

New Fiction from Matt Gallagher: “The Biggest Little City”

“Been to Las Vegas? Clean. Corporate. Sleek, serious suit. We’re that guy’s kid brother selling Adderall in the parking lot.”

That’s a line I use at cocktail parties and readings and the like. Book people – *literary* people, apologies – tend not to be New York natives (quibble away, *literary* people) so a natural social lubricant is the Where Are You From fancy dance. There are good answers: Georgetown, Paris, Hong Kong. There are bad answers: Tampa, “near” Chicago, Long Island.

And then there are strange answers, answers like Reno, which is my answer.

Home lingers in us all. Mine just happens to smell of sagebrush while sounding like slots.

Really, truly: that’s the first thing anyone notices at the airport. The cheery singsong of slot machines doling out quarters and dimes. (It used to smell like cigarette smoke, too, dense as blubber. Then bin Laden came along and something, something, travelers of the sky can only drink while they gamble. I don’t know. I don’t pretend to understand the world anymore.)

So, Reno. Born in it, raised in it. Mixed feelings galore. Left at 18 with the grace of a startled dog, been gone for about a decade. Back this evening, for reasons I’ll get to. Now, though, I’m waiting for this dear and precious Mormon family of twelve to unload themselves and their matching ash blonde hair from the airplane. They, and I, are the only passengers who remain. All this for a rear window seat.

"So sorry," the dad says, loud fluoride shine rushing out like sword blades. "Don't ever have kids." He pulls down stroller number four and backpack number eight from the overhead bin. Mormons are breeding for the end of the world, and winning at it. People out east don't know that but they should.

"It's no problem," I say, because I am a fake person.

He keeps talking with affection about the rigors of family life, and while I nod and smile, I don't respond. It's not that I mind his friendliness, aggressive though it may be, or even that I distrust it. It's more that it's draining. Besides, I think, I came home to reckon with the silence of the past. Nothing else.

Mercy eventually intervenes, and we empty the plane. Ascending the jetway, my ears search for the familiar jingles of the shakedown. "Hail, Hail, Hail," they will ring. "Our hometown boy done good." I step into the terminal. Other than the Mormons, it's deserted and dumbstruck. The sound of a faraway vacuum cleaner fills the space between.

In my head, I say, "Hello, Reno," like a slurring British rock star. Some horde cheers in response, made up of fuzzy yearbook faces from yesteryear. In reality, I just nod at the Mormon dad, who's on a knee strapping in his brood. Then I follow the signs for baggage claim.

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I pass the vacant slots. I pass a stuffed brown bear that's been an airport staple since the eighties. I pass a Kaepernick display with photo prints and a signed football encased in glass. He was a college quarterback here, a local legend before he became a national third rail. Some rube attacked the display with scissors last year. Hence the glass.

Near the escalators are neon signs pushing second-rate casino buffets and third-rate lawyers. I recognize one of the lawyers

as a high school classmate. MARCO LO DUCA, the sign reads. THE ZUMBA LAWYER. An image of Marco Lo Duca in bright fitness gear dancing in a courtroom grins down as I descend the escalator. Marco Lo Duca must be a better lover than he is attorney – the gossip cables hath informed that he's dating Sasha Caughlin.

Which is bullshit for a host of reasons, chief among them that I never dated Sasha Caughlin.

I retrieve my luggage and step outside and take a big, sloppy breath of mountain air. That, at least, is as sweet as remembered. Tonic for the body, balm for the soul. The downtown casino lights wash celestial against the dark well of vast sky. Bliss, I think. No wonder those silver miners and pioneers stayed way back when. I've long held that if it weren't for other people, my hometown would be utopia.

"Thrope!" I turn to the call of my teenage nickname. It's Ali, waving from an idling white Suburban parked illegally across a handicap spot. "You goofy bitch, over here." She's shouting four decibels louder than necessary because that's how people like Ali speak. I toss my bags into the back and get into the passenger seat.

"Greetings," she says. "Hello Ali," I say. We exchange a half-hug and she peels out for the freeway like a racecar fiend. Ali is my oldest friend (since sixth grade, we bonded over *Magic: The Gathering* cards and the discovery of sarcasm) and the bestower of my nickname: Thrope, short for misanthrope, earned after one too many ignored video-game invitations. It spread through the suburban hills like wildfire. The jocks called me Thrope. The druggies called me Thrope. My sophomore-year girlfriend called me Thrope. So did my senior-year almost-girlfriend. My own sister took to it.

Ali asks if I'm game for some beers. I tell her it's been a long day. We drive to Malarkey's, a pub in the old south. Confusingly, the district has been rebranded by the Chamber of

Commerce as midtown. Many locals view it as cynical ploy to attract hipsters from the Bay Area. Perhaps that's true. If so, it's working. Buildings I knew as seedy gas stations and porn shops are now trendy restaurants and art galleries.

"The hell is happening?" I ask.

"There is no remedy," Ali says, faux-wisdom coating her words. "If we stopped putting out all carbon, this very instant, the oceans will continue to acidify to the point that coral and shellfish can no longer exist, kicking out the legs of the food chain. Everything. Is. Fucked."

Ali's become a doom prophet in our old age. She sends occasional texts to our group chat about the coming fate of the anthropocene. (I didn't even know that word a year ago and I'm the writer.) Ali's not an environmentalist, mind you – I'm not sure she even recycles.

"Dude. I meant the gentrification."

She laughs, then points to the center console. A worn copy of my book sits there, wedged between the gear shift and a cupholder. "Gonna need to sign that." I nod. I'm not sure how Ali feels about her character's depiction. She's never brought it up, which I appreciate. She's probably pissed. Most are.

We take a corner table. Malarkey's has that chic warehouse aesthetic going on, complete with chalkboard menus. Novelty beer tap handles line the bar like sentries, little guitars and wolf heads denoting different craft brews. A mural of Kaepernick kneeling against the American flag covers the far wall, framed by an angular silhouette of Nevada. I don't know art but it seems like good art. It's also quite the political statement for a local business to make. As with the nation as a whole, Kap's anthem protests have divided our hometown.

The only other people in the pub are an old man in all denim and a cowboy hat and a group of white, bearded twenty-

some things staring into their phones. "It's Sunday," Ali explains. "Band night on the other side of midtown."

