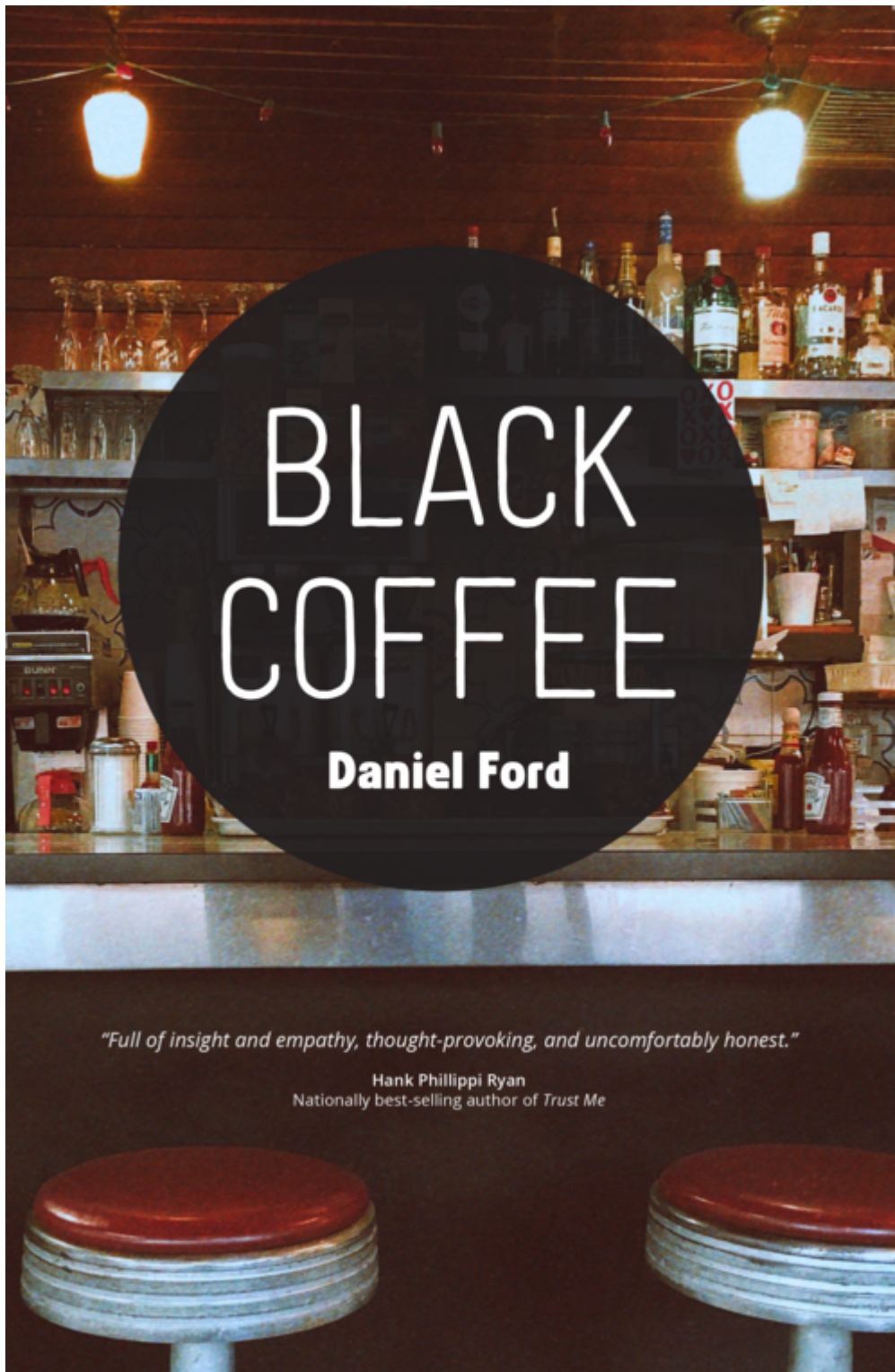


New Fiction from Daniel Ford: **BLACK COFFEE**

*Excerpted from the collection [Black Coffee](#) by Daniel Ford,
September Sky Press, June 2019.*



"Are we ever going to leave this bed?"

"God, I hope not."

"We have to at least attempt to do something today."

"I'd argue that we've done plenty already."

"I mean real things."

"That all seemed pretty real to me. Seriously, what could you possibly want to do out there when you could keep making love to me in here?"

"You're insatiable. Aren't you hungry? I'm hungry."

"One of us can go get food and the other could stay here and hold down the love fort."

"Don't say 'love fort' ever again."

"Roger that."

"Trying to get used to the lingo already? Can you believe the draft went that high?"

"With our luck, yes."

"The news says things are improving, but now we need more muscle over there?"

"I'll give you a full briefing when I get back."

"I prefer you give it to me right now."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ugh. 'Ma'am' doesn't sound good on me."

"Everything sounds good on you."

"He bedded the girl and is still in hot pursuit. You're not going to use those lines on other women over there are you?"

"Come on, give me some credit. I'd never reuse old material."

"Bastard."

"We're not going anywhere, so get back under the covers."

"Fine, but only because I'm chilly."

