

New Fiction from Andria Williams: “The Attachment Division”

1. The Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety

They were the survivors, they should have been happy, they should have been fucking thrilled (the President accidentally blurted that on a hot mic few years back, everyone quoted it until it was not even that funny anymore, but that’s what she’d said, throwing up her hands: “I don’t get it. They should all be fucking thrilled”), but three decades of daily existential dread had taken its toll. The evidence was everywhere: fish in the rivers poisoned not by dioxin runoff now, but by Prozac, Zoloft, marijuana, ketamine. There were drugs in the groundwater and the creeks and the corn. Birds were constantly getting high, flying into windshields, Lyfts, barbeque grills, outdoor umbrellas, the sides of port-a-potties. The different types of thunks their bodies made, depending on the material they struck, were the subject of late-night talk show jokes.

As for humans, the pills weren’t enough, the online therapy, in-person therapy, shock therapy, exposure therapy, clown therapy, none of it. The suicide rate hit twenty percent.

It was Dr. Anton Gorgias—still alive, now, at one hundred eight, and very active on Twitter—who initially proposed, and eventually headed, the Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety. The leaders of fifty-six nations came together to declare a worldwide mental-health crisis. Ironic, really, because the climate problem had been mostly been solved (the U.S being third-to-last to sign on to the Disaster Accords, just before Saudi Arabia and Equatorial Guinea. Thank God we even did, Steph sometimes marveled. She was twenty-seven;

people just ten or twenty years older than she was would often tell her she was lucky to have missed the very first years of the Wars; she'd think, yes, it had all been a real joy, thank you). Nothing could be reversed, but they could buy themselves some time, maybe even a few hundred years. That was in Sweden—of course it was Sweden—and so Minnesota was the first U.S. state to grab the ball and run with it, copying its spiritual motherland with only a smidge less efficiency.

Twelve states had Bureaus now, with more in the queue. But those states all looked to Minnesota, where the successes were measurable: suicide down by seven to nine points, depending on the study; people rating their daily satisfaction at a respectable 6 out of 10. It had once been two. Remember that, Stephanie's local director had told them in training. We brought it up to six. It used to be two.

Using combinations of genomic scanning, lifestyle analysis, and psychological evaluation, people could pinpoint their main source of anxiety and apply for its corresponding relief branch. The only hitch, at this point, was that each person could apply to only one branch. It was a budget and personnel thing, Steph explained when asked; the Bureau had its limits like anything else. People did not like being told they had to choose, but their complaints made Steph feel a little defensive. What more could people ask of a government agency? "At least we allow you to be informed," she'd pointed out to her parents, her sister, Alex, anyone who took issue. She was cribbing from the Bureau's original slogan, "It's the Most Informed Decision You'll Ever Make."

"Yeah," quipped Alex, in the recent last days before their breakup, when he claimed Steph was getting too sensitive, too cranky, too obsessively hung up on the death of her dad. "We should all be fucking thrilled."

People complained about other aspects, too: registration was a bitch, the waiting period took at least two years and there

was mandatory yearlong counseling, but, again—the numbers didn't lie. "It Used to Be Two" was now printed on the sides of bus stops, above the seats on the light rail.

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2. Never Laugh in the Presence of the Pre-Deceased

Steph worked for a small subset of Mortality Informance called the Attachment Division. The Attachment Division was tailored to people with anxiety caused by the prospect of loss: that their significant other might pass away before they did. This was what kept them up at night, what woke them with gasping nightmares. They wanted to know that they would die first, because the opposite horrified them. They could choose to be informed—if indeed they would be first to go—either six months or three months before their partner.

True, plenty of people registered for the program as newlyweds and then rescinded their applications a few years later, submitted them elsewhere. But Stephanie still liked this niche, this branch of the Bureau, for its slightly less self-involved feel, its unabashed sentimentality, the gamble its applicants were willing to make for love. A person had to put aside a bit of their pride to work for the Attachment Division. It was not considered one of the sexy branches. It was the Bureau's equivalent of an oversized, well-worn cardigan sweater.

I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. Each day I do my job with compassion and, above all, professionalism. I am on time, clean, and comforting, but never resort to intimacy. I remember that a sympathetic nod goes a long way. I do not judge or discriminate based on a Pre-Mortal's appearance, race, creed, economic status, or any other factor. I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason. I remember always that I, too, will die.

She recalled her classmate Devin, the first day of training, raising his hand and asking how the Attachment Division defined “intimacy.” Steph tried to get his attention, jabbing her finger silently at its definition on page four of their brand-new handbooks to spare him the embarrassment of asking something obvious, but he asked anyway. It turned out that “intimacy,” for a Mortality Informant, encompassed almost everything, other than 1) helping someone if they collapsed, and 2) the required shoulder squeeze upon first releasing information. They’d practiced The Shoulder Squeeze in the same Estudiante A/Estudiante B setup she remembered from high school Spanish, reaching out a straightened arm, aiming for “the meat of the shoulder.” “One, two,” the instructor had called, briskly clapping her hands. “One, two. Fingers should already be prepared to release on the two.”

“You could probably squeeze a little harder,” said Devin, diligent in his constructive criticism. “But that could just be me. I like a lot of pressure.” They practiced with classmates taller, shorter, and the same heights as themselves.

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3. Nils Gunderson, Neighbor

Steph settled onto a green metal bench across the street from the address she’d been given, swiped her phone, and logged into her Bureau account to access the file, waiting as it loaded. A long page of text came up. Mortality Informants like herself were required to read their cases’ backgrounds first, before viewing the image, to help prevent involuntary first impressions (which, it turned out, were unpreventable).



She jiggled her foot as she scanned, her flat shoes slapping lightly against her heel. Even a year and a half into the job, she was always nervous, right before. She'd been assigned to tell whoever came up on her screen –as professionally as she could, and because this was what they had requested, they had signed up for the program themselves – that in three months they would be dead.

The top line read, in bold, NAME: NILS GUNDERSON.

“Shit,” she muttered. It wasn't that this name made anything worse, necessarily, but that it represented, to Steph, something particular. A man named “Nils Gunderson” would be what she thought of as one of the Old Minnesotans. A lot of them had moved out of the Cities the last few decades, but she – perhaps because she was not one, or only partially one (on her mom's side), her late father having been relocated to Minnesota from Thailand as one of thousands of the state's climate refugees – had a soft spot for the ones who'd braved the rapid change and stayed, the folks who loved their city and weren't freaked out by the people from all over the world who'd come, out of necessity, and often reluctantly, to live in it. She scrolled down: Nils Gunderson was forty-four years old, married to Claire, worked a desk job for the utilities company. Mother, Edna, still alive; father, Gary, dead of a heart attack at fifty. Four sisters, alive also. An adopted brother from Ghana, interesting. Thirteen cousins around the state. A large family, the traditional sort that believed in upward mobility, that had reproduced with diligence, steadily,

starting in Sweden or wherever five generations back, and then came here and just kept it up, moving through the world as if it all made sense, as if the world were bound to incrementally improve simply because they believed or had been told it would, naming their children things like Nils Gunderson. (Although it was worth noting that Nils Gunderson, himself, did not have children.)

She tapped "Open Photo." But when she saw his face she gave a small jump, not because of anything alarming about the image itself, but because, surprisingly, she recognized him. He was the man who walked his cat past her apartment every night. He was someone she, casually but genuinely, liked.

The Bureau tried to prevent matching caseworkers with anyone they knew. Each time a name came in it was scanned against the lists Steph had provided: her mom and brother, extended family, ex-boyfriend Alex (newest name on her list), former bosses. But she hadn't known this man's name, and couldn't list him. And so while it hadn't happened until now, here she was, confronted with the face of a familiar person. Her phone buzzed with the drone update: he was ten minutes out, headed home from work now.

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So now she knew that the man who walked his cat past her apartment in the evenings had three months left to live. It would have been a sad piece of information even if she did not have to deliver it herself.

"Walking the cat" was an energetic phrase for her neighbor's nightly routine. He and the cat strolled, really, in no hurry, stopping often, Nils Gunderson smoking, following the gray tabby which wore a red halter and leash. Stephanie had seen him just the night before, in fact, as she'd hip-nudged shut the door of her car, a cloth bag of groceries in each arm. He was shy and polite, middle-aged, always slightly rumped-

looking, dressed in the way of a person who was not entirely proud of his body and embarrassed to have to select clothing for it. He wore, usually, an oversized gray t-shirt with the writing worn to nothing, baggy cargo shorts; his white legs slabbed into sandals that were themselves slabs. He had a way of answering her “hello” with a head motion that was both a nod and a duck, replying “How’s it going” so quietly she could hardly hear him—as if he were almost-silently, in a disappearing voice, reading the disappearing words on his shirt— then glancing fondly down at his halter-wearing cat as if glad for the distraction of it. He didn’t carry a phone, which was unusual. Maybe along with the cat and the cigarette that would have been too much. The cat’s name was Thor. Stephanie knew because she’d hear him try to chuck it up like a horse sometimes, a click of his tongue and a little jiggle of the leash: “Let’s go, Thor.”

Thor, who matched his owner with a slight chubbiness, did not go. Thor moved along the sidewalk with excruciating distraction, sniffing every crack in the pavement as he came to it as if solving a delicate mystery, inspecting each tuft of grass or weedkiller-warning flag (“No, no,” the man said with gentle concern, tugging it away, though he must have realized the flag was a joke, pesticides had been banned for two decades). It must take a world’s worth of patience to walk that cat three blocks, Stephanie thought. Or maybe this was the only opportunity the man had to smoke, and he was relieved not to hurry. Smoking was illegal indoors now, even in your own home, and you needed a license— one pack a week, but of course people still got cigarettes other places.

She hadn’t, all this time, known Nils’s name. But because she saw him almost daily she also saw him on the worst day of her life: the evening, six months before, when she’d gotten the phone call, at work, that her father had died. Frantic, numb, she’d only just texted Alex to tell him, and she pulled up in front of the apartment and couldn’t park her car. The space

was too small. In and out and in and out she tried, yanking the wheel, blind with tears, and the man with the cat, walking by, seeing her struggle, paused to direct her into the space. She remembered him in her rearview mirror, wagging his fingers encouragingly, holding up his hand, *Good, Stop*. His supportive, pleased thumbs-up when she finally got the car passably straight. And then she whirled out of the car and rushed toward her apartment, toward the blurry form of Alex who had come out to take her in his arms with the gorgeous, genuine sympathy of some kind of knight – Alex had held her and cried; he had loved her father, too – and she'd almost collided with the man-with-the-cat, who noticed, suddenly, her stricken, tear-streaked face, and said, quietly: *Oh*.

Just “oh.” With a slight step back, and so much empathy in his voice, sorrow at having misjudged the apparent triumph of their situation. There was an apology in the *oh*, and she had felt bad later that she hadn't been able to reply, to say something stupid like No worries or even just thank him; she'd jogged forward in her haze of grief, her heart still revving helplessly, her stomach sick, while the man quietly tugged the cat's leash and walked away.

In winter, of course, she saw Nils and his cat far less. The cat would not have wanted to stroll in a driving January rain. But after she got back from her dad's funeral, and started to readjust to life, slowly, and notice the things she had noticed before, she liked spotting them. There was something endearing about the pair, the cat's refusal to move quickly or in a straight line, the man's attendant humility, his lack of embarrassment (in a neighborhood of joggers, spandexed cyclists, Crossfitters) at being an unathletic forty-something male out walking a cat.

Of course, the smoking, the lack of fitness might have contributed to Nils Gunderson's situation. Because there he was, looking back at her out of his profile photo with an almost hopeful expression, as if he were waiting for her to

speak so he could politely respond. She'd never had the opportunity to study him the way she now could, in the picture: gray-blue eyes, a slightly hooked nose, the gentle roll of a whiskered double chin cradled by what looked like the collar of a flannel shirt, a fisherman-style sweater over that. She flicked to her badge screen and held it loosely on her lap, closed her eyes a moment, preparing herself with the first line of the creed on a loop in her mind, because it was the most soothing to her. *I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not*— Her phone buzzed and she opened her eyes, glanced down, saw the newest drone update that he was two miles away, expected home in four minutes. He was driving a gray Honda Civic, and would be alone. *Please activate recording device, the message concluded, and Good Luck.*

The capitalized “Good Luck” always struck her as slightly odd, as if she were about to blast into space. But, glancing back down at Nils Gunderson on her phone screen, imagining him coming home to his wife—Claire, she read, was a librarian, Jesus; *it is not sad*—and his cat, she did feel a sudden drop in her stomach that could have been described as gravitational, or maybe it was just the gravity and density of the information she held, about to pass through poor Nils's unshielded, unprepared rib cage like molecules of uranium, changing him almost as much as his real death would. His death, according to her notes, would occur on September 8th, three months from today.

She pressed her recording button (“for quality control”) and took a deep breath. She would be compassionate and professional and punctual and clean and non-intimate. It was the best she could do.

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That morning, not for the first time, she had typed a

resignation letter, then deleted it. She'd just had to tell a nineteen-year-old that her fiancée would die of a sudden, aggressive leukemia; that an 80-year old woman would lose her husband of 57 years. (Parents were exempted from the program until their children were at least 18, or else the whole world would have gone into chaos.)

"We're not all suited to the job," her friend Erica had said over the phone. "You know all the lifers are on drugs." Erica had quit the main Mortality Informance branch (not the Attachment Division) after eight years; now she had her Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and worked for a chocolate company, writing inspirational quotes for the inner foil wrappers. "Everything is for the best!" she'd write. "Kathy N., Lincoln, NE." Or, "Don't forget to giggle! – Lisa P., Detroit, MI." One night Steph and a very tipsy Erica had amused themselves by brainstorming the least inspirational quotes they could come up with. "Imagine opening your chocolate to find: 'Shut up.' – Jenny, Topeka, KS," Erica had laughed, wiping her eyes. "Or: 'Yes, it's probably infected.' – Marsha, Portland, ME."

"There are jobs out there," Erica had promised her, "that are so easy, you could cry. You don't have to make life so hard on yourself."

And here was his car now.

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Nils Gunderson parallel-parked, smoothly, a quarter of a block away, fumbled with something in the passenger seat for a long time—a backpack, Stephanie saw as he stepped from the car, hoisting it over one shoulder—and finally made his way in her direction up the sidewalk. He was slightly duck-footed; maybe this was more pronounced in his work khakis and brown shoes. There were light creases of sweat across the top of each khakied thigh.