I don't know what any of that means so I order the most commercial beer I see.

The thing I want to talk about, the thing I'm back in Reno for, seems like the kind of thing to ease into. Instead I ask Ali about Marco Lo Duca, Zumba lawyer. This is the right string to pull; a holy crusade of expletives forms across the table. Ali's a lawyer, too, and from what I can tell, a good one – an assistant district attorney who has served as our group's legal counsel for years, from our friend in tech selling his start-up for *beaucoup* coin to advising our aid-worker friend through her divorce. Ali can't stand lawyers who advertise, like Marco Lo Duca. Ali can't stand lawyers with reputations for swindling lower-income clients, like Marco Lo Duca. Ali can't stand lawyers who went to shit law schools, like Marco Lo Duca, yet who still have become citizens of local renown, like Marco Lo Duca.

"And now he's fucking Sasha Caughlin!" Ali shouts this five decibels louder than necessary, causing the bartender and the man in the denim to look over in irritation. That's it, though, as Ali is 6'2 and rugby thick. "The world's a cruel and unjust place, Thrope. Beyond salvaging."

"And how's Paula?" I ask.

"That's Doctor to you, son," Ali says, raising her fingers for another beer. Paula is Ali's wife and an anesthesia resident at Saint Mary's Hospital. They're bona fide, a true power couple as these things go. Not elites – this part of the west doesn't have those, at least not in the eastern sense of the word – but still, known. Moneyed. Both families have been in the area for generations; Ali's dad is a regional supermarket baron while Paula comes from a venerated Basque clan that owns cattle ranches and produces a senator every forty years or so.

Perhaps most significantly, Paula's uncle was the head football coach of the 2001 Hidden Valley Indians, the last northern Nevada team to win state in the big-school division. (Vegas high schools dominate everything now, much to the consternation of the various has-beens and never-weres among the Reno dad population.)

Belatedly, Ali recognizes the intent behind my question. "She's fine. We're going to try again in the spring, we think." After a strained beat she adds, "She's over that business being in the book. You wouldn't be staying with us, otherwise."

"It's a novel," I say. "Fiction. Borrowing from life, it's the job."

"Mmm." Ali does something with her mouth that conveys both skepticism and acceptance. I wonder what she thinks about my use of their personal tragedy. It's maybe my second biggest regret from the book. Before I muster up the courage to ask in a roundabout way, she asks if I'm dating anyone in New York.

"Here and there," I say, which is true.

"Poor bitches. Communicating their feelings to you must be like trying to negotiate with a vending machine."

We drink two more rounds then call it a night. I ask if Ali's good to drive, she laughs and flashes her ADA badge. I stare at her, hard, until she rolls her eyes. "Seriously? Four beers on a full stomach. Wasn't *that* long ago I spent my Saturday nights out-chugging Kap's o-line. Get in the car, princess."

She may not be feeling the drink but I am. We roll smooth through the streets of Reno on a magic carpet of SUV might. I'd forgotten how quiet everything is here, the kind of quiet that chews up human folly and human triumph and spits it back out into the high desert like little bones. The Bonanza Casino shoots a searchlight from its roof, casting the strip of fast

food restaurants across from it in half-shadows. The east coast doesn't have good fast food, I think. No Jack in the Box. No In-N-Out. Carl's Jr. goes by some charlatan name which stales the cheeseburgers, somehow.

The Bonanza searchlight sweeps across the intersection to our front. We went to school with the Bonanza kids, the Rouhanis, who came and went in stretch limos. My mom likes to say that people in the casino industry don't understand *The Godfather* films are a critique and not a celebration, and then lo and behold, the Rouhani parents got arrested for federal tax evasion. I believe the kids run the casino now, which, hey, I think, good for them. As long as they're paying their taxes. Uncle Sam always gets his. Why don't the libertarians out here grasp that? Fever cowboy logic leftover from the old days.

All of this will be Great Basin fossil someday, I realize. The Jack in the Box. The libertarianism. The Bonanza limos. All like that ancient dinosaur fish whose name no one can spell. I unroll the window hoping to hear something. The churn of the river. A siren. Maybe a distant coyote howl. Instead there's only more annihilating silence.

"Good of you to come," Ali finally says. "Leaving after the memorial?"

"That evening." I pause, swallowing to wet my throat. "True he collapsed directing traffic?"

Ali nods. "Morning drop-off. Died as he lived. Yelling at idiots."

We share a laugh. Mr. Flores had indeed enjoyed yelling at idiots, something our high school provided ample opportunity for.

Ali and Paula live on a sleepy cul-de-sac in a bungalow near the river, in a neighborhood we used to call "near the river." Who knows what nonsense it goes by now. A few blocks out, we

drive parallel to Lake Street and the old city arch. “Reno,” it reads in clean steel lettering. “The Biggest Little City in the World.”



“A good title, really. *The Biggest Little City*.” There’s not a drop of inflection in Ali’s voice. “Gets at the duality of it all.” She’s talking about my book. Nevada literary legends tend to use broad, mawkish titles like *The City of Trembling Leaves* and *Sweet Promised Land* for their testaments to our home. I stole mine from the fucking arch.

“Yeah,” I say through a yawn. “I got that much right.”

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Saint Ignatius was, and remains, the only private high school in Reno. Can’t speak to the current student population, though I’d guess the makeup’s about the same: 150-ish students per grade. One-third of those from old Reno, good Catholics baptized in the church who tithe and confess with regularity. These folks form the bedrock of northern Nevada, hard middle-

class and proud Republicans since the days of Ike. Their kids skew toward nice and interesting enough, though no one's meaner than a Reno Catholic teen set on it. These select jackwagons become Saint I's linebackers and social merchants, year after year, decade after decade, rinse and repeat.

Another third of students come from new Reno, everything from lapsed Catholics to [insert prim Protestant sect here] to Jewish. (Yes, Reno does have Chosen People.) These kids come from both coin and fast crowds, so their parents determine that sending them to Saint I's will cure their little darlings of their drug/alcohol/sex habits. Problem is, other parents with the exact same issue settle on the exact same solution. It's like sending a bunch of angry young terrorists to an island prison and letting them further radicalize each other. (That's a great line, I know. Used it in my novel.) This is why Saint I's has a reputation as a party school.

