New Poetry by Wayne Karlin: “What Binds Us”

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Hope and Heartbreak in Kyle Seibel’s “Hey You Assholes”

About four years ago I first encountered Kyle Seibel’s work while volunteering with this publication (Wrath-Bearing Tree). He submitted a poignant animated story, “Lovebirds,” which surprised and delighted me. It is unusual to experience surprise let alone delight at my age when encountering new fiction. This was during COVID. A vignette that didn’t beat you over the head with meaning, the story unfolded in a way that allowed the reader to experience the ups and the downs (the hope and the heartbreak) without judgement. I enjoyed it greatly.

So it was that I became greatly excited when Kyle announced that it was part of a book and that the book, *Hey You Assholes*, had a publisher. That was a couple years later, maybe 2022 or 2023. I bought five copies. The publisher shuttered and I got no books.

Fast forward to early March of this year, when between solicitations for money for progressive and reactionary causes I found an email from Kyle telling me that the book had found a new home and in fact was out in paperback.

I’m glad that there are still some honorable (and wise!) publishers out there, and that Kyle found one. Kyle sent me a copy of *Hey You Assholes*, which I read with such pleasure that I was moved to write this review. If some day he ever finds the address of the publisher who stiffed him and me, I only hope that he lets me know and has a seat in the car for when we go on an appropriately misbegotten but emotionally necessary mission of vengeance.

Kyle’s stories have that thing every writer hopes for: a voice, a distinct identity, and a message. Some of the stories in *Hey You Assholes* are very short, no more than a couple pages, snapshots of some weird or messed up situation. Others are proper short stories with a beginning, middle and end. All of them bang.

He writes the kind of story I prefer in short fiction; snapshots of an emotion or a situation. Usually the situation is confused and involves a professional or personal

relationship; someone wants something that another person can't or won't give. Ambition and love thwarted. Few of the stories are, like "Lovebirds," optimistic or encouraging; most of them follow people who derail themselves or who find themselves betrayed. Many of Seibel's protagonists remind me of the main character and narrator in Denis Johnson's *Jesus Son* who just keeps fucking up, no matter how hard he wants to succeed and improve. But they don't give up.

Why would I review this for WBT? Have we turned into another literary magazine, adrift from our original purpose and mission? Absolutely not; *Hey You Assholes* was written by a veteran (Seibel was in the Navy) and is full of stories set on ships and in garrison; many characters and interactions are informed by the mechanical logic of the service, which is a time-honored fabric by which to weave the tapestry that is a person's experience of life. Reading about life on a boat, or on the west coast of California, one cannot help but think that these stories would be just at home in Carthage or Athens; different settings for the wandering, weird life one encounters while navigating a wandering and weird world.

It took me the better part of a Sunday to read *Hey You Assholes*, and if you like books the way I do, you won't regret it. If you're strapped for time, keep it by your bedside and read a story or two before going to bed. It will make you laugh, and it will make you think. It will also support a good publisher, which apparently is an increasingly rare thing in this crazy world. In case you need more reasons to buy an awesome book.

New Poetry from Scott Janssen: “Bottle Tree”

VIETNAM DID I / *image by Amalie Flynn*

On my first visit I asked
A stock question about
Whether you’d been in the military.

Marines, nineteen sixty-six, you said,
A hint of menace in your eyes.
I never talk about it.

On my way out the door
I asked your wife about a
Tree in the front yard,

Its branches capped with
Blue and green and pink
Bottles made of glass.

It’s a bottle tree, she said.
Pointing at a cobalt blue bottle
Glinting with sunlight,

She told me it had
Special power to lure in
Ghosts and lurking spirits.

They get trapped in there, she said.
Then sunlight burns them up
So they can’t haunt us anymore.

Eight months later
You could no longer walk.
I rolled your wheelchair

Onto the warbled porch
Where we sat and talked
About how rough life is.

I never told you about
Vietnam, did I? You whispered.
I shook my head.

As you spoke,
Your eyes averted,
I looked at that cobalt blue bottle

And imagined it slowly filling
With blood and shrieks
And grief and the sound of

Rotor blades and the smell
Of burning flesh and the
Taste of splattered gore

And the sensation of
Adrenaline pulsing and
Memories of home and

Buddies who were killed
And of fear and rage and
betrayal and weeping

That lodge in your throat
Before you swallow
It all down

Into your belly.
Don’t ever tell anyone
About this, you said,

Your hands trembling,
Jaw shivering.
I asked if there was

Anything else.
You started to say something
But stopped yourself.

No, you said.

New Poetry from Nestor Walters: “Homecoming”

FLATTEN TO BREATHLESSNESS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Only the dead have seen the end of war —Plato

he lies down, finally to rest.
grey light bands his closed door
with no silver at the edges. They said he left
one foot in the sand. wait, a head
no, a hand. the pale orange bottle, only
dust at the bottom, slips from his
fingers. one missed his mouth
small, white, and round, it
shines from the dark floor like
a little moon. In the space
between shadows and dreaming
his way to death, he smoothes a dressing on
the hole in Seth’s neck, he wraps
a scarf on Nick’s face, still
burning with chemical fire, he
lowers Jeremy’s hand, still gloved,
into a black trash bag. His
pupils sharpen to pinpoints, his
chants flatten to breathlessness, these,

his friends’ names, hammered into
cold steel necklaces
Jeremy, Seth, Nick
beckoning
from darkness

won’t someone tell him
you’re not crazy
you should want to go home but
stay a while
stay and be here with me

New Poetry from Ben Weakley: “Checkpoint,” “There are 4 Ways to Die in an Explosion,” “Good Friday,”

PRAY FOR THE BLAST / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Checkpoint

The car came from nowhere, it came
from everywhere –

white blur and tire squall,
a four-door payload
of heat and pressure and steel.

