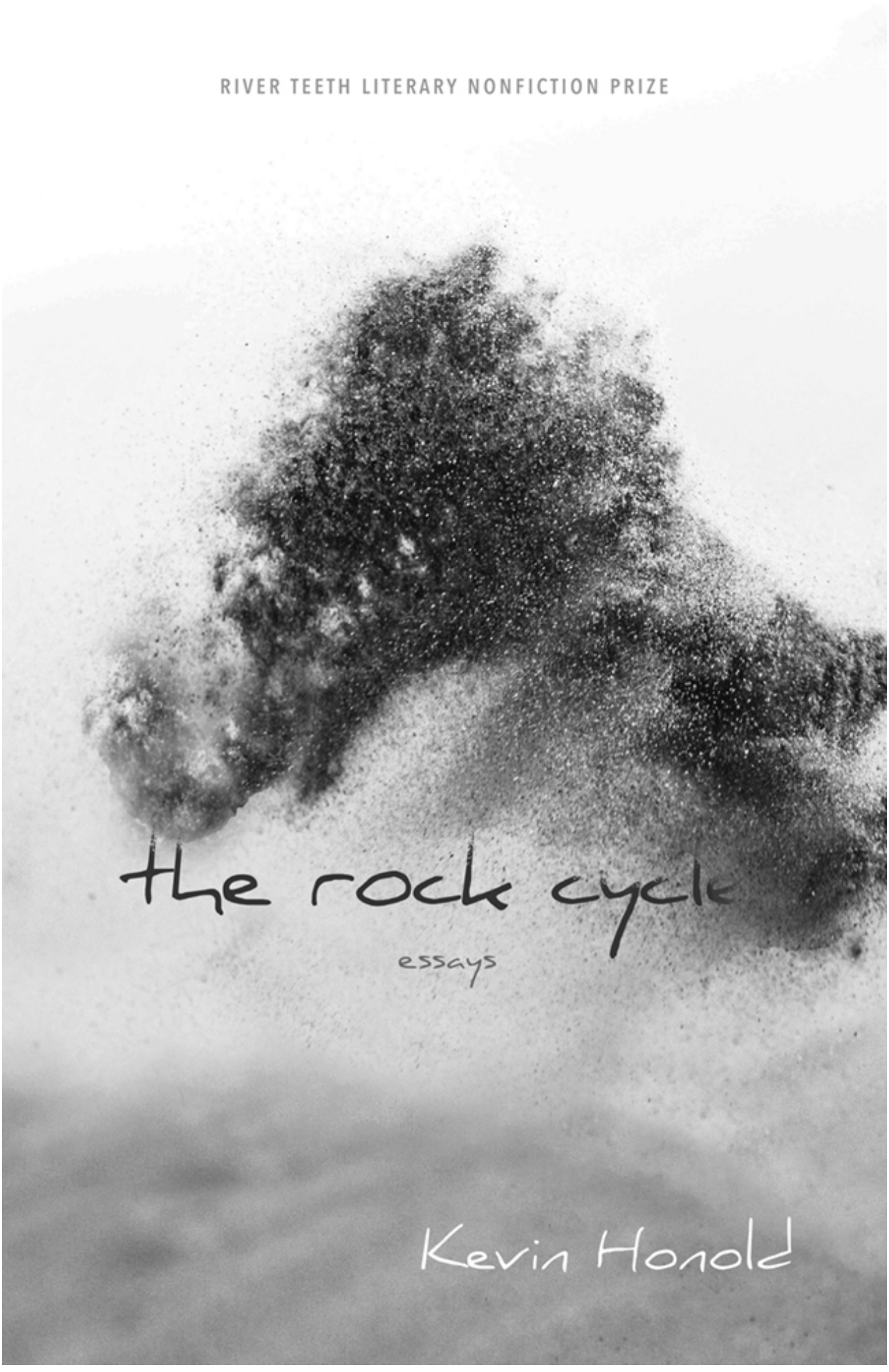
New Review: Mike Carson on Kevin Honold’s “The Rock Cycle: Essays”

RIVER TEETH LITERARY NONFICTION PRIZE



the rock cycle

essays

Kevin Honold

Kevin Honold's new essay collection, *The Rock Cycle,* begins in the Arabian Desert. It is 1991. U.S. forces have just invaded Kuwait to push Saddam Hussein's armies back into Iraq. Honold's unit is lost. They stumble upon a Bedouin camp. His Lieutenant asks the Bedouins if they have seen other soldiers, tugging at his uniform, then pointing at Honold and the others in Honold's unit. The Bedouins do not help them. The U.S. soldiers drive on. Honold says the Lieutenant was a decent man. He didn't want any trouble.

A little later in the same essay, Honold talks about Euripides' play, *The Bacchae.* He calls it a strange tale. In it, the unbeliever as well as the believer are horribly punished. I find that confusing, he says. I don't. I have long found *The Bacchae* to be relatively straightforward. What I find confusing is Honold's *Rock Cycle*. There is much punishment, but no punishing. It is a painstaking record of human failure that is also an improbable document of human freedom. It's about integrity and decency and generosity in a world where believer and unbeliever alike are horribly punished.

I know. It's insane. Batshit crazy.

But that's the point.

In "Light Discipline," Honold's second essay, the author tells us that in the desert, "notions of order and disorder are irrelevant."

He then quotes Benedicta Ward's translation of *The Desert Fathers*:

"Macarius the Great said to the brothers in Scetis after a service in church, 'Flee, my brothers.' One of the brothers said to him, 'Abba, where can we flee when we are already in the desert?' He put his finger upon his lips and said: 'I tell you, you must flee this.' Then he went into his cell, shut the door, and remained alone."

You just went into your room, Abba.

There’s nothing in there, Abba.

Abba?

But I tell you, Honold insists (you reading this, you who thinks that you know, you who thinks that you are sad and wise, you who think you are not sad and wise, you who thinks you are anything at all), you must flee *this*.

Flee what?

After Honold’s Army unit leaves the Bedouin camp, they find the enemy. American planes and tanks then destroy the enemy. The enemy is no more. They are dispatched. Disappeared. Smashed. Smushed. They have been burned and shot and exploded. The Berlin Wall has fallen. The Iraqis are history. We are history. History is history.

Honold tells us he hid in his tent while the other U.S. soldiers cleaned up the bodies. He read Herman Hesse. Like all young boys do when we hide in our tents.

In the same essay he reflects that “there must be few things more shameful than to be held cheap by the dead.”

This will strike some people as silly. They were the bad guys, Kevin. You didn’t even kill them, Kevin. The war in Iraq started in 2003. People die all the time. And so on.

But this emotional cheapness, to Honold, is precisely the problem. This book is filled with the deliberations of thinkers who refused to be held cheap and hold cheap. Their imagination took them over the edge of History into something else, something that is history and is not history, where fidelity to the givenness of things does not become an idolatry of the necessary. And Honold (somehow) weaves these ancient imaginations into preternatural essays of his own, strange alchemies of syntactical discipline, reckless

curiosity, and impetuous generosity.

He admires thinkers who give without reason. Who hold nothing cheap, neither the dead or the living or the birds that watch over both. He also admires the worldview of entire peoples, like the Huron of the Ohio Valley, who believed stinginess the one unforgivable sin.

In “A Brief History of the Huron,” Honold tells of how the Huron welcomed the Jesuits when they arrived in their forests, armed with nothing but a fanatical eloquence and memories of their own martyrdom. The Hurons admired the Jesuits’ courage. Still, being un-stingy people, they wanted nothing to do with their heaven, that desperate either/or, this maniacal righteousness. It must have struck them as unimaginative. A little sad even. All this wealth and technology and History and this is the best you can do?

Some death bed scenes:

“Which will you choose,’ demanded the priest to a dying woman, ‘Heaven or Hell?’” ‘Hell if my children are there,’ returned the mother.”

“’Heaven is a good place for Frenchmen,’ said another, ‘but the French will give me nothing to eat when I get there.’”

It saddens Honold too. Not just the death-bed Jesuits, but all of us basically decent people who think the way out of the desert involves condemning others to tepid moralisms. He seldom gets angry, Honold, and then only at the fact that we, Jesuits and Hurons both, are not alive to how good we actually are, how good we want to be, and how this goodness is never, ever transactional and mercenary.

Here he is in a much later essay, as he cycles the Mojave in 2013 and is tended to by stranger after stranger in the fantastical and impossible union of disparate peoples that is the U.S.A:

“It’s a fact that most people are on the lookout for someone to be kind to. This might be in answer to some unconscious suspicion that existence is justified, in some small ways, by acts of selflessness. But much faith is required to accept the proposition that goodness is instinctive. The world belies that notion every day, in a million ways, and mocks it endlessly. To confess that sort of faith is to invite derision; to act on it is seditious, if not plain batty. Still, the fact remains.”

Plain batty. You said it, Kevin.

At the end of the “Brief History of the Huron,” Honold tells us the Jesuits strung fireflies to the trees when nuns arrived in Quebec. This too is a fact. Just like the women and men who reach out to Honold on his bicycle are facts. Just like the hysterical laughter of young Honold staring into the Persian Gulf is a fact. The book is filled with many facts: batty, seditious, insane facts. Reading this book is much like arriving at the end of the trail in Zanskar, India, stumbling, as Honold does, upon “a sheer flight of stone where the sky had been,” so close you “can smell the melting ice that streamed from its face at a hundred points.”

Still, the original question. The problem at hand. We are in our tents in middle of the desert. Bodies are piling up outside and have been piling up for 4 billion years and we are listening to a pop song. Reading Hesse and playing cards. Yet we are the killers. We are the ones doing the killing. We are the killers and the forgetters. But we are also the rememberers. We are the ones on the lookout for someone to be kind to. We are also the ones reading Honold’s book.

It doesn’t make any sense. We don’t make any sense.

In “A Natural History of New Mexico,” Honold discusses how Western education has taught us to mistrust our imagination. He tells us that he has spent his whole life unlearning this,

learning instead that “one event can bear multiple truths.”

Here’s a multiple truth: Yes, remembering everything would, as Honold points out, annihilate the world in an instant. Thank god for the fact we do forget. We live in a semi-comatose oblivion and this allows us to survive, to wake up in the morning, to move forward from unnecessary wars and failed relationships and the things we didn’t say and the things we did. But then there’s the opposite truth, as Honold says, “if we fail to bring the past with us into the future, we will arrive less than human. A rootless and death-forgetting people have no one to forgive them and nothing to forgive. They have no need of atonement, and therefore seek no absolution. For such a people, blameless in their own eyes, compassion and mercy become difficult.”

This is true too. We have two truths. Here’s a third truth, perhaps even harder than the other two (but no less true):

“But this forgiveness, for oneself and for the world, must proceed from a broken heart; a broken heart is the alembic in which compassion is quickened. That is why, in the old story, a man of sorrows came looking for other men and women of sorrows, and forgave precisely those who love too much. Brokenheartedness is a discipline learned in shame, in failure, and in years. Forgiveness is, in a sense, a homely art, self taught for the most part. It has a power to destroy power, and to make free. Human freedom is precipitated by this strange alchemy. I’ve read about it in books, I’ve seen it practiced. This is the truth that sets free. But the truth is beyond me, every day.”

The power to destroy power. What an idea! How wonderful! Actual freedom! Not the pretense of the thing, not the posture of it, but a memory of the past that is not a forgetting of the past. A way to have integrity without having to take away another’s integrity. To cast them into hell. To damn them with stinginess. But isn’t this morbid? Brokenheartedness? How can

you be forgiving and morbid at the same time?

Our imagination often fails us. Another fact. Not the last fact, but a fact nonetheless.

In “The Rock Cycle,” the essay that gives the collection its title, Honold comments on how early modern thinkers tried to explain away the fish fossils on mountain tops by calling them sports of nature, *lusus naturae*, God’s jokes. Nature’s comedy. Figure this one out, scientists, they laughed.

They did figure it out. Scientists are an imaginative and patient bunch. The most famous of them, James Hutton, watched the Scottish earth for twenty-five years. He concluded: “solid parts of the present land appear in general, to have been composed of the productions of the sea.”

Rocks move. They go up and down like blood pumping through geological arteries.

Deep Time. We live in deep time. Wait long enough and nothing stays still. Not even mountains. (“What you look hard at seems to look hard at you,” says Gerard Manley Hopkins in Honold’s first essay.)

But Deep Time only points the problem with a giant clown finger. *Nothing* stays still. An inferno of corpses is heaped outside our tent while we feverishly read and play and sing. We have not buried a single one of them. We don’t know where to begin. Our imagination flails. It strains and bucks and begs for mercy or calcifies into ignorance and pride and History.

Honold doesn’t have an answer. All he has are these essays. Essays are truer than answers, and more difficult, more dangerous. Instead of punishing because we have been punished, they give because we have been given. They flee the timid transactions of selfhood and self-aggrandizement for the terrifying dislocations of our innate selflessness. They

are—if we are being perfectly honest—insane. You should never sit alone in the desert, finger to your lips, listening to the rocks move and people forgive. Who knows what Deep Time might say to you? Who knows what our history might become?

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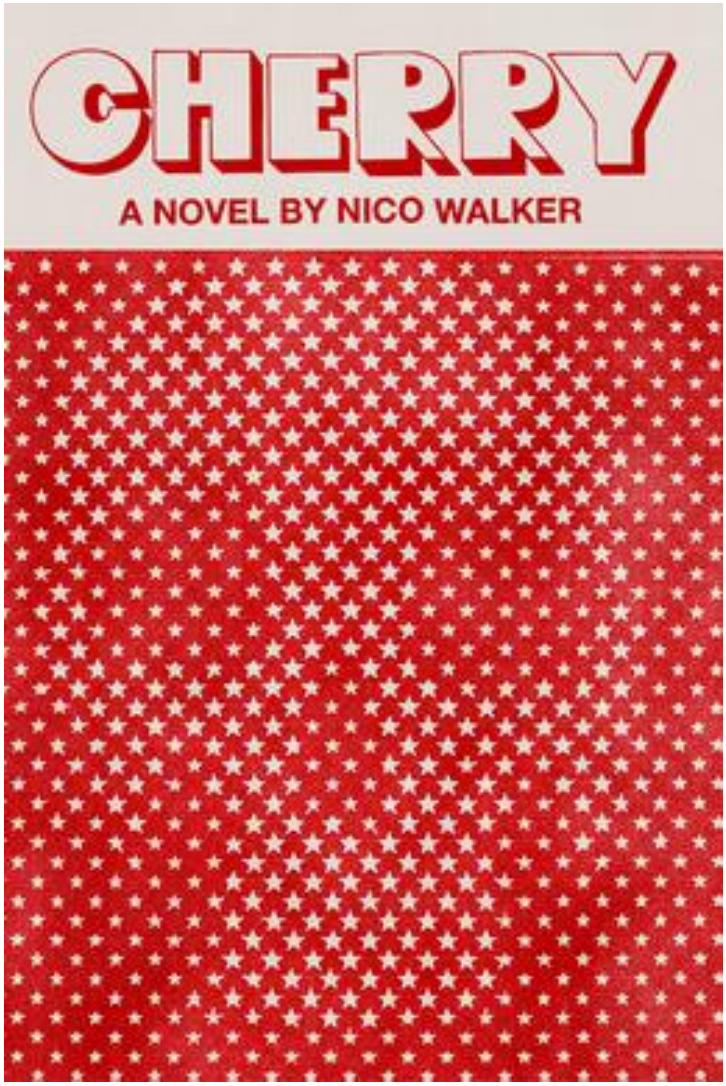
Kevin Honold's *The Rock Cycle: Essays* was the winner of the 2019 River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Book Prize. You can purchase it here.

