

New Fiction from Benjamin Inks: “Jack Fleming Lives!”

Okay—let me set the record straight. It started as a bunch of rumors first, before we lost control of it. But it really started as a stupid word game at a mission briefing.

“Your porn name!” LT began. “Pet’s name and the street you grew up on.”

He was keen on figuring out everyone’s combination. Mine was Bella Tulane. Not bad if I was a chick. We got some other good ones: Snickers Calhoun, Georgie Wilder, Sherry Potts. Then this quiet, young private comes in and LT demands his info.

“Uh. Jack Fleming,” the kid says, and our jaws drop.

There is a moment of silence before LT says, “My God, that’s a handsome name,” bringing fingertips to temples like it’s too much for his brain to process.

“*Jaaack Flemmming*,” Sergeant Kim tries it out, and sure enough, it’s as smooth on the lips as it sounds in the ears. A phonetic Adonis.



Jack Fleming Lives! A modern Adonis

Rivera starts slow clapping like this kid just did something Silver-Star worthy. And it wasn't just Rivera; we were all possessed by the garish weight this name carried.

"Jack Fleming could be an American James Bond," I say.

"Very classy, indeed," LT agrees. "The type of name that'll wine and dine you—before taking you back to its apartment for a tender pounding."

This poor kid spoils our fun by telling us that Jack is a fluffy white Maltese, and Fleming is a residential byway in meth-town USA. We get a few more jokes out of it and then stop laughing when the captain comes in so we can all shout "at ease" at the top of our lungs. Captain throws a pen at Rivera, who's the loudest, and we're once again reminded that people will most likely try to kill us on our next mission passing out rice and beans.

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We go about our business the next few days with no mention of

Jack Fleming, that glorious gem we'd tripped over only to neatly rebury in the dirt for being too beautiful for any one man to possess. Like any good improv joke, it was kind of a one-time deal. Outside of that briefing room it wouldn't have made much sense.

Then the Battle of Jowgi River happens. You might have heard of this one: Taliban down a Black Hawk and decide to ambush the rescue party. You haven't? Well, we get out there; it's outside our A0, but we're available so we go. These pararescue guys are dug in on the wrong side of the river. They had already recovered the pilot's remains and incinerated the bird, and they're taking heavy fire by the time we arrive, trying to decide if they should risk getting wet running or just fight their asses off. And Rivera—crazy sonofabitch—starts laying down 240, and he is just on-point, I mean—we're watching bodies drop while these PJs are stringing a rope across the river to exfil. I'm surprised Rivera didn't burn the barrel off—he was just rolling in brass by the end. So, the PJ guys get away, and they come up on our net flabbergasted.

"Who's the maverick on the 240?" they ask. "We want to know the name of the man who saved our lives."

Rivera is just all pink. I mean, we respect the hell out of these guys, shit—most of us wanna *be* these guys, or Rangers or SF or what have you.

"Aw, geez," Rivera says, twisting his foot like a schoolgirl. "Tell 'em . . . tell 'em Jack Fleming did it. Yeah, *Jack Fleming* is a machine-gun Mozart."

It made us laugh pretty good.

And that was just about the birth of it. We can blame it all on Rivera. If he wasn't such a humble prick . . . You see, he set the precedent. Anyone did anything cool afterwards—Jack Fleming got the credit.

-Jack Fleming shot and stopped a VBIED, though it was really Kim

-he CPR-revived a choking baby; LT did that one

-unearthed and snipped an IED

-rendered aid to an Afghan cop with a sucking chest wound

-befriended a pugnacious village elder

-attended Mosque with a terp and locals

-found multiple weapons caches

-got all our confirmed kills

The list goes on. Anything even remotely noteworthy, we all just said Jack Fleming did it. Why? Fuck, I don't know. We were bored, I guess. Even I caught two dudes at 0300 pushing an IED in a wheelbarrow and said Jack Fleming spotted them. Saw them clean and green through an LRAZ atop a cliffside OP. Called it in; got put in for a medal. Though back at the FOB and outside of official paperwork, me getting these guys was a rumor added to the growing list of miracles performed by one Jack Fleming. For some reason this felt more meaningful than another stupid ribbon for my Class A's.

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Now I first started to suspect we had opened Pandora's gossip-box when my little cousin serving in Iraq's drawdown messages me on Facebook. My deployment had ended, and I was back in Fayetteville being pulled around the mall by my preggers wife Christmas shopping. So, I check my phone while she's checking juicers or salad spinners or some such nonsense, and there it is.

[Hey Cuz! You ever serve with a Jack Fleming? Might have been around during your rotation?]

My first instinct—apart from laughing my ass off—is to push this farce as far as I can before coming clean with the truth.

[Fuck yes, I did! Jack Fleming is the goddamn patron saint of mayhem! You know how many lives he saved by being so deadly? No one wanted to do shit for ops without Jack Fleming covering our six!]

Now, what he says next causes me to pause. Maybe I feel chills, too.

[Well, he's here in Iraq! Must have volunteered for another deployment. I haven't met him, but it gives me peace of mind knowing he's out there.]

So, once we get home from x-mas shopping, I call up LT, Kim and Rivera and tell them we might have a little problem on our hands.

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We figure it's highly improbable that our collective imagination gave birth to some sort of phantom Fleming—if that's what you're thinking. More likely there's some poor bastard in Iraq who just so happens to be named Jack Fleming. Some unwitting private who we just turned into a wartime legend. You hear our rumors, then you pass a fit-looking kid at the FOB rockin' *Fleming* nametape, and you think: *could it be?*

We figure it's probably best just to let this one run its course. We've seen a few shenanigans in our time. For a hot minute, after this one episode of *Family Guy*, everyone was shouting *Roadhouse!* at anything requiring the least amount of physical effort. Well, we stopped saying roadhouse after so long, so we figure we'd all stop with the Jack Fleming bullshit, too.