When it is over, there is just
the tinkle of falling brass and a man

slumped
in a pool of broken glass
and coolant on hot asphalt,
calm as a corpse.

Doc cuts his shirt.
His face is weathered by years
of this. Layers
of skin and yellow fat pucker
from his open side.

He breathes.

In the trunk of the rusted-out sedan,
where the bomb
should be,

there are only two tanks,
an oxygen mask, and a box
filled with apricots and dates.

There are Four Ways to Die in an Explosion

First the blast rips limbs
from the torso. Throws tender bodies
against concrete walls. Pulverizes
bones against pavement. Those closest
to the bomb are never found
whole.

Then the fragmentation.
Little pieces of metal debris,
like the one that punched
an acorn-sized hole through the back

of Sergeant Gardner’s skull.

Heat from the explosion starts fires.
Vehicles Burn. Ammunition
burns. People burn,
alive. When a driver is trapped inside
white-hot steel, prayers
must be said silently for the smoke
to take him first.

Pressure collapses
lungs and bowels. The bleeding
happens on the inside.
It can be hours
before the skin turns pale
and the bulk of a person
drops.

None of the anatomy is safe,

so when the time comes, pray for the blast
or fragmentation. Pray for the heat that vaporizes.
Pray for the kind of pressure
that makes the world dark and silent
before the bitter taste of iron
and cold panic.

Good Friday, Udairi Range Complex, Kuwait

The first time I saw the sun
rise over the desert
it was 4 a.m.

Across miles of sand

and rusted hulks, the throbbing
of heavy guns echoed.

Over the horizon,
where the beginning and the end
meet and disappear, Friday arrived.

We saw the jeering crowds, the scourge
and spear-tip, the crown of thorns
and the crucifix, waiting.

What could we have known about atonement?
What did we know, then, of judging
the quick against the dead?

Poetry from Westley Smith: “Homecoming,” “On Not Dying,” “Nocturne”

THE SHOTGUN, BREATHES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Homecoming

He doesn’t feel quite right, being there—
same house, a little run down, dirtier
than he remembers. They smile and shake his hand,
escort him to his room—with everything
just where he left it.

Then, they surprise him—
they leave. He hasn’t been alone in years.
When night arrives with no boots to shine,
no weapon to clean or letters to write,

he listens for threats that never come.
He’s up and moving before everyone
to stalk the house, lock and relock each door,
his family asleep in separate rooms.

*

Days later, he finds a retail job at Sears,
takes orders from some stateside twit named Greg.
When he’s had enough, he slams Greg into a wall—
Then, no more job.

He starts to drain his savings.
His family adjusts to him being home.
They start ignoring him, which he prefers.

*

Deer season now. He packs his rucksack, grabs
the shotgun, leaves the family a note
and hikes out to the deep woods of Ohio.
First time he’s felt himself: carrying
and wearing his BDU’s, scarfing MRE’s.

He sets up camp near where he tracked a deer-
swatches of scraped oak-bark and tramped ground
mark its territory. On the cold, hard ground,
he sleeps the best he has in months.

*

He wakes, packs up his gear and climbs the oak.
Wandering back to friends, to when he knew
what was expected, back to when he had
a purpose, when he knew his life mattered.

In the tree stand, he sees the shotgun’s dirty—
a stick jammed in the slide and around the chamber.
He pulls it out, unloads the shells, and wipes
the weapon down with the pre-oiled rag

he carries in his pack. He does a functions check,

reloads, then sees a deer, a five-point buck
breaks cover and stands, looking him in the eye.
He aims the shotgun, breathes. The deer just stares.

On Not Dying

I’m glad I didn’t pull the trigger
on the .44 magnum while

the barrel was in my mouth.
Oh, I’ve done crazier shit—

Walking at night along
the handrails of bridges, backwards,

to entertain laughing friends.
Drinking rotgut whiskey

on top of abandoned buildings, hoping
never to wake, but always waking again.

After the war, during a protracted
divorce, unable to see my kids,

I’d wake from a nightmare to grab
my gun and patrol the perimeter

of my ranch-style in Richmond,
Indiana, to make sure everything’s

secure, everyone’s safe.
Finding no threats, I’d sit

on the couch, in the dark, feeling
stupid, still fighting—

for what? I didn’t die there
and I refuse to let it kill me now.

Nocturne

I’m awake-the bed shakes
as I bleed out, alone, a blade still
buried in my thigh.

I feel the warm wet
on my legs but it isn’t blood.
I throw the sheets in the washer,

retreat to my favorite chair.
Flipping through reruns,
I settle on a comedy I’ve seen.

