibration, a kind of rhythmic thudding and a drone of voices. As I stepped fully into the flames figures appeared to be weaving themselves into each other, their bodies bound up in one form of writhing then another, their desperate faces mouthing the air, their arms and hands hitting me unfeelingly as I pushed my way through. Everything mounted into a violent, unbearable wave of anguish. I was knocked to the ground and began scrambling furiously. The thudding grew in my hands and knees, in my stomach, vibrating everything into one densely concentrated center until it could no longer contain itself. Light flashed from the core of an explosion, consuming everything. Then darkness. Silence. I felt the coolness of night as if directly on skinless muscle.

I woke up and stared at the ceiling, something inching its way from my stomach into my throat and finally over my lips, so delicately that even I could not quite make it out. Though I understood. *Kill the soldier, save the man.*

Cal picked me up. He rolled around the corner of the jail in

my 1986 Land Cruiser. The old leaf spring suspension had long since lost its spring and took all bumps under the tired, squeaking protest of its joints. From a dead stop it coughed up a little cloud of exhaust and could putter up to sixty-five mph given a long enough, flat enough stretch of highway. I smiled to see it parked at the curb.

Cal waited for me to move but I just stood there and stared at him through a fog of breath. His hand went up as if to ask if I was getting in or not. He eventually got the picture, opened his door and circled around front to the passenger side, lunging toward me, shouting "Shotgun!" in my ear as he passed. He didn't even have a driver's license.

In fact, I wasn't sure if Cal existed at all. As far as I knew he had gone completely off the grid. In his mind, veterans of our stripe were all on a secret government watchlist. He believed the state was not so obtuse as to train us to abandon empathy, kill on command, send us to war, and then simply release us back into the world with a pat on the back, an unlimited prescription for drugs and a suicide hotline card without at least keeping an eye on us, see if we could still play the game without getting too wise. Cal had it all worked out. When he smoked he became very lucid, almost telepathic, he claimed. He'd lay on the floor blowing thick clouds at the ceiling and intercept conference calls from the Pentagon between a handful of politicians, a data-storage gate-keeper, and a spooky DoD agent going on about "*the imperative to track and, when necessary, guide liabilities as they are released back into the mainstream.*" There would be unofficial requests for sensitive information and off-the-books transactions.

Cal would close his eyes, point to both of his temples and see top-secret memos appearing in encrypted email inboxes regarding a surveillance operation to acquire location- and activity-intel on veterans who meet signal criteria. He'd start listing them: "...combat...college...debt-free...single..." as if straining to receive each word which, according to him,

constituted a probability of ideological disillusionment and sedition sufficient to red-flag an individual for life. According to Cal, one of us was on the fast-track to being "disappeared." He'd relight his joint and blow smoke, occasionally mumbling another paranoid stream of thought: "If credibility is established by credit...and credit is debt..." He'd take a long drag and ash in the big planter pot then keep going: "...and debt is forced labor, and forced labor is the mechanization of humans, and..." and on and on.

He tapped out a short couple of beats on the dash board. "The Colonel's looking for guns," he said to the windshield, waiting to see if I'd respond, then continued, "I told him we'd meet just as soon as I could spring your sorry ass." What he meant was *hired* guns. The Colonel was actually a retired Army Colonel who by whatever nebulous network of connections was eager to put together a private security team to head back into high-conflict areas. His types of teams ran defense and often offense for god-knows-who, doing things that made for long redactions in official reports. The one certainty was the money. "A hundred fifty Gs for six-month's work, boy." I could tell by his voice Cal was already there. He never really left. "Fuck it," he said, "I'll text him right now."

I don't know why I didn't tell him not to. The cold, clean air drafted through the window and I was just glad to be feeling and breathing it. I couldn't summon the energy to negate anything that was going to happen. He plugged the auxiliary cable into his phone as he read the Colonel's text. "*Sanctuary. One hour.*" He cocked his head at me, "There it is. Let's get a few freedom beers in you, partner." He scrolled down his screen and selected *Oh, Marie* by Louis Prima, rolled the volume knob, drummed the dash with his hands and yowled as the cymbals and sax really kicked in, "*Once more unto the breach!*"

I righted the table and chairs, found a broom and swept all the glass, mopped the floor and fastened the cabinet doors best I could back on their hinges. Cal sat at the table with the paper, occasionally reading out loud something that twisted up in his mind just right. I finished putting the kitchen back in order, poured myself a glass of water and sat down across from him. Without looking up he said something about meeting the Colonel again to iron out the details, sign some papers for clearance. It hadn't registered to me that a decision had been made, as though I was simply caught up in some kind of entropic undertow. I didn't even know how many days I'd been waiting to get spat out and wash ashore. But there I was. He told me I better go warm up the beast.

On cold mornings, because the cable was broken, I had to pop the hood of the Cruiser and manually wedge the choke closed with a stone that had sat in the console for years and just so happened to be the ideal size, apparently waiting for that very purpose. We cut tracks through a couple inches of fresh snow, hit main street and headed downtown. The sidewalks were empty. We sipped coffee at our usual table in the corner and waited for the Colonel.

Every few feet on the walls were different glossy photos—a silhouetted elk, spotted whitetail, nesting blue herons, rainbow trout. Above Cal's head was a photo of a single bison, its eyes like polished obsidian squinting against wind-driven snow directly into the lens. Written beneath it on a little wooden placard was the title and the price: *Winter Hunt, \$290*. It was number four of twenty-three prints. I scratched out the math on a napkin and said the amount to myself. Cal asked what it was. Ignoring him I looked around the shop counting the photos with similar placards and did that math. "One hundred thousand, fifty dollars." I sat there waiting for whatever else was rising to the surface.

Cal sensed a shift and switched to recruiter-mode. "Don't get weird on me, son. We'll be out of this sorry shithole by

tomorrow. There's a zero-six-thirty to Seattle, Seattle to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to a nice desert paradise, eighty-five degrees. Masters of our own destiny again." He kicked my chair to get my eyes off the photo. "Hey, you listening to me? Don't forget you're getting paid to get the hell out of this phony-ass town to do some *real* shit again. It should be the easiest decision you ever made."