New Review from Michael Carson: "Cherry" by Nico Walker



Early on in Nico Walker's *Cherry*, the narrator, working a dead-end shoe store job to pay for drugs while his parents pay for his college, says that he has a well cultivated sense of shame. This is true. He does. Many people do not. Many people are shameless. They do not care how they degrade themselves as long as society says it's okay to degrade themselves in this way. Or they are full of shame in an uncultivated way. It just spills out here and there, at rare moments, when they let their guard down. It makes you wonder if they even care about their shame. If they too are shameless as those that are shameless.

That would make everyone shameless except for Nico Walker. I think this might very well be true. I think only Nico Walker feels shame. He is the only writer from the recent wars that I've read who has taken his shame and cultivated it to such a

degree that it is impossible not to be ashamed of the Iraq War (or whatever the journalists and historians are calling it now).

He makes you ashamed of your country. He makes you ashamed of yourself. He makes you ashamed of being alive.

It's glorious. *Cherry* is an absolute delight. I have not had this much fun reading a book in a very long time.

Maybe it's because Nico Walker robbed a bunch of banks. Maybe it's because Nico Walker was a bad soldier. Maybe it is because Walker had a "bad" war (whatever that means). Maybe it is because Walker was a junkie. Maybe it is because Walker is actually funny. Maybe it is because Walker can write. Or maybe it's all these bound into one. Maybe the urge to make it about one or another is to miss the point. It shows a terribly uncoordinated sense of shame. It is maybe, even, a little shameless.

So I kind of love this book. Walker's narrator doesn't play fuck fuck games (as they used to say in Ranger school, one of those schools that train us to kill better, to play roles better, to take pride in shamelessness). He gets straight to the point. He knows the ending. Death, indignity, compromise. The ending, as he says, is fucked.

Here he is talking about Emily, the woman that provides a strange and mysterious through-line in the novel, which feels, at times, to be more of a fantasy than anything else, the idea of a woman we might imagine for ourselves but also, miraculously, a woman who insists on being herself:

"The day I met her we went for a walk after class and we ended up in her dorm room. We talked for a while there and then for whatever reason I got to crying, like really bawling-my-fucking-eyes-out crying. I'd already seen everything that was going to happen and it was a nightmare. Something like that. And she was really sweet to me. I don't think there was ever

anyone who felt more compassion for weak motherfuckers.”

Whoever Emily is, whatever her fictional or physical reality, I love her too. I love this compassion. I love the fact that she disappears and then reappears mysteriously under sewer grates. That she follows the narrator through the war and then into drugs and his life of crime and that she puts ice on his crotch before his final robbery that sends him (and Nico himself) to eight years in jail. That she is always cursing. That she is fucked up, that she sees that it is fucked up, all of it, yet somehow, she still has compassion for a man who says (idiotically, perversely, criminally), “I take all the beautiful things to heart and they fuck my heart until I about die from it.”

She is an ending that is not an ending. She is the possibility of a person. He tries to be good for her. Not jerk off to anyone but her. Not sleep around. Keep her high. He tries to be decent in a world that is not, that cannot be, that does not care about beauty, that does not want to die from beauty so dies all the time, forever and ever.

Mid-deployment, between one succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders and the next succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders, the narrator and other soldiers watch pornography and see that the “unsuspecting” woman wears a wedding ring and that the reality TV pornography is not reality TV pornography.

The narrator says:

“And we know then that life was just a murderous fuckgame and that we had been dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.”

If we don’t have compassion for the weak, for those who don’t have a choice and those who make bad choices, we have nothing.

Or not nothing. Not exactly. We still have Staff Sergeant North.

North looks like Morrisey. North is from Idaho. North is a killer. He grows to hate the narrator for being incompetent. For being, deep down, a faker. Not a soldier. North disappears from the narrative. But we are told that he survives the war unscathed, that he goes on to bigger and better things. Killers often do.

The narrator is not a killer. It kills him.

He's a medic, though. A bad one. Here's the narrator trying and failing to save an Iraqi that his squad accidentally murdered for leaving his own house at night.

"I should have packed the haji full of gauze, I should have kept packing the wound til I couldn't pack it anymore, til it was packed tight. But I didn't. I should have had him lie on the side he was wounded on. But I forgot. I said I was going to prop the haji's feet on my helmet because he could go into shock if his feet weren't propped up that way. And even though this was true I was only saying it just to say things because there was no exit wound and I didn't know what to do. The haji's eyes rolled up in his head and then came back, focused again, rolled up again. I said I was going to give him morphine to keep him from going into shock.

North said, 'Do what you have to do, doc. You don't have to tell us.'

I gave the haji morphine, so I could look like I was doing something right. I stuck him on his right thigh and went back to working on a line. His arm was thin. I couldn't get a flash. Then I got a flash, but he moved and I lost it.

I said, 'Keep still, you fuck! I'm trying to help you.'

North said, 'Be quiet, doc.'"

The narrator does not listen to North. The narrator is not a professional. He cries. He yells. He makes jokes. He commits

crimes. He goes crazy. He counts his failures one by one, lovingly, like someone with a well cultivated sense of shame. Like Jerry in Edward Albee's play "The Zoo Story" (which provides the epigraph to one of Walker's sections), the narrator won't shut up, won't not fall on his own knife. He is going North from the zoo. To tell his zoo story. Our story. That life is very often a murderous fuck game and that we are almost always dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.

So. This being a fact. What do we do with this? Where do we go from here?

We might laugh at flying babies. Before deployment, the narrator is put in charge of a recruitment "rockwall" in Ohio somewhere. Parents hand him babies and the babies don't weigh enough for the pullies, so they just fly up to the top of the rockwall. The narrator doesn't know what to do but the parents keep on handing him babies. He straps them up and away they go.

We could also, perhaps, be crushed by the beauty of it all, as the narrator often is. This, remember, is what makes him a weak motherfucker in the first place.

Here is Emily and the narrator getting fake married for real extra benefits. She's wearing some kind of gas station attendant uniform and his nose is swollen from a friend's headbutt:

"And we knew at that moment we were the two most beautiful things in the world. How long it lasted, I don't know, but it was true for at least a few minutes. Six billion people in the world and no one had it on us."

Vonnegut once said that there are billions of people in this world and that he supposes they all want dignity.

They do. They do. And sometimes they even get it.

Vonnegut also said remember the nice moments.

Here’s a nice moment from Iraq:

“One time the prisoners all sang together and you could hear them outside the jail and it was very beautiful and it made you feel like an asshole.”

I feel like an asshole after reading this book.

It’s okay. Sometimes it is good to feel like an asshole. Sometimes we need to remember we are assholes. How else could we ever stop being one?

There’s been a lot of controversy lately about the book and the movie and instagram photos. Some say that Walker didn’t write it. Or he doesn’t deserve this after what he did or didn’t do. Blah blah blah. The internet keeps on handing us babies. Away the babies go.

The question is this: Do we want a hero? Or do you want a novelist? I for one have had enough of heroes. Bring on more Nico Walkers. If only because Nico Walker cares about how he degrades himself. He is sensitive to his degradation and the different ways that each one of us degrade ourselves on a daily basis. He lives it, understands it. I would not recommend this way of being to anyone else but Nico Walker. I wouldn’t even recommend it to Nico Walker (not all the time anyway). But I’m glad we got this book out of it. Because that war was fucked. And we should be ashamed.

Turn On, Tune Out, Drop In:

Review Essay of Ben Fountain's Beautiful Country Burn Again

D.H. Lawrence once claimed that the "essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." This sounds nice, something to be proud of in a masochistic sort of way; unfortunately (or fortunately), it's not true. Americans might be hard, isolate, stoic killers at times, but what people aren't? Here is the D.H. Lawrence quote on America that matters: "The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom. Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom. The shout is the rattling of chains, always." This is a long Lawrence way of saying something rather simple: Americans are ridiculous.

Ben Fountain, the author of the 2006 short story collection *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, the 2012 novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, and the 2018 essay collection *Beautiful Country Burn Again*, has always been particularly good on this fundamental aspect of the American character. Here is the U.S. aid worker protagonist from Fountain's short story "Lion's Mouth."

"So here was the joke: she'd come to Salone determined to lead an authentic life and had instead discovered all the clichés in herself. She wanted to be stupid. She wanted to be rich. She wanted to be lazy, kept, indulged—this is where her fantasies took her lately, mental explosions of the guiltless life."

Here, in "Asian Tiger," a former pro-golfer Texan half-wittingly enables a conspiracy between billionaire venture capitalists and Malaysia's military junta:

"Maybe you felt the urge to scream and rage around, maybe you

felt like that would be the moral thing to do, but you sucked it up and stayed cool. Because out here the critical thing was to play it straight. To go along with the joke. To concentrate, he realized with something like revulsion, on golf."

And here are two U.S. Army grunts in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Fountain's novel about an infantry squad invited to the Super Bowl Halftime Show at Cowboy Stadium while on leave from Iraq:

"At staged rallies, for instance, or appearances at malls, or whenever TV or radio is present, you are apt at some point to be lovingly mobbed by everyday Americans eager to show their gratitude, then other times it's like you're invisible, people see right through you, nothing registers. Billy and Mango stand there eating scalding hot pizza and their fame is not their own. Mainly it's just another thing to laugh about, the floating hologram of context and cue that leads everyone around by their nose, Bravo included, but Bravo can laugh and feel somewhat superior because they know are being used."

Fountain's characters consistently confront this American "joke"—that wild disproportion between "the floating hologram of context and cue" and the fact that they are, theoretically, choice-making dignified and sovereign individual human beings. This disproportion has little to do with the individuals themselves, who are, almost without exception, nice guys and girls, but with the fact that they were born in a country with more wealth than God. Add in the comically lopsided distribution of that wealth, a military budget larger than the next 7 countries combined, and a 24/7 entertainment industry that makes money off every hour of our waking lives, and it is difficult to be proportional. And to act without proportion—as Lawrence well understood—is to act ridiculous.

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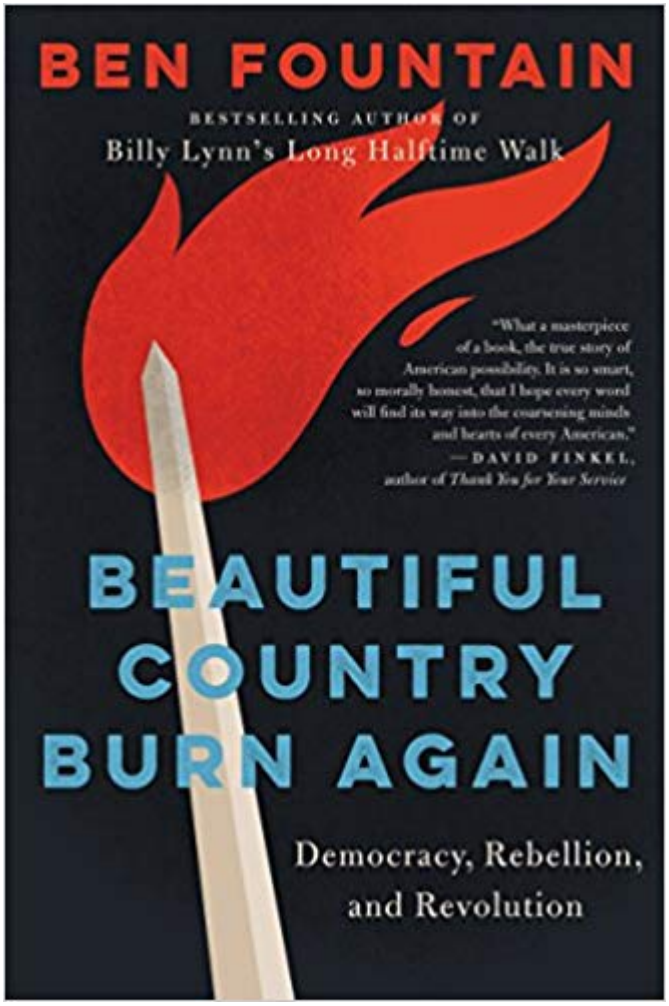
Of course, just as one can't "indulge the mental explosions of a guiltless life" unless one periodically aspires to authenticity, one can't truly be ridiculous unless one occasionally takes oneself Very Seriously. Hence Democracy. Hence Elections. Hence the hope that despite the various horrors of our past—the slavery, the segregation, illegal wars, and ill-gotten wealth—there might be hope of renewal, straight talk, progress, and redemption. And hence the genius of the *Guardian* in commissioning Fountain to report on the 2016 U.S. elections. Who better than Fountain to document our 6-billion dollar circus of platitudes, sanctimony, cynicism, and apocalypticism? Who else could trace whatever it is in the American character that made Donald Trump not only a possibility—horrifying in itself—but president of an entire country with living people in it?



Unsurprisingly the author of *Billy Lynn* rises to the ridiculous occasion. The introduction to *Beautiful Country*

Burn Again—the Robinson Jeffers-inspired title of Fountain's collected Guardian reportage—even has a relatively straightforward historian "thesis" to explain both the last election and much of American history:

Our founding fathers, Fountain argues, promised us "meaningful autonomy," but we got "profit proportionate to freedom" and "plunder correlative to subjugation" instead. In other words, the more money an American takes in this country, the more freedom an American has. Which seems pleasant enough, except for the opposite also holds true, in that the more wealth an American has taken from them, the less freedom they have. Thus, despite "all the sound and fury of the most bizarre election in the country's history," this unhappy equation persists and belies all the talk of "meaningful autonomy," and until this equation changes, argues Fountain, "it's still a chump's game."