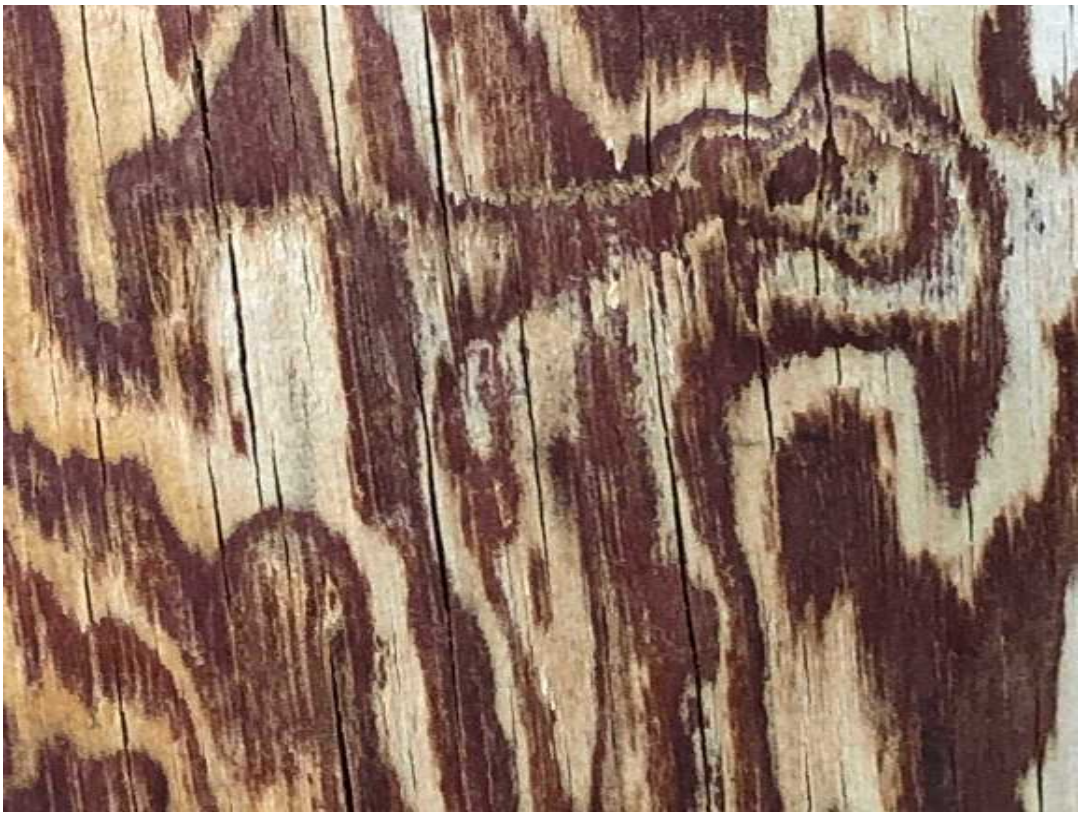
It’s dark. I hear his breath
wheezing slow. The odor
of cigarettes as he drives the blade

deeper. I scream—my dog barks.
The windows blush:
I’m on the floor, the TV

flickering the news of a new day.

New Poetry from Jacqlyn Cope: “Mission 376: Patient X,”

“Prolonged Exposure Therapy,” “Doxies and Rum”



THERE’S EARTH INSIDE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

MISSION 376: PATIENT X

There’s dirt in his mouth now

you

know that for sure.

There’s Earth inside his bloated belly

you

know that for sure.

The worms might have eaten away his ragged skin by now

but the metal is still there.

Splayed on the satin or cotton lining

like sad coins of a wishing well.

His casket might be oak, or cherry wood

you hope it was something sleek

and aesthetically pleasing

you hope the flag was soft enough

for hands and cheeks that needed touching.

PROLONGED EXPOSURE THERAPY

Ten minutes staring at
a fountain pen stabbing,
scribbling paper.

A rocket hit a concrete wall
I told her.

Water spots on bifocal glasses
blurring iris’s, flickering like
burnt out pixels on a screen.

A desk placard bolded
with professional credentials
hooraying the study of mental illness.

A rocket hit a concrete wall and

Tic-tacs shaking in my red purse
snapping the container at its neck

revealing the candied-mint nonsense
delaying my esophagus to stretch
in the direction of answer.

A rocket hit a C-130 fuel tank spraying
shrapnel

Her voice dives
down into the depths
of her vocal cords
pulling out
forced tonal sympathy
an octave of care.

If
you'd like, I can prescribe you Zoloft today.

The rocket hit a concrete wall
the metal
a rocket
hit
the fuel tank
a concrete
w
a
l
l

DOXIES AND RUM

My Dachshund

watches me pour

my

third

rum and
Coke.

His
bowed legs sit

firmly
under

his robust

chocolate colored
chest.

Eyes
beaming

not
in judgment

but acceptance.

Captain
Morgan’s

leg
swung firmly

resting on
a barrel

he winks, opens his mouth

and
howls a whistling screech

a

rocket’s screech.

A
hand over his mouth

I quiet
him.

Pouring
the rest in the empty glass

the
ice breaks up

dissolving
into

themselves.

Spice,
sugar, caramel,

washes away the
dryness in my throat

and
salt from the sinuses stuck there.

Salt that I refuse

to expel

any
natural way.

My Doxie jumps on
my lap

smelling
distinctly of corn chips

for
no reason at all.

He rests his head
in the crevice

of my arm

sighing deeper

than
I thought he could.

New Fiction: The Sandbar

The morning of day three, Kelly decided to go out on a jet ski. She'd been resistant at first for all the usual reasons. But the accumulated effect of watching other vacationers roar around on the water, the insanely beautiful tropical backdrop, and listening to Dan complain about her unwillingness to try new things finally broke her. It was for her own good, this trip down to paradise. That's what everyone said, and what she told herself. Looking out onto the water, however, she'd felt nothing. As though the blast that had ripped open her leg had taken something besides blood.

Dan smiled when she made her wishes known and said, "told you, it'll be fun." Then they walked down to the jetty to catch the 11am trip. Kelly wore a one-piece under mesh shorts and a yellow t-shirt, Dan wore a bathing suit and a unit t-shirt from the 82nd. The shirt, which Kelly had bought with some

encouragement from her first sergeant, featured a grinning metal skull with wings that said, “Death from Above.”

