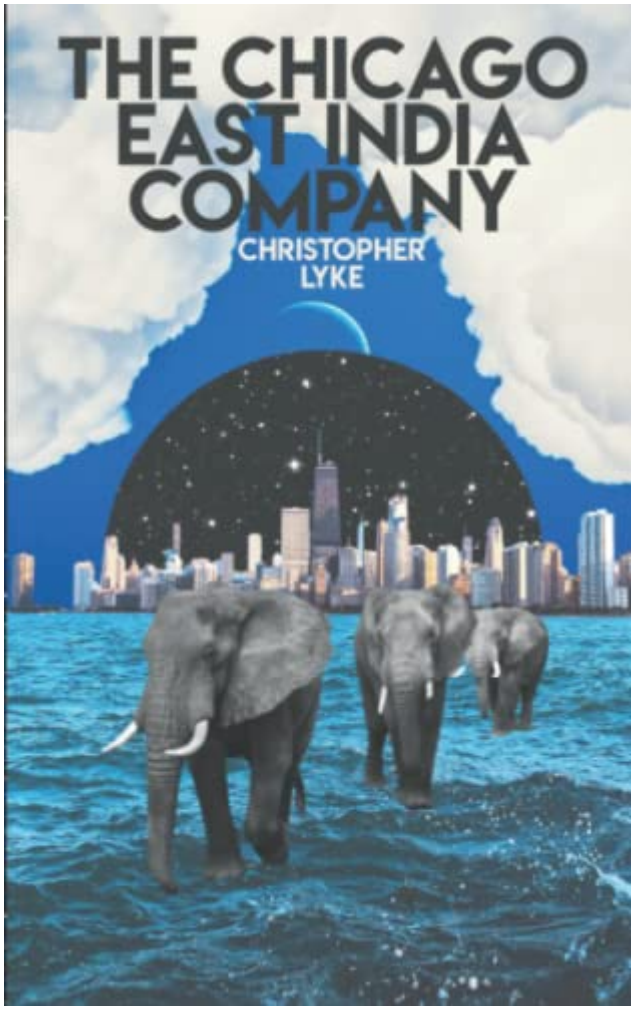
New Nonfiction: Review of Christopher Lyke's "The Chicago East India Company"



Gravitational lensing – as half-remembered from an article I read years ago, as confirmed courtesy of a recent Wikipedia dive – takes advantage of the presence of massive objects to shape the path of light coming from objects on the far side relative to the viewer. A sufficiently large star, for instance, could be used by Earth-bound astronomers to "see" far beyond what they otherwise could by bending rays of light coming from distant bodies. The basic physics behind the principle was known to Newton and Cavendish, and a multinational effort just after World War I confirmed many of Einstein's theories about gravitational lensing. It may be our

best bet for obtaining direct visual evidence of habitable exoplanets in other solar systems.

Christopher Lyke's The Chicago East India Company (Double Dagger Press) is a sufficiently large star. A collection of short stories and vignettes based both on the author's time in uniform and career as a teacher, the book takes on a refreshing and encouraging role, despite the sometimes-laden and harrowing subject matter of surviving combat and finding purpose in a bureaucratic education system.

I'll return to the "sufficiently large star" concept in a moment.

The writing throughout TCEIC is, as one would guess, taut and clean, in the sense that there are no wasted words or characters or stories. There's a physicality that guides the collection, present in spare but efficient vignettes – whether character portraits like "Canton"' or meditations on events as in "Another Ginger Ale Afternoon" – but on full display in the longer pieces like "Life in the Colonies," which amplifies the corporeal experiences of a jungle excursion by examining the personal and political context surrounding it. The sensory descriptions also ground what could be otherwise ephemeral introspection, and this balanced duality continues throughout the book.

In "These Are Just Normal Noises" the monotony of a foot patrol drags on for more than four pages but the writing never falters. Not a word is unnecessary in building to the tension of the impending incident. Every description – of the "kohl-lined eyes and dyed-red beards" on the men and women encountered in the village, or the "riverbed…the tall grass that covered the ground…the ditches and small stonewalls" – seems at once familiar and extraordinary. The connection back to the world entices, but endangers:

> We pulled them from thoughts of Chicago and the L and the

> weekend festivals that they were missing. A soldier remembered the way a girl had spoken to him and how she seemed cool and like the river that glided through the valley below him. We pulled them from this and back to the mountain, to a path or a rocky outcrop at which to point a gun.

We know it's coming, right? The ambush, the firefight, the attack – we've seen this before. The description continues, though, hard and unrelenting, and the agony of a withdrawal delayed by wounded vehicles and drivers, another couple hundred words detailing the by-now familiar yet still deadly blow-by-blow, but "It must have been only a minute since the fight began." We feel that minute stretched over two pages and the exhaustion weighs heavy on us.

A similar burden falls on our shoulders when we read "Solon," perhaps the most memorable story in the book. An unnamed teacher – though likely the same man whose travails we've been following the whole time – ventures from the demanding and unfulfilling classroom to the football field, coaching a team of students unaccustomed to winning and not far removed from the soldiers he once served alongside. Hopes are raised, then tempered; this is no Hollywood story of a team defying all the odds, though the growth and depth of the kids is much more realistic. Dreams are dashed, not by death but by an injury sufficient to upend what would be, in a scene meant to inspire, the rags-to-riches career of the honest and likable young Darnell. The teacher unspools, seeing the players set beside soldiers set against football players from his own suburban youth in Ohio, and spins out of control:

> …he knew that the team he was coaching was bad, and that it wasn't their fault. They were in a system that prevented them from being slightly more than terrible. And if it were a movie maybe an emotional director would have the poor kids win. But in reality, if they played one another his boys would probably get hurt…He didn't blame the suburban

> boys, they didn't hate the city boys, they just knew they'd beat them to death and wanted to, because they wanted to beat everyone down. That's what they were trained to do, and bred to do, and would do. It wasn't malice so much as inertia. They'd smile uncynically and help our boys up after cracking their ribs.

I found no morals here, because every time I tried to connect the Ohio players to Afghanistan or the Chicago players to the insurgents or reversed the roles or asked *Who would be who in the war zone* the futility of that line of questioning stopped me. War is not football, football is not war, but both deserve our attention for their consequences.

The other stories – "No Travel Returns"; "The Gadfly"; and the title piece – contain just as much depth of characterization and breadth of plot, maybe even more so. As readers we recognize the central character – sometimes first-person narrator, sometimes third-person participant, even as a literal bystander in "Western and Armitage," when he spends less than a page delivering a gut-punch and denouement at the scene of a traffic accident – that Lyke inhabits and uses to bring us along on a journey that doesn't end. "None of it ended," he says in protest to the idea that stories need resolution. But compared to many combat or redeployment stories about the hopelessness of such an idea, I feel like there's something to look forward to here.

TCEIC arrived at an opportune time for me as a writer. Full disclosure: Christopher Lyke founded and runs Line of Advance, a military- and veteran-focused literary website that has hosted much of my work, and even more work from many other writers. LOA sponsors the Col. Darron L. Wright Award for military and military-adjacent writers. They've amassed enough groundbreaking and stunning writing to publish Our Best War Stories (Middle West Press), with hopes for a second volume. LOA has been a great and generous home for my own writing, and I was excited to read more of Lyke's own work, if only to see

into the mind behind a mainstay in the vet writing constellation.

Getting civilians to care about "The Troops" has been far easier than getting them to care about veterans. Wave a few flags, drop a few parachutists into a football game or two and they will stand for the anthem and mouth the affirmations they're expected to. It's American tradition – dating back to the Newburgh Conspiracy, the Bonus Army, and burn pit legislation – to celebrate war and forget the vet.

The writing in TCEIC embodies an antidote to that malaise, not in building overly optimistic bridges across the civil-military gap, but in reminding those of us in the vet writing communities that this kind of storytelling still matters, and will continue to matter. As major combat deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq fade in the general consciousness – if it were ever really there, short of jarring news announcements – and attention shifts elsewhere, spaces like LOA and books like The Chicago East India Company serve to focus our efforts. The longevity of a website that allows for creative expression gives hope. The straddling of worlds in TCEIC – connecting the experiences and people in a combat zone miles and years away to the experiences and people in contemporary and ongoing America – gives us that sufficiently large star. We can use its presence to bend the light and see habitable planets beyond the terrestrial profusion of "typical" war stories, the kind you see in Hollywood if at all, and imagine literary planets where authors with military memories can explore stories beyond combat, can continue "writing things that aren't just bang bang stories," as Lyke puts it in an interview with Phil Halton, and maybe one day bring along a few of those civilians to populate these new worlds.

The Chicago East India Company by Christopher Lyke is available for purchase here.

New Op Ed from Teresa Fazio: This Memorial Day, Let's Honor Essential Workers

In the first weeks of lockdown, I paced my two-room Harlem apartment, feeling trapped while an unpredictable threat loomed. After a few days, it clicked– the collective need for vigilance and protective gear had stoked memories of my deployment to Iraq as a Marine Corps officer. There, rocket and mortar attacks had punctuated long periods of boring routine for my communications company colleagues and I. In the early evenings, our company's evening brief provided solace and companionship.

In the midst of the pandemic, that version of nightly comfort became the Twitter feed of Columbia's Department of Surgery—a daily summary of pragmatic encouragement, written by its eloquent chair, Dr. Craig Smith. He used familiar military jargon of staff "redeployments" and "battlefield promotions" for emerging medical leaders. He wrote about colleagues infected with COVID, and one who committed suicide.

This Memorial Day, as Dr. Smith and other first responders lose colleagues on a scale not seen since 9/11, and supply chain personnel from meatpackers to grocery clerks risk infection to keep America fed, we should extend honors to all of the essential workers who've given their lives. Doing so would help unify the nation and bridge the military-civilian divide.

Healthcare workers watch U.S. Air Force C-130s from Little Rock Air Force Base fly over Arkansas, May 8, 2020.

Only about 1% of US workers currently serve in the military, but according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, an equal number serve as firefighters and law enforcement. A whopping ten times that number– more than ten million people– work in healthcare professions as doctors, nurses, EMTs, and hospital personnel. Transportation and delivery workers– warehousemen and truckers who transport everything from asparagus to zucchini– make up another 10% of American workforce. And that's not even counting agricultural, food, and maintenance workers. A mid-April CDC report listed at least 27 US healthcare workers dead of COVID, a number that has undoubtedly grown, and the Washington Post reported over 40 grocery store worker fatalities in the same time frame. As of early May, about 30 firefighters nationwide have died of the virus, too. The NYPD alone lost over 30 personnel to the pandemic, and national police casualties count dozens more. Like troops in a war zone, those essential healthcare, public

safety, and logistics workers now face a wily, invisible enemy every day. Paying respects to their fallen just as we veterans honor our own would mean acknowledging that it takes **everyone**'s service to help us get through this crisis.

Coronavirus is forcing businesses and governments to acknowledge the dignity of the blue-collar and service-industry workers who make our vast supply chain possible, similar to the physical work we honor in common servicemembers. In April, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) issued a joint statement with Stop and Shop calling on the government to classify grocery workers as "extended first responders" or "emergency personnel." Moreover, in Passaic, New Jersey, a firefighter's coronavirus death prompted a mayor to ask for state legislation to classify it as a death in the line of duty, which would entitle his family to additional benefits. We can't bring these workers back, but we can honor them by helping their families recover, and funding their children's educations—just as we do for fallen service members. If, as Fed chair Jerome Powell said, we are facing an economic downturn "without modern precedent," one piece of recovery will be financial remuneration for those who have sacrificed in the name of keeping the country running.

Emotional support is necessary, as well. Medical professionals who triage an avalanche of patients decide who lives and who dies. We don't yet know how many of them will suffer PTSD or moral injury from scenes like overflowing emergency rooms. In the past month, New York Presbyterian emergency room physician Dr. Lorna Breen and FDNY EMT John Mondello committed suicide in the wake of treating an overwhelming number of coronavirus patients. Military veterans who have rendered first aid at the scene of IED blasts, rocket attacks, and similar catastrophic mass casualties know these emotional scenarios all too well. Losing colleagues with whom one has served side by side— and perhaps blaming oneself for failing to protect the sick and

wounded, even in an impossible situation—are experiences many troops know intimately.

Whenever well-meaning civilians called me or former comrades heroes, we often told them, “The heroes are the ones who didn’t come back.” I suspect some of the medical professionals I now call heroes would say the same thing. Which is why we must honor the fallen without putting all those who serve on a holy pedestal. Veneration of the dead without practical follow-up care for the living only alienates trauma survivors; it doesn’t help them reintegrate into society. Military veterans have learned this the hard way; recent Memorial Days have included remembrances for troops who have died by suicide. So in addition to honoring essential workers who have died from coronavirus, we must treat the burnout and PTSD from those who survive, especially in the medical professions, so we are not remembering them as tragic statistics in future years.

Columbia’s Dr. Smith wrote a total of 59 nightly missives, each offering comfort and guidance to my anxious-veteran mind. In the meantime, the United States has lost over 83,000 people to coronavirus. In memory of them— 83,000 parents, first responders, warehouse workers, delivery persons, doctors, nurses and counting— let’s expand this Memorial Day to honor essential personnel, with the aim of creating a more united America.

Editor’s note: Teresa Fazio’s memoir, FIDELIS, is forthcoming in September 2020 from Potomac Books.

New Fiction from Ulf Pike: “Welcome Home, Brother”

My arm burned red resting out the window in the summer sun as I drove east out of the mountains. I passed through the shade of centuries-deep bluffs carved by the Yellowstone River, then curved south into open, tall-grass prairies.

