

# New Essay by Anthony Gomes: Is There Finality in Death?



*All beings in this world, all bodies must break up: Even the Teacher, peerless in the human world. The mighty Lord and perfect Buddha has passed away. – The joy of renunciation in The Radical Buddhist.*

*Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, It seems to me most strange that men should fear, Seeing that death, a necessary end, Will come when it will come.– Julius Caesar, Act 2, Scene 2. William Shakespeare*

With the sudden appearance of COVID-19 that has been killing the elderly at an alarming rate, doctors may be forced to make life and death decisions based on age, underlying medical condition and the need for respirators, something unthinkable in the near past. Emergency Medical Service (EMS) teams who cannot find or restart a pulse while administering CPR on adult cardiac arrest patients have been instructed not to bring those patients to hospitals. How the COVID-19 epidemic will change our approach to death remains unclear as of this writing. In this regard it is noteworthy remembering what the Roman Seneca commented some 2000 years ago: *death is sometimes a punishment, often a gift, and for many a favor.*

Death is a dreaded word no living human being wants to hear. But ultimately, all of us have to face our own death or that of our loved ones. For only one thing is certain in our lives: the fact that one day we will die.

Medically, death is declared when an individual sustains either an irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions or an irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem. On

the other hand, if a person experiences the “irreversible cessation of all functions of the brain,” he or she is considered legally dead. With the availability of life-support measures, a legally brain dead subject with a beating heart may be kept “going” until the decision is made to remove all life-support measures.

The process of dying, of how, when, and where, has changed over the last century. In the US, nearly two-thirds of deaths occur in a hospital environment, in the intensive care-units where patients often undergo all sorts of complex procedures, including surgery and other life-extension measures. Some of these patients are transfers or admits from nursing homes, and many are oblivious of their life-expectancy. Their relatives not uncommonly plead with the doctor: “Please doc, do all you can,” and often the doctor obliges seeking consultations for each failing organ from a host of specialists: cardiologists, pulmonologists, gastroenterologists, kidney specialists and surgeons, all doing their thing, as if to maintain each “organ” disregarding that they are human beings, whole entities rather than parts of an unraveling body. Yes indeed, modern medicine can prolong life, but ultimately cannot avoid death. These so called “medicalized deaths” are not exactly what people desire. Polls conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *The Economist* report that most healthy people hope that they will die at home peacefully, free from pain and surrounded by loved ones. However, that doesn’t mean that their wishes will hold when they are faced with a catastrophic illness such as COVID-19. In the past, I have encountered patients and their relatives rescind DNR (do not resuscitate) instructions to insert a pacemaker in a terminal patient.



The insecurities associated with death, and the much argued presence or absence of an afterlife compound our anxieties and add to the fear of dying. One can argue that death is preferred to severe disability or suffering with its

devastating effect on quality of life. However, some would strongly hold a counter position that life is sacred, ordained by God, and, nobody has the right, the subject or his doctor to end life prematurely, no matter how miserable the existence. Indeed, few people if any will celebrate death with champagne as Anton Chekhov did. Chekhov's wife, Olga was with him when he passed away. She writes that they had ordered champagne; he took a glass, and turning his face towards her, he smiled at her and said: "It's a long time since I drank champagne." He calmly drained his glass, lay down quietly on his left side, and shortly afterward, fell silent forever.

In the US, in contrast to some European and Canadian cultures, we prefer to let life ebb away and ultimately extinguish itself. I have been following a patient for several years on whom, years ago, I had performed a successful ablation of a rapid heart-beat. Recently however, she was going downhill with severe limitation due to a lung condition, weight loss, and a previous cancer that left her with a single lung, now diseased as well. She was in a nursing home barely able to breathe. She said to me: "I am waiting to die a miserable death...I wish I would go quickly." Her feelings are entirely honest. If ethicists and psychologists confirm those wishes are genuine, then one might ask whether society, cultural norms or "religious righteousness" can or should deny them. With the sudden appearance of COVID-19 doctors may be forced to make life and death decisions without the input of the patient or his/her spouse or relative.



As much as death is abhorred in our society, even in the setting of terminal cancer, heart failure, and old age, the recognition and understanding of the importance of quality of life and of death itself, a subject little talked about, let alone discussed, assumes considerable import. Unlike Asian societies, Western culture, more so the American, hold in disfavor old age and death. In other societies, particularly

in the Eastern, old age is revered, and in some, death has no absolute finality.

One might argue that in affluent western societies there is much to live for. And so, nobody in his/her sound mind wants to die even if the ravages of age or illness are evident. Undoubtedly, a healthy mind irrespective of age and disability can amply enjoy the fruits of living, particularly if one has a caring, loving family or one has "purpose" to keep on living. It is pleasurable for an older person, a matriarch or patriarch of the family, even if disabled by disease, to be surrounded by children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren for some or all festive occasions. Furthermore, not uncommonly, in terminal medical conditions, the will to live or the "will to die" is highly personal. Even in the most desperate of situations, death may not be a welcome alternative. A patient of mine who survived the holocaust and is now over 90 years of age and disabled, but with decent mental faculties, told me that in the Nazi concentration camp she had the option to get electrocuted on the fence while trying to escape, and some did just that. She was afraid of death and rather preferred to live a tortured existence. She survived, came to America, and raised a family. Even now, this courageous woman desperately wants to go on living, and even today, having witnessed the ravages of history, and having made a life for herself and her family, she still fears death.

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### ***OUT-OF- BODY EXPERIENCES***

Some of my patients who survived an episode of sudden cardiac death, and lived to recount the experience, describe seeing their long-gone ancestors around them, perceiving detachment from their own almost lifeless bodies, and looking down at them. Immediately, thereafter, they passed through tunnels into another universe of scintillating lights, and subsequently were pulled back into their bodies at the very

time of successful resuscitation. Obviously, we do not have clear scientific explanations for these perceptions. But I do believe, after questioning my patients at some length that these are true and rather repetitive perceptions in people who survived an episode of sudden cardiac death, and not a fancy of their imaginations, nor perhaps dream-like states. Quite astounding is the fact that these experiences have, most of the time, been positive and not frightening. Whether they occur during activity at some cortical level due to an alteration of neurotransmitters as a result of the cessation of blood supply to the brain, or they reflect the detachment of the living energy from the body, perhaps can only be determined by scientific experiments such as functional-Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) or Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scanning during a cardiac arrest, something that is practically impossible to accomplish in the setting of a non-beating heart and no blood circulation.

On the other hand, electroencephalographic (EEG) studies that determine brain activity have been recorded during blackout spells (in the condition known as vasovagal syncope) induced by head-up Tilt Testing, where the bed is tilted to a 70, or 80-degree angle, for a period of 20 to 30 minutes. These studies reported by Ammirati F and coworkers [\[1\]](#) showed that in patients who blacked out because of temporary cessation of heart rhythm, there was a *sudden reduction and disappearance of brain wave activity (i.e. a flat EEG)* seen at the onset of blackout spells. The EEG normalized immediately after recovery. This study obviously proves that loss of consciousness even over a short time span is accompanied by loss of brain activity. Moss and Rockoff [\[2\]](#) reported on a 62-year-old woman who had simultaneous EEG and ECG during emergent carotid artery surgery. While the surgeon was closing the incision, the patient developed cardiac arrest. There was loss of EEG activity within 15 seconds of heart stoppage and activity returned almost instantly after resuscitation. In animal models of cardiac arrest produced by rapid injection of

potassium chloride, a flat EEG occurred within 25 seconds of cardiac standstill. These studies do show that the occurrence of cardiac arrest with resultant loss of blood flow to the brain is associated with a loss of brain electrical activity. *Does this then imply that extrasensory perceptions during cardiac arrest are not related to brain activity, but rather to the release of another form of energy from the body?*

## **THE CONCEPT OF AFTERLIFE**

Not uncommonly, fear of death, or lack thereof, and the idea of an afterlife are strongly rooted in religious beliefs. The teachings of world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism have different philosophical viewpoints on these matters. In Judaism, the Torah is silent on the presence of an afterlife. Instead, it entirely focuses on *Olam Ha Ze*, meaning this world. This view is contrary to that held in the Christian and Muslim faiths, where Heaven is the eternal realm for chaste people, and damnation into Hell for evil ones. I have met dying people of the Christian faith who expressed certain contentment that soon they would attain the Kingdom of Heaven and perpetual life in the presence of Christ. Yet, despite their belief in a better eternal kingdom ahead, these believers were eager to delay dying. In the far eastern religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, and even in Kabbalistic Judaism, an afterlife is grounded in the theology of reincarnation, in which life is reordered after death as another earthly life in the physical world. The transmigration of souls, or *samsara*, results in the passage of a soul from body to body as determined by the force of one's actions, or Karma, in the recent past. Successive reincarnations attempt to achieve a superior grade of consciousness, which ultimately leads to liberation from the cycle or rebirth, and the attainment of *Moksha*. In Tibetan Buddhism, Bodhisattvas are not reborn through the force of *karma* and destructive emotions, but rather due to the power of their compassion. Thus, the Hindu and Buddhist do not view

death as an end in and of itself.

Death, on the other hand might be more difficult to accept for a Jew, in contrast to a Christian or Muslim, who has the promise of Heaven. I have witnessed prolonged and futile resuscitative codes on Rabbis sometimes for over an hour, when the doctors in attendance well knew that the effort was useless.



### ***Reconnecting in the After-Life***

*A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty.*— [Joan Didion, \*The Year of Magical Thinking\*](#).