The last third of students go to Saint Ignatius for academic and/or small-classroom reasons: a gray-haired band of geriatric college professors teach the honors courses. That's why I went, that's why Ali went, that's why most of our friends went. There's overlap and exceptions in that sweeping overview, of course, because life is always more complex and layered than memory allows for. But human minds must dissect and categorize, if not for order, at least for the guise of it.

Anyhow. That's the ecosystem in which we all met Mr. Flores, and where he became my mentor. He was the first teacher in my life to tell me to read widely and write free. He was the first teacher in my life to say that I possessed a gift. He believed in me, as few ever had, as few have since.

I repaid all that by making him the antagonist of my novel, severe and draconian in ways he only feigned at in real life. He never forgave me for it. Then he collapsed dead in the Saint Ignatius parking lot directing morning traffic, yelling

at idiots.

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I wake in the guestroom of the bungalow, unsure where I am. Awareness comes as I sit up and look out the sliding glass door to a narrow garden patio. The door is cracked, a low October bite nipping through it. A pile of golden-brown leaves sits in a corner of the patio, waiting to be picked up like a dutiful child after school. I close my eyes and take in a sloppy breath of clean morning air.

I'd stay here forever, I think, but for this dash of hangover lurking about my skull.

Ali has already left for work but Paula sits in their kitchen, sipping from a mug of coffee. She asks if I want one and I join her at the kitchen counter. We small-talk so we both can inform Ali later we did so.

I tap the most obvious vein first, doctoring. She hadn't gone to medical school thinking about anesthesia, she begins, and we're off. She's lopped her hair, I notice, into something like a bob. It's a striking change. Years before, a dark scarlet sheen fell from her head like a waterfall. I'd probably have fallen in unrequited love if I hadn't found something about Paula so deeply unknowable. Then I'd thought it an elusive dreaminess, the result of talking to too many horses on her family's Washoe Valley ranch. With time, I realized it was just apathy. She didn't share Ali's (and my) appreciation for whimsy and bullshit. She didn't have time for people who weren't going to help her achieve her goals. I'd admire it if I hadn't been assessed disposable.

"And your family?" she asks, bringing me back. My mind had drifted from the conversation. "How are they?"

"Same ole'," I say. My parents filed for divorce the day after my little sister left for college and both were gone

themselves within the year. My mother retired after twenty-two years as a paralegal at the local power firm Donner Douglass & Hagen, moving home to Virginia, while my father – the last Porsche executive still in Reno after the headquarters fled in 1997 – finally joined his comrades in Atlanta. A beat late, I remember Paula was one of my few friends to visit with my mother during that long year.

“My mom sends her love, of course,” I manage.

“She’s great. I know you know that.” Paula liking my mother more than she likes me is one of those unknowable things I was going on about. “So. Gonna see the big sights? Saint I’s? Maple’s? Rattlesnake Mountain?”

These are oblique references to my book. Paula thinks Saint I’s is full of “privileged mediocrity.” (Did she actually say that or is it something her character said? I can’t tell the difference anymore.) My first summer job was at Maple’s Casino, where the valet overlords judged me tender because I couldn’t yet drive stick. I became a health club attendant instead, and occasionally, older gay men would hit on me while I collected towels in the locker room. This experience served as the crux of Chapter 3. Rattlesnake Mountain (a lonely, dusty hill in the old southeast) was where a young maiden claimed my innocence, a historic moment forever dignified in the final pages of Chapter 6.

“Getting lunch with Robert Bonilla, actually.”

This makes Paula smile. Everyone likes Robert. Thinking her intimations an opening, I begin to stammer out an apology. She cuts in after eight words.

“I’m glad you’re here. Say hi to Robert for me.”

With that, coffee with Paula is over.

I shower and shave and think about the nature of forgiveness,

who should seek it, who gets to issue it. I lock the front door, as instructed. The day smells of pine needle and kerosene. To the near east, saws of black smoke mark what's left of industrial Reno – most everything that can afford it has moved to rural Storey County, where Tesla's built a gigafactory. To the hard west, the snow-tipped Sierras shoot from a meadow of sun-browned tumbleweeds, giant earth castles shaped by a manic god. Today's sky is big, I observe, even by the standards of the west. On the sidewalk across from the bungalow someone has spray-painted a note in money green. "ARE YOU HELPING," the sidewalk asks. "ARE YOU HURTING."

Walking north, it doesn't take long to hear the crawl of languid water. The Truckee is more creek than river, but I don't tell that to the ducks paddling about its reedy banks. They're nostalgic holdouts, I decide, clinging to a summer that's never returning. I make a mental note to walk back this way with bread. A noon bell tolls, but from where I'm at, I don't know if it comes from a church or casino.

I find Robert on a bench in front of the old Riverside Hotel. The city was founded in this very spot in 1859 by an entrepreneur who built a log bridge over the river and began charging mining prospectors for its use. The hustle endures. A sign promoting an upcoming poker tournament at Maple's rises from a pole next to the bench, everyone in the photograph smiling with big carnivore teeth, winners and losers alike. This strikes me as off. The summer I worked at the health club, a state assemblyman shot dead a Chinese high roller in the VIP poker room. I wanted to see the body but security wouldn't let me in.

Robert's wearing new cowboy boots, faded hipster jeans, and a striped button-up open at the collar to let flow his chest hair. Dark, carefully-cultivated stubble swathes his face. He looks up as I approach and I see a pale reflection of myself in his metallic sunglasses.

"Thrope." He puts out his hand and I help him up. "I bring bad tidings."

"Oh?"

"Sasha Caughlin. Marco Lo Duca. It's a belligerent act."

"Good for them?" I try. Robert shakes his head. "The world's beyond salvaging," I offer next. He nods at that.

Robert's our friend who got rich, the one who sold his tech start-up with Ali's help. He splits his time between San Francisco and Tahoe, an amateur angel investor and ski junkie. Ali's taken to calling him "The Baja Globetrotter" because of a predilection for the foreign-born. Like all professional romancers, Robert plays bashful when pressed on it, smiling distantly before changing the subject. He's come a long way from the boy who flew his desk around science class pretending it was the Starship Enterprise.