She’d met Dan at crossfit, and she’d given him the shirt after they started dating. Dan had never served, but the shirt suited him. It brought up bad memories for her, but seeing it on her man made the shirt seem less menacing, more like an affectation.

When Dan had left her at the bar last night to chat with an older gentleman and his younger wife—but mostly the younger wife—Kelly had remembered the shirt, how it hung on his shoulders. To be so hard on the outside, so sculpted, made her feel like she couldn’t trust him. He was undependable inside, soft, but, she thought, that was the point. His violations the errors of a faithful dog kept inside too long, or of a baby, helpless to avoid filling its diapers with the effluvia after a day’s feasting. He had come back to her at the bar when another guy bought her a drink. She’d made sure not to return the new guy’s attention, and Dan’s ego (light as it was) hadn’t even been bruised.

At the beach, a resort employee wearing a blue shirt with “Chris” embroidered in white thread checked the names of guests against a list he had affixed to a clipboard. He was tall and well-built, and for some reason he reminded her of an Eastern European Staff Sergeant from the maintenance platoon. Dan introduced them, shaking Chris’s hand and grabbing his elbow while looking in his eyes. “Got room for two more?” he said.

“Sure,” said Chris. “Which house do you have?”

“We’re in the ‘Prince Eugene,’ up the hill,” said Dan.

Chris scanned the list he held on his clipboard, pausing halfway down the second page. “Dan Fuchs and Kelly Browski. Know how to swim?”

“Practically born with webbed feet,” said Dan, laughing.

Kelly pointed toward the lagoon’s middle. “How deep does it get?”

Chris scratched his head. “Not too bad—maybe twenty feet around the middle? Thirty?” He looked at Dan. “Thinking about diving? It’s much better further out, on the reef.” He saw Kelly’s leg, then looked away quickly. “Wouldn’t recommend going into the water if you have any cuts or scrapes… you know. Can attract the wrong kind of attention. Anyway, you’ll want to catch the dolphins, they should be around here somewhere.”

Dan shook his head, looking down at her with an expression. “Jet skis should be plenty for us today. Maybe I’ll head out to the reef tomorrow.” The “by myself” was implied.

They dragged Kelly’s jet ski into the water, then Dan grabbed his own and pulled while she pushed, wanting to help. Chris and the other guests were already in the water. Dan brought the engine to life with a roar and joined the larger group.

Kelly mounted hers gingerly, settled into a comfortable position. She ran her hand down the scar on her right leg, tracing its fresh, raw lines. Without thinking, she itched it, and blood welled up.

“Shit,” she said, wiping the red on her thigh. She debated bailing on the event, then imagined what Dan would say. She fired up the jet ski and sped out after them.

The lagoon was huge. Three hundred feet out from the shore the bottom had already vanished in the blue. Kelly supposed if it was as deep as Chris said, she didn’t want to see the bottom, see the life swarming beneath the waves, looking for a big shadow, graceful serpentine undulation. The logical antipode to her mantra as a paratrooper with the 82nd – “Death from Below.” Ahead of her, someone shouted—Chris was on a jet ski, pointing. A group of dorsal fins broke the surface of the water. They’d spotted the dolphin pod.

She drifted to a stop, admiring the graceful animals, their subtle rhythm. They seemed so carefree and happy. Of course, life outside civilization was more complicated than a video snapshot of photogenic mammals grinning, they were just animals. For them, life was a ruthless competition for food, sex, sleep, and safety. Maybe what looked like fun to her was a chaotic mess of anxiety and barely-contained violence. She’d heard something about infanticide and murder among dolphin pods, but Christ, at least they didn’t attack humans. Who cared what savage acts they committed against each other?

She moved to join the group, then shut down the engine. Ahead of her, Dan was talking with two college-age girls. They were pretty, which, with Kelly’s injury and the secondary effects it had had on the rest of her previously balanced system, meant they were prettier than her. He was sitting up straight on his jet ski, with his chest out, watching one of them talk—the more attractive of the two. She wondered whether he’d explained his military themed shirt—whether he’d told them he

didn’t want to talk about it, or told them it belonged to his girlfriend. The attractive girl laughed and pointed at the dolphins. Dan was laughing, too.

Kelly sat still for a moment, gave herself space to feel what to do. If she went over now, she’d arrive clumsily, she’d be jealous. In pulling up to Dan, she’d intrude, or worry about intruding, in that way she had of being intrusive in overcrowded social situations. Things would require an explanation, which Dan would furnish, introducing her as his girlfriend. The girls would greet her perfunctorily, and then stare. She’d feel awkward about her body, her legs, forced by bullshit society and their expectations to feel bad about her greatest source of pride: her service. Dan would make the appropriate qualifications. Kelly realized that she didn’t want to ruin everyone’s good time. She looked out at the sandbar that made the lagoon possible, and headed there instead.

Kelly had grown up in Connecticut, on a typical Long Island Sound beach. During exceptionally low tides, a sandbar connected the beach to a nearby island. This semi-permanent bridge had a little trail of hardened sand at the very middle, a crust of safety above the mud below. Her dad had warned her to stick to the sandy part, and sink up to her ankle or worse. That if she were too heavy she’d break through, and the mud was bottomless. Clams lived in the mud—normal clams, unsafe to eat from decades of chemicals spilled into the water, and razor clams, native to Connecticut. The razor clams were so named due to their resemblance to a nineteenth century barber’s straight-edge. When Kelly was eight, she had walked out to the island during summer and broken through a patch of thin sand into the mud beneath. A razor clam had cut her and she’d bled for an hour. This was one of her most vivid memories from early childhood. Panicking as her parents reacted to the sight of the cut, the red mixed with dark,

rotting brown.