There is a strong desire for a loved one, particularly for a spouse or a parent to communicate with the dead person, and this is often achieved through mediums. One of my patients, whom I shall call Mary, related her story in search of her dead child, whom I shall call Mallory. Mary together with her husband and her teenage son had a meeting with a psychic. She said to me: “Immediately the psychic said there was a little girl present and she would not stop talking. The psychic’s voice changed to that of a little girl, and, looking directly at me, said, ‘“Mommy, you are crying too much. Please stop. I don’t throw up anymore and I can run and dance. I am so happy here. Those doctors can’t hurt me or call me names anymore. Please stop crying. I am okay.”’ To her father, she asked that he should not be so sad. To her brother, she said she loved him and made reference to a tattoo he talked about. She also said that what happened to her was supposed to happen, and none of them could have changed it.

“The tears were flowing heavily,” said Mary. “We heard a lot from Mallory that day. We all left there with a new peace in our hearts, and I felt a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I often think back to that reading and how it played a major role in my being able to move on.”

After my wife died of cancer at a young age of 40, I searched for her wherever I went, in whatever I saw. I expressed these feelings in a poem I wrote:

*“Amid flowers: I searched her face;  
in the ocean wind: I heard her cry;  
in the falling star: I saw her leap;  
in the snowflakes: I felt her breath.”*

Recently, a friend of mine whose wife died of cancer claimed that he felt her presence at home in the form of shifting light. Undoubtedly each encounter, whether real or a figment of one’s imagination, provides relief and closure to overwhelming grief. Needless to say, it’s not the objective of this essay to refute or confirm these extra-sensory perceptions; after all, the existence of anything only occurs when we perceive it, and so if one perceives and believes that the person felt the presence of the dead person in a parallel universe, so be it. Something that we do not perceive for all practical purposes does not exist *for us, but might exist for others*. Undoubtedly, the lonely deaths due to COVID-19 without the presence of loved ones will leave families grieving and empty for a long time with a strong desire to connect in the afterlife.



### ***The Concept of Mass/Energy Applied to the Afterlife***

The much acclaimed, Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, through his heteronym, Bernardo Soares, said of death: *When I see a dead body, death seems to me a departure. The corpse looks to me like a suit that was left behind...*

In death, all the physical, biochemical, and mental energy within us, the very idea in our brains of who we are and what we are, is energy that dissipates slowly as the body cools

down. The French philosopher Rene Descartes said: "I think, therefore I am." One can therefore pose the questions: Where does the energy spent on thinking of who we are, and other mental functions disappear? *One of the fundamentals of physics is that energy does not die, that it cannot be created nor destroyed—it simply gets converted into other forms of energy.* And so, the body ultimately reverts to dust, intermingling with the soil of the earth, passing on its mass/energy, or rather converting into other forms of energy, such as biochemical energy into plants and all living beings—providing nourishment to mother earth, the continuum cycle of death and rebirth. An important common belief in native American culture is profound respect for Mother Nature—the earth, the sky, the trees and the animals, and that we humans are a part of nature. Our suffering, our illnesses are not different from those of the animals around us, and when we die we become part of that from which we came: from dust to dust. Our biological material is recycled and re-distributed; and even if we do not believe in an afterlife we live on as biological matter in mother earth in the cycle of life and rebirth.

***But of the soul or the spirit of man—where does that energy go?***

*I am incapable of conceiving infinity, and yet I do not accept finity. I want this adventure that is the context of my life to go on without end. – Simone de Beauvoir.*

*I depart as air—I shake my white locks at the runaway sun, I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags. I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love...Walt Whitman*

In  $E = mc^2$  Einstein reached the conclusion that mass and kinetic energy are equivalent, and can be converted into each other since the speed of light ( $c^2$ ) is constant. Thus, a small amount of mass can generate a large amount of energy and vice

versa. Who is to say that this energy within us does not transcend from one universe into another? Or pass on to the closest of kin? Indeed, do we not feel the energy, the life of the dead person, within us? I believe that after the death of my young wife, I was no longer the person I was before. I became a different person incorporating within me her energy. In my view, this was not a concerted effort on my part, but rather a spontaneous phenomenon without thought or intention. Thus, I believe that the very thought, the idea of a dead loved one: a wife, to a husband, or vice-versa, a parent to a child, lives within our minds as the very source of our own new amalgamated energy.

One can plausibly argue that there is no such thing as a soul or spirit as separate entities; that the very soul or spirit resides in our brain as a conglomeration of a host of neuro-hormones and neural transmitters that makes us feel and appreciate beauty, spirituality, a sense of transcendence through chemical interactions.

*However, any such chemical interactions are, after all, a source of mass and energy.*

There are possibly an infinite number of universes, and everything that can possibly happen occurs in some universe. All possible universes exist at the same time, regardless of what really happens in any of them. In this regard, space and time are limitless. In Einstein's theory of relativity, there is no such thing as time in the singular. Time passes differently for different observers depending on motion. Time slows down substantially, and with it the aging process when travelling into space and at the speed of light. When Einstein's old friend Besso died, he lamented that Besso had departed from this world a little ahead of him. That means nothing, he thought. "People like us...know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion." Thus, immortality does not mean a perpetual existence in time without end, but rather resides

outside of time altogether. This spiritual energy within us, the soul, the atman, whatever you may want to call it, exists within us, around us, since the past, present and future, or what we call space and time, could be but timeless illusions.

Undoubtedly, science has come a long way in understanding the physical nature of the human body, but our understanding of the human brain, the thinking process, such lofty and abstract attributes like spirituality, clairvoyance, the soul, and the presence or recognition of alternate parallel universes is lacking profoundly. It is possible that life continues as forms of energy in a parallel universe—some solace to the living and dying in these tragic times.

[1] Ammirati F, Colivicchi F, Di Battista G et al: Electroencephalographic Correlates of Vasovagal Syncope Induced by Head-Up Tilt Testing. *Stroke*, 1998; 29: 2347-2351.

[2] Moss J, Rockoff M: EEG Monitoring During Cardiac Arrest and Resuscitation. *Journal of American Medical Association*. 1980; 244: 2750-2751.

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## **A Review of Ruffi Thorpe's New Novel 'The Knockout Queen,' by Andria Williams**

"Who deserves anything?" asks Lorrie Ann, one of the protagonists of Ruffi Thorpe's first novel, [The Girls from Corona del Mar](#) (Knopf, 2014). She's putting the question to her stunned-into-silence friend, Mia, who has so far known Lorrie Ann only as something of a saint, a martyr of circumstance, the golden child from a perfect family ruined by

terrible twists of fate—until the two women meet up suddenly after years apart. Lorrie Ann pops a baklava into her mouth—she’s a junkie now, to Mia’s shock; she only wants to eat sugar, she’s raving a little—and she demands, “Do we deserve the spring? Does the sun come out each day because we were tidy and good? What the fuck are you thinking?”

Even when the line is delivered by a young heroin addict whose husband has been killed in Iraq and whose father was a Christian rock musician, it’s an important one to Rupi Kaur’s writing. The question—“who deserves anything?”—permeates all three of her books, which also include [\*Dear Fang, With Love\*](#) (2016) and [\*The Knockout Queen\*](#) (April 2020). Her characters, sometimes taken far astray by life, puzzle over what they have done, or what has happened to them—has it made them good or bad, or is that a spectrum like anything else?— or maybe their worst fears really are true, and good and bad are terrifyingly, irrevocably definitive.

Lorrie Ann, former evangelical, junkie, cuts through all that with her blunt, manic aphorisms and her baklava-smeared fingers. She knows how the historical intersects with the personal. She’s seen it herself. Still she wonders, Do we deserve the spring? What are we all thinking?

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In Kaur’s most recent novel, *The Knockout Queen*, our narrator’s name is Michael. He is (at first, briefly, before we inhabit his teenage self) eleven years old, and his mother has been sentenced to three years in prison. Michael is looking around at a world that makes no sense:

*When I was eleven years old, I went to live with my aunt when my mother was sent to prison.*

*That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass*

*destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too.*

*Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated! If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting.*

This is the lively, engaging, youthful, and astute voice we will hear from Michael throughout the rest of the novel. As a young teenager he is already aware that perceptible deviance will assign you blame. Women fare horribly in domestic violence cases, he knows, because no one expects a woman to be the aggressor. No mind if she has put up with years of abuse, prior—there's just something that's not right about it. (But are we *sure* that we can place any blame on President Bush?) With his mother gone, he has been taken in by his exhausted Aunt Deedee and is sharing a room with his cousin, Jason, “an effortlessly masculine and unreflective sort...who often farted in answer to questions addressed to him.” Jason's also got a mean homophobic streak that only makes life harder for the closeted Michael. Finding it hard to make friends, Michael turns to a dangerous habit: meeting much older men online.

This is Orange County, California, circa 2010. Michael has the internet and a false sense of confidence, or maybe hope. He has seen how history intersects with the personal. Still, with the sun glaring outside his window, he aims for privacy in the darkness of his room. He reaches out. Maybe there's someone on the other side. His tension and longing are a tender thing, snappable. What will he find, or who will find him?

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Across her three novels, Ruffalo Thorpe's characters share a common childhood in the sun-drenched, high-wash landscape of Southern California, often pre-or-mid-dot-com, when some normal people still lived in normally-priced houses. Michael, for one, does, now that he has moved in with his Aunt Deedee. But she's working two jobs—at a Starbucks and at the animal shelter—just to pay her mortgage and to provide some kind of future for that aforementioned, flatulent meathead son. Michael observes that she has a personality “almost completely eclipsed by exhaustion.”

Still. Still. It's California. A reader can almost feel that legendary warm air coming off the page, the smell of hot asphalt, car grease, stucco, sea salt, chlorine, oleander on the highway medians, bougainvillea; the too-prickly, broiled grass in small front yards. I've read that Thorpe's novels have the quality of a Hockney painting-turned-prose; they do, the brightness, the color, the concrete, the sky—the scope and scale—but there's also a nostalgia, a tenderness, and a cellular-level familiarity in her writing that's capable of delving even deeper into that locale, and which can probably only come from having had a California childhood. I could almost feel my eyes burnt by the bright white sidewalks, the way, as a kid walking home from 7-11 or Rite Aid, you'd have to look at something else for a moment, glance at the grass for relief but still see the sidewalk rectangles bouncing vertically behind your eyelids.