I stared into my coffee and spun the mug a half-circle by the handle and muttered it back to myself. "The easiest decision."

"The *easiest*. What's there to think about?"

"You ever wonder why it's easy?"

"Christ almighty. Is your head screwed on? I just told you why."

"I don't think I need *easy*. I don't need a way out of here." I sort of rolled my eyes around the coffee shop then leveled them across the table. "I need a way out of *here*," I said, reaching across the table and tapping Cal's temple with my finger. He grabbed my wrist and stared at me, then through me as he let go. He wasn't there anymore. I stood up sharply, knocking my chair over. A couple heads turned to see what was happening. I picked up the chair, gathering myself upright, then pushed it back under the table and inhaled slowly. "Thank you for your service, Cal." I apologized to no one in particular then turned and walked out the door.

The Cruiser stuttered faithfully into action. I pointed west and drove until all signs of civilization faded but the road itself and a few old ranch houses. I drove for an hour, then two, in silence except for tires on pavement and crisp air whistling through a crack in the window. I knew where I was going. Soon the road turned to frozen dirt and up ahead cut through the crest of a ridge at the base of a giant V in the

earth before descending sharply into the river valley. I could hear the glimmer in my father's voice telling me I'd better hold onto something as the truck accelerated toward what looked like the edge of the world.

Even though I knew what was coming my stomach would rise into my throat, out of my body it seemed, and stay suspended somewhere above in a moment of perfect weightlessness before rushing back into me like a flood as the wheels received the full weight of the truck again. With a big youthful grin he would gently apply the brakes and, taking in the view, exhale as though to slow down his heart. I let myself believe that was the memory which accompanied him over the edge when his heart finally slowed to a stop.

The width of the valley was marked distinctly by sheer plateau walls like far-reaching bookends. It spanned maybe a mile at most and was never so narrow that you could throw a stone from one side to the other. The road sort of disintegrated into a primitive two-track used occasionally to hay cattle and check fences. But there were no cattle to be seen and all the post-latch gates were laid open. Where the way intersected the river I turned left paralleling it upstream through dormant, snow-dusted grass and sagebrush. In the narrow sections of river the water was frozen solid like frosted glass and I wondered how thick, if it could be driven across without breaking through or getting stuck. A couple of times I passed large stones and nearly stopped to hoist them from the bank down onto the ice but decided to keep going.

Eventually the road curved out into the field and then back toward the river-crossing. I held the wheel at an angle and the slight pull felt like being in a slingshot. Depressing the pedal and bracing either side of the wheel my head hit the roof as I sped over a sharp dip at the bank. Ice shards and water instantly cascaded over the hood and windshield. I instinctively ducked and held my breath, pinning the accelerator to the floor, feeling each stone under the tires

claim a little more momentum. And like a beast whipped to the brink, hissing plumes of steam and coughing, the vehicle limped up the bank on the other side. I managed to coax it to the foot of the escarpment, where it sputtered to a halt alongside a small juniper. There was no sense in trying to start it again but I tried anyway, turning the ignition over and over until there was nothing. I opened the door, stepped out and closed it, reluctantly accepting I was stuck there.

When I was just a boy, standing very near that same place, I'd look up the steep slope to the base of the cliff with dread anticipating the burning in my lungs and thighs, the terrible thirst and having to claw through the crevice at the top. Somehow everything I'd seen since in no way diminished that feeling of dread. I started hiking.

Halfway up I kicked through the snow a bit, more for the memory than anything. In the summer if you dug around in the talus you could sometimes find tooled stones, pieces of spear or arrowheads, even bison remains, bone shards. I was so much smaller then, when the world went on forever yet seemed closer somehow. Peering up to the top of the cliff I would shudder to imagine an entire herd leaping one after the other from the edge and plummeting toward me, the frantic adrenaline in their eyes, the earth heaving under the impact of their massive bodies. Young men would peer panting from the edge down to the bloodied arms of women expertly stripping those bodies of their hides and carving the meat from their bones. They would be all around me as I made my way up the slope to the base of the cliff wall.

The only way to the top was through an opening there wide enough for one person. It led through the stone where water had eroded its way for thousands of years through weaknesses and where very little light penetrated. Acute claustrophobia held each breath just out of reach as I inched my way up and through, relieved only in the assurance that at least in the winter, rattlesnakes lay dormant, brumating in their dens,

their hibernacula. In my mind they were coiled tightly together, purring through dreams in the buried warmth of the earth around me. My skin ran flush with a surge of heat then shivered in the last shadow as I pulled myself finally from the hole at the lip of the plateau. Catching my breath, I turned to survey the valley. Behind a thin veil of clouds the sun was soft and low on the horizon. I stepped back from the edge and picked a couple of rocks from beneath the snow. Flinging them underhand I watched them spin silent in the air and tumble down the slope. I threw one half-heartedly at the Cruiser before sitting down and staring out across the valley.

It seemed there was nothing in sight to indicate *when* I was. It was all time and no time at all. I plucked a sprig of sagebrush, rolled it in my fingers and held it under my nose, inhaling its sweetness, cool like mint in the back of the throat. I scratched up a small handful of icy snow, compressed it in my palm and sucked the moisture from it. Tracing the river upstream I saw sun-baked ground and fine clouds of dust rising along the banks behind horse-drawn travois, the sinew-lashed lodgepole bowed under a winter's rations. I saw naked young men and women washing blood from their bodies where the current was swift. I felt everything slow and waited for darkness.

**New Fiction by John M.
McNamara: "The Mayor of West**

Callahan Creek”

A bare bulb in a hooded fixture illuminated the sign. Fog obscured the wooden placard, and as Joseph neared it, the black lettering seemed to recede into the white plywood. It read:

WEST CALLAHAN CREEK
POPULATION 1,187
EST. 1866
CITY LIMITS
VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED

Prosecuted for what? Joseph Hunter walked his bicycle along the highway shoulder; the rear axle ticked off his progress like a metronome, tires crunched on the gravel. He paused and stared across the embankment at the billboard, and then chuckled.