Nobody noticed her absence. The dolphins jumped through the water, frolicking and spinning in the hot midday sun. Kelly decided to cruise with the jet ski before succumbing to the inevitable despair of social maneuvering. She revved the engine and headed out toward the sandbar. Forced herself to enjoy the sense of mechanical power, though she knew how many ways that sword cut, forget about it, just try get a sense of the lagoon's boundaries. Kelly bounced on the waves, hesitantly at first, then with abandon. As she got closer to the sandbar she could see the bottom. It was like the shore, not deep at all. Actually pretty safe. And the sandbar was wide. Unlike the murky water of the Atlantic northeast, with its lurking threats.

Five minutes of this left her soaked with sea-spray, and although her wounds burned and tingled, the pain reminded her of childhood, and life, and her unlived future. She remembered the simple pleasure of tearing around dirt roads on a bicycle, wet from exertion and alone, blissfully independent. Kelly let the engine idle as she drifted up to the sandbar, and slumped forward on the handlebars, watching the sea beneath her. She remembered parts of a dream from last night, and wondered if the other guys in the truck would've liked this place. Portmanteau was always talking about the water—from Mobile, Alabama, with a slow, deliberate drawl—he and Rafe, bullshitting about what they'd do when they got out. Get buried, that's what they did, that was the sum of their human potential, no more youth, no vacation. Barely worth the time it took to remember their names. And here she was, floating in warm, quiet luxury. Two feet of water, maybe less. She could feel the bottom of the craft scraping against the sand.

It was horrifying, the feeling. The lightest of touches on the sand, the machine was no longer floating but almost resting on the ground. *Fuck* that. Kelly gunned the engine and sped into deeper water. After twenty seconds her panic subsided, and she

realized that she'd moved far from the rest of the group. They were 500 meters away, now, just a series of black dots, still following the dolphin pod. She hated the jet ski now, everything about the experience made her skin crawl. She turned her craft toward the group, no longer worried about the consequences of her arrival.

As she turned, the jet ski's engine sputtered and died. Kelly drifted to a stop near the middle of the lagoon, facing the group. No chance of capsizing, not with this ingenious contraption. She checked the gas meter—still nearly full. She tried starting the engine again. Nothing.

"You've gotta be *fucking* with me," Kelly muttered, like she was back on deployment. "Cheap goddamn resort piece of shit jet ski…" She beat her fists on the the plastic engine cover. Nothing. The group was so far she couldn't hear them, which meant it was doubtful whether they'd hear her even if she yelled. She stood up awkwardly and waved her arms. No reaction.

Kelly sat down again and looked around. 500 meters from shore, she'd never make that swim because she'd never leave the jet ski. Exactly why she hated doing this type of shit. Her wound was oozing blood again, dropping her life into the water like a sacrifice to the old ones beneath the waves. Grateful for the one-piece, she took off her shirt and stood up again, waved it in a circle. Maybe a lifeguard would notice or something. After a couple minutes, a commotion among the jet ski group gave Kelly hope that they'd seen her. Three riders sped out from the main group, but cut to her left—heading further out, toward the sandbar. She sat down, quivering with anger. She couldn't wait to tell those lazy irresponsible bastards a thing or two when they got over here. Oh yeah.

Except, she wouldn't. It wasn't really their fault, they were just college kids. Maybe she'd hunt down the mechanics and give them a good razzing. Nothing to do but sit at the moment,

she'd try again in a minute or two. Movement out of the corner of her eyes caught her attention, and she looked over the side of the jet ski for the first time since it lost power. The sun was hitting the waves and the tiny objects suspended below, sending shapes and shadows into the depths. Here, the water was deeper, darker—this wasn't 30 feet, it must be more like 50. She blinked. A deeper shadow among the others swam in the depths, slow, unconcerned. Or maybe it was just a trick of the light. She looked again—no way to be sure. Now it moved, now it didn't. Should she look again, confirm her worst fears, see the hammerhead or the tiger shark or the bull shark or whatever they had down here in tropical fucking heaven? A goddamn pack of sharks, a hundred of them, the big ones, twenty-footers, ready to explode up from the deep, cresting through the surface, a storm of teeth and hunger, and take her legs, everything this time, right at the torso? Dan was still too far away. He'd left her alone, just like he had at the bar last night, just like fucking Portmanteau and the rest of them had when it counted, marching off to Valhalla and leaving her adrift.

Kelly made herself a part of the jet ski, hung on to it for dear life, melded into it, gasping for breath, squeezing. The jet ski was hot, the waves, warm. She forced herself to look down. Nothing. Just the way sun hit the water at that depth. Why keep living this way, goddamnit. Why pretend that this was any better than just *fucking doing it*. She looked again. No shark. Come on. Beneath the unhealed wounds on her leg, wounds that would never heal, fully, a deeper hurt stung now, aching, weeping.

Carefully, deliberately, she let go of the small watercraft, and slipped in. At 500 meters it would take her fifteen minutes to swim ashore, and someone would notice way before then. Her legs throbbed like mad as she began to kick toward the beach, and she imagined the tendrils of blood flowing out behind her, searching for whatever destiny awaited.