Our teenage narrator, Michael, muses that he can't believe anyone could live in a place with such terrific weather and not simply smile all the time. However, at this point California is already changing. “On either side, my aunt's house was flanked by mansions,” Michael describes.

*Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard*

*pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor's face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.*

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Though she lives in one of the hulking new-construction mansions next door, things are not much easier for Michael's neighbor, Bunny. Bunny is the tallest kid in their class. Soon she grows taller, to her own horror, than all of the teachers and parents as well. This is not something that she can help. When she meets Michael stealing a smoke in her side yard—not knowing he's also been swimming in their pool whenever she and her father go on vacation, though she'd hardly care—the two strike up an easy and natural friendship.

Bunny lives with her father, Ray, one of those realtors "smiling toothily" from billboards, and perhaps the most ubiquitous of them all, having risen to the highest ranks of his toothy, hustling kind – his face plastered on bus stops all over town, attached to every holiday and parade, to the point that he seems to Michael a sort of local, B-grade royalty. Off the billboards, the real Ray is a somewhat fatter, puffier iteration of his entrepreneurial visage, and he has a bit of a drinking problem as well as a fixation on his daughter's future in sports. (This last bit will become important.) He will also be, under Thorpe's skill, an intermittently hilarious, bizarre, very deeply flawed delight to read.

Complicating factors, there's cruel gossip circulating around the death of Bunny's mother in a car accident some years before.

So life is hard for Bunny, too, and her friendship with Michael becomes a once-in-a-lifetime sort of friendship, which will be forged even stronger when Bunny does something irrevocable, sending both of their lives spiralling. This is an often sad, and not an easy book, but I can say with confidence that their rapport, due to Thorpe's seemingly-effortless skill and sparkling dialogue, is a joy to read.

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Thorpe's novels grapple, frequently, with what it means to be "good" – for women, men, kids, parents. What happens to girls and women who aren't seen as "good," boys who are not tough enough? (What happens to the boy who cannot, in fact, fart on cue?) What happens when there are deviations from the strict masculine and feminine markers our species depends upon to send immediate signals to our poor, primitive basal ganglia? Some people – the unreflective sorts, maybe, the Tarzan wannabes like Jason, the ones who take solace in the bedrock of their own infallible outward markers—could get upset.

In Michael's case, his cerebral nature and his kindness may be nearly as dangerous, at least in high school, as his sexuality. "The people I had the most sympathy for," he thinks, "were almost never the ones everyone else had sympathy for."

Still, both Bunny and Michael want, the way most teenage kids want, to be good—to be liked, to be happy, to have positive relationships with their friends and parents; to be, in the ways that count, *pleasant*. Here's Michael:

*[It] was a popular take when I was growing up, among the post-Will & Grace generation: Fine, do what you want in bed, but do you have to talk in an annoying voice? I did not want to be annoying, I did not want to be wrong, I wanted to be right. And yet I knew that something about the way my hands moved betrayed me, the way I walked, my vocabulary, my voice.*

*I did not consciously choose my eyeliner and septum piercing and long hair as a disguise, but in retrospect that is exactly what they were.*

“As often as I was failing to pass as a straight boy during those years,” he later thinks, “Bunny was failing to pass as a girl. She was built like a bull, and she was confident and happy, and people found this combination of qualities displeasing in a young woman.”

Through the figure of Bunny we see, then, what qualities might instead be pleasing in a young woman. Contrast Bunny with her volleyball teammate Ann Marie, as seen through Michael’s eyes:

*Ann Marie was a special kind of being, small, cute, mean, glossy, what might in more literary terms be called a “nymphet,” but only by a heterosexual male author, for no one who did not want to fuck Ann Marie would be charmed by her. She was extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine, a creature white-hot with lack of irony. She was not pretty, but somehow she had no inkling of this fact, and she performed prettiness so well that boys felt sure she was.*

Thorpe stays impressively in Michael’s voice: only a young man of his very-recent generation would speak so easily about lack of irony and “performing prettiness” in the same breath as “extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine” and “fuck.” Her mention of that “heterosexual male author” with a nymphet preoccupation is also a smart nod to a later scene in which Bunny’s dad, Ray, somewhat drunk (as usual) and sentimental (less usual), sits Michael down and strong-arms him into looking at an old family photo album, a socially awkward and therefore very funny situation several narrators across multiple Nabokov novels have also faced. It’s equally funny in *The Knockout Queen*. But Thorpe gives the monumental authority of the male gaze a clever twist, for Michael, unlike one of Nabokov’s middle-aged narrators, is not at all titillated by these photos of Bunny but instead empathetic, fascinated by

his friend's life before he knew her, before her mother died, before her whole world changed.

*I wished I could go back and really look at the divide in her life: before her mother's death, and then after. When she ceased to be part of a scene that her father was documenting and began to be posed artificially, always on her own. Was I imagining the sadness I saw in her smile? Or was it an effect of the camera flash, the glossy way the photos had been printed, that made her seem trapped in those images, sealed in and suffocating behind the plastic sheeting of the photo album?*

*"Thank you for showing these to me," I said.*

Michael marvels at the loving photos he sees of Bunny's mother, decried as a slut by the gossips in town, her death whispered "suicide." Do these images tell the truth, or do they lie as much as any other, prone to the bias of the photographer, prone to distortion? Michael feels that the tenderness he sees in them is genuine, even though he knows how easy it is for a certain angle to tell it wrong. Where he feels the distortion has occurred is on the outside of this album, this family, in the crucible of group thought. (There's a joke both in Nabokov as well as here about the distorting power of the visual: in *The Knockout Queen*, a Facebook photo of the high school volleyball team goes viral because, due to perspective, Bunny erroneously looks fully twice the size of any other member of the team. In Nabokov's *Transparent Things*, the slim and attractive Armande in an early photo is given, "in false perspective, the lovely legs of a giantess"). As with Hugh Person, in *Transparent Things*, or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, the camera and the idea of a photographic memory eventually lose some of their stability, some of their complete control—and so, through Thorpe, does the male gaze and the historical power of the speaker, or of the loudest one in the room. There are hints of knowledge, Thorpe suggests, that evade group accusation, that dodge the iron maiden of a

harsh mainstream and even the seeming authority of daguerreotypic capture: like motion, or like memory.

It would be hard to write three California novels without the specter of Joan Didion hovering overhead, so Thorpe leans into this, as well, with the addition of a grisly, community-shocking murder that seems to come right out of the *White Album*—the sort of local tragedy Didion might have learned of while floating in her Hollywood rental home's pool. With this event, too, Thorpe challenges what we think we know from the outside.

There are real problems in this paradisaical California town. Racial inequality, homophobia, the fact that fewer and fewer people can afford their own homes. A salacious news story is a most excellent distraction. But Michael, young as he is, feels the sick appeal of the outside verdict and tries to resist it. Yes, everyone's talking about the murder with concerned gravity—so grave, so concerned— at every Starbucks you wait in line at, everyone whispering, *Can you believe it? It happened to someone from here? How could she have let that happen to her?* But he senses the *tsk* of judgment in their analyses. Why would anyone let violence happen to them?

*We needed to pretend violence was something we could control. That if you were good and did the right things, it wouldn't happen to you. In any event, it was easier for me then to demand that Donna [the victim] become psychic and know how to prevent her own murder than it was for me to wonder how Luke could have controlled himself. It was easier for all of us that way.*

Luke, here, the killer in question, is a sort of (pardon the comparison) George W. Bush, perplexed by his own power, almost a victim of society's forgiveness for what is already understood and comfortingly masculine and clear. (It seems intentional that the victim's name, literally, means "woman.")

Isn't it easier to cast your lot with someone who seems to have control – even if they can barely understand it – rather than the weaker person, the one still striving?

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Bunny and Michael decide to play at “realness.” It’s a term they’ve gleaned from the drag queen documentaries and the reality TV they love to watch—RuPaul, and *Paris is Burning*—where Michael can practice at performing and Bunny, riveted, can “deconstruct” femininity, which still eludes her even as she longs to attain it. They crack each other up to the point of tears with their impressions of people they know, at which Michael is very good and Bunny just abysmally horrible.

*One of the terms we stole from RuPaul's Drag Race was the concept of “realness.” They would say, “Carmen is serving some working girl realness right now,” and a lot of the time it just meant passing, that you were passing for the real thing, or that's maybe what the word began as. But there were all different kinds of realness. In Paris Is Burning, which we must have watched a hundred times, a documentary about New York City drag ball culture, there were drag competitions with categories like Businessman or Soldier. Realness wasn't just about passing as a woman, it was about passing as a man, passing as a suburban mom, passing as a queen, passing as a whore. It was about being able to put your finger on all the tiny details that added up to an accurate impression, but it was also about finding within yourself the essence of that thing. It was about finding your inner woman and letting her vibrate through you. It was about finding a deeper authenticity through artifice, and in that sense it was paradoxical and therefore intoxicating to me. To tell the truth by lying. That was at the heart of realness, at least to me.*

I loved this, as a fiction writer. The fun of pretending, how

it can be an empathy, or a skewering. The wildness of that ranging, creative, odd and hilarious act—trying on voices, affects, personalities, lives. Trying your hand at fiction.

*To tell the truth by lying.* What is “realness,” then, but a mission statement on writing fiction? On invention, on possibility?