The ashen fog had intensified since Joseph battled the shadows earlier that afternoon, enshrouding him more thoroughly than the day before, clouding his concentration and fuzzing his perceptions. The attack came as suddenly as an ambush. He'd developed an instinct for anticipating the murkiness, but it had descended upon him with viciousness soon after he crested the tallest of the hills on Highway 22, which paralleled the Loup River. He had pedaled off the road and kicked down the bike's stand, then squatted and caught his breath. Under an overcast and featureless sky, he rolled onto his back and locked his hands behind his head. Then the choking shadows, their edges indistinct, (they lacked clarity, which he assumed meant he lacked it as well), assaulted in full force. His chest constricted and the panic rippled; the sensation felt like his organs were being drawn through seams in his skin. Deliberate breathing, measured and slow. Fingertips pressed firmly against the temples in circular rotation, eyelids lowered while his thoughts focused upon past recoveries.



Paul Vogler, Lane Near A Small Town, 1864.

No one had agreed with his decision to undertake this journey, not parents, therapist, or friends. To a person they fretted about the solitude, about his coping mechanisms, about tendencies they dared not name. His therapist warned about the risks of self-diagnosis, the danger of assuming Joseph knew what was best for Joseph. It's the brain telling the brain how to fix the brain, she'd said. It's unreliable.

He opened his eyes and glanced around, assessing the location for possible campsites. He made out a barely visible fence line beyond the sign, rows of barbed wire on wooden posts, and continued rolling his bicycle slowly, keeping to the edge of the highway in the limited visibility, fearful that in the fog a vehicle would encounter him with no time to react, to swerve and avoid striking him. He'd witnessed IEDs heave men and metal skyward in sooty, sandy-brown plumes, and believed the mockery of a collision on an American roadside might prove more than he could process. In the distance he spied spires of evenly-spaced lights vanishing up into the fog, each encircled by a woolly halo. Silos, he realized, like so many he'd encountered in towns across the prairie. They sharpened in definition as he neared the gated entrance to the co-op. Farther down the road he saw a dome of diffused light.

As he approached, its structure materialized: a Gas'n'Go with two pumps and a manual car wash bay. A widow sign advertised cold beer.

A hundred yards or so beyond the store, Joseph crossed a bridge with a low, steel railing, peered down at the slow-moving water, and imagined it must be the creek that offered the town its name. On the other side of the bridge, the gravel edge gave way to asphalt. The entrance to a parking lot; a single pinkish bulb cast an aura on the space. Joseph read the redwood sign with mustard-colored, inset lettering: West

Callahan Creek Park. Below the lamp, a path led away from the empty parking lot; Joseph wheeled his bicycle and the small trailer in which he towed his camping supplies past the circle of light, along that dark path, navigating more by intuition than sight. He stopped, retrieved a flashlight from a pouch on the trailer, and switched it on. The fog refracted the beam into a ball of hazy illumination, affording little visibility of his surroundings, but he did discern a curtain of drooping tree branches a short distance from the path. Willows. They favored stream and creek banks, he knew; he switched off the flashlight and steered his bicycle toward them.

Joseph managed to pitch the tent in the foggy twilight (the mechanics had become rote during the two weeks of his trip), and when he'd spread the foam camping mat and unrolled his bag, he lay quietly on his back and listened to the environmental sounds: a sluggish hint of water, feathery wisps of the willow branches chafing when a breeze rippled, and (undulating along the creek like a current), the metallic clatter of a hog feeder. He dined on dried fruit, a handful of mixed nuts, two strips of beef jerky, and a packet of cookies, checked his cell phone for messages, surprised when he saw three bars in the upper corner (it seemed West Callahan Creek had a cell tower nearby), and then lifted the tent flap to go out and relieve himself. It was an evening routine he followed with rare deviation. (One afternoon when the western sky portended thunderstorms, he stayed in a no-name motel, lavishly soaking in a hot tub in the dark bathroom as the thunder bouldered, lightning illuminated the room, and the rain strafed the windows). He lay on his sleeping bag, reading of a North Vietnamese soldier who had survived that war on his Kindle for an hour before stripping to his underwear, rolling to his side and closing his eyes, wondering what dreams he might encounter, and how much of them he would recall in the morning.

Hello, someone called. Wake up in there.

Joseph stirred and rose to a sitting position as he realized someone stood outside the tent.

Hey. Open up.

Joseph said he was awake and slid into his jeans, then unzipped the tent and crawled out into bright sunlight. The fog had disappeared and as he stood, he glanced quickly at the topography of the park: flat ground, the willows trees he had discerned the previous evening lining the bank of the narrow creek.

This isn't a camping area.

Joseph shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at the sheriff's deputy who had retreated a step or two from the tent entrance.

Sorry. Last night in the fog, I couldn't make out much and I needed somewhere to sleep.

Well, it's a violation. I'm going to have to take you into town. Judge will probably fine you. Let's go.

The sheriff removed handcuffs from his equipment belt and gestured for Joseph to turn around.

Are you serious? He couldn't read the man's eyes behind his sunglasses, to determine if his tactic was to scare Joseph into quickly moving on, not lingering in the town.

Dead serious. Turn around.

Joseph stepped toward the man, who gripped his wrist and sefficiently around. The sheriff affixed restraints to his wrist, gripped his elbow and guided him toward the path.

What about my stuff?

We'll collect it for you.

During the short drive, while the deputy radioed in that he had a prisoner in custody, Joseph tamped down anger and worried about a rise of the shadows. The patrol car, with emergency lights flashing and siren keening, circled a three-story, red brick courthouse, situated in a town square ringed by storefronts. The deputy completed a loop of the building before steering the car to the rear of the structure. He parked beside a set of concrete steps leading to an iron door.

He opened the rear door and rested a hand on Joseph's head, as he had when he placed him in the back seat at the park. Up the steps, he indicated. His tone, calm, without inflection.

The heavy door opened onto a small holding area with a polished wooden floor; another deputy behind a half wall, the upper section caged with chain link fencing, except for a small slotted opening on the countertop.