A road sign for Little Bighorn Battlefield flashed by with its mileage—more than once a “stop along the way” during road trips when I was young. A few cars passed with the vanity license plate of General Custer staring across the plains at Sitting Bull. I tried to picture the battle, as I always had, hear the rifle-fire and war cries. I tried to picture my great-great grandmother, speaking no English, boarding a passenger train with her children en route to a new life in Montana. What might she have been picturing? What did she hope for and fear, studying the strange landscape into the West, into *Indian Country*, news of Custer’s defeat no older than her youngest daughter?

Being a fifth-generation Montanan had always nurtured in me a special kind of pride and ownership. But nothing felt that way anymore, not since I got back.

My brother-in-law's penciled directions read *end of the world gas station – L.* I turned the wheel as I took in the derelict old building, scrawled with graffiti, a sunken canopy over absent pumps, pointed shards left in the windows. The truck bumped a few more miles through open range where sparse groups of horses pondered the ground and swatted flies with their tails. One tan and bony mare ambled along the shoulder of the road, unfazed by my passing.

As I drove through town past pairs of following eyes, I had to reassure myself that I'd been invited. Feral dogs with taut stomachs trotted through alleyways, cowed as if under an invisible raised hand. In a dirt lot a girl of maybe three sat alone on a swing, pumping her legs and grinning vibrantly. I caught her eyes and smiled. Behind her, two shirtless teenage boys with long braided hair played basketball under a netless hoop.

Turning onto a dusty two-track, I saw the first sign and slipped the directions into my shirt pocket. Through sagebrush up the hill, spray painted in safety-orange on scraps of plywood with arrows at the turns, they guided me to the *Other Medicine Sun Dance.*

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I woke in the bed of my truck to the first rays of light and the sound of drumming, rhythmic and steady, above which men's voices sang in solemn unison, one occasionally leaping from the rest, a piercing wail which made my blood rush. The first of the four-day ceremony had begun and the many family and friends who'd come to support the dancers and offer prayers gathered around the lodge, which was constructed of numerous tree trunks stripped and re-planted in a large circle around a much taller center-tree, all of them linked with draping boughs and long strips of thin fabric which wavered in the gentle morning breeze. I stood a distance away and waited. No one regarded me with scorn, nor did they encourage me to come closer, until a man in a wheelchair rolled up from behind me and told me they didn't bite, "…most of them anyway."

I followed close behind him and stopped at his side in the shade just outside the lodge. He wore a black hat with "Iraq War Veteran" embroidered in yellow around a Purple Heart. His face was puffy and badly scarred. Both of his legs were missing above the knee. When he turned his head to look up at me he seemed to smiled and spoke so as not to be heard over the singing: "An Offering Song."

I nodded.

He extended his massive calloused hand and said even softer, "No Mud."

I took his hand and told him my name.

"So," he went on, keeping his grip, "how many years did they

get out of you?” At my hesitation he explained, “I saw your vet plates last night when you drove in.”

“Oh, right. Just three. One deployment.”

His dark eyes were watery. He seemed to be looking vaguely beyond me. I asked him the same question.

He applied more pressure and pulled me closer as if to tell me a secret and breathed warm into the side of my face, “They took years I ain’t even lived, little brother.” He loosened his grip and disarmed his voice, adding a quick, “*Hey!*” before dropping my hand as if forgetting why he was holding it. A couple people glanced back with looks of restrained concern then sent their eyes in search of someone else.

A tall woman approached No Mud, crouched and put her arm around his shoulder, lowered her face to the side of his and said something softly in another language. He appeared to weep momentarily but quickly composed himself and kissed her on the cheek. She squeezed his shoulder as she stood up and then the back of his neck, glanced a courteous smile at me and returned to what she had been doing. We waited in silence until there was a change in drumming and the singers began a new song.

Four men emerged from a small tent behind the lodge and filed toward the center tree. They wore only red and white cloth around their waists and a whistle-like piece of bone with a feather at the end around their necks. No Mud nudged my leg and leaned towards me: “Eagle Dancers,” he said. I didn’t tell him one of them was my brother-in-law, but I figured it was obvious enough. Seeing him made me blush with the heat of a hundred eyes.

Each dancer stood his turn before the center tree as a long-haired elder wearing aviator sunglasses and latex gloves, used a surgical scalpel to make two inch-long incisions down each of their pectorals. Then like a lace through a stiff leather boot-tongue he pushed the sharpened end of two three-inch

sections of deer antler under each bleeding loop of flesh. Four ropes hung from the top of the center pole, each split at the end like a Y. He attached these ends to either side of both antler tips thus marrying each Eagle Dancer to the tree. For the next four days they would go without food and be called upon to dance when the drumming and singing began, their sacrifice shared and elevated by the presence and prayers of their family and friends.

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My brother-in-law had ridden bulls in a semi-pro rodeo circuit for a few years until finally giving in to the doctor's insistence that his body wasn't going to last another eight seconds up there, let alone under hoof and horn. He moved to Montana to cowboy with a vision in his head he gathered from accounts like *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sundance Chief,* a book he would later present to me as a gift. The author spent months with the Crow leader recording everything he was told. He was adopted by the Yellowtail family and in time participated in their Sun Dance. For my brother-in-law it was more than a romantic notion, it was a calling from a time he felt he was meant for, but by some tragic cosmic glitch had ended up fair-skinned and red-bearded in a world of credit cards and cell-phones.

He hunted elk, deer and antelope with both rifle and bow in the valleys and eastern plains of Montana and alone deep in the Tobacco Root, Beartooth and Crazy Mountains. Each time was a spiritual attempt, he insisted, to dislocate his *self* from his body and reintegrate with the universe. Though I barely knew him then, he would send letters to Iraq, to the brother he never had, a brother fighting in a war, also in pursuit of something beyond his sense of self. I received envelopes with return addresses of *Deep in the Crazies* and *The teeth of a Chinook.* I imagined him crouched behind a boulder high above the timberline gripping the paper and pencil, jotting down a few words between gusts. He was almost mythical to me, as I

would learn I was also to him.

I read of his friends, the sweat lodges, feasts and the Sun Dance. The new-old way. I allowed myself to escape through his descriptions of rituals and celebration, of the *eternal hunt* and finding his *forever eyes*. Under stars after a night patrol through open desert, where there was no thing nor body, where officers would call for fire from artillery to explode in the emptiness, I'd relieve myself of armor and ammo, light a cigarette and try to imagine myself stalking elk in knee-deep snow through the mountains or crawling naked into a sweat lodge, into the *womb of the universe*, as he said it was called. I tried to imagine it and hoped to dream of it when I fell asleep—though dreams were rarely anything but fevered scenes of some repetitive task like cleaning a combat-load of bullets one-by-one after a sand storm.

People ask how hot it was over there and I tell them many nights failed to sink below triple digits and we patrolled often in a hundred-and-thirty degrees during the day. They raise their eyebrows and I don't tell them of the eighty-plus-pounds of body armor, weapon, ammo, food and water. I don't tell them how unnatural it all felt. And I don't tell them how our suffering seemed almost absurd reflected in the stare of a shepherd, a shop keeper, a mother standing in the doorway of her home as we passed, assuming the worst of them. Theirs was an ancient suffering most of us could only wear like a costume. Whenever I locked eyes with them I found it nearly impossible to pretend they weren't beyond us somehow, seeing us not as we imagined ourselves but as we truly were. They were willing us away.

Official U.S. Navy photo by Photographer’s Mate 1st Class Arlo K. Abrahamson.

Every day I wanted to leave more. And every day it was less from fear of dying. It was a feeling that slithered around inside. The best you could do was try and shake it loose and hope it coiled up in a different part of your body.

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A stern wind carried dust from the road and drove it through the lodge. Thin strips of fabric tied to the tips of each tree thrashed at nothing from their knots. The drummer’s song fled out over the sage brush and a distancing presence was felt. New resolve seemed to rise in the dancers against the assaulting air, each of them tasting the ground in it with dry tongues, reassured of their purpose in the sting of splitting lips.

No sacrifice can be made if doubt is not confronted. No Mud assured me of this. I saw it in the dancers when they closed

their eyes and gathered themselves against visible inner friction, lifting and dropping their bare feet as if to draw the song back from the squall driving it away. I imagined myself an Eagle Dancer, the person enduring suffering that it might be undone, though vanity banished the vision like a swirl of fine earth to some unseen end. The wind tore at us in gusts and No Mud secured his hat on his head with one hand.

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As a boy I rode a dreamed horse through desert washes, open plains and timbered mountains with a carved tree branch for a rifle. I imagined ambushes and firing lead into swift animals, into enemies as they rose from behind boulders and thickets with bows drawn. I'd mouth the explosions of my rifle and fall from my saddle with an arrow sunk deep in the muscle. Invoking the movie scenes which most haunted my sleep, I'd break off the fletched end, clinch it in my teeth and push the tooled stone out the other side and pull it free, wincing with great drama at the tragedy of my own blood. I'd pack the entry and exit wounds with gunpowder and taste the bitter chokecherry wood as I brought the flame to each wound and my eyes would roll back in my head with the pain and smell of carbon and seared flesh and I would fall into sand, into pine needles, and follow the merging and dispersions of clouds.

After carrying my rifle for almost a year through the desert, the day finally came when I switched it off of *safe* and squeezed the trigger. It was not an ambush, not a battle, not movie material. It was a serene afternoon in late October. We were patrolling outside a rural village when someone spotted a tunnel entrance dug into the side of a canal. Ordered to *recon by fire* I prayed my bullets would find a meaning there. For months I tried to convince myself I was disappointed that the only thing I ever shot while at war was a hole in the ground.

"Come to the Sun Dance," my brother-in-law wrote in his last letter. "As a warrior you are invited to help cut down the

center tree for the lodge.” Even though most people I met seemed obliged to convince me, or at least themselves, that I was a warrior or some kind of hero, I had stopped trying to convince myself. When anyone shook my hand and thanked me for my service, or worse, for their freedom, I became vaguely nauseous as if shallowly buried beneath our feet was a decaying corpse we both pretended not to smell.

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By the third day the Eagle Dancers seemed to have transcended the failure of their bodies and rose each time from the grass to pledge their feet to the drums and move in toward the center tree then back, breathing rhythmically through the eagle-bone whistles between their teeth with the drummer’s voices urging them in song to dance “for their heart’s deepest wound,” No Mud told me, “and pray for healing.”

The sun was high behind us and burned the back of my neck. I drank guiltily from my water and watched my brother-in-law. His skin was badly burned, as if bruised by exposure and peeling from his forehead and shoulders. His lips were visibly cracked and bleeding, the loops of skin in his chest stretched and raw from being pulled taut repeatedly by the weight of his body as he danced away from the center pole to the full extent of his rope, sometimes leaning back, his points of flesh pulling skyward as he sunk into the pain.

A breeze occasionally wafted smoke by, giving the air a burnt sweetness. Anyone entering the inner portion of the lodge received the attention of an elderly woman holding a bundle of smoking sage, which she would pass over and around the individual’s body in a motion that reminded me of an airport security guard scanning someone with a handheld metal detector, which she performed with similar practical efficiency. I followed No Mud’s gaze to a line of women approaching the lodge. Each stood before the elderly woman as she drew the smoke over their heads with a cupped hand and

under each of their feet, indicating when she was finished with a hand extended in the direction of their next steps toward the long-haired elder wearing latex gloves.

“The women will make flesh offerings,” No Mud said to me leaning closer but not turning his head. Then looking at me askance and patting his stumps he said, “I already made mine,” managing an upside-down grin. His eyes returned to the elder who was pushing the root of a feather through the incisions he had made in a woman’s shoulder. “That’s my sister,” he said, “the tall, pretty one.” She waited her turn behind two other women. I remembered her measured smile and feeling politely tolerated. The elder held both ends of the feather and made a quick jerking motion breaking the loop of skin holding it in place. “I made her a promise,” No Mud continued. “I’m here to honor that promise.”

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The Eagle Dancers laid in the cool grass under the first stars blinking into sight. A drumless song was being sung almost like a lullaby by two elderly men, both with long braided hair and wearing pearl-snap western shirts. No Mud invited me to eat with him. We filed through the tent and filled small bowls with elk heart stew and a piece of fry bread. Crickets seemed to sigh with relief in the cool stillness as we made our way across the matted grass of the field turned parking lot. I lowered my tailgate like a table and waited for No Mud to finish before asking him what had been bothering me ever since I decided to come to the Sun Dance. He laughed to himself and told me other tribes have made declarations of war against non-Native participation in their Sun Dances, calling it a desecration of their sacred ceremony. “Some people don’t think your brother should be here,” he told me plainly, “or you.” Feeling the blood run from my face I asked him what he thought about it.

He looked away past the lodge up a darkening hillside, tilted

his head back slightly and spoke from a different place, “My grandfather says some people have blind sorrow, and they abuse us with it. They make themselves feel better by honoring us like ghosts. But they honor their own guilt.” Then leveling his eyes after considering this he continued, “Sometimes I wish I was a ghost.” He was quiet again and seemed to be listening to the men singing, who could be heard faintly. “If people tell you what you are for long enough then that’s what you can become in your own mind if you’re not careful…. But I think your brother has a good heart. Maybe he wants to assimilate to our ways for the sins of his people. *Your* people.” He laughed again, hitting my leg with the back of his hand. “Maybe it’s a sin for my people to let him think he can.”

Late in the sun of the final day the singers struck the drum with a tempered fury and dug for their most naked voices. The long-haired elder approached my brother-in-law, standing as if in a lucid dream, and removed the tether-loops from the antler ends letting the rope swing back to the center tree as he pulled out his scalpel and stepped around to face his back. Of the same size and depth as the chest incisions he calmly made six, three down the right, three down the left side of his back, pushing then the sharpened antler tips through each and attaching to them the six split ends of another rope which hung slack like a tail on the ground behind him.