But Americans today, some might protest, are educated, media-savvy, aware. We have internet. Color TV. Ironic cat memes. How can we be chumps? Fountain's fictional characters often struggle in similar ways, agonizing over how they, who went into life so clear-sighted and full of good will, became like everyone else, actively aiding whatever it was they didn't want to be. How could they, they ask, who so despise chumps, become chumps? Yet the reason for their failure is blindingly obvious, and all the more painful for being so obvious.

Money.

Here is Fountain in "Iowa 2016: Riding the Roadkill Express" on Hillary Clinton receiving $675,000 in speaking fees from Goldman Sachs for three hours worth of speaking:

"The human mind wasn't built to comprehend moneys of this magnitude; we need time to behold and ponder, time for the vastness to seep into our brains like a cognitive vapor, and there remains an awesome abstraction to it all….And so the

realm of political money is beyond the understanding of most of us. This many millions here, shit-tons more millions there…we numb out."

As money wears down the moral sense of characters in much of Fountain's fiction, so too Hillary Clinton. So too the Democratic Party. So too the American Middle Class. So too the American Working Class. So to you. So to me. Couple this impossible wealth with a trillion dollar entertainment industry—which Fountain christens the "Fantasy Industrial Complex"—and you and me not only numb out to morality but cease to believe in the possibility of reality.

"The old distinctions start to break down, the boundary between reality and fantasy," Fountain says in "Two American Dreams," an essay on the 1980s, Trump's New York, and advertisement. "It becomes increasingly difficult to know what's real anymore, especially there, inside those screens where so much of our daily existence takes place."

Because how can you be moral or good if you don't see a difference between the real and the unreal? How do the words we use to weigh democratic participation and civic responsibility compete with a fantastical simulacrum that consists of color blotches and furry-Star-Wars-Guardians-of-the-Galaxy-crossover fan-fic Reddit threads? Trump, in this American Dream, becomes our Shakespeare, the playwright of a peculiarly American art form, one that does not so much privilege fantasy over reality but turns fantasy into reality, and all of us sprint drunkenly into the arms of infinite disproportion for fear of the stubbornly proportional chump game—"profit proportionate to freedom; plunder correlative to subjugation"—staring us in the face.

"Easy to despise the political phony," says Fountain of Trump's success in "The Phony in American Politics," "at least in retrospect. The harder work is plumbing the truth of an electorate that allows the phony to succeed. He didn't create

the situation of fear; he merely exploited it. What is it about the American character that allows the long con of our politics to go on and on, electing crooks, racists, bullies, hate-mongering preachers, corporate bagmen, and bald-faced liars? Not always, but often. The history is damning. We must, on some level, want what they're offering."

And that right there is the really hard question. What if we, we of the oh-so-innocent and proletariat-like 99%, *want* what they are offering? What if we vote for the hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars because we ourselves are hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars? And, if so, do we gain a sort-of freedom by voting in the hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars that reflect our hateful, corporate, and prevaricatory values? Did we, despite all our handwringing over illegal invasions, foreclosures, and student debt, find meaningful autonomy in Wal-Mart hypermarkets, Dallas Cowboy halftime shows, and Netflix binges?

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No. If you are wondering. The answer is a no. Fountain trots out an impressive array of historical evidence to prove the extent which Roosevelt's New Deal and post-WW II prosperity have been sabotaged, how the middle and working classes have been robbed, humiliated, and manipulated by Reaganomic Republicans and Third Way Democrats, and how what happened in 2016, insane as it was, makes logical sense, given the historical record. In this view Clinton and Trump are less enemies, and more two sides of the same $100 dollar Monopoly bill, one selling the soul, dollar for dollar, piece by piece, the other telling us to just be you because there's no such thing as a soul anyway.

Yet –joke of jokes–we buy what they sell. This is our "floating hologram of context and cue." These are our "mental explosions of the guiltless life." They leave us feeling like

all insane pornographic fantasies do. Empty. Like chumps. Seen but not seen. Half existing. Manipulated (but ironically so!). Eating hot pizza in a giant football stadium.

So it's our fault. We are the chumps. We sold our neighbors and ourselves time and time again. We bought into the fantasy of the corporate bagmen and crooks, of the fantasy industrial complex, of the military industrial complex, of the neurotic self-doubting complex. We said there was no other way. We watch cowboy movies. Game of Thrones. Toy Story 4. Trump hugging the flag. Hard. Isolate. Killers.

But this is part of the fantasy, isn't it? The lack of choice. A Trumpian vision of callow sentimentality, ironic bombast, and murderous power politics thrives on the idea of necessity—"sometimes you get what you need," the Rolling Stones sing at all his rallies—and the delusion succeeds because it allows us to imagine there is nothing but necessity. This is the force of his fantasy. It has all the appeal of reality. We need (or want?) to believe it is real so we don't have to be real.

It makes sense. Being real means making difficult choices. And Fountain's uncanny understanding of the American character extends not from his belief that we have no choices, and that we are doomed to make the wrong choice, but that choices matter, and that we have made the right choice before (during The Civil War and New Deal), and, therefore, that we can make the right choice again. He believes the conscience is a thing. A real thing. God forbid. And that this thing should not be given up for profit. The artfulness of his fiction attests to this. So too the eloquence of these collected essays. His prose bristles with confidence, in the belief that there was once an America that believed in the possibility of dignity for all men and women, an America where sovereignty might not depend on one's bank account, and that there can be one once again.

In the collection's final essay, "A Familiar Spirit," Fountain recounts the long depressing history of racial violence in the U.S. He shows how the codification of "whiteness" promoted and excused the murder and plunder of our fellow Americans. He shows how it's back with a vengeance in 2016, and how this shouldn't surprise us, as it never really went away. It is a tragic note to end on, and would seem to confirm Trump's "American Carnage" horror show and Lawrence's "hard, isolate, killer" bit, to prove that behind all the sanctimony, sentimentality, and sententiousness is nothing other than a moral void of blind hopeless hate and greedy violence.

But Fountain does not actually end there:

"Fantasy offers certainty, affirmation, instant gratification, a way to evade—for a while, at least—the reality right in front of our face. It's so much easier that way, but perhaps we're fast approaching the point where the fantasy can no longer be sustained. The evidence won't shut up; it insists and persists…Consciousness—historical consciousness, political consciousness—has been raised to critical mass, and to suppress it, to try to stuff it back in the box along with all its necessary disruptions and agitations, will destroy the best part of America. The promise of it, the ongoing project."

The evidence insists and persists. And the fact that it insists, that people like Fountain are still writing, thinking, and voting based on this evidence proves that the idea of meaningful choice-making autonomy, while not exactly thriving, is not exactly dead either. The joke is there, yes. But the joke is not everything. It is a testament to the genius of Fountain and the power of this collection that he is able to point out the disgusting and disturbing schizophrenia so fundamental to the American character without giving up on whatever is good and true about the American experiment.

“I Like the Real Stuff”—WBT Interviews Ben Fountain

Ben Fountain, the award-winning author of Brief Encounters with Che Guevera, Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk, *and, most recently,* Beautiful Country Burn Again, *was kind enough to invite two WBT editors, Matthew Hefti and Mike Carson, into his Dallas home for lunch and an interview this past month. The interview took place at a dining room table piled high with well-organized stacks of reading material (including Ulysses S Grant’s annotated memoirs and at least a year’s worth of New York Review of Books back issues) and surrounded by a colorful selection of Haitian and Mexican folk art. Fountain got things going by asking us if we were sure we were recording. A reporter from another publication recently failed to record his interview with Fountain on two separate occasions. That person should know better, Fountain explained (using a choice expletive), as redoing an interview is the “most painful thing.” Fountain’s speech mirrors the concerns of his writing. He is always searching for the right word, and adds on to what he has already said with words like “just” and “like” and “and,” not because he can’t find a useful or appropriate word or simile, but because he wants to find one that is truly tethered to experience, to details, to the real, and he is aware of just how much of our language has been emptied out, “un-moored,” as he says in the interview. His refusal to abide linguistic insincerity and passionate commitment to (and faith in) authentic human experience is a source of inspiration for these interviewers and the whole WBT team. You can read a review of his most recent book here and buy it here.*

—WBT

WBT: Walker Percy. No one talks about him much anymore yet you, in an early interview, put him down as an important

influence. How did Walker Percy influence your writing?

BF: I discovered him in college. I graduated college in 1980, and that year he was the hot guy in American fiction. He had this slow build to his career. And each step, you know, he got stronger. By the late '70s, he was at his peak in terms of reputation. And he'd also gone to Chapel Hill. And he was a southerner. He had figured out a way to take Southern literature beyond Faulkner. It seemed like the generation after Faulkner everybody was kind of working in the same vein, the same idiom, and Walker Percy figured out a way to make it new, to keep it genuine and authentic, but also take it to the contemporary world, and find a different medium, a different language for it.

You know, I'm sure he's very out of favor right now, because of the way he wrote about women especially. And I'm sure certain views of race haven't aged well, at all. But I think there's a lot that's worthwhile in his writing, I mean a tremendous amount, and so I still think of him quite a bit. And I can't read him when I'm writing my own stuff, because his voice is too powerful, his vibe. But I do appreciate the way he used humor. I think there's this notion in American letters, this attitude, that if it's not depressing the hell out of me, then it must not be profound or important. I think the really great writers use all 88 keys on the keyboard, like everything from humor, to pathos, to utmost tragedy. [Gabriel] Garcia Marquez does it, and I think Walker Percy was really, really good at humor. So I paid attention to that when I started reading him and still do.

WBT: We've come across people who find humor in your writing and describe it as satirical. Do you consider yourself a satirist?

BF: I think satire is different than humor. My notion of satire is exaggeration. You take reality, and you push it at least one step further. The classic example of that is "A Modest Proposal" by Jonathan Swift, where he says, "we'll let the rich eat Irish babies." God forbid we ever actually get to the point where someone seriously proposes that. To me, that

is satire. I think I'm a straight-up realist. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is not satire. Because everything that happens in that book, either had happened, was happening, or has happened since. So it's just straight-up realism, and if there is humor in it, the humor, hopefully, just comes out of who the people are and the nature of the situation. I think people cracking jokes is just a basic part of human experience. I mean even in the concentration camps—people were making jokes. I'm not saying they were doing it a lot, but it's just a basic component of human nature. In *Billy Lynn*, every time you get a group of guys together, within 4-5 hours, they have this inside joke that's going on and it's constant. There's a lot of laughter. So, satire and humor, I would say satire can be humorous, but they aren't necessarily the same thing.

WBT: Much of your writing focuses on history. Do you do a lot of historical research when writing fiction and, when you have free time, do you read history or fiction?

Both. There's always the thing you need to read specifically, either for background or direct knowledge. I had the idea for *Billy Lynn* in 2004, and I didn't start writing until 2009. I was working on other things, but I had the notion for it, and I started making notes. You know, it's a sign when the notes keep coming that maybe you got something here. So my default reading for the next five years was about these wars. Because if there wasn't anything pressing, whether in I needed it for work, or just something I really wanted to read for my own pleasure, I was always reading about these wars, about Iraq and Afghanistan, just because I thought if I'm going to make a run at this *Billy Lynn* story, I want to have this deep background. And that's where my head and my heart lead me anyway. It felt very important to me to try to understand these wars and all the levels of experience that go into them.

WBT: Did you read war writing and fiction from previous wars in preparation for Billy Lynn? Or did you just focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

I mostly focused on this recent war, and nonfiction accounts,

like long-form journalism. There's been a lot of really good long-form, like magazine journalism, written about these wars by very talented writers at *Rolling Stone*, *Harpers*, and in daily newspaper accounts. My stack of periodicals and newspaper clippings probably got about this [points to the space next to his chair], three feet high. They're all in a file somewhere, but I'm just trying to immerse myself.

WBT: When you're writing fiction, when you're actually in the middle of a novel or a short story, do you read fiction by other writers? Do you ever worry about their work influencing yours?

I mean certain people—their voice is too strong. I can't read Saul Bellow while I'm writing. And I shouldn't read Joan Didion while I'm in middle of heavy duty, writing my own work, because they'll bleed into my stuff. But the more I've done this work, and just the more I have seemed to dial into my own signal, the less of a concern that is; it's like I'm a little more immune to this bleed over of styles. I always try to keep some poetry going, because I think it's good for prose writers to stay in touch with that wonderful compression of language, and I do usually have a fiction book going on the bedside table.

WBT: Is there a poet you return to most often?

Yeah. Those I read are all almost contemporary poets. I could not pick out one in particular. But there's a lot of really fine poetry being written right now, as we're kind of in a golden age. Obviously, no one is making money at it, but there are a lot of fine poets doing great work, and lots of little publishers bringing out their books and these beautiful additions. Poetry is thriving in this country right now.

WBT: Do you ever write poetry?

No. It's too hard. It's like look at the poets—they're the Formula One of writing whereas prose writers are like NASCAR. We kind of trundle around the track in these hunks of junk and Formula One is all purity and elegance. No, I'm going to stick

with the stock car.