New Fiction by John M. McNamara: “The Mayor of West Callahan Creek”

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

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

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

The ashen fog had intensified since Joseph battled the shadows earlier that afternoon, enshrouding him more thoroughly than the day before, clouding his concentration and fuzzing his perceptions. The attack came as suddenly as an ambush. He’d developed an instinct for anticipating the murkiness, but it had descended upon him with viciousness soon after he crested the tallest of the hills on Highway 22, which paralleled the Loup River. He had pedaled off the road and kicked down the bike’s stand, then squatted and caught his breath. Under an overcast and featureless sky, he rolled onto his back and locked his hands behind his head. Then the choking shadows,

their edges indistinct, (they lacked clarity, which he assumed meant he lacked it as well), assaulted in full force. His chest constricted and the panic rippled; the sensation felt like his organs were being drawn through seams in his skin. Deliberate breathing, measured and slow. Fingertips pressed firmly against the temples in circular rotation, eyelids lowered while his thoughts focused upon past recoveries.

Paul Vogler, Lane Near A Small Town, 1864.

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

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

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

cold beer.

A hundred yards or so beyond the store, Joseph crossed a bridge with a low, steel railing, peered down at the slow-moving water, and imagined it must be the creek that offered the town its name. On the other side of the bridge, the gravel edge gave way to asphalt. The entrance to a parking lot; a single pinkish bulb cast an aura on the space. Joseph read the redwood sign with mustard-colored, inset lettering: West Callahan Creek Park. Below the lamp, a path led away from the empty parking lot; Joseph wheeled his bicycle and the small trailer in which he towed his camping supplies past the circle of light, along that dark path, navigating more by intuition than sight. He stopped, retrieved a flashlight from a pouch on the trailer, and switched it on. The fog refracted the beam into a ball of hazy illumination, affording little visibility of his surroundings, but he did discern a curtain of drooping tree branches a short distance from the path. Willows. They favored stream and creek banks, he knew; he switched off the flashlight and steered his bicycle toward them.

Joseph managed to pitch the tent in the foggy twilight (the mechanics had become rote during the two weeks of his trip), and when he'd spread the foam camping mat and unrolled his bag, he lay quietly on his back and listened to the environmental sounds: a sluggish hint of water, feathery wisps of the willow branches chafing when a breeze rippled, and (undulating along the creek like a current), the metallic clatter of a hog feeder. He dined on dried fruit, a handful of mixed nuts, two strips of beef jerky, and a packet of cookies, checked his cell phone for messages, surprised when he saw three bars in the upper corner (it seemed West Callahan Creek had a cell tower nearby), and then lifted the tent flap to go out and relieve himself. It was an evening routine he followed with rare deviation. (One afternoon when the western sky portended thunderstorms, he stayed in a no-name motel, lavishly soaking in a hot tub in the dark bathroom as the

thunder bouldered, lightning illuminated the room, and the rain strafed the windows). He lay on his sleeping bag, reading of a North Vietnamese soldier who had survived that war on his Kindle for an hour before stripping to his underwear, rolling to his side and closing his eyes, wondering what dreams he might encounter, and how much of them he would recall in the morning.

—

Hello, someone called. Wake up in there.

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

Hey. Open up.

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

This isn’t a camping area.

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

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

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

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

Are you serious? He couldn’t read the man’s eyes behind his

sunglasses, to determine if his tactic was to scare Joseph into quickly moving on, not lingering in the town.

Dead serious. Turn around.

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

What about my stuff?

We'll collect it for you.

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

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

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

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

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

You can ask the judge.

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

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

Joseph Hunter.

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

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

Twittering and laughter from the crowd.

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

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

serve as the honorary mayor of our town for this weekend’s sesquicentennial celebration.

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

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

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

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

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

We like a little theater, he replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gale Stockwell, Parkville, Main Street, 1933.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As he had the night of the thunderstorm, Joseph drew a hot bath and lay with a wet washcloth over his eyes, recalling

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

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

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

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

—

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

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

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

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

They circled the town square. The barber, pointing a finger at the hair falling onto Joseph's collar, offered a free trim, which Joseph declined. At a florist shop, a woman pinned a red

carnation in the buttonhole of the blazer lapel. Hand-crafted caramel was presented at a candy store. Every stop brought excessive yet heartfelt generosity and hospitality. He developed a soreness in his neck from the frequent nodding and tension in his jaw from the repeated grinning. But his anxiety of meeting new and unfamiliar people remained submerged as Ben Hamilton introduced person after person, names that floated away like windblown pollen, faces that morphed into a single countenance of genial salutation.

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

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

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

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

For Joseph it was the shadows; for the town's youth it was the escape of the gritty sameness of their lives. Had any of them chosen the army, he wondered? And would they come to regret their decisions? The therapist told him regret was punishment

levied by an internal authority. Self-imposed penance, she said. Forgiveness doesn't always come at a cost.

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

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

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

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

anxiety. A nagging feature of fear: it rarely emerged in a pragmatic location. Of course, what sort of location would that be, Joseph mused.

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

Joseph Patrick Callahan, veteran of the civil war, served in the 18th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, fought in several notable battles: Second Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and Petersburg, where he sustained a bullet wound to his lower left leg, and as a result, he walked with a slight limp for the remainder of his life. Achieved the rank of sergeant. Returned to his home in Bristol after the war, but soon embarked west, by train to Omaha, and then, burdened with the tools and trappings of a farmer in the bed of a buckboard, followed the Platte River, turning north where it was joined by the Loup River and diverting then again along a then-unnamed creek. He paused one night to camp and, according to his journal, (the prized possession of the West Callahan Creek Library collection), determined he'd put enough distance between himself and Massachusetts to forget his home and memories of the war.