Vagrancy. The arresting deputy nodded to his counterpart, who smirked as he reached under the counter. A loud buzz sounded and he steered Joseph through another door, into a windowless, high-ceilinged corridor; creamy globes Joseph associated with school rooms hung from the ceiling.

Is this really necessary? Joseph loathed the plaintive quality of his own voice, as though he'd galvanized the words with solicitousness.

You can ask the judge.

At the end of the corridor, the deputy turned a polished brass handle and ushered Joseph across the threshold, into a courtroom filled with people, who rose almost in unison and began applauding. He turned his head to the right, where a woman wearing black robes rose from her chair behind the elevated judge's bench, and with a wooden gavel in her hand, motioned for the deputy to bring Joseph to the area directly

before the bench. She extended her arms and patted the air a few times, urging the people in the gallery to sit and grow quiet.

What is your name? Her voice startled Joseph, her tone officious but her smile playful.

Joseph Hunter.

The deputy gripped his wrists and unlocked the handcuffs. Joseph swiveled his head and studied the people in the wooden rows behind him. Everyone smiling, a few nodding and waving to him. His imagination flashed visions of horror movies through his mind, of human sacrifice cults and inbred cannibal creatures, and then he turned back to the judge, asking what the hell was going on.

You've been found guilty of violating our municipal code, Joseph Hunter. Do you have anything to say before I pass sentence?

Twittering and laughter from the crowd.

What is happening here? Are you kidding me? He rubbed his wrists where the handcuffs had bound him.

I'm quite serious. The judge leaned across the bench and aimed the gavel at Joseph. You do have a choice how you serve your sentence. Three days in jail. She paused and her eyes glinted as she surveyed the rows of people behind Joseph. Or you can serve as the honorary mayor of our town for this weekend's sesquicentennial celebration.

The entire gallery erupted once again in applause as the deputy clapped Joseph on his back, leaned in and whispered an apology for the cuffs.

Personally, the judge said, I recommend you accept our offer as mayor.

Joseph stood dumbfounded as people streamed out of the wooden seats, entered the area beyond the counsel tables, and crowded around him in front of the judge's bench.

He wanted to ask again if the judge was serious, but within the new context of the celebrity she had asked to confer on him.

Quite a bait and switch, he said to the deputy, who stood with his arms behind his back in a parade-rest position. The man, his eyes unmasked now, squinted as a smile enveloped his face.

We like a little theater, he replied.

A balding man gripped Joseph's hand, pumping it as he introduced himself as the office holder Joseph would supplant for the two-day celebration of the town's one-hundred-fiftieth celebration.

Ben Hampton. Happy to relinquish my duties and responsibilities, young man. Welcome to West Callahan Creek.

The judge banged her gavel several times, calling for quiet. The prisoner hasn't chosen his sentence yet. What do you say, Joseph Hunter?

Joseph wagged his head, glanced around at the folks in the courtroom, and then looked up at the judge. That's *Mayor* Joseph Hunter, your honor.

More laughter and applause, as Ben Hampton led Joseph out of the courtroom, trailed by townspeople. Let's get you settled at the hotel. It's really more of a bed and breakfast. Only four rooms, but they're clean and comfy. You'll like it there.

How did you choose me? Joseph followed Ben Hampton outside the courthouse, down a wide set of stone stairs, and onto the green expanse of the tree-lined lawn.

We left it up to the sheriff. The town did the same for its

centennial and it seemed like a fine gesture for this anniversary. You kind of surprised us, though. We thought he'd nab a speeder where the limit falls from fifty-five down to twenty-five. The twenty-five-mile-an-hour sign *might* be blocked by a low-hanging tree limb. He chuckled. But finding you was good fortune. I hope all the festivities won't inconvenience you unduly.



Gale Stockwell, Parkville, Main Street, 1933.

They arrived at a stone walkway in front of a two-story Victorian, crowned by a cupola with a pheasant weather vane, bedecked with gingerbread trim, trellises along the wrap-around porch laced with blooming vines; two women Joseph assumed were mother and daughter stood on the porch, smiling as he and Ben Hampton climbed the steps.

Good morning, mayor, the older woman said, looking directly at Joseph. Her gravelly voice reminded Joseph of the sound of his tires on the roadway edge in the fog. Your room is ready and I've laid out your things. She wore a wrap-around denim skirt and a pale blue cotton blouse.

Joseph paused until he felt a hand on the small of his back. He glanced sideways at Ben Hampton, who arched his eyebrows, nodded.

The younger woman, light brown hair pulled back in a long braid, wore black shorts and a sleeveless blouse, flesh-colored, pale against her tanned arms. She held open the screened door and Joseph entered the house. In the foyer stood a round oak table, covered in a lace cloth, upon which rested a vase of black-eyed-susans. To his right he saw a sitting room, with several upholstered wingback chairs, a red brick fireplace, and a settee with carved wood legs. To the left a dining room with a long table that he surmised could easily sit twelve people.

I'm Sally Hutchins and this is my daughter Peggy.

He noted resemblances between the two women: blue-gray eyes, brown hair (worn longer by Peggy than her mother, and with straw-colored highlights), the square shape of the hands.

Here's your room key. It's up the stairs, last one on the left, with a view of the gardens out back. Why don't you take some time to freshen up and I'll come get you around noon for lunch?

Joseph thanked her, mounted the staircase, and turned left along a corridor papered with a pattern of alternating rose and lavender stripes. The door to his room hung open and as he entered he saw his clothing laid out on the canopied bed. In the adjacent bathroom, his sparse toiletries had been arranged on the black granite vanity. The floor was covered with white, octagonal tiles, the walls with white subway tiles; he twisted the taps of the claw foot tub and tugged the pull-chain handle of the old-fashioned commode; the water tank elevated above the bowl whooshed, and Joseph chuckled. He wondered how he could have achieved a greater contrast between the claustrophobic fog of the previous evening and the expansiveness of the morning's surprising revelations.