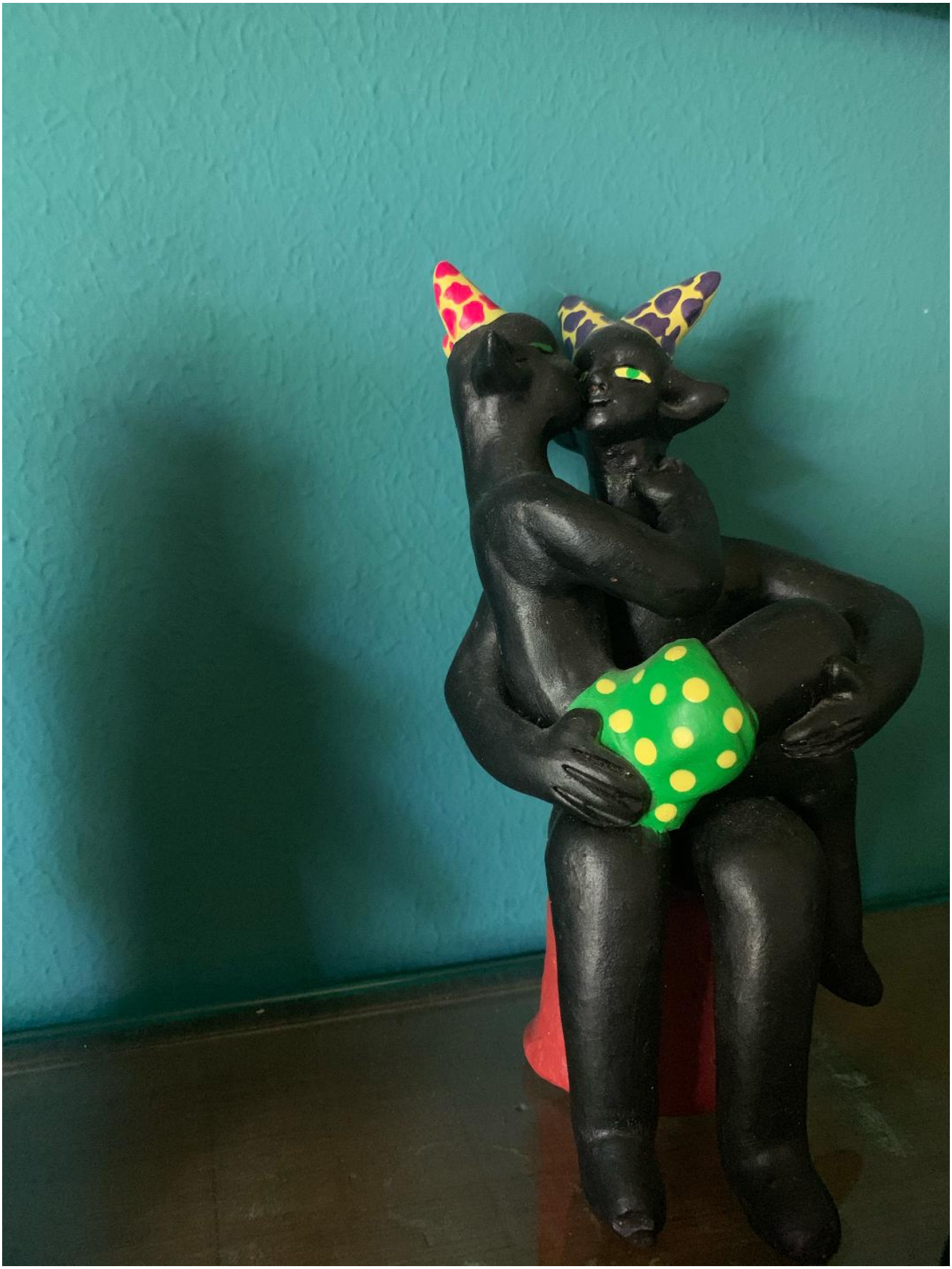
WBT: You've written acclaimed short stories, acclaimed essays, and an acclaimed novel. Which genre do you feel most comfortable in?

I think I'm a fiction writer. At least I want to be a fiction writer. When the opportunity came along for the essays in *Beautiful Country*, when the Guardian said, do you want to write about the 2016 election for us? I thought, yeah, I really want to do that. I had been dissatisfied with that kind of writing I've done in the past; it was like I hadn't figured it out yet. So I thought, I really want to study these elections, figure out what's going on, and I also want to get better at this kind of work. But starting out I didn't know if I could do it properly—go out on the road and on campaigns. And then a book came out of that, and I'm happy with the result. I'm at peace with it. Let's put it that way. It's like, I did the best I could, and didn't take any shortcuts, and I didn't take any cheap shots. Whatever shots were in there, they [the politicians] deserved it. I now know if the need arises, I can write like that, and there's a chance I can do a good job. But I'm working on a novel now set in Haiti, and I'm really happy working on it. I'm getting these chances to write about the election coming up in 2020, and I'm trying to say no, because I'm happy working on a novel.

WBT: *Speaking of other genres, your short story "Fantasy of Eleven Fingers" has always struck me as somewhat anomalous in your short story collection* Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*. What is the genesis of that story?*

My kids. I made them take piano when they were growing up. I would always sit there at recitals where I could see the kids' hands. And I was just, you know, sitting there for a recital once and these are normally bright kids—I mean no prodigies here—these are just kids who applied themselves, and you're looking at their hands. And I was thinking, My God, this was really amazing, you know, what these kids are doing with their fingers. And it just came to me: What would it be like if you threw an extra finger in there? The idea sailed in there

randomly. I walked around with it for a few days after thinking about that extra finger and it started to coalesce—for whatever reason—around fin-de-siècle Vienna and Jewishness.



WBT: Music is an important element in that story. I also noticed many song references in many of the Beautiful Country Burn Again *essays. What is the relationship between music and writing for you? Do you listen to music when you write?*

No. I never have music on when I'm writing at home. As for the music references—it's just that there's a lot of music around these campaign events I went to. It seemed like part of the fabric of the story. Like, you know, describing Trump's playlist at that rally in Iowa, and just how eclectic it was and the crowd's like half-conscious reaction to it; or, at the Bernie rally, at the end, they're playing "Star Man" from Bowie—*Here's a star man waiting in the sky*—and just as the event cleared out, down on the arena floor, there are a bunch of kids doing a whirling dervish, that deadhead thing. I thought that I needed to record that. That has a place in there somewhere, these little whirlpools of ecstasy going on, eddying in the wake of this Bernie event, and, honestly, it just seemed a natural part of the story to weave in those songs.

WBT: In Billy Lynn *you have strange text breaks where the words begin to float away. In* Beautiful Country Burn Again *you have mini-chapters called "Book of Days" that also break up the text. What are you trying to accomplish with these breaks?*

In Billy Lynn I call them "word clouds." They are kind of floating all over the page. By the time I started writing it I felt that there were certain words that had become detached from reality in the culture. They were used but they no longer signified what they originally did. They had become something else. In a way they had become not signifiers of realities but ways to obscure reality. You know, I thought if I heard George W. Bush say "supreme sacrifice" one more time I'm just going to fucking knock my head against the wall. It was bullshit. You could tell that often they weren't even thinking about what they were saying; it was so automatic, like "they have made the extreme sacrifice." There were a lot of words like that—"9/11," "terrorism," "war on terror." It's like you hear those words and your brain shuts off. And, I was trying to

think, how do you get that on the page, just like they're no longer tethered to lived experience. I thought I would have them kind of float around, and kind of like in this fog. So that was me acting out of desperation, trying to figure out a way to get as close to the experiences as I could, or at least the experience I was having of language unmoored. I just thought, well, there will be times when Billy's hearing those words and they are no longer lines that you know, they're no longer in orderly progression, they're just kind of floating.

The Book of Days [in *Beautiful Country Burn Again*] was also a solution to a problem. So much happened in 2016. It really was an intense year, an extreme year, and a violent year, and a surreal year. And so how do you set up that context for these discrete events that I'm writing about without overloading the beginning of the chapter? It's like so much happens in the month before the NRA convention in Louisville. How am I going to shotgun that in and give people a proper sense of the context? So I took a clue from *Harper's Magazine*, in their weekly blast, where they would shotgun all this stuff that happened in a given month. I thought, all right. Let's try that. I felt like that's probably the most efficient way to do it.

WBT: That makes sense. It was very hard to for me to read those sections. It felt like like an assault at times.

BF: I wanted it to be an assault. Because it was. And we forget quickly. It was a wild year. Leading up the Republican Convention there had been 6-bloody weeks. And not just in the U.S. There was the truck attack in Nice, France that killed 80 people and the shootings in Dallas at the Black Lives Matter rally the week before the convention. Then, just when we get to the convention, on that Sunday, there's somebody shooting cops in Baton Rouge. So you're arriving in Cleveland, and you're thinking, what's next? Whatever is going to happen is going to happen here. Well, you know, amazingly it didn't. Nothing happened. Except Trump getting nominated. It was a wild year. I think we forget that quickly. It's just the nature of life these days. Something new is always coming at us.

WBT: You write a lot about the shortage of America's collective memory. What is your first individual memory?

BF: The very first?

WBT: Yes.

BF: [Long pause] All right. My dad was getting his PhD at Carolina. He was a TA, so he was making starvation wages, and he had 3 kids, and a wife to support, and so money was really tight. My first memory was graduate student housing, there on the campus at Chapel Hill, and I'm sure it was falling down. Anyway, my first memory I think is being in a crib, like with bars, with that white enamel paint. I have a memory of those bars and white enamel paint, some of it chipped, and being sick. Down the hall there's the sound of cartoons playing and also the smell of pork chops. My mom was frying pork chops. It's just a powerful sensory memory and maybe it crystallizes around being sick.

WBT: WBT is run by veterans and the family members of veterans, so we enjoyed the chapter on chickenhawks and Ambrose Bierce in Beautiful Country Burn Again*, and we, of course, loved* Billy Lynn's Halftime Walk*. Where did your interest in the military come from?*

BF: Well, I come from a very non-military family. Like we go when we are drafted. But I grew up in North Carolina, eastern North Carolina. And there were a lot of soldiers around growing up, like our neighbor in Kinston was a sergeant major in the Army. He had been at the Battle of the Bulge and was a career, noncommissioned officer. Soldiers and veterans were all over the place. And I was a normally, savage, bloodthirsty little boy. I was really into wars and reading about wars. Some kids like to play with trucks and erector sets. I liked to play with soldiers and guns. I was always very conscious of that part of history and always reading about it and am always conscious of it being around me. I thought at one point when I started writing *Billy Lynn* that I've known veterans of American wars going back to World War One. I may have even

crossed paths with a veteran of the Spanish American War. I was born in ’58, so it’s entirely possible, growing up in the South also, where everybody’s ancestors fought. My great-grandfather enlisted in the Confederate Army when he was 18 or 19 in 1861. Our generations are long in my family. For most people my age, it’s their great great grandfather or great great great grandfather, but for me, it’s my great grandfather. So that history, at least to me, and a lot of other people in that place and time, the Civil War felt very present. And also North Carolina was so rural back then that if you stood a certain way, it could be 1863 again. There was nothing modern within sight. There might be an old harrow or piece of farm equipment sitting out, unchanged from 1860. The landscape of it was very present.

We discuss military obsessions in Southern writers like Barry Hannah, William Faulkner, and Walker Percy, and how this doomed military past often permeates the consciousness of the southern male.

BF: They were doing a documentary on Tim O’Brien this last year, and I got to talk to him for a few hours. He and I got talking about the Civil War and he asked me if my ancestors fought for the Confederacy. And I said, “yeah, they did.” And he said, “are you proud of them?” I said, “yeah, I am.” And he pressed me on it. He said, “Why are you proud of them?” Well, it’s conflicted. They did their duty as they saw it. They risked themselves. But he was really pressing me on it. He was not being just polite. And I was like, okay, let’s get real. Let’s get down and dirty. Let’s talk about this assumption I’ve been walking around with my whole life. They went off and did their duty. They fought and risked their lives. Yet it was for the absolutely, absolutely the wrong side.

My great grandfather, he was in a private school, a small private school. He and all his classmates enlisted with their schoolmaster. The schoolmaster became their sergeant. He must have been a pretty charismatic man. In 1863 the schoolmaster got killed. In a letter my great grandfather says of the schoolmaster, “he died hard.” The schoolmaster was wounded and it took him a week to die. He was the mentor of all those

kids. They must have been shattered, to watch him suffer, like that, their hero. My grandfather comes home and marries that man's little sister. There's some powerful bonding in that group. They just saw it like this, like okay, boys, the war's on, let's go join up. And you wonder what they are thinking. It's like—I'm not staying behind.

Long interval where the WBT editors discuss our own choices at 18 and 19 to participate in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and whether or not we would have made the right choice in other historical circumstances and what the right choice is (or was).

WBT: Over lunch, we talked to you and your wife Sharon about the move from North Carolina to Dallas 37 years ago, and the 5 years you worked as a real estate and bankruptcy lawyer before turning to writing full time. At one point you said, "I've made my peace with Texas." What did you mean by this?

When I came to Dallas, I interviewed for a job here. I was coming here because Sharie was a year ahead of me in law school. So I was visiting her here and I was thinking, Oh, this is pretty much like North Carolina. I was lucky in North Carolina to grow up around a lot of really fine adults. That was my sense of it, then. And looking back on North Carolina, you know, as a person of some experience, I think it's still, by and large, true. Like these were people, a lot of them had real integrity and principles, and they paid the price for it at various times, but they were real role models. You know, I'm sure a big part of that perception is me being young, and just not understanding the complexities of things, but I also think there's some truth to it.

So I came here, and one of the signals was people kept asking me who's the richest man in North Carolina. I said that it never occurred to me. Nobody talks that way. Whereas in Texas, there's these lists, you know, who's the richest mofo in Texas, and every year you get these lists. In North Carolina, whoever the richest person was, he or she damn sure didn't want to be on any list. Plus no one really had any money. In every town, the richest three men were the Coca-Cola bottler, the guy who owned the tobacco warehouse, and maybe the lawyer or doctor, but everybody else was middle class at best. Whereas, you know, you come to Texas and money—just materialism and conspicuous consumption—is part of the air you breathe.

WBT: Do you think that's uniquely Dallas? Or Texas?

BF: I think it's Texas. I think it's very Texas and it's very, very Dallas. In Dallas and Houston you get the purest strain of that kind of Texanism. When I went to my firm in Dallas, I was thinking it was going to be people like the lawyers I'd grown up around, like those I worked with as a summer associate and as a page in the legislature for four months. These lawyers back in North Carolina, they—at least in my experience—taught me this is how you should be in the world. You stand for certain things, and you work for certain things, and money is not the main thing. In North Carolina I'm living a certain kind of life and being part of the community—that's

the main thing. Then again, that's an adolescent's and a youth's perspective, and yet it still feels pretty genuine to me. So I came here, and in the legal profession, money was in your face. It really was different. I'm not finding any Atticus Finches around here.

I mean I was around a lot of good people in Dallas, but not as many and not to the degree that I assumed I would be. I was also around a lot of people I did not respect. So that, and just how powerful capitalist culture is here, almost to the exclusion of virtually any other awareness that there might be different ways. It's like what else is there besides the free market? Who wouldn't want to have this no-holds-barred survival-of-the-fittest society?

But I made peace with it. There are certain things to be said for this kind of life. It's a very dynamic, energetic place, and lots of amazing things happen. Texas Instruments changed the history of the world. And that's just one example of the innovation and dynamism and initiative both corporate and individual. It's important to recognize the good, but there remains a lot that unsettles me or strikes me as inauthentic.

WBT: What time of day do you write? Is it a set time? Or do you let the inspiration strike you?