A man from the far side of the lodge labored slowly toward them, his fists around a rope at his chest and slung over his shoulder pulling behind him six horned buffalo skulls linked and dragging the well-danced ground by their teeth, dust rising around them in the dry heat. This man collected the rope from the ground and tied them together so the chain of skulls lay only a few feet behind my brother-in-law. A third man draped a buffalo hide over his shoulders like a blanket and gave him a tall staff.

His first attempt to move forward summoned a kind of

impossible acceptance to his eyes as the rope pulled taut and he planted the end of the staff, clutching it with both hands and leveraged himself forward, each step holding that acceptance as if too close to a flame. Sharp, deliberate breaths left his mouth as he pulled the skulls around the center tree, eyes cast to the ground, blood staining the white of his cloth and running in thin streams down the backs of his legs. The singers sent their drum sticks into the stretched hide as if to drive it into the ground and the high, clean voice of a young child sprang from among them singing with un-lived years. I heard the murmuring pleasure of proud parents.

My brother-in-law made his way around the inner lodge and soon he was near me and he lifted his eyes from the ground as he approached and held mine as if to pull himself closer. I shuddered to be recognized and though I wished to shield my heart from the piercing eyes I imagined all around me I could not. Righting himself before me, seeing me from some burning emptiness, he extended the staff to touch my shoulder, and spoke his only words in four days as if speaking them made our bodies present and visible again. Standing next to No Mud, who did not so much as shift his weight, my skin flushed to be so spectacularly recognized.

As the skulls were drug out of the inner lodge my brother-in-law was reattached to the center tree. Before the pounding of my heart could subside I was asked to participate in a final ceremony where a sacred pipe would be passed between anyone with a prayer before being given to an Eagle Dancer that he might finish his dance with those prayers in his guard. No Mud urged me to do it.

The elderly woman drew sage smoke over my head and under my feet and I again tried and failed to shield my heart. We lined facing one another as the lit pipe was passed down the line alternately, each individual placing it to their lips briefly and inhaling. At the mouth of the line where the pipe would be handed to a dancer, my brother-in-law stood waiting.

The final dance is a rite by which each dancer prepares their heart to break free from their rope by moving methodically, prayerfully into the center tree then back, gathering the strength and resolve needed to honor their sacrifice before sprinting backwards from the tree with enough force to break the loops of flesh, as foreshadowed by the women's offerings. Each dancer in their own time did this, the sound of their separation a visceral snap in the dry air.

As the pipe-bearer, he went last. With it cradled in his arm he moved in toward the tree, his bloody legs tensing then gaining speed until meeting the full purchase of his rope. But instead of breaking free, his body bucked forward, sending its extended length past parallel with the ground and six feet above it then down on his chest with a dusty thud. Returning to his feet and immediately back to the center tree he danced without noticing half of the pipe lay broken behind him. A second time running back and he met the end of his rope as if being shot in the shoulder, one loop breaking sending that half of his body in a violent twist hinged off the other. On his third attempt, he broke free and stood panting for a moment before looking finally at the pipe.

His eyes searched back to where he had first impacted the ground. Kneeling there as if to make himself as small as possible he retrieved the other half. I looked at No Mud and knew nothing would be said. The collective silence was static like that of dry lightning and followed me back down the dusty two-track onto the highway, through the tall-grass prairies along the Yellowstone River, into the low sun.

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We all crawled naked into the lodge, No Mud using his fists like feet, the rest of us on our hands and knees, shoulders and thighs pressing together as we formed a tight circle inside. The elder shoveled stones from the fire outside and placed them in the pit between us. Once full he crawled in and

closed the flap behind him, sealing the lodge in darkness. At his side was a pile of beargrass bundles which he passed around one-by-one. “It opens your pores,” my brother-in-law whispered as he handed me one. Into a bucket of water at his side the elder dipped a cup and poured it over the rocks which hissed and steamed and he began to sing.

The heat was instantly unbearable, the vapor burning the back of my throat, searing my skin. I clinched my eyes shut and rocked back and forth begging myself to endure it. Everyone sang, their voices moving through my head with a submerged, burning singularity and I felt myself sinking into the ground. They soon began using the beargrass like whips over their legs, stomachs, shoulders and backs. I bent to the dirt in search of cooler air. Finding none I sat up desperate for breath. I gripped the beargrass and whipped my face reflexively then my chest and shoulders. I whipped my back repeatedly as if the thin clean sting of it might drive the deeper burning away. This went on until it seemed there was no time nor space and I was certain my muscle shone exposed beneath the skin.

The singing eventually ceased and the flap was peeled open, flooding the lodge with light and cool air. Relieved and suddenly proud, I watched for the men near the entrance to begin crawling out. But they remained seated with their eyes closed, inhaling sharply through their nostrils then letting the air out slowly, silently. No Mud clutched the beargrass between his legs. His chest rose and fell, glistening, spotted with the scars of many Sun Dances. I looked to the entrance and saw the elder watching me. He turned, reached up behind him and pulled the flap closed, sealing the lodge in darkness. There was only breathing until my skin became warm with it. I heard the cup emerge from the bucket and the thin, seething hiss of the stones.

New Fiction by John M. McNamara: “The Mayor of West Callahan Creek”

A bare bulb in a hooded fixture illuminated the sign. Fog obscured the wooden placard, and as Joseph neared it, the black lettering seemed to recede into the white plywood. It read:

WEST CALLAHAN CREEK
POPULATION 1,187
EST. 1866
CITY LIMITS
VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED

Prosecuted for what? Joseph Hunter walked his bicycle along the highway shoulder; the rear axle ticked off his progress like a metronome, tires crunched on the gravel. He paused and stared across the embankment at the billboard, and then chuckled.

The ashen fog had intensified since Joseph battled the shadows earlier that afternoon, enshrouding him more thoroughly than the day before, clouding his concentration and fuzzing his perceptions. The attack came as suddenly as an ambush. He’d developed an instinct for anticipating the murkiness, but it had descended upon him with viciousness soon after he crested the tallest of the hills on Highway 22, which paralleled the Loup River. He had pedaled off the road and kicked down the bike’s stand, then squatted and caught his breath. Under an overcast and featureless sky, he rolled onto his back and locked his hands behind his head. Then the choking shadows,

their edges indistinct, (they lacked clarity, which he assumed meant he lacked it as well), assaulted in full force. His chest constricted and the panic rippled; the sensation felt like his organs were being drawn through seams in his skin. Deliberate breathing, measured and slow. Fingertips pressed firmly against the temples in circular rotation, eyelids lowered while his thoughts focused upon past recoveries.

Paul Vogler, Lane Near A Small Town, 1864.

No one had agreed with his decision to undertake this journey, not parents, therapist, or friends. To a person they fretted about the solitude, about his coping mechanisms, about tendencies they dared not name. His therapist warned about the risks of self-diagnosis, the danger of assuming Joseph knew what was best for Joseph. It’s the brain telling the brain how to fix the brain, she’d said. It’s unreliable.

He opened his eyes and glanced around, assessing the location for possible campsites. He made out a barely visible fence line beyond the sign, rows of barbed wire on wooden posts, and continued rolling his bicycle slowly, keeping to the edge of the highway in the limited visibility, fearful that in the fog a vehicle would encounter him with no time to react, to swerve and avoid striking him. He'd witnessed IEDs heave men and metal skyward in sooty, sandy-brown plumes, and believed the mockery of a collision on an American roadside might prove more than he could process. In the distance he spied spires of evenly-spaced lights vanishing up into the fog, each encircled by a woolly halo. Silos, he realized, like so many he'd encountered in towns across the prairie. They sharpened in definition as he neared the gated entrance to the co-op. Farther down the road he saw a dome of diffused light.

As he approached, its structure materialized: a Gas'n'Go with two pumps and a manual car wash bay. A widow sign advertised cold beer.

A hundred yards or so beyond the store, Joseph crossed a bridge with a low, steel railing, peered down at the slow-moving water, and imagined it must be the creek that offered the town its name. On the other side of the bridge, the gravel edge gave way to asphalt. The entrance to a parking lot; a single pinkish bulb cast an aura on the space. Joseph read the redwood sign with mustard-colored, inset lettering: West Callahan Creek Park. Below the lamp, a path led away from the empty parking lot; Joseph wheeled his bicycle and the small trailer in which he towed his camping supplies past the circle of light, along that dark path, navigating more by intuition than sight. He stopped, retrieved a flashlight from a pouch on the trailer, and switched it on. The fog refracted the beam into a ball of hazy illumination, affording little visibility of his surroundings, but he did discern a curtain of drooping tree branches a short distance from the path. Willows. They favored stream and creek banks, he knew; he switched off the

flashlight and steered his bicycle toward them.

Joseph managed to pitch the tent in the foggy twilight (the mechanics had become rote during the two weeks of his trip), and when he'd spread the foam camping mat and unrolled his bag, he lay quietly on his back and listened to the environmental sounds: a sluggish hint of water, feathery wisps of the willow branches chafing when a breeze rippled, and (undulating along the creek like a current), the metallic clatter of a hog feeder. He dined on dried fruit, a handful of mixed nuts, two strips of beef jerky, and a packet of cookies, checked his cell phone for messages, surprised when he saw three bars in the upper corner (it seemed West Callahan Creek had a cell tower nearby), and then lifted the tent flap to go out and relieve himself. It was an evening routine he followed with rare deviation. (One afternoon when the western sky portended thunderstorms, he stayed in a no-name motel, lavishly soaking in a hot tub in the dark bathroom as the thunder bouldered, lightning illuminated the room, and the rain strafed the windows). He lay on his sleeping bag, reading of a North Vietnamese soldier who had survived that war on his Kindle for an hour before stripping to his underwear, rolling to his side and closing his eyes, wondering what dreams he might encounter, and how much of them he would recall in the morning.

—

Hello, someone called. Wake up in there.

Joseph stirred and rose to a sitting position as he realized someone stood outside the tent.

Hey. Open up.

Joseph said he was awake and slid into his jeans, then unzipped the tent and crawled out into bright sunlight. The fog had disappeared and as he stood, he glanced quickly at the topography of the park: flat ground, the willows trees he had

discerned the previous evening lining the bank of the narrow creek.

This isn’t a camping area.

Joseph shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at the sheriff’s deputy who had retreated a step or two from the tent entrance.

Sorry. Last night in the fog, I couldn’t make out much and I needed somewhere to sleep.

Well, it’s a violation. I’m going to have to take you into town. Judge will probably fine you. Let’s go.

The sheriff removed handcuffs from his equipment belt and gestured for Joseph to turn around.

Are you serious? He couldn’t read the man’s eyes behind his sunglasses, to determine if his tactic was to scare Joseph into quickly moving on, not lingering in the town.

Dead serious. Turn around.

Joseph stepped toward the man, who gripped his wrist and sefficiently around. The sheriff affixed restraints to his wrist, gripped his elbow and guided him toward the path.

What about my stuff?

We’ll collect it for you.

During the short drive, while the deputy radioed in that he had a prisoner in custody, Joseph tamped down anger and worried about a rise of the shadows. The patrol car, with emergency lights flashing and siren keening, circled a three-story, red brick courthouse, situated in a town square ringed by storefronts. The deputy completed a loop of the building before steering the car to the rear of the structure. He parked beside a set of concrete steps leading to an iron door.

He opened the rear door and rested a hand on Joseph’s head, as he had when he placed him in the back seat at the park. Up the steps, he indicated. His tone, calm, without inflection.

The heavy door opened onto a small holding area with a polished wooden floor; another deputy behind a half wall, the upper section caged with chain link fencing, except for a small slotted opening on the countertop.

Vagrancy. The arresting deputy nodded to his counterpart, who smirked as he reached under the counter. A loud buzz sounded and he steered Joseph through another door, into a windowless, high-ceilinged corridor; creamy globes Joseph associated with school rooms hung from the ceiling.

Is this really necessary? Joseph loathed the plaintive quality of his own voice, as though he’d galvanized the words with solicitousness.

You can ask the judge.

At the end of the corridor, the deputy turned a polished brass handle and ushered Joseph across the threshold, into a courtroom filled with people, who rose almost in unison and began applauding. He turned his head to the right, where a woman wearing black robes rose from her chair behind the elevated judge’s bench, and with a wooden gavel in her hand, motioned for the deputy to bring Joseph to the area directly before the bench. She extended her arms and patted the air a few times, urging the people in the gallery to sit and grow quiet.

What is your name? Her voice startled Joseph, her tone officious but her smile playful.

Joseph Hunter.

The deputy gripped his wrists and unlocked the handcuffs. Joseph swiveled his head and studied the people in the wooden

rows behind him. Everyone smiling, a few nodding and waving to him. His imagination flashed visions of horror movies through his mind, of human sacrifice cults and inbred cannibal creatures, and then he turned back to the judge, asking what the hell was going on.

You've been found guilty of violating our municipal code, Joseph Hunter. Do you have anything to say before I pass sentence?

Twittering and laughter from the crowd.

What is happening here? Are you kidding me? He rubbed his wrists where the handcuffs had bound him.

I'm quite serious. The judge leaned across the bench and aimed the gavel at Joseph. You do have a choice how you serve your sentence. Three days in jail. She paused and her eyes glinted as she surveyed the rows of people behind Joseph. Or you can serve as the honorary mayor of our town for this weekend's sesquicentennial celebration.

The entire gallery erupted once again in applause as the deputy clapped Joseph on his back, leaned in and whispered an apology for the cuffs.

Personally, the judge said, I recommend you accept our offer as mayor.

Joseph stood dumbfounded as people streamed out of the wooden seats, entered the area beyond the counsel tables, and crowded around him in front of the judge's bench.

He wanted to ask again if the judge was serious, but within the new context of the celebrity she had asked to confer on him.

Quite a bait and switch, he said to the deputy, who stood with his arms behind his back in a parade-rest position. The man, his eyes unmasked now, squinted as a smile enveloped his face.

We like a little theater, he replied.

