Our Personal Community by Curtis J. Graham

It was in the news. On a bright summer day in Helmand Province, Lance Corporal Wickie did his duty and killed an insurgent. A suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with explosives into the berm of Outpost Shir Ghazay. Wickie returned fire, then applied a tourniquet to someone's wounded leg. He earned a Combat Action Ribbon, a Commendation Medal, and a Valor Device. He was promoted to Corporal, then Sergeant, and he reenlisted.

Before we deployed, Wickie told me he was getting out as soon as possible, that his contract couldn't expire fast enough. He would eat the apple, and fuck the Corps.

I first met Wickie at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. I was a

Private First Class with a single chevron on my shoulder. I had orders to report to an office inside a warehouse, and the Corporals told Wickie to show me around. Wickie was small, with a round head and big brown eyes, like someone's kid brother. He brought me to a wall locker covered in dents and bootprints. He opened the door and pulled out a plastic cowboy hat. "Check out this bad boy," he said. He dusted it off affectionately and rapped it with his knuckles. "OSHA approved."

Outside, Wickie led me to the far corner of the lot, where rusty forklifts were parked in a row. He began to tell me about his dad. "Yeah, he was Secret Service for a while, before he got contracted for Blackwater. You know, spec ops. Assassin shit." He pulled out a camouflage wallet and opened it with a rip. He handed me a black business card with a longhorn skull in the center. It said, *Robert P. Wickie, Blackwater Operative*, with a phone and fax number.

"There's no address," I said. "And why is there a fax number?" The card felt like printer paper.

"Obviously, ain't no address," he said, and took the card from me. He stuffed it into his wallet. "Works where he wants, when he wants, my old man."

"How much does he make, doing that?" I said.

He took a while to answer, like he was making something up. Then he told me twenty thousand a week. "Bull crap," I said.

Wickie sucked his finger and felt the wind. The sun was setting. "'Bout that time," he said. We walked to the formation for dismissal, and Wickie realized he'd left his blouse out back. He was wearing a green t-shirt with a toothpaste stain shaped like a lollipop. The Corporals made him stand in his own formation for a while, facing a brick wall.

I’d been in Afghanistan three months, on an outpost called Shukvani. The base was situated in a depression surrounded by hilltops. The day Wickie arrived, he threw rocks at the windshield of the forklift I was driving and shattered it in three places. The Sergeant Major sent him away, to Outpost Shir Ghazay.

In the early months, I photographed things. I had a mattress in a metal bunk frame, a luxury, and I took a picture of it. The previous occupants had left us a mini fridge, a black loveseat filled with knife punctures, and a small TV. I took a picture of the sun setting behind an abutment, helicopters landing at night. A frozen steak grilling on wire mesh over burnt wood scraps. I uploaded the images to my Facebook profile.

One night, a short burst of gunfire woke me up. The noise echoed around the base, then stopped. Everything was quiet. I climbed out of bed and pulled on my flak jacket and helmet. The radio crackled with chatter. “Everyone to the berm, now,” said the voice of the Sergeant Major.

Outside, dust blew in the breeze. The ground was pale blue with moonlight. We sprinted across the packed gravel of the helicopter pads. I imagined I might shoot and kill someone tonight, then I stopped imagining. I racked my bolt while I ran, chambering a round. I reached the berm and lay against the baked earth. I caught my breath. Nearby, I heard a radio. Someone spoke.

They told us that a small convoy operated by the Afghan National Army, our allies, had parked just outside the base. They were on their way to another part of the desert and needed to pass through. They had no radios, so they fired their AK-47s into the air to get our attention. We were not in danger.

I walked alone across the crushed stone, back to the tent. I lay awake on my mattress, and felt nauseated from unspent adrenaline. I listened to mice as they ran around the tent, invisible, chewing holes in things and attacking one another over food scraps. Their tiny screams. I awoke when the sun shone through a rip in the canvas by my eye. The next day, I went to the computer tent and logged into Facebook. I checked my album titled *Afghan 2013* for likes. People had commented on my pictures of our small television, the mattress, the single steak. Someone wrote, "Wow, really roughing it over there." I deleted each of the pictures, then the album entirely.