BF: I've always treated my writing like a job. I get up in the morning with everybody else, see the kids off to school, start writing until lunch, eat lunch, lie down for 20 minutes to clear my head, then get up and write some more until it was time to pick up the kids from schools. The kids are grown now, but it's still basically the same schedule. Get up, give it most of the hours of the working day, and the best hours. And that decision—am I going to write today?—is already answered. Yes, you're going to write today. It would drive me crazy to get up in the mornings and ask: Am I going to write today? Should I write now? Should I wait until later? I can't do it. It's too much indecision.

WBT: Would you consider yourself a southern writer? Or are categories like these unhelpful?

I think it's a legitimate category. It's a legitimate way to start thinking about certain things—different traditions in American letters and placeness and particularities and peculiarities of history and geography. It's a starting point. But I didn't want to be one of those Southern writers. I don't have anything against this type of writer. Jill McCorkle and a number of other people in North Carolina and around North Carolina, they are Southern writers. They are working Southern history and Southern culture. But I wanted to do something different. I wanted to go in a different direction. You know, I've felt guilty because I didn't read as much Faulkner as I was supposed to. Being a Southerner and a writer, you're told you should read every single word that Faulkner wrote. It's just that certain writers grab you and hold and others you see the good in them but there's not that visceral connection. When I discovered the Latin American writers, and started reading them systematically, I discovered they had really gone to school on Faulkner. I thought, okay, I'm getting my Faulkner. It's being filtered through Latin America. That helped me get over my Faulkner guilt.

WBT: Which Latin American writers?

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is the master. [Julio] Cortázar, [Mario] Vargas Llosa, [Jorge Luis] Borges, [Clarice] Lispector. There are huge gaps in my familiarity with Latin American literature, but the things I do know feel very relevant. It's like Garcia Marquez especially. That's writing. I can't try to imitate him but the scope and the spirit of it—

WBT: The magic and the humor and the wonder?

BF: Yeah, but also how it is incredibly grounded in human experience. Salman Rushdie is a writer that people hold up as a 2nd generation magical realist. But his work doesn't ring true to me because it feels untethered. His magical realism isn't as grounded in the real as Marquez. Marquez's understanding of the world, and how it works, and how people behave, it just seems very profound to me and it is not as strong in Rushdie. That's true of some other writers who have

gone the magical-realist route. Garcia Marquez is not magical.

WBT: You described your work as realist earlier. Is this what you meant?

BF: Human experience is so complex. Take *Beloved* [by Toni Morrison], which I think is a great American novel. There's a lot of talk about the metaphorical aspect, the symbolism and the magical realism. I'm not so sure. She's profoundly real. It just takes a little shift in the shadows. Like place the light over here instead of over here, and it's as real as anything in life. Whatever trauma and angst and pain is bound up in that is fucking real. I don't like symbols very much. I like the real stuff.

WBT: Then, strangely, labels like magical realism actually work to limit the possibilities of reality?

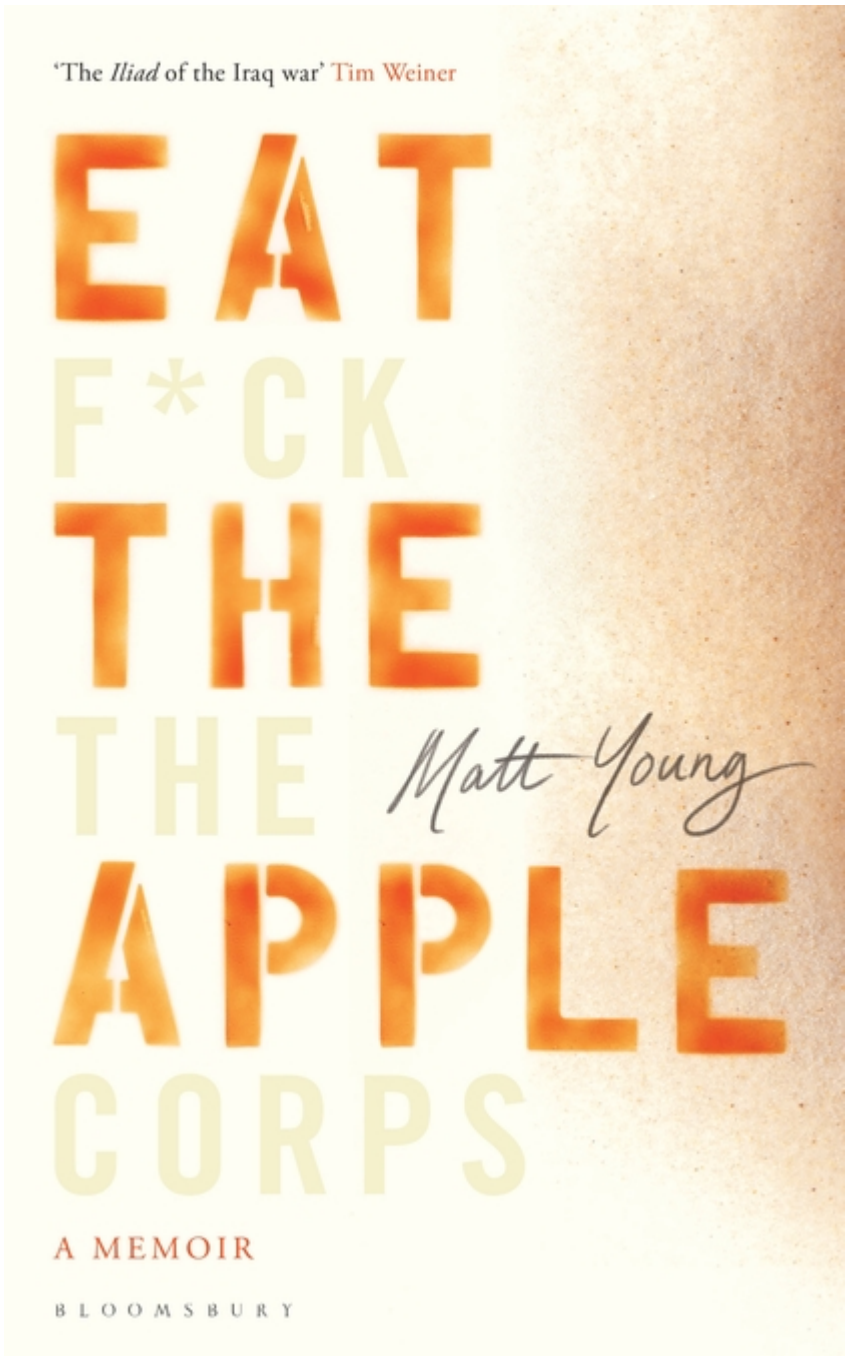
BF: If you aren't careful, yes. It's shorthand. Marquez is magical realism, but that's a start. It shouldn't limit the discussion. Human experience is so complex and deep and varied and leveled and layered. Are ghosts real? What exactly do we mean when we say ghosts? If we are talking about the past, in the present, and the past in us, and in our psyches, and in our families, ghosts may be a way of talking about that, embodying that. There's a mystery there that maybe we shouldn't sweat so much. We should let be, and acknowledge, and try to portray it as authentically as we can.

Author Bio:

Ben Fountain’s most recent book is *Beautiful Country Burn*

Again: Democracy, Rebellion, and Revolution, and is based on the Pulitzer Prize-nominated essays and reportage that he wrote on the 2016 presidential election for The Guardian. He is also the author of a novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, and a short story collection, *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*. His work has received the National Book Critics' Circle Award for Fiction, the PEN/Hemingway Award, theLos Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction, the Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize, and a Whiting Writer's Award, and has been a finalist for the National Book Award in both the U.S. and the U.K. (international authors division). His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Le Monde*, *IntranQu'îllités* (Haiti), *Esquire*, *The Paris Review*, *Harper's*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, and elsewhere.

Interview with Matt Young, Author of Eat the Apple



Matt Young is a writer, teacher, and veteran. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from Miami University and is the recipient of fellowships from Words After War and The Carey Institute for Global Good. You can find his work in Catapult, Granta, Tin House, Word Riot, and elsewhere. He teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at Centralia College and lives in Olympia, Washington. His first book, a memoir titled *Eat the Apple*, is out now from Bloomsbury Publishing.

WBT: In Six Memos for the Next Millennium, Italo Calvino, the Italian novelist and World War Two veteran, discusses how he

“gradually became aware of the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world—qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them.” Calvino then relates the myth of Perseus and Medusa. Perseus, Calvino argues, not only kills Medusa with his shield’s reflection, but must also carry the burden of his experiences—and Medusa’s head—with him indirectly; otherwise, he will, well, turn to stone. Perseus’s strength, Calvino claims, “lies in his refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden.”

I have found this a useful metaphor for the problem of relating war experience. Too literal, you kill the experience. Too abstract, you don’t say anything at all. It is also the first thing I thought of when I encountered Eat the Apple’s humor, diagrams, cartoons, and pronouns (“you” and “we” and “Recruit” and “Young,” instead of “I”). Can you talk to us about how and why you decided to recount your military experiences indirectly?

YOUNG: The change in POV started off as art imitating life. In Marine boot camp you’re required to refer to yourself as “Recruit So-and-so” and it felt unnatural to write a story about boot camp using “I” so I let the third person do work there.

I struggled with the fact that most war memoirs I’d read had some kind of extreme circumstance at their center—that kind of Special Forces narrative that inundates the media these days. My experiences by comparison seemed tame and silly. But I thought about all the grunts I’d served with who’d had similar experiences over the four years we were together and I thought about all the battalions that had replaced us in country full of similar guys who’d also had similar experiences. Those two thoughts gave rise to that communal first person plural voice—I realized it was best to lean into that idea of not having a unique experience, painted myself as no different

than any other.

Lots of early pieces I wrote were ‘How to’ stories. Some of those made their way into the final draft, but many more changed focus later on. That highly imperative second person, felt like it confronted both military and civilian complicity in Iraq. But ultimately, the second-person perspective loses its power quickly because it often forces the audience to acknowledge they’re reading a story in ways other perspectives don’t so I tried to keep it to a minimum and fit it with form to make it feel more natural.

I also found that those other perspectives helped me confront my past actions in a less direct manner and helped me be more honest about who I’d been and what I’d done. They made me feel less alone, took me off the page and put me next to the reader and let me show them something I couldn’t have with just “I”. There’s something about the removal of the “I” that let me cut a little deeper.

WBT: The essays in Eat the Apple are relatively short and incredibly poignant. I experienced each and every one like a punch to the gut. Did this economy come into your writing naturally? Or did you have to refine longer essays into the powerful vignettes they became?

YOUNG: When I started writing I set off to write flash. I wanted the essays to mimic memory, and flash felt like a natural fit. It’s often how I remember moments—a smell or image or sound recalls a tiny thing and sends it zipping through my brain for a microsecond and then it’s gone, but I’m left thinking about it and reflecting on it sometimes for days.

I didn’t write or journal during my time in the Marines so I had to do a lot of memory recall exercises, late-night texting of former platoon mates, and research online to find incident reports. That process itself felt fractured, which also seemed

to fit what I was trying to do—piecing together four years of experience and emotion to make a narrative.

I love the lyricism that generally comes with flash essays—it felt like a fantastic way to spice up the sometimes complete banality of war. In the beauty of those lyrical descriptions the horror of what I'm writing about maybe becomes a bit easier to stomach for a reader as well—that's the hope anyway.

WBT: In a Time Magazine essay, you write the following: "I tried to fictionalize what I'd done because I wasn't quite ready to acknowledge that I never fulfilled that manly heroic expectation people have of military service." As someone who writes fiction, I found this unsettling (in a good way). Could you expand on what you meant here and maybe tell us a little about what you consider the relationship between fiction and nonfiction?

YOUNG: It happened on two levels for me. My senior Marines had fought in Fallujah. I saw them as the peak of manhood, real heroes. They'd been in firefights, cleared houses, killed people. I wanted to have done those things then. I'd been told those men were the pinnacle of maleness and I was so uncomfortable in my skin and lacked so much confidence as a young man that I was an easy sell and bought in fully. Then, when I got home after my first deployment I didn't feel like I'd measured up to them and when I went to tell my family and friends about what war was like, I felt like I didn't measure up to their expectations, either. So I made up stories to tell them, made my experience more like my seniors'. I lied. And I kept lying for years because it made me feel good and it kept me from having to reflect about what I'd done and what had happened.

Then, by the time I got to undergrad at Oregon State and started writing I had those lies mixed up with my truth. When I tried to write stories about my experience I saw myself in the characters I created and immediately began to defend them,

to make their experience mean something. I wanted them to be heroes, and so they turned into caricatures. They spent their time in my stories explaining “the real world” to civilians unironically. There was no truth in those stories, because I couldn’t be truthful with myself.

It’s a bit odd, maybe. You usually hear from writers that fiction is a more direct vehicle for the truth. But for me it wasn’t writing fiction that got me there. It was using fiction writing techniques. Lines between fiction and nonfiction are super blurry a lot of the time. The moment an event happens and someone documents it, it’s filtered through an individual’s lens—that person’s contextual place in the world. Are the things I recount and the stories I tell considered fact? Probably not, by most standards. Are they truth? 100%.

WBT: Toxic masculinity is a topic much in the news recently. For good reason. We spend a lot of time of WBT debating and thinking about violence and its effect on communities. But sometimes we can forget how cultures of violence eat away at men too, at how this toxicity is a two-way street. Eat the Apple bravely confronts this exact issue. For example:

“You’ve chosen the United States Marine Corps infantry based on one thing: You got drunk last night and crashed your car into a fire hydrant in the early morning and think—because your idea of masculinity is severely twisted and damaged by the male figures in your life and the media you surround yourself—that the only way to change is the self-flagellation achieved by signing up for war.”

I feel Eat the Apple responds to this “idea of masculinity,” and I encourage readers interested in this subject to buy and read the whole collection through (a couple times). Did you set out to write on this idea of what it means to be a man in the U.S. today or is this simply a byproduct of describing your particular experiences in the Marines?

YOUNG:

Short answer? No.

Longer answer? I set out to write my experience as an infantry Marine and it was impossible to write that experience without writing about the antiquated ideals of masculinity and anti-feminism, which construct the ethos of both the Marine Corps and especially Marine grunts. It was delivered via Drill Instructors, School of Infantry Instructors, senior Marines, and higher-ups—a kind of disdain for everything feminine. Drop back on a hike? You're a bitch or a pussy. Have a girlfriend back home? She's fucking some other guy behind your back because you can't trust Susie Rottencrotch. Women Marines—WMs—are dehumanized; called Wookies (which I never got) or walking mattresses. Those are the more overt portions of toxic masculinity I, and most, experience.