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

She spoke of Callahan's service as the town's first mayor, a

thirteen-year tenure, his reluctance to observe the tenth anniversary of the surrender of Lee at Appomattox, his contrary attitude toward the neighboring Pawnee, Ponca, and Arapaho, (contrary to that of other settlers, Callahan advocated peaceful relations), and how he riled many townspeople by banning the wearing of firearms within the town boundaries. But he was overall a popular, if at times moody, citizen and public servant. Selma Fenstrom continued with her biography of Callahan, but Joseph latched onto the single word: *moody*. Was there within his journal a more detailed account of the cause of his moodiness? Sipping from his water, Joseph scanned the crowded room: Many of the attendees nodded at her recollections about the town's growth, its sons who had served in both world wars, Korea, and Vietnam. No mention of any active duty service members or casualties from Afghanistan or Iraq, and Joseph hoped the town's youth had wised up to the nationalistic rhetoric of army recruiters.

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

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

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

The crowd applauded as she shuffled her pages and nodded once,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I've been given every hospitality. I'm very grateful and

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

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

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

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

Joseph nodded. Thank you.

—

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

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

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

Bared his soul, she said. It was tortured at times by recollections of the war. He wasn’t alone in that out here on the prairie. Many veterans from both sides went west after the

war. Seeking what they couldn’t find any more at home.

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

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

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

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

Joseph chuckled at the mention of inconvenient timing.

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

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

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

A new flag. I like that, Joseph said.

A flag that represented him, not a nation at war. That’s what

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

One fell swoop.

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

I've been questioning whether that's possible.

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

It would have done them a world of good.

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

He sounds like an interesting man.

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

Do you think he ever achieved his redemption?

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

Not by that name. Maybe reconciliation.

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

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

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

He recalled his conversation with Selma Fenstrom, realizing his predisposition to try and glean wisdom from her familiarity with Callahan. Tracing the name of his spells through the histories of war: shell shock, battle fatigue,

stress response syndrome, PTSD. Even Job, the embodiment of patience, was said to have suffered mental disturbances from battle. Every person around him bore a smile and he imagined that later circumstances in their lives might enforce grimaces or expressions of sadness; nothing was permanent. But then, the grimaces and expressions of sadness held to impermanence as well. He remembered moments when he and his brothers rested, post-action, guzzling water, leaning their backs against walls, removing their helmets and shading their eyes beneath blinding, cloudless skies, and then regarded one another as similar smiles and then laughter erupted to rinse the amassed tension from the clustered squad members. The parade. Could it be his victory parade? The conquest of fear. The taming of the shadows.

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

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

As they wished him good night and walked toward their rooms at the rear of the house, Joseph felt an urge to ask them to

linger, to engage them in conversation, could envision night stretching into dawn, as it had sometimes in Iraq, as man after man talked, the subjects varied and unimportant, camaraderie being the unspoken objective.

In the morning, Joseph descended the stairs for breakfast, with Ben Hamilton, Sally and Peggy Hutchins. He had hoped to say good bye to Selma Fenstrom, but reasoned such a farewell might seem anticlimactic. She'd provided Joseph all the assistance she had to offer the night before. At the conclusion of the light meal, the mother and daughter flanked him as they descended the steps to his bicycle and trailer. At the curb beside the sheriff's squad car, the conjoined vehicles rested, cleaned and polished, the blue frame glinting in the morning sunlight.

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

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

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

Joseph eyed him and the sheriff chuckled.

First gulf war.

Thanks, Joseph said. For everything.

Our pleasure. Stay safe.

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

New Poetry by Liam Corley

A VETERAN OBSERVES THE REPUBLIC AND REMEMBERS GINSBERG

Claes Moeyaert. *Sacrifice of Jeroboam*, 1641.

America, I've given you all, and now I'm less than one percent.

America, fourteen-point-six-seven-five years of service I can't characterize
as other than honorable,
three hundred ninety-one days pounding dirt in other people's countries,
and one hundred seventeen sleepless nights per annum in perpetuity,
September 11, 2017.

America, I’m willing to renegotiate our social contract. I won’t complain about the clean bill of health
charged against me by the V.A., and you can stop involuntarily mobilizing memes of my demise
in support of indecent campaigns. America, believe me when I say
I’m not dead broke, I ain’t so straight, I’m not all white, and I don’t love hate.

America, when will you realize we are peopled with two-and-a-half times more
African Americans than veterans,
discounting three million souls in both tribes? Here I incorporate them all,
the ones *hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,* survivors whose lives matter,
because we both know the wary grief of looking at a uniform we paid for and wondering
whom the man beneath has sworn to protect and defend.

America, into this veteran poem I will take all the graduates of Columbine and Sandy Hook,
the ones who lived after having no answers for the warm muzzle of a gun, and their teachers,
especially the ones who ran toward shots. The hall of the American Legion
will overflow with such heroes, streaming like the blessed dead of Fort Hood and Chattanooga
across the Styx in Charon’s commandeered craft, the open door of welcome
forced, as always, by warriors still living.

America, let’s rent a cherry picker to take down the F in the V.F.W. sign,
let *what is removed drop horribly in the pail.* Police will gather in their surplus riot gear
and nod in understanding fashion, their years of service trailing them like a sentence,

arming them with arcane questions of whether civilians we protected yesterday will kill us today.
America, out of the sands of Kandahar and Ramadi, I go with them too.

Furthermore, America, in this election season, I go with righteous immigrants and refugees,
fellow sufferers of long journeys in inhumane transports that leave them in permanent pain.
O, my desperate ones, border-crossers of unwilling countries, you who pay taxes of sweat and fear,
you are not alien to me, or my thirty-five thousand brother and sister dreamers in green and khaki
fighting for something that isn't wholly ours in dangerous places where we simply do our jobs.