Stephanie stood, patted her dark bun, smoothed her skirt, gathered her small shoulder bag and phone. She wore a butter-yellow shirt because she thought it a comforting color. The skirt, pale brown and A-line, was "sexy as a paper bag," Alex had said: joking, she knew, but screw him anyway, she wasn't supposed to look sexy at her job. He acted as if she should go out the door in a black leather miniskirt and stilettos, like some dominatrix angel of death.

Halfway across the street she was interrupted by a group of college-age kids, sprinting, shouting a breathless "Move!" and waving her out of the way. She knew what they were doing, playing a new game everyone was obsessed with, where they scanned their locations into their phones at surprise moments, and then their friends had ten minutes to get there and catch them. She heard people talking about it everywhere she went. They'd win virtual cash which they spent on an imaginary planet that they'd build, meticulously, from the first atom up. People spent months on their planets and were devastated when they lost; a guy had been shot over it in Brainerd the week before, and the game itself was causing traffic problems, accidental hit-and-runs, a lady's small dog had been clipped right off the end of its leash by a speeding Segway. Steph jumped back as the three men plowed forward, one, at least, calling "Sorry" over his shoulder. "Hope your imaginary planet is awesome," she snipped. Alex had been getting into this game; sometimes his phone went off at three a.m. and he'd dash out the door almost desperately. He had started to sleep fully dressed, even wearing his shoes. If she slowed him down by talking as he made for the door, he'd get crabby, in this weird, saccharine tone where she could tell he was trying to moderate his voice because he knew it was, at heart, an absurd thing to get irritable over. He was aware of that at least. So she'd started pretending to stay asleep. Then, once he left, she'd toss and turn angrily, obscurely resentful of this idiotic game. She was glad all that was over now, Alex and his dumb game, even though he had named his planet after her,

which was sweet. And last night she'd been tossing and turning anyway, but because he *wasn't* there, and she'd ended up fishing his basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves out of the back of her closet and wearing it to sleep—sweet Jesus. Was there no middle ground?

She had to catch up to Nils Gunderson. He was almost at the front door. "Mr. Gunderson," she called, trotting the last few steps in her flat, unsexy shoes. He turned, a quizzical smile crossing his face—not one of recognition, in the first instant, but because she was a small, non-threatening female person calling after him—and then growing slightly more puzzled as he placed her.

"Mr. Gunderson, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"I — sure," he said. "Wait. You — you live a few blocks that way." He pointed.

"I do. Please come over here, if you would." She gestured to the grassy strip alongside his building, wishing there were a bench closer by. It was good to have a place where people could sit down, but she didn't want to lead him all the way back across the street.

He followed her a few steps, as she asked him to verify his name, address, date of birth. He answered so trustingly, his grayish-blue eyes patient, politely curious, that she could hardly stand to see (as she flashed her badge) the dim knowledge gathering around their edges and then intensifying. She told him, in the plain language she'd practiced hundreds of times, that she was a Mortality Informant, reminding him gently that he had signed up for this program, had requested notification three months before his death, that he would pass away long before his wife, and that was why an Informant had been sent. No, she could not tell him when his wife would die, but it was far into the future. He paled before her eyes, she could see it happen, his mortality crashing in on him like the

YMCA wave pool he'd later tell her he'd loved as a child, arms outstretched, staggering backwards, chlorine, briefly, in his nose and throat—the exhilaration of having cheated death, which he was not cheating now. Steph placed one hand on his thick shoulder and gave it a squeeze, one, two. She was prepared for him to cry, to ask why so soon, so young, even his dad had made it to fifty; to tell her in shock to go away, fuck her, fuck the program, he wished he'd never heard of it: some people got very upset. They wanted this information in the abstract, but not the real, or they didn't want the moment of receiving it. Several mortality informants had been punched or kicked. Devin had once been chased three blocks. Now they had an emergency button on their phones that could call for backup.

But he surprised her. "Thank God," he said, his voice choked, overwhelmed. "Oh, thank God, thank God."

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It was close to eleven p.m. when she heard him. Windows cracked, crickets singing through the warm St. Paul night, and then suddenly a wail from street-level that sounded agonized, almost otherworldly. Somehow Steph suspected it was him even before she went to peek. From her second-story brick apartment she saw Nils Gunderson's large figure hunched on the bench below, the cat sniffing thoughtfully at a crushed cup.

I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason.

The wail was followed by distinct, repetitive sobs; someone cycling down the street glanced over, pedaled on.

I remember always that I, too, will die.

"Fuck," she muttered. She yanked off Alex's old basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves and threw it onto the couch. Strode out the door and down the wooden stairs in her

baggy, checked pajama pants and ribbed tank top.

When she stood next to him, he looked up, his face swollen, tear-streaked, awful.

"You can't do this," she said, crossing her arms over her chest, self-conscious of her braless state. "I'm not supposed to talk to you."

"I'm not doing *anything*," he said. "I come to this bench every night." She glared at him and he added, automatically, "I'm sorry."

For a moment they both stood, staring at the black, puddled street. There'd been a late afternoon rain. Four young men raced by on bikes, whooping, phones in their hands, the thin tires splitting the puddles in two like bird-wings.

"That is the dumbest game," Nils Gunderson said, and before she could stop herself Stephanie let out a dry chuckle. He looked at her gratefully. Tapped his shirt pocket. "Smoke?"

She hesitated. The first week of training they'd had to swear off cigarettes, alcohol, weed, opiates, anything that might dull or heighten their sensitivity to other people. The database bounced them from liquor stores and dispensaries. Their mornings began with fifteen minutes of guided meditation on their phones, setting their intentions for the day. Their intentions, it turned out, were always to be compassionate, professional, punctual, clean, and non-intimate. Meditation annoyed her. She recalled Alex coming out of the shower one morning, a towel around his waist, and spotting her meditating (she'd cracked one eye just a sliver when she heard the door); grinning, tackling her, teasing her until she turned the phone face-down and just let it drone on. That had been a fun morning.

Nils held out a cigarette.

“Yes, please,” she said.

He scooted over and she sat down beside him. He lit her cigarette. The nicotine wrapped her brain in the most welcome hug, tight, tighter, like a snail in a shell. God, now she craved a drink.

Nils talked. He was worried about his wife. The librarian, Claire. “She’ll be so lonely,” he said.

“When you signed up for this program,” Steph said, rallying her work-voice though she felt worn out, “there was an unselfishness to your act. Remember that.”

“Okay,” he said. “That makes me feel better. Talk about that a little more. I mean, if you don’t mind.”

Steph took a drag, exhaled. If she could just smoke all the time her job would be a lot easier. “We’ll have a team of grief counselors, a doctor, and after-care staff at your home within minutes of your passing. Claire won’t be left alone until her family can get there. The best thing you can do when you feel it happening is to quietly go lie down. It’s less upsetting for everyone.” Steph looked at him, his bleak expression heavying his face. She could see him imagining his own, undignified death, gurgling facedown in a cereal bowl, slumped in the shower while water coursed over his beached form. She repeated, “Remember that, just go to the bedroom and lie down.”

“She has a sister in Sheboygan,” Nils began.

“We know. We have it all on file.”

“Will you be one of the people there with her?” He’d suddenly developed the ability to cry silently and abundantly, like a beautiful woman in a film. Tears ran down his cheeks. He picked at his bitten thumbnails, weeping.

Steph shook her head. “It’s a separate team. My job was only

to inform you.”

“I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

“I can put in a request for something to help you sleep, but only for the next few nights. We don’t want you sleeping away the last three months of your life. Try to enjoy yourself, Nils. Go on a vacation. Sit outside. Re-watch your favorite movies, go to restaurants.” She thought of her friend Erica and her chocolate-wrapper slogans. “Remember to giggle. Watch the sunrise. Have a lot of sex.” That was not from a chocolate wrapper; that was what happened when she winged it. She should never wing it. “If you can. I mean, maybe not tonight. Give it a week or so.”

He glanced at her, tear-streaked. “Have sex with Claire, you mean.”

“Well, of course. That’s what I meant.”

“Just checking. I don’t know what kind of advice you guys give. You’re all so smug,” he added after a moment, but in a sad voice, almost to himself, and it would turn out this was as insulting as he got.

“We’re really not,” Steph said.

“Should I tell her?”

“I can’t make that decision for you.”

They sat for a while; Steph accepted another cigarette. The cat rubbed against her pajama pants, his back arched, tail upright and quivering. She reached down to pet him. His fur was slick and soft as a seal’s.

“That one time I helped you park,” Nils began.

Steph looked at him.

“You were crying,” he said. “I felt terrible. I didn’t even

notice until after you got out of the car.”

“It’s not your fault. I mean, I was in a car. You probably couldn’t see my face clearly. You were being nice by helping me out.”

“I just remember giving you this really stupid thumbs-up, and I was still holding it when you almost ran into me. Just grinning with my thumbs up, like a fucking idiot.”

“It was a really tight parking spot.”

“What were you crying about?”

Now her own eyes were stinging. “My dad,” she said after a minute. “I’d just found out he died.”

“Oh.” There it was again, Nils Gunderson’s *oh*. Steph’s vision swarmed. Nils said, “I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah,” said Steph, an edge of bitterness to her voice. “Car accident. Can’t really be prepared for something like that.”

“He wasn’t in – in the program? Like I am?”

She smiled bleakly. “He didn’t believe in it.”

Nils nodded, looked out at the street again. “I’m wondering if it was a mistake. For me, I mean.”

Steph hesitated. “Everything always works out for the best,” she said, and then stopped. “No, that’s bullshit. It’s total bullshit. Sometimes things just don’t work out at all. Sometimes people die and it’s just fucking sad.” His mouth dropped slightly and she sped up: “But I don’t think that’s the case with you and Claire. I mean, that any part of this is bullshit. I think – I think you’ve had a wonderful life together and you’ve done right by her. And that signing up for this program was the right thing to do.” She rallied: “It was the most informed decision you could have made. I believe

that. I do, Nils.”

“Thank you.” He wiped his face on both arms. Droplets glittered on the hair. “That was really nice of you to say. Will you meet me here tomorrow night?”

She tossed her cigarette onto the pavement – also illegal, she didn’t care right now – and Nils ground it out with his shoe. “I can’t,” she said.

As she got up, scuffing back toward her apartment in flip-flops, he called: “What department did you sign up for, anyway? For yourself?”

She was honest: “I didn’t sign up for any.”

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4. The Confession

But he was back out by the bench the next evening, a large, forlorn form in the dark, this time standing and looking directly up at her building. He was holding something in his hands. Steph waited him out, tried to do the crossword puzzle in the Strib, made a cup of tea, dumped it in the sink. If this kept up, she would certainly lose her job before she could make any decisions herself about it. “Jesus fuck,” she said finally, flip-flopping downstairs.

He immediately apologized in a voice so hoarse she could barely hear him. “I’m sorry, but I need your help. I made something. I was wondering if you would listen to it for me, tell me if it’s okay.” He added ominously, “It’s the most important thing I’ve ever made.” He thrust the package toward her. It was wrapped in newspaper and he had triangled the corners, taped them. If he’d had a bow he probably would have put one on. “What are you *wearing*?” he blurted. “Do you play basketball?”

Steph’s cheeks flared as she fingered the edge of the

sweatshirt, which went down to her knees. “Oh. It was my boyfriend’s. Ex-boyfriend’s. I shouldn’t be – I shouldn’t be wearing it.”

Nils’s eyes widened, wet. “Did he die?”

“God, no. It’s not like I – *make* people die,” Steph said, and then she started to laugh, an odd, cathartic laugh, one hand over her eyes. She realized she hadn’t laughed all day. She wheezed until she half-bent over, holding her waist with the other arm. The thought of herself as some cursed being, walking around while people dropped away like playing cards – it was too much. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, waving her hand, getting control of herself. She was not supposed to laugh in the presence of the pre-deceased.

But he was chuckling, too, tears blinking on the edges of his eyelids. He was laughing simply because she was laughing, out of some empathetic impulse. For a split second she wanted to hug him. She could probably get away with a shoulder squeeze. Lord knew she was royally fucking this up already. Instead she pinched her nose, took a deep breath, looked down at the item as he handed it to her. “What is it?” she asked.

“It’s just – things I wanted to tell Claire. Things I want her to know about me. I feel like, after all this time, she should know everything about me. Before we’re parted forever.”

“Maybe not forever,” Steph tried, regretting it the moment it came out.

He brightened. “You think so?” Whispered: “Do they teach you something in school the rest of us don’t know?”

“No,” Steph said. “I’m sorry. Why are you asking me for advice on your – your recording? I’m not, like, a writer or artist or anything.”

“But you’re honest. I can tell. And I want you to be honest

with me, tell me if you think it's any good. Promise me you'll listen to it," he said.

"There's a chance people shouldn't know everything about somebody else," she cautioned.

He shook his head. It was the most emphatic thing she'd seen him do. "That's not true," he said, nearly defiant. "This is me and Claire we're talking about here."

*

Back upstairs, she tugged open the newspaper to reveal a memory stick tucked up against a pack of Marlboro Reds. She smiled in spite of herself, cracked the window.

The file was enormous. He had talked for twelve hours straight: indoors, perhaps while Claire was at work; outside, voices in the background, cars swishing past. Initially, he was quite poetic. He must have been a reader, Steph thought, to marry a librarian.

He talked with a low urgency, but slowly, clearly, his voice growing drier by the hour. Steph, sitting with a notepad and pen, initially tried to jot helpful notes.

"My first memory," Nils was saying, his voice strong at this point, "is of my own foot. I must have been six or seven months old. I remember looking at it in my crib, grabbing it, marveling. I think I found my foot beautiful. The toes were lined up in descending order like small pearls, the nails pink as areolas."

Steph frowned. "Shifting point of view," she scribbled. "A baby wouldn't be able to make these comparisons." Then she crossed it out. "Which foot?" she wrote. She crossed that out, too.

Nils roamed on, through his toddler years, a dog bite, falling off a tall piece of playground equipment, the disappointment

of the local pool shutting down for water conservation (Steph didn't even remember public pools – a startling idea, to have your body in the same water as a bunch of strangers'), accidentally wetting his pants in first grade, his first memorable, puzzling erection a year or so later, and how his mom had spanked him afterward. He didn't think the two were related, but he couldn't be sure. "Maybe more positive memories," Steph suggested.

"Dad used to tell me I was a quitter," Nils was saying, two hours later. "I quit four jobs in high school. I quit the football team because half the guys were assholes. I quit lunchtime Spanish club. There are forty-six books in our house I've never read, Claire. Forty-six. You've read all of them. I didn't make it to Grandma Clark's funeral. I'm a failure in so many ways. I feel like I've never stuck with anything except you, Claire. You're the only thing worth sticking by."