The ground floor of the old Riverside is now a grill known as Comstock Willy's. We decide to eat there, taking an outdoor patio table. Ska punk pumps from unseen speakers, a form of music you don't hear in New York, I think. Too jumpy.

An old woman in an electric scooter rolls by, a large plastic cup of coins primed for the slots wedged into a front basket. She's attached to a portable oxygen tank and a miniature American flag flies from the scooter on an antenna. I can't help but notice the message on the woman's outsized tee shirt: "SHUT UP AND STAND UP," it reads. "KAEPER-DICK."

"There's no place like Reno," Robert says, a mystical sort of irony splashing his words. "For all the mortal delights."

This is a line from my book. I cribbed it from Didion, but the overlap of readers between her and me is limited to my mom's book club. Robert didn't mind his fictional rendering, unlike most, though he still insists I exaggerated his libertine

persona. Which I may have. Fact and interpretation blurred a long time ago, of both place and people.

We get beers and sandwiches and catch up in a breezy, tranquil way. Some old friendships fray, some adapt, some remain fixed and exact through time and rigor. This is how it is with Robert and I am glad for it. It's nice to pretend at being aimless again.

"I feel like we know them." I follow Robert's eyes into the grill, where a father, mother and three small children have taken nest. It takes a few seconds but I place the parents.

"Jason and Amanda Jankowski," I say. "Class ahead of us. Dated all through Saint I's."

"Ah. They look – " he shrugs. "Like each other."

"That can happen," I say. "Marriage is a face blender."

The Jankowskis' food arrives from the kitchen and they clasp hands and begin to pray.

"Stop, Thrope," Robert says. I haven't done or said a thing.

"What."

"I see the gears moving up there." He shakes his head. "Big-city writer, can't go home again."

I hadn't thought that or anything about the praying family. My mind, really, truly, had been on the river ducks, and the graffiti message on the sidewalk. I tell Robert this, and say that I admire the conviction and sincerity in an act like public prayer. Hell, I say, I could use more of both.

He just shakes his head again. He doesn't believe me.

We finish our sandwiches and get another round. Robert leans back in his chair and crosses his legs, his cowboy boots catching a glint of peeking sun.

"Flores, dead and gone." I tilt my head. "You guys ever ... " He trails off, not finishing his sentence. Whatever word he intended, my answer remains no.

"Too bad," he says.

"Yeah," I say.

"All because you made him a fake villain who shuts down a pretend student newspaper." Robert and I have had this conversation before, almost word for word, but I still appreciate his going through the motions. "So weird."

"He was a prideful man." I pause. "Though 'Mr. Flowers' as a stand-in for Flores could've been more subtle."

Robert shrugs. For him, the book is someone else's lark, someone else's ball and chain. He's like I was before, free of the burden of others' lives. It's ignorance, perhaps, though without that ignorance I'd never have been able to see it through. Maybe Ali's right about everything being fucked. Robert asks if I want to go to a party in Basque Creek that evening. "Some fancy folk will be there. Good material for your next bestseller! Text Ali, the power couple should come, too."

I don't want to go to a party with fancy folk in Basque Creek. I came here to brood and remember, not to find and enjoy. But Robert's easy swagger has infected the best of us over the years.

"Why not," I say.

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Here's the thing about the book: it did *fine*. People in publishing would call it a *nice* debut. *Solid*. Which means: *middling*. *Ordinary*. *Meh*. Which really means: *On to the next one*.

Did *The Times* review it? Reader, it did not. Did *The Post*? It did not. A Sinclair Lewis scholar reviewed it for *The New Republic* (online only) and found it “engaging in a belabored, post-ironic kind of way ... perhaps this tale of youthful blundering could’ve charmed if only its author had recognized the characters’ complete lack of stakes.” I have reason to suspect that half the hardcovers sold reside in my dad’s basement.

A novel about growing up in Sante Fe came out a month after and sold eight times as many copies. It made every award short-list ever coveted. I met the author in New York at a reading. He didn’t even do me the courtesy of being an asshole.

So. *Middling*. *Meh*. On to the next one.

But! *The Biggest Little City* did generate some interest in pockets of its namesake. *The Reno Gazette-Journal* ran an author profile, positive enough. The *Sparks Citizen* didn’t hate it, despite the truly terrible things I wrote about Sparks. (“Reno’s crusty sock,” for one.) The alt weekly sketched out a map showing “my” Reno, buoyed by short interviews with people who knew me when, to include one Eugene Flores, honors English teacher at Saint Ignatius High School.

“He always kept an active imagination,” is the entirety of his statement. The weapon of restraint can strike so clean by those who know how to wield it.

Was my intention to malign? It was not. (With the exception of a couple minor characters from the baseball team.) I’ve just always needed to tell things as I see them, straight and clear and bemused, the way an addict needs a fix, the way Chambers of Commerce need hipster midtowns. I’m not saying it’s right. I’m not saying it’s healthy. I’m only saying it is. I’d have done the same to the moon had I been reared there.

But I wasn’t. I’m from Reno. So I wrote about it. Straight.

Clear. And so very bemused, not by place, or people, but by the strange and bitter magic of life.

(Yes, I cribbed that line, too.)

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Reno is a place of constant change, which means to survive, it must also be a place of constant reinvention. Robert reminds me of this as we drive out to Basque Creek. When an industry dies, new ones must be found. The old mines and timber mills became marriage chapels and railroads. The prewar shine of heavyweight title bouts and a divorce courthouse fit for Hollywood couldn't be golden age forever. Corporate gaming came, inevitably, for the self-made casino pioneers. Companies from Lear Jet to Helms Construction to Porsche, all local saviors of their time, all empty tombs, now. But hear the old refrain, once more: Reno's back, baby.

"Gigafactory's changed everything," Robert says through gulps of open convertible wind. "Panasonic's leasing space there, making battery cells. Google just bought a shit-ton of land down the road for a data center. Those are the direct jobs. Who's building out that road? A local company. Who feeds all those employees? Local companies. Economic impact's in the billions, easy. That's why tonight's happening. Birthday party for a Tesla exec, sure. But it's also a statement. Of what we are, what we're becoming."

I ask again about an open bar.