America, when will you give Cyber Purple Hearts to all who have had their lives taken
out of your senile, digital grip,
starting with the twenty-four million whose secrets you've let slip into China's voracious panda pocket?
We shall update and tweet ourselves feverish with the chant, "Uncle Sam is my Big Brother"
in protest of all those Xis and Putins and Snowdens and Kims and Transnational Criminal Elements stealing our binary essence.
I'm not joking, America: I foresee the day when every iPhone will be issued with a trauma kit,
every laptop with a liability release for unauthorized remote access.

O America, my love, my burial plot, all this I will put in a phantom poem,
my own republic, for you to receive, a sea bag of sights unseen
to tumble down the ramp of a decommissioned C-130,
this empty box,
this absent limb.

Suicide and the Military

There are two substantial issues facing the American military and veteran community today. The first, a logical and narratively unified reaction to years of hero-worship, is a backlash against the impulse to thank soldiers for their service – a tendency, made explicit in recent media pieces, to vilify veterans and stigmatize them as prone to violence, hatred, racism, bigotry, and murder. The second issue is less dangerous than the first in absolute terms, but based on real statistics and empirical evidence: a growing problem with suicide.

This topic has been examined under a microscope. 22 soldiers and veterans die per day in America by their own hand, victims of some unknowable, tragically preventable plague. Especially tragic given the notion that a person who has cheated death should have some sort of inherent attachment to life. We believe that a man, having avoided bombs, bullets, and grenades from determined foes as variable as the enemies we've faced over the last seventy years, should have a higher reason to live. We believe that a soldier-veteran, ennobled by the experience of having come close to an end to their existence, should far more than others be eager to embrace the world, to love life. We imagine that we, in our dull day to day lives, which include regret, and trifle, and petty annoyances, have got it bad, and that veterans have seen clear through to some transcendent truth. Like a sunset over the water after a thunderstorm, with rays of light reaching up into the heaven,

and beyond ourselves. Like encountering a known limitation, and moving beyond it.

Of course veterans are people like everyone else. Different in the sense that they've made a choice many non-veterans think – wrongly – that they're incapable of making, fed on a steady diet of propaganda from movies, books, comics, video games, and history. Think, then, how disappointing it must be for a servicemember – a soldier, marine, airman, sailor, or coastguardsman (what do they call themselves?) – to discover that they won't see war? Or, having seen it, that there's no transcendent truth behind a dead face – friend or foe? Imagine that every meaningful assumption you'd made about the order of things was up-ended – good, generous, industrious and clever people died or were thwarted, while bad people, lazy and unscrupulous people profited and prospered? How would you feel, to know that life and death meant nothing?

I'm laying aside the question of faith in a higher power, and refraining from offering my own thoughts on the subject because a great many different ideas have occurred simultaneously in war on the topic of who believed what about which God, and praying to each of them seems to have had about the same effect (which is to say, nothing). Also, men of faith have taken their own lives, and agnostics and atheists have done the same, and out of respect for their service to God and Country, I should like to imagine that their lives are better or easier now.

During my time in the military, I came to believe that one reason there were so many suicides – apart from the proportional wealth of toxic leaders I encountered who likely did much to encourage their soldiers to take their own lives – was that it's the single area over which the military has absolutely no jurisdiction. Each individual is instructed from the earliest moments in training that authority is violence,

and violence is authority, and who can do the greatest harm to whom determines rank. A salute isn't just a gesture of respect, it's an acknowledgement of hierarchy. One person must awake at four in the morning to clean an area so that another person can walk over it with dirty boots. Infractions are punished. Individuality is punished. Thoughts are punished. Feelings are punished.

But suicide can't be punished. Threats of suicide and suicide attempts are taken seriously by military units – very seriously – with the offending soldier often being carted out to behavior health and instantly transformed into a walking pariah, at least to the extent to which that soldier is still allowed to be a part of their unit. The impulse or desire to commit suicide, vocalized, is the worst type of offense possible – likely because it undermines the possibility of corrective violence, which is the military's only organizational / institutional ability to correct misbehavior. For a toxic leader, who relies only on the threat of violence, suicide must be an evil. For a good or scrupulous leader, suicide is an unparalleled catastrophe.

Some people are afflicted with medical conditions that prevent them from taking any joy in life, or the world. Depression – suicidal depression – is a real condition. For these people, sights and smells and sentiments from which reasonable people would take pleasure offer nothing instead. These people require help – medical assistance, psychiatric guidance – and should be in places, surrounded by professionals who are capable of giving them said help. I've had brushes with depression in my own life, had my share of beautiful summer evenings that unaccountably tasted like ash – enough to know that people who must live with depression, with existential crisis, on a daily, hourly basis are truly cursed.

But this is different. These active duty military service members are killing themselves not because of a biochemical predisposition toward self-murder, but as an alternative to a

torture that must feel infinitely worse than the idea of painlessness.

Veteran suicide, meanwhile, points at a similar but more diffuse problem – the problem of finding suitable engagement for veterans habituated to being employed, accustomed to using themselves in a way that creates meaning and value for their societies (but unable to do that in the context of the military any more, for a variety of reasons). Society itself becomes the problem for which the only solution is painless release – a society where service members are allowed to transition out without having jobs ready for them, or livelihoods assured.

So long as the military has toxic leadership, and a promotion system that encourages toxicity, many service members will take their own lives. So long as society does not have adequate room for veterans who wish nothing more than a steady pay check and some sort of useful employment, veterans will take their own lives. Perhaps the answer to the scourge is not to vilify the preventable suicides – but vilify the systems that make them possible in the first place. Otherwise, the prudent solution could be to stop vilifying suicide in the first place – make it an acceptable option in the event that a person's life is truly unbearable. Of course, the system of financial servitude we live in could not bear such a situation – it would quickly collapse.