Steph noted the time and wrote, "Sweet."

"And Thor," Nils amended. "I've stuck by Thor." He went on a brief tangent of memories about the cat, charming particularities of its behavior. "Good!" wrote Steph. Smiley-face.

"But," the recording went on, "I'm still ashamed. If I'm being really honest, Claire, I'm ashamed. Because I've had so many secret thoughts in my head. Do you ever wish we could know each other's thoughts, Claire? What would happen to the world if we could all be inside each other's heads?"

Steph yawned, a cigarette dangling from her left hand. It was the middle of the night but she couldn't seem to stop listening. Outside, crickets sang.

"The thing is, Claire," Nils went on, "you're so good. I've realized I'm not as good and I wish I could find a way to make it up to you. I know you don't sit there at the library checking out every guy who walks in but I look at girls all

the time. I mean like all kinds of girls and women. I can't help it. Teenage girls, older women. I can't help but notice their bodies in their clothes. Sometimes I think about them later. And I know that's so hypocritical because I'm no Ricardo Lee myself [an action-movie star]. I've never even taken very good care of my feet. I should have made my feet look better for you. I should have lost weight for you, Claire. Sometimes I thought about it but I could only stick to a diet for, like, three hours. I have no self-control."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Steph wrote.

"Sometimes, when we'd make love, Claire, I'd picture someone else. Rhonda Jones [a prominent Black actress]. Remember that movie where she had sex with Ricardo Lee? I would think about that a lot when we'd make love. Just the way her breasts bounced. I would picture them and it would help me, you know, get there." Steph felt her nose crinkle. "And sometimes I would picture your sister. Not Marla: Kate. When we went on that beach vacation to Ocean City I felt terrible because that was some of the best sex of our lives and I was picturing Kate in her orange bikini most of the time. You were always so self-conscious about your small chest but it never really bothered me. The only thing I really should have been feeling, every day with you, was gratitude. You know?" Nils was crying now and Steph, at a loss, had turned to doodling swirls in the margins of her notepad. "That's the part that just kills me. Why did I waste any of you, Claire? You're precious to me. The only thing I ever should have felt was gratitude."

Steph clicked on the screen: there were still five hours remaining. She closed the computer. It was nearly time for her to go to work. She was going to be a mess. She had only four cigarettes left and she felt too sick even for coffee. She turned the shower as hot as she could, briefly pondered her own smallish breasts, washed her hair three times to get the smoke out, braided it down her back, changed into fresh clothes, and drove to work.

*

5. Feedback

Nils waited two evenings, respectfully, before returning to the bench. "I didn't want to rush you," he said. He was composed, even a little eager, but slightly puffy through the face. He had freshly showered and shaved and was wearing a polo shirt, and the overall impression was that he had been sort of scraped, steamed, and stuffed. It made him look both less tired and more so at the same time. "I'm trying to look better for Claire," he explained. "I even brushed Thor." The cat did look sleek.

"Have you told her yet?" Steph asked.

"No. I'm waiting a little longer."

"That must be hard," she said, as if it were the only hard thing about the situation. When his eyes began to water she changed the subject. "Your recording," she said.

He brightened. "What did you think? I decided to call it The Confession. Because that's what it is. The truest thing I've ever told anyone."

"Yeah," said Steph. "I think—I think you should definitely not give it to Claire."

Nils's face changed utterly with confusion. "What?"

"It's just — I think you want to leave her with the best possible memories of you. With — with this," she said, indicating his hair, his shirt. "These are the last memories of you she's going to have for her entire life. I think you want them to be positive, you know?"

"But it's the truth," he said.

Steph made a small irritated sound. "Lots of things are the

truth," she said. "Think about Claire—"

"All I ever think about is Claire."

"Apparently not," said Steph, and then apologized. "You shouldn't give someone a confession they can't respond to. It's – unethical. She'd be stuck with just your words here, and who knows exactly how she'd interpret them? Which ones she'd focus on? What if she doesn't hear all the times you're telling her you love her, and just thinks endlessly about the other stuff? Why do you need to confess, anyway? I hate to break it to you, but nothing on this recording is that bad. It's just – it's just kind of inappropriate. You know?"

"But it's the truth."

"Yes, you keep saying that, but this is your marriage and your life, Nils. Do you really want it to be some kind of social experiment, or do you want it to be warm and loving and meaningful? Don't shoot yourself in the foot here. You want – you want Claire to feel like she made a good decision with her own life," Steph blurted helplessly. "That she made the best possible decision."

Nils stood quietly a moment, seeming to shrink slightly into himself. "And you think she didn't," he said.

Steph felt a wash of shame. "That's not what I meant to say."

"No, I understand," he said, not accusingly, but as if reeling with the thought. He spoke slowly, almost as if in wonder. "When I expressed my truth, it became clear to you that I was not Claire's best decision."

How many ways, Steph wondered, am I going to be forced to hurt this man? "I think giving her this recording is not the best decision," she said. "I think *you* were probably a great decision."

He nodded to himself, his eyes brimming again. "Well, thank

you for listening to it," he said. "And for your time. I know I took a lot of your time and energy. I feel bad about that. I took a lot of your emotional energy."

"Don't feel bad," said Steph, exhausted.

"It was really helpful to talk to you," Nils said. He began to shuffle down the street, looking defeated. Thor, gleaming like a tiny streetlight, followed. Then Thor stopped, and Nils stood two feet from Steph making encouraging kissy sounds, and the cat started up again. And then stopped. And then started, and then stopped. Nils tried to gaze up at a tree. I am going to actually die right now, Steph thought.

But she wasn't. Or, at least she didn't think she was.

*

6. The Game

For the next few weeks, Steph was careful not to encounter Nils. She grocery-shopped on Saturday mornings, instead of after work, and she did not go outside during his walking hours. It helped that there were weeks of heavy rain, shining in intermittent sunlight, the gutters constantly steaming as if they breathed. It was not ideal weather for Thor to stroll in.

When her termination notice came, she was not surprised. She wondered, briefly, if Nils might have reported her, but her supervisor produced drone images: she and Nils smoking on the bench. There had been a brief investigation, agents sent to Nils's apartment. Loyally, unaware of the photos, Nils claimed that Steph had refused to speak to him outside of work and never had; Steph smirked at his sporadic attachment to truth. Her supervisor, noting her smirk, reminded her that there was nothing funny about being a Mortality Informant, and that was why it was necessary that she now seek another career.

“Maybe there’s sometimes something funny about it,” Steph said.

Her supervisor told her to pack up her desk.

*

September 8th nagged at Steph on her wall calendar; her eye flicked to it again and again. When the morning came, hot and bright, she found herself unable to sit still. She circled want ads in the paper – low-paying jobs working with the disabled, or small children – and finally went for a run. She passed Nils’s street but could discern nothing out of the ordinary; cars lined both sides, as always, and there didn’t seem to be any more or less than usual. She found herself running faster and faster, the steamy air filling her lungs, her heart pounding frantically and ecstatically until it seemed to fill her whole chest and body and vision and mind. She reached a bench at a park half a mile away and bent over, gripping its metal back, nearly hyperventilating. Her mind was filled with an enormous, pulsing red. It bloomed and bloomed as if trying to push her eyeballs out. Steph dropped to her knees. The ground was muddy and gritty beneath them, pungent, slightly cool. The tiny rocks in it hurt. She tried to spit on the ground, but hit her own thigh.

“Miss?” an unfamiliar male voice asked. “Are you alright?”

She looked up.

“Are you part of The Game?” he asked. “Are you looking for John?”

It took her a moment to parse this. “No,” she said. “I’m not. I was just jogging. Just a little out of shape.” She added, with manufactured effort to pass the nausea, “Good luck with your Game!”

She wasn’t really out of shape, but the man took her word for

it and politely moved on. Besides, he was looking for John. When Steph's vision had cleared, she walked slowly toward home, hand on her cramping ribcage, small spots still dancing around the corner of her eyes. Just go lie down, Nils, she thought, as if she could send him a message with her mind. Just go lie down.

When she got home, she staggered, exhausted, into her tiny bedroom, laid on her back the bed, and balled her fists into her eyes. She was soaked with sweat, small pebbles spattering her knees like buckshot. She no longer had access to her work files, of course, but she imagined the notification that would have popped up: CASE CLOSED. Her chest tightened again and she rolled onto her side, reaching back to yank hard on her ponytail, a habit she had in moments of grief. It was almost enough to shock her out of any emotion, that pull, hard and fast.

She must have fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes again the sunlight was slanted, descending. She sat up, clammy, rubbed the pebbles from her knees. Wiped her eyes. She would find a new job, buy groceries, call her mom. When she stood, she let out a small sigh, which sounded like *oh*.

Interview with Tom Keating,

Author of 'Yesterday's Soldier'

Andria Williams for The Wrath-Bearing Tree:

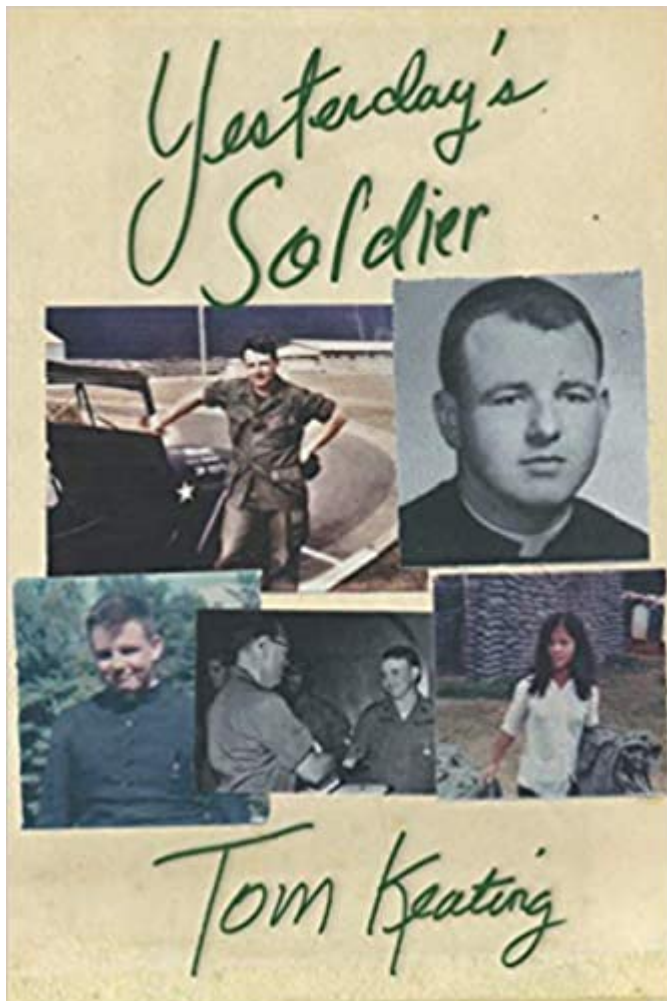
I was honored to read Tom Keating's memoir, '[Yesterday's Soldier](#),' an excellently written and sensitive account of his time as a non-combatant servicemember during the Vietnam War. Tom had been a novice in the Roman Catholic priesthood, but when the priests at his seminary deemed him a not-ideal candidate for that calling, he enlisted in the army, which caused him a massive change in his state of mind. His responses to some of my questions are below, and the link to the full interview is embedded. Please come watch – Tom is a great speaker, and his thoughts on how various cultures of religion and obedience play into military service are interesting.

Good news: Tom is now happily married and lives in Massachusetts.

*

WBT: Can you explain your path from seminary school into the military?

Tom Keating: I am the first son of my family of Irish Roman Catholics. Back then, to be a priest was admirable. I attended an all boys' catholic high school taught by priests, the Congregation of Holy Cross. They were young priests, and they were great role models. The idea of being like them grew as I went through the four years. In my senior year, I sought their advice and declared my intention to be one of them. The next five and one half of my life I was one of them.



My admission of my CO struggle at Bridgewater State college during the class on educational philosophy. The assignment was, we all had to share a moment of radical action we performed. The class was full of veterans. It was tough to share my story with them. Their positive reaction to my story gave me the idea to write a book, but it took years to complete.

WBT: You mention that there were 27 novitiates in your first-year group, but only 5 remaining when you left. What do you think made them leave?

Tom Keating: I was a young seminarian full of the aggiornamento of the church, full of the idea to be Christ's apostle for the flock, so to speak. That flock included the young men who wanted to avoid the draft. I saw my role as

ministering to them. Hell, I even co-signed a loan for my friend, a coed who needed money. Of course I had none myself. That action and my activities did in fact affect my future as a priest. The men who were in charge of the seminary were afraid of the liberal trend in the church that I embraced. I originally wrote in the EPILOGUE of the book "And Father's world? The world he lived in, one of order, Latin masses, strict obedience to a hierarchy, Gregorian Chants, celibacy, black cassocks and clerical collars, a world he treasured and tried to protect? He was right to be afraid. That world had been turned into-dogshit." A reference to the dog poop on the previously spotless corridors of the seminary ([Cat, my editor](#), thought I should change that, so I did make it milder.)

My Dad and I watched the demonstrations in Chicago during the convention. I was home then from the seminary. We shared our shock and disgust at the police in the riot. He was from the World War 2 generation, respect for authority, etc. It cemented our relationship.

There were violent incidents where I *didn't* have that aversion, mostly in-country. A monument to Army training/brainwashing. In the book, I described a vehicle accident that happened when I was on my way to the elephant factory. That violence was accepted by me and the jeep driver. The dead bodies on the wire after a sapper attack elicited no aversion, just acknowledgement of our firepower. I was bothered by that but could not show it.

Seminary life in 1963-64 was harsh. Monastic rule meant sparse meals, rule of silence except when in class, early morning prayers before breakfast, work on the property after class. No social life, parental visits once a month, poverty chastity and obedience. The social dynamic of 27 mostly teenage boys in that pressure cooker of conformity and strict rules was tough. The novitiate year, where we spent working and praying on a farm in Vermont was very strenuous. It was a pressure cooker, like military basic training, only it lasted one whole year.

Our farm was located outside the town of Bennington VT, and we could hear the music playing on car radios that drove by. The world was driving by us, and we were anchored in a centuries-old system. Desertion from the novitiate was swift. We finished the year there with 10 newly sworn in religious.

War and peace today? Of course right now the Ukrainians are being assaulted by Russia. Peace is harder to find. I don't have any great thoughts on war and peace except to say countries are fighting for lithium and rare earths now, and resources like water and iron and salt and sugar. It is insane. I try to have peace around me, so I work with my church and the local veterans' community to help them. I can't do much for nations and their wars, but I can give peace to my friends and social circle.