A balding man gripped Joseph’s hand, pumping it as he introduced himself as the office holder Joseph would supplant for the two-day celebration of the town’s one-hundred-fiftieth celebration.

Ben Hampton. Happy to relinquish my duties and responsibilities, young man. Welcome to West Callahan Creek.

The judge banged her gavel several times, calling for quiet. The prisoner hasn’t chosen his sentence yet. What do you say, Joseph Hunter?

Joseph wagged his head, glanced around at the folks in the courtroom, and then looked up at the judge. That’s *Mayor* Joseph Hunter, your honor.

More laughter and applause, as Ben Hampton led Joseph out of the courtroom, trailed by townspeople. Let’s get you settled at the hotel. It’s really more of a bed and breakfast. Only four rooms, but they’re clean and comfy. You’ll like it there.

How did you choose me? Joseph followed Ben Hampton outside the courthouse, down a wide set of stone stairs, and onto the green expanse of the tree-lined lawn.

We left it up to the sheriff. The town did the same for its centennial and it seemed like a fine gesture for this anniversary. You kind of surprised us, though. We thought he’d nab a speeder where the limit falls from fifty-five down to twenty-five. The twenty-five-mile-an-hour sign *might* be blocked by a low-hanging tree limb. He chuckled. But finding you was good fortune. I hope all the festivities won’t inconvenience you unduly.

Gale Stockwell, Parkville, Main Street, 1933.

They arrived at a stone walkway in front of a two-story Victorian, crowned by a cupola with a pheasant weather vane, bedecked with gingerbread trim, trellises along the wrap-around porch laced with blooming vines; two women Joseph assumed were mother and daughter stood on the porch, smiling as he and Ben Hampton climbed the steps.

Good morning, mayor, the older woman said, looking directly at Joseph. Her gravelly voice reminded Joseph of the sound of his tires on the roadway edge in the fog. Your room is ready and I've laid out your things. She wore a wrap-around denim skirt and a pale blue cotton blouse.

Joseph paused until he felt a hand on the small of his back. He glanced sideways at Ben Hampton, who arched his eyebrows, nodded.

The younger woman, light brown hair pulled back in a long braid, wore black shorts and a sleeveless blouse, flesh-colored, pale against her tanned arms. She held open the screened door and Joseph entered the house. In the foyer stood a round oak table, covered in a lace cloth, upon which rested a vase of black-eyed-susans. To his right he saw a sitting room, with several upholstered wingback chairs, a red brick fireplace, and a settee with carved wood legs. To the left a dining room with a long table that he surmised cold easily sit twelve people.

I'm Sally Hutchins and this is my daughter Peggy.

He noted resemblances between the two women: blue-gray eyes, brown hair (worn longer by Peggy than her mother, and with straw-colored highlights), the square shape of the hands.

Here's your room key. It's up the stairs, last one on the left, with a view of the gardens out back. Why don't you take some time to freshen up and I'll come get you around noon for lunch?

Joseph thanked her, mounted the staircase, and turned left along a corridor papered with a pattern of alternating rose and lavender stripes. The door to his room hung open and as he entered he saw his clothing laid out on the canopied bed. In the adjacent bathroom, his sparse toiletries had been arranged on the black granite vanity. The floor was covered with white, octagonal tiles, the walls with white subway tiles; he twisted the taps of the claw foot tub and tugged the pull-chain handle of the old-fashioned commode; the water tank elevated above the bowl whooshed, and Joseph chuckled. He wondered how he could have achieved a greater contrast between the claustrophobic fog of the previous evening and the expansiveness of the morning's surprising revelations.

As he had the night of the thunderstorm, Joseph drew a hot bath and lay with a wet washcloth over his eyes, recalling

what have given him the impetus to begin this trip: sessions with the therapist, isolating himself in his parent's house, watching marathon reruns of *Law & Order* and its spinoffs, eventually switching off the television because he needed no reminders of how horrible people could be to one another. Deciding to act according to his nature as a fighter, to learn to cope with the shadows without assistance, but not pushing himself to exhaustion. Going the distance, but not at a sprint. Trimming away life's excess to reveal a core, essential truth about himself.

The darkness imposed by the washcloth reminded him of the previous day's fog, how at twilight it had enshrouded him in a gray chrysalis. Something his father had expressed as Joseph left: hopefulness that his quest would be successful. He may not have fully understood his son's need for this journey, but he identified with it as a mission. He had served in Vietnam. His father's father had served in the second world war. Joseph associated singular smells with each man: cigarette smoke with his grandfather, Lava soap with his father. As a child, Joseph watched TV shows with his father about war: *Combat*, *Twelve O'clock High*, *Hogan's Heroes*. When he asked why there no shows about Vietnam, his father said they didn't make TV shows about wars that were lost.

As he dried himself with the plush bath towel, Joseph wondered: if he had a son, what smell would the boy associate with him?

Through the window overlooking the back yard, he watched Peggy clipping herbs from a raised-bed garden. Her braid slipped over her shoulder and she flipped it back; as she moved down the row of plants, it continued to slide over her shoulder and she continued to flip it away from her work. Retaking the same ground again and again, he observed.

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When he sat at the dining room table with Sally and Peggy Hutchins and saw the size of the grilled pork chop on his plate (an inch-and-a-half thick, stuffed with a sage dressing), he nearly chuckled. After the meal, Ben Hamilton arrived with a garment bag: khaki slacks, white Oxford shirt, red tie, and Navy blue blazer. We guessed your size, he said. Weren't sure if you were traveling with dress-up clothes. Why don't you change and then I'll take you on a tour of the town? Introduce you to some of the people who'll be attending the dinner tonight at the lodge.

Joseph nodded, slinging the garment bag over his arm and retreating to his room. He had urged Sally and Peggy Hutchins to talk about themselves during lunch. People enjoyed that, he knew, and regardless of whether they blared like a horn or whispered secrets, it kept them from asking questions of him.

The clothes fit: not tight but also not loose enough to make him appear clownish. When he descended the stairs to the foyer, Ben Hamilton offered a thumbs-up. Sally Hutchins brushed an imaginary fleck of lint from his shoulder and bestowed a proprietary smile.

The two of them walked back toward the town square, which Joseph noticed had been transformed: patriotic bunting draped from building fronts, lamp posts, and second-story windows; a grandstand in front of the courthouse; and a banner stretched across the street proclaiming the celebration of the town's founding in 1866. He and Ben Hamilton greeted folks who extended their hands, welcoming and congratulating Joseph. Most of the people on the street fit a curious demographic, old people and teens; there was hardly anyone Joseph's age and he imagined them fleeing the town for more exciting settings as soon as they reached the age of mobility.

They circled the town square. The barber, pointing a finger at the hair falling onto Joseph's collar, offered a free trim, which Joseph declined. At a florist shop, a woman pinned a red

carnation in the buttonhole of the blazer lapel. Hand-crafted caramel was presented at a candy store. Every stop brought excessive yet heartfelt generosity and hospitality. He developed a soreness in his neck from the frequent nodding and tension in his jaw from the repeated grinning. But his anxiety of meeting new and unfamiliar people remained submerged as Ben Hamilton introduced person after person, names that floated away like windblown pollen, faces that morphed into a single countenance of genial salutation.

Fear of the shadows often menaced more frighteningly than the shadows themselves; he'd described the fear to the therapist as a light gray hint of the ebony darkness. Being enveloped by them was the least amniotic feeling he could imagine. When he told her he was unsure how to live, she counseled that PTSD was not a weakness.

Acknowledge it. Understand what it is, she'd said, and you'll learn to control and handle it.

But it had not been in his nature to wait, so he embarked on the trip, and in a paradoxical twist, conceded that patience was one of the trip's most constructive lessons.

Many of the people they encountered expressed hope that Joseph was not too inconvenienced by his honorary incarceration, to which he responded that all he was losing was time. Thoughts of loss had consumed him when he returned from the army, but one stood out above the others: loss of feeling that his childhood home was home. The absence of people his age in the town and his urge to leave home reminded him of an old song lyric: *How you gonna keep'em down on the farm, after they've seen Paree*.

For Joseph it was the shadows; for the town's youth it was the escape of the gritty sameness of their lives. Had any of them chosen the army, he wondered? And would they come to regret their decisions? The therapist told him regret was punishment

levied by an internal authority. Self-imposed penance, she said. Forgiveness doesn't always come at a cost.

As they approached the bed and breakfast, Ben Hamilton laid out the schedule for the celebrations: a dinner that night at the lodge, a parade the following day (during which Joseph would serve as the Marshall), and then a cookout at the park and fireworks.

Sally and Peggy will drive you to the lodge tonight. I'll see you then, he said, and then walked away, a man with purpose in his stride.

Instead of mounting the steps to the porch, Joseph followed a flagstone path around the house to the garden in which he'd seen Peggy Hutchins clipping herbs. In a gazebo at the rear of the yard, he removed his blazer, reclined on a padded chaise, and closed his eyes, birdsong in the trees surrounding the yard serenading him. He had encountered so many birds on the trip and lamented not having brought a field guide to help identify them. One vestige of life in the army: the ability to fall asleep anywhere, anytime, under nearly any conditions.

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The lodge hall struck Joseph as a haphazard fusion of a high school cafeteria and a roadhouse bar. It was cluttered with folding tables and chairs. Large, metal-framed windows overlooked the gravel parking lot on one side, and on the other a corn field. Framed photos hung on the wall of stiff men in dark suits, aligned in stiffer rows in front of the building. Guided to a raised dais, Joseph passed folks he'd met that afternoon, who greeted him with the intimacy of an old friend. The closeness of the space and the volume of people (more than a hundred, he estimated), sparked worry that the shadows would harass him. He envisioned them reaching out from the walls to harass him; a fear of reacting to them in the environment that engendered them often doubled the

anxiety. A nagging feature of fear: it rarely emerged in a pragmatic location. Of course, what sort of location would that be, Joseph mused.

Remarks followed dinner. Ben Hamilton. The judge who had sentenced him and other town officials, but the keynote address was delivered by Selma Fenstrom, introduced as the town's unofficial historian, a retired teacher and part-time librarian.

Joseph Patrick Callahan, veteran of the civil war, served in the 18th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, fought in several notable battles: Second Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and Petersburg, where he sustained a bullet wound to his lower left leg, and as a result, he walked with a slight limp for the remainder of his life. Achieved the rank of sergeant. Returned to his home in Bristol after the war, but soon embarked west, by train to Omaha, and then, burdened with the tools and trappings of a farmer in the bed of a buckboard, followed the Platte River, turning north where it was joined by the Loup River and diverting then again along a then-unnamed creek. He paused one night to camp and, according to his journal, (the prized possession of the West Callahan Creek Library collection), determined he'd put enough distance between himself and Massachusetts to forget his home and memories of the war.

Joseph Callahan quickly learned he possessed no aptitude for farming and after two disappointing seasons turned instead to shop keeping, establishing and managing a general store for neighboring farmers and ranchers. The town of West Callahan Creek grew around the store, (Selma Fenstrom noted that the official date of incorporation differed from the date of Callahan's arrival on this stretch of prairie, as detailed in his journal; they preferred the latter for purposes of marking anniversaries).

She spoke of Callahan's service as the town's first mayor, a

thirteen-year tenure, his reluctance to observe the tenth anniversary of the surrender of Lee at Appomattox, his contrary attitude toward the neighboring Pawnee, Ponca, and Arapaho, (contrary to that of other settlers, Callahan advocated peaceful relations), and how he riled many townspeople by banning the wearing of firearms within the town boundaries. But he was overall a popular, if at times moody, citizen and public servant. Selma Fenstrom continued with her biography of Callahan, but Joseph latched onto the single word: *moody*. Was there within his journal a more detailed account of the cause of his moodiness? Sipping from his water, Joseph scanned the crowded room: Many of the attendees nodded at her recollections about the town's growth, its sons who had served in both world wars, Korea, and Vietnam. No mention of any active duty service members or casualties from Afghanistan or Iraq, and Joseph hoped the town's youth had wised up to the nationalistic rhetoric of army recruiters.

One hundred and fifty years on this prairie we call home, Sarah Fenstrom said, born of a wanderlust by a man from Massachusetts who answered the call of his country to preserve the union.

Joseph side-glanced at her as she neared her conclusion. A birdlike woman, with closely-cropped graying hair, wire-rimmed round glasses that reminded him of photos of John Lennon. Her voice belied her slight frame. Strong and confident. The commanding projection of a teacher accustomed to corralling fidgeting children.

In his final journal entries, Callahan reflected on his life, and logged his life's greatest regret: he never married, never fathered any daughters or sons, remained disheartened within his pride that the town bearing his name would never be home to any descendants. But, Selma Fenstrom concluded, we are all the children of our founding father, Joseph Patrick Callahan.

The crowd applauded as she shuffled her pages and nodded once,

then twice, and waved a hand at the audience, returning to her seat on the end of the dais opposite from Joseph. Ben Hamilton rose to the microphone, as Joseph stared at Selma Fenstrom, determined to speak with her at the conclusion of the dinner. Reminding everyone that during the town's centennial, an honorary mayor had been drafted to oversee the celebrations, Ben Hamilton indicated Joseph with an extended arm, his palm up, gesturing for him to stand. Joseph complied, facing the room, grinning, bobbing his head, glancing at Selma Fenstrom, whom he discovered had been studying him in profile, squinting through her eyeglasses, smiling in a manner that made him feel she recognized in him something he didn't wish to reveal.

Mayor Joseph Hunter, would you care to say a few words?

Ben Hamilton's request startled Joseph, and he glared at the man for a moment as applause rippled through the room and people stood, chanting *Speech! Speech!*

Ben Hamilton beckoned him with a wave of his arm and stepped from the microphone.