But uh. . . man. Was I ever wrong on that account.

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We get sent out to endure us some more freedom, this is over a year later, mind you. Different crew, but still got Rivera, Kim, and LT is now a captain.

We land in country eager to meet our ANA counterparts and quickly realize the whole Jack Fleming thing has turned somewhat cultish. Beyond your desert-variety war stories. I'm talking mythic proportions. You can't so much as take a shit without seeing graffiti about an impossible sniper shot made by Jack Fleming. You hear people in the chow hall chatting about orphans he carried out of a fire or the high-risk livestock he helped birth. Stranger stuff than that, stuff people have no right believing in. How he shot an RPG out of the sky. That there's really three Jack Flemings, triplets who enlisted at the same time. One Jack Fleming donated a kidney to another Jack Fleming who got shot—I mean, it's just getting bizarre. Kim comes up and swears he saw a Jack Fleming morale patch worn by some Navy Seal types. Apparently, it's a cartoon face of a sly 1950s-era alpha male: Ray-Ban sunglasses, a dimpled chin and slicked-back hair. An acronym in gold underneath: *WWJFD?*

Even the ANA are hip to the Fleming mania. We'll be sitting before heading out on a patrol, and they're rattling off Pashto: *"Something, something, something—Jack Fleming!—something-something-something,"* and they all start laughing.

The more this goes on, the more I rue the day we ever discovered the name.

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It's worse for Rivera. While it annoys me, it terrifies him. Maybe it's his strong catholic morals, prohibitions against lying and all that, or maybe he feels more responsibility because—as I said—he started all this.

"I'm freaking out, man," he says. "I can't eat. I can't sleep. I'm not worried about getting schwacked by the Taliban, I'm worried about what people are going to do when they find out we've been stealing our own fucking valor."

"Wait now," I say. "Do you really think people believe in Jack Fleming?"

"The other day I saw two local national kids huddled over a drawing book. I approached with a smile expecting to see Ninja Turtles or some shit, but—*no*—it's a custom-made Jack Fleming coloring book. Someone designed it and ordered up a plethora online. They're all over Afghanistan, man!"

"Okay," I say. "But what can we do? This is bigger than us now."

"We have to put Jack Fleming to bed."

"Yes, but how?"

"I don't know. But it has to be huge . . ."

"We're going to have to kill Jack Fleming."

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So, we put on our murdering-hats and spend an inordinate amount of free time scheming how to pull it off. It sort of feels like trying to kill King Arthur. You can't just make up lore; these things unfold organically.

And then OP Tiger Eye gets overrun. Now, I know you've heard of this one. It had been hit once or twice before, yet from what I gather it was a fairly chill place to kick back and survey the land. Well, the boys up there at the time get ejected, practically tumble down the mountain. A Taliban flag flies up the pole. Prudent thing to do would be to send out a drone, forget we were ever up there. Well, when QRF responds they light up the mountain with indiscriminate 50-cal, just as

an f-you on their way out. This starts up a damn-near four-hour firefight neither side wants to break from. OP Tiger Eye is a landfill by the end of it. We take some casualties, and there's even an MIA who never made it off the mountain. Real *fog of war* shit. It's the perfect opportunity we need to kill Jack Fleming.

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We spread the seeds of hearsay far at first, and it's amazing how quickly it doubles back to us. Any FOB we visit outside of our AO we circle up and gab about Jack Fleming's untimely demise. We write in Sharpie on DFAC tables:

Jack Fleming, KIA OP Tiger Eye.

God rest his beautiful soul

And you know what? It takes. Better than we could have hoped. A little too well. People go into public mourning. FOB Fleming gets erected. I'm seeing little candle-lit vigils outside of MWR hooches. It seems the only thing we did by killing Jack Fleming was to further cement his legacy. Looking back, I'm not sure why we expected a different outcome. Course, everyone present at OP Tiger Eye claims "It's not true. Jack Fleming wasn't even there. Which means . . . he's still alive!" This—I guess—is how a series of counter-rumors gets started. Kim tells us that he heard from a Marine out in Helmond that his terp heard from a jingle truck driver that Jack Fleming secretly married a war widow and now lives peacefully with the local population out in Mazār-i-Sharīf. Luckily, these marriage rumors are branded conspiracy and most go on believing Jack Fleming perished.

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We edge closer to heading home and it becomes increasingly clear we must do the right thing and shatter the Jack Fleming mythos. People can't go on believing something that doesn't

rightly exist. Also, Rivera will probably need psychological counseling. Not for PTSD, but he can't live with these lies any longer. They're corroding his insides.

A soft-spoken ANA sergeant approaches and asks if we know Jack Fleming's wife and children back in the States, and Rivera starts trembling like he's about to spontaneously combust.

"Please tell his family," this sergeant says to me, "that we are praying for God's peace to surround them during this sorrow."

"That's such a kind sentiment, Hakim. I'll make sure they know!"

And Rivera stares me down with the look a man makes right before he stabs you in the fucking face. I tell him it just wasn't the right time or person.

We decide the "right time" is conveniently our last day in country. Captain—formerly LT—holds an emergency formation, a "family meeting" as he calls it. The ANA form up, too, and Rivera, Kim and I march out, somewhat informally.

Kim starts us off. "We wanted to say a few words about . . . Jack Fleming."

Heads lower in reverence.

Kim looks at me, looks at Rivera. No one wants to be the one to squeeze the trigger. Rivera stands in awe before this humble formation of both Afghan and American soldiers. Hard-working people, a little rough around the edges, who believe in a better world so much that they're willing to die for it.