"Pretty sure all my heat is gravitating to one place at the moment."

"Well, I'll just have to go where the heat is, I guess. Consider this your incentive to come home."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now I'm using teeth."

*

Mike's fifth therapy session didn't go well.

He didn't mind talking about things, which made his panic attacks even more arbitrary. If he were anyone else, every session would feature a breakthrough. For him, it was chatting with a therapist who seemed just as disappointed that they hadn't found anything close to a root cause.

Damn my parents for being loving and supportive, Mike thought. *Would have been easy to pin all this on an abusive mother or absent father.*

"Are the attacks happening more or less frequently?" Ernest asked.

"Same amount. More powerful."

"Takes time."

"I've been back a while."

This room reminded Mike of most of the accommodations over there—federally mandated gray walls and IKEA-like furniture built by the lowest bidder. Ernest didn't have a beard, which unnerved him a little bit. The guy could probably go a month or two without shaving.

How much knowledge and life experience could he actually have without the ability to grow facial hair? Mike thought.

Ernest paused his questioning to write a few more illegible lines in his notebook. He did a lot of writing during these sessions, which also caused Mike anxiety. His pen movements were swift, especially when he was crossing out full paragraphs. Mike was impressed that someone could think out loud and on the page simultaneously—even if that person was wrong most of the time.

“Do you feel like killing anyone during these episodes?”

“No. Feels more like high school heartbreak.”

“Did someone break your heart in high school?”

“Of course. Feels like we’re fishing here.”

“We are. Could you possibly have anything else to reveal?”

“I was an altar boy as a kid.”

“Did you get molested?”

“No.”

“Too bad. You’d be rich.”

Mike had told him about the killing. The fear, the sweating, the loneliness, the firefights, the bullets he took, the blood, her death, the crying. The ability to open up about it all only provided more questions.

Ernest rubbed his cheek where his therapist beard should have been.

“Can you still get it up?” he asked.

“You’re pretty old. Can you get it up?”

“Nothing wrong with your sense of humor. So you didn’t think of any fresh ideas?”

“It’s pretty random.”

"Like the duck?"

"Like the duck."

"Thinking about her doesn't necessarily trigger an episode then?"

"If it did, I'd be in an asylum by now."

"You think about the good and the bad?"

"Everything. I cry about it. I have a drink. I usually don't have to flee the premises or check myself into the emergency room."

"You don't remember going?"

"Not until I regained consciousness. Woke up to a pretty hot nurse. Wish I hadn't soiled myself when I walked in."

"What were you doing before?"

"Can't remember. In line for a movie maybe? I vaguely remember a woman screaming into a phone."

"How many of your buddies died over there?"

"We lost guys too fast. I didn't have time to make friends. I can't picture faces. I only have snippets of a couple of guys. How he was shot. What info was on his dog tags. A hometown or two."

"Ever feel guilty you survived?"

More old territory, Mike thought. Spinning in circles.

"Yeah, but I've always had bad luck. I guess I was saving up all my good luck to make it back. Living and carrying on seemed the best way to honor those guys who didn't make it. Certainly better than being angry all the time."

"Damn."

“What?”

“You’re well-adjusted.”

“I know. Pisses me off, too.”

New Poetry from Abby E. Murray

Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want

It takes a misdelivered *Cosmo*
to finally understand what I want
and how to get it. Gwen Stefani
tells the truth on page 89.
We believe in Gwen because
her apron of chainlink stars
sparkles over a black bustier;
star-spangled bondage, says an editor.
She slouches, holds the heel
of her right white Louboutin
in one hand as if to say Congress
respects my body, as if to say
rifles aren’t worth shooting.
This is what I want and Gwen
is here to deliver. When she slips
into a red sport coat and jeans
she comes in loud and clear:
grant proposals that write themselves,
cartons of baby formula
sold from unlocked shelves at CVS,

eight days of rain over California.
Because Gwen knows how to get
everything I want, she can afford
to be an optimist. Pharrell is rad,
her mom is rad, the whole world
is rad. I agree, Gwen, I do!
And I'd be giddy too in that baby blue
jacket, its faux-bullet spikes screaming
peace talks and pacifism,
bubblegum fingernails that tell me
soldiers who drop my writing class
are only on vacation. She pulls
her Union Jack sunglasses down
with one finger. This means Ruth Stone
never died but went into hiding,
it means the grocery store lobsters
have escaped, it means I can refinance.
Gwen steps into a pair of fishnets
as if to say the 2nd Infantry Division
won't return to Iraq, as if to say minke whales
are singing on the Japanese coast.

Notification

This is how I imagine it.

A black Durango follows me to work,
then home, tracks me to King Soopers
where I buy peppermint tea and milk.

It idles in the parking lot,
the driver obscured by clouds
of bitter exhaust. I know it is a man
by his shoulders, his grinding jaw.

I know he has drawn the short stick.

He tracks me home and waits
until the faint clicking of our luck
slows and stops. He steps outside
on a current of aftershave
and starched polyester,
pulls another man in uniform
from the backseat: he will stay
to help me make arrangements.

They use the handrail on the wooden porch.
They expect to be wounded.