We're well past the city limits I once knew. My Reno ended with the waterpark off the freeway. The waterpark marked the edge of civilization. Now, the wilderness beyond has become subdivision after subdivision, sprawled across the valley in a blanket of stucco houses. It smells like drought out here.

"Might as well be Vegas," I say. Robert laughs.

We keep driving. Robert's red Miata begins to crawl up sun-scorched hills like a bug on a picnic table. We keep driving. The orange sun of the high desert fades behind us, slowly. We come to green manicured lawns and little thumbprint ponds and keep driving. Then comes a marble statue of a bighorn sheep and a sign etched from stone: Basque Creek Golf & Country Club.

I make a joke about the sprinkler bill but Robert doesn't hear me anymore. He's running his tongue over his teeth and checking his nostrils for loose hairs in the rearview mirror, making himself fancy for the fancy folk. I do the same.

We leave his convertible with college-age valets covered in tattoos and furry goatees who possess that young aimlessness I miss so much – they just shrug when Robert tells them to take care of his beloved. He hands over a twenty-dollar bill. They call him sir and say yes, no problem.

We're directed toward a dim ballroom. Hundreds of bodies mill about, the low roar of boozy chitchat ubiquitous. There's an honest to Christ ice sculpture of the gigafactory in the center of the room. Robert wiggles an eyebrow and says he needs to go glad-hand with other techies. He disappears into the throng.

Jeans and cowboy boots surround me like hostiles on an open plain. I'm wearing the only nice clothes I brought, my black funeral suit with no tie and scuffed wingtips, and have never felt so New York in my life. Someone asks if I'm the Adderall guy. I go to the nearest bar and order a local Great Basin beer to show the others that I'm one of them. Then I park myself against a column and crowd-watch, because, well. I am also Thrope.

For the many people I don't know or recognize, there are some I do. The old mayor who lived near us, which meant our neighborhood always got plowed first after a snowfall. The

fourth wife of a mafioso who inherited all that Tahoe waterfront and turned it into an environmental research center. A tax lawyer from Saint Ignatius who's gone bald. Another Saint Ignatius grad I could've sworn died of a meth overdose. The hot middle school counselor who's still got it. Channel 2's evangelical meteorologist. The trans snowboarder who brought home Olympic bronze. The libertarian radio host who went on hunger strike during a land rights dispute. Donner (Junior) of Donner Douglass & Hagen. The desert explorer who works with special needs children. And others.

It's a real cross-section of the community.

A club employee in a polo shirt finds me at the appetizer table. "So sorry, sir," he says. "The others are already in the back."

"What?" I say.

The employee's eyes splinter. "Google marketing exec, right?"

It's because I'm the only person around wearing a suit, both youngish and disheveled enough to maybe be from Silicon Valley. Before I set the kid straight, I think, *what the hell*. Some dead writer advised that still-living writers need to take chances. So I tilt my head and say, "What do you think?"

This makes the employee apologize again, and we're off, striding across the ballroom through all the high ceremony Reno can muster. He leads us to a room behind a code. This room feeds to an escalator that takes us to another room behind a code. This room snaps with the brittle chill of too much air conditioning. That's the first thing I notice. The second is that it's filled with some of the most important people of northern Nevada, movers and shakers I've never spoken with but know from reputation and news interviews.

There are about two dozen, mostly men, mostly white, mostly thick, either in the shoulders or the gut. There are the Maple

brothers, of Maple's Casino, one smart and one drunk, though no one can tell them apart until happy hour. There's Donner (Senior) of Donner Douglass & Hagen, who's made his name and fortune lobbying for tobacco and liquor. There's a man in a white stetson whose name I can't summon but know is a big land developer all over the state. (Of places like the Basque Creek master-planned community.)

I spot the Governor (Saint Ignatius Class of 1980) in a far circle near a muted big-screen turned to football. He's wearing a western dress shirt and talking with Tesla suits and an air guard general. The Governor's teeth are dentist-commercial white and I want to ask how he does it. All in this room seem very pleased with themselves, and with one another. I wonder if anyone here has read my book. It seems unlikely. I look again at Donner (Senior), recalling a story my mom told of him in a heated negotiation, reminding the other attorneys he was descended from Donner Party cannibals, and that some things were just in a man's blood.

She'd told the story with respect, proud of her firm's chieftain because he'd won. In the room above the ballroom, I feel a pang of dark regret, sudden and forceful. It's for Mr. Flores. There are so many more deserving villains, I think, than a lifelong educator who devoted himself to literature and good order.

"Mister Google." It's the man in the white stetson, pointing to me with a stubby thumb. "Enjoying the native spoils?"

He means the Great Basin beer in my hand. It occurs me that if I'm to play this role of new prospector I should do it well.

"Drink local, think global," I say. This earns some chuckles and entrance to the near circle of important men.

They're discussing Kaepernick. "Of course you have a *right* to kneel during the anthem," Donner (Senior) says, with all the understanding of a wall. I'm not surprised he doesn't

recognize me – it's a giant firm – but bothered, perhaps. My mom worked there twenty-two years. "It's still the *wrong* thing to do."

He looks across the circle, straight at me. "Imagine Silicon Valley thinks different?"

"All depends," I say, because I imagine it does.

Talk turns to the future of the city. The gigafactory's changing everything, they agree, which means the possibilities are endless. Another youngish, disheveled man I figure to be from one of the tech companies asks about the arch. It seems outdated, he says.

"It's an icon." The man in the white stetson speaks with volume, the gobbler under his chin shaking with authority. "A reminder, in its way. Now, a new city slogan? Some of us have been looking at that."

"I still like 'Reno Rising,'" one of the Maple brothers says. Most everyone else groans.

The man in the white stetson squares himself toward me. It remains cold in the room but his eyes probe colder. He's short but broad and full like a shovel head and it's easy to understand, in this brief nugget of time under his stare, how he's attained power. "You tech kids are good at this," he says, speaking in a slow monotone packed with old Nevada cunning. "Any flatlander ideas?"

For a few seconds, I realize, I have the rapt attention of men who affect change. This is no insignificant thing. Their techniques might not always be clean and their intent might not always be pure, but hey, I think, that's life in the wild west. I want, desperately, to provide what they seek: something good and true for our city.

It comes like genius lightning.

"How about," I say, "Reno: for all the mortal delights."