"Fuck it," I say, using aggression to hype me up. "Listen here, men. You people need to know that Jack Fleming is nothing but a big, fat—"

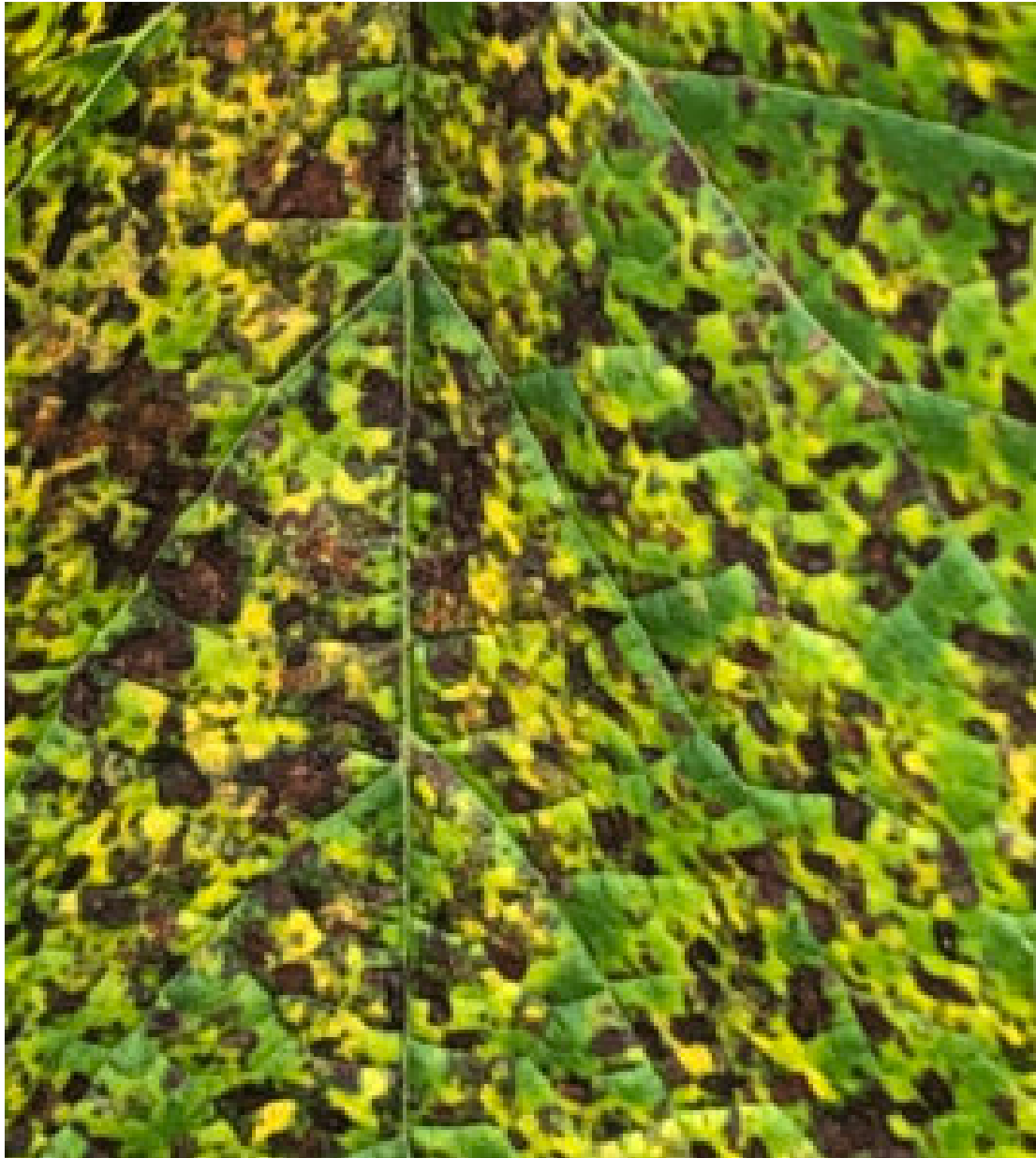
"American hero!" Rivera practically pushes me over shouting

this. He looks left, he looks right. “And Afghan hero,” he says. “A hero to two nations. And I’m proud to have served with such a man. But he wasn’t extraordinary. He was just like you and just like me. Having Jack Fleming on our side didn’t give us a superhuman advantage out there. He was a simple man who only wanted to do his best. And his best was pretty damn good. *He* wanted to be good. As we all aspire to be. And I think you know that deep down we all have the capacity to be our own Jack Fleming.”

The formation ends in mass applause. We’re clapping, some are crying. As this goes on, Kim leans into Rivera and says, “So, I’m pumped and all, but what happens when we get back and the president wants to award nine posthumous Medals of Honor to Jack fucking Fleming?”

Rivera bites his lip. “We’ll cross that landmine when we come to it.”

New Poetry by Chris Bullard: “All Wars Are Boyish”



THE MELTDOWN MEADOW / *image by Amalie Flynn*

All Wars Are Boyish

Autopilot on self-destruct,
we went joy riding on tanks
into the thermal wasteland.

The static of roentgens played
like parked ice cream trucks
on the detection equipment.

Playgrounds went incendiary

as squalls of cluster bombs
skipped over the pavement,

but our camo HAZMAT suits
insulated us from the acts
we had been ordered to take.

They were on the run, maybe,
or counterattacking. We took
rations beside a napalm campfire.

Jets among the sweep of stars,
scorched amphibians peeping
in the meltdown meadow,

what more could a kid ask for,
except dinosaurs? They were
already working on them in the lab.

New Fiction from Nancy Stroer: “Move Out”

I drum the steering wheel of the rental car with the flats of my palms. It's the opening riff of a song by Yaz. It takes three notes, four—that blossoming into a fanfare of electronic horns, and I'm a teenager in the 80s driving these same roads in Ingrid's crap Toyota, bellowing along.