Happy Birthday, Army

I'm wearing lace this time,
gold trim over a black slip because
Happy Birthday, Army.
I offer you these blisters
in my black leather stilettos
with mock-lace cut-outs.
Tom says it's a short ceremony,
we'll be done by nine
but he tells the sitter eleven
and I wedge a book into my purse.
In seeing nothing I've read too much:
the empty-bellied howitzer
kicked up in the corner of the ballroom
points me toward the cash bar,
casts a shadow over the cream
in my Kahlua and turns the milk grey.
I drink it. I order a second
before the emcee tells the men
to seat their ladies.

Uniforms droop by the exits
on velvet hangers, gas masks

sag on wooden dowels.

Quick, boys! Post the colors!

The lights drop and the general
mounts the stage in a shimmer
of green and yellow spotlights,
tells us to enjoy ourselves for once—
but first these messages:

thank you to our guest speaker,
the anchor from ESPN,

thank you to our sponsors,

thank you to the sergeant major
here to recite “Old Glory”

in the center of the room:

I am arrogant.

I am proud.

I bow to no one.

I am worshipped.

We are dumbstruck,

his recitation flung toward us
like an axe through paper.

Tom finds him later

and pays for his beer.



Johann Wilhelm Preyer, "Still Life with Champagne Flute," 1859, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.

The chandeliers are champagne,
crystal brims sloshing with bubbles.
Someone's wife wins a kayak

and just when I think
a lieutenant nearby will surely jump
from his table to shake
a bag of limbs from his eye sockets,
a truckload of body parts
grey with longing for the soul,
a woman's voice whispers
from beneath the howitzer,
the rented microphone
on fire with song:
happy birrrrthday, dear arrrrmy
a la Marilyn Monroe,
and we are all a bunch of JFKs
in our lace and heels
and cummerbunds and cords,
watching a five-tiered cake
piped in black and gold buttercream
being pulled between our tables
by a silver robot
and shrug into the silk of knowing
we could end all this
with the flick of a finger
if we wanted.

Majors' Mafia

They want us to call ourselves
the *Majors' Mafia* and by They
I mean We because the Majors
are our husbands and they say
very little about what is discussed
during cocktail hour
at the Commander's house
as if our words sound friendly
but are muffled by a closed door
and the Wives giggle as if to say

we are not exactly *thugs*
as if to say they would *never!*
and a knot of words loosens
at the bottom of my throat
like a paper lantern released
as if to say *get out*, as if to say
I am on fire, and I have a problem
with the gang metaphor
but also the possessive *Majors'*—
that bitch of an apostrophe
at the end of my husband's rank
like I am, we are, owned
the way farmers own turkeys
and we are just as articulate,
just as grand, just as preoccupied,
because farmers are in the business
of keeping turkeys alive until they aren't,
farmers don't keep turkeys warm
because turkeys have rights
and these women can't possibly
be standing in a half circle
around a stack of spangled cupcakes
generating ideas like these,
like names, like possessives,
like we aren't making ourselves
more palatable by forming a flock
and nibbling sweet things,
and the sugar stars in the frosting
remind me how one can trick
a headstrong bird into eating
by leaving shiny marbles in its dish,
like the bird will think *marbles!*
I love marbles! then forget to fast,
and these women can't possibly
be women, they must be birds,
they sound like a lullaby
when they say we need a group name

because we need a Facebook page
in order to *express solidarity*
and they say solidarity is a survival skill
for all Army Wives,
and the paper lanterns are rising
again up my neck toward the brain stem
and my spine is burning
and I'm thinking about the tomahawks
and sabers and rifles and hunting knives
on the walls here in this lovely home
and I'm thinking survival
is a bread that I can't eat here,
and I ask them to excuse me
for a moment so I can check
my face in the bathroom mirror
where I find a sugar star wedged
in my teeth and I'm thinking
I could use an ax to fix that.

When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major's Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion

Hi is this Becky this is Abby Murray my husband
(different last name) is the S-3
in the battalion where your husband is being sent I
don't know what S stands for or
why 3 anyway Tom's leaving this position and your
husband will replace him soon
you sound nice anyway welcome do you
know if there's something I'm
supposed to say or help you with Tom just said
welcome her and I guess I have
I don't know what does it mean to feel welcome
as a woman I really can't say
every week I feel more at home in a compact mirror I
think I was asked to call you

because we are both women my dog doesn't even speak
when I tell her to but
she does bark a lot she likes to speak on her terms
anyway the
battalion mascot is a buffalo so people are really into
buffalos here buffalo hats
sweaters earrings umbrellas leggings there's a big dead
buffalo in the entryway to
battalion headquarters it was donated by a museum in
Alaska the taxidermist
even glazed his nose to make it appear wet like he
was snuffling the prairie just
seconds before a glass case sprang up around him and BAM he
had a few minutes to breathe
his last bits of air while the herd backed away my
daughter loves the buffalo but is
concerned about his lack of oxygen he's not the only
symbol of death in that hallway
there are rifles and sabers as well I'm sorry
I hope you like it here the
winters are mild and there's cedar everywhere it smells
good on the coast Tom
says you're from Texas that's nice I was in
Texas once it was Texasy
I should warn you your husband might ask you to do strange
things for reasons he can't
articulate like calling women because you are a
woman and we should all be welcomed
to the jobs we don't have if there's anything you need
 try Google or maybe call
someone who knows your voice I'm sure you'll be great
 you sound happy



Philippe de Champaigne, "Still Life with a Skull," 1671, Musee de Tesse, Le Mans, France.