*

Watch the full interview with Tom Keating here:

**Book Review: Lauren Hough's
'Leaving Isn't the Hardest
Thing' and Sari Fordham's**

'Wait for God to Notice'

"I was like an inept spy pretending to be American based on movies I'd watched and books I'd read."

– Lauren Hough, 'Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing'

"In 1984, we would arrive in Texas, and we might as well have been aliens."

– Sari Fordham, 'Wait for God to Notice'

*

In [Lauren Hough](#) and [Sari Fordham's](#) recent memoirs, human life reads like a series of parallel universes. Both authors' families moved, globally, for religious motivations, many times when they were young: Hough grew up in seven countries, while Fordham lived in Uganda as a child, then Texas, Georgia, and, later, South Korea. The religions here are not exactly the connection (though in each author's case, religion is arguably their first culture, their first universe). Hough grew up in an abusive cult called The Family (Children of God), while Fordham's Adventist family was close-knit, loving, and devout.

Rather, the connection is Hough and Fordham's attunement to the many different worlds of their lives, which they navigate from very young ages: observing, skirting the edges, shifting their behavior when necessary. Hough and Fordham both describe the shock and dance of trying to match these as they are moved from place to place, culture to culture.

Their memoirs beg the question: Are we the same people we are now as when we were young? Are we the same people when we have changed lifestyles, allegiances, mannerisms, attitudes? How much choice do we have in how we become who we are?

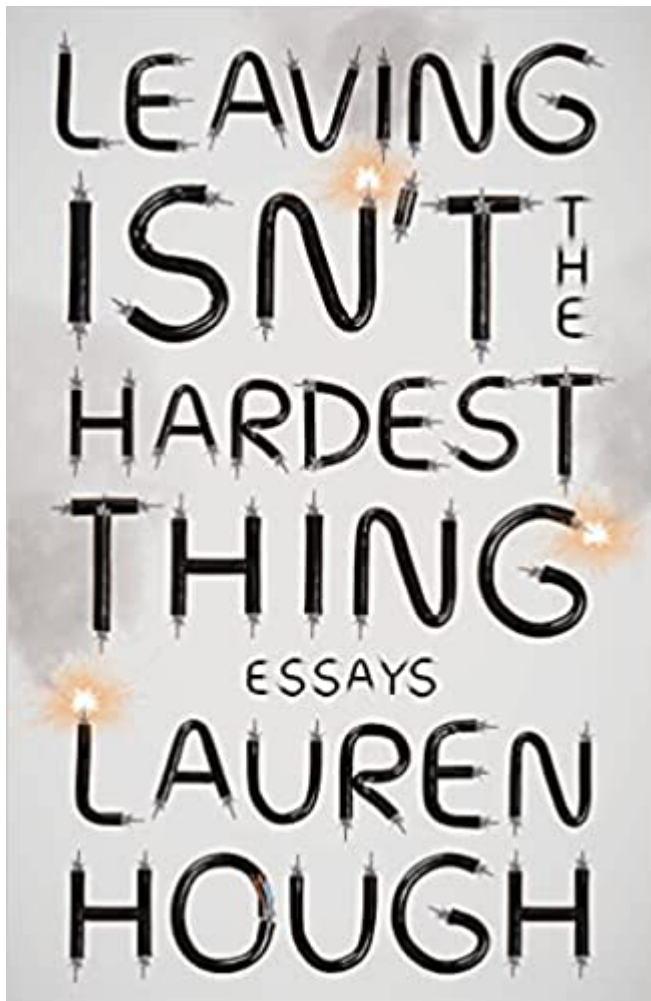
Both Hough and Fordham have a complex understanding of what it

means to be sometimes lonely or left out, peripheral, wondering; excluded or bound by place or newness or religion, by politics or sexuality or ethnicity, or by whatever power structure is currently in place; to be thrown at the world in various ways that are sometimes neither fair nor wholly deterministic. These two beautiful memoirs are deeply moving, funny and observant and sometimes very serious, but always attuned, and always stunningly, openly, thrown.

1. **“Where Are You From?”: Lauren Hough’s ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’**

Lauren Hough opens her memoir with a lie. Or, rather, with the lies she tells other people when they ask where she is from. They can’t place her accent, her manners.

If you ask me where I’m from, I’ll lie to you. I’ll tell you my parents were missionaries. I’ll tell you I’m from Boston. I’ll tell you I’m from Texas. Those lies, people believe.



Where Hough is “from,” at least in one sense, is an Apocalyptic cult called The Family (formerly Children of God), where the Antichrist was a constant imagined presence and children were passed around for sexual “sharing nights” with adults. For Hough, who never fit in with the expectations of the cult (gender and otherwise), this was a source of shame, fear, and resentment. She was once badly beaten for not smiling. These are some of the milder details, and many are very sad.

This – the cult – is an important fact about her. But it is not the only fact.

She’s also empathetic and funny as hell. (“Sometimes all you can do is fucking laugh.”) She is a champion of the underdog. Her attention to the ties that bind people – spiritual belief, escaped religion, the military, terrible jobs, homelessness, family, love – runs throughout the book. When Hough finds a

novel in Barnes & Noble which lists in the author bio, "raised in the Children of God":

You'd have thought I was a closet case buying lesbian erotica the way I carried that book...I had to buy three other books just so it wouldn't stand out.

Upon escaping the cult, Hough joins the Air Force. The thing is, she is a self-admitted "closet case" in more ways than one, and this is under Don't Ask, Don't Tell (which, in retrospect, sounds like it could have been a name for her cult). Eventually, after "Die Dyke" is written on her car and then her car is set on fire, she is the one expelled under Don't Ask Don't Tell.

It's grossly unfair. It's also not entirely surprising to anyone associated with military culture.

I thought I'd find something in the military. I'd wear the same uniform as everyone else. They'd have to accept me because I was one of them. I'd find what every book I read, every movie I watched, told me I'd find friends and maybe even a sort of family, a place where I belonged.

But all I'd done was join another cult. And they didn't want me any more than the last one had.

*

After leaving the Air Force, Hough is temporarily homeless, sleeping in her car. Her caring and fiery passages in defense of the working poor and the unhoused, replete with her trademark lush cursing, are refreshing to read.

She eventually finds an apartment with her friend, Jay [also military discharged for "homosexual admission"]. It has only one bed, which they must share, and the gallows humor is off the charts:

All I cared about was that we had a door and a roof, a

bathroom...I had a home. It was hard at first to focus on anything but that relief. But you can't share a twin bed past the age of ten unless you're related or fucking. Jay's an aggressive cuddler. I'm an unrepentant snorer. There wasn't even room to build a pillow wall between us. So after a few sleepless nights of his telling me to roll over and my trying to shove him just hard enough to get him away from me without throwing him onto the floor because I thought the hair on his legs was a mosquito, we headed to Walmart. The cheapest air mattress was \$19.99. But in a stroke of genius, we found a five-dollar inflatable pool raft in the clearance section of sporting goods. It's probably a good thing we bought it. Anyone hoping to stay afloat in a pool would have drowned.

Jay, whose shift at the bar ends earlier, claims the bed. Hough gets the raft.

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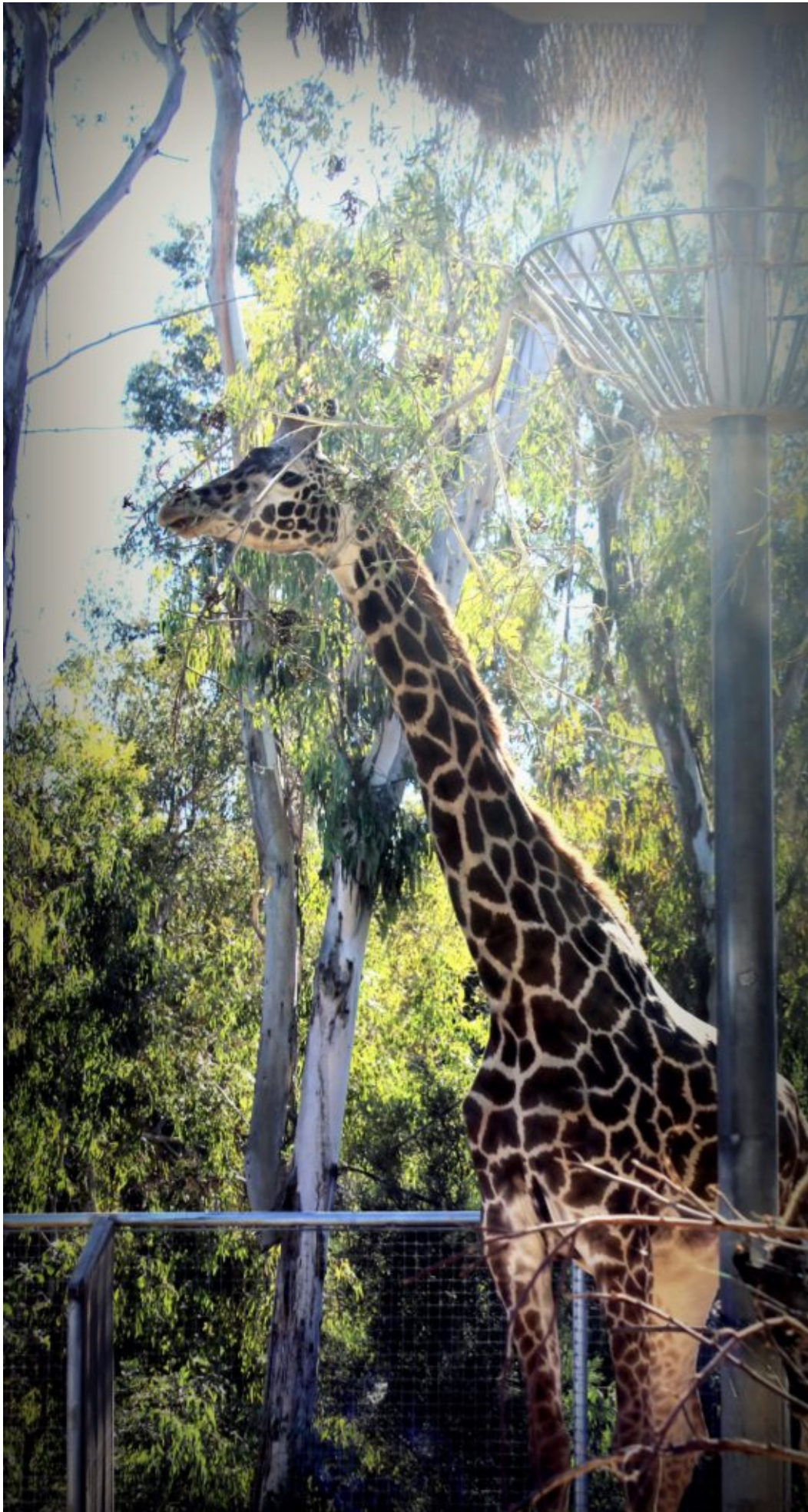
'Leaving' made me wonder, then: What does it mean to be "defiant?" Hough has experienced defiance in every form: early on, defiance of herself; defiance of authority; defiance on behalf of other people who need it. This may be one of the most cohesive threads running through her personality as presented in 'Leaving': a keen attention, almost an instinct, for the way people are forced to duck and hide, reveal themselves, band together, survive. She's had experiences with power structures most of us would not want.

"I was going to be normal," Hough vows, once she's on her feet, with a steady job as a bouncer and a home of her own. She is out of the cult. She has joined the world of what The Family had called the "Systemites."

But one day, traveling through Texas and suddenly curious, she decides to go back to the Texas site of the original cult. It's an incredibly lovely, lonely scene.

If anything remained of the old buildings, I couldn't tell

from the fence line...[But] the fence was all wrong. ...[It was] black steel and eight feet tall. I was busy staring at it when a family of ibexes with their twisted antlers bolted out of a mesquite clutch. That's not a sentence found in nature. Then I looked up. Towering above us all stood a single fucking giraffe, probably wondering why the trees wouldn't grow tall enough to chew. You're not supposed to identify with a fenced-in giraffe that doesn't belong in Texas. I rolled to a stop and stared at the poor animal, awkward, lonely, and completely fucking lost.



*

I don't want to spoil the very last scene of the book, which is so gorgeous I teared up typing it out to a friend. It's set back in Hough's cult days and involves a wonderful, visually beautiful act of youthful defiance among a group of children. You cannot help but cheer them on: *Defy it!*

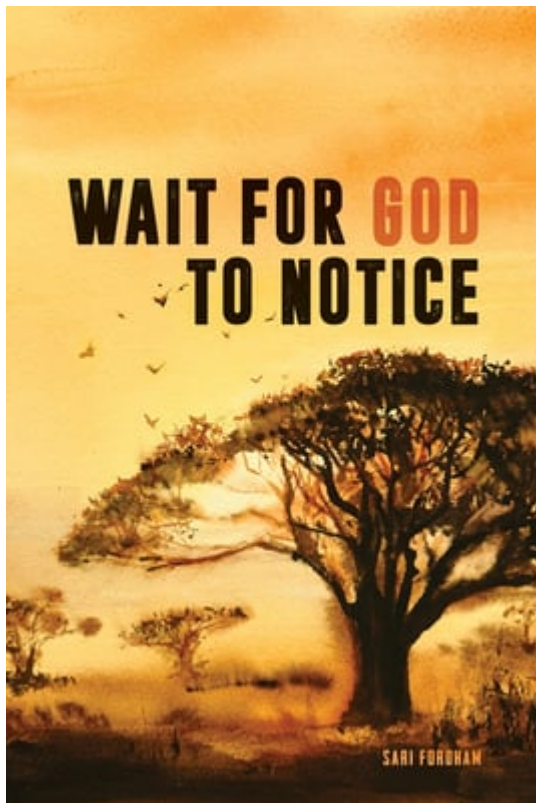
Lauren Hough's 'Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing' is a glorious, raucous, fuck-you to anyone who has abused their power, and a love letter to those who have endured it. That is where she is from.

2. "What are you doing here?": Sari Fordham's 'Wait for God to Notice'

In South Korea, where I had once lived and where Sonja [my sister] still lived and worked, we were known as 'You Fordham sisters.'...Sonja's husband added to the mantra. On long trips in the car, he would sigh, 'You Fordham sisters and your stories,' and we would realize we had spent long hours passing familiar narratives back and forth. The stories began like this:

1. *Wouldn't Mom have liked this?*
2. *Remember that time in Africa?*
3. *We were such outcasts in the States, such nerds.*

The last was the most developed narrative. It was the one that started us laughing. It is not difficult to spot a missionary – there is something about the hair, the dress, the earnest eyes. We had all that and more. We were the kind of missionary children that other missionary children found uncool. When we stepped into our respective American classrooms, we never had a chance.