And it feels so very Californian, in a way, adding gravitas to Thorpe’s chosen locale, to “[find] a deeper authenticity through artifice.” Ray laughs to Michael, “No one was born in North Shore!” There are plenty of people who were born in California and live there now, but also a huge number who were not. Isn’t that, in a sense, passing? What separates one kind of passing from another, makes it more or less acceptable? How could some transplanted midwesterner who adopted whole-hog the California lifestyle judge a gay kid for wearing eyeliner?

What is the line between authenticity and fiction? What do we do with what is given to us?

\*

At the end of the day, Michael and Bunny are two kids whose parents have royally screwed up, probably because someone also screwed up when *they* were kids. So it goes, on and on. *Amor fati*, reads the tattoo on Lorrie Ann’s slim shoulder, which, as Thorpe points out, is just another way of saying “embrace the suck,” and which Nietzsche re-purposed from the Stoics.

Why tell these stories, I wondered, if nothing is ever going to change? After all, *amor fati* seems a last resort. Lorrie Ann’s husband dies in Iraq. George W. Bush and Michael’s dad both get off scot-free. The outsider kids will always be bullied. In Thorpe’s second novel, *Dear Fang, With Love*, the narrator, a young-middle-aged college English professor named Lucas, who has been exploring both his family’s Holocaust-razed past and his daughter’s newly-diagnosed schizophrenia (and who sounds, here, influenced by T.S. Eliot) thinks:

*Our family had been jumbled by history, by war, by falling and rising regimes, by escapes across the world, by drives through orange groves and trips to Disneyland and the slow poison of sugar flowers on supermarket cakes.*

*America was not safe. We would never be safe. The danger was within us and we would take it wherever we went. There was no such line between the real and the unreal. The only line was the present moment. There was nothing but this, holding my daughter's hand on an airplane in the middle of the night, not knowing what to say.*

Thorpe understands the way trauma makes its way through society and through an individual life. Trauma is not always the blunt instrument; or, even if it started that way, it may not be, forever. It can be sly and nuanced. It can be both traceable and unknowable, brutal and delicate. Do we try to pass, within it, above it, until we are all okay? What if we know that not everyone will be okay, even though they try, even though they deserve to be?

There is a Bunny who exists outside the gossip against her, separate from her jarring appearance and possibly, Thorpe suggests, even separate from some of her own actions. "You don't have to be good," Michael tells Bunny. He means she doesn't have to be socially acceptable, she doesn't have to be fake-good, girly good. She already is good. They both are.

Thorpe, Ruffi. [The Knockout Queen](#). A.A. Knopf, 2020.

The Knockout Queen is [now available](#) anywhere books are sold.

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# New Nonfiction from Andria Williams: Reading Joan Didion in August 2019

In the summer of 1968, while starting several of the essays that would comprise her collection *The White Album*, Joan Didion began to suffer from a series of unexplained physical and emotional ailments. After an attack of “vertigo and nausea,” she underwent a battery of tests at the outpatient psychiatric clinic at St. John’s Hospital in Santa Monica, CA. In *The White Album*’s title essay, she shares some of the professionals’ feedback:

*Patient’s [results]... emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitable to conflict and failure...*

A month later, Didion was named a *Los Angeles Times* “Woman of the Year.” It did not seem to matter to her much. Instead, what she remembers of that year:

*I watched Robert Kennedy’s funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai [in which more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, were murdered by American soldiers]. I reread all of George Orwell...[and also] the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child...[rescued twelve hours later] reported that she had*

*run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for "a long time." Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew.*

She adds, a few pages later: "By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968."

\*



Julian Wasser/Netflix

Hyper-awareness has always been both Joan Didion's secret weapon and her *hamartia*. Circa 1968, being seemingly everywhere at once, observing and recording at an unforgiving pace, there is no way the world could not have felt kaleidoscopic, splintered. In *THE WHITE ALBUM*, she attends The Doors' recording sessions (but not for long), visits Huey Newton in jail and Eldridge Cleaver under house arrest. She analyzes the California Governor's mansion, and the Getty Museum (which she sees as an artistic flub, "a palpable contract between the very rich and the people who distrust them least"); she rhapsodizes about water. The Manson murders, happening just down the street to people like her and the subject of her rumination in the title essay, seem a symptom of this summer of dread.

\*

That summer, Didion also, improbably, starts watching biker films, a habit she continues over the next two years. "A successful bike movie," she declares, "is a perfect Rorschach of its audience."

*I saw nine of them recently, saw the first one almost by accident and the rest of them with a notebook. I saw Hell's Angels on Wheels and Hell's Angels '69. I saw Run Angel Run*

*and The Glory Stompers and The Losers. I saw The Wild Angels, I saw Violent Angels, I saw The Savage Seven and I saw The Cycle Savages. I was not even sure why I kept going.*

But she does know why she keeps going, and despite the humor of this absurd list and the thought of Joan Didion investing the time to consume it all (did she ever remove her sunglasses?), she begins to wonder what these storylines are giving their audience. "The senseless insouciance of all the characters in a world of routine stompings and casual death takes on a logic better left unplumbed," she muses.

But then, of course, she plumbs it, and what she observes, given the current political climate, feels almost prescient.

*I suppose I kept going to these movies because there on the screen was some news I was not getting from the New York Times. I began to think I was seeing ideograms of the future...to apprehend the extent to which the toleration of small irritations is no longer a trait much admired in America, the extent to which a nonexistent frustration threshold is not seen as psychopathic but a 'right.'*

I begin to imagine if the heroes of these bike movies had had Twitter. I decide to stop imagining that. They are people, Didion writes in closing, "whose whole lives are an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made. [These people] are, increasingly, everywhere, and their style is that of an entire generation."

\*

Throughout all these mental roving runs Didion's usual vein of skepticism and aloofness. Danger, for her, is personal, never institutional. It's the threatening man on the street or the hippie at the door with a knife. She's not a revolutionary, not exactly a liberal (though she was one of the first to, in a 17,000-word essay for the *New York Review of Books*, advocate for the innocence of the falsely-accused

Central Park Five). Visiting Huey Newton in jail, she mentions that “the small room was hot and the fluorescent light hurt my eyes.” A reader can’t help but think, at least for an instant, Suck it up, Joan! But mere pages later she’s on the campus of San Francisco State, which has been temporarily shut down by race riots, and her shrewd eye sees the truth: “Here at San Francisco State only the black militants could be construed as serious...Meanwhile the white radicals could see themselves, on an investment of virtually nothing, as urban guerrillas.”

\*

Here in the summer of 2019, I can, in at least some minor ways, relate to the dread Joan Didion felt in the summer of '68. Today, it is August 10<sup>th</sup>. On the third of this month, 20 people were killed and 26 others injured by a gunman who walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas at ten-thirty in the morning and began firing with a semi-automatic Kalashnikov-style rifle, aiming at anyone he suspected to be Hispanic. Hours later, nine more people were killed and 27 injured in a mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio. The Proud Boys are marching in Portland and the President of the United States has denounced only those who've come out to oppose them. (It should be noted that these are grown men who call themselves “boys,” and that is the least alarming thing about them.) A little over a week ago I watched Private First Class Glendon Oakley, a US soldier who had saved several children during the El Paso shooting and wept openly about not having been able to save more, stand at parade rest while the President pointed at him on live television and said, “The whole world knows who you are now, right? So you’ll be a movie star, the way you look. That’ll be next, right?”

Oakley looked stricken. “Yes, sir,” he said.

\*

Now it's August 13<sup>th</sup> and there is a rally at the police station

in downtown Colorado Springs. Ten days prior—the same day as El Paso—nineteen-year-old De’Von Bailey was shot seven times in the back while fleeing Colorado Springs police. I watch the unbearable video, circulating on the local news outlets, taken from an apartment security camera across the street. De’Von Bailey, young, short-haired, skinny as my son, runs across a sweep of pavement just like any you’d see in any suburban town. He doesn’t pull a weapon or even turn back to look over his shoulder. Two armed cops enter the frame not far behind him. Then, he falls, skidding in a seated position, staying briefly upright. For a moment, from this distance, in a still image, he could be merely relaxing, sitting with one arm propped behind him. Then he crumples forward and the police close in, cuffing his hands behind his back before rendering aid. In the hospital, De’Von Bailey dies.

Today, the attorneys for De’Von Bailey’s parents are holding a press conference outside the police station downtown. The Pike’s Peak Justice and Peace Committee has put out a call for citizens to show their support for the Baileys and their demand for an unbiased investigation. I like the Justice and Peace Committee, a group of tenacious old-timers who sometimes, at unpredictable intervals, convene to hold a giant sign in front of the Air Force Academy that reads, “WHAT ABOUT THE PEACE ACADEMY?” They mostly get yelled at from car windows. They have used the same sign for years; the phone number at the bottom has been whited over and repainted several times; it is canvas, more than five feet tall and probably ten feet long, printed with perfect spacing and propped by two wooden posts, so as to be quickly unrolled and then rolled back together for a quick exit as necessary. I joined them in a protest once, this past April, when Donald Trump spoke at the Air Force Academy commencement. I held one end of their sign. I was the only military spouse there, though there were a couple of long-haired Vietnam-era veterans. A man offered me eight hundred dollars to help pay our rent if my husband would divest from the military. “Just

until he can find other work," he said. He said he was helping another service member get out now, a chaplain. This man was incredibly earnest, thin, gray-haired, in jeans and a flannel shirt, with no pains taken over shaving or hygiene; I believed him. I thanked him, knowing full well my husband, an officer, is comfortable in his job and does not want to leave, knowing this man would be disappointed in what that says about us; and he shook my hand and said to call him, the church would help get us out when we were ready. I did not know what church he meant, but I am sure its people are good.