"Notification" was originally published in Ragazine.

"Happy Birthday Army," "Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want," and "Notification" appear in [Hail and Farewell](#). Hail and Farewell was [winner of the 2019 Perugia Press prize](#).

"Majors' Mafia" and "When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major's Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion" are previously unpublished.

New Nonfiction from Andrew Clark: A Church For All

On a spring day in 1984 my grandfather, Leonard Clark, whom we all called Papaw, gathered his children, grandchildren, and friends around a little building on a patch of land near the French Broad River outside of Asheville, North Carolina – a place formerly known as the Snake Farm – to dedicate a tiny church he called the Little Brookside Chapel. A preacher, one of Papaw's drinking buddy's sons, said a few words at the dedication; Papaw said he was "one of the good ones." The Little Brookside Chapel was a small structure with white painted wood siding, narrow windows, and two rows of tiny pews inside that could seat about twelve people. At thirteen years of age, I didn't want to spend my Saturday at a church dedication, and beyond that, I couldn't understand why Papaw wanted to build a church in the first place.

Growing up in Barnardsville, North Carolina, and later settling in Woodfin, Papaw was a master of many trades. He served in the Marine Corps., worked as a baker, served as a policemen for the City of Asheville, worked as a prison corrections officer, established his own hydraulics sales and repair business, and opened a convenience store, where on multiple occasions I saw him give groceries to poor folk who came in the store with children hugging their legs. Papaw was a Mason, a real estate investor, a landlord, a city Alderman and even a songwriter, penning and recording a Christmas song called "[Happy Magic Christmas](#)" that is in the Rockabilly Hall of Fame. None of this explained why he was building a church; Papaw never went to church. He didn't even like church.



To say Papaw had a complicated relationship with religion is a serious understatement. When my sister, who had married a preacher, had problems in her marriage, my grandfather reminded her that he had warned her against the union, that she had been a “damned fool” to marry a “sorry preacher,” and that she would have been better off picking up a fella from a bar. He often mocked how divorced people took up religion after their marriages failed. My parents, having divorced when I was 3, were both active in their churches and Papaw said they’d gone “plum church crazy.” He would talk about how one could find God out in nature or in almost any place on earth, *except* a church. At the same time, he would talk about how Jesus had blessed him over and over in his life.

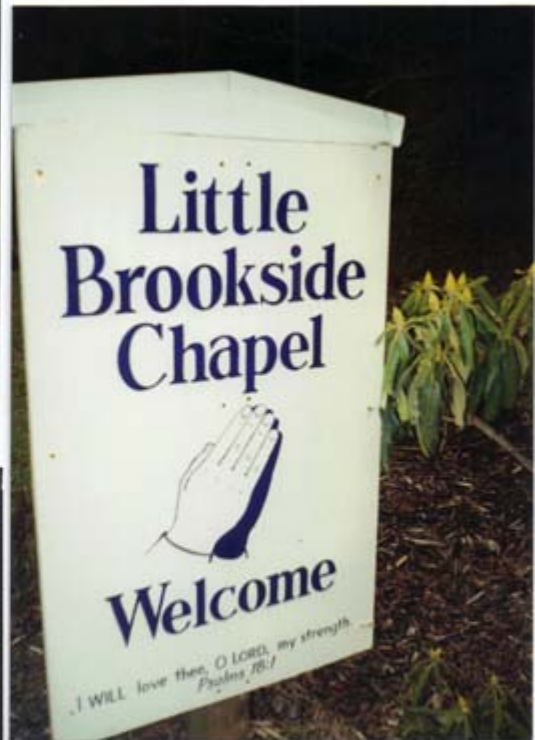
You see, papaw didn't dislike Christ. He disliked Christians. Maybe not all of them, but damn near most. He was an expert at finding and pointing out hypocrisy on the part of men of the cloth, or people in local congregations who were in church on Sunday morning, but anything but Christ-like Monday through Saturday. Papaw hated hypocrisy. He would say, "I might be a real son of a bitch, but at least I'm honest." Once when a televangelist was exposed on the news for having an affair, Papaw jumped up from his seat and yelled with delight at the television.

So where did Papaw get the idea to build a church? In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, my grandfather took many vacations to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s, along the seemingly endless stretch of highway toward Myrtle Beach, my grandfather stumbled upon a tiny church. The church was in Conway, South Carolina, where it still stands – it is known as The Traveler's Chapel. Built in 1972, the church is one of the smallest in the United States. With narrow pews that will seat 12 people, the church is always open, with a big guestbook placed by the door for folks to sign. So inspired was Papaw by the little Traveler's Chapel, that he decided a few years later to build a similar church on land he owned on New Stock Road near Weaverville. Because the site he chose had a small stream beside it, he named the church the Little Brookside Chapel. Like the Traveler's Chapel, Papaw put a white picket fence out front.