Then it hits you from civilians, too. Again with their expectations—what a soldier is supposed to be, what they're supposed to have experienced and done, and how they're supposed to react to that experience. Usually civilians expect you to have killed someone, to be damaged irreparably by post-traumatic stress, to be that strong silent type, to be a hero.

But calling someone a hero negates their experience or their feelings about that experience. It tells them their individual feelings are wrong and replaces them with a narrative people are more comfortable with. Hero worship is part of toxic masculine culture and it's an act of silencing. It says, Shut up about your experience, smile when I thank you for your service so I can feel better about myself, and take the beer I just bought you. It perpetuates the tough guy military narrative—a thing I'd bought into so much I lied about my true experiences to family and friends when I returned home. I really couldn't write about anything in my life right now without confronting masculinity in our culture.

WBT: Hard question time. That quote above. Isn't this exactly what happened? Didn't the experiences recounted in this book change you in ways that you both wanted and did not want? It's okay if you just say, "read the last chapters of Eat the Apple." Readers should.

YOUNG: Unsatisfying answer time: For sure. Doesn't every experience do that? Before that quote I speculate as to what might happen if I don't join. Do I think now that becoming a Midwest caricature was the only other outcome? No. I could've joined the Peace Corps, or sucked it up and enrolled in community college, or reconciled with my parents, or hit the lottery. There are infinite futures I could've had that could've changed me and affected me in infinite ways, but at that time I thought I was a bad man on a road to even more badness. I thought the Marine Corps would give me direction and purpose. I thought it would make me a man. I'm impulsive by nature, so I went with it.

I spend most of the rest of the book examining how misinformed I was and how directionless I became. This is really the problem I had with writing fiction about my experience when I got out. I wanted it to mean something. I wanted to know the world and myself better and more fully afterward—or wanted to pretend my military service had enlightened me to those things—but everything became more convoluted. It took being out and going to college and gaining education and language that I could use to articulate my experience to help me understand my experience and myself more fully.

WBT: I teach Slaughterhouse-Five to students every year. Every year they get upset by the descriptions of masturbation, pornography, and the picture of Montana Wildhack's breasts. I ask them why they get upset by the masturbation and not all the massacres of human beings. Eat the Apple does not pull any punches when it comes to the sexual life of Marines. Can you tell us about Eat the Apple's reception? Have you had any pushback?

For the most part people have appreciated the honesty. I write a lot about masturbation in the book for a couple reasons—one because I (and most of us) did it a lot. It really is a way to stay awake on post or pass the time or make you feel like you're still somewhat human, so it becomes part of the fabric of Marine grunt experience. But also, it's super intimate—in some respect more so than sex. You're at your most vulnerable when masturbating. All your shortcomings, your kinks, your dumb facial expressions, whatever. You don't have to hide any of those things when you're jerking off by yourself. I wanted people to see that part of myself. It helped me let down that masculine guard that's always up in military memoirs. Everyone masturbates. It's a great way to build empathy.

Some people see it as crass and childish or disgusting, which says more about them as readers and people unwilling to engage with difficult topics. Most of the pushback comes from older men who don't like me scuffing up the spit polished Marine Corps veneer. They're a dying breed I think—those men and the stories they love so much. People want more. If the festering gash that is civilian/military divide is ever going to heal it's going to take acknowledgement of the breadth and depth of service experience out there.

That people clutch their pearls at sex and not violence is an issue of our puritanical and patriarchal roots. Sex is bad because it empowers women. Violence is good because it establishes dominance and power—regressive masculine traits.

WBT: A fellow WBT editor and I have an absolutely unscientific generalization about war literature. There has not been, we contend, a war book published in the last fifty years that has not mentioned dogs, dead or otherwise. We have many theories as to why, none of them particularly insightful. Your work spends a lot of time talking about dogs too. Why do Americans write so many war books about dogs?

YOUNG: Man's best friend, maybe? Relatability to the audience?

Shock value? Killing a dog probably has some kind of purpose in the moment—to get them to stop eating corpses, or to get them to shut up, or out of boredom. In terms of literary merit, the killing of a dog is maybe more powerful than the killing of a human. We're so desensitized to human death. The killing of an animal, especially a dog, is much more rhetorically pathetic.

Tobias Wolff has maybe the best line ever about U.S. war writing in In Pharaoh's Army: "And isn't it just like an American boy, to want you to admire his sorrow at tearing other people's houses apart?" Of course, Wolff—being the brilliant writer he is—does not actually admire his sorrow, but interrogates it through the essay form itself—opens up the tensions implicit in recounting morally repugnant wartime experiences. I believe Eat the Apple to be one of the few memoirs since Wolff's that accomplishes something similar. I also believe there is little "sorrow" in Eat the Apple and even less patience with those who might admire it. Did you consciously reflect on the privilege of reflection when writing these essays? How did you avoid falling into the trap Wolff describes?

YOUNG: I love *In Pharaoh's Army.* One of my undergrad professors, Keith Scribner, recommended it to me when I was trying to figure out how to write about the Marines. Now that you mention that, maybe he saw me admiring my own sorrow in my fiction? Damn. My mind is kind of blown right now.

Anyway, after trying to fictionalize my experience I became very aware of the benefits and detriments of reflection. Honesty and humor kept me out of the trap. Those POV switches and different forms and styles were all working towards honesty and let me pull out the magnifying glass and pinpoint a sunspot to scorch the living hell out of my past self. Most of the humor in the book is self-deprecating—lacerating I suppose. I wanted the audience laugh at me. The humor at my own expense is naked honesty; the audience is laughing because

of how horrible I am, which maybe makes the feel a bit of shame because of the rhetoric surrounding the military ("Support Our Troops!"). It creates a balance with those poignant moments and keeps me from verging into woe-is-me-I-signed-up-for-the-Marines-and-they-made-me-go-to-war-isn't-that-sad? territory.

WBT: You teach writing. What do you tell your students on the first day of class?

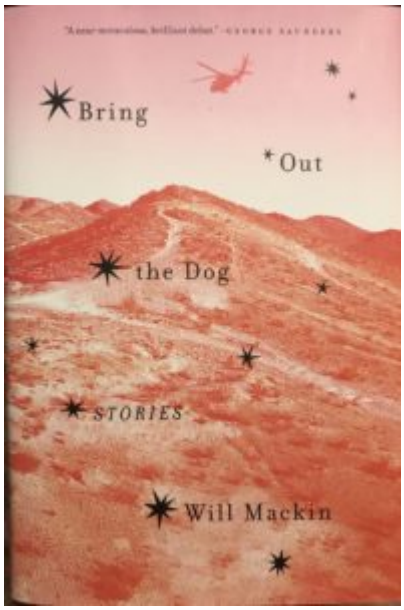
YOUNG: Anyone who gives you a prescriptive fix for your writing, and means it, is a cop.

WBT: What do you tell your students on the last day of class?

YOUNG: Go make art and be good.

Purchase *Eat the Apple* here.

Go Home and Dig It: A Review of Will Mackin's Bring Out The Dog



“Crossing the River with No Name,” the eighth story in Will Mackin’s debut collection, *Bring Out the Dog,* describes the movement of a SEAL team “to intercept” Taliban coming out the Pakistan Mountains. Using night-vision equipment, the SEALs plan to light up the night-blind Taliban with sparklers that the Taliban cannot see, and then fire state-of- the-art weapons at the invisibly sparkled men, eliminating the threat before the threat can become a threat, before the threat knows that it is, in fact, threatened. They have done this, the first-person narrator explains, many times before.

A paragraph from early in the story:

“Electric rain streaked straight down in my night vision. Cold rose from the mud into my bones. It squeezed the warmth out of my heart. My heart became a more sensitive instrument as a result, and I could feel the Taliban out there, lost in the darkness. I could feel them in the distance, losing hope. This was the type of mission that earlier in the war would have been fun: us knowing and seeing, them dumb and blind. Hal, walking point, would have turned around and smiled, like, Do you believe we’re getting paid for this? And I would have shaken my head. But now Hal hardly turned around. And when he did it was only to make sure that we were all still behind him, putting one foot in front of the other, bleeding heat,

our emerald hearts growing dim.”

A series of simple sentences, each spare, lithe, exquisitely precise, usually in clusters of three, each distorting the known or assumed physical world. The rain becomes part of the night vision. The mud rises up into the bones. The cold takes away warmth but provides an uncanny sensitivity to the enemy’s pain and fear. But then a pivot, a pointed reference to the carefree juvenescence of these would-be demigods, when they couldn’t believe they were getting paid to appear in the middle of the night and massacre a platoon of clueless, effectively blind, Taliban. And yet that was then, six intercepts ago; what now? What has happened to these emerald glow-in-the-dark hearts? Where has their youth gone?

Will Mackin knows intimately. A 23-year Navy veteran, Mackin flew jets, wrote speeches for the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, and spent six years as a Joint Terminal Attack Controller with a SEAL Team before retiring in 2014. As such, his work has a unique perspective not only on the endless succession of deployments and dislocations SEALs endure, but the disproportionate vision of people and country with all the power in the world and no idea what to do with it.

The next paragraph in “Crossing”:

“We made steady progress through the rain until we came to a river. The river looked like a wide section of field that someone had broken free, that had, for unknown reasons, been set in motion. In fact, the only way to tell the river from the field was to stare at the river and sense its lugubrious vector. But to stare at the river for too long was to feel as if it were standing still and the field were moving.”

Again: paradox. How can you make steady progress through then rain and then come to concentrated water? Then a simile that claims that what has stopped them, blocked their “progress,” has itself broken free. The pivot. A slight pause, an ironic

reference to fact—slippery in all of Mackin's stories—and an appeal to concentrated vision, some determinate perspective, which is immediately undermined and inverted when the land moves and not the river.

Soon the narrator is drowning in the river. The Virgin Mary appears. She tells him she won't be saving him. "How come?" asks the narrator. "Because saving you would require a miracle, and you already used yours," she said, "not unkindly." The story then transitions to the States, and a teenage narrator who laughs at a sentimental loser football coach from Ocean City, NJ (what a place to be from! To live your entire life in!), sleeps with the football captain's girlfriend, and smashes the mailboxes of rich people in the neighboring town. Then the narrator gets the miracle. They win the football game. A skinny kid whose name he can't remember scores a touchdown.

Viktor Shklovsky argues that Leo Tolstoy "forgoes the conventional names of the various part of the thing, replacing them instead with the names of corresponding parts in other things." He "estranges" because he refuses, Shklovsky says, to "call a thing by its name." So too Mackin. As Peter Molin points out in his Time Now post, Mackin calls nothing by its name—the cold sensitive heart, the literally unnamed river that does not move, the skinny kid who he does not remember. In other stories, SEALs hunt for two captured American soldiers named "no-chin" and "chin," the SEALs hold an elaborate memorial service for a killer Vermont Trappist monk dog killed by a SEAL. "What do you folks want to hear?" asks a tuba (!) player on an isolated outpost in middle of Afghanistan. *Anything, nothing, go fuck yourself*, says the crowd of soldiers high on horse drugs.

This aesthetic technique is not only a delight to read, but fits Mackin's subject. His SEALs live estranged lives. They exist in multiple time zones. They travel by air from one nameless spot on the map to the next. They have the power of

gods and the soft bodies of men. At the end of “Crossing the River with No Name,” the narrator, rescued from the river by a fellow SEAL (thanks for nothing Virgin Mary), goes on to intercept the Taliban. The narrator talks about how their leader Hal used to invisibly sparkle the Taliban in the middle of the platoon. “That would be the man we spare,” says the narrator. “And that would be the man who would drop to his knees in a cloud of gun smoke, raise his hands in surrender. That would be the man who would tell who he was, where’d he’d come from, and why.”

An act of divine mercy or human sadism? What’s the difference exactly? Estrangement, undulating perspective, chip away at once obvious distinctions. Mackin’s SEALs sleep with strippers, assault stripper boyfriends, take drugs, ignore training protocol, steal manpower away from other units because they can. Rules don’t win wars. SEALs do. So what then are these modern-day Templars of the sky and sea and mountain top winning with all this money, all this power, all this violence, all this freedom? Are they saving Afghanistan? Afghans? Iraqis? Civilians? Hostages? The World?

Psychedelic British Classic rock mostly. Pink Floyd songs about mean teachers. Led Zeppelin LPs in reverse. Mailbox busting. Girlfriend stealing. A sense of teenage disaffection clings to the narrator, a cynical half-irony, vague entitlement in the face of endless plenty, combined with band-of-brothers militancy, a love not of the country—*dulce decorum est* and all that Horace crap—but of each other and an unwillingness not to let one another down (because, as W.H. Auden says, our sex “likes huddling in gangs and knowing the exact time”).

In other words, the narrator—for all his explosions, all this violence, all those dead bodies—is not much different than any other American boy, any other American man.

How’s that for the horror of war?

Barry Hannah's "Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet" provides Mackin his epigraph. "We saw victory and defeat," the epigraph says. "They were both wonderful." Elsewhere in "Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet" Hannah's narrator, a U.S. Captain in Vietnam, reflects:

"It seemed to me my life had gone from teen-age giggling to horror. I never had time to be but two things, a giggler and a killer."

Sometimes the SEALs call Mackin's narrator "Fuckstick" (a nod to Fuckhead of Denis Johnson's *Jesus Son* perhaps, another psuedo-bystander). Sometimes the narrator throws a charnel rock for no reason and imagines and asteroid hitting the earth and aliens—little bars of blue light—finding the SEALs dead bodies and asking each other why he threw the rock. Sometimes the narrator listens to a SEAL team leader speak about the imperative of "speed and violence," about how the SEALs are on the top of the food chain for a reason, and notices how nicotine enters through the SEALs "thinnest of membrane on his upper lip."

Displacement. Disproportion. Despair. We can call down the fire of gods in the form of drone strikes, artillery shells, and invisible lasers, but can we save the people around us from dying off one by one? Can we combat the battle fatigue evident after five deployments? Can we stabilize and make sense of the endless succession of kaleidoscopic dislocations born of a war with no clear direction, no beginning, no end?

No. Not really. But we can love our men. We can love the war. We can giggle and kill.

"Fools. Fools," says Barry Hannah's Vietnam Captain. "Love it! Love the loss as well as the gain. Go home and dig it."