Refusing was an untenable position, so Joseph stood, walked to the tabletop lectern, gripping it with both hands, and surveyed the crowded room as a tightening in his sternum warned that the shadows lurked patiently on the periphery of the room, awaiting the most inopportune moment to cloak him in debilitating fear and anxiety. But they remained at a distance, and he wondered if the good nature and the good will of the assembled people kept them at bay.

Thank you all, he said, hopeful his amplified voice repelled the shadows, even if temporarily. It's an honor to be your honor.

Laughter coursed through the room. Joseph wondered if cheerfulness and good spirits could also inhibit his shadows.

I've been given every hospitality. I'm very grateful and

looking forward to tomorrow’s festivities. Thank you all. He waved an arm above his head in a sweeping arc and stepped back from the lectern, nodding and smiling like a campaigning politician, and then returned to his seat. He glanced quickly at Selma Fenstrom; she stared at him with a close-lipped grin and nodded at him as she sluggishly blinked.

As Ben Hamilton announced an official end to the evening, Joseph side-stepped behind those seated on the dais until he stood beside Selma Fenstrom’s chair.

I’d like to hear more about Joseph Callahan, he said. If you have some time.

The woman’s eyes softened as she rose from her chair. Why don’t I meet you at Sally’s and we can talk there?

Joseph nodded. Thank you.

—

Selma Fenstrom’s late husband, a Marine veteran of the Korean War, exhibited symptoms of PTSD, although the condition then was called combat exhaustion or fatigue. His spells, she called them, never turned violent, but her research into the life of the town’s founder uncovered what she called common singularities.

It’s a contradiction in terms, I know, but too many quirks in their character aligned like fence posts.

Callahan’s journal alternated between brief and lengthy discourses. The short entries recorded mundane, day-to-day goings-on, notes about the weather (an unremitting concern in an agricultural community). But the longer entries revealed the man.

Bared his soul, she said. It was tortured at times by recollections of the war. He wasn’t alone in that out here on the prairie. Many veterans from both sides went west after the

war. Seeking what they couldn’t find any more at home.

Callahan wrote that he knew when to stop his travels because it was in his nature to recognize it.

As I suppose you’ll know as well. It’ll be in your nature to know. Selma Fenstrom sat on the settee in the sitting room, cradling a glass of bourbon in both hands. Sally Hutchins had escorted them to the room, returned with the bottle and glasses, and then withdrawn as though she and Selma Fenstrom had choreographed the scene.

You mentioned he had a reputation for being moody. Joseph traced the rim of his glass with the tip of a forefinger.

Those were other people’s observations. Nothing too erratic. He mentioned trying to control his spells. That’s what he called them. He described how his conscience haunted him, like a specter, often at night, and at other, inopportune times.

Joseph chuckled at the mention of inconvenient timing.

Like yours, right? Selma Fenstrom lifted the bourbon to her lips and gazed at Joseph over the rim of the glass.

Sconces on either side of the fireplace and a floor lamp behind the settee illuminated the room in a golden glow, casting shadows in a variety of geometric forms against the walls, papered in a pattern of tiny roses among giant peony blooms. No good time for them, Joseph said. Did Callahan mention how he coped with his spells?

No. Only that they occurred. But he wrote about how coming west affected them. Founding this town gave him a new flag under which to fight. That’s a direct quote. An allusion to his war experiences, I’m sure.

A new flag. I like that, Joseph said.

A flag that represented him, not a nation at war. That’s what

I want to believe. And that Joseph Patrick Callahan founded this town as a form of occupational therapy, long before the benefits of such an approach were even anticipated. He never called his spells demons. He understood what haunted him. Not a single incident but the cumulative experiences of his wartime years. We're a curious lot, you know, people. We strive to isolate a problem's cause, then fix it.

One fell swoop.

Exactly. Ridding the body of a parasite, but without destroying the host.

I've been questioning whether that's possible.

Oh, my boy. It's possible. Callahan wrote that toward the end of his life he felt like a husk, but he didn't have the resources available to you today. Ironically, he was surrounded by men who shared similar experiences; talking to them might have helped quell the spells. Selma Fenstrom laughed at her own rhyming phrase. He could have held a group therapy session in his general store. Wouldn't that have been a sight to set tongues wagging!

It would have done them a world of good.

I think that's exactly what Callahan sought. A world of good. Not of war. Not of destruction and death. Juts a world of good. And he tried to establish that here. His writings reveal his wishes in that regard.

He sounds like an interesting man.

He was. Like many public figures, we've mythologized him, sanded down his rough spots to fashion a presentable figure. But I've glimpsed into his soul, as trite as that sounds. He possessed the breadth of a prairie sky and the depth and of the deepest well. A fascinating man.

Do you think he ever achieved his redemption?

Fascinating question. In all his writing, I've never seen him use that term. Unlike a lot of the people at the time, he was not religious. But I suppose redemption was wrapped up in what he sought. What about you, Joseph Hunter. Do you seek redemption?

Not by that name. Maybe reconciliation.

Selma Fenstrom nodded, braced herself on the arm of the settee and rose. It's been a pleasure meeting you. She extended her arm and Joseph gripped her warm hand in his own. Trust your nature to help you recognize when it's your time to stop. She clasped Joseph's hand in hers as he walked her through the foyer to the door.

—

Seated in the grandstand in front of the court house, Joseph (wearing a blue sash with the word MARSHALL emblazoned in gold satin letters) applauded bands, floats bedecked in crepe-paper flowers and tugged by tractors, a convoy of fire trucks from neighboring towns, a procession of antique automobiles restored to pristine condition, and a bearded man in the uniform of a Union sergeant, riding a black horse and waving a sword at the crowds lining the streets that enclosed the square. Trailing the Callahan figure in a ragged picket line, half a dozen other men in Union garb paused every few yards and fired off a volley from their antique rifles. Joseph winced at the first report, but with repetition grew more confident the gunfire would not trigger the shadows.

Ferdinand Krumholtz, Dom Pedro II. von Brasilien, 1849.

He recalled his conversation with Selma Fenstrom, realizing

his predisposition to try and glean wisdom from her familiarity with Callahan. Tracing the name of his spells through the histories of war: shell shock, battle fatigue, stress response syndrome, PTSD. Even Job, the embodiment of patience, was said to have suffered mental disturbances from battle. Every person around him bore a smile and he imagined that later circumstances in their lives might enforce grimaces or expressions of sadness; nothing was permanent. But then, the grimaces and expressions of sadness held to impermanence as well. He remembered moments when he and his brothers rested, post-action, guzzling water, leaning their backs against walls, removing their helmets and shading their eyes beneath blinding, cloudless skies, and then regarded one another as similar smiles and then laughter erupted to rinse the amassed tension from the clustered squad members. The parade. Could it be his victory parade? The conquest of fear. The taming of the shadows.

At the cook-out in the park, Joseph wandered among the crowd, asking questions, listening to the answers, and revealing some of his story to those who asked about his life. Person after person thanked him for his service, to which he nodded and told them they were welcome. His father early in young Joseph's life had emphasized the importance of how to receive a compliment. It's a gift to the giver to acknowledge their thanks, he'd said. Tell them they're welcome and look them in the eye.

The fireworks that night drew a collective *oohing* and *aahing* approval of the gathered onlookers, and although Joseph flinched at the first noisy bursts, he soon relaxed on a grassy spot in the park, watching the display with what he could only define as a lightness in his heart, a sensation he wondered if Callahan had ever experienced in this town that bore his name. The deafening finale brought him and those around him to their feet in explosive clapping, and as the quiet night replaced the booming echoes, Joseph joined Sally

and Peggy Hutchins for the ride back to the bed and breakfast.

As they wished him good night and walked toward their rooms at the rear of the house, Joseph felt an urge to ask them to linger, to engage them in conversation, could envision night stretching into dawn, as it had sometimes in Iraq, as man after man talked, the subjects varied and unimportant, camaraderie being the unspoken objective.

In the morning, Joseph descended the stairs for breakfast, with Ben Hamilton, Sally and Peggy Hutchins. He had hoped to say good bye to Selma Fenstrom, but reasoned such a farewell might seem anticlimactic. She'd provided Joseph all the assistance she had to offer the night before. At the conclusion of the light meal, the mother and daughter flanked him as they descended the steps to his bicycle and trailer. At the curb beside the sheriff's squad car, the conjoined vehicles rested, cleaned and polished, the blue frame glinting in the morning sunlight.

As befits mayoral transport, the sheriff said, emerging from his car. I'm going to escort you to the town line.

Joseph grinned, gripping the hand of Ben Hamilton, looking him in the eye as the man thanked him for being such a good sport, accepted hugs from both Sally and Peggy Hutchins, and then mounted his bicycle and followed the sheriff's car, its emergency lights flashing, as it crept back toward the town square, where several people paused and waved at Joseph, wishing him good fortune and a safe journey. No one had gathered to see him off or welcome him back from Iraq. A few blocks from the square, the sheriff steered to the shoulder and turned off his lights. Joseph pulled astride the driver's window.

I know you're not a marine, the sheriff said, but *Semper Fi*.

Joseph eyed him and the sheriff chuckled.

First gulf war.

Thanks, Joseph said. For everything.

Our pleasure. Stay safe.

Watching the car complete a gravel-spitting U-turn and speed back toward town, the sheriff blasting the siren briefly as he waved his farewell, Joseph recalled Selma Fenstrom's confidence that his nature would allow him to recognize his destination, if not his destiny, that he would receive a signal that he finally knew himself. Shadows, he considered, might darken and diminish his vision, but they need not blind him.

New Poetry from JD Duff

Night Flash

You've been having nightmares again.
The cruel shaking of a body
resisting slumber.
Hands twitching,
chest jerking to beats
of unknown song,
playing over and over
like memories you sold at a tag sale,
buried on the Tuscarora trail,
dumped in a white room
at Bethesda Naval Hospital.

Jules Tavernier, Heart of a Volcano Under the Full Moon, 1888.

I awake to the moon beaming
unto a lonely bed,
find you out back where dreams
smear on a blurry canvas of recollection,
and ghosts rise from wooded corners of truth.

I climb under the poncho liner
that covered you through
countless peaks of ice
and frost, Persian sandstorms,
fighting holes where you used
the cloth to shield you from walls
of claylike dirt.
The June breeze dries the sweat
around your lips. I lift a rifle
from your chest, place it beyond
the reach of ready palms.
A single leaf rests
on your cheek.
Cicadas cry for their lost
as I hush your silence with a kiss.

The Homecoming

It rained for a week
after our mailman’s son
died in a roadside bomb
attack near Al Karmah.
The sky wept
as half-mast flags
blew gently
on the prairie’s haze.
Signs of well wishes
bowed in store windows,
bellowed from alters of diverse
domes of prayer,
rested in alms of flowers
and fried dough.
A Corps led procession,
thick with mourners,
crowded the lot
of the pearly
mountain church.
Bagpipes sang
for a Lance Corporal
draped in dress blues,
mother betrayed
by dark dismissals
of nightly pleas,
father wilting
to soft hymns
for his broken boy.
The lone sibling
stared at the casket,
wondered why he survived
the trashings of war
while his brother

lay in a box,
waiting for rifles
to speak his praise,
a dark tomb to welcome
another lost Marine.

Seal of God

Foxholes and submarines led you to farm life
where you graze the vast splendor of still land.
Crickets speak to the quiet hush of night
as an elusive sky captures secrets,
spits sins in large chunks of hail,
disrupting the tranquil flight of time.

Faith’s armor shoves you in church
where peace is offered between pews
and sounds of crossfire muffle
the graceful hum of atonement.

William Holman Hunt, Cornfield at Ewell, 1849.

You sneak home through cornfields;
stalks reek with bruised dents
of blistering flesh.
Wounded frogs leap past
thick tridents of reticent thought,
darkness dismantled by the crippled promise
of a swelling cherry dawn.

The euphonies of children
replace cancors of slivered screams
as the wind blows you
toward our kitchen, where we break bread
with an Amish farmer
and wait for God to heal us.

New Poetry from Yuan Changming

[anagrammed variations of the american dream]

A ram cairned me
In a crammed era [where]
Cameramen raid

A dire cameraman [or]
Arid cameramen
[Becoming]

A creamed airman [or]

A carmine dream
A minced ram ear

[a] maniac rearmed
As freedom turns into a dorm fee
Democracy to a car comedy, and
Human rights to harming huts

D.H. Friston, Scene from The Happy Land (The Illustrated London News, March 22, 1873)

[we have no more statesmen]

They have now become speech actors, working with
Eight classes of words and
Seven syntactic elements
Changing singulars to plurals

Passive into active, or otherwise

A whole set of rules

All as conventional

As idioms per se

Adding some new vocab every year

Their job is to make new sentences
Based on the same old grammar

New Poetry by Liam Corley

A VETERAN OBSERVES THE REPUBLIC AND REMEMBERS GINSBERG

Claes Moeyaert. *Sacrifice of Jeroboam*, 1641.

America, I’ve given you all, and now I’m less than one percent.

America, fourteen-point-six-seven-five years of service I can’t characterize
as other than honorable,
three hundred ninety-one days pounding dirt in other people’s countries,
and one hundred seventeen sleepless nights per annum in perpetuity,
September 11, 2017.

America, I’m willing to renegotiate our social contract. I

won’t complain about the clean bill of health
charged against me by the V.A., and you can stop involuntarily mobilizing memes of my demise
in support of indecent campaigns. America, believe me when I say
I’m not dead broke, I ain’t so straight, I’m not all white, and I don’t love hate.

America, when will you realize we are peopled with two-and-a-half times more
African Americans than veterans,
discounting three million souls in both tribes? Here I incorporate them all,
the ones *hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,* survivors whose lives matter,
because we both know the wary grief of looking at a uniform we paid for and wondering
whom the man beneath has sworn to protect and defend.