“Don't make a sound, move out,” I serenade the interior of the rental car. I stop. No one moves out without some battle-rattle, no matter how much duct tape they've applied to their loose parts. With soldiers, who the uninitiated think of as following orders without hesitation, news of moving out is

often accompanied by a fair amount of bitching and moaning. It's human nature to resist change, even good change. Inevitable change.

I picture myself as a nineteenth century woman, children clinging to my long skirts. My husband has just returned from the saloon where he's swapped lukewarm beers with a prospector recently returned from California. "We're goin' West," my husband announces, gold dust sparkling in his eyes.

"Men!" I grunt to the womenfolk over our respective washtubs later. "Are not the rational sex!" Even as the other women snort in agreement, though, I am picturing *myself* astride a horse, leading a wagon train, encountering endless prairies, mountain vistas, cultures unknown. I'd be sweaty, sure. I'd be worrying about the kids' educations and about snakes camouflaged against their basking rocks. Nonetheless, I allow myself a frisson of excitement.

Had it been common in nineteenth century white America—or anywhere, anytime, really—for the woman to be the one who badgered her husband to pick up and go? To keep moving, moving? This was true for me, so it must have been true for others.

What happened to those people—women or men—when they finally ran out of road?

When, after years of maneuvering around the planet, the road finally ended or worse—they landed back where they started, like I had? I'd tried to stay ahead of this day. If I moved far enough, fast enough, I thought I could outrun it. For thirty years my husband and I had always managed to wrangle one more job overseas—but not this time, and probably never again. My husband jokes about the heel marks I gouged into the floor of Heathrow Airport as he dragged me across it for the last time.

Rental cars are like modern day covered wagons, I tell myself

as I drive. I love the snug, Little House on the Prairie feel of them—pristine, reliable. Chock-full of everything you need. Adventure awaits! But the built-in sat nav on this one is getting on my nerves. I learned how to navigate the old-fashioned way, in the Army. By wandering, map in hand. Boots on the ground. Even when I was a teenager, we picked unfamiliar roads and drove wherever they took us. There was nothing for teenagers to do but drive, nothing to look at but kudzu pulling down power lines and old porches. But that habit of open-ended exploration has stood me in good stead over the years. Nowadays people are at the mercy of cars and phones and satellites that tell them what to do, where to go, what to listen to. In the olden days we drove endlessly, listening to music. We prided ourselves on discovering new music and mixed cassette tapes ourselves, glued to WUOG if you were trying to bag the latest indie band, or to 96 Rock in Atlanta, waiting for that pregnant pause between DJ prattle and the beginning of our favorite songs so we could pounce on the record button. There are hundreds of channels on this radio, or whatever you call it, feeding me nothing but the songs it thinks I want to hear. Delayed gratification, always a scarce commodity in America, this land of plenty, is a complete goner.

When I realize I'm enjoying song after song with never a moment of dissonance, I search for the off button. I find it, eventually, on the steering wheel. This car is taking me backwards, not forwards. Its fancy time machine runs in reverse and that is not where I want to go.

I know cars, for crying out loud. I was a maintenance officer. But in England I live—lived! Shit!—two blocks from the doctors' office, two blocks the other way to the dentist. The kids walked out the back gate to their schools, joining the mass migration of other children, parents and grandparents and strollers, dogs on leashes, boyfriends and girlfriends tethered to each other, tethered to their devices, but walking—to the supermarket, to cafes and restaurants and pubs.

To church if I wanted to, which I didn't. But I could.

I walked in Turkey. I walked and rode my bike in Germany. In Japan I rode my bike to work, frogs leaping like synchronized swimmers into the rice paddies as my front wheel shushed them out of the way. People in suits sweeping in front of their businesses as a team—everyone clearing a gentle path for the day to follow.

But here people get in their cars to drive two blocks. They have to—there aren't any sidewalks, no bike paths, no walking trails. They roll their windows up to keep the climate inside their cars perfectly adjusted to their exacting specifications. Never a bug or a bead of sweat allowed. No careful curl blown by the wind. All safe and certain, which is nice but also the gateway to complacency.

“You couldn't just stay in England?” My extended family is happy to have me back on American soil but they know me. They worry about me. They have this westward ho idea of me, that all the world is mine and I can go where I want and do what I want for as long as I want. They don't know the complexity of visas and immigration, or that it might not be moral to think of other countries as unconquered territory. When I try to explain that exploration opens minds, their kind faces remind me that experiences are always filtered through default settings—settings that usually have to be adjusted back at the factory. I do not want to be reminded of this. I am even more perplexed than they are, and also angry, that I could not just stay in England.

Unfortunately, I also like my husband. The wagon train wouldn't be the same without him singing nonsense songs to pass the time and cooking up a mess of beans at the end of the day. We've spent hours with the real estate agent this week but now he's back at the generic hotel, drinking a beer that's trying too hard to be something it's not—beer with grapefruit essence? what the hell?—and watching home and garden shows

while I look at more houses. He doesn't argue that I should just pick one perfectly fine house and be happy. He knows me, too. He knows I need to go see one more, then one more after that, and as many more as I need until I'm utterly exhausted.

What if God was one of us? asks a road sign.

Sanctuary of Jesus Christ of Jefferson Road, two miles.

Fresh Peaches!

Fresh peaches and sanctuary at the same roadside stand? I'm cross-eyed from the monotony of three house models per curated subdivision, carved out of the unspoiled open areas of my youth. Kute kountry kitchens opening onto family rooms. Family rooms opening onto treated redwood decks, overlooking other redwood decks. Every mile unfurling a growing dread that I will never find a home to return to in this state of my birth.

The Day of the Lord is coming! Are you ready?

Hell is hotter than summer in Georgia!