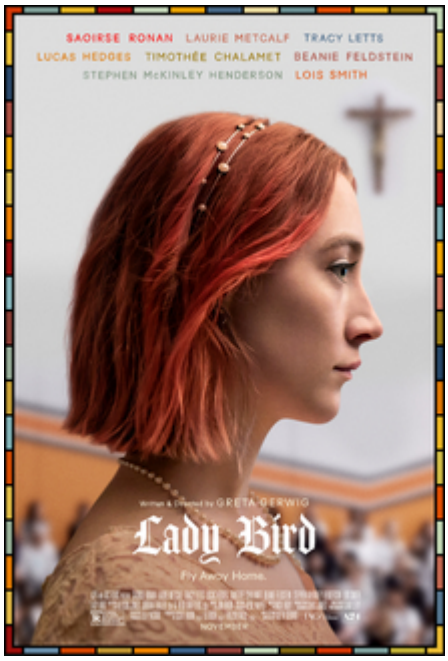
Go home and dig it.

Dig what? What can we fools at home dig?

“I lay back on the outcropping,” says another Mackin narrator, during a training exercise in Utah, waiting for a plane to blow up a fire truck that may or may not be a real fire truck. “The stone was warm, the breeze refreshing. Drifting off to sleep, I found myself feeling thankful to the war. What else would bring me up here on such a perfect day?”

Dorothy Parker once argued that Hemingway wrote not like an angel—as his many admirers insisted—but like a man. Mackin actually writes like an angel. Like an angel that wants to go back to being a man, or, rather, like a man with the perception of an angel and the soul of a man. The cumulative effect is as astonishing as the fact our country has been fighting a war for eighteen years and might well be fighting for eighteen more years: it estranges us to the experience of ourselves, to the experience of America, the experience of history. Our eyes grow, as Mackin’s says, “bright with relativity”—the war does not end; it cannot end. But we see. We fools see. Don’t we?

Lady Bird’s Pain



There’s an odd narrative thread in Greta Gerwig’s 2017 *Lady Bird*. The titular hero lives out her senior year of high school against the backdrop of the Iraq War. Characters watch the war’s escalation on televisions while debating boyfriends, mothers, friends, school plays, and sex. But the war has no direct bearing on the narrative—it is static to lower-middle class economic desperation in the aughts United States; a violent echo, a joke and a punch line, like the posters around Lady Bird’s school encouraging students to remember 9/11.

Except for one scene.

Lady Bird loses her virginity to a boy who reads Howard Zinn, hates Dave Matthews, and rolls his own cigarettes. All the tics of suburban aughtian “rebellion.” She is under the impression that he is a virgin too. Afterwards, he lets her know this wasn’t his first time. She gets upset. He can’t understand. “I just wanted it to be special,” she says. “Why?” he asks. “You’re going to have so much unspecial sex.” He then gets upset when she gets even more upset. “Do you know how many innocent civilians have been killed today?” he asks, pointing to the television and news of the Iraq invasion.

“Different things can be sad,” she says. “It’s not all war.”

War has a way of negating the particular. When used rhetorically, extreme violence shuts down conversation, or, worse, turns it into an endless series of self-justifying repetitions. It does not clarify; it excuses. Politicians point to military sacrifice as often as they can for a reason. Partisan advocates on Facebook wax hysterical about the suffering of our fighting forces for a reason. To point to mass violence distorts particular violence, makes it absurd—trivial and sentimental. Impossible.

But the particular is everything.

The boy Lady Bird sleeps with hates anything mainstream. Lady Bird also tries to separate herself from her peers and family. Not only does she take on a pretentious name, but she wants to leave California, to escape the horrors of suburban Sacramento, her given life, for something else, anything and anyone else other than the here and the now, this present.

Her boyfriend's father is dying of cancer. Lady Bird's father is dying of poverty. Her priest is dying of grief. The larger sweeps of history, these violent abstractions, weigh down on the details of experience. Make them silly. Banal. Sacramento rather than a sacrament.

Greek tragedians assumed pain brought wisdom or spiritual growth (*pathei mathos*). This is not necessarily true. Suffering can also make it impossible to think clearly about the relationships around us—it can pervert rationality, turn us into monsters possessed by the infinite and incapable of loving the finite. Worse, when we reference pain that is not ours—greater pain, greater suffering, bigger wars, bigger genocides—we risk excusing the specific pain we ourselves give on a daily basis.

"O Reason not the need," King Lear begs his daughters. "Our basest beggars

Are in the poorest thing superfluous./Allow not nature more

than nature needs,

Man’s life’s as cheap as beast’s.”

Confronted by his daughters’ irrefutable logic, Shakespeare’s Lear warns that if we abandon ourselves to mathematical logic, if we insist on necessity, on reducing our experience to the quantifiable, proportion out our pain and empathy, we become blind to what we are, what makes us different than everything else that is. Deprived of particular wants, desires, and love, our human life becomes “as cheap as a beast’s.”

Lady Bird takes increasingly stupid risks to escape her life. She sabotages her mother’s love by insistently pointing out her mother and father’s failure as parents, their inability to meet the economic expectations of American “success.” As she does her name, she denies the life she has been given. But, in the end, Lady Bird discovers a mysterious opening in the curves of her hometown roads, the lives lived there, the memories living there. She stops setting up a false contrast, what the rhetoricians call an either/or fallacy. She takes her given name. She accepts the “isness” of experience. She is able to say thank you. To be grateful for existence.

“You’re going to have so much unspecial sex in your life,” her boyfriend says.

This is true, but it misses the point.

In the last few month’s allegations of sexual assault have dominated the headlines. Many in the United States are waking up to the particular pain silently endured by many for decades. This is a positive development. But the counterassault will soon come. Propagandists and their media teams will point to the big and the broad and the violent. They will talk much of the real world, of the truth, of people suffering in the Middle East and Middle America. They will scream about the big picture, about men in positions of power making hard decisions. They will tell us many stories about

War, of missile-button pushing and beaches stormed. They will teach us about History. They will preach Necessity.

They will say you don’t know how good you have it.

Many of the accusers will begin to doubt the validity of their own pain. The victims will begin to wonder if they were selfish to be hurt in a world where people die in horrible ways and suffer so many horrible wrongs. How can their pain be special when there is so much pain? How can these violations mean anything in a world defined by greater violence? Greater violations?

But this misses the point. Pain is not quantifiable. And those who attempt to do so should wonder why they feel the need to do so, what they want to celebrate and what they want to excuse.

Like King Lear, Lady Bird, this confused suburban teenage girl, is a fool. She knows she is a fool and she persists in making a fool of herself because she cannot see any other way out (I was often reminded of Terrence Malick’s *Badlands*, another story of American youth finding a dangerous self in a wilderness of media, poverty, and self-loathing). And she wants out. The other characters—the priests, the nuns, her mom, her father, her brother—endure great pain, great tragedy. She dances on, this fool, knowing nothing of death, of civilians dying halfway across the world, of the suicides in her midst, thinking only of herself and her pain and her escape.

But is her dance foolish? Are her trials necessarily lesser, less substantial, than those who deal out and insist on pain because they see the world as so much pain? Should her agony be measured out, meted, compared, excused and denied by the pompous ineluctability of History and War? Don’t her experiences, the extremity of her definite emotions, contain the radical possibility of all that is singular and

incomparable? Can different things be sad? Is it all war?

Lady Bird begins with the very last line of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—"she put her lips together and smiled mysteriously." In the novel, Rose of Sharon's baby has just died. She feeds a dying man with her breast milk. Her lips. Her breast. Her smile.

Faced with the immensity of history, the refuge of the particular is not escapism. It is the thing itself. And so too this satisfying movie. It is the thing itself. Life.

Is Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five an Anti-War Book?

Pop Quiz

Which famous veteran author said the following?

"An anti-war book? Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?"

If you said Kurt Vonnegut, you're one hundred percent, absolutely, overwhelmingly, incredibly, astonishingly wrong.

Yes, this quote does appear in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Yes, Kurt Vonnegut the author of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, typed these words with his own two hands. But no, he does not *say* them. They are spoken by Harrison Star, "the famous Hollywood director." The narrator (if the narrator is in fact Vonnegut) responds to the quote. The actual exchange:

"You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books?"

"No. What *do* you say, Harrison Star?"

"An anti-war book? Why not write an anti-*glacier* book instead?"

What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that too.

And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death."

This might sound like a quibble. The narrator ultimately agrees with Harrison Starr, doesn't he? It's not. To mistake the famous Hollywood director Harrison Star's words for Vonnegut's is to not only not get the joke, but to turn the living protest that is *Slaughterhouse-Five* into an artifact of a futility and resignation; it is to misunderstand what inspired Vonnegut's masterpiece and the unique role art can play in the wars we still fight.

A Dostoevskian Digression

"Everything there is to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But that isn't enough anymore."

This is Captain Eliot Rosewater. During Billy Pilgrim's first mental breakdown, after he returns from World War Two and the Dresden firebombing, Eliot Rosewater teaches Billy about books, mostly Kilgore Trout, the excitable science fiction writer, but also about Fyodor Dostoevsky, the excitable religious writer.

I find this important. For all the obvious differences—aliens and spaceships mostly—Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* have a lot in common. They both wrestle with the possibility of free will in a deterministic universe. They both agonize over the impossibility of individual human action in an aggregate din of communal stupidity and vice. But more than this, they both tend to be remembered for the ideology the author despised.

Even those unfamiliar with *The Brothers Karamazov* will likely have read or heard of the "The Grand Inquisitor" section. It is often excerpted in literary anthologies. I have seen it published by itself and on the shelf at bookstores. In it, the atheist Ivan Karamazov tells his brother, the young priest Alyosha Karamazov, the story of a medieval Inquisitor. In the story, Christ returns to life. The Inquisitor arrests Christ. He tries to explain to Christ why He is no longer needed. People prefer earthly bread to the spiritual variety. The government will provide what Christ could not. Christ doesn't respond with words. He simply kisses the Inquisitor.

This novelette within the larger novel is an eloquent, indeed almost perfect, argument against religion and proof of man's spiritual poverty. It is so good that many critics believe that Dostoevsky secretly agreed with Ivan Karamazov's unapologetic (and the Inquisitor's *de facto)* atheism. Yet this is to confuse Dostoevsky the polemicist for Dostoevsky the artist. Dostoevsky embedded the Inquisitor's argument within a larger frame, a single movement within a larger symphony. Only a fool would mistake a picture of the crucified Christ in the back of cathedral for the entire cathedral itself. To take

Ivan’s story for the whole requires a seductive myopia on par with the Inquisitor’s (an argument could be made that this scene parallels a larger movement in miniature, but that’s different…).

On Tralfamadore We Are Forgiven

Those who have read *Slaughterhouse-Five* know the refrain “So it goes” well. Vonnegut describes the destruction of Dresden and a flat bottle of champagne with the same verbal shrug. It is, Billy says, a Tralfamadorian sentiment. To the alien race Vonnegut describes, death is not a big deal because at some other moment that which is dead is alive. Existence is “structured that way.” No one has to feel bad about killing people or people they saw killed. If we all saw the big picture, we would be content with the horrors we survive and the dead loved ones we forget.

Billy Pilgrim becomes a prophet for this new Tralfamadorian faith. It provides solace after the horrors he witnessed at Dresden. The irony is, of course, that this faith is no different than the old faith, the very pedestrian one that justifies past horrors by seeing them within a larger scheme of such horrors, that mistakes everything that happened as inevitable simply because it happened. But paralleled with one another, the two specious justifications and tempting causal chicaneries speak to the sparking mechanism, the relative and shifting dialectic common to any successful novel.

Think of it like a chorus of a Greek tragedy. These choruses often say something along these lines: “We are doomed”; “nothing means anything”; “is there any escape from the human woe?” The actors (and the plot) respond by proving the chorus only partly right, by committing the crimes and enacting the despair of the chorus. But in this conversation, in these repetitions and pointed articulations, a space opens up for the audience, for catharsis, for pity, for a world that is

other than what is (Mikhail Bakhtin called this the dialogic imagination in Dostoevsky, but all worthwhile art employs to some degree this sustained thesis and antithesis, this ironic countervailing).

Here is Billy towards the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, again in a hospital. Bertram Copeland Rumfoord is in the bed beside him. A Harvard history professor, Rumfoord is a strong and outdoorsy man in the vein of Teddy Roosevelt—the narrator says Rumfoord actually looks like Teddy Roosevelt—writing a book about the U.S. Air Force. Rumfoord wishes Billy would just die so Rumfoord could forget his existence and finish the book. But, in what becomes the climax of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Billy speaks up. He says he was physically there at Dresden. Billy saw the destruction.

"It had to be done," Rumfoord told Billy, speaking of the destruction of Dresden.

"I know," said Billy.

"That's war."

"I know. I'm not complaining."

"It must have been hell on the ground."

"It was," said Billy Pilgrim.

"Pity the men who had to do it."

"I do."

"You must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground."

"It was all right," said Billy. "Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore."

At the plot's critical moment, the moment when Billy finally speaks, when he employs his moral authority as a survivor of a

massacre, the fact that he is an individual who existed in time, at a time—who therefore means something rather than nothing—Billy undermines his revelation with his talk of Tralfamadore. He justifies the Rumfoords of this world, those who say the last massacre excuses and ennobles the next. Everything has to be done because it has to be done, the ineluctable and geometric logic of the Inquisitor and cynical fanatics everywhere wins. The dialectic swings. Humanity, morality, and free will take it in the chin once again. Right?

No. Taken by itself, this exchange would indeed be an expression of profound despair. *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes a book making fun of anti-glacier books. But it is not a book making fun of anti-glacier books. It is an anti-glacier book. It is an anti-glacier book because each of these pronouncements—these biting excretions of apathy and mordancy—exist in conversation with other modulated choric futilities, and within these parallel and expertly crafted rhythms, space opens up for a world without glaciers, without any large impossible blocks of necessary and ineluctable ice (to be clear, I'm talking about war here).

From *Slaughterhouse-Five's* first chapter:

"Even then I was supposedly writing a book about Dresden. It wasn't a famous air raid back then in America. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been in Hiroshima, for instance. I didn't know that either. There hadn't been much publicity.

I happened to tell a University of Chicago professor at a cocktail party about the raid as I had seen it, about the book I would write. He was a member of a thing called The Committee on Social Thought. And he told me about the concentration camps, and about how the Germans had made soap and candles out dead jews and so on.

"All I could say was, "I know, I know. *I know*.""

Three “knows.” Note the italics on the third know. For the University of Chicago professor (as for his fictional doppelgänger, the Harvard educated Rumfoord), what we “know” has become an excuse not to act. Knowledge of one genocide clouds our vision of another. We despair of our condition and reconcile ourselves to it by parroting each historical genocide like some Gregorian chant in the church of moral abnegation.