So if the Justice and Peace Committee wants me to show up for De'Von Bailey's family, I will. I scrawl a hasty sign on a piece of foam core I bought at King Soopers: "NO POLICE BRUTALITY." On an investment of virtually nothing, I drive downtown to the corner of Nevada and Rio Grande to see the street blocked off with traffic cones and police cars, a crowd visible already in front of the brick police station. Parking on a side street, I take my sign and head there on foot, along sidewalks with cracked concrete and sun-bleached grass growing up between the paving. I try to face the words on the sign away from scrutinizing traffic. I pass the bail bonds shop from which Dustin and Justin Brooks, 33-year-old twins, set forth a week prior, wearing bulletproof vests and brandishing their handguns, to confront these same protestors. (Dustin and Justin Brooks are what Joan Didion might call men with an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.) That was three days after De'Von Bailey's murder. The brothers intimidated the predominantly black gathering until finally being arrested, shouting "All lives matter!" as their hands were pulled behind their backs. Seventeen riot police were dispatched in the skirmish, standing behind plexiglass shields. Hopefully the irony was not lost on anyone that a black boy had been killed for running from police unarmed and two white men could walk around waving handguns and shouting in a crowded area and simply be arrested, off to live another day. If the Dustin-Justin brothers hadn't been shouting, they

may not even have been arrested. Colorado is an open-carry state. Who feels safe in an open-carry state varies widely depending upon circumstance. On November 27, 2015, shortly after we moved here, an armed, agitated older white man was seen pacing around outside the CO Springs Planned Parenthood building at 11:30 a.m. Concerned employees and passers-by called the police, but were told there was nothing they could do. "It's an open-carry state," police said. Eight minutes later, the man, 57-year-old Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., burst into the building, shooting three people dead and wounding nine others. One of the employees killed was a Filipina-born Navy wife, who had enjoyed her new job in the Springs, her husband's duty station. The Planned Parenthood location here has been changed at least three times, and the address is not advertised on their web site.

All this crosses my mind as I walk toward the police station. I do not feel at all in danger, and I know that statistically, I am very safe – far safer in virtually any situation than the other protestors, mostly people of color, gathered on the sloping space of lawn. Still, because of men like Dustin and Justin Brooks and Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., I have left my children at home.

\*

The rally is peaceful, and sad. Greg Bailey and Delisha Searcy speak about the loss of their son. Their lawyers reiterate a demand for an independent investigation. Young boys hold signs: "Please Let Me Live Past 19." "Hands Up Don't Shoot." Several signs say, "Imagine If It Were Your Son." The black families console one another, embracing. Three black reverends are there. Their mood is markedly sadder than that of the "allies" like myself who have shown up and for whom the event, though attended with the best of intentions, could be described as almost recreational.



Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

A prominent local Unitarian clergywoman – lean, energetic – is there in street clothes and her rainbow stole, wearing sunglasses, her short gray hair spiked. If not for the stole she might be some fitness celebrity, or a badass chef. There's a contingent from Colorado College. A tall, thin young white man holds a sign that says, "JAIL ALL KILLER POLICE." The Justice and Peace Committee is scattered around (I don't see my military-liberator friend from back in April), but they have (appropriately) left their "Peace Academy" sign at home.

After half an hour or so, as the press conference seems to be wrapping up, the crowd is less quiet, some people whispering to one another. I strain to hear the voice of an obviously distraught black woman who's questioning the Baileys' white attorneys. "How do we know," the woman is asking, "that any investigation will be impartial? How can it possibly be fair?"

(Next to me, three of the "Moms Demand" moms ask a bystander to take their picture. They turn, their blond ponytails swinging, to beam at the camera with the crowd behind them. I feel, almost desperately, that this is not the right time.)



Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

"How will we know it's fair," the woman calls over the crowd, "if the committee is made up of all white men?..." Suddenly her voice catches, and a pause hangs in the air for just an instant. "...White women?"

She sounds so hopeless, so angry, so deservedly frustrated and hurt. I can feel the sharp point of tears gathering in my throat. I report this not so anyone will feel sorry for me but because it happened. I can't hear what response the woman is

given. People begin to drift away. It was the last question.

For the rest of the afternoon, I cannot get that moment out of my mind, the way the woman's voice caught, her split second of hesitation before she said "women." Before she said "white women." What was it that gave her pause; was it some vestige of sisterhood-loyalty that she realized no longer applied?

I'd been hoping to briefly throw white men under the bus, let them take the fall. I wanted to huddle in my sense of at-least-some-shared-experience. It would have eased my discomfort. My discomfort does not need easing. My discomfort is no one else's problem to solve. Anywhere from 47 to 53 percent of white women, depending on whose poll you believe, voted for the current president. 95% of black women did not. When she let the word "women" out, when she let the words "white women" out, it was the tiny slap-in-the-face of realizing the intersectionality you champion may not want you back. I am glad she said it. And for a moment— and I think it's okay to say things we are ashamed of — I'd been hoping, so badly, that she wouldn't.

\*

That night I chat with my husband about Joan Didion and the late sixties and ask him if he thinks the upheaval we're feeling now is anything like what people must have felt in 1968, when it must have seemed in some ways that the world was ending. He was a history major in college, so he tends to have a good perspective.

"No, not at all," he says almost immediately. "Because think about 1968. Think about the instability. I think it was much worse then. The draft was still going strong. You could basically be called up from your own house and have to go fight a war with no choice at all."

I recall Didion's essay "In the Islands," which I've recently finished, one section of which she spends watching the funeral

of a young soldier at the military cemetery in Oahu, in the dip of an extinct volcano crater called Puowaina. He was the 101<sup>st</sup> American killed in Vietnam that week. 1,078 in the first twelve weeks of that year. That essay, however, was written in 1970. Maybe 1968 felt somehow quaint by then. Maybe, by then, people were wishing they could go back.

"And you had Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, RFK's," my husband is saying.

"And the Civil Rights Act had only been signed four years before," I add. I have always liked brainstorming.

"Sure. Now I think it's the onslaught of information, all this instantaneous, inflammatory news, that makes us feel that things are really unstable."

I think he's right. This is no summer of 1968. I start to believe that Joan Didion, less threatened by the events of the time than many, but more observant than most, held up pretty well, considering. And over time at least a few of the problems she was experiencing, some attributed to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and treated with lifelong prescriptions, waned. Others didn't. She's not a calm person by nature; she's anxious; I imagine she cannot turn off her brain. She's 84 now. She's survived the loss of her husband and her daughter. I'm not sure how. I do know that ten years after the events she describes in the title essay of *The White Album*, finally completed in 1978, she ends with the admission, "writing has not helped me to see what it means."

\*

Even later that night, as she has all summer, my youngest daughter wakes me at exactly three a.m. She appears by my bed in pajama pants and a short-sleeved shirt, clutching her stuffed animal. The animals change nightly. Tonight it is Joey, a seafoam-green sheep. She whispers, "I have to go to

the bathroom.”

She does have to go to the bathroom. But more than that, this is her new ritual, exciting for her, a very mildly transgressive foray into the dark of night, in which I stumble groggily behind her and she switches on every light in the house as she goes, Joey under her arm, chatting up a storm. It's as if the hours of sleep she's had already have bottled up a torrent of potential communication, and she wants to tell me everything. She had a dream where she was drawing faces on paper plates. She had a dream that we all got ice cream. She talks and talks, all shaggy red hair and freckles like tiny seeds scattered across her sleep-pinked cheeks; expressive, energetic eyebrows. Her mood is tremendously good. She washes her hands, dripping water even though I say dry them all the way, please, and I switch off lights as I go to tuck her back in. She is perfectly happy to go back to sleep; this was all she needed, this little check-in under the pretense of a bodily function; and so I have made no move to curb this new habit, and in fact almost look forward to it, sometimes waking up just moments before she comes into my room.

As I start to shut her bedroom door she calls out, “I'm excited for tomorrow!”

I turn around, laughing. “Why?!”

She laughs, too. “I don't know!”

I quietly close her door and wander into the kitchen, where there's only one light still on, above the sink. I stand and look at the few dishes and mugs there, then out at the dark, flat yard. There is no way I can go back to sleep, and it does not, now, seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 2019.

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# Interview: The Problem of the Hero: Peter Molin Talks with Roy Scranton

**Introduction:** Roy Scranton's soon-to-be published *Total Mobilization: American Literature and World War II* expands upon Scranton's controversial 2015 *Los Angeles Review of Books* article "The Myth of the Trauma Hero, from Wilfred Owen to 'Redeployment' and 'American Sniper.'" The *LARB* piece asserted that American war literature over-privileges the emotional suffering of white male American combatants at the expense of their war victims, while ignoring larger social and political aspects of militarism and war. In *Total Mobilization* Scranton locates the birth of the trauma hero in canonical World War II fiction and poetry. He connects literature with culture by making two arguments: 1) Treating soldiers as easily-damaged and pitiable victims of war obscures moral reckoning with war guilt and effective reintegration by veterans into civilian society, and 2) identifying and isolating veterans as a sanctified social caste offers veterans a dubious cultural reverence that overestimates the authority of their experience, while satisfying a dubious logic that preserves soldiers their identities as good men and the wars they fought as good wars. In making this argument, Scranton shuffles the deck of World War II-writing, inviting readers to seriously reconsider the cultural work performed by canonical works, and asking them to pay more attention to a number of novels, poems, essays, articles, and movies that tell a different, more nuanced story about World War II and the decades after.

The interview was conducted via a series of phone calls and

email exchanges.

– Peter Molin

**PM: When did the concept of the trauma hero as a literary trope and cultural reality begin to form in your mind? Was it related more to your actual service in Iraq or to your reading and beginning efforts to write afterwards?**

RS: I can pinpoint the origin of my conceptualization of the trauma hero and, in fact, the origin of what became *Total Mobilization*, in a graduate seminar I took on war literature at the New School, in 2007 or 2008. I was anxious about taking the class, because it was one of the first graduate seminars I was to take, and because I was highly sensitive about the way in which my personal experience in Iraq might distort the classroom dynamic. I wrote the professor an email in advance, asking about the course, expressing my concerns, and assuring him that I was really interested in the material, not in using the classroom as a space to talk about myself. He responded enthusiastically, encouraging me to join the class, and telling me that my personal experience need not be a focus in the seminar, though he was convinced the mere fact of it would help my fellow students better connect with the material.