Of all his accomplishments, building the Little Brookside Chapel gave Papaw the most pride. He would often talk to me about the church, and how he built it for sinners. "Drunks and whores" are welcome to the church, he'd say, and "no one can judge them or look down their long noses at them." He was proud they could come to the church anytime they wanted, as the church was open 24 hours a day. The lights inside and outside of the church were always on, and my grandmother, Christina Clark, decorated the church with a nativity scene

each Christmas. Papaw would say, "There won't be no fighting in my church, 'cause there ain't no preachers."

To understand the man and his animosity toward church, it is necessary to go back. Way back. Papaw grew up in the middle of the Great Depression and he grew up poor. So poor that the one room shelter used by his family had no running water and the weather came in through cracks in the roof and walls on the children as the huddled in bed at night. I will never forget his description of how in a hard snow, there would be lines of snow across the floor of their home, including across his bed. As a young boy, he would cajole as many cats as he could under the pile of covers to help keep his feet warm. In this backdrop of poverty, the family's misfortunes were compounded when Papaw's father, my great-grandfather, went to prison. When this happened, Papaw said everyone turned their backs on the family and left his mother and her children to fend for themselves. Nowhere was this more pronounced than when his mother took her children to church. People at the church turned up their noses at the poor hillbilly children sitting on the pews in shoes with holes that showed sock feet. My grandfather told stories of how families would cross to the other side of the street if his mother and siblings were passing. The churches, he felt, had been somewhat kinder to his mother when she was a longsuffering wife with a husband who had trouble with the bottle. Sure she and her children were trash, but they made a nice a charity case for the church. However, when Papaw's dad went to prison, that all ended.



So the little church Papaw had found on his way to Myrtle Beach had intrigued him. It was a church without the pain of his religious experience. It was a church without people, just a place you could get off by yourself and pray. In building the Little Brookside Chapel, he built a church for himself and others, but was also trying to heal an old wound that had festered over the years. He had been deeply hurt seeing his mother treated poorly by “church people” but somehow he had never blamed God for this, understanding Psalm 118 better than most: “It is better to trust in the lord than to put confidence in man.” With the chapel, it was as if he found a kind of redemption and wanted the world to share in it.

In the late 1980’s and through the 1990’s the church became a

popular community fixture, and several guest books were filled up over the years from folks who were passing through or heard about the chapel. There were numerous weddings at the tiny church. In the early 2000's the church was vandalized repeatedly. "Don't they see," I remember Papaw saying, "This church is for all the people! It don't matter what you believe." He fixed the chapel repeatedly, had it repainted and kept it open for the sinners and tourists who might have a need. Papaw would say that the vandals probably hated church because they had been looked down on, and that if they knew him they might have a lot in common. In April of 2005, arsonists burnt the church to the ground. After that, I saw the spark in my grandfather's eyes begin to dim. He did not rebuild the church. "Those bastards will just burn it down again," he explained. The Asheville-Buncombe County Arson Task Force never had any leads in the fire. The church had been open 24 hours a day, seven days a week for more than 21 years.

For many believers church is not just a building in which you pray. For many, attending church is also about community, about making connections with other people. Part of me mourns that my grandfather never found a church community where he found this kind of connection. But when I think about it, he found community in other ways. He loved to go fishing with drinking buddies, although it might be more accurate to say he loved to go drinking with fishing buddies. He kept up with some of the policemen he'd served with, became involved in Woodfin politics, and had a large family with many grandchildren and great grandchildren to keep him busy. He also loved animals, rescuing abandoned feral cats from the neighborhood, which he then chastised constantly for attacking the birds that flocked to his yard for the dozens of birdfeeders he'd installed and kept full.

We lost Papaw in October of 2012. He'd lived his whole life in the mountains of North Carolina, where his ancestors

settled after coming from Scotland before the Revolutionary War. For the last several years of his life, he talked wistfully about the chapel, and it was such a fixture in his life that his sons, upon his death, had his and his wife's tombstone engraved with an image of the chapel.

I visited the site of the Little Brookside Chapel last winter. Back away from the church site there was a section of the little white picket fence that used to stand out front. A sign from the church was also on the property, faded by time, the letters barely legible. As I walked back along the creek behind where the church once stood I saw the wooden cross my grandfather had mounted between two large creek rocks there on the bank. It still stands there, defiant, marking a place where even a sinner like me can get close to God and say a prayer, unjudged by man.



New Nonfiction: Soft Target

When I was nineteen years old, in 2016, I joined the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). I sat at my family's kitchen table, holding in my hands a contract for 13 years (standard length for a 00178 Armour Officer), over the moon with happiness and excitement. My family stood around me, confused and apprehensive but trying hard to be supportive. I could feel their unsaid thoughts: *you are making a mistake.*

I signed the papers.

I felt logic leave the building, felt a scorpion made of bullet casings climbing up my back.

*

At twenty, I went to basic training. In the CAF, it's called Basic Military Officer Qualification (BMOQ, say "bee mock") and it takes place in a giant, 14-story grey zigzag a full kilometre long. The building is officially known as the Batiment General Jean-Victor Allard Building, but its nickname is the Megaplex, or simply the Mega. "Megaplex" is also the name of a Furry convention that has taken place annually since 2002, in Florida. Perhaps I should have gone there.