Best Price for Firewood! One by one, the signs mark the approach of either outcome—pull over, or don't pull over and suffer the consequences. I've just looked at the last house on my list and have nowhere else to go, so I pull over.

The rest stop isn't more than a collection of sheds and gravel but I know it from the free-standing marquee that announces, *Prepare thy chariot and get thee down.* Mine's the only chariot pulling in. I don't want church, even if it's the only unique thing, the only structure I find with any character, for miles. At their core, all world religions are the same, and pretty good. In practice I find them suffocating. Controlling in unique ways. On the other hand, a real Georgia peach straight from the orchard is not something you can get just anywhere. A pure, good thing. I get myself down from my chariot and head for the produce stall, squinting against the

sun. Besides the peaches there are tomatoes, cantaloupe and sweet corn, a dollar an ear. Jars of preserves and honey and piccalilli for considerably more than a dollar. I want all of it but they only take cash. That, at least, is like Europe and Asia. I open my wallet as the sleepy teenager weighs out some peaches and I ask, "Which one's the church?"



He points to the largest shed, which has a cross over the doorway, a couple of two-by-fours nailed at right angles. In England, a cathedral soars—soared—over our town. It squatted on medieval haunches over a crypt from Anglo-Saxon times. The windows glowed as darkness fell, as the organ and the choir celebrated Evensong. On Friday afternoons in Ankara the men left me in their shops—utterly alone and surrounded by carpets and ceramics and gold—and went to wash their feet as the muezzins called them to prayer. Next to our house in Misawa, the old farmers, themselves bent at right angles from a lifetime of planting rice, kept company with the millet gods at the tiny kibi jinja tucked into the woods. I never had the slightest urge to join any of them, but none of these neighborhood protectors were faking it. Their actions were authentic to them.

My eyes take a second to transition from blazing sun into the dim of the shed and when they do I see a man sitting on a metal folding chair at the end of the room, otherwise empty except for a stack of other folding chairs, and a kiddie pool in the corner. A shaft of sunlight comes through a gap in the roof and beams directly onto his bowed head.

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do—clap to awaken the gods? Bless myself with water from the pool? But he looks up just then and says, "You ought to wash those peaches first. The fuzz can be unpleasant."

"Yes, sir," I say. I wonder how he knows what's in the paper sack. "Is there a hose somewhere?"

He nods towards the pool. "You can use the baptismal font."

"Business a little slow during the week, I guess." It feels strange but also sanctifying, washing peaches in a blue plastic oval with cartoon mermaids swimming on the bottom. The comedian Eddy Izzard has a bit where she compares the Church of England to fundamentalist religions. "Cake—or death?!" the church ladies threaten, while forcing a cup of tea on people after Sunday services. Cake or death. Cake or death. Is this glorified shed for real, or just an idea it has about itself as so much of America seems to be? I want to feel it in my heart but will run at the first sign that I've been lured there by peaches, only to be ambushed by proselytizers. Georgia is full of realness, and also full of traps. This has never changed.

My husband and I have seen the bylaws of Homeowners' Associations this week, page after page of requirements for what can and cannot be planted in your own front yard. I picture the garbage cans along a German street on pickup morning, each precisely aligned with the others. Japanese rock gardens; bonsai trees tightly bound by tradition. All enforcements of ideas, all of which made me claustrophobic. In

contrast: the kapıcı of our apartment building in Ankara mowed straight across the rose bushes with an electric hedge trimmer, laughing and joking with the kapıcıs from other buildings up and down the street, as they first maimed and then watered their own rose bushes from garden hoses, splashing water on the leaves with no care whatsoever that they'd be scorched in the relentless sun. Was that the inşallah approach to gardening or just carelessness?

How does a person find a true place in this joint? And by joint I mean the entire planet. There are so many rules, some of them good but never all of them in the same place at the same time. And oh, how I'd cried at the sight of those orderly ranks of garbage cans every week, even as they irritated the shit out of me, as the day of our departure from Germany approached. I wanted to get out of the car and shove them all off the perpendicular, mess them up. I'd gone to Germany as a young soldier; I left as a young married woman. So much had changed during those eight years, so it wasn't that I couldn't handle change. I could. I was black belt qualified at rolling with the changes. And Germans drove me crazy with their incessant pressure to conform. They were interested in Americans, at least, bless their scarred, soul-searching hearts, but because I looked like a stereotypical German, I guess, they wanted to bind me with all the Regeln, spoken and unspoken. In Japan and Turkey there was no chance of being mistaken for a native, and therefore, we could fuck up with more or less impunity but would never fit in. There were different rules for foreigners. In England, we might have looked like we belonged but it was made clear to us, in large ways and small and non-stop even after fifteen years of hearing the question, "How long will you be here?" that the asker wanted to know when the door would finally be hitting us on the asses on the way out. Whether they should bother to speak to us at all after the end of the conversation.

Americans, the nomadic (colonial) types, the military types

(come to conquer or occupy) were the best I'd ever met at forging tight personal bonds—that were then raggedly severed as they rotated to their next duty stations. No one ever said a definitive goodbye. They said, *maybe next time!* Except next time, if there was one, was a whole 'nother thing. I had left too many pieces of my heart in too many places now. I should keep moving forever, like a shark, or I should never have left. I never felt at home in a place until I was just about to leave it.

“Business is always good,” the man says from his folding chair sedile. As some people age their appearances morph into the universal. Men and women begin to resemble each other. This man was probably a light-skinned Black guy, but he could have been white. The kid outside at the produce stand is definitely a Black kid. Black farmers are a thing out here in the Georgia countryside, unlike in Germany or England. And these days Asian people, and people from Central and South America, pop up everywhere, with properly slurry, twangy Southern accents. This has always been the case, but has actually improved in my absence. “Not many make time for the Lord on a work day, but you can learn a lot, sitting here in the quiet.”