As he had the night of the thunderstorm, Joseph drew a hot bath and lay with a wet washcloth over his eyes, recalling what have given him the impetus to begin this trip: sessions with the therapist, isolating himself in his parent's house, watching marathon reruns of *Law & Order* and its spinoffs, eventually switching off the television because he needed no reminders of how horrible people could be to one another. Deciding to act according to his nature as a fighter, to learn to cope with the shadows without assistance, but not pushing himself to exhaustion. Going the distance, but not at a sprint. Trimming away life's excess to reveal a core, essential truth about himself.

The darkness imposed by the washcloth reminded him of the previous day's fog, how at twilight it had enshrouded him in a gray chrysalis. Something his father had expressed as Joseph left: hopefulness that his quest would be successful. He may not have fully understood his son's need for this journey, but he identified with it as a mission. He had served in Vietnam. His father's father had served in the second world war. Joseph associated singular smells with each man: cigarette smoke with his grandfather, Lava soap with his father. As a child, Joseph watched TV shows with his father about war: *Combat*, *Twelve O'clock High*, *Hogan's Heroes*. When he asked why there no shows about Vietnam, his father said they didn't make TV shows about wars that were lost.

As he dried himself with the plush bath towel, Joseph wondered: if he had a son, what smell would the boy associate with him?

Through the window overlooking the back yard, he watched Peggy clipping herbs from a raised-bed garden. Her braid slipped over her shoulder and she flipped it back; as she moved down the row of plants, it continued to slide over her shoulder and she continued to flip it away from her work. Retaking the same ground again and again, he observed.

—

When he sat at the dining room table with Sally and Peggy Hutchins and saw the size of the grilled pork chop on his plate (an inch-and-a-half thick, stuffed with a sage dressing), he nearly chuckled. After the meal, Ben Hamilton arrived with a garment bag: khaki slacks, white Oxford shirt, red tie, and Navy blue blazer. We guessed your size, he said. Weren't sure if you were traveling with dress-up clothes. Why don't you change and then I'll take you on a tour of the town? Introduce you to some of the people who'll be attending the dinner tonight at the lodge.

Joseph nodded, slinging the garment bag over his arm and retreating to his room. He had urged Sally and Peggy Hutchins to talk about themselves during lunch. People enjoyed that, he knew, and regardless of whether they blared like a horn or whispered secrets, it kept them from asking questions of him.

The clothes fit: not tight but also not loose enough to make him appear clownish. When he descended the stairs to the foyer, Ben Hamilton offered a thumbs-up. Sally Hutchins brushed an imaginary fleck of lint from his shoulder and bestowed a proprietary smile.

The two of them walked back toward the town square, which Joseph noticed had been transformed: patriotic bunting draped from building fronts, lamp posts, and second-story windows; a grandstand in front of the courthouse; and a banner stretched across the street proclaiming the celebration of the town's founding in 1866. He and Ben Hamilton greeted folks who extended their hands, welcoming and congratulating Joseph. Most of the people on the street fit a curious demographic, old people and teens; there was hardly anyone Joseph's age and he imagined them fleeing the town for more exciting settings as soon as they reached the age of mobility.

They circled the town square. The barber, pointing a finger at the hair falling onto Joseph's collar, offered a free trim, which Joseph declined. At a florist shop, a woman pinned a red carnation in the buttonhole of the blazer lapel. Hand-crafted caramel was presented at a candy store. Every stop brought excessive yet heartfelt generosity and hospitality. He developed a soreness in his neck from the frequent nodding and tension in his jaw from the repeated grinning. But his anxiety of meeting new and unfamiliar people remained submerged as Ben Hamilton introduced person after person, names that floated away like windblown pollen, faces that morphed into a single countenance of genial salutation.

Fear of the shadows often menaced more frighteningly than the

shadows themselves; he'd described the fear to the therapist as a light gray hint of the ebony darkness. Being enveloped by them was the least amniotic feeling he could imagine. When he told her he was unsure how to live, she counseled that PTSD was not a weakness.

Acknowledge it. Understand what it is, she'd said, and you'll learn to control and handle it.

But it had not been in his nature to wait, so he embarked on the trip, and in a paradoxical twist, conceded that patience was one of the trip's most constructive lessons.

Many of the people they encountered expressed hope that Joseph was not too inconvenienced by his honorary incarceration, to which he responded that all he was losing was time. Thoughts of loss had consumed him when he returned from the army, but one stood out above the others: loss of feeling that his childhood home was home. The absence of people his age in the town and his urge to leave home reminded him of an old song lyric: *How you gonna keep'em down on the farm, after they've seen Patee.*

For Joseph it was the shadows; for the town's youth it was the escape of the gritty sameness of their lives. Had any of them chosen the army, he wondered? And would they come to regret their decisions? The therapist told him regret was punishment levied by an internal authority. Self-imposed penance, she said. Forgiveness doesn't always come at a cost.

As they approached the bed and breakfast, Ben Hamilton laid out the schedule for the celebrations: a dinner that night at the lodge, a parade the following day (during which Joseph would serve as the Marshall), and then a cookout at the park and fireworks.

Sally and Peggy will drive you to the lodge tonight. I'll see you then, he said, and then walked away, a man with purpose in his stride.

Instead of mounting the steps to the porch, Joseph followed a flagstone path around the house to the garden in which he'd seen Peggy Hutchins clipping herbs. In a gazebo at the rear of the yard, he removed his blazer, reclined on a padded chaise, and closed his eyes, birdsong in the trees surrounding the yard serenading him. He had encountered so many birds on the trip and lamented not having brought a field guide to help identify them. One vestige of life in the army: the ability to fall asleep anywhere, anytime, under nearly any conditions.

—

The lodge hall struck Joseph as a haphazard fusion of a high school cafeteria and a roadhouse bar. It was cluttered with folding tables and chairs. Large, metal-framed windows overlooked the gravel parking lot on one side, and on the other a corn field. Framed photos hung on the wall of stiff men in dark suits, aligned in stiffer rows in front of the building. Guided to a raised dais, Joseph passed folks he'd met that afternoon, who greeted him with the intimacy of an old friend. The closeness of the space and the volume of people (more than a hundred, he estimated), sparked worry that the shadows would harass him. He envisioned them reaching out from the walls to harass him; a fear of reacting to them in the environment that engendered them often doubled the anxiety. A nagging feature of fear: it rarely emerged in a pragmatic location. Of course, what sort of location would that be, Joseph mused.