America, into this veteran poem I will take all the graduates of Columbine and Sandy Hook,
the ones who lived after having no answers for the warm muzzle of a gun, and their teachers,
especially the ones who ran toward shots. The hall of the American Legion
will overflow with such heroes, streaming like the blessed dead of Fort Hood and Chattanooga
across the Styx in Charon’s commandeered craft, the open door of welcome
forced, as always, by warriors still living.

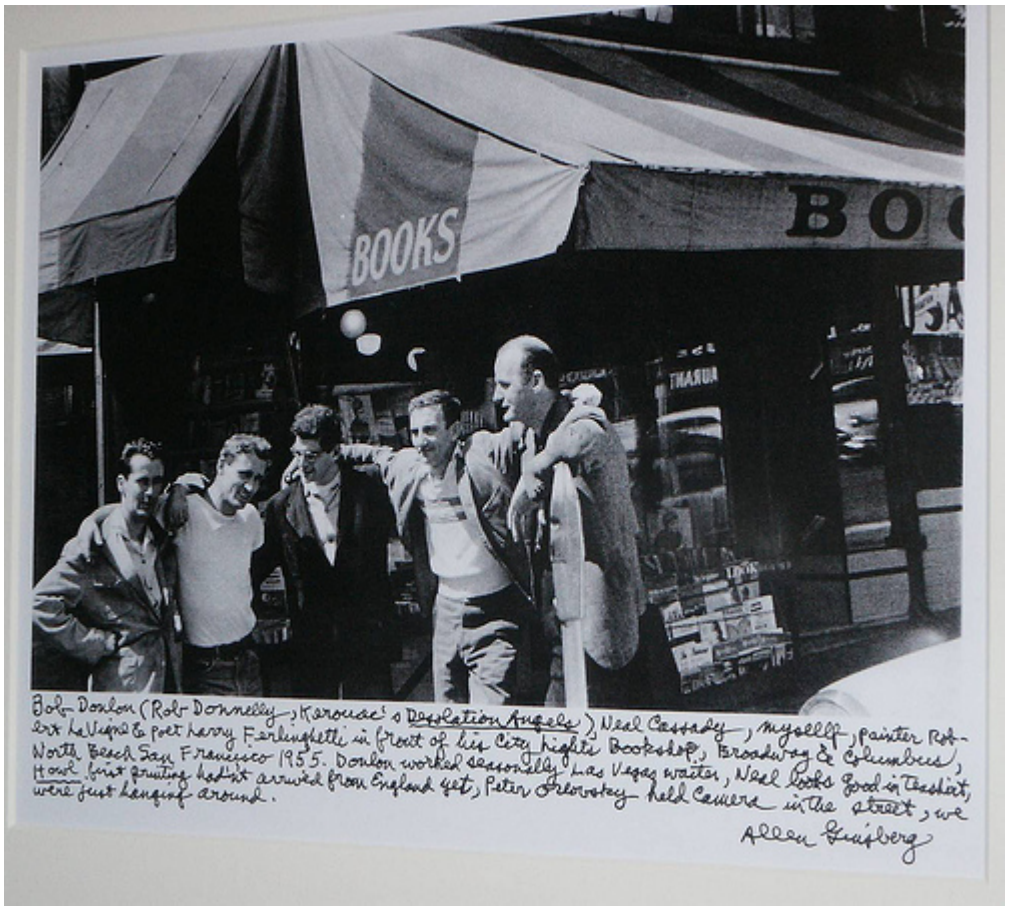
America, let’s rent a cherry picker to take down the F in the V.F.W. sign,
let *what is removed drop horribly in the pail.* Police will gather in their surplus riot gear
and nod in understanding fashion, their years of service trailing them like a sentence,
arming them with arcane questions of whether civilians we

protected yesterday will kill us today.
America, out of the sands of Kandahar and Ramadi, I go with them too.

Furthermore, America, in this election season, I go with righteous immigrants and refugees,
fellow sufferers of long journeys in inhumane transports that leave them in permanent pain.
O, my desperate ones, border-crossers of unwilling countries, you who pay taxes of sweat and fear,
you are not alien to me, or my thirty-five thousand brother and sister dreamers in green and khaki
fighting for something that isn't wholly ours in dangerous places where we simply do our jobs.

America, when will you give Cyber Purple Hearts to all who have had their lives taken
out of your senile, digital grip,
starting with the twenty-four million whose secrets you've let slip into China's voracious panda pocket?
We shall update and tweet ourselves feverish with the chant, "Uncle Sam is my Big Brother"
in protest of all those Xis and Putins and Snowdens and Kims and Transnational Criminal Elements stealing our binary essence.
I'm not joking, America: I foresee the day when every iPhone will be issued with a trauma kit,
every laptop with a liability release for unauthorized remote access.

O America, my love, my burial plot, all this I will put in a phantom poem,
my own republic, for you to receive, a sea bag of sights unseen
to tumble down the ramp of a decommissioned C-130,
this empty box,
this absent limb.



New Poetry by Lynn Houston

You Leave for Afghanistan

If I'm writing this, it means I can't sleep and that
the rain outside my window drops blindly in the dark.

The crops need it, the cashier told me earlier, ringing
me up for a pint of milk, making small talk, making change.

And now the tipped carton has marred the pages
on my too-small desk. I'm trying not to make too much of it—

this mess, the disasters my life and pages gather.

I’m trying to be kinder to myself, more forgiving.

Outside, a leopard moth lands on the screen, shudders
to dry its wings. One touch from my finger would strip

the powdered coating that allows it to fly in rain.
I wish it might have been so easy to keep you

from boarding the plane that took you to war.
In the predawn, my neighbors still asleep, I am the only one

to hear the garbage truck grind to a stop,
its brakes the sound of an animal braying.

The rain has stopped, too. I look over the smudged papers
on my desk. Nothing important has been lost.

When you come home safely to me in six months,
we will be able to say, *nothing important has been lost*.

You Send Very Little News

You don’t know all the time I’m killin’.
I watch it pass ‘til nothing’s left . . .
I let my memory carry on.
—Buffalo Clover, “15 Reasons”

I try to imagine where you live now, try to read beyond what operational security allows.

You say it’s dirty there and hot. There’s sand everywhere. You have a French press for coffee.

Here, I keep things green for you—lie in the fresh grass
with the dog until we no longer smell like walls,

make entire meals out of honey and peaches. I choose
fields in Connecticut that remind me of the farm,

stare up at the now goatless clouds, imagine that the distant
bird I see is the shape of the plane that will bring you home.

They Lie Who Don’t Admit Despair

I’m trying not to think about you,
but when this combine rocks and rolls,
it shakes my mind and shakes my body,
the way your leaving shook my soul.
—Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

I’ve had some dark moments
while you’ve been gone.
Mostly I’ve been okay, having
made up my bullheaded mind
to just get through it.
But last night you said
that in a few weeks you will
ask me to stop sending mail,
because you are that close
to coming home. And I felt
a lightness I haven’t known
since meeting you.
From that first day,
this absence weighed on us.
When you return, we will
be together for the first time
without the threat
of imminent departure.

I imagine you this morning
with warm flatbread, steaming coffee.
I imagine you smiling.
I’m smiling, too, listening
to the house creak.
Imagining you here.

You Call from the Airport to Say You Are Home

When we began, our hummingbird bodies
did a thousand anxious pirouettes midair,
dazzled and unfazed by the sour nectar
we had to drink at end of season.

You are back now, and we will do it
all again, but with sweetness.
All the beauty of bodies in love.

How generous is war
to give us two beginnings.

At the Harbor Lights Motel After You Return

The fish aren’t biting on Key Largo
the morning we spend together
after you return. You nap all day,
sheets spiraled like a carapace
around your torso and legs.

Next to you in bed, I touch your head,
stroke the hair you’ve grown long,
and ask what it was like over there.
But you pull the blankets higher
and turn away to face the wall.

Hours later, I call to you from the doorway
to show you a snapper on my line. You dress,
find me on the dock where we drink beer
as the sun slumps behind the palms.

You sleep through the night, and in the morning,
before you leave for a dive on a coral reef,
you tell me that turtles sleep like humans do—
you’ve seen them at night tucked into the nooks
of wrecks, heads withdrawn into shells;
you’ve seen their eyes blink open in the beam
of your dive light; you’ve even seen one wake
and swim away when a fish fin came too close.
They have nerve endings there, you tell me.
They can feel when something touches their shell.

When you return from the reef, I ask you
again how it was over there, and this time
you begin to tell me what you can.

The Persistence of Measurement

There’ll be a thousand miles between us
when I pass the border guard.
Is that thunder in the distance,
or just the breaking of my heart?
—Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

The morning he leaves me, my lover buries
a lamb—a runt who’d only lived a few days—
on a hill of the Tennessee farm where we met.

Does he think, as he digs the grave,
as he presses his face to the cold wool
to say goodbye, of the last time he caressed
my hair or pressed his body against mine?

Or are his thoughts already in Memphis, with her?

I wouldn’t know. I was not given the dignity
of a burial, just an email sent after he’d been drinking,
blaming me for asking too many questions, asking
too much of him, for failing to give him space.

In Connecticut, winter refuses to relent.
It is still the season of waiting.
I look out the window of the room
where I waited faithfully for half a year,
where I wrote him daily.
The sky is cruel: clouds still take the shape
of farm animals, and birds become the plane
that never brought him home to me.

Part of me will always be waiting
for the return of the man I met in summer,
before the deployment changed him.
But that man is thousands of miles away.
He will always be thousands of miles away.

New Fiction by Helen Benedict: WOLF SEASON

STORM

The wolves are restless this morning. Pacing the woods, huffing and murmuring. It’s not that they’re hungry; Rin fed them each four squirrels. No, it’s a clenching in the sky like a gathering fist. The wet heat pushing in on her temples.

Juney feels it, too, her head swaying, fingers splayed. She is sitting on the wooden floor of their kitchen, face raised, rocking and rocking in that way she has. Hair pale as a midday moon, eyes wide and white-blue.

“It smells sticky outside, Mommy. It smells wrong,” she says in her clear, direct voice, no hint of a whine. Soldiers don’t whine. And Juney is the daughter of soldiers.

“Nothing’s wrong, little bean. Maybe we’ll get a summer storm, that’s all. Come, eat.”

Juney is nine years old, the age of curiosity and delight before self-doubt clouds the soul. Fine hair in a braid to her waist. Bright face, wide at the temples, tapering to a nip of a chin. Delicate limbs, skinny but strong.

She lifts herself off the floor and wafts over to the kitchen table, a polished wooden plank the size of a door, where she feels for her usual chair and settles into it with the grace of a drifting leaf. Starting up one of her hums, she dips her spoon into the granola Rin made for her—sesame seeds, raisins, oats, and nuts, every grain chemical-free.

“More milk, please.”

Sometimes, when Rin is not hauling feed, chopping wood, weeding, or fixing some corner of their raggedy old farmhouse, she stands and watches Juney with wonder, her miracle daughter, and this is what she does after pouring the milk; she leans against the kitchen counter, still for a moment, just to absorb her. Juney moves like a sea anemone, fingers undulating. She can feel light and sun, shadow and night, and all the myriad shades between.

“I want to go weed,” she says when her bowl is empty, sitting back to stretch, her spindly arms straight above her, twiggy fingers waving. The scrim of clouds parts for a moment, just enough to allow a slice of sun to filter through the windows,

sending dust motes spinning and sparking into the corners of the kitchen. She rocks on her chair inside a sunbeam, hair aglow, fingers caressing the air. She can hear their cats, Purr, Patch, and Hiccup, stretching out on the floor. Smell their fur heating up, their fishy breath slowing into sleep.

“Me, too,” Rin says. “Let’s go.”

Juney was born in the upstairs bedroom, amid Rin’s outraged yells and the grunts of a stoic midwife; she knows her way around their ramshackle house and land as well as she knows her own body. Rin only helps by keeping unexpected objects out of the way, as even the dogs and cats have learned to do. No tables with sharp corners; no stray chairs, bones, mouse corpses, or drinking bowls. The house itself might be a mishmash of added rooms and patchwork repairs, windows that won’t open and trapdoors that will, but everything inside has its place.

Out in the backyard, Juney stops to sniff the thickening heat—the clouds have closed over again, gunmetal gray and weightier than ever. “Itchy air,” she declares, and makes her way to the vegetable garden. Ducking under the mesh Rin erected to keep out plundering deer and rabbits, she squats at the first row of tomatoes. Weeding is Juney’s specialty. Her fingers climb nimbly up the vines, plucking off the brittle spheres of snails, the squishy specks of aphids. Her palms caress the earth, seeking the prick of dandelion leaves and thistles, the stubs of grapevine and pokeweed, and out they come, no mercy for them.

Her father loved planting. Jordan Drummond was his name, Jay to all who loved him. Jay, flaxen-haired like Juney, face white as a Swede’s, eyes set wide and seaglass blue. Tall and rangy, with enormous feet, and so agile he might have been made of rubber. He, too, was born and bred on this property, back in the time when it was a real farm. Helped his parents raise cows and corn all his life, until the farm failed and

drove him into the army. When his platoon razed the date groves around Basra, acres of waving palm trees, their fronds a deep and ancient green, their fruit glistening with syrups—when they ploughed those magnificent trees into the desert just because they could, he wept as if for the death of a friend.

Now Rin arranges her days around forgetting, pushes through a list of tasks tough enough to occupy her mind as well as her muscles. Juney comes first, of course, but her wolves take concentration, as do her chickens and goats and vegetables. She has staked out her ground here with all her companions. If anyone wants to find her, they have to negotiate half a mile of potholed unpaved driveway, barbed wire, electric wire, a gate, and her four dogs, who are not kind to strangers. Not to mention her army-trained marksmanship.

Juney feels her way around the spinach and carrots, pulling and plucking. “Mommy, what are we doing today?”

“Going to town. The clinic. Not till we finish the chores, though. Come on, let’s feed the critters.”