When she is very young, Sari Fordham's family moves to Uganda, where her father will serve as an Adventist minister. Her Finnish mother, Kaarina, packs up the two girls – Sari and her older sister, Sonja – and they fly halfway across the world to meet him.

As missionary kids it is, obviously, a religious childhood (Fordham's young friends, bored on the Sabbath because games aren't allowed, sneakily devise a game of Bible Freeze Tag, in which, unfreezing each other, they recite a Bible verse: "'Jesus wept,' we shouted. 'Rejoice in the Lord always,' we shouted"). But it is by all accounts a loving one, within a close-knit family, in which her parents are genuinely concerned for the people they serve.

First arriving in Uganda, however, the Fordham sisters feel their visual difference acutely:

The children darted forward in ones and twos, laughing. How could anyone be as drained of pigment as we were? They touched our skin and held tentative fingers toward our hair...The children stared at us, and Sonja and I stared back.

Soon, being children, they settle in. They play with the other kids. Fordham chronicles the lush, often fun, and occasionally terrifying moments of her Ugandan childhood, where snakes drop from the trees, fire ants climb over her sleeping infant body until her parents follow the trail and notice; and where in an airport, guided by her mother's careful calm masking enormous fear, they have to shake hands with Idi Amin.

One of my favorite passages (indulge me) is an example of Fordham's riveting and lyrical writing – as well as a lovely insight into memory, and how we claim our own life events – when her mother, who has been reading *Animals of East Africa*, takes them to see the hippos:

The water stirred with hippos...Adult hippos can't swim. They walked along the river's floor, occasionally propelling themselves to the surface...Those on the bank seemed to hitch up their trousers and haul themselves up. In the distance, there was snorting and flashing of teeth. The river boiled around two or three angry hippos – it was hard to know – and then the water and the vegetation settles as they resolved their differences. The hippos moved up the bank, a hippopotamus migration, and they stood, majestic, on the shore.

This is how you would remember: you took a picture. You would later have something concrete to hold onto. That hippo would be yours. You could make as many copies as you liked, and you could show people. See, this really happened. You would have tangible proof. And you would own something magnificent.

*

After Idi Amin's violent rise to power ("soothing" widows of the disappeared on the radio by telling them their husbands are not dead, they must have just run off with another woman), missionary families are forced to leave the country. And so the Fordhams head home.

But where is home?

At first, it is Texas. "Boys fidgeted in their jean jackets, their legs draped across the aisle. *We are Texas men*, their posture said. *Who are you? And what do you want?*"

Fordham's account of her sister Sonja's first day of seventh grade is so tender it is almost hard to read:

She was wearing an outfit our mother had bought in Finland, an outfit too sweet to wear without irony. Sonja looked as if she had just stepped off a Swiss Miss box.

...She stood in the doorway for just a moment, but it was enough for her to have an epiphany: Everything about her and her Care Bear lunch pail was terribly, terribly wrong.

...She was so silent that as the day progressed, her classmates began to believe she was mute. They would ask her questions (Can you talk? Do you understand English? Are you retarded? Do you think Steve is cute?) And she would look away. During Texas history, her teacher forced her to read aloud from the textbook, and when she rhymed Waco with taco, she could hear the whispers...She ate lunch in a bathroom stall.

Siblings, sometimes, claim one another's stories as their own. Or at least feel for them. Perhaps memory is permeable, and definitely shareable. You can make as many copies as you like. *Remember that time in Africa?*

"We were like a family of polar bears plodding across the savannah," Fordham writes, in an interesting corollary to Hough's giraffe story. "We didn't belong. We didn't belong in Texas."

*

The Fordham sisters persevere, first in Texas and then in Atlanta, where the family settles.

Much later, in college and strolling across the spring campus, Fordham is thrilled to be mistaken for a non-missionary kid:

A man known as 'the preacher' appeared. 'Don't be an Eve,' he said as I declined a pamphlet. He walked beside me, 'Jezebel, Jezebel.' I quickened my stride, my mouth a scowl, but inside, I felt pleased. He hadn't seen the earnestness that Adventism and my missionary childhood had drawn onto my features. I, Sari Fordham, was fitting into a public university. 'You're traveling to hell, missy,' the preacher shouted at my back.

*

Much of 'Wait for God to Notice' is devoted to Fordham's mother, who died far too soon from cancer; a fascinating woman both resilient and fearful, who traversed continents but would not drive at night, could not keep a secret, was fascinated by the weather. The ultimate belonging is within our families, though we may resist it. "You're just like me," Fordham's mother tells her, to her occasional teenage disgust, and it's a double-edged comment, both a compliment and a rebuke, or maybe a caution. But it is also a powerful sharedness, and one can't help respecting the fact that, through all of this, Fordham's mother must have felt like an outsider, too. She had also lived many lives.

*

Perhaps what Hough's and Fordham's memoirs make most meaningful is that there doesn't need to be a strict divide between our past and present lives, or our relations to the people around us. These will never touch up completely anyway. There is only so close we can get to that, "you're just like me."

"We knew her best of all," Fordham says after her mother's passing. And maybe that is the important thing, impossible but not entirely sad: to try to know other people as well as ourselves, not in the false divisions of difference but in the joy of it. It might be that when it comes to who we are, the only choice lies in this trying.

* *

Hough, Lauren. *Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing*. Penguin Random House, April 2021.

Fordham, Sari. *Wait for God to Notice*. Etruscan Press, May 2021.

An Interview with Elliot Ackerman

*Elliot Ackerman is the author of four novels—most recently *Red Dress in Black and White*, set in Istanbul primarily during the 2013 Gezi Park protests—and a memoir.*

Here's a synopsis of [Red Dress](#):

“Catherine has been married for many years to Murat, an influential Turkish real estate developer, and they have a young son together, William. But when she decides to leave her marriage and return home to the United States with William and her photographer lover, Murat determines to take a stand. He enlists the help of an American diplomat to prevent his wife and child from leaving the country—but, by inviting this scrutiny into their private lives, Murat becomes only further enmeshed in a web of deception and corruption. As the hidden architecture of these relationships is gradually exposed, we learn the true nature of a cast of struggling artists, wealthy businessmen, expats, spies, a child pulled in different directions by his parents, and, ultimately, a society in crisis. Riveting and unforgettably perceptive, *Red Dress in Black and White* is a novel of personal and political intrigue that casts light into the shadowy corners of a nation on the

brink.”

Wrath-Bearing Tree is featuring an excerpt from Red Dress this month, and were glad that Ackerman agreed to drop in for a chat to accompany it. Here, he talks with WBT co-editor Andria Williams.

ANDRIA WILLIAMS: Hi, Elliot. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I just finished Red Dress in Black and White, which the Seattle Times called “cunning, atmospheric” and “splendidly gnarly” (!).

I’d love to hear about the writing process for the novel. I think I remember reading that you spent several years on this book. What gave you the idea for a love story set in Istanbul?



Elliot Ackerman, author of ‘Red Dress in Black and White (Knopf, May 2020).

ELLIOT ACKERMAN: I lived in Istanbul for about three years, arriving shortly after the 2013 Gezi Park protests that are mentioned in the novel and staying until 2016. Throughout my time in Istanbul, I could see how those protests—a political event—echoed in the personal lives of so many of my Turkish friends. I’ve always been interested in the fault line between the political and the personal, so it felt very natural to

tell a love story not only set in Istanbul but also set within a society in crisis, which Turkey very much was during the years that I lived there.

AW: *One of the other Wrath-Bearing Tree editors, Michael Carson, and I both noticed some similarities – in tone, in the characters, in the use of a young boy as onlooker – to Graham Greene’s The End of the Affair (but without the fatal dose of Catholicism!).*

Is Greene an influence, or are these similarities coincidental? Who are your biggest literary influences?

EA: I’ve always admired Greene’s work and I think he and I are interested in many of the same themes, namely the intersection of the personal and the political. *The End of the Affair* is a great book but didn’t directly influence the writing of this book, though I certainly see what you and Michael are talking about. William, the boy you mentioned in my novel, does serve as a more passive onlooker. The sections that are told from his point of view are important because they give us a glimpse of the principle characters from outside the many other biased perspectives that occupy the novel.

As for other literary influences, it’s tough to say because they’re constantly evolving. There are, of course, those classic writers who you encounter when you’re younger and constantly return to (Greene, Hemingway, Malraux, Didion, Balzac, etc.) but I’m always reading and being influenced by what I read, so of course that filters into my work. Recently, I’ve greatly enjoyed books by Renata Adler (*Speedboat*), Richard Yates (*Young Hearts Crying*), Catherine Lacey (*Pew*), Richard Stern (*Other Men’s Daughters*) and Shelby Foote (*Love In A Dry Season*).

AW: *You write quite frequently from what could be considered an “othered” position: with close third-person perspective on characters who are Afghan, in Green on Blue; women, such as*

Mary in Waiting for Eden and Catherine in Red Dress in Black and White; as a Turkish businessman in Red Dress, and as a dozen or more other people across your work who aren't like yourself.

As a fiction writer myself, I'm interested in this part of the craft, and am wondering if you could speak a little about it. Some writers of fiction stick close to their own time frame, social milieu, and so forth, and that can work very well. But I think there's a certain bravery and liveliness to writing from a variety of perspectives.

Did this sort of wide-ranging style come naturally to you, or did you have to train yourself? What about the adjacent humor of being frequently referred to as a "journalist" when you so often write from completely different points of view than your own?

Who is to say that I [even] am writing about the "other"? In *Green on Blue*, I wrote about a young man fighting in an Afghan militia; I spent three years embedded and fighting in the very militias I wrote about. Mary is a woman, sure, but she is a military spouse; if you know anything about my life, it will probably come as no surprise to you to learn that military spouses who've lost loved ones certainly don't feel like the "other" to me, and in the case of Catherine nor does a woman living in the expatriate scene in Istanbul. Also, if you believe, as I do, that every person contains within them the "feminine" and the "masculine" it is no problem for a man to write from the female perspective or for a woman to write from the male one. As for Murat, he is Turkish, but he is also a businessman who struggles to balance his personal life with his professional life; and, well, let's just say I have plenty of loved ones who have faced similar struggles.

I only bring up these examples because the current fashion in so much of literature—and, sadly, in art—is to force writers into a cul-de-sac of their own experiences as defined by those

who probably don't know them and are assuming the parameters of the artist's experience based on some superficial identity-based epistemology. That type of censoriousness makes for bad art and, in my view, bad culture.

AW: Thanks for those thoughts!

Much of 'Red Dress' is set around a dramatic protest which took place in Gezi Park, when citizens rallied against the government's urban development plan. Can you talk about these protests? Were you present for any of them?

EA: These protests—which occurred principally in May and June of 2013—began as a demonstration against the proposed development of Gezi Park—a greenspace in central Istanbul—into a shopping mall. The government reacted brutally to handful of activists and then the protests spread, becoming the greatest political upheaval in Turkish society in a generation.

I wasn't present for the initial set of protests but was present for the subsequent protests in the fall and into the following year. There are scenes in the novel that describe the protests and I recreated those based on conversations I'd had with friends who participated, as well as the work I did as a journalist covering subsequent protests in the same parts of the city.

AW: Do you see reverberations of the Gezi Park protests in the current and enduring protests that have surged in the United States this summer?

EA: The way the protests have captivated the public consciousness is certainly similar, but American society isn't Turkish society. The aftermath of the Gezi Park protests led to the re-writing of the Turkish constitution, a failed military coup, the creation of an executive presidency as opposed to a parliamentarian one where Erdoğan can stay in power indefinitely, as well as the imprisonment of thousands of anti-Erdoğan intellectuals and the state takeover of the

majority of media outlets. We're far from there, and I think it's important not to engage in hyperbole, as if the situation in the U.S. (troubling as it may be) is analogous to Turkey.

AW: In an interview with The Rumpus, you speak very eloquently about your time in the Marine Corps, and how much of it is essentially about "building love" for fellow Marines, but then being willing to tear this down – that the mission supersedes even such a strong love.

I see elements of this thinking in both Waiting for Eden and Red Dress. Can you speak more about this idea, in military service, life, and art?

EA: Art is the act of emotional transference. How often have you gone to a museum and been overwhelmed by a work of art? Or seen a film and cried? When I am writing—if it's going well—I am feeling something as I put the words on the page, and if you read that story and feel some fraction of what I was feeling then I have transferred my emotions to you. That we both feel something when we engage with the subject matter is an assertion of our shared humanity and that is an inherently optimistic act.

To create this type of art—in stories—you have to learn to love your characters. In the military—to serve, to sacrifice—you have to learn to love the people you are alongside. My time in the Marines taught me how to love people across our many seemingly profound but ultimately superficial divides. That impulse has ultimately found its way into my writing. My hope is that it finds its way to my readers in the stories I tell.

AW: What are you working on next?

EA: I've co-authored a novel with my friend Admiral James Stavridis, whose last position was as Supreme Allied Commander Europe; it is a work of speculative fiction (so a bit of a departure for me) which imagines what would happen if the U.S.

and China went to war, primarily at sea. It is a story told on a broad canvas with a large cast of characters. It's been a lot of fun to write and will come out in March 2021, with Penguin Press. These calamitous events take place in the year 2034, from which the novel takes its title: 2034.

AW: *That sounds like lots of fun. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me, Elliot.*

[Red Dress in Black and White](#) is now available wherever books are sold.

Poetry Review: “The Light Outside” by George Kovach



The Light Outside
George Kovach

George Kovach's poetry collection, *The Light Outside*, begins with a narrator who's stuck holding open a window.

He's a little embarrassed about it. The window, that is. He accidentally painted over it a few years past, in a hundred-year-old house, and only just now has gotten it to budge. And so, finally, holding it, he's not sure that he wants to shut it again.

With the window free a burdened balance replaces

the ease the architect intended. I have to hold it open.

The situation is humorous, humble. It sets the stage for the way Kovach will approach many of his poems: curious, searching, and then decisive. The journey he is about to take the reader on is far from light, and sometimes darkness will overwhelm. But there is a unique resolve to this collection: "I have to hold it open."

It's a resolve befitting a poet who has chosen to try to see hard-won light, who has endured the Vietnam war and then, as an artist, worked (through his literary magazine, CONSEQUENCE, and other venues) to highlight and promote artistic voices often very different than his own: prismatic, divergent; contrasts and complements. Like the Rothko painting that graces the collection's cover—"Dark Over Light (No.7)," in which a charcoal square threatens to overtake the apparent delicacy of a smaller, pale rectangle—or the Sugimoto photograph referenced in the poem "Picture at an Exhibition"—the strength may not be in the encroaching square but in the sliver below that, against all odds, remains open.