“Um,” I say, feeling self-conscious. I love to find a treasure at an unplanned destination. Are Black and white Georgians more comfortable with each other now, or less? I wonder if I can speak honestly with him about what I'm thinking. Whether my rambling confessions would be welcome, or an intrusion on his more than likely hard-earned solitude.

“You'd always be welcome here.” His eyes are honest but gentle. He is looking at me.

Tears spring to my eyes like they did at the Immigration desk in the Atlanta airport. A woman, golden-skinned, dark-eyed, stocky and stern and not to be joked around with, stamped my passport with gusto and looked me dead in the eyes as she handed it back. “Welcome home,” she said, welcoming me to a

club she felt certain of. As if she didn't know how uncertain I felt. She couldn't know that no one ever says that to me anywhere else.

I shake the excess water from two of the peaches onto the concrete slab of the floor although I don't like to be sloppy in public. I saw an American guy at the Tokugawa shrine in Nik-ko, utterly disregarding the procedures for washing first one hand, then the other. He'd taken hold of the dipper with his unclean meat hooks; rinsed his mouth and then spit back into the communal trough. The memory still jerks me awake at night. "Would you like a peach?" I ask the old man.

"Don't mind if I do," he says. I'm not fooled by how picturesque he is. It's not like I'll be doing my weekly grocery shopping with the disinterested teen outside. An eight dollar jar of piccalilli is a bijou idea *I* have about living in Georgia again. No, I'll be driving to Publix with everyone else in the...public. And I won't be hanging out with this guy on his rusting chair, hanging on every reminiscence of his Alice Walker-type childhood. I'll be eating a ham sandwich at my desk for lunch, just like I've done in every country I've ever lived in except Turkey. Pork products were a little hard to come by there.

I go to the car to finish my peach. Maybe the old guy was fine with swirling the peaches in holy water but I can't bring myself to wash my hands in it. I've got wet wipes in my purse, still on the passenger seat. Car unlocked. No one will rob you out here, but that has been true everywhere we've lived. Or maybe I'm utterly unaware that my guardian angel comes dressed in the Kevlar of privilege.

My phone rings. "Where are you?" Behind my husband I hear the hum of the hotel air conditioner and I shiver. I hate air conditioning. It's hotter in Georgia than almost anywhere but I am always cold here.

“Eating a peach,” I say. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“The little strings will get stuck in your teeth.” He’s a Midwesterner, which is why he is so charmed by Georgia. It’s one of the reasons he’s so charmed by me.

“Already there,” I say, sucking on my incisors. I’ll have to floss later. “It’s a metaphor.”

“Huh?” My husband, tolerant but bemused as always, is not so secretly looking forward to hanging up the harnesses after so many decades on the trail. He can’t wait to mow grass according to the height requirements set forth by the Homeowners Association. He’ll bring brownies to the doorsteps (or more likely, some charred thing off the grill) and commiserate about the people with too many gnomes in their yard. He doesn’t actually care about the gnomes or the height of the grass, but he is and always has been completely cool with the inevitable.

“You fight everything,” he says. It’s true. It’s a character flaw, or a malabsorption of Army nutrients. I’m the pioneer who leads with her chin. “Just come back to the hotel.”

“Not yet,” I say. I sit in the hot car, one foot grounded on the gravel parking lot, the other hovering over the gas pedal. The brake. I don’t want any more peaches and eventually I get too hot. I throw the pit on the ground and close the car door for the return trip to the charmless hotel – so I can drink a craft beer that’s trying a little too hard, and swim in the rectangular chlorine pool.

New Poetry by Rochelle Jewell Shapiro: “Each Night My Mother Dies Again”



FALLS ON NIGHT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

EACH NIGHT MY MOTHER DIES AGAIN

Each night the phone rings—
Your mother has passed.

Each night I expect to be relieved, but night falls on night.
Each night she is the mother who makes waffles,
batter bubbling from the sides of the iron, the mother
who squeezes fresh orange juice, and serves soft-boiled eggs

in enchanted egg cups. Each night I squint into her face as she carries me over the ocean waves, her arms my raft. Each night she refills Dr. Zucker's prescriptions for diet pills and valium. Each night she waters her rosebushes with Dewar's. Each night I see her hands shake, her brows twitch. Each night she adds ground glass to the chopped liver, rubbing alcohol to the chopped herring. Each night she puts a chicken straight on the lit burner without a pot. Each 2:00 a.m., Mrs. Finch from 6G phones—*Sorry to say your mother is naked in the hallway again.* Each night my mother is strapped into her railed bed at Pilgrim State, curled into a fetal position, her hands fisted like claws. Each night she calls to me from her plain pine coffin, calls me by the name she gave me, the name she hasn't forgotten.

New nonfiction from Rebecca Rolland: "A Letter to My Ten-Year-Old Daughter"

"Something terrible happened today."

"At my school?" you asked.

"No," I replied. "But at a school, yes."

You asked how far away it was. You sat and blinked hard. You asked whether you would be safe. You reminded me that a

similar thing had happened before, a week ago, or ten days ago, you couldn't remember. You asked if a person could be shot and still live.

I sat with you and answered your questions. I tried to be as honest as I could.

But what I didn't tell you was that I had looked at the photos of the dead children and their teachers and saw in them your face, saw your upturned smile in their smiles, saw their hope and happiness and honor-roll certificates and thought of you. What I didn't tell you was how ashamed I felt having to have this conversation, how I couldn't in all honesty promise you safety, not when there were active shooter drills and active shooters.

And what I didn't say was how I write about empathy, teach empathy, but how empathy without compassionate action is never enough. It's not enough to feel the pain of others if we simply sit with that pain. It's not enough to have conversations that stay in our individual homes; that don't become broader conversations, and concrete acts in the world.