The syllabus was fairly typical “war lit,” jumping from the *Iliad* to [Robert Graves’] *Good Bye to All That* and Wilfred Owen, then a bunch of stuff on Vietnam, then I think ending with [Anthony] Swofford’s *Jarhead*. What quickly became apparent, however, was that for the professor, all the material we were reading could only be understood through a combination of Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* and Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. For this guy, all war literature was a story of trauma. But not just for him: he was merely a particularly dogmatic preacher of what was, I soon realized, a pervasive cultural belief.

Now I’d loved *Hero with a Thousand Faces* when I read it in

high school, and spent two or three years annoying my friends by breaking down every movie we saw into its constituent archetypal moments, the giving of the boon, the crossing of the threshold, confronting the father, blah blah blah. But that had been a long time ago, and I'd long since realized the limits of Campbell's reductionist approach, despite the real insights it often offered. And while much war literature did seem to fit loosely within the adventure-story framework Campbell elaborated, reading something like [Ernst Junger's] *Storm of Steel*, to take only one example, through the lens of trauma seemed deeply mistaken, not only missing what was most interesting about the work, but wrenching its central premises into an alien ideology. The same thing seemed true with the *Iliad*, which is deeply misunderstood when viewed through the lens of trauma (as in [Jonathan] Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*, which misreads Homer and misunderstands Greek culture, though does nevertheless have real insights), as are numerous other works.

So I did what I do, which was to ask annoying questions, find counter-examples, and probe the professor's all-encompassing theory for weak points. The entire seminar was soon taken over by our intellectual grappling: things rapidly spun out of control and devolved into a power struggle. I was fighting for my intellectual integrity, my authority as a veteran, and my grade, while he was fighting for—well, it turned out that his brother had gone to Vietnam and come home fucked up, and this professor seemed to have devoted his life since to fixing his brother by proxy. I did not know when I started the class that I was to be another such proxy, but when our conflict climaxed in him sending me an eight-page email telling me how sorry he was that I was so traumatized and how much he wished he could help me, I went to the department chair.

The professor was not invited back to teach. I saved my grade, wrote an essay about trauma and confession that was published in George Kovach's journal *Consequence* ("The Sinner's Strip-

Tease: Rereading *The Things They Carried*," *Consequence*, 2:1, Spring 2010), and started delving deep into the idea of trauma: where it came from, how it worked, and why everybody seemed to conflate it with socially organized violence.

**PM: At what point did you begin to sense that the trauma hero trope worked not as a redemptive effort by authors to "humanize" soldiers by illustrating the brutality of war, but a pernicious cultural mechanism that valorized an unhealthy way of thinking about soldiers, war, and militarism? Was there a specific book, thinker, or event that crystalized the impression?**

RS: From the beginning, really, I was asking myself how this worked and who it served. *Cui bono*, right? I was also—let's just say that I was deeply formed in the hermeneutics of suspicion, and at the same time as I was taking that seminar on war literature I remember reading Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. Now Foucault... I'm not going to spend any time defending Foucault, as a thinker or a historian or whatever. I've always thought he's the Jamiroquai to Nietzsche's Stevie Wonder. But a key point of the *History of Sexuality*, which is a basically Nietzschean point, is that saying we're *not* going to talk about something is a way to talk about it. Repression is a mode of expression. Foucault made this point about the Victorians and sex, but it's worth keeping in mind anytime you start looking at cultural practices, since taboos and mysteries and so on are usually key to a culture.

This may seem sideways, but it's important to remember that trauma is always "that which cannot be spoken." Recall Tim O'Brien's mystical lyricism about how there's no such thing as a true war story (which I discuss in my chapter on trauma). Narrating the unspeakable is a power move: it designates you as a master of mystery. Now I already knew about and was suspicious of the moral authority invested in veterans simply by fact of their having joined the military. It was a pretty

short step then to see how trauma functioned as a way of evoking and preserving a sense of mystery around that authority. Luckily, I happened to come across Israeli historian Yuval Harari's magnificent book, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*, which provides a deep synoptic cultural history of how the experience of war changed in the west from being understood as a testament to one's capabilities, like a bullet point on a CV, to being understood as a revelation of esoteric wisdom. That book was very useful for helping me understand how contemporary perspectives on the experience of war evolved and what kinds of cultural work they do.



**PM:** Early in [\*Total Mobilization\*](#), you list a fairly conventional canon of well-known World War II fiction and poetry. But these are not the works you want to discuss in *Total Mobilization*. Instead, you bring to the fore authors such as poet Kenneth Koch and popular entertainment fare such as a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Why? What do we get by paying attention to this “alternative canon”?

RS: Norman Mailer wrote in “The White Negro” in 1957 that “The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it.” Yet by the early 2000s, if not before, a clear mythic framework had emerged for understanding World War II, which can be seen in the pre-eminent WWII films of the late 1990s, *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, both from 1998, that re-interprets WWII through both the American war in Vietnam and the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War. This framework interprets World War II as primarily an individual traumatic experience of violence that leads the individual to a more enlightened state, in *Saving Private Ryan* to a deeper patriotism, in *The Thin Red Line* to a deeper Transcendentalist engagement with the non-human world.

But these films come out of a major cultural revision of the meaning of World War II that happened primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, first in literature, then in film, which laid the groundwork for these more explicitly trauma-based narratives. The mere fact of this should strike observers as puzzling, since World War II was an unquestionable American victory, a war in which America suffered fewer casualties than any other major combatant nation, and the origin of a half-century of American global hegemony. *Total Mobilization* explores two questions concurrently: First, how did World War II (and by extension, all war) come to be identified with trauma? Second, what is this re-interpretation obscuring?

What I found in my research by going back to the literature of World War II with fresh eyes, discounting the academic and literary consensus which tendentiously declares that World War II “didn’t produce any great literature,” is that writers attempting to make sense of WWII—from Ralph Ellison to Herman Wouk, from Wallace Stevens to Kenneth Koch, from James Jones to Joan Didion—were obsessed by a set of problems I group under the idea of “the problem of the hero,” essentially questions about how the individual relates to society in a time of total mobilization.

What was at stake was a conflict between different kinds of stories society told itself about its values, which is to say, how Americans told themselves the story of who they were: on the one hand, narratives in which every individual was an equal and independent member of a commercial democracy where everything was for sale, and on the other hand narratives in which every individual was subordinated to the collective and the most important thing anyone could do would be to sacrifice their life for the nation. The total mobilization of American society to fight World War II demanded, in Kenneth Burke’s words, a “change from a commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives to a collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives.”

In effect, World War II opened wide a conflict that had been building within the western world since the Napoleonic Wars: the conflict between nationalism and capitalism, specifically the conflict between the metaphoric logic of nationalism and metaphoric logic of capitalism around the issue of bodily sacrifice. This is the conflict at the heart of *Total Mobilization*, the conflict at the center of World War II writing from the 1940s to the 1960s, the conflict for which the “trauma hero” provides an imaginary solution. Looking at works that have fallen outside the canon—such as Kenneth Koch’s war poetry, wartime Bugs Bunny cartoons, Wallace Stevens’s wartime poetry (which is generally derided or ignored as war poetry), or James Dickey, who has been more or less deliberately abandoned—while also revisiting canonical works such as Jarrell’s “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” *Catch-22*, and *The Thin Red Line* with new eyes, helps us see the complex historical reality that the post-Cold-War academic and literary framework erases and obscures.



Author Roy Scranton

**PM: In particular, I was struck by your rereading of Randall Jarrell’s “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner.” How has that well-known very short poem been misunderstood or not appreciated in its full magnitude?**

RS: Jarrell, as many readers will know, was drafted during the war, and served stateside as an instructor in “celestial navigation.” He never saw combat, but he did see plenty of men who were headed that way. One interesting thing about Jarrell is that he writes all these poems in which youthful, virile young men are sacrificed to state power, but his letters show a pervasive and thoroughgoing contempt for his fellow soldiers. What he thought of the actual men he served with (he calls them racists and says they are intellectually “indistinguishable from Cream of Wheat”), however, is less

important than the use he made of them in his poetry, which was to revitalize the British trench lyric through a Protestant American mindset. In his poetry, pre-eminently focused on bombers, Jarrell is performing a complex ritual substitution: the victims of American political violence—German and Japanese soldiers and civilians—is being replaced by the agents of that very violence—the bomber crew. The picture is flipped, so that instead of seeing Germans and Japanese women and children physically wounded and killed by American bombing, we focus instead on the suffering that bombing causes the person doing it. With the fully developed trauma hero myth the suffering is purely spiritual, but we can see Jarrell working it out *de novo*, as it were, making the transition from the physical—as in “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”—to the spiritual—as in the poem “Eighth Air Force.”

The observation that Jarrell turns killers into victims isn't new. As Helen Vendler noted in her 1969 review of Jarrell's *Complete Poems*, “The secret of [Jarrell's] war poems is that in the soldiers he has found children; what is the ball turret gunner but a baby who has lost his mother?” What I do in *Total Mobilization* is look at the context and mechanism for how this happens within the genre I identify as the “bomber lyric,” within the literature of World War II, and within broader currents of American literature from 1945 to the early 2000s.