*



Hiroshi Sugimoto, "Boden Sea," 1993.

Kovach's poems often ring with the language of the sea—coves, moorings, ledges, gulls—though each word holds a far more distilled power than that of a natural world merely-observed. Here, nature observes you—the melded, overlapping nature of the populated Atlantic seaboard, where the human and the wild may have long cohabited but can't claim to be used to one another, not quite. The gray fog and tides meet low chain-link fences, lilacs, Catholic statuary, paved patios and Coppertone in summer, echoes of Pinsky and Bishop and Lowell.

The legacy of the latter is most overt in "Covenant," which opens with Lowell's famous line, "The Lord survives the rainbow of His will," borrowed from "[The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket](#)." Like "Quaker Graveyard," it is a poem about a shipwreck. Both poems share a rhyme scheme and irregular pentameter as well as a vein of bitterness-in-loss, of grappling with what could easily seem, from the ground, an

indifferent Almighty.

Whole families

*Left what failed them, but held close to their faith;
boarded the St. John in Galway,
threw sprays of white rock-cress leeward
and watched the green hills fade. October 8th*

1849, hard into a gale

*Within view of a sheltered cove the rigging
failed, shrouds ripped from the bleeding deck,
voices below screamed in the dark and wailed at God.*

Now a statue of John the Baptist stands watch there, over a shoreline that has eroded to his bare, stone feet.

Lowell, a conscientious objector who dedicated “Quaker Graveyard” to a cousin killed at sea in the Second World War, limned that poem with a tense and devastating ask: Why would a creator let so many people perish in such cruel ways, and why do we, as humans, seem hell-bent on heaping even more suffering upon ourselves?

Kovach, contrasting Lowell as a combat veteran of a different, perhaps in some ways more culturally fraught war, uses “Covenant” to ask the same. “Covenant” is subtler and shorter than Lowell’s poem, and equally compassionate, but it maintains its predecessor’s edge, the sharp intelligence that won’t let the reader off easy. If a rainbow must be initiated by massive loss and violence—survived, perhaps, only by the Lord with his iron-and-dew will—then it is a double-edged sword: a promise of an eternal love, and a promise that large-scale loss will happen again. Does it comfort you? In a stunning twist, Kovach’s final line reaches out to another Lowell allusion, this time from “For the Union Dead,” which uses a separate historical event to cast its evaluating eye on modern man. Kovach writes,

*Slick cormorants skim
with cruel black wings beyond the harbor's edge.*

and that judgment-by-nature, which may seem at first an easier thing to dodge than the judgment of God or man, is packed with all the horror and human-on-human hurt Lowell alludes to with his own famous final lines, *A savage servility slides by on grease.*

We are the mourners, of course; and we are the noble lost, the starving faithful. We are also the savage servility. Anyone can slide by, watching.

*

I am not surprised that “Covenant” reads to me like an anti-war poem. Kovach is founding editor of the aforementioned *Consequence* magazine (along with Catherine Parnell and a [masthead](#) of other editors), which focuses on the “culture and consequences” of war and its effects. *Consequence* is an exceptional journal, wide-reaching and brave, and it has served, for me in my last two years with *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, as a model of what a real literary, intellectual and artistic effort toward justice, true exchange of ideas, and cooperation might look like. Dedicated to the voices of all people touched by war, the magazine has published a special issue featuring Cambodian writers, and its most recent issue—its eleventh volume—features poet Brian Turner as guest curator of a [selection](#) of searing and fantastic Iraqi poetry.

Kovach’s “Editor’s Notes” for each issue read like beautiful small essays in themselves. “Prejudice finds soft targets among the vulnerable,” he writes (Vol. 9, February 2018), making plain his opposition to the [Muslim travel ban](#). The Editor’s Note for Volume 7, three years prior, reads like a mission statement:

For me, reading these works [in the magazine] unfastens the flak jacket of my assumptions and enables me to enter a kind

of sacred space where the meaning of suffering and loss become complex, nuanced, spoken in a voice that's both strange and familiar. The cumulative effect is recognition of our shared humanity and how the experience of war is both different and the same, regardless of where it's fought.

"Unfastens the flak jacket of my assumptions": It is this humility—this willingness to make oneself a soft target, on par with everyone else—that sets a journal like *Consequence* apart, that sets the work it features apart. This is an age where it is so easy to turn away—to slide by, watching; or to dismiss the soul for the show, to over-watch, isolated, judgmental, and gaping.

I like the closing lines of Judith Baumel's poem "[Sputinu in Gerace](#)," published in *Consequence* last year. It is a poem about olives the way "Quaker Graveyard" and "Covenant" are poems about shipwrecks. The voice is one of both inclusivity and distinction. Some readers will be the voice of the colonized islander, describing the types of olives, and some will be the invaders. Perhaps this is historical and cannot be helped. Perhaps, being human, we can choose the way we proceed from here.

No. Don't say. I'll tell you. The invaders didn't call these cultivars nocellara etnea e Moresca and Biancolilla as we do now but it is what kept them here, wave upon wave, until we did not know the difference between them and us.

*

Several of the poems in the first half of *THE LIGHT OUTSIDE* touch on veteran experience. "The Page is Empty," about the memory of a body—interestingly, the written-down memory of something the narrator claims he cannot remember—is almost too harrowing to read.

*He's uncertain, so he leaves out
the glottal stop of a lung*

*pulling air through the folds
of a fresh tear; leaves out the snap-
shot-silence of the others, prone
in rank water, transfixed*

*by a wall of patient reeds (the missing
sound's the soft sweep of reeds)*

It's followed by an equally unsettling but highly visual, energetic long metaphor, "[Another prose statement on the poetry of war]":

*Imagine war after a fix, gold studded and cuff-linked,
prowling the wedding reception, uninvited. He fingers the tip
of a rubber tube coiled in his coat pocket...He shakes hands
greedily with the wedding party. They beam at his glazed eyes,
sallow flesh, acetone breath. The groom's family thinks he's a
friend of the bride's, the bride's family looks at each other
as he slides to the maid of honor, the best man...*

Each poem in the collection hands off a word, theme, or object to the one that follows it. "Soundings," for example, a poem about tourists on a whale-watch boat, passes a tour guide (in another time and place) to the curious travelers in "Basilica." "Basilica" passes a watchful eye, as well as mentions of gods and trees (wood, oak, carvings) to the wonderful three-part poem "Siegmund," a lively and humorous recounting of Richard Wagner's "The Valkyrie" from the Ring Cycle.

It's a wonderful interplay, not just between the lines of each poem but between the poems as partners and showmen, jostling slightly to tell you the story, as if they're saying, But there's more, there's more. You really didn't think that would be all, did you—that there was only one side to a thing?

I should mention, then, that the poems about war hand off to poems about family, parenthood, marriage—that they lead into poems about love.

*

There is humor in these poems, too. "It's hard to watch immortal mid-life crisis," the poet muses in "Siegmond," as the Norse god Wotan throws a hissy fit. (Surely, Cosima Wagner thought the same thing about Richard a time or two.)

Another god, or demigod, arrives, in a playful rumination on Ansel Adams:

*He breathed the tops of hemlocks
spectral oaks and snow above the tree line.
When the aspens silvered, he came down*

*From El Capitan carrying plated images
of rivers slowly splitting mountains,
his hoarfrost beard brittle in the wind.*

Word play is in fine form; the poor, boat-bound tourists in "Soundings" "toggle in dramamine equilibrium between alarm and regret," and in "Basilica," there are "hubristic papal bees squatting between olive branches, a profligate pope's baroque addition."

More than anything, though, there is the joy and relief of a world filtered through this poet's searching mind. In many poems we are reminded of what we are not seeing—reminded, gently, to look back—or forward. In "Soundings," the tourists miss the whale after all: "But we're looking behind, to where we thought we were."

Frustrated, the narrator in "Basilica" observes a statue and thinks, "I can't make out what's in the pupil's blurred/geometry." Later, s/he says,

*There's no sense of scale; every perspective's
blocked by angles, ages of angles designed
for rapture, built on boxes of bones.*

*

The overwhelming mood of the book is one of a tender, intelligent hunger for illumination—to see the world for what it is and our human role in it. What is the point of us, so easily distracted, easily discarded, building our monuments? We rapture on boxes of bones. The stone god won't look us in the eye. "But why," Kovach asks, in "Lucifer's Light," "do I remember darkness better than light?"

I'd argue that he might not. After reading the collection twice, I'm still thinking of that first poem, "A Burdened Balance," where the narrator is holding open a window he's accidentally painted shut.

*Years ago, careless and in a hurry to finish at the top
of a tall ladder, I painted it shut from the outside.*

Now it won't budge.

And so the narrator is stuck there, having finally got the hinges to move.

*I hear inside the wall the window's counterweights recoil and
clang together,
bang against the wood mullion.*

*The brittle cord connecting them fails—they fall
and with them what I took for granted, the way things work.*

Fresh air flows in, rousing a wasp which has been nesting in the attic. The wasp flies out and the narrator, still indecisive, remains, laughing slightly at himself (the window is getting heavy), but waiting for something. "I've no reason," he thinks, "to keep the hobbled window open." This admission is funny, self-deprecating, and wry. The poem is about holding a window the same way "Covenant" is about a shipwreck and "Sputino in Gerace" is about olives. We are waiting, like the narrator, stuck, laughing, humbled, to see what will come next—some bit of joy or mercy, some bit of the light still outside. There's certainly been enough of the

opposite. Why not just shut the window?

I've no reason, I suppose

To keep holding the hobbled window open. But I don't want to let the heft of it drop, to close a way of returning.

Kovach, George. [*The Light Outside*](#). Arrowsmith Press, 2019.

Fighting for All of Time: Katey Schultz's Novel, 'Still Come Home'

Still Come Home, the first novel from *Flashes of War* author Katey Schultz, opens in the tiny town of Imar, Afghanistan, where a young woman stands by the window, wanting an apricot. The weather is hot and the woman is hungry and thirsty, and she thinks to herself that she would like very much to walk to the market and purchase an apricot. "It would taste like candied moisture," she thinks, "like sunlight in the mouth."

This seems a simple and easily attainable desire. But in Taliban-occupied Afghanistan, without a male relation to accompany her, it's next to impossible. Seventeen-year-old Aaseya is a young woman nearly alone in a village that "insists on the wrongness of her life." Her family was killed by the Taliban, under the mistaken belief that they were American collaborators. In truth, they were only a moderately liberal family with a dangerous belief in freedom and education, including—most suspect of all—the education of girls. Now she is married to Rahim, a man twenty years her senior, whose work—which she believes is bricklaying, though

he has actually, and reluctantly, taken a recent job with the Taliban—keeps him away from home all day while she is taunted by neighbors, including her own cruel, myopic sister-in-law, and unable to fulfill even the most basic longing for a piece of fruit. The metaphor has many layers. Aaseya's sharp mind longs for the pollination of reading and books but can't get them. Her marriage has not yet produced children; all speculation as to this lack is directed at her, not at her much older husband.

Aaseya mourns the loss of the local school where she was educated and its English-speaking teacher, Mrs. Darrow, who was forced to flee three years before. She doesn't know that her husband Rahim may be at this very school building right now—it has become “quietly minted Taliban headquarters”—getting his instructions for the day's distasteful work. (“Afghans have been fighting for all of time,” he reasons. “Even not fighting ends up being a kind of fight.”) His employer is the gaunt, black-robed Obaidhullah who drifts through the schoolhouse overseeing a cadre of drugged, cackling foot soldiers. Rahim is an inherently nonviolent man who finds comfort in verses from the Sufi poet Hafiz (“the past is a grave, the future a rose. Think of the rose”), but his past could serve as a grave for even the strongest of people: he was taken at a young age to be a *batcha bazi*—“dancing boy”—for a corrupt general. He reflects, movingly, that “his body was like his country; it would survive and it would always be used.”



Rahim is paid to dig up AKs, hidden along roadsides in advance, and use them to deter aid vehicles, along with his friend Badria, who's in with the Taliban deeper than Rahim knows. Rahim aims for the dirt, or the tires, or the rearview mirrors, and hasn't yet killed anyone. But he cannot tell Aaseya, whose family raised her with an idealistic affection for Americans and for democracy, of this arrangement. When she sees him carrying American cash, she's thrilled, but it hasn't come directly from Uncle Sam—it's come from Taliban leaders accepting payment to let certain convoys through, for a cut. Now Taliban fighters swagger through the market place showing off stacks of American dollars loaded enough with meaning to be nearly munitional in themselves.

So Aaseya spends her days alone. She will, not, in the end, be able to buy the apricot. (It's amazing how much traction a simple desire can get in a work of fiction—the reader simply

knowing their protagonist wants to buy a piece of fruit.) But this day will end up bringing a much greater gift in the form of a small, mute orphan boy named Ghazel, who'll change the structure of her family forever, even though she's just now spotted him from her open window.

*

Meanwhile, not far away on FOB Copperhead, National Guardsman Nathan Miller—a well-meaning, slightly uptight, former high school Valedictorian with a wife and young daughter at home, plus, sadly, the specter of the child they lost—is preparing his team for one final, humanitarian, mission. They will be delivering water to Imar, where Rahim and Aaseya and Ghazel live, a town watched over by its one, defunct water pump installed years before by hopeful Americans and now silently gauging the town's decline, like the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg in *Gatsby*. The dry pump and a distant well have put pressure on marooned Imar—Rahim has returned home more than once to find there's not enough water left after cooking to drink—and Lt. Miller is almost looking forward to the mission and the chance to do good. His four deployments have strained his marriage to a point he fears irreparable, and he struggles daily with the lack of clarity that descends on a life of perpetual war-fighting in a tribal environment of unknowable loyalties, connections, and deceptions. There is the constant threat of death for Miller and his men; death provides its own awful clarity, but he never knows when it's coming (“it could be now. Or now. Or now”). Working for change is even harder. One step forward, two steps back. As Aaseya does, he uses the word “impossible”: “Like grabbing fistfuls of sand—that's what this war is. Like trying to hold onto the impossible.” When Miller finally does get his humanitarian mission, it's a dream come true, the water bottles sparkling in the sunlight as thirsty children drink. “It feels so good,” he thinks, “to do something right.” By “right,” he means something charitable, something unselfish, but also finally—clearly—that they have

done something *correctly*. They have not, yet, screwed up.

One can't help but think of Kerouac here, warning, "that last thing is what you can't get." But Miller gets so close.