My BMOQ course was taught by a rotating stable of instructors, all colourful characters in their own rights. One went by "Bear" and had had his nipple piercing torn out during a parachute jump, one was a cheerful master seaman who was into RuPaul's drag race in the creepy way straight men sometimes are; another couldn't stop talking about killing children. He wasn't the only admitted war criminal who taught us, but he was the one who made the biggest impression.

He was a big guy, exuberant, dramatic, profane, broken. He had gone to Afghanistan twice, and he had killed Taliban child soldiers there, and now that he was back in Canada teaching recruits, he just could not shut up about it. Killing children, he told us, was easier than killing dogs. He had done it and he would not hesitate to do it again. When everything else from that course fades into an age-hazed blur, I will still see him standing by our sixth-floor window, talking about how easy it is to kill a child.



Banksy, Bethlehem street art.

Other candidates could laugh it off, ignore it, giggle at it, whatever, but I was the one whose brain it stuck in. After basic, no one mentioned it at all. Sometimes want to ask my former classmates, "Did he really say those things? Did he kill those children? Did you forget? Did I hallucinate?" The instructor will probably die before me, and when he does, I may be the only one on the planet, aside from the parents, who remembers that those children ever even existed.

Things vanish like that, in the army. Uncomfortable moments, questionable incidents, they all disappear. The moment passes, the words fade, and then it's back to business, back to the military's hollow approximation of normalcy. Things vanish because they need to vanish, because if they didn't vanish, every soldier would end up like me, overburdened by memories, struggling to parse or even comprehend what they experienced. Under heavy physical weight, limbs fracture (mine did); under heavy mental weight, minds will do the same (mine did).

*

Before I joined, I interviewed a family friend for a school project. He had been one of several "mission monitors" authorizing NATO airstrikes in the former Yugoslavia during that nation's protracted collapse. This is how it worked: pilots enforcing the no-fly zone would see something suspicious— the four barrels of a ZPU anti-aircraft gun, or a Serbian attack helicopter spinning up its rotors— and radio the NATO control centre in Verona, Italy, asking for permission to destroy whatever they had spotted. Based on their information, he would say "yes" or "no".

From 35,000 feet, it's hard to get a full picture. Bombs sometimes don't fall where they're aimed. The ZPU turns out to be a playground, the helicopter is taking off near a mosque. You know how it goes. "I estimate I killed about 200 kids over there," he told me "but you can't let that catch up with you, or it'll kill you." Everyone knows someone whose deeds have

caught up with them. Things vanish because they need to vanish. You forget, or you die.

There's a famous Mitchell and Webb sketch where two SS officers are nervously chatting during a firefight. "Are we the baddies?" one asks, in his charming British accent. "Our hats have got little skulls on them!" We laugh, but it's really not that funny. The British Royal Lancers wear skulls on their hats, skulls and two crossed lances and their motto *Or Glory*. American soldiers graffiti Punisher skulls on their helmets. Canadian soldiers wear them on their t-shirts.

"Are we the baddies?"

Yes. Of course we are. We've always been that way.

In the army, beneath every normal-seeming moment lurks the possibility of unimaginable violence, of cruelty beyond measure. Robert Semrau is a former Canadian army captain convicted of "mercy-killing" a wounded Taliban fighter, of shooting a dying man in the head with his pistol. I bought his book before my second army course, Basic Military Officer Qualification-Army (BMOQ-A, say "bee mock ah"). If you read the book, it's very clear that Robert Semrau had a pretty good time in Afghanistan, except for the whole murder trial thing. What's subtle, what whispers to you underneath each page, is that Robert Semrau cannot understand why he was arrested at all. What did he do that was so wrong? Only shot a wounded man to death.

Violence without thinking, cruelty as a reflex. The army puts enormous effort into making sure its soldiers are capable of these. Military training is a process not of breaking down and building up but of warping under pressure, the way plastic does when it's bent. Like plastic, the warping process leaves its stress marks on the brain. Like plastic, if you try and bend the soldier back into the position he was before he got warped, sometimes he will break.

*

BMOQ-A is what's known in the CAF as a "cock course". "Cock" is an acronym; it stands for "confirmation of combat knowledge". A cock course is a military training course that is designed to suck as much as humanly possible. It's meant to harden the soldier against all physical and mental torment, designed to produce in him, her, or them the ability to be instantly and reflexively violent.

At the beginning of BMOQ-A, a friend asked me something about the army. I don't remember what he asked, but I remember what I told him: that for me each day in the army required constant buy-in, that as soon as I woke up each morning I had to convince myself that everything I was going to do that day would be morally acceptable to me. "Are we the baddies?" I asked myself every single day, and I didn't have the spine to answer "yes."

It is the narrowest of all possible lenses. If I had asked myself whether everything I was going to do that day would be morally acceptable to the families of the civilians killed by NATO, by ISAF, by the IDF, maybe I would have had my realizations sooner.