What I didn't tell you was how much a generation of mothers and fathers and grandparents and relatives are hurting, with the images of those dead on their hearts, and how much more the relatives of the dead are hurting, the lives of their loved ones become statistics. The number of children lost to gun violence, the number of shootings since the start of the year: all these statistics may be true. But they don't always help us see those children: the boy who wanted to spend the summer swimming, the girl proud of her grades, the gymnast who wore a bright pink bow and stared at the camera, confident of life ahead.

What I didn't tell you was how I can't bear, as part of this generation, to leave you and all the children your age with this crisis, a problem referred to as simply "intractable," as if gun violence were like the weather, and simply existed, no matter what.

Before this letter, I wanted to write about how to talk with children about gun violence, about how to assure them they are safe, but stopped. You are not safe, not completely; this we

know but cannot say. You are not protected from the horrors of this world.

And as I think about all the other families across this country, and all the other children and teachers fearful to go to school, I want to make one critical distinction. Yes, we need to sit with our children, to hear them out, to answer their questions as honestly, with as much care, as we can. Yes, we need as much patience as we can muster, and care, and time. But we need to do more than sit in the face of this overwhelming terror and death. We need the empathy to feel the pain of others, and then the empathy to take action for change. We need to promise our children they will be safer, not only because of our empathy, but because of the concrete changes we decide on collectively. We need to be able to face our children and, out of love and honesty and respect, tell them we will do more than empathize. Across the political spectrum, we must gather together, in horror and pain and grief, and then, we must model for our children that we can act.

New Nonfiction from Dr. Anthony Gomes: “The Gun Culture in America: Will There be a Light at the End of the Tunnel?”

To fathom the Gun Culture and gun-related violence in the US, it is important to understand *The Second Amendment (Amendment*

II) to the United States Constitution, which protects the right of the people to [keep and bear arms](#). It was adopted on December 15, 1791, as part of the first ten [amendments](#) contained in the [Bill of Rights](#). The Second Amendment was based partly on English common law³the right to keep and bear arms and was influenced by the [English Bill of Rights of 1689](#). [Sir William Blackstone](#) described this as an auxiliary right that supported the right of self-defense and resistance to oppression, in addition to the civic duty of every citizen to act in defense of the state. It originated during a turbulent period in English history during which the authority of the King to govern without the consent of Parliament, and the role of Catholics in a country that was becoming Protestant was challenged. Ultimately, James II, a Catholic, was overthrown in the Glorious Revolution, and his successors, the Protestants William III and Mary II, accepted the conditions that were codified in the Bill. One of the issues the Bill resolved was the authority of the King to disarm its subjects, after James II had attempted to disarm many Protestants and had argued with Parliament over his desire to maintain a standing (or permanent) army. The bill stated that it was acted to restore “ancient rights” trampled upon by James II.

There have been several versions of the Second Amendment. As passed by Congress and preserved in the National Archives, the amendment states: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The [Supreme Court of the United States](#) has ruled that the right belongs to individuals, while also ruling that the right is not unlimited and does not prohibit all regulation of either [firearms](#) or [similar devices](#) (Epstein, Lee; Walk, Thomas G. September 18, 2012). [State](#) and [local](#) governments are limited to the same extent as the [federal government](#) from infringing this right.

Early English settlers in America (Hardy, p. 1237; Malcolm, Joyce Lee (1996). p. 452, 466), viewed the right to arms and/or the right to bear arms and/or state militias as important for one or more of these purposes (in no particular order):

- enabling the people to organize a militia system.
- participating in law enforcement.
- deterring tyrannical government; (Elder, Larry; July 3, 2008)
- repelling invasion.
- suppressing insurrection, allegedly including [slave revolts](#); (Bogus, Carl T, Roger Williams,1998)
- facilitating a natural right of self-defense.

Excepting for the last, none of the other purposes hold sway today.

THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION (NRA) AND ITS ROLE IN THE POLITICS OF GUNS

The NRA was founded in 1871 in New York by William Conant Church and George Wood Wingate. It is headquartered in Fairfax, Virginia and had 5 million members as of 2017. The NRA advocates gun rights and informs its members regarding gun related bills since 1934. Since 1975, the organization directly lobbies the presidential candidates, the US Congress and Senate for and against gun legislation. According to Center for Responsive Politics, nearly 90% of NRA donations went to Republican candidates. The NRA spent \$54.4 million in the 2016 election cycle, almost all of it for or against a candidate but not a direct contribution to a campaign. The money went almost entirely to Republicans. Of independent expenditures totaling \$52.6 million, Democrats received \$265! The NRA's largest 2016 outlay was the \$30.3 million it spent in support of Donald Trump for President. (Mike Spies and Ashkley Balcerzac, OpenSecrets, November 9, 2018). According to ProPublica and the Federal Election Commission, most of the

money went to support the Republican Presidential candidate and Republican Congressional races in 2020. Undoubtedly, the NRA is one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington that rates political candidates targeting candidates that are for gun control. Essentially, it uses the Second Amendment as cover to promulgate gun dissemination and profits on gun sales, much at the cost of gun deaths of Americans.



Guns are displayed at Dragonman's, an arms seller east of Colorado Springs, Colo.

THE IMPACT OF NO-ACTION ON GUN-CONTROL ON YOUNG HIGH-SCHOOL AMERICANS

Since the Columbine High School shooting on April 20, 1999, in Littleton, there have been 229 U.S. school shootings not including misfires or instances in which a shooter was stopped before inflicting deaths or injuries. In 2022 alone there have been 212 mass shootings. On May 14, 2022, a [racist attack](#) at [a Buffalo, New York, supermarket](#) by an 18-year old gunman took the lives of 10 people and left three more injured. And just only 10 days later, an 18-year old gunman killed 21 people including 19 children at an elementary school [in Uvalde, Texas](#). It was the deadliest school shooting in America [since Sandy Hook](#).