Remarks followed dinner. Ben Hamilton. The judge who had sentenced him and other town officials, but the keynote address was delivered by Selma Fenstrom, introduced as the town's unofficial historian, a retired teacher and part-time librarian.

Joseph Patrick Callahan, veteran of the civil war, served in the 18th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, fought in several notable battles: Second Bull Run, Chancellorsville,

Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and Petersburg, where he sustained a bullet wound to his lower left leg, and as a result, he walked with a slight limp for the remainder of his life. Achieved the rank of sergeant. Returned to his home in Bristol after the war, but soon embarked west, by train to Omaha, and then, burdened with the tools and trappings of a farmer in the bed of a buckboard, followed the Platte River, turning north where it was joined by the Loup River and diverting then again along a then-unnamed creek. He paused one night to camp and, according to his journal, (the prized possession of the West Callahan Creek Library collection), determined he'd put enough distance between himself and Massachusetts to forget his home and memories of the war.

Joseph Callahan quickly learned he possessed no aptitude for farming and after two disappointing seasons turned instead to shop keeping, establishing and managing a general store for neighboring farmers and ranchers. The town of West Callahan Creek grew around the store, (Selma Fenstrom noted that the official date of incorporation differed from the date of Callahan's arrival on this stretch of prairie, as detailed in his journal; they preferred the latter for purposes of marking anniversaries).

She spoke of Callahan's service as the town's first mayor, a thirteen-year tenure, his reluctance to observe the tenth anniversary of the surrender of Lee at Appomattox, his contrary attitude toward the neighboring Pawnee, Ponca, and Arapaho, (contrary to that of other settlers, Callahan advocated peaceful relations), and how he riled many townspeople by banning the wearing of firearms within the town boundaries. But he was overall a popular, if at times moody, citizen and public servant. Selma Fenstrom continued with her biography of Callahan, but Joseph latched onto the single word: *moody*. Was there within his journal a more detailed account of the cause of his moodiness? Sipping from his water, Joseph scanned the crowded room: Many of the attendees nodded

at her recollections about the town's growth, its sons who had served in both world wars, Korea, and Vietnam. No mention of any active duty service members or casualties from Afghanistan or Iraq, and Joseph hoped the town's youth had wised up to the nationalistic rhetoric of army recruiters.

One hundred and fifty years on this prairie we call home, Sarah Fenstrom said, born of a wanderlust by a man from Massachusetts who answered the call of his country to preserve the union.

Joseph side-glanced at her as she neared her conclusion. A birdlike woman, with closely-cropped graying hair, wire-rimmed round glasses that reminded him of photos of John Lennon. Her voice belied her slight frame. Strong and confident. The commanding projection of a teacher accustomed to corralling fidgeting children.

In his final journal entries, Callahan reflected on his life, and logged his life's greatest regret: he never married, never fathered any daughters or sons, remained disheartened within his pride that the town bearing his name would never be home to any descendants. But, Selma Fenstrom concluded, we are all the children of our founding father, Joseph Patrick Callahan.

The crowd applauded as she shuffled her pages and nodded once, then twice, and waved a hand at the audience, returning to her seat on the end of the dais opposite from Joseph. Ben Hamilton rose to the microphone, as Joseph stared at Selma Fenstrom, determined to speak with her at the conclusion of the dinner. Reminding everyone that during the town's centennial, an honorary mayor had been drafted to oversee the celebrations, Ben Hamilton indicated Joseph with an extended arm, his palm up, gesturing for him to stand. Joseph complied, facing the room, grinning, bobbing his head, glancing at Selma Fenstrom, whom he discovered had been studying him in profile, squinting through her eyeglasses, smiling in a manner that made him feel she recognized in him something he didn't wish to reveal.

Mayor Joseph Hunter, would you care to say a few words?

Ben Hamilton's request startled Joseph, and he glared at the man for a moment as applause rippled through the room and people stood, chanting *Speech! Speech!*

Ben Hamilton beckoned him with a wave of his arm and stepped from the microphone.

Refusing was an untenable position, so Joseph stood, walked to the tabletop lectern, gripping it with both hands, and surveyed the crowded room as a tightening in his sternum warned that the shadows lurked patiently on the periphery of the room, awaiting the most inopportune moment to cloak him in debilitating fear and anxiety. But they remained at a distance, and he wondered if the good nature and the good will of the assembled people kept them at bay.

Thank you all, he said, hopeful his amplified voice repelled the shadows, even if temporarily. It's an honor to be your honor.

Laughter coursed through the room. Joseph wondered if cheerfulness and good spirits could also inhibit his shadows.

I've been given every hospitality. I'm very grateful and looking forward to tomorrow's festivities. Thank you all. He waved an arm above his head in a sweeping arc and stepped back from the lectern, nodding and smiling like a campaigning politician, and then returned to his seat. He glanced quickly at Selma Fenstrom; she stared at him with a close-lipped grin and nodded at him as she sluggishly blinked.

As Ben Hamilton announced an official end to the evening, Joseph side-stepped behind those seated on the dais until he stood beside Selma Fenstrom's chair.

I'd like to hear more about Joseph Callahan, he said. If you have some time.

The woman's eyes softened as she rose from her chair. Why don't I meet you at Sally's and we can talk there?

Joseph nodded. Thank you.

—

Selma Fenstrom's late husband, a Marine veteran of the Korean War, exhibited symptoms of PTSD, although the condition then was called combat exhaustion or fatigue. His spells, she called them, never turned violent, but her research into the life of the town's founder uncovered what she called common singularities.

It's a contradiction in terms, I know, but too many quirks in their character aligned like fence posts.

Callahan's journal alternated between brief and lengthy discourses. The short entries recorded mundane, day-to-day goings-on, notes about the weather (an unremitting concern in an agricultural community). But the longer entries revealed the man.

Bared his soul, she said. It was tortured at times by recollections of the war. He wasn't alone in that out here on the prairie. Many veterans from both sides went west after the war. Seeking what they couldn't find any more at home.