*

In the middle of BMOQ-A, my platoon was getting inspected by the commandant of the Infantry School and his regimental sergeant major (RSM). The RSM was a sturdy French-Canadian, and he walked from soldier to soldier, tapping us each on the chest and asking us why we joined. When he got to me, I babbled something about how interesting tank combat was to me (I'm an armour officer, remember) and my desire to lead men.

"You do not have *it*," he told me simply, and moved on to the next man, asking him the same question.

"RSM," bellowed the young officer. "For queen, god and

country, RSM!”

“You have *it*,” the RSM said.

It: that precious ability to be cruel without thinking, to commit violence in the name of ideals that were never worth anything in the first place. To absorb and replicate the violence around you, to live in it, marinate, become it, and never ever even think of being anything else. *It*, the desire never to question but only to serve. I don't have *it*. I never had *it*. I'm too soft, and I couldn't harden myself, not the way they could. Some people have tried to reframe softness as strength, as necessary and worthwhile, but to me it never felt like anything but failure.

“I'm showing you my 'girl side,'” said the strikingly handsome young infantry officer, tall, with honey-tan skin and warm blue eyes. His “girl side” was the side of himself that he showed to girls he was hitting on. “Maybe I'll start hitting on you next.” Was he joking? Wasn't he? I fell regardless. I fell despite myself. For the rest of the summer, he told me how much he loved spending time around me, how highly he thought of me. He ruffled my hair and flashed me tender smiles and for just a moment I forgot we were learning how to kill people.

We were in the woods on a five-day navigation exercise, and the sergeant was showing us how to put a grenade under a water jerry can so that if someone goes to get water, the grenade explodes. If a civilian is going to use that water, we have all just committed war crimes.

On the last live-fire range of the course, I mistook the realistic human targets for real people. I turned to the man next to me and was about to tell him to stop firing, that there were people on the range, but then I realized I was already shooting.

*

Sometimes I wake up panicked and sweating, thinking I'm back on BMOQ-A and late for formation.

Sometimes I think about the senior captain who paused a Russian propaganda video right as it was talking about "sexual degeneracy" and said *doesn't this make you wish you were Russian?*

Other times I remember the corporal who said *I'd rather fuck a five-year-old than a tranny, because at least the five-year-old is a real girl*, to a quiet smattering of laughter that accepted the joke.

It's really enough to make you want to scream. I want to go up to every CAF member I see in the hallways of my workplace and tell them *Listen buddy, I feel it too. I feel that growing gnawing sense of wrong. I hear your doubts in my own head! Give in, man, give in, let's leave this place together, let's those quiet doubts dominate our brains until it forces us to be the opposite of what the army wants. Please, just take my hand and let's get out of here! Let's build something outside this, something real and not based on the logic of cruelty. Let's do it! We can do it, if we really want to.*

If you say that to a soldier, of course, they'd think you're crazy. So I want to say it to you.

This essay is for you. It's for you to read and feel each wrong, for you to get to know the absurdity of this system the same way I have, for you to realize there is nothing, not one scrap, not one shred of it worth saving. It simply shouldn't exist.

I hope that if you take nothing else from this, you take that. I hope it stays with you. I hope you do something with it.

I hope I do too.

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

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

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

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

I watched Robert Kennedy’s funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai [in which more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, were murdered by American soldiers]. I reread all of George Orwell...[and also] the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her

five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child...[rescued twelve hours later] reported that she had run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for "a long time." Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew.

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

*



Julian Wasser/Netflix

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

*

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

I saw nine of them recently, saw the first one almost by accident and the rest of them with a notebook. I saw Hell's Angels on Wheels and Hell's Angels '69. I saw Run Angel Run and The Glory Stompers and The Losers. I saw The Wild Angels, I saw Violent Angels, I saw The Savage Seven and I saw The Cycle Savages. I was not even sure why I kept going.

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

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

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

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

*

Throughout all these mental roving runs Didion's usual vein of skepticism and aloofness. Danger, for her, is personal, never institutional. It's the threatening man on the street or the hippie at the door with a knife. She's not a revolutionary, not exactly a liberal (though she was one of the first to, in a 17,000-word essay for the *New York Review of Books*, advocate for the innocence of the falsely-accused Central Park Five). Visiting Huey Newton in jail, she mentions that "the small room was hot and the fluorescent light hurt my eyes." A reader can't help but think, at least for an instant, Suck it up, Joan! But mere pages later she's on the campus of San Francisco State, which has been temporarily shut down by race riots, and her shrewd eye sees the truth: "Here at San Francisco State only the black militants could be construed as serious...Meanwhile the white radicals could see themselves, on an investment of virtually nothing, as urban guerrillas."

*

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

Oakley looked stricken. "Yes, sir," he said.

*

Now it's August 13th and there is a rally at the police station in downtown Colorado Springs. Ten days prior—the same day as El Paso—nineteen-year-old De'Von Bailey was shot seven times in the back while fleeing Colorado Springs police. I watch the unbearable video, circulating on the local news outlets, taken from an apartment security camera across the street. De'Von Bailey, young, short-haired, skinny as my son, runs across a sweep of pavement just like any you'd see in any suburban town. He doesn't pull a weapon or even turn back to look over his shoulder. Two armed cops enter the frame not far behind him. Then, he falls, skidding in a seated position, staying briefly upright. For a moment, from this distance, in a still

image, he could be merely relaxing, sitting with one arm propped behind him. Then he crumples forward and the police close in, cuffing his hands behind his back before rendering aid. In the hospital, De'Von Bailey dies.

