New Fiction: Excerpt from Jay Baron Nicorvo’s The Standard Grand

"A bracingly original writer and a joy to read."
—DENNIS LEHANE

THE Standard GRAND

JAY BARON NICORVO

The veterans of the Standard had been back from their wars for some time, trying to figure out how to live lives in the face of newfound civilian freedoms. No one barking orders but their girlfriends, wives, and mothers. Fuck them. The vets could do anything they wanted anytime—they were Americans in America—though what they wanted wasn't what they needed.

They had good cause to bolt home and wind up straggling in the streets of New York City, where they couldn't qualify for hud/vash benefits, having exhausted the good graces of the dom program, unable to uncover any information on Project Torch, given the run around by the administrators of Operation Home. They had multiple DUIs, student loans for what the GI Bill 2.0 didn't cover to attend the University of Phoenix, credit cards with 20 percent interest rates. They were drug addicts, closeted queers, amputees, alcoholics. They were Born Again. They were Black Muslim. They were violent offenders and ethical vegetarians. They'd done short time in county lockups, charged with violating restraining orders, lewd and lascivious conduct, six counts of animal cruelty for selling a litter of kittens with pierced ears over the internet. To say they all expressed both the loss of physical integrity and a response to an event that involved terror and helplessness—the hurting-for-certain hallmarks of PTSD—would've been too easy. The harder truth was that they were men unmanned. More than the sum of the bullet points in the revised *DSM-5*, they were the very reasons for some of the revisions. They were outliers. They hadn't fallen through cracks. The ground opened up and they dove in face first—*hooah!* But they could only live like beasts for so long, so they'd gone with Milt, who gave order to their days, even if his orders were crazy.

The vets mustered at the center of the Alpine village. Over their secondhand camos bought in bulk from Liberty Military PX, they wore full alpaca pelts fastened with lengths of catgut. The pelts, worn casually, were their uniforms, part of Milt's psyop campaign to ward off trespassers while keeping

alive the legend of the Catskills Sasquatch.

They called their hides ghillie suits, except for Stotts-Dupree, who called his a yowie, which was how they referred to them at Camp Robinson, Army National Guard Sniper School, where Stotts-Dupree flunked out after contracting a bad case of the yips.

Most of the vets were accustomed to the notion that in uniform they looked like Germanic shepherds being retributively raped from behind by a herd of lanky sheep. Come winter, they'd again be grateful for the warmth the pelts provided. But here it was, end of a scalding, droughty summer, and they were in furs. They were uncomfortable and irritable.

Their routine had been busted. They hadn't eaten lunch. Midday Simon Says—part military drill, part camaraderie builder—had been canceled, the daily briefing pushed back to evening. All so Milt could make one of his weekly milk runs.

Scratching their beards of varying lengths, the Standard vets stood at a remove from the old fountain pool they used to contain their cook fire. The two Marines of the company climbed in, kicked over the sewer grate that served as a grill, and stomped out the coals. Smoke tumbled up around them. They sought to settle a grudge and, despite the disruption, the entire company was glad for a diversion from their standing orders—split wood; set snares; see to the meat rabbits, chickens, and alpaca; gather their droppings to age, mash up, and water down to fertilize the three-acre garden after they tilled; weed endlessly, harvest, seed the fall crops, on and on. Readying for winter was a nine-month means they got a break from only while trying to survive its end. This unrelenting work distracted them from their real-world guilt over the families they'd abandoned, and from the certain knowledge that these families were, to a one, easier off for their absences.

For most of them, the Standard was their last potshot at a decent life. Once they left, they'd be on their own, and most of them wouldn't make it alone.

Like Luce, who will leave in the middle of a biblical plague of bats to bum his way out to Greenport toward the end of the North Fork of Long Island. There, he begs his ex-wife, on a Tuesday, on his knees, on her sunken front stoop, to let him in, and when she does, as soon as the door closes behind them, he's back to begging her, back on his knees. He wants to get her off with his stump. She can't believe it, and against her bad judgment, she undresses and lets him. Despite her reservations and the ugly, unsanitary look of the thing, she appreciates it, enjoys it even, the bizarre behavioral therapy. Trying to turn loss into love. This alone gets them through the first month, but it doesn't erase her suspicions. In month two, she catches him picking up Asian men on Craigslist, using her computer, and she throws him out. He rents a room in Riverhead at the Peconic Inn, next door to a pizza parlor, a long commute to Greenport for a job crewing aboard the Shelter Island ferry. Before work, he buys a fifth of the cheapest vodka at the closest package store. Nipping from the plastic bottle, he walks to the Riverhead train station. Moments after a train passes, he can be seen, on his knees, as if in prayer, resting one cheekbone, then the other, against the tracks. The vibrations jostle, warm, and loosen the mucus in his sinuses, the tracks heated on the iciest days by steel wheels worn to a mirror shine. For a few seconds, his head clears. He can go about his day crossing and re-crossing Peconic Bay.

One blustery winter morning, he rises off the track lightheaded and chases after an unloaded freight train picking up speed. He heaves himself aboard with his good hand, his only hand, and settles into an empty unlocked stock-car, its floor covered in frozen manure. There, he eases into the long, windy ride, sub-zero, kept company by a fifth of Kasser's

Kavkaski, and twenty-four hours later he’s found dead, no ID, his one hand rigor stiff and curled through an opening in the steel slats. The responding firemen and medical workers are confronted with the choice of cutting through the steel wall of the cattle car or breaking the poor hobo’s wrist to free his body. An EMT tries a forearm massage to loosen up the hand. Nothing. Guy’s hard as rebar. After a call to Anacostia Rail Holdings Company, they decide against cutting the cattle car. With a hair dryer, they take turns thawing the wrist and fingers, the freight train outrageously late by the time John Doe lets go.