*

Readers of Katey Schultz's critically lauded 2013 collection *Flashes of War* will recognize Aaseya, Rahim, and Lt. Miller and his wife Tenley from those pages. As with Brian Van Reet's character Sled, whose genesis occurred in *Fire and Forget* and then grew to be a major character in *Spoils*, it's a pleasure to meet these characters for another round. It's satisfying to see them grow into not just themselves but into the preoccupations and concerns the author has provided for them. Forgiveness, shared humanity, the frustration of unfair restrictions (upon women, upon soldiers, upon children like the orphaned Ghazel and like young, exploited Rahim) come to the fore again and again in Schultz's work. For *Still Come Home* she has chosen an epigram from Yeats's poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul": "A living man is blind and drinks his drop," it begins. True enough. We're all blind. But its close urges gentleness, with oneself and others: "I am content to live it all again...measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!"

I don't know if these characters would want to live everything all over again. It might be cruel to ask them to. I do know that I gained understanding and compassion at being walked in their shoes. These are characters who ask questions and, by Schultz, are asked. (A notable number of sentences in *Still Come Home* end with a question mark, often questions the characters are posing to themselves. There are so many questions that I thought of Rahim's beloved poet Hafiz, chided gently by the Magian sage: "It's your distracted, lovelorn heart that asks these questions constantly.")

Rahim might say, echoing Hafiz: "There are always a few men like me in this world/ who are house-sitting for God."

Schultz's characters find ways to care for one another in a world that tries to claim there's no time or energy left for that, that this is the first thing we must cut out. In the end they will, despite the hard tasks they have been given, find themselves emboldened by and for love. There is the shared sense among them that all this pain will be worth it if at least something endures.

Schultz's authorial balance is realistic, tough, painstakingly researched, steeped in the knowledge that the world is unfair. Her writing style is supremely attentive, and it's this attention that may be the great gift of writing and novels: not a trick-like verisimilitude or trompe l'oeil but a careful asking of questions. What would happen now; how would this person feel now? What would they say now? I find myself wanting to ask her, as Hafiz does his friend:

“When was this cup
That shows the world's reality

Handed to you?”

*

An excerpt of Still Come Home appeared in the August 2017 issue of Wrath-Bearing Tree. You can read it [here](#) and purchase the book [here](#) or [here](#). Wrath-Bearing Tree contributor Randy Brown has a [recent review](#) of Still Come Home—with valuable insights—on his blog, Red Bull Rising.

Film Review: JOKER, by Adrian

Bonenberger and Andria Williams

Andria Williams: Hey there, Adrian.

Adrian Bonenberger: Hi, Andria.

Williams: So, I heard you recently saw “Joker” in the theater, as did I. It’s gotten a lot of buzz. I’ve seen various reviews call it everything from “disappointing” to “an ace turn from Joaquin Phoenix” to “not interesting enough to argue about,” but I get the sense that you and I both liked it, and I would much rather talk about things I do like than things I don’t. So I’m glad you wanted to talk about it a little here with me.

Should we start with the styling? I’ve always enjoyed the various iterations of Gotham. In the Christopher Nolan trilogy (2005-12), for example, the sleek, crime-ridden city contains visual elements of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Chicago, and New York City. Todd Phillip’s vision seems much more an early-eighties, pre-gentrification city in the midst of a garbage strike, apparently circa 1981 (if we’re to believe the film marquee advertising *Zorro: The Gay Blade*, which played in theaters that year—an over-the-top comedy about a hero who consistently evades capture), without much of the warmth or can-do grit NYC often elicits.



<https://www.abc.org/create-and-produce/behind-the-scenes-joker/5012.article>

Bonenberger: Yes, that's true; and the Gotham of the 90s Batman—Tim Burton's version—was much more stylized (no surprise there), simultaneously futuristic and antiquated, set in the America of the 1930s. Monumental, bleak, massive. I thought *Joker* did an excellent job of capturing the look and feel of the 1980s New York I remembered as a child; dirty, *on edge*, menacing at night. The parts that were beautiful, to which I was fortunate enough to have had some access, were cordoned off from the rest of the city, but even there things were dingy. If the setting for Todd Phillips' Gotham in *The Joker* is NYC circa the early or mid 1980s, he nailed it.

Williams: I never knew that version of New York, and I can't even claim to know the current one, so I think that's fascinating.

I did recently learn that a city of "Gotham" first entered the popular American lexicon through Washington Irving, who

described it in his early-19th-century collection *Salmagundi*. In its British iteration, it's a town King John hopes to pass through on a tour of England, but the residents, not wanting him there, decide to feign insanity so that he will take another route (and he does!). I thought that was kind of fun. Do you see any hints of this early Gotham in *Joker*?

Bonenberger: That's amazing, I had no idea... how delightful! It's an excellent and appropriate comparison... in *Joker*'s Gotham, that allegory or metaphor is inverted, though; the residents who *are* mad, or driven to mad action by impoverishment and disillusionment, do want a king. When the man who wants to be king, Thomas Wayne, is murdered, the "king" who's selected instead for adulation is The Joker, a madman himself.



Photo, TIFF.
<https://nypost.com/2019/09/10/toronto-film-festival-2019-gritty-joker-is-no-superhero-movie/>

Williams: With all I'd heard about its bleakness, I suspected I was not going to "enjoy" the afternoon I spent watching the

film, and I was right—I didn't, not exactly. Watching someone be humiliated is physically awful, almost intolerable. The worst parts for me, for some reason, were when Arthur Fleck would be terrified and running, in his Joker suit and makeup. It was horribly sad. He has this awful potential to kill but in those moments he's fearing for his own life the way anyone would, almost the way a child would. There was something really pitiable about it and I found that harder to watch than the violence.

Arthur Fleck is a man writhing in torment for almost the entirety of the film. On more than once occasion he says, very clearly and deliberately, "I only have negative thoughts." He lost considerable weight for his Joker role, and on several occasions pulls out a loaded gun, places it under his chin, and seems to prepare or at least pretend to shoot himself. I thought of Kierkegaard's "the torment of despair is the inability to die," his claim that despair is "always the present tense," is "self-consuming." "He cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing." (It should be noted that I am bringing Kierkegaard into this discussion almost solely to make our editor Matthew Hefti roll his eyes and stare into the middle-distance, and to make another editor, Mike Carson, laugh.)

What, if anything, does an audience gain from sitting with Arthur Fleck through two hours of his torment, his self-consuming, his inability to die? Is it morbid curiosity, a failure of the "darker-is-deeper" direction of DC comics, an exercise in empathy, a joke?



photo, Warner Bros.
<https://www.insider.com/the-joker-movie-new-trailer-video-2019>
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Bonenberger: If we're talking about viewing *Joker* in terms of Phoenix's acting, I think his performance is suitably magnificent and compelling to argue that the movie is worth watching simply because of his presence. He does transform himself, and his body is so weird, his charisma so powerful, that simply to watch the film because of a virtuoso performance is not to lose one's money (I paid \$18 for a matinee show with me and my son).

Williams: His body is very unusual, and played up to be even more so in *Joker*. He's got that congenital shoulder deformity—you can't help but notice it because in the film he's shirtless half the time with his shoulder bones jutting out—and you have to kind of admire Joaquin Phoenix for not

having it fixed, in a world where a person with enough money can pay to have anything fixed.

I read an interesting and kind of wild [Vanity Fair](#) interview where Joaquin Phoenix, who comes across as rather sweetly self-deprecating, relates almost proudly that the director described him as looking like “one of those birds from the Gulf of Mexico that they’re rinsing the tar off.” And I mean, he really does. You should read that interview, it’s bananas: he has two dogs that he raises vegan, and he cooks sweet potatoes for them, and one of them can’t go into direct sunlight so he had a special suit made for her. It’s fascinating. I mean, sometimes I brush my dog’s teeth and I feel like I deserve a medal.

But I digress. So your eighteen dollars were well-spent—it was worth it to spend two hours watching Joaquin Phoenix as Arthur Fleck?

Bonenberger: Is Arthur Fleck’s struggle worth watching in and of itself—is his torment and suffering worth two hours of one’s time? As someone who doesn’t spend much time thinking about the disabled or discarded of society, even as caricatures (this is not a documentary, it is fiction), I thought Phoenix’s quintessentially *human* performance was, in fact, worth watching; in me it inspired a deep empathy for my fellow humans, and for the difficulty of their interior lives. Again, that is not true of everyone, and a movie ought not to be taken literally, but if this is a tragedy, of sorts, then yes, I think it’s worth it.

Like yourself, I’ve always been skeptical that darkness equaled depth; one can easily imagine superficial movies that are dark; many “jump-scare” horror movies fall into this genre, as do gorier horror or war films that end up disgusting audiences rather than bringing them into a deep emotional moment. I would say that any dramatic movie that is deep will be dark, by definition—and any comedy that is deep will flirt

with darkness only to emerge into the light. *Joker* is dark, and I also believe that it is deep.

Williams: I was struck by the primacy of Arthur Fleck's imagination in the film. He frequently envisions himself doing things which are impossible, but interestingly—other than pretending multiple times to shoot himself—none of them are violent. Instead, he visualizes various yearnings: for the approval of his idol, talk-show host Murray Franklin (Arthur imagines himself being called from the audience, his weird laugh suddenly not a freakish tic but the mode that directs Franklin's attention to him, and even brings forth a fatherly sort of love); or when he invents an entire relationship with a neighbor; or when, reading his mother's diagnostic reports from Arkham Asylum, he imagines himself in the room with her as she's questioned decades before.

It's not Arthur's imagination that leads him to commit violent crimes, it's his knee-jerk reactions to the rejection or betrayal of these fantasies.

How do you see the role of imagination in the film? Is the fantastic dangerous; can the imagination volatilize?

Bonenberger: You've hit on what I think is the key to the film's effectiveness as a human drama—the energy that makes *Joker* viable as a super-villain, the ante that makes the movie so moving. Phoenix portrays the story of a man with beautiful dreams, and we tend to think that such people are incapable of evil. That *The Joker* is a criminal, instead—this is a truth well-known to all—is the source of criticism that frets about *The Joker* inspiring copycat criminals or mass shooters or incels or any of the other dangerous real-world villains people are worried about right now.

Arthur Fleck fantasizes about a world where he's loved. He fantasizes about community, and kindness, and respect, and dignity. Alas, the world he lives in and has lived in his

entire life has been one of solitude, lies, and exploitation, adjudicated by violence. If this were a superhero movie, Fleck would discover in himself some hidden reserve of power, a la Captain America (a similar story in many respects), and learn to overcome the circumstances of his life and universe. Instead, he is ugly, and poor, and weird, and damaged, and the system does its best to target him for elimination. Rather than escape and hide, Arthur fights back.

It seems clear that in the world of the movie—a world where many poor and disaffected people view the police, the government, and the wealthy with overt hostility—Arthur's conditions are not unique, or even particularly unusual. Hence the widespread rioting and looting that takes place at the movie's end. He is simply the catalyst for change.

Because this is a super-villain origin story, not a superhero movie, the role of imagination and dreaming is a kind of joke (appropriately given the movie's title); it is a cheat, something to deceive one into inaction. In The Joker's world, violence against one's powerful oppressor is the only realistic choice, the only truth. This is what a nihilist ends up believing, this is the truth that makes fascism work (a country surrounded by enemies like Nazi Germany, beset by the potential for destruction). Secret optimism is what makes Arthur Fleck a character one cares about, and explains why anyone would follow him in the first place. Actual pessimism—nihilism, really is what makes The Joker a criminal.

Williams: I think you're really right that Arthur's disaffection is not unique in the film. He's only the most fantastic iteration of it.

That brings me back to the big, scary "copycat question." In his *Critique of Violence*, Walter Benjamin notes that "the figure of the 'great' criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, [can arouse] the secret admiration of the public." And in *Joker*, it's definitely not secret: Arthur Fleck's

actions spark not just the imaginations of hundreds or thousands of Gotham city residents, but their imitation, as they don his clown mask and gang up on a pair of cops in a subway. How do you read their enthusiasm for the killer of three young, male Wayne Industries employees (the leader of whom, my husband [who, for the record, found *Joker* slightly boring] noted, looks like Eric Trump, although it's hard to imagine Eric Trump being a leader of anything)? If Slavoj Zizek sees Bane as a modern-day Che Guevara fighting "structural injustice," how do you think Arthur Fleck compares to or continues that role?

Bonenberger: I had always wondered why people followed The Joker. In the original Batman series, where The Joker is a costumed criminal who tries to steal jewels and defeat Batman (who is attempting to prevent the taking of jewels), the motive is clear: greed. In more recent films and comics, though, The Joker ends up being a figure of anarchy and mischief, violence directed against the powerful. With the recent Jokers in mind, and in this movie in particular, one discovers that people follow The Joker because he is a deeply sympathetic character in which many exploited and downtrodden individuals perceive deliverance from their own injustices. Then, it turns out, as in the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* when Heath Ledger's character sets a pile of money ablaze, that The Joker is crazy, and not really interested in "justice" at all; he's interested in destruction and violence for its own sake. This movie explains The Joker's fascination with The Batman, and the Wayne family, and also demonstrates that his schemes and plans attract people because he lives in a world that produces many people capable of being attracted by someone like The Joker.

To get back to the last question briefly, the world of Fleck's fantasies, in which people think he's funny, and he's loved, and treated respectfully—kids actually seem to respond very positively to him in reality, he is child-like—there are no

Joker riots, there are no savage beat-downs in alleys. The movie requires that viewers decide, then, if the utopia of Arthur Fleck's drug-induced reveries is more ridiculous and implausible than the reality, where The Joker somehow inspires unfathomable violence, murder, and unrest. As with most great art, what one believes is true depends on the viewer. Some will think that The Joker is the problem, and if he is removed, Gotham's problems will go away. Others will think that the system is the problem, and that destroying the wealthy and powerful will lead to a better world. Others still will see in Fleck's dream a call to build a world based on love and respect, in which violence is unnecessary save as a last resort.

Williams: In your Facebook post about the film, which first gave me the idea for this chat, you mentioned the "pathos and bathos" that *Joker* provides. I, personally, loved its increasing outrageousness in its final minutes, the grisly humor of Arthur Fleck leaving bloody footprints down the hallway and then, in the final frames, being chased back and forth, back and forth by hospital orderlies. It seemed like the film was announcing its transition from origin story to comic-book piece. It felt, to me, like it was saying, "Relax a little. This is a comic now."

How did you read the ending?

Bonenberger: Same, exactly. We've gone entirely into The Joker's world, now, and it's a world of whimsical jokes, murder, and chaos. Perfect ending to the movie. We're all in the madhouse now.