Today, the attorneys for De'Von Bailey's parents are holding a press conference outside the police station downtown. The Pike's Peak Justice and Peace Committee has put out a call for citizens to show their support for the Baileys and their demand for an unbiased investigation. I like the Justice and Peace Committee, a group of tenacious old-timers who sometimes, at unpredictable intervals, convene to hold a giant sign in front of the Air Force Academy that reads, "WHAT ABOUT THE PEACE ACADEMY?" They mostly get yelled at from car windows. They have used the same sign for years; the phone number at the bottom has been whited over and repainted several times; it is canvas, more than five feet tall and probably ten feet long, printed with perfect spacing and propped by two wooden posts, so as to be quickly unrolled and then rolled back together for a quick exit as necessary. I joined them in a protest once, this past April, when Donald Trump spoke at the Air Force Academy commencement. I held one end of their sign. I was the only military spouse there, though there were a couple of long-haired Vietnam-era veterans. A man offered me eight hundred dollars to help pay our rent if my husband would divest from the military. "Just until he can find other work," he said. He said he was helping another service member get out now, a chaplain. This man was incredibly earnest, thin, gray-haired, in jeans and a flannel shirt, with no pains taken over shaving or hygiene; I believed him. I thanked him, knowing full well my husband, an officer, is comfortable in his job and does not want to leave, knowing this man would be disappointed in what that says about us; and he shook my hand and said to call him, the church would help get us out when we were ready. I did not know what church he meant, but I am sure its people are good.

So if the Justice and Peace Committee wants me to show up for De'Von Bailey's family, I will. I scrawl a hasty sign on a piece of foam core I bought at King Soopers: "NO POLICE BRUTALITY." On an investment of virtually nothing, I drive downtown to the corner of Nevada and Rio Grande to see the street blocked off with traffic cones and police cars, a crowd visible already in front of the brick police station. Parking on a side street, I take my sign and head there on foot, along sidewalks with cracked concrete and sun-bleached grass growing up between the paving. I try to face the words on the sign away from scrutinizing traffic. I pass the bail bonds shop from which Dustin and Justin Brooks, 33-year-old twins, set forth a week prior, wearing bulletproof vests and brandishing their handguns, to confront these same protestors. (Dustin and Justin Brooks are what Joan Didion might call men with an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.) That was three days after De'Von Bailey's murder. The brothers intimidated the predominantly black gathering until finally being arrested, shouting "All lives matter!" as their hands were pulled behind their backs. Seventeen riot police were dispatched in the skirmish, standing behind plexiglass shields. Hopefully the irony was not lost on anyone that a black boy had been killed for running from police unarmed and two white men could walk around waving handguns and shouting in a crowded area and simply be arrested, off to live another day. If the Dustin-Justin brothers hadn't been shouting, they may not even have been arrested. Colorado is an open-carry state. Who feels safe in an open-carry state varies widely depending upon circumstance. On November 27, 2015, shortly after we moved here, an armed, agitated older white man was seen pacing around outside the CO Springs Planned Parenthood building at 11:30 a.m. Concerned employees and passers-by called the police, but were told there was nothing they could do. "It's an open-carry state," police said. Eight minutes later, the man, 57-year-old Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., burst into the building, shooting three people dead and wounding nine others. One of the employees killed was a Filipina-born Navy

wife, who had enjoyed her new job in the Springs, her husband's duty station. The Planned Parenthood location here has been changed at least three times, and the address is not advertised on their web site.

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

*

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

*

That night I chat with my husband about Joan Didion and the late sixties and ask him if he thinks the upheaval we're feeling now is anything like what people must have felt in

1968, when it must have seemed in some ways that the world was ending. He was a history major in college, so he tends to have a good perspective.

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

I recall Didion's essay "In the Islands," which I've recently finished, one section of which she spends watching the funeral of a young soldier at the military cemetery in Oahu, in the dip of an extinct volcano crater called Puowaina. He was the 101st American killed in Vietnam that week. 1,078 in the first twelve weeks of that year. That essay, however, was written in 1970. Maybe 1968 felt somehow quaint by then. Maybe, by then, people were wishing they could go back.

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

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

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

I think he's right. This is no summer of 1968. I start to believe that Joan Didion, less threatened by the events of the time than many, but more observant than most, held up pretty well, considering. And over time at least a few of the problems she was experiencing, some attributed to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and treated with lifelong prescriptions, waned. Others didn't. She's not a calm person by nature; she's anxious; I imagine she cannot turn off her brain. She's 84 now. She's survived the loss of her husband and her daughter.

I'm not sure how. I do know that ten years after the events she describes in the title essay of *The White Album*, finally completed in 1978, she ends with the admission, "writing has not helped me to see what it means."

*

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

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

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

I turn around, laughing. "Why?!"

She laughs, too. "I don't know!"

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