Slaughterhouse-Five, taken as a whole, is nothing if not a hilarious satire of this criminal sentiment by supposedly sentient creatures—a rebuke to those who use knowledge of the past to excuse future repetitions, who lack the fortitude to imagine why we know what we claim to know, who in their desperation for forgiveness end up excusing the crime through a grotesque and pompous teleological satisfaction.

Like Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, Vonnegut’s success extends directly from how deeply Vonnegut subjects himself to what he doesn’t personally hold to be true (the inevitability of the Dresden firebombing and the Vietnam War), how artfully and doggedly he mines the implicit ideology of historical stupefaction, our lazy biological predestination, the complacent and smug morality that looks on war and murder and slaughter and says it was meant to be because it hurts too much to admit it (and we) equally could not have been.

Flying Backwards and Other Historical Angels

Many admire the scene in *Slaughterhouse-Five* when Billy watches the World War Two film backwards and bombers fly in reverse over Germany to suck shrapnel from the earth and the good people of America work hard to dismantle bombers and bury ammunition. I do too. It speaks to possibility. It speaks to a response to Tralfamadorians of other worlds and Rumfoords of this world. It speaks to a world where we are not implicitly

forgiven our wars by the lie of power and fact of survival, where our blinkered unimaginative humanity does not excuse our repetitive and moronic inhumanity.

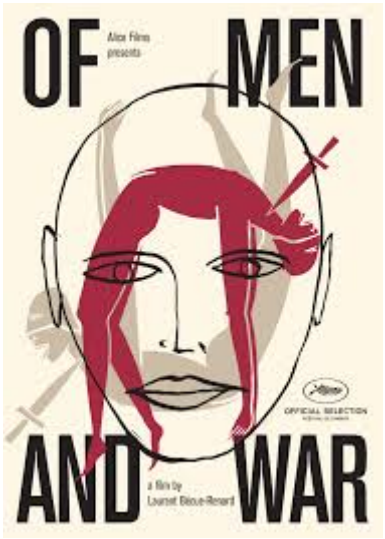
But I also especially admire another scene. It's in the book's first chapter. Vonnegut tells us about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He describes Lot's wife before God turns her into a pillar of salt:

"And Lot's wife, of course, was told not look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human."

Vonnegut is a pillar of salt. He doesn't simply look back. He does not "record experience." He writes an anti-war book that admits it might as well be an anti-glacier book, which makes the best possible argument for the permanence and monolithic nature of war, but adamantly remains an anti-war book. In short, Vonnegut's expertly crafted and strategically balanced novel testifies to the radical instability of existence, including the supposed inevitably of whatever war we happen to be fighting. It is an explicit rejection of the iron laws of academic causality, of history as we claim to know it. It responds to those who pretend to believe in free will and learning but who in truth seek in history the precedent and justification for future ignorance and violence.

So this July 4th over natty boh, fireworks, and talk of long ago wars please take a moment to think of Kurt Vonnegut—it might have been hopeless to attack a giant clump of floating ice with nothing more than a few jokes and stories about aliens, but we should love him for it, because it is so human, and we need all the humanity we can get in a world where endable wars never end and the massacres continue apace.

In Laurent Bécue-Renard's Of Men and War War Is Not Tragic But Embarrassing



In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argued that every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. There is truth to this. Some soldiers do go to war expecting an exciting adventure. Some don't expect to be killed or even think about their chances of being killed. Some don't dwell on the fact that they have guns and will have to shoot the enemy. But most do. Most are rational actors with the same evidence we all have at our disposal: namely, war involves violence. So why are they so often surprised when the war they go to turns out to be, well, violent?

Though concerned with what happens to soldiers after war, the question of imagined experience versus actual experience haunts Laurent Bécue-Renard's powerful documentary *Of Men and War*. Following several veterans at the Pathway Home, a California facility established to help traumatized veterans find meaning in trauma, Bécue-Renard reveals that the men

fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan did not find the experience worse than expected, not exactly—they found it more humiliating than expected.

According to the documented counseling sessions, many of the veterans at the Pathway Home participated in firefights, staunched the bleeding of ruptured bodies, and helped collect dead bodies. That they did these things should surprise no one. I would be hard-pressed to imagine anybody who did not know these things happen when you bring rifles and bombs to a place with a bunch of rifles and bombs. And, not surprisingly, the Pathway veterans tell very few of these traditional wartime stories. Only a few seem particularly upset by the fact that they had to kill an enemy, or lost a battle buddy or even their own combat injuries. This is not to say that these things did not upset them, only that they do not explain why they are at Pathway Home.

The veterans do, though, tell a whole lot of accident stories. One tells the story of how he kicked in a door and broke the neck of a little boy who was about to open the door. One tells about getting a lifelong disability because he jumped from a helicopter five or six feet to the ground and landed wrong. One tells about watching a tanker pull a gun out of the turret and how the tanker blew his own head off. Another tells about leaning into a fridge to get his best friend a Monster energy drink and pulling his M-4 trigger and killing his best friend.

After the release of *American Sniper*, Americans had a national conversation about PTSD (or what passes for a national conversation in America). In the movie version, American Sniper Chris Kyle's decision to kill a child and save American soldiers haunts him. But most soldiers would not be haunted by this. This is a straightforward exchange, a decision that involved conscious volition and a commitment to save fellow soldiers. It is the same logic with which we drone bomb and carpet bomb and drop nuclear bombs on cities—horrible, morally

suspect, but (for many) a necessary utilitarian sacrifice that comes with war. Moments like this do not haunt the soldiers at the Pathway Home. In the Pathway Home version, the sniper would have tried shooting the boy and shot an American soldier or shot the wrong boy or failed to make the shot and all the soldiers died. That's what haunts. Accidents haunt.

Kicking in a door and breaking a child's neck cannot be rationalized. The soldier who did this in *Of Men and War*—an obviously decent and empathetic man—tries to blame it on bad Iraqi parenting. He tries to blame the boy. He tries to blame it on himself. But it can't be explained. It can't be reduced to any schema. It is just stupid and horrible and unfair. The boy is dead and you didn't mean to kill him. That's it. It is a stupid accident. It is humiliating. It sucks. It is impossible to lend meaning to such a moment and such a story because embarrassments like that don't deserve meaning—they resist explication not through their horror but their arbitrary horror.

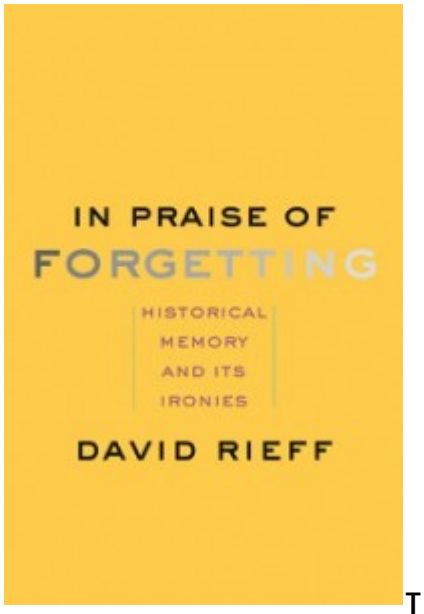
In "The Chaff," a short story by Brian Van Reet, the narrator describes how what troubles veterans is seldom what most would consider traumatic. Instead, the narrator finds himself overwhelmed in civilian life by a trivial moment, an action and event not especially traumatic. The narrator of Matthew Hefti's novel, *A Hard and Heavy Thing*, obsesses for years over a practical joke involving a pebble—"the stupid, galling, rebarbative, pestilent, abrasive carking rock"—rather than the actual violence the pebble supposedly caused. The opening line of Phil Klay's National Book Award winning *Redeployment*, "We shot dogs," has similar implications. Soldiers go to war to kill humans. Soldiers (and civilians) do not expect to kill dogs. Soldiers remember the dead dogs, not the person of whatever age or gender they had to kill to save friends or because some Captain told them to (the ending of Klay's story suggests the multiple moral ironies inherent in such logic).

From different angles, Van Reet, Hefti, Klay and Bécue-Renard approach the idiosyncratic nature of PTSD—not its horror, not its thousand-yard stare, how war was so much worse than expected, but its very ridiculousness, the awkward and absurd and pathetically embarrassing nature of war. There is nothing dignified about the denizens of Pathway Home. These veterans do not stare into the abyss. They do not see any heart of darkness. They have no access to some existential truth. They have not returned sadder and wiser men. They are simply lost men stuck on what might not have been, how something as silly as forgetting to un-chamber a round or buckle a seatbelt killed their best friend.

Young men and women do not join the military thinking that it will all be a walk in the park and that war's violence won't affect them. They are not imbeciles. What soldiers do miss is that the violence they will face is often desperately pedestrian, something that could have happened to them back home, which has no meaning other than the fact that it happened. Wrestling with sheer happenstance is not an easy thing to do for civilians. It is even harder to do with several thousand years of war mythology and sentimentalizing telling you that an accident has a larger meaning when it clearly does not. By immersing us in the experience of the men at Pathway Home, Bécue-Renard's provocative documentary wrestles with this disconnect. Let us hope the people who send these young men and women to war start wrestling with it too.

David Rieff's In Praise of

Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies



In *At The Mind's Limits*, a series of essays reflecting on his time spent in the Nazi concentration camps, Jean Améry predicted that in one hundred years the murder of millions, carried out by "a highly civilized people," will be lumped with countless other 20th century horrors and submerged in a general "Century of Barbarism." Victims like Améry "will appear as the truly incorrigible, irreconcilable ones, as the anti-historical reactionaries in the exact sense of the word." And history will be, perversely, the prime agent of this (and his) erasure.

Améry was not wrong. As David Rieff points out in his illuminating study, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies*, by 2045 the last survivors of Nazi atrocities will be dead. Whatever moral or intellectual satisfaction Améry might have obtained from remembrance of his atrocity will pass on to people who were not victims, people who, no matter how well-intentioned, manipulate Améry's memories and experiences to their own social, political and cultural ends (like me, right now). "The verb to remember," Rieff argues, "simply cannot be conjugated in the plural except when in

reference to those who lived through what they communicate."

Despite this, the collective memory industry is booming. From Washington DC to Saudi Arabia groups of concerned citizens and respectable thinkers recreate the past in their own image, projecting grievances and "the memory of wounds" into the future out of a mistaken belief in memory's ability to prevent future crimes (take, for example, the ongoing 1916 Irish centenary or Russia's 70th Victory Day anniversary military chest-thumping). Relying heavily on "highly questionable notions of collective consciousness," Rieff contends, these groups have turned memory into a "moral and social imperative," an imperative that has become one of the "more unassailable pieties of our age." Rieff finds this notion justifiably—and demonstrably—absurd.

And yet, even if he is right, very few would find it anything less than irresponsible to contemplate the obvious, if terrifying, alternative—forgetting. Rieff just does that. Rieff's *In Praise of Forgetting* covers a remarkable amount of ground in less than 150 pages—from Australia's Anzac Day ceremonies and First World War Gallipoli campaign to W.B. Yeats and Ireland's Troubles to the 9/11 Memorial and Al Qaeda—while glossing an even more remarkable number of scholars and poets for evidence of the ways in which memory is used and abused. Is it time, he wonders, that we dispense with Santayana's famous adage about remembering the past for Nietzsche's "active forgetting"?

Important to this counterintuitive argument is Rieff's notion of progress. Very much like the English philosopher John Gray—who appears often in *In Praise of Forgetting*—Rieff does not really believe in progress, at least not in the traditional sense. Where many governments today consciously and unconsciously assume teleological and Whiggish constructions of the historical record—that we are the culmination of history rather than its contingent

byproduct—Rieff's understanding of history is less palatable perhaps but infinitely more pragmatic and productive. In this version, when progress is made, it comes through ugly compromise, what John Gray describes as a "modus vivendi among civilizations," necessary in a world where particular cultural values are, unfortunately, incommensurable.

According to Rieff, nothing impedes this type of progress more than paeans to collective memories that cannot logically exist, and which idealize a perfect rationality that humans clearly do not possess. Rieff adroitly interrogates the overreaching claims of historians like Avishai Marglit who call for some kind "of shared moral memory for humankind" to combat the "biased silences" in the historical record. Rieff compares such thinking to that of those who in the human rights communities "insist that there can be no lasting peace without justice." Not true. History, Rieff asserts, "is replete with outcomes that provided the first while denying the second." To Rieff, the memory community could stand to grow up a little in this respect— giving up on utopian dreams of perfectly remembered pasts for the rough and tumble politics of strategic forgetting.

But the target of Rieff's argument is less professional historians like Marglit, who often qualify their arguments, acknowledging the dangers of memory obsessions (e.g., Confederate memorials or Bin Laden's "crusader armies"), and more the memory industry, whose uncritical interpretations have turned experiences like Améry's into self-validating tourist kitsch and perpetuated violence in places like Ireland for seventy years. Rieff's book takes for granted what academics have long been wary of acknowledging—that the majority of human beings have little use for the subtleties of critical history. What they do have use for is the banalities of historical platitudes and the mysticisms of collective memory. Cases in point: Joan of Arc's current incarnation as the enemy of immigrants in France, Mel Gibson as Scotland's

national hero and any promise to make "America Great Again."

Memory for memory's sake should not be laughed at (at least not always). Rieff witnessed firsthand in the Balkans how each side used often-valid historical grievances to justify the continuation of violence. My own time working with Iraqis from 2006 to 2007 in Mosul taught me something similar. And in an U.S. election cycle dominated by grievance, it is perhaps time we start taking forgetting seriously, and not simply its consequences but also its inevitability and practicability. The alternative, the continued privileging of memory, of starry-eyed assumptions about the redemptive possibilities and inherent morality of remembrance, carries with it its own dangers, dangers we would be foolish to dismiss as third-world barbarisms.

Of course, such talk of forgetting will have its critics. Anyone who has studied race in America well knows how silence and amnesia can perpetuate violence too. And movies like the sublime *Son of Saul* prove that there are ways to remember the Shoah and other atrocities that don't descend into kitsch. Yet, after watching *Son of Saul* on my computer, advertisements proliferated in my web browser. They all asked the same thing: that this Passover, I think about investing in Israel Bonds. This surprised me. After reading Rieff's *In Praise of Forgetting*, it shouldn't have. Memory is not sacred. It is not above the present. It is not above the politics of the now. Whatever your thoughts on forgetting, it would be criminal to exchange one self-satisfied piety for another—to forget that the victims of history can be and often are persecuted by those who consider themselves the most competent and thorough of historians.