As I write in *Total Mobilization*: “If we want to understand the human experience of war, we must come to terms with numerous difficult and unpleasant facts. One of them is that no agent of violence can be deemed innocent or faultless, even if that agent is drafted against their will to fight in a war ultimately considered just. We must understand the soldier first, foremost, and always as an agent of state power, since that is their objective social role. Hence stories of soldiers must be read in light of their complicity with and participation in sovereign power. Soldiers are the state's

killers. That's their job. Jarrell's efforts to excuse the men engaged in bombing the German people on the basis that they like puppies and opera, or because they are mortal, turn soldiers into victims of their own violence. Such efforts are not only deluded and obscurantist but ethically naïve."

**PM: In the chapter section titled "The Hero as Riddle: The Negro Hero and the Nation Within the Nation" you tie together Richard Wright, James Baldwin, John Oliver Killen's 1962 novel about a black quartermaster company in World War II *And Then We Heard the Thunder* to interrogate the racial dimensions of the trauma hero. What is significant about the African-American literary perspective on World War II?**

RS: What looking at the African-American literature around World War II really helps illuminate is how much the question of war literature, and the related question of the hero, are related to what Benedict Anderson famously called "the imagined community of the nation." War literature qua "war literature" is fundamentally tangled up in questions about the national identity of the writers and subjects of that literature. This is why when people say "Vietnam War literature," they typically mean [Tim] O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* or [Larry] Heinemann's *Paco's Story* or [Karl] Marlantes' *Matterhorn*, rather than Bòo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* or Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*.

The single most important issue at stake in the African-American literature of World War II is the question of national belonging. As James Baldwin puts it in a reminiscence written many years later, "This was in 1943. We were fighting the Second World War. *We*: who was this *we*? For this war was being fought, as far as I could tell, to bring freedom to everyone with the exception of Hagar's children and the 'yellow-bellied Japs'.... I have never been able to convey the confusion and horror and heartbreak and contempt which every black person I then knew felt. Oh, we dissembled and smiled as we groaned and cursed and did our duty. (And we *did* our duty.)

The romance of treason never occurred to us for the brutally simple reason that you can't betray a country you don't have... And we did not wish to be traitors. We wished to be citizens."

As I discuss in the work of Baldwin, Richard Wright, John Oliver Killens, Gwendolyn Brooks, and most notably Ralph Ellison, the dilemma faced by many African-Americans under total mobilization during World War II was that they were being *ordered* to sacrifice themselves for the war, they *wanted* to sacrifice themselves for the war, but they were structurally incapable of actually sacrificing themselves—because while they could serve and while they could die in that service, like Messman "Dorie" Miller died, like Lieutenant John R. Fox died, like Sergeant Reuben Rivers died, their deaths were not recognized as legitimate sacrifices for the nation, since they were not seen as genuine constituents of that nation. In Jim Crow America, the negro was not regarded as a free citizen, hence while the negro was expected to give their life for their country—or indeed anytime it was demanded—that act was not regarded as sacred.

For writers such as Ellison and Killens, this problem emerged not only as a sense of having been prohibited from joining the (white) nation, but also as a provocation to understand their own identity as already existing within a "nationality," what James Baldwin called "a nation within a nation," which is to say Black nationalism.

When we take into account how nationalism is constructed through ideas of shared blood, either through inheritance or through sacrifice, we begin to see the powerful ideological work narratives of collective violence do in shoring up cultural hierarchies—or in opening them to criticism and question. It's no mystery that the trauma hero in American war literature has been predominantly white, or that when we talk about "American war literature," people mostly mean literature by white men. Militarism, American identity, and white supremacy are deeply intertwined, and in fact have been woven

together since World War II over and over again, in novels and poems and films that focus on traumatized white citizen-soldiers suffering for the violence they themselves unleashed on countless unnamed Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Iraqi, and Afghan bodies.

**PM: An author who is not a veteran and who is not often thought of as a writer with an abiding interest in World War II is Joan Didion. But *Total Mobilization* asserts her importance in understanding how the American West and the World War II Pacific Theater were connected in ways that differed from the American East Coast's connection with the war in Europe. How can we think of Didion as a World War II writer?**

RS: One of the central conceits of so-called "war literature" is that it is primarily by and about men in combat: Wilfred Owen, Ernest Hemingway, Tim O'Brien. But the violence of combat, as dramatic as it may be, is only one aspect of the larger phenomena of socially organized mass violence. Even thinking back to the *Iliad*, say, only parts of that work are about actual combat, and not necessarily the most interesting parts. Who can forget the scene on the battlements between Hector and Andromache, where Hector's son Astyanax recoils from his father's helmeted face in fear?

The Trojan War was perhaps the greatest literary and dramatic subject of Athenian culture, but the work addressing it was in no way restricted to narrow representations of the combat experiences of individual warriors. From Homer's *Odyssey* to Aeschylus's *Oresteia* to Sophocles's *Philoctetes* to Euripedes's *The Trojan Women*, we see Athenian dramatists and poets exploring a wide range of that war's events and effects. Similarly, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, World War II was a hugely important cultural event in American history, easily the most important event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and when we take a wide view of post-1945 American culture, we can see that

cultural and aesthetic representations of World War II have struggled to come to terms with its staggering historical, ethical, political, and psychological complexity in a variety of ways, in poetry, novels, musicals, history, television mini-series, comic books, video games, and films. From Pearl S. Buck's novel *China Sky*, depicting American doctors caught in the Japanese invasion of China, to the first-person shooters set in World War II that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, starting with the now-classic *Wolfenstein 3D* and continuing with the blockbuster franchises *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*; from Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* to George Lucas's *Star Wars*; from Chester Himes's novel of racial tensions in wartime Los Angeles, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, the protagonist of which is a professor of "Hitler Studies," the variety of American cultural production from the last seventy years that works explicitly, allegorically, and sometimes unconsciously with and through World War II is at once a testament to the war's importance and an overwhelming strain on our efforts to understand it.

Yet if we were to go looking for the war's impact strictly in the canonical "war literature," which is focused on the traumatic combat experience of individual soldiers, we would not see it. The focus on trauma obscures and elides the historical complexity of the event. This is how someone like Joan Didion, for whom the effect of World War II on American society is probably the central subject of her career, can be excluded from the canon of "war literature."

There is much to say about Didion's work, not least to speak of its sheer technical brilliance, or of the interesting place she occupies in literary history, as the American heir of Conrad and Orwell and the progenitor of the pop-art merging of advertising and the Stein-Hemingway tradition we eventually see fully developed in Don DeLillo, for example. But first and foremost she is a chronicler of American empire, the complex way that the frontier mentality of "the West" transformed into

the Cold War mentality of "the West," through the crucible of victory in World War II. As a native Californian, old enough to remember Pearl Harbor but too young to do anything about, dragged around the country by her father (a reservist called to active duty), who saw her home state undergo a dramatic transformation from what was essentially agricultural feudalism to being perhaps the primary sector of the military-industrial complex and the utopian dream-space of suburban America, Didion was remarkably well placed to witness the disruptive and disturbing emergence of the post-45 American military Leviathan, which she tracked through her fiction, journalism, and memoir, from her first novel, *Run, River*, which is about the effects of World War II on agricultural life in the Sacramento Valley, to her memoir *Where I Was From*, which explicitly connects the frontier mentality of the Western pioneers with the emergence of American hegemony, while also elucidating the inescapable, long-term effects of military industrialization on Californian culture. Indeed, as she argues about modern Hawaiian culture in a key article I discuss in *Total Mobilization*, postwar Californian culture is inextricable from hypostasizing American militarism. And while it may be easier to see this in the west, in Hawaii and California, which only exist as they do today because of World War II, the insight applies to the whole nation. Since 1942, the United States has been a society mobilized for war, organized for war, even if only a small cadre do the actual fighting. Didion helps us see that.

**PM:** To what extent do veteran authors and artists knowingly and culpably participate in the trauma hero narrative? I would think, or maybe hope, that most would be horrified to think that their works instantiate or re-instantiate misguided, reactionary, and generally oppressive cultural and historical practices and patterns of thinking. But you suggest that they do.

RS: The most generous response would be to say that we're all

figuring it out as we go. We have the stories we love, the stories we were raised on, like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now* and *Star Wars*, for example, we have the stories we take up when we're trying to figure out how to make sense of an experience, we see how people respond to the stories we try to tell—and we make decisions as we go. Especially those of us trying to have careers, trying to reach a wider public; you can't just say whatever shit you feel like. There's some back and forth, whoever you wind up talking to, and sometimes there's more freedom and sometimes there's less, and most folks will take the path of least resistance rather than try to fight their way through to a deeper understanding. Some people maybe know better and choose not to give a fuck. But most people think they're good people, most writers believe they're trying to really get into the complexity, and that they're doing the best they can. The deeper issue is that people lie first of all to *themselves*, but that's just human nature.

One example we could discuss from *Total Mobilization* is Brian Turner. I know Brian, I like Brian, I respect Brian. I have long admired his poetry. I think he's a good man and a good poet. But the situation he found himself in with the cover of *Here, Bullet...* The cover of that book is a striking visual example of the work that the trauma hero does to refocus attention from the typically brown-skinned victims of war to the spiritual travails of the white American soldier: it shows Turner himself, alone in an empty landscape, facing the viewer with a thousand-yard stare. As Turner describes the process that led to this cover (in an interview in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*), he and his editor decided to literally erase Iraqi bodies from the photo they used because he thought the blunt truth of his experience would repulse readers. The thing is, he's not wrong. From a certain perspective, he made the absolute right choice. On the other hand, telling people what they want to hear, trimming off the unpleasant bits, leaving off the hooded Iraqi prisoners—all that contributes to

a collective vision of the Iraq War that focuses on the psychological suffering of American soldiers at the expense of even *seeing* the bodies of the people we killed, never mind discussing the larger political context, which is an outright scandal. So do I sympathize with Brian, as a young poet making decisions about his first book, to minimize the unpleasant reality of the Iraq War and try to keep people focused on his poetry? Of course. But I think we also have to consider the big picture.