Callahan wrote that he knew when to stop his travels because it was in his nature to recognize it.

As I suppose you'll know as well. It'll be in your nature to know. Selma Fenstrom sat on the settee in the sitting room, cradling a glass of bourbon in both hands. Sally Hutchins had escorted them to the room, returned with the bottle and glasses, and then withdrawn as though she and Selma Fenstrom had choreographed the scene.

You mentioned he had a reputation for being moody. Joseph traced the rim of his glass with the tip of a forefinger.

Those were other people's observations. Nothing too erratic. He mentioned trying to control his spells. That's what he called them. He described how his conscience haunted him, like a specter, often at night, and at other, inopportune times.

Joseph chuckled at the mention of inconvenient timing.

Like yours, right? Selma Fenstrom lifted the bourbon to her lips and gazed at Joseph over the rim of the glass.

Sconces on either side of the fireplace and a floor lamp behind the settee illuminated the room in a golden glow, casting shadows in a variety of geometric forms against the walls, papered in a pattern of tiny roses among giant peony blooms. No good time for them, Joseph said. Did Callahan mention how he coped with his spells?

No. Only that they occurred. But he wrote about how coming west affected them. Founding this town gave him a new flag under which to fight. That's a direct quote. An allusion to his war experiences, I'm sure.

A new flag. I like that, Joseph said.

A flag that represented him, not a nation at war. That's what I want to believe. And that Joseph Patrick Callahan founded this town as a form of occupational therapy, long before the benefits of such an approach were even anticipated. He never called his spells demons. He understood what haunted him. Not a single incident but the cumulative experiences of his wartime years. We're a curious lot, you know, people. We strive to isolate a problem's cause, then fix it.

One fell swoop.

Exactly. Ridding the body of a parasite, but without destroying the host.

I've been questioning whether that's possible.

Oh, my boy. It's possible. Callahan wrote that toward the end of his life he felt like a husk, but he didn't have the resources available to you today. Ironically, he was surrounded by men who shared similar experiences; talking to them might have helped quell the spells. Selma Fenstrom laughed at her own rhyming phrase. He could have held a group therapy session in his general store. Wouldn't that have been a sight to set tongues wagging!

It would have done them a world of good.

I think that's exactly what Callahan sought. A world of good. Not of war. Not of destruction and death. Just a world of good. And he tried to establish that here. His writings reveal his wishes in that regard.

He sounds like an interesting man.

He was. Like many public figures, we've mythologized him, sanded down his rough spots to fashion a presentable figure. But I've glimpsed into his soul, as trite as that sounds. He possessed the breadth of a prairie sky and the depth and of the deepest well. A fascinating man.

Do you think he ever achieved his redemption?

Fascinating question. In all his writing, I've never seen him use that term. Unlike a lot of the people at the time, he was not religious. But I suppose redemption was wrapped up in what he sought. What about you, Joseph Hunter. Do you seek redemption?

Not by that name. Maybe reconciliation.

Selma Fenstrom nodded, braced herself on the arm of the settee and rose. It's been a pleasure meeting you. She extended her arm and Joseph gripped her warm hand in his own. Trust your nature to help you recognize when it's your time to stop. She clasped Joseph's hand in hers as he walked her through the

foyer to the door.

—

Seated in the grandstand in front of the court house, Joseph (wearing a blue sash with the word MARSHALL emblazoned in gold satin letters) applauded bands, floats bedecked in crepe-paper flowers and tugged by tractors, a convoy of fire trucks from neighboring towns, a procession of antique automobiles restored to pristine condition, and a bearded man in the uniform of a Union sergeant, riding a black horse and waving a sword at the crowds lining the streets that enclosed the square. Trailing the Callahan figure in a ragged picket line, half a dozen other men in Union garb paused every few yards and fired off a volley from their antique rifles. Joseph winced at the first report, but with repetition grew more confident the gunfire would not trigger the shadows.



Ferdinand Krumholtz, Dom Pedro II. von Brasilien, 1849.

He recalled his conversation with Selma Fenstrom, realizing his predisposition to try and glean wisdom from her familiarity with Callahan. Tracing the name of his spells through the histories of war: shell shock, battle fatigue, stress response syndrome, PTSD. Even Job, the embodiment of patience, was said to have suffered mental disturbances from battle. Every person around him bore a smile and he imagined that later circumstances in their lives might enforce grimaces or expressions of sadness; nothing was permanent. But then, the grimaces and expressions of sadness held to impermanence as well. He remembered moments when he and his brothers rested, post-action, guzzling water, leaning their backs against walls, removing their helmets and shading their eyes beneath blinding, cloudless skies, and then regarded one another as similar smiles and then laughter erupted to rinse the amassed tension from the clustered squad members. The

parade. Could it be his victory parade? The conquest of fear. The taming of the shadows.

At the cook-out in the park, Joseph wandered among the crowd, asking questions, listening to the answers, and revealing some of his story to those who asked about his life. Person after person thanked him for his service, to which he nodded and told them they were welcome. His father early in young Joseph's life had emphasized the importance of how to receive a compliment. It's a gift to the giver to acknowledge their thanks, he'd said. Tell them they're welcome and look them in the eye.

The fireworks that night drew a collective *ooing* and *aahing* approval of the gathered onlookers, and although Joseph flinched at the first noisy bursts, he soon relaxed on a grassy spot in the park, watching the display with what he could only define as a lightness in his heart, a sensation he wondered if Callahan had ever experienced in this town that bore his name. The deafening finale brought him and those around him to their feet in explosive clapping, and as the quiet night replaced the booming echoes, Joseph joined Sally and Peggy Hutchins for the ride back to the bed and breakfast.

As they wished him good night and walked toward their rooms at the rear of the house, Joseph felt an urge to ask them to linger, to engage them in conversation, could envision night stretching into dawn, as it had sometimes in Iraq, as man after man talked, the subjects varied and unimportant, camaraderie being the unspoken objective.