“Which clinic?”

“Yours.”

She hesitates. “Have I got time to do the birds first?”

Juney’s favorite job is tending the bird feeder. Rin wanted to throw it out after that mama bear knocked it off its squirrelproof stand, plunked herself on the ground and dumped the seeds down her throat like a drunk—Rin watched the whole thing from the kitchen window, describing the bear’s every move to Juney. But the feeder means too much to Juney to relinquish. She judges how empty it is by feeling its weight in her palms, plants it between her feet to hold it firm, fills it to the brim from the seed sack, and deftly hangs it back up. Then she sits beneath it, head lifted while she

listens and listens. “Shh,” she says this morning. “There’s a nest of baby catbirds over there.” A faint rustle, the quietest of hingelike squeaks. “Three of them. They want their breakfast.”

Leaving her to sit and listen, Rin kicks the sleepy cats outside to make their way through the day and eases her car out of the barn. The barn sits to the side of her house, on the edge of a flat field that used to hold corn. Beyond that, a hardscrabble patch of rocks and thistles meanders up a hill to scrubby hay fields and a view of the Catskill Mountains to the south. Otherwise, aside from her yard, the ancient apple orchard in the back, and the vegetable patch, she is surrounded by woods as far as the eye can roam.

Ten acres of those woods she penned off for her three wolves, leaving them plenty of room to lurk. Wolves need to lurk. They are normally napping at this time of morning, but the seething heat has them agitated and grumbling. Rin can sense their long-legged bodies moving in and out of the shadows, scarcely more solid than shadows themselves. Even her absurdly hyperactive mutts are feeling the unwholesome weight of the day, but instead of expressing it with restiveness like their cousins, they drop where they stand, panting heavily into sleep.

Frederic Remington. *Moonlight, Wolf,* 1909.

The entire compound is preternaturally still. The yard, the woods, the porch cluttered with gnarled geraniums and fraying furniture; the rickety red barn with its animal pens clinging to its side for dear life; the piles of lumber and rusting machinery—all are as somnolent as the snore of a summer bee.

Rin looks at her watch. “Time!”

Juney straightens up from under the bird feeder, wipes her earthy hands on her jeans, and walks toward her mother along the little path planted with lilac bushes, a path she memorized as an infant. She puts her head on Rin’s chest, reaching the exact level of her heart.

She smells her mother’s fear even before she hears it in her

voice. The sweat breaking out slimy and oyster-cold.

Juney was conceived in the back of a two-ton, Camp Scania, Iraq, under a moon as bright and hard as a cop’s flashlight. A grapple of gasp and desire, uniforms half off, bra up around Rin’s neck, boots and camo pants flung over the spare tire. Jay’s mouth on her nipples, running down her slick, sandflea-bitten belly, down to the wet openness of her, the salt and the sand of her, the wanting of her, his tongue making her moan, his fingers opening her, his voice and hers breathing now and now and now.

Wartime love in a covered truck, that desert moon spotlighting down. His chest gleaming silver in its glare, eyes glittering, the scent of him sharp and needing her, the voice of him a low growl of yes like her wolves.

But even through the slickness, even through the wanting and wanting, she felt the desert grinding deep into her blood. Toxic moondust and the soot of corpses.

As Rin drives her rackety maroon station wagon along the rural roads that take her to town and the clinic, Juney hums again beside her, rocking in her seat, her warbly tune following some private daydream. The windows are open because the AC refuses to work and the sweat is rolling down Rin’s arms, soaking the back of her old gray T-shirt, the waistband of her bagged-out work pants. She glances down at herself. She is covered with dirt from the yard. Probably has burrs in her hair. Once she was slim with just enough curve and wiggle to make Jay smile. Long hair thick as a paintbrush till she cut it for war. These days, squared-out by childbirth and comfort food, she looks and moves more like a lumberjack. Still, she should have had the decency to shower.

Juney is mouthing words now, rocking harder than ever to her inner rhythm. Rin should teach her not to do that—it makes people think she’s retarded—but she doesn’t have the heart.

Juney rocks when she’s happy

“Tweetle tweetle sang the bird,” she croons in some sort of a hillbilly tune.

“Twootle twootle sang the cat.

You can’t get me, sang the bird.

I don’t want to, sang the cat.

Tweetle and twootle, tweetle and—”

“Juney?” Rin is not exactly irritated but needs her to quit. “You’re going to be okay at the clinic, right? No screaming like last time?”

Juney stops singing long enough to snort. “I was a baby then. And they stuck me with that long needle.” She takes up her song once more, then stops again. “Are they going to stick me this time?”

“Soldiers don’t mind needles. It’s just a little prick, like you get every day in the yard from thistles.”

“Yeah. Who cares about needles?”

“It’s just an annual checkup to see how much you’ve grown. Nothing to worry about. They’ll probably tell you to eat more, skin-and-bones you.”

“That’s ’cause you won’t let me have candy. I’m going to tell the doctor to order you to give me candy.”

This is an old battle, Rin’s strictness about food. She is strict about a lot of matters. No TV, no cell phones. No radio, either, not even in the car. Yet there are limits to how much even she can cushion her daughter. Thanks to the law, she is obliged to send her to school, and there, as if by osmosis, Juney has absorbed the need for the detritus that fills American lives. Despite all Rin’s efforts, Juney has

caught the disease of Want.

Rin wonders if Juney's daddy would approve of how she's raising her: Jay, the only man she's ever wanted, ever will want. Jay, gone for as long as Juney has been alive. And look what he left behind. A broken soldier. A fatherless daughter. The wolves who patrol the woods like souls freed from the dead, their thick-furred bodies bold and wild—the ones who won't be tamed, won't be polluted, won't be used.

It was Jay's idea to raise wolves. His plan was to do it together once they were done soldiering—he had always wanted to save them from extinction, the cruelty of zoos and those who wish to crush them into submission. "They need us, Rin," he said to her once, his big hand resting tenderly on her cheek. "And we need them." So when she found herself alone and pregnant, she decided to carry out the plan anyway. She tracked down a shady breeder over by Oneonta and rescued two newborn pups, blue-eyed and snub-nosed, blind, deaf and helpless, their fur as soft as goose down, before he could sell them to some tattooed sadist who would chain them up in his yard. One was female, the other male, so she hoped they would breed one day. As they did. "Never try to break wolves," Jay told her. "They've got loyalty. They might even love you, who knows? But we must never tame them. They're wild animals and that's how it should stay."

Her guardian angels. Or devils. She hasn't decided which.

"We're here!" Juney sings out. She knows the town of Huntsville even when it's midmorning quiet and raining: the asphalt steaming, the wet-dust funk of newly soaked concrete.

Rin drives down the main drag, a wide, lonely street with half its windows boarded up and not a soul to be seen. A Subway on the left, a Dunkin' Donuts on the right, its sign missing so many letters it reads, duk do. The CVS and three banks that knocked out all the local diners and dime stores. A Styrofoam

cup skitters along the gutter, chipped and muddied by rain.

Pulling up the hill into an asphalt parking lot, Rin chooses a spot as far away from the other cars as she can get, her stomach balling into a leathery knot. She hates this town. She hates this clinic. She hates doctors and nurses. She hates people.

Pause, swallow, command the knot to release. It won't. She sweeps her eyes over the macadam, down the hill to the clinic, over to the creek bubbling along behind it. Back and forth, back and forth.

"Mommy, we're in America."

"Yeah. Sorry." One breath, two. "Okay. I'm ready."

If Rin could walk with her wolves flanking her, she would. Instead, she imagines them here. Ebony takes the front guard, his coat the black of boot polish, eyes green as a summer pond, the ivory curve of his fangs bared. Silver brings up the rear, her fur as white as morning frost, her wasp-yellow eyes scanning for the enemy, a warning growl in her throat. And the big stately one—the alpha male, the one Rin named Gray, his body a streak of muscle, his coat marked in sweeps of black and charcoal—walks beside her with Juney's fingers nestled into the thick fur of his back, his jaw open and slavering, ready to tear off the head of anyone who so much as looks at her.

With her invisible wolves around her and her daughter gripping her hand, Rin plows through the now-strafing rain to the clapboard box of a clinic and up to its plate-glass front, on which, painted in jaunty gold lettering, are the words *Captain Thomas C. Brittall Federal Health Care Center's Pediatrics/U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*.

"Department of Vaporized Adolescents," she mutters, pushing open the cold glass door and its cold metal handle. They step

inside.

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Naema Jassim is standing in the white starkness of that same clinic, suspended in one of the few moments of tranquillity she will be granted all day. Her hands, long-fingered and painfully dry from constant washing, press down on the windowsill as she gazes into the hot wetness beyond. The sky has turned an uneasy green, tight with electricity and tension. Even from inside her clinic office, the air smells of singed hair and rust.

“Doctor?” Wendy Fitch, the nurse, pokes her head into the room. “Your nine a.m.’s here. We have four more before we close. TV says the hurricane’s due around two.”

“Yes, the rain, it has already come.” Naema turns from the window, so slight she is almost lost inside her voluminous white coat, her black hair gathered in a loose knot at her neck. Face long and narrow, eyes the gold of a cat’s. A star-shaped scar splashes across her otherwise smooth right cheek.

Behind her, a sudden wind catches the weeping willow outside, sending its branches into a paroxysm of lashing and groaning. But the tightly closed windows and turbine roar of the clinic’s air-conditioning, set chillingly low to counteract the bacteria of the sick, render the premature storm as silent as dust.

Naema slides her clipboard under her arm and moves to the door.

Outside, the trees bend double and spring back up like whips. The clouds convulse. A new deluge drives into the ground, sharp as javelins.

A mile uphill, the wind seizes a tall white pine, shaking it until its ninety-year-old trunk, riddled with blister rust,

splits diagonally across with a shriek. It drops onto the Huntsville Dam, already thin, already old, knocking out chunks of concrete along its crest until it resembles a row of chipped teeth.

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Rin grips Juney's hand while they sit in the waiting room, her palms sweating as she scans every inch of the place: walls too white, lights too bright, posters too cheerful, a television screen as big as a door blasting a cooking show. But she refuses to look at the other women. Their calculating eyes. Their judgments. Their treachery.

The monologue starts up in her head, as it always insists on doing at the VA, even though she is only in an affiliated pediatrics clinic, not a full-fledged hospital full of mangled soldiers and melted faces. She fights it as best she can, trying to focus on Juney, on her wolves growling in their hot fur by her feet, but it marches on anyhow, oblivious to her resistance: *Where were you ladies when I needed you, huh? I saw you fresh from your showers; I saw you listening. Scattered, every one of you, like bedbugs under a lamp. Where were you when, where were you. . . .*

"Stop." Juney pulls Rin's hand to her chest. "Mommy, stop."

Rin looks for her wolves. They are crouched around her still, tongues lolling, their musky fur and meat-breath reassuring. She should have brought Betty, her service dog. She keeps telling herself she doesn't need Betty. But she does.

Juney lifts her nose and Rin can tell she is smelling the medicinal stinks of the clinic. All scents are colors to Juney, an imagined rainbow Rin will never see. The disinfectant in the wall dispensers, sickly sweet and alcohol sharp—this is her yellow. The detergent of the nurses' uniforms, soapy and stringent, she calls bright orange. The chemical-lemon odor of the floor polish: purple. The pink of

freshly mown grass, magenta of oatmeal, green-bright breath of their cats, black of their dogs panting. The glaring white of her mother's alarm.

Rin sends her mind to her hand, still clasped against Juney's narrow chest. Juney's heartbeat reminds Rin of the chipmunk she once held in her palm, soft and weightless, alive and warm—a tiny bundle of pulsating fluff.

Another soldier mother is squeezed into the far corner, holding a feverish infant to her breast. A second sits by the wall with her child, its back in a brace. A third walks in with her toddler daughter, whose right hand is wrapped in a bandage. The beams of the women's eyes burn across the room, avoiding one another yet crossing like headlights, smoldering with their collective sense of betrayal.

Time inchworms by.

Finally, a hefty nurse with frizzled blond hair steps through the inner door, the name fitch pinned loudly to her bosom. She runs her eyes over Rin and Juney and all the other mothers and children suspended in this stark, white room. "Rin Drummond," she calls.

Rin cannot speak.

"Mommy?" Juney lifts Rin's hand off her chipmunk heart and jumps down from her chair. "We're ready," she tells the nurse and pulls her mother's arm. She and Rin follow the nurse's broad back down the corridor and into an examining room.

"Just strip to your undies, honeypie, and hop up here," the nurse tells Juney. "Doctor Jassim will be here in a jiffy."

"Thank you. I know what to do. I'm nine years old and my name is June Drummond."

"Of course it is," the nurse says, unruffled.

“Did you say ‘Jassim’?” Rin asks, finding her voice at last. “Who’s he?”

“Doctor Jassim is a woman. She’s been a resident with us for half a year now. She’s very good, don’t worry.”

“Where the fuck is she from?” Rin’s hands curl up tight and white.

“Mrs. Drummond, relax, okay? She’s the best physician we have here. You’re lucky to get her.” The nurse leaves, closing the door with a snap that sounds more as though she is locking them in than giving them privacy.

Juney peels off her T-shirt and shorts and kicks away her flip-flops. Both she and Rin are dressed for the heat of the August day, not for the clinic’s hypothermic AC, so her skin is covered in goose bumps. Rin finds a baby blue hospital robe hanging on the back of the door and wraps Juney’s shivery body in it before lifting her onto the plank of the examining table, its paper crackling beneath her. She is so fragile, her Juney, a wisp of rib cage and shoulder blade, legs pin-thin as a robin’s. Rin holds her tight, not sure who is comforting whom.