Williams: So, you can only choose one or the other: DC or Marvel?

Bonenberger: If we're talking about movies: DC. If we're talking about comic books, Marvel.

Williams: Who's your favorite DC villain?

Bonenberger: At this point, The Joker.

Williams: Mine's not really a villain: It's Anne Hathway's Selina Kyle in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Bonenberger: Yeah, you're cheating there.

Williams: I know! But what's not to love? She's like six feet tall (jealous!), she's smart, she's got a relatively articulate working-class consciousness. She's feminine (the pearls!). She plays on female stereotypes to get what she wants. Although I'll admit that the way she rides that Big Wheel thing is utterly ridiculous and actually a little embarrassing.

She's also got some good one-liners. My favorite is when one of her dweeby male-bureaucrat-victims sees her four-inch pleather heels and asks, "Don't those make it hard to walk?" And she gives him a sharp kick and says, breezily, "I don't know...do they?"

Bonenberger: That is an amazing one-liner; I suppose it's hard for me to see anyone but Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman after she dispatched Christopher Walken's villainous character by kissing him to death. Powerful.

Williams: I guess there are worse ways to go out.

Bonenberger: My favorite villain is actually from Marvel, from the comic books; it's Dr. Doom. He will do anything for supreme power—he is in his own way an excellent archetype of greed. I love his boasts. I love how he embodies his persona so naturally, and is so comprehensively incapable of overcoming his weaknesses and flaws...he is a tragic character. Doom is nearly heroic—he has his moments—but his great flaw overwhelms his capacity for good. Isn't that what separates the bad from the good?

Williams: That sounds like a very Wrath-Bearing Tree kind of

question to
end on.

New Fiction from Andria Williams: "Polecat"

Camp TUTO, Greenland
1960

When Paul, a nuclear operator, had arrived in Greenland, the reactor at Camp Century was still not fully assembled, so he and a dozen other men were being held temporarily at another camp a hundred miles south. Everything he could see on the edge of the polar ice cap was white and brown like some kind of visual trick: dirt, and snow, and snowy dirt, and snowy air, and sometimes blowing dirt. The snow and dirt were constantly changing places.

He was in the mess hall when Master Sergeant Whitmore appeared at his elbow. Paul hopped to his feet, and Whitmore asked, with no preamble, "You ever drive a D8 Cat?" Whitmore had buggy, vein-scraggled blue eyes that seemed to intensify anything he said, giving any question he asked an oddly moral implication.

Paul hesitated. "Not yet."

"Well, you're gonna have to fill in," Whitmore said. "It's just like driving a tractor, except it's a giant one. You've driven a tractor, right?"

Paul had not.

Whitmore forged on. "You'll be towing a fuel canister. All you got to do is stay behind me and follow the bamboo markers. Do

not fall asleep and drive into a crevasse. We drive six hours on, six hours off. It'll take about a week."

Paul was relieved enough to simply get on the road, so he nodded, and when Whitmore left, his friend Mayberry appeared beside him.

"King of the road!" Mayberry said, grinning at Paul. Mayberry was the camp geologist, and this was his fifth tour in Greenland. Tall and thin, with a scientist's buzzing mind, he worked in an underground lab below the base, surrounded by rows of ice samples stored in what looked like oversized poster tubes. Because he spent his working hours alone, he seemed perpetually delighted to encounter other people. He said that Camp Century was a dream compared to his first base in Greenland, which had been called Fistclench.

"How bad will it be?" Paul asked.

But Mayberry was watching Whitmore, who stood across the room talking to the camp cook. Cookie, as they called him, had been in Greenland for who knew how long. He was as thin as a Confederate zealot, and while the men ate he stood smoking in his stained apron, watching them as if it gave him either grim pleasure or unabated pain.

"Good!" Mayberry said. "We get to bring Cookie."

"Should make for great conversation," said Paul.

"Oh, he talks," Mayberry promised. "You'll see."

The Polecat was idling next to several others just outside the camp's garage. They rumbled in concert, swathed in plumes of steam and exhaust. Paul identified his by the orange fuel canister attached to the rear and mounted on skis. The Polecats were Swiss innovations, specially adapted vehicles with huge track frames – Paul guessed twenty feet – and wide

track pads that could traverse uneven ice without tipping or breaking through.

There would be three other Polecats like his, carrying various types of freight in the middle of the caravan. Whitmore's D9 led the line, with a blade attached, to help clear a path. Then there was the Command Train, a huge tractor that pulled the cook shack, radio shack, and three refurbished old boxcars on skis called wanigans, where the soldiers relaxed or slept. Finally, there was the last boxcar on the whole train: the latrine, that foul caboose, following them like a bad thought. What an absurdly human predicament, Paul thought, having to cross the polar ice cap lugging literal shit behind you.

Whitmore strode up and slapped Paul on the back. "Good luck," he said. "Don't drive into a crevasse." This was becoming a common theme with the master sergeant, and Paul was beginning to suspect he wasn't kidding. To Mayberry, Whitmore said, "Quit smoking by the fuel rig. Here're your keys."

Everyone climbed into their tractors. Slowly, Whitmore pulled his D9 out into the lead. At this rate, Paul thought, we will never get anywhere. Then he pulled his own tractor in line and found it moved even slower than the boss's.

It seemed unbelievable they'd travel at this snail's pace for an entire week. Paul tried not to think about it. He wondered when he would break down and allow himself a cigarette. He wondered what his wife, Nat, back in Idaho was doing. He thought quite a lot about what they would do if they were together. Meanwhile he squinted to keep track of the pointed tops of the bamboo poles they followed, many almost buried beneath the moving glacier. Sometimes the poles would be so hard to see that an impossibly-bundled man would have to walk ahead, locate them, and then wave in the direction the trucks should go. Paul's Army career had started in petroleum supply, and stunts like this were one reason he'd left that field. Lugging massive canisters and a shitter across the ice felt

like some Neanderthal gig, the work of people without bright ideas.



photo by Ray Hansen

Between their shifts, the drivers sat in the rocking but well-heated wanigan, paging through month-old newspapers someone had brought from Fort Andrews. There they were joined by Cookie, who had never stopped smoking, his legs crossed and one foot jittering up and down. Cookie would wait until the men around him began to engage in any kind of interesting conversation—about sports back home, their previous tours of duty, anything—and then he'd suddenly interject his own litany of complaints against the Army and life in general, as if that had been the topic of discussion in the first place. "I wasn't meant to be here," he'd say, sucking on one cheek, his small eyes blazing. "I'm from Mississippi. No way was I meant to be here." He alternated this thought with its close cousin, "I wasn't meant to be in the Army" (he had initially attempted to get into the Navy) and also, "I was never meant to be a cook" (he had hoped to be a machinist, but failed some critical aptitude test). Cookie and his quibble with destiny had rapidly become tiresome, and it was impossible for the other men not to occasionally respond with wiseacre remarks.

"I was meant to be here," Mayberry said as he flipped the pages of the classifieds. It was the only section everyone had not yet read multiple times. "This, here, is the point in life I was born for." The wanigan gave a lurch and someone in a bunk cursed.

Cookie ignored him and continued, "I was a runner in high school. I ran cross-country. I wasn't meant to stand in one place, flippin' burgers."

Mayberry was reading the classifieds aloud. "Here's an ad for a home dental care system. It says, 'Polish Your Teeth on Your Own Time.'"

"That's what I've always wanted to do with my own time," said Benson from a folding chair across the room.

"We could let Cookie drill our cavities," said Mayberry. "Maybe he was meant for that."

"I had three ladies back in Mississippi," said Cookie. "Three of 'em, who loved me. They cooked for *me*."

"Hmm," said Mayberry, in a placating way.

"I had five women," said Benson. "They polished my teeth for me."

Cookie snapped to attention. "You did not," he said. "That's stupid." Then he lapsed back into thought.

The wanigan hit a deep groove, and the men steadied themselves. "Jesus," said Benson. "And people think they get seasick in the Navy."

"I was meant to be in the Navy!" Cookie said, with sudden interest. Then he stood from his chair and looked at the boxcar door with a focused expression, his hands on his hips, knobby elbows sticking out from white shirtsleeves. "Forget this shit," he said. "I'm going home."

Mayberry rattled his newspaper so it wouldn't slump. "Great," he said, without looking up. "Tell your three ladies we said hi."

"Forget you," said Cookie, very loudly, leaning over Mayberry who looked over the top of the paper in surprise. "Forget you, all you stupid food-eaters, who just sit around eating my food. Complainin' and complainin'. I am a man! I was not meant for this shit job!" He stepped back and glanced around with flashing eyes, muttering, "Maybe you should cook for your damn selves is what."

"Geez, I'm sorry," Mayberry began, but Cookie strode to the boxcar door, unlatched it, and heaved it open. The air that entered the room felt as cold as rubbing alcohol.

"Whoa," said Mayberry, getting to his feet also. And then the cook, in only his short-sleeved white uniform, jumped right out.

For a moment everyone stood and the room was silent. Paul looked around, as if this had just been some optical illusion, and Cookie would actually be sitting back in his chair where he'd been a moment before. But the chair was empty. The wanigan door creaked slowly toward closing.

"Holy shit," Mayberry cried, and he and Paul scrambled. They reached the door at the same time and yanked it open. Mayberry leaped out first, and Paul followed. The force of the cold nearly spun him around, and it took him a second to gather his wits and begin running. He heard Benson hit the ground a few beats behind him. Cookie had taken off across the ice, surprisingly fast, heading for the white horizon.

"He's a runner," called Mayberry as they sprinted after the cook. "He ran cross-country."

"He's gonna die," Paul cried. Any second he expected Cookie to slip from sight into the narrow cradle of an unseen crevasse.

The ice was hard and slick, and their feet slipped every few steps. Cookie, on the other hand, appeared to have magic shoes. He was loping ahead at a steady pace, his body a slim, efficient machine.

“Go back, Benson,” Mayberry said over his shoulder.

Paul could hear Benson’s heavy breath like a zipper being yanked up and down. “Someone will radio the boss,” he shouted encouragingly.

“That someone should be you!” Mayberry said.

This is ridiculous, Paul thought. He knew he had to give the chase all he could. He focused on pumping his arms and legs as fast as possible. He narrowed his vision on Cookie and raced all-out, his lungs burning with an intense pain.



photo by Ray Hansen

Cookie might have actually gotten away, run off to the top of

the world, if he hadn't hit a ripple on the ice and stumbled. He caught himself and straightened, limping slightly, and Paul, feeling delirious and oxygen-deprived, gave his last burst of speed. The gap between himself and the cook narrowed. Paul took several long strides and flung himself against the cook's lower back, pulling the two of them down onto the ice with a painful slap.

The second Cookie hit the ice he began yowling. He fought like a wildcat. He kneed Paul in the gut and smashed the flat of his hand against Paul's nose. Paul realized that his only advantage was his greater size, so he fell forward onto Cookie and clung to the wiry man for dear life. It was like wrestling a greased snake. All he could see was Cookie's white-shirted abdomen, into which his face was pressed, the muscles twisting and bucking against his cheek. He gritted his teeth and waited desperately for Mayberry to reach them.

A moment later Mayberry sprinted up and fell on top of them both, and from a distance it must have looked like some ecstatic reunion, or the winning touchdown in a football game. "Sit on his arms," Mayberry grunted, and Paul, dazedly obedient, tried to find one to sit on. He crawled up Cookie's body and fought to pin down the cook's skinny, flopping limb, which jumped over and over again just out of Paul's reach like a fish on land. Finally, Paul pegged the arm and sat on it, and Mayberry sat on the other, and then there they were, gasping for breath, the cook writhing and screaming on his back beneath them.

Benson finally jogged up, looking ill, and in the distance they could see Whitmore's D9 turn slowly, slowly, to come and get them. This seemed absurd; they could walk faster than it drove.

"I'm sorry, Cookie," Mayberry was saying. "We'll show you we care. We'll bake you a cake."

"We need to stand up," Paul said. "We'll freeze." He was concerned about Cookie's bare elbows on the ice.

They waited for Benson to catch his breath, and then they all grabbed onto an available part of the cook and lifted him to his feet. Cookie screamed; Paul winced to see the two lines of blood on the ice where his arms had begun to freeze to the ground. "Sorry," Paul said to the cook, and "Start walking," to the others. With mincing, difficult steps they made their way toward the line of tractors.

Sergeant Whitmore leaped down from his idling vehicle, waving his arms and shouting, "What the hay, Cookie?" for he was a man who did not curse. "What did you think you were doing?" Cookie stared at him defiantly, and Whitmore made a sound of disgust. "Tie him up," he said, "tie him to a bunk til we get to Century. We'll decide what to do with him there."

On the count of three, Paul, Mayberry, and Benson heaved the slender cook up into the wanigan and over to a bunk. Whitmore fetched a coil of rope. "Don't you tie me," Cookie began to shout, "don't you dare tie me!," but they did anyway, binding him to the bunk in a seated position with his arms behind his back. From there, he yelled half-sensible platitudes at them for hours. "You can't keep a man where he don't want to be," he said, and "This is my life, not yours, you rat bastards," and, cryptically, "You're just like all them, you know what." He hollered until he wore himself out, and then he stared at them despondently from where he sat.

That night, after a dinner of cream of wheat and tinned milk, Paul tried to sleep, but every time he opened his eyes he could see Cookie's own, glittering back at him. Paul rolled onto his side to face the wall. Cookie's gaze crawled up his back. He yanked his wool blanket to his shoulders. "Cut it out, Cookie," he said.

Cookie's voice came across the room, plaintive, almost

mewling. "I ain't doing nothin'," he said. "I'm just sittin' here like a good boy." A moment later he hissed, "Come on, untie me. I won't go nowhere. I'll sit just like this."

"Can't do that," Paul muttered.

Cookie's voice was hoarse. "My Leroy's itchin'."

"Sorry."

"Untie me, please," Cookie begged. "Come on now, you're the only nice one of them in here. You're the nice guy. The best one." A minute later he said, "Never mind, you're the worst one. You a priss is what you is. You prissy!"

Paul had never been called this before and felt actually startled.

"A man's body is his own," Cookie said. "It's the only thing he really got. You know, someday the rules are gonna be here for you when you don't want them, either."

Paul screwed shut his eyes. The wanigan lurched and groaned, and a coffee cup slid off a table, hit the ground with a thud, and rolled hollowly across the floor. Outside, the pitch of the wind rose and fell, a sound both strange and familiar: a waning alarm, distant machinery, blood roaring in the ear.

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photos by [Ray Hansen](#)