In the morning, Joseph descended the stairs for breakfast, with Ben Hamilton, Sally and Peggy Hutchins. He had hoped to say good bye to Selma Fenstrom, but reasoned such a farewell might seem anticlimactic. She'd provided Joseph all the assistance she had to offer the night before. At the conclusion of the light meal, the mother and daughter flanked him as they descended the steps to his bicycle and trailer. At

the curb beside the sheriff's squad car, the conjoined vehicles rested, cleaned and polished, the blue frame glinting in the morning sunlight.

As befits mayoral transport, the sheriff said, emerging from his car. I'm going to escort you to the town line.

Joseph grinned, gripping the hand of Ben Hamilton, looking him in the eye as the man thanked him for being such a good sport, accepted hugs from both Sally and Peggy Hutchins, and then mounted his bicycle and followed the sheriff's car, its emergency lights flashing, as it crept back toward the town square, where several people paused and waved at Joseph, wishing him good fortune and a safe journey. No one had gathered to see him off or welcome him back from Iraq. A few blocks from the square, the sheriff steered to the shoulder and turned off his lights. Joseph pulled astride the driver's window.

I know you're not a marine, the sheriff said, but *Semper Fi*.

Joseph eyed him and the sheriff chuckled.

First gulf war.

Thanks, Joseph said. For everything.

Our pleasure. Stay safe.

Watching the car complete a gravel-spitting U-turn and speed back toward town, the sheriff blasting the siren briefly as he waved his farewell, Joseph recalled Selma Fenstrom's confidence that his nature would allow him to recognize his destination, if not his destiny, that he would receive a signal that he finally knew himself. Shadows, he considered, might darken and diminish his vision, but they need not blind him.

New Poetry by Lynn Houston

You Leave for Afghanistan

If I'm writing this, it means I can't sleep and that
the rain outside my window drops blindly in the dark.

The crops need it, the cashier told me earlier, ringing
me up for a pint of milk, making small talk, making change.

And now the tipped carton has marred the pages
on my too-small desk. I'm trying not to make too much of it—

this mess, the disasters my life and pages gather.
I'm trying to be kinder to myself, more forgiving.

Outside, a leopard moth lands on the screen, shudders
to dry its wings. One touch from my finger would strip

the powdered coating that allows it to fly in rain.
I wish it might have been so easy to keep you

from boarding the plane that took you to war.

In the predawn, my neighbors still asleep, I am the only one

to hear the garbage truck grind to a stop,
its brakes the sound of an animal braying.

The rain has stopped, too. I look over the smudged papers
on my desk. Nothing important has been lost.

When you come home safely to me in six months,
we will be able to say, *nothing important has been lost.*



You Send Very Little News

*You don't know all the time I'm killin'.
I watch it pass 'til nothing's left . . .
I let my memory carry on.*

–Buffalo Clover, “15 Reasons”

I try to imagine where you live now, try to read
beyond what operational security allows.

You say it's dirty there and hot. There's sand
everywhere. You have a French press for coffee.

Here, I keep things green for you—lie in the fresh grass
with the dog until we no longer smell like walls,

make entire meals out of honey and peaches. I choose
fields in Connecticut that remind me of the farm,

stare up at the now goatless clouds, imagine that the distant
bird I see is the shape of the plane that will bring you home.



They Lie Who Don't Admit Despair

*I'm trying not to think about you,
but when this combine rocks and rolls,
it shakes my mind and shakes my body,
the way your leaving shook my soul.*

–Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

I've had some dark moments
while you've been gone.
Mostly I've been okay, having

made up my bullheaded mind
to just get through it.
But last night you said
that in a few weeks you will
ask me to stop sending mail,
because you are that close
to coming home. And I felt
a lightness I haven't known
since meeting you.
From that first day,
this absence weighed on us.
When you return, we will
be together for the first time
without the threat
of imminent departure.

I imagine you this morning
with warm flatbread, steaming coffee.
I imagine you smiling.
I'm smiling, too, listening
to the house creak.
Imagining you here.

You Call from the Airport to Say You Are Home

When we began, our hummingbird bodies
did a thousand anxious pirouettes midair,
dazzled and unfazed by the sour nectar
we had to drink at end of season.

You are back now, and we will do it
all again, but with sweetness.
All the beauty of bodies in love.
How generous is war
to give us two beginnings.

At the Harbor Lights Motel After You Return

The fish aren't biting on Key Largo
the morning we spend together
after you return. You nap all day,
sheets spiraled like a carapace
around your torso and legs.

Next to you in bed, I touch your head,
stroke the hair you've grown long,
and ask what it was like over there.
But you pull the blankets higher
and turn away to face the wall.

Hours later, I call to you from the doorway
to show you a snapper on my line. You dress,
find me on the dock where we drink beer
as the sun slumps behind the palms.

You sleep through the night, and in the morning,
before you leave for a dive on a coral reef,
you tell me that turtles sleep like humans do—
you've seen them at night tucked into the nooks
of wrecks, heads withdrawn into shells;
you've seen their eyes blink open in the beam
of your dive light; you've even seen one wake
and swim away when a fish fin came too close.
They have nerve endings there, you tell me.
They can feel when something touches their shell.

When you return from the reef, I ask you
again how it was over there, and this time
you begin to tell me what you can.



The Persistence of Measurement

*There'll be a thousand miles between us
when I pass the border guard.*

*Is that thunder in the distance,
or just the breaking of my heart?*

—Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

The morning he leaves me, my lover buries
a lamb—a runt who'd only lived a few days—
on a hill of the Tennessee farm where we met.

Does he think, as he digs the grave,
as he presses his face to the cold wool
to say goodbye, of the last time he caressed
my hair or pressed his body against mine?
Or are his thoughts already in Memphis, with her?

I wouldn't know. I was not given the dignity
of a burial, just an email sent after he'd been drinking,
blaming me for asking too many questions, asking
too much of him, for failing to give him space.

In Connecticut, winter refuses to relent.
It is still the season of waiting.
I look out the window of the room
where I waited faithfully for half a year,
where I wrote him daily.
The sky is cruel: clouds still take the shape
of farm animals, and birds become the plane
that never brought him home to me.

Part of me will always be waiting
for the return of the man I met in summer,
before the deployment changed him.
But that man is thousands of miles away.
He will always be thousands of miles away.