A long, strained moment passes, then another, and then all the important men laugh, at once and together, at one of the most beautiful lines ever written about their home.

*

Mr. Flores –

Hope this finds you thriving at Saint I's and otherwise. All good here – New York's a beast of a city, but I'm learning to navigate it. Through much trial and error, I've taught myself how to sear pork chops and vegetables. A welcome break from Chinese takeout.

I've emailed you a couple times with no response. Did my book offend? I'm truly sorry if it did. It just kind of tumbled out that way, and I thought I'd have plenty of time to edit and revise and change things. Then it found a publisher, and things happened so fast ... the newspaper thing was unfair to you (well, Mr. Flowers). For what it's worth, you weren't like that at all as a teacher. You were judicious and thoughtful. If the character wasn't nuanced enough, the fault is mine. Like you used to tell us in class, "Be better next time." That's my aim now.

Be well, Mr. Flores.

He never replied to that message, either. So I stopped trying. What's a man to do? Mr. Flores wasn't the only one trying to reconcile hidden pride with someone else's memories.

*

I escape the air-conditioned room before the important men grasp who I am not. Talk had turned to zoning laws and Donner (Senior) seemed to be sorting my face through his memory annals. Besides, I'd gotten what I needed.

Flatlander, I think. Hurtful! But also: a great insult.

The next book will get much use from it.

My mind's whirring with plot ideas as I return to the ballroom. I look for the club employee to ask for a pen and bar napkins. So many villain options, I think. The challenge will be deciding who to emphasize. The man in the white stetson seems an obvious frontrunner.

It'll need to be third person, of course, to prove I have the range ...

"Thrope!" It's Ali, four decibels louder than necessary, standing near the ice sculpture. She's doing something with her face that conveys both amusement and alarm but it's not until I'm steps away that I realize why: the stranger she's talking with isn't a stranger at all, but Sasha Caughlin.

I remember to breathe, smile and hug, in that order.

"Hey, Thrope," Sasha Caughlin says. "Been a while."

She looks up with big, dark eyes and a coy smile, too, and glory be, those tender, pretend hopes of the far past can be realized by the abrupt present. One only needs will it to be.

"Where are you now?" she asks.

"Went east a few years ago," I say, hoping for the effect Yale grads have when they tell people they went to school in New Haven. "How are things here?"

"Freaking Ali! Freaking Thrope!" It's Marco Lo Duca, predictably ruining everything. He slaps my back and Sasha Caughlin settles into his shoulder like a Lego piece. I wonder if anyone else in the history of the world has known personal tragedy such as this.

Marco Lo Duca compliments Ali on a recent case she won before

turning his charms on me. "Great to see you, man." He sounds eager, even genuine. "Your book – what an accomplishment. Wow!"

"You wrote a book?" Sasha Caughlin sounds confused and I want to scream into the abyss. "I'd no idea."

"Yeah, babe! A novel. We have a copy at home, in the den somewhere. Funny stuff."

"He was always funny," Sasha Caughlin says. "Weren't you, Thrope?"

I only nod in agreement and stand there, open-mouthed and dead-souled, as Marco Lo Duca explains my own creative offering to the girl I spent much of my youth daydreaming about. He even gets some of it right, in a straightforward, literal-thinking, Marco Lo Duca sort of way.

"Sad that Mr. Flores took it to heart the way he did." Marco Lo Duca purses his thin, stupid lips and then finishes the question no one else has. "You two ever talk it out?"

I shake my head. "Student newspaper thing really upset him."

"Well. That wasn't quite it." Marco Lo Duca grits his teeth and sighs, in that showy way showy people will do, and launches into his tale. He and Mr. Flores hadn't been close in high school, he says, but they bonded later when the older man helped him with law school essays. Had this been around the time *The Biggest Little City* was published? Marco Lo Duca thinks it must've been. He remembers Mr. Flores being excited for me, then confused by what I was trying to say in the book. About Reno, about Saint Ignatius, about him.

"The bit about his character no longer speaking with his grown daughter." Marco Lo Duca's voice is so knowing, so certain, I want to shatter it. "Too much, maybe."

Marco Lo Duca keeps talking, but I'm no longer listening. My

novel did contain a sentence about Mr. Flowers' strained relationship with a grown daughter. A short line, a quick line, a throwaway line I'd never thought twice about. Had I taken that from the real teacher, the real man? I must have, I realize, far too late and far too away to do a damn thing about it. Ali's looking at me from the corners of her eyes with a sharpness I've never before seen directed my way.

I wish Robert was here. Or my parents. They like the book for what it is. They never expected it to be anything else. They never expected it to be anything but a book.

Ali's glare remains fixed on me. It holds and it holds and it holds. Forgiveness isn't a thing or even an aim, I think, too late, always too late. It's a process. A process without end.

Desperate to change the subject, I ask about them. Sasha Caughlin talks about her business development job at one of the casinos. Marco Lo Duca goes into detail about the rigors of Zumba lawyering. Then they say that they're calling it an early night but it was great to see us, and we'll talk again at tomorrow's memorial.

Left with nothing else, I smell Sasha Caughlin's hair as they turn to leave.

I look at Ali. She looks at me. Shame burns through me and I want nothing more than to be under a blanket somewhere, hiding from the world. Ali hails a waiter with a tray of beers. Great Basins, of course.

"Paula's not here?" I ask.

"She's not," Ali says.

"Because of me," I say.

"Because of you," she says.

I close my eyes. Ali's my oldest friend and I've hurt her

deeply. The others I'll get over. This one matters, though. She deserves more. She deserved better. I begin to stammer out an apology. She cuts in after four words.

"Another time," she says. "The fuck were you?"

So I tell her: about the air-conditioned room, and the Governor's teeth, and the man in the white stetson, and the conversation about the arch and flatlanders from Silicon Valley.

"Sounds crazy, I know," I say. "But I almost sold that Didion line."

Ali considers that, then points to the ice sculpture of the gigafactory. "Might help to think about the rising oceans and humanity's goliath carbon footprint. Little to no chance we'll slow either enough in the coming decades to keep society from total collapse. This? It's the End."

We clink our bottles together in a wordless toast.

*

Before the memorial the next morning, I borrow Ali's Suburban and drive into the foothills of southwest Reno to see my childhood home.