There is no purpose in reviewing these ghastly events; however, to mention just two that touched me the most since these were only children, is what happened on December 14, 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, and on May 24th in Uvalde, Texas.

There is no doubt that Adam Lanza, the mass killer of Sandy Hook was mentally deranged, but without guns he would be unable to go on a killing spree of innocent first-grade children. Although the states of Connecticut and New York passed stricter gun laws, despite President Obama's highly emotional appeal and repeated appeals after other gun shootings, the US Congress and the Senate did nothing. To me this was and remains unconscionable and speaks of total inhuman cowardice of politicians in front of the world at large. Besides, most of these politicians are of the Christian faith who flaunt their Judeo-Christian faith and the greatness of our western civilization. I have wondered where Christ fits in this equation!

On the night of October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock of Mesquite, Nevada fired more than 1,100 rounds on a crowd of concertgoers at the Route 91 Harvest music festival on the Las Vegas Strip

in Nevada, leaving 58 people dead and injuring 851. He was found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. This incident was the deadliest mass shooting in the United States committed by a single individual whose motive remained unclear. As usual it reignited the debate about guns and guns laws. This time around the attention was focused on *bump-stocks* used by Paddock to convert his semi-automatic rifles to fire at a rate of a fully automatic weapon. The usual pictures on TV; the mourning, the flowers, the prayers, President Trumps visit to the injured, but NO action whatsoever!

And it happened again: On February 15, 2018, a 19-year old Nikolas Cruz opened fire with a semi-automatic gun at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida killing 17 and wounding 14 others, five with life-threatening injuries. Apparently, he purchased the semi-automatic weapon a year ago when he was only 18. It is ironic that the legal age to purchase alcohol in the US is 21 years, whereas a semi-automatic weapon can be purchase at the age of 18! As usual we saw the same pictures on TV: students running helter-skelter, parents crying, TV and newspaper correspondents saying and writing and asking the same questions all over again, and politicians offering prayers and condolences.

Mental health has been often used as a scapegoat. Yes, indeed these killer individuals could have significant psychiatric issues, that need to be dealt with, but without a gun and a semi-automatic moreover, they couldn't kill. Yes, they might stab some, and even kill some with a knife or whatever else, but the overwhelming number of killings with a semi-automatic wouldn't occur. Mentally deranged people are all over the world, but they don't go killing innocent people at random, because they don't possess guns! Furthermore, it is difficult to determine which medical condition is associated with a desire for mass killing, and young people with mental disorders unless institutionalized are well known to stop their medications for a variety of reasons.

It seems these killings of young people, and the after-emotions have become routine, and in a few days all of this drama disappears from the radar, until another killing surfaces. All of this despite the fact that the majority of Americans favor some gun control. Today, as before, parents all over the US agonize over the safety of their children. It is ironic that instead of passing sensible gun reforms, some elected politicians and lawmakers would prefer to further militarize our schools by arming teachers.

Our politicians and gun advocates can take the examples of several countries in the world, in particular Australia, where the current homicide rate is the lowest on record for the past 25 years. In 1996, after a mass shooting in Tasmania in April of that year, Australia passed the National Firearms Agreement. In the Tasmania killing, known as the Port Arthur Massacre, a 28-year-old man, armed with a semi-automatic rifle, shot and [killed 35 people, and injured 18 others](#). Under the 1996 law, Australia banned certain semi-automatic, self-loading rifles and shotguns, and imposed stricter licensing and registration requirements. It also instituted a mandatory buyback program for banned firearms. (Eugene Kiely, *The Wire*, October 4, 2017).

What can be done to prevent gun violence in America?

1: Ban on the purchase of all semiautomatic and automatic weapons, bump stocks, and high-capacity magazines. These are military style weapons and need not be used for hunting or protection.

2: Strict background checks and *uniform gun-laws nationwide*. There is high rate of gun violence in Chicago despite strong gun laws; however, guns in Chicago come from Indiana.

3: Increase age limit for gun purchase to 21.

4: Better attention and alertness to mental health issues. However, this is a difficult problem to deal with in our

multi-faceted culture and our dysfunctional health care system.

4: Campaign finance law in the US changed drastically in the wake of two 2010 judicial opinions: the Supreme Court's decision in [Citizens United v. FEC](#) and the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals decision in [SpeechNow.org v. FEC](#) (Campaign Finance Historical Timeline, 2011). In a nutshell, the high court's 5-4 decision gave a green light to corporations and labor unions to spend as much as they want to convince people to vote for or against a candidate.

Our corrupt political system based on lobbies and campaign contributions by individuals, PAC's, super PAC's, and corporations should end forthright. Each individual should be able to contribute an X amount, and the pool of public money should be divided equally both in local and presidential elections.

5: Regarding the Second Amendment it is important to recognize that at a time when the [English Bill of Rights of 1689](#) was written England had no standing army. And when the Second Amendment was adopted on December 15, 1791, as part of the US Constitution, the US had gained freedom from British colonialism and imperialism just 15 years before, and consequently feared a foreign invasion. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that we have the largest and most sophisticated military the world has ever seen, and we don't need guns in individual citizenry to protect us from a foreign invasion. Those amongst us who feel threatened by our own government, should keep in mind that their guns and militias are no match to our government military forces. Thomas Jefferson believed that unless every generation had the right to create a new constitution for itself, the earth would belong to "the dead and not the living". (Thomas Jefferson to William Plumer, 1816.)

These arguments in no way means that we should take away guns

for self-protection, sport and hunting. One can well understand that for rural America gun ownership for sport is part and parcel of their culture.

These changes would go a long way in asserting our humane values and our democracy and shall not deprive any person in the pursuit of life, liberty, and property without due process of law.

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