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The wind rampages through woods and parking lots, streets and gardens, seizing sumacs, maples, and willows and shaking them until their boughs drop like shot geese. Up the hill, the rain-bloated creek presses its new weight against the crumbling dam, pushing and pounding until, with a great roar, it bursts through, leaps its banks and rushes headlong down the slope toward the clinic; a foaming wall of red mud, branches, and rocks flattening every shrub and tree in its path.

Inside, the air-conditioning hums. Voices murmur. Babies whimper.

Wendy Fitch hovers by the door of the examining room, checking her watch. Dr. Jassim might be great with her patients but the woman has zero sense of time. Whether this has something to do with her culture or is only an individual quirk, Wendy doesn't know, but the doctor needs to finish up here and fetch her son from his friend's house, the boys' summer baseball camp having sensibly closed against the impending storm. The rain is beating on the windows now and Wendy can feel the patients' parents growing more restless by the minute, as eager as she is to get back to their canned food and bottled water, their batteries and candles. Her pulse quickens. As a lowly nurse, she has to bear the brunt of the parents' ire, and these are no ordinary parents, either. They are all military veterans, half of them ramped up or angry. Like that pit bull of a woman, Rin Drummond.

"We better hurry, storm's coming on quick," Wendy says when Naema emerges at last from the first examining room. "Watch out for this one," she adds in a whisper, touching her temple. "Room three."

Naema nods with a resigned smile and walks toward the door.

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Rin can't believe they gave Juney an Arab for a doctor. Typical of the VA to hire the second-rate. The woman probably bought her certificate online, did her training on YouTube. Probably blew up some sucker of a soldier or two on her way here, as well.

"Mommy, what's wrong?"

Rin takes a breath. And another. "It's okay. It's just this place." She strokes her daughter's hair and pulls her close once more, feeling her frail body shiver.

A knock on the door. Gentle, yet it sends a spasm through Rin's every nerve.

The door opens and in walks a woman in a white coat, as if she’s a real doctor. No head scarf, at least, but there’s that familiar olive-brown skin and blue-black hair. She’s carrying a clipboard file, which she reads before even saying hello, which Rin considers damned rude. Then she looks up.

A splattered white scar on her right cheekbone. Most likely a shrapnel wound. Rin would know, having some fifteen herself.

“Good morning,” the doctor says to Juney, voice snake-oil smooth, accent not much more than a lilt but oh so recognizable. “You are June, right?”

But Juney isn’t listening. Her head’s up, cocked at the angle that means her mind is elsewhere. “Mommy?”

Rin is shaking. The face. The scar. Her breath is coming short and airless.

“Mommy?” Juney’s voice is more urgent now. “I hear something.”

“There is no need to be frightened, dear,” the doctor says, and Rin can’t tell whether she’s talking to Juney or her.

“Mommy!” Juney jumps down from the examining table, her robe falling off, leaving her in nothing but white cotton underpants, skin and bone. “Something bad’s happening!”

“Get out of here!” Rin yells at the doctor.

“What is the matter?” The doctor looks confused.

“No, not her!” Juney cries. “Run!” And she hurls herself into the dangerous air, unable to see the metal table covered with glass bottles and needles, the jutting chair legs on the floor.

Rin reaches out and catches her, but she wriggles free in true terror. “Let us out!” she screams, and the doctor turns around, bewildered, saying something Rin can’t hear because at

that moment the window bursts open and a torrent of red water crashes through, smashing them against the wall, knocking them over, pounding them with a whorl of mud and branches and shattered glass. . . .

Rin's soldier training, her war-wolf heart, these are not in her blood for nothing. She struggles to her feet, seizes Juney around the waist and forces the door open, kicking away the flailing doctor tangled in her white coat, her long hair, her scar, and her legacy.

Rin slams her face down in the water and steps on her, using her body to lever her daughter through the door and out of the water to safety.

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An Interview with Helen Benedict, Author of WOLF SEASON

Helen Benedict is the author of seven novels, five books of nonfiction, and a play. Her most recent novel, WOLF SEASON, is this month's fiction selection on The Wrath-Bearing Tree.

WOLF SEASON "follows the war home," as a starred review in *Library Journal* puts it, examining war's reverberations on the lives of three women and their families. There is an Iraq war veteran named Rin, who keeps three wolves from a pack she

started on her land with her late husband; she is raising a daughter who was born blind, perhaps from lingering effects of Rin's service. There's Naema, a widowed Iraqi doctor who has come to the U.S. with her son. And there is Beth, a Marine wife raising a troubled son, who awaits her husband's return from Afghanistan even as she fears it.

Helen was generous enough to take the time to speak to me about WOLF SEASON, war, writing, the strengths of fiction vs. nonfiction to speak to specific themes, Charlottesville, and more.

The Wrath-Bearing Tree (Andria Williams): Helen, you've said that your newest novel, WOLF SEASON, is about "the long reach of war." Can you tell me a little more about that?

Helen Benedict: The Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have affected all of us in America, whether we know it or not. Our morality, our politics, our pocketbooks – all have been profoundly changed. But, of course, the most affected are those who have either served or suffered in those wars, and those who love them. Of the women in WOLF SEASON, Rin is a veteran of the Iraq War, Naema is an Iraqi refugee, and Beth is married to a marine deployed to Afghanistan. All three women are raising their children alone because of the fallout of war. Of the men in the novel, Louis is also a veteran, Todd the marine, and they, too, are profoundly affected by their experiences of war. The characters in WOLF SEASON personify the ways that war has permeated the little town of Huntsville, NY, the people who live there, and, in a sense, us all.

But I don't want to characterize WOLF SEASON as purely a war book, for it is just as much about tenderness, love, and hope. It is also about the way human beings can rise above through horror and trauma to find and help one another, even when the odds are against them.

WBT: To which character in WOLF SEASON do you hope readers

will feel most attached?

HB: I hope that all my characters are compelling in their own ways, but I suspect the answer to this has more to do with who a reader is than anything else. Already, I have heard a full range of reactions to the characters in WOLF SEASON: some readers like the women best, others the children, while yet others especially love the wolves, and some relate most to the men. One of the aspects of writing I love the most is seeing how varied the reactions of readers are, and how everyone brings their own interpretations to a book that can be quite independent from mine.

WBT: Helen, I've read that you grew up living all over the world, on islands in the Indian Ocean; in Berkeley, CA; and in England. You've said that during your years of island living you did not attend school and were allowed to "run wild," and I was instantly reminded of Margaret Atwood's youth, and her wild-and-free summers in remote camp sites with her entomologist father, her mom, and her brother.

Do you think the period of free time you experienced had an effect on your imagination, or somehow helped foster a writerly way of thinking?

HB: Yes! Largely because of these travels, I spent a lot of

time alone as a child, so learned to read early and took comfort in books. I was an addicted reader by the age of six or seven, so much so that I'd be heartbroken when a book ended. Then I discovered I could continue the magic by writing myself.

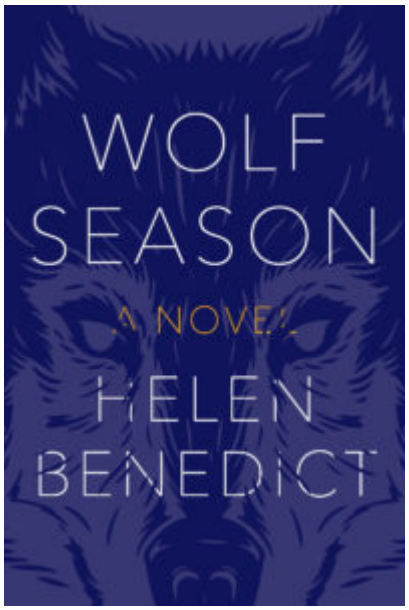
I also learned about poverty and suffering by living on those islands, which were poor and disease-ridden at the time. Even at the age of three, I was profoundly saddened by seeing starving children and people living in shacks. Children understand these things much more deeply than we adults realize.

WBT: With such an international childhood and youth, how did the issues facing women in the American military first come onto your radar? Your nonfiction book, THE LONELY SOLDIER, was the first book I read by an academic discussing female service members; if it was not the first, then at least it was the first one I heard of, with the largest impact and starting the most national discussion. Most academics I know, at least in my experience, rarely think about the military at all. What brought you to this topic, and with such conviction that you've continued to address it across at least three books?

HB: I am not really an academic, but a journalist and a novelist who happens to teach. The research I did for THE LONELY SOLDIER, which was indeed the first book to look at women who served in the post-9/11 wars, was essential not only for my journalistic work, but for my related novels, SAND QUEEN and WOLF SEASON. Over a stretch of more than three years, I interviewed some 40 women veterans of the Iraq War, and then later I also interviewed Iraqi refugees. These interviews, along with other research, informed my imagination, allowing me to plunge deep into the interior lives of refugees and soldiers to create my fictional characters; something I would never have dared do had I not spent so long listening to real people.

As for why I came to this topic, I'll start by saying that all my work, whether fiction or nonfiction, has looked at the powerless and the outsider, and much of it has especially focused on women. When I saw the U.S. invade Iraq for no reason and learned of the destruction and death we caused there as a result; and then also learned about the epidemic of sexual assault in the military and the moral injury that the war was causing to women and men, I had to write about it. I care passionately about justice, and the right of the oppressed to be heard.

As for why I turned from journalism to fiction – from THE LONELY SOLDIER to my novels, SAND QUEEN and WOLF SEASON – that is because I wanted to get to what war does to our interior lives, our hearts, our morals, our souls, our minds. That is the territory of fiction.



WBT: I first read THE LONELY SOLDIER as a relatively new officer's-wife, and to be quite honest, felt like I went through several stages of grief while reading. It was difficult to reconcile my husband's recent, major life decision, and his well-intentioned enthusiasm for it, with the book's description of the military as based on a model of predation, and occupied by, in essence, various levels of predators very graphically rendered (recruiters who force

teenage girls, for example, to give them head in parked cars). It was also difficult to consider our family's new path from the perspective of my conviction that I was a feminist, with a deep concern for other women. How had I not known this was happening to female service members? I remember the striking detail that the women profiled in the book asked to use their real names, as a way of "fighting back." THE LONELY SOLDIER was the first step in a long and rather painful exposure of, what may not necessarily be my experience with the military, but what is the truth for many women.

I guess my question here is one that's bothered me to some degree for more than thirteen years: Do you feel that a person whose life work is spent within an institution like the U.S. military has chosen, in effect, to side with an oppressive regime? Is it possible to still be an ally to others, those often ignored or hurt by war and by institutionalized racism, sexism, and violence?

HB: I think this is a brave question, and in a way, my answer lies in WOLF SEASON, as well as my other related books, because my veteran characters are all struggling with questions like yours, especially how to push back against injustice and wrongdoing within the military, and how to feel like a good person when you have come to feel you were used to do wrong.

My veteran characters have been distorted by war and its inherent injustices, yes, but they also want to love, mend, and amend. This is the essential struggle in the aftermath of war for us all – how, having done a great wrong, we can grope our way back to doing some right.

Another path, and I do see veterans doing this, is to help the real victims of our wars: the innocent Iraqi citizens whose lives we have destroyed. This, too, is a theme in WOLF SEASON.

But going back to the earlier part of your question, yes, I do

think that joining the military is to give yourself to an institution that usually causes more harm than good. But that said, I also think it's important to fight wrongdoing from the inside. Part of our duty as citizens of a democracy is to hold governmental institutions accountable when they go wrong, and to expose and fight and correct that wrong wherever we can. I know how much courage it takes the military from within, but I've seen active duty service members and veterans do it, and I admire them deeply.

WBT: You were in Charlottesville, VA, during the horrifying neo-Nazi rally this past August. How did you end up there at that time, and what did you observe, on the ground? What, for you, did that event say about America circa 2017-18?

HB: I have written about that terrible day in Charlottesville before, so all I'll say here is that I was at an artist's residency nearby, so went to bear witness and counter-protest. The main point I made in this essay is that, as a writer and reader, I know that using one's imagination to put oneself in the shoes of others is the key to empathy and compassion. The racists, Islamophobes and anti-Semites who attended the rally that day refused to use their imaginations to do any such thing, thus freeing themselves to dehumanize the people they wished to hate. It was a sickening sight to behold, the screaming red faces of those who relish hatred; the opposite of what writers and artists stand for.

WBT: You've addressed themes of systemic violence through both fiction and nonfiction. How do you feel these genres are uniquely suited to addressing political issues?

HB: Nonfiction explains it, fiction explores it. In WOLF SEASON, as in any novel, I was able to plunge into a character's heart to show how it really feels to be the victim or the perpetrator or violence, and what that does to the human soul. The field of fiction is the human interior – our hearts, our minds, our morals. I love that. That's why I read

novels, and that's why I write them.

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WOLF SEASON is available from Bellevue Literary Press or wherever books are sold. A reading group guide is available for download here. You can find out more about Helen Benedict's writing on her web site.

New Poetry: "What Great Grief Has Made the Civilian Mute" by Jennifer Murphy

To watch soldiers load into planes on television

To ignore veterans who manage to make it home

To cry out when an airman murders four of your friends
To never question the valiance of combatants

To have visions of your father stabbing you to death
To lose your sight in vodka and cigarettes

To flee the western night for that big bright eastern city
To discover there is no such thing as relief in escape

To forget the names of the slain from your hazy youth
To remember in excruciating detail the site of their wounds

To learn there is nothing you can do to raise the dead
To spend your life writing the killed into existence

To read the greatest fear for men is being embarrassed
To understand that for women it’s being murdered

To be the only female in the room of camouflaged men
To befriend the lonely fighter in the city of civilians

To love a Marine who became a decorated firefighter
To lose him in the North Tower that blue September

To watch soldiers load into planes on television
To embrace veterans who manage to make it home

for Deborah, Amy, Melissa, and Heather Anderson
and Captain Patrick “Paddy” Brown

Photo Credit: U.S. Army photo by Maj. Adam Weece, 3rd CR PAO, 1st Cav. Div.