In the mid-eighties, this was the fringe of town, the new master-planned community where all the white-collar casino families and hotshot Porsche execs were supposed to live. My mom wanted a house in old Reno, near the river, a big Colonial Revival along California Avenue. My dad came from a humbler background and besides, the suburbs were the future. The possibilities, well. They were endless.

It's a shadow blue home at the top of a hill, with a front yard of honeysuckle my mom planted herself and a rolling side yard perfect for summer slip 'n slides and winter sledding. I never thought much of it as a physical space for the eighteen

years I lived in it, it was just there. Where I ate, grew, dreamed. But now, here, I find myself thinking about things like its bright, open dining room and the way the bathroom faucet water felt in my palms and the peculiar cranny in the garage where my mom found an angry rattlesnake and then killed it by driving our Volvo station wagon over its head forty times.

I park in the cul-de-sac across the street and leave the engine running. The honeysuckle garden remains, though it's more feral than we ever let it grow. There's a strange weathervane on the roof – a black zit on a face of shingles, looking out of place in the way only reality infringing upon memory can. My sister used to rollerblade every day in this cul-de-sac, I remember, until some sixth-grade mean girl told her you can't be pretty if you rollerblade.

The return ticket to New York sits in my back pocket. I know already how today's memorial will go: there will be Catholic pomp. The Saint Ignatius community will turn out in force. There will be scriptural readings but no personal eulogies, no way Mr. Flores would allow indulgence like that. At some point I'll tear up because I'm sensitive, and people around me will think it's because of what happened with the book, but it won't be about that at all, it'll probably be because of something random like the sidewalk graffiti that demanded to know if I'm HELPING or HURTING. Then there will be hugging, much physical hugging, and maybe I'll get to smell Sasha Caughlin's hair again.

I realize my old home must be inhabited by a young family. There are play-patches in the grass and the top of a basketball hoop peaks out from the backyard. This is right, I think. Maybe it's the Mormons from the flight here. Or the Jankowskis. I'd like that.

I consider ringing the doorbell, asking whoever answers if I can look around. But I don't. This way, my old home remains

boundless.

Interview with Jay Baron Nicorvo



Jay Baron Nicorvo's novel, *The Standard Grand* (St. Martin's Press), was picked for IndieBound's Indie Next List, *Library Journal's* Spring 2017 Debut Novels Great First Acts, and named "New and Noteworthy" by *Poets & Writers*. He's published a poetry collection, *Deadbeat* (Four Way), and his nonfiction can be found in *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Believer*. You can find out more about Jay at www.nicorvo.net.

Interviewer:

We must first start with the sentences.

Some samples from your opening (check out more [here](#)):

“Specialist Smith gunned the gas and popped the clutch in the early Ozark morning. Her Dodge yelped, slid to one side in the blue dark, then shot fishtailing forward. The rear tires burned a loud ten meters of smoking, skunky rubber out front of the stucco ranch house on Tidal Road.”

“She sped out of the hotdamn Ozarks through the Mark Twain National Forest. She threw her ringing phone—Travy—out the window and into the parched summer. It smithereened in the rearview. She used her teeth to pull off her wedding band and engagement ring. Spat them into her hand and shoved them into the trash-crammed ashtray, mall-bought diamond solitaire be damned.”

T. Geronimo Johnson, author of *Hold It Till It Hurts* and *Welcome to Braggsville*, once argued that writers should consider the paragraph a sentence rather than limit themselves to movement between two individual periods (my rough—very rough—paraphrase). Your novel sparks from the first clause to the last, and each paragraph feels carefully crafted, as if itself a sentence. Can you give us some perspective on your syntactical choices?

Nicorvo:

Thanks, and I couldn't agree more with you and Mr. Johnson. I've got zero patience for shoddy craftsmanship. The neat masonry of reading in English, left to right, row after row, is a bit like brickwork. And writing is little more than masonry. Stacking, unstacking, restacking. If the basic

building block is the word, than the syllable – where we're able to isolate the music, the meter, of each word – is my mortar. Sounds of words reverberating off one another, that holds my sentences together. The syntactical choices I make are often musical. If a word doesn't sound right, even if it has the right meaning, it's got to go.

And it sounds fussy, but I'm not satisfied with the perfectly uniform bricks you get at the big box stores. I like a flaw. Give me those old terracotta bricks cut by hand, no two alike. They've got a warmth, a life, a history and a heft you can feel in the hand. Sure, they're more brittle and difficult to work with – they smithereen – but that's part of the satisfaction. Each sentence, like each brick, should be radiant, alive, tell a story and have its own weight. No two alike. And so, too, each paragraph. That's how you get – ultimately and after interminable years – to the place where you've built, brick by brick, not just a whole novel but a whole world. But that thing I said earlier? That writing is little more than masonry? That's some bullshit right there.

Interviewer:

Your novel is one of the first to directly connect the experience of two American wars—Vietnam and Afghanistan/Iraq—both through the lens of establishment outsiders and post-traumatic stress disorder. Not coincidentally, anxiety runs through each page and each word, and the reader is often rewarded with poignant paragraphs like the following:

“She loved being on the road, when the road wasn't going to explode beneath her. She gave it more gas. Milt leaned back as the van accelerated—slowly, surely—and reached the speed limit, 55. There she coasted. She was driving like an old lady. What's state motto was Live Free or Die? Freedom was

like war that way: if it didn't make you nervous, you weren't truly engaged in it. Driving, she felt anxious, she felt alive."

What drew you to this subject and these points of view?

Nicorvo:

Well, I suppose I'm an outsider and I consider myself anti-establishment. I'm a civilian who wrote a war novel – though it's really a post-war novel – so my perspective has to be farther from the frontline. This has its drawbacks. Harder for my point of view to have the immediacy – never mind the moral authority – of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*, or Matt Gallagher's *Youngblood*. These are breathtaking novels by novelists who've had fingers on combat-weight triggers, and their stories are close-quarters. But every position has its disadvantages. The trick is to be aware of them, and then use that difference to possible advantage.