Several scholars have begun attending to the ways that the “veteran-writer” operates in the MFA economy of postwar American literature, most pre-eminently Mark McGurl, Eric Bennett, and Joseph Darda. What they’ve found is that the role of the veteran-writer has been privileged in the MFA-dominated literary economy as a form of white ethnic identity writing. Just like writers of color are expected and encouraged to put themselves forward first of all as representatives of their racial or ethnic trauma, so are veteran-writers expected and encouraged to put themselves forward as representatives of their war-time trauma (A broader critique of how identity-based grievance works to create subjects conformable to the commodity logic of neoliberal capitalism can be found in the work of writers such as Joan Scott, Allen Feldman, Wendy Brown, and Asad Haider, among others). These expectations function all along the line, at every level of gatekeeping, from MFA admissions to agents to publishing to award committees. Working against these expectations is profoundly risky, especially for emerging writers.

It can be done—Percival Everett’s wicked satire *Erasure* comes to mind, or Eric Bennett’s novel *A Big Enough Lie*, perhaps my own novel *War Porn*—but it’s not usually going to win you accolades.

**PM: My reading of *War Porn* is that its Iraq vet protagonist refutes sympathetic identification as a trauma hero, nor can we grant him the experiential authority of the “noble**

**veteran.” What is the relationship in your mind (and chronologically) of *War Porn* and the academic work that became *Total Mobilization*?**

RS: I started *War Porn* pretty soon after coming back from Iraq, while still in the army and stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, then finished the first draft the summer after I ETS'd, in Berlin in 2006. There was a lot of revision ahead, but the main generative work was done. And as you suggest, I was even at that point working out a pretty strong critique of the trauma hero, even if I hadn't distinctly articulated the figure itself. I feel like *Total Mobilization* is working out analytically some of the things that *War Porn* was working out narratively.

**PM: Your framing of the issue seems divisive and perhaps even something of a betrayal of the veteran-writer community, which we might say you helped establish with the seminal 2013 *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* anthology (co-edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher, and containing work by contemporary veteran-writing luminaries such as Brian Turner, Phil Klay, Colby Buzzell, David Abrams, Brian Van Reet, and Jacob Siegel, and military spouse Siobhan Fallon). Can you talk about the desire or efforts by contemporary vet-writers to form a veteran-writer community? Can you talk about how you see your work in relation?**

RS: In the conclusion of *Total Mobilization*, where I talk about the end of the Cold War and shifting arguments about the meaning of World War II, I bring up as an example the National Air and Space Museum's attempted exhibit on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WW2. The exhibit failed, largely because of pressure from veterans' groups. One of the sticking points was the number of expected American casualties in the planned invasion of Japan, which was a key piece of evidence in arguments about whether the use of the atomic bomb was justified. The historical record—the consensus of professional

historians—is clear: there was a clear path to surrender with Japan that would obviate any Normandy-style landing on Honshu and Kyushu, which invasion the US military at the time expected would lead to 30,000 to 50,000 casualties. The Air Force Association and others kept insisting that the language in the exhibit employ later estimates of 500,000 or more casualties, which come from Truman and Henry Stimson's postwar memoirs and are unsupported by the historical record. As military historian John Ray Skates notes in his book *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*, "the source of the large numbers used after the war by Truman, Stimson, and Churchill to justify the use of the atomic bomb has yet to be discovered." At one point in the argument, Tom Crouch, who was the chairman of the museum's aeronautics department, put the problem neatly: "Do you want to do an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want to do an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both."

Historian Edward Linenthal describes this as conflict between a "commemorative" view and a "historical" view. We face the same conflict every time we come back to the act of representing war, discussing war, talking about war literature, because—as I argue in *Total Mobilization*—war is one of the key practices through which human beings construct their collective identity. Every discussion about war, about a museum exhibit, about the cover of a book of poetry, about a poem, is a discussion about who "we" are, which is to say what it means to be American. And the conflict Linenthal describes, the conflict exemplified in the issue at the National Air and Space Museum, is over whether we should focus on commemoration—remembering together, emphasizing our bonds and our unity, reassuring ourselves of our basic goodness—or on the objective historical record, which often shows the American military and American government doing horrible things for morally unjustifiable reasons.

I've seen this play out in smaller ways in the vet writers community. When we were putting *Fire and Forget* together, around 2011 or 2012, it seemed like one major thing vet writers could do for each was to help keep each other honest: to help keep each other from telling readers what they wanted and expected to hear. I think a lot about Jake Siegel's story from *Fire and Forget*, "Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere," in this respect: the experience of war the characters in that story are commemorating is so raw, so powerful, that the idea of betraying the experience is tantamount to betraying your battle buddy. But as the vet writers community became more definitively established, as the actual experiences of war have faded into the past, as people have built careers as professional veterans, I've seen the community grow increasingly hostile to dissent. It seems like there's been a real closing of ranks, a sense of a community supporting and protecting each other, and any real critical function has been lost (present company excepted, along with a few others). Commemoration has won out over any concern for the historical record. This is no doubt connected to the way that the "vet writer" serves to recuperate white ethnic militarism as a commodifiable victim identity (as discussed above), a fundamentally unstable identity formation given the historical and contemporary privilege afforded white men in American society, and given the tendency of militarism (however tempered by liberal multiculturalism) to resolve into a fascistic worship of power as such.

**PM: The conclusion of *Total Mobilization* asserts that contemporary war-writing about Iraq and Afghanistan represents a continuation, even a doubling-down, on the trauma hero trope. How has this come about and what are the consequences?**

RS: I wouldn't say it represents a "doubling-down"—while I think trauma has remained central to contemporary war writing about Iraq and Afghanistan, I also think that many writers

have looked for ways to innovate, if only to distinguish themselves from previous generations and each other. The film *American Sniper* and Kevin Powers' novel *Yellow Birds* are the most obvious and conventional versions of the contemporary trauma hero story, but even Powers struggles to renovate the trope, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, by pushing through O'Brien's total negation of truth to wind up with something that is the obverse of Hemingway and Owen's insistence on particular factual sensory data: representing the act of violence as the origin of linguistic indeterminacy and the font of literary production as such. And with [Phil Klay's] *Redeployment*, [Brian Van Reet's] *Spoils*, [Elliot Ackerman's] *Green on Blue*, and [Will Mackin's] *Bring Out the Dog*, just for a few of the most talked-about examples, you can see writers struggling to get past the trauma hero, with varying degrees of gumption and success. Overall I think it has to do with long-term cultural changes: trauma remains a powerful concept for understanding reality, but I suspect that it's on its way out, and that a new emphasis on materiality is emerging. Which is to say, that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in trauma is increasingly less persuasive than that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in the body. But this is only a supposition. We'll have to wait and see. But as soon as the traumatized veteran becomes useful again, we see him return. The trauma hero will probably be around for a long time.

**PM: In practical terms, how can understanding the trauma hero as a literary trope and cultural myth help us think better, more clearly, about actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war? What might the nation, or its military-medical apparatus, do to help them?**

RS: Well, I've written a work of literary and cultural history, not a practical guide to coping with trauma. I would say, though, that the entire way that we understand "actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war" must be understood as process of collective meaning-

making. The psychologically damaged veteran is certainly suffering, but that suffering takes shape in performing a specific social role, which is the “traumatized veteran.” As long as we stay within the bounds of the discourse, there’s no way to “help” such a person by pointing out that their genuine suffering is culturally produced. I suppose we might tell them “trauma isn’t real,” but then what? They have to make sense of their experience somehow, and the best that could come from delegitimizing a culturally dominant way of making sense of experience would be the emergence of a new way of making sense of experience. Are there better and worse ways of making meaning? I think so. But that’s another discussion. The only *practical* help my project might offer is, I would hope, some understanding of the ways that the “actual veteran” exists in relation to the “nation.”

I’m a Spinozist at heart, which means I’m a materialist, but it also means that I believe freedom comes first of all from understanding. Until you understand what compels you to understand your experience through certain roles, frameworks, and practices, you’ll be stuck performing those roles, seeing through those frameworks, and acting out those practices. Understanding may never provide physical or social liberation, but it can at least open a space for some freedom of thought and movement, and the possibility of equanimity toward the world as it exists, which is to say a sense of peace.

**PM: On what grounds can a veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan feel good about his or her service? On what grounds can a veteran construct a guilt-free life post-military?**

RS: I’m not here to make former soldiers feel good about their experience. The whole premise feels a bit absurd to me. Nor am I interested in articulating a way for anyone to live life “guilt free.” I think guilt, like shame, can be useful and healthy. How else do you learn and grow as a person except by confronting your mistakes and owning them, internalizing them, recognizing what you did and finding a way forward? “Guilt-

free” is an advertising slogan.

This goes back to what I was talking about earlier with the difference between “commemorative” and “historical” views about war and the role of the veteran in American culture. I feel no obligation as a scholar, critic, or writer to “commemorate” war or to “honor” the direct role some people play in America’s wars. On the contrary, I feel an obligation to be faithful to the historical record, objective facts, and unpleasant realities. Because I am myself a veteran, some people see a contradiction there, as if selling my ass to the US Army for four years somehow obliges me to participate in the collective myth-making of American militarism. But such an expectation is absurd. I refuse to play the role of the professional vet.

It seems clear that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are unjustifiable in any moral sense. Everyone involved was not only complicit, but an active agent in genuine evil and massive human suffering. You have to come to terms with that.

**PM:** You also have a novel coming out this year, titled [\*Heart Oklahoma\*](#)? What can we expect?

**RS:** It’s a “road movie novel,” a vision-quest, a deep dive into the blood myths of modern America. Let’s just say there wind up being a lot of bodies on the highway. LitHub is publishing an excerpt, which I’d suggest as the easiest way to see whether you feel like taking this particular death trip.