As an outsider, maybe I'm more inclined toward the long view, from the homeland, but also historically. I can't help but see the invasion of Iraq – Afghanistan is different – through the warped lens of Vietnam, but through, too, as many other conflicts as I'm able. Civilians should feel obliged to read more about war, and some of them to try to write war. The author of the *Iliad* was a blind man. *The Red Badge of Courage* was written by a reporter. *A Farewell to Arms* is the work of an ambulance driver. *Tree of Smoke* was conceived by a hippy burnout. *The Sympathizer* came from an academic.

The late Tom Hayden is a bit of an easy target, a peacenik Freedom Rider and the second of Jane Fonda's three husbands, but there's a [quote of his I think about a lot](#): "If you conduct a war, you shouldn't be in charge of narrating it." I take this to mean that those who conduct our wars should be doing the narrating, but not *all* of the narrating, and I don't

believe anyone should be in charge of who gets to tell a story. We've got no shortage of soldier writers. Oddly enough, though, they're mostly dudes in my demographic: white working-class. I say oddly. One of the most beautiful things about the American military is how the institution takes in all kinds – though it likes the poor kind best – and puts them on firm but equal footing. I can't think of a more meritocratic American institution – for men, at least, though the women are securing their rightful place – and in my mind that makes it ideally American (even if the real America is about how best to subtly tip the scales in your favor).

So I'm an outsider in some ways, not in others. I'm right up there on the emotional frontlines, for one. I was diagnosed with PTSD about a month before my agent sold the damn novel. I like to joke that novel writing – and trying to publish a novel – caused my traumatic stress. But the hard truth is that I've suffered from anxiety overload (as you so perfectly put it) all throughout my adulthood, induced by my childhood sexual abuse, something I kept largely secret for 35 years. Phil Klay's got a killer essay, "[After War, a Failure of the Imagination](#)," that closes the gap between traumas. A funny thing about trauma – haha. The experience of it is absolutely singular. No two alike. You can never know my trauma. But the after-the-fact symptoms of trauma are all shared. That tourniquet chest. Those quick sipping breaths. The feeling like you've been here before and will, for fucking ever, be here again. Our emotional fallout is communal. You can't know my trauma, but you can share my anxiety, because anxiety is contagious. Once I can overcome my anxiety – which is not the same as having no anxiety – then I can tell you the story of my trauma. In my experience, that's one of the hardest things a person can learn to do, never mind do well.

Interviewer:

Irish novelist John Banville once said, “the world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language.” D.H. Lawrence famously wrote at length about the dramatic divide between the didactic and art. Yet, with a novel like yours, I feel “reality” and “language,” are not necessarily mutually exclusive (or the former the product of the latter exclusively). Further, you have written [powerful non-fiction](#) about the United States Code of Military Justice, Bowe Bergdhal, Trump, and the history of democracy. Particular political wrongs and historical injustices seem to motivate your writing. What, then, are your thoughts on the relationship between politics and art?

Nicorvo:

I don't really recognize those dichotomies: reality, language; art, politics. In my fiction, I'm trying to make a recognizable reality using language. I'm doing the opposite in my nonfiction: trying to make reality recognizable using language. I'm not someone who believes all art is political, all politics is artistry. Music can be apolitical, I think. But writing, as an art form, has to be political. There's no way around it; it's guilt by association. They both traffic in the same medium: words. Novels and laws require nouns and verbs. The US Constitution isn't a piano concerto or saxophone solo.

Maybe because I grew up poor – sometimes on welfare, sometimes off – I've long thought the system was rigged. But one thing I learned pretty early was that command of language is a way to overcome some of the trappings of that system. Because our language shapes our reality. This, in part, determines the resistance to political correctness. When people try to shape our language, it quickly comes to feel like mind control. It's authoritarian. What Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the

“willing suspension of disbelief” required for immersion into a good story might more accurately be classified as a willing surrender to authority.

Reading is submission to mind control. And some people can’t take it. The reader gives up his inner self for a time – in what should be understood, in this egocentric age, as nothing short of heroism. When you read, you allow the writer, in this case me, to take up residence in your head. While you read this, your thoughts don’t exist apart from mine, as I’ve here expressed them. This is, in part, what gives the word of God, as captured in the Bible, its control. Most of us have only a tentative grasp on the extent of this power – here’s where politics comes in – but all of us feel its sway.

In my writing, what I’m aiming to do is to honor the trust you’ve given me – the leap of faith you’re willing to take – by choosing to read what I’ve written. The way I best know how to hold up my end of this bargain is by making the effort to write about our most difficult issues – the wrongs and injustices – in a way that doesn’t try to put them in a good light or a bad light but in a true light. If I do, you can tell, because the light hums.

Interviewer:

A lengthy author’s note in the back of *The Standard Grand* lists a wide variety of source material. Your epigraph includes a quote from a Josh Ritter, a contemporary country singer. You have told me that particular television shows like *Rectify* inspired moments in *The Standard Grand*. Not all artists are comfortable acknowledging the collaborative nature of an artistic project. Some would resist lumping different mediums together into fiction. Obviously, you have no anxiety of influence. How did you come to this expansive (and refreshing!) view of the art of the novel?

Nicorvo:

Failure. I'm a firm believer in failure. And debt. One of the dumbest things F. Scott Fitzgerald ever wrote, in *The Last Tycoon*, was that "there are no second acts in American lives." That reflects the backwards thinking of someone born into excessive privilege, where there's no where to go but down. Look no further than the White House. America, where our pariahs become president. I've found that there's nothing more expansive than failure if, ultimately, it's overcome. And a debt repaid offers significant gratification. But if you succumb to your failings, if you're overwhelmed by your debts, well, there's nothing more isolating and suffocating. An awful feeling, getting choked out by the world. Failure imparts humility. Hopefully, it's balanced out by a dram or two of success now and then. Otherwise, you're reduced to sniveling, that or the tortured thinking of the conspiracy theorist or the lone gunman. If you're lucky and stubborn enough to meet some eventual success after multiple failures – *The Standard Grand*, my first published novel, is the fourth one I've finished – I think you're instilled with an increased capacity for gratitude. Because I have a great deal of influence anxiety – maybe more than my fair share – but it's overshadowed by my gratitude. We vastly overestimate our independence. Especially in this country. And among writers, it's no big secret that we take a great deal, knowingly and unknowingly, from everyone and everything around us, in order to finish what we make. I wanted to go on record acknowledging that I am not owed. I owe.