A month passed before the big explosion happened. It felt nearby and sudden. It was like a punch of breeze, a gentle concussion. Across the desert, at this moment, Wickie was becoming a hero.

When the deployment came to an end, we kicked the sand from our boots and flew home in cargo planes. They searched every other bag for rocks and vials of moon dust. "Leave the country how you found it," they told us.

Back at Camp Lejeune, I found Wickie sitting in a pickup truck outside the warehouse. He'd used his deployment cash to buy a black Chevy with four rear tires. We got talking about Shir Ghazay. "No one believes me, man." He reached up and slammed the truck door.

I'd read the official report on the Division website, and I'd heard from others who were there. Private Cody talked about how Wickie just shucked a bunch of rounds from his magazine so that later, it would look like he'd returned fire. Rucker said he saw Wickie crouching beneath a truck, covering his ears during the firefight. Wickie stood in front of me and twisted his toe in the dirt. He told me that, last week, he'd been eating a sandwich at Chick-Fil-A when someone dropped a tray of dishes. He ducked beneath the table and barricaded himself with chairs. People laughed at him, he said.

I’d been out of the Marines for six months. I grew my hair long and wore flannel shirts. I was in college studying literature, and I’d recently signed up for a course in war poetry. On my way to classes, I walked past the campus veteran’s lounge. It was an oversized closet with a computer desk and a silver mini-fridge with Capri Suns for the veterans to drink. The students inside laughed often. I never went inside. I didn’t feel like one of them. Most of them wore combat boots with blue jeans, t-shirts from the infantry units they’d been in. Their hoodies were smattered with graphics of skulls smoking cigarettes. Aces of spades, fanged dogs. They probably had good stories, and I couldn’t think of any of my own.

In the poetry classroom, students took turns reading stanzas from Brian Turner’s “At Lowe’s Home Improvement Center.” The poem was about a veteran walking through aisles and seeing weaponry in household items. The students sat in a circle, reading aloud. They were careful to pause when appropriate, to read with continuity from one line to the next. In the poem, a

box tips over, and nails trickle out like shell casings from a machine gun. Paint spills and expands like a puddle of blood.

A student with a combover read a stanza about dead soldiers lying on the conveyor belt at the cash register. I listened to the description of the body. A year ago, I had been standing in a medical tent watching an Afghan civilian dying. He had fainted from blood loss. He was naked, with a catheter inserted. His toes were all crossed over themselves, and he had gashes that peeled and showed the muscle beneath. I watched the Navy Corpsmen bustle around, wearing tied-on paper scrubs over their cammies. At the far end of the tent, a little girl lay on a plywood table. She would soon have her legs removed. She would live. On the wall were x-rays of her femurs and pelvis. I saw the faint gray silhouette of her flesh on the outside, cracked white bone on the inside. She had stepped on a doormat bomb the day before. The man in the bed would die after amputation. The next day, I would drive a forklift and carry a cardboard box containing his legs, and those of the little girl, to the pit where they would be burned. I'd drop them off, and I'd smell them burning as I drove away.

In the poem, none of the shoppers see what the narrator sees. I set my photocopied page on the table because my hand was shaking. I looked around the room and was conscious of my heart beating in my ears. The students kept reading and reading. I grabbed my bag and left the classroom before it was my turn.

I walked down the hallway, touching the wall at intervals. It was cool beneath my fingertips. Billboard flyers fluttered as I walked past them, promoting frisbee tournaments and drag concerts. In the bathroom, I dry heaved. I flushed the toilet with my foot and waited in the hallway for the hour to end.

My next class was American Education. I arrived early. There were two veterans in this class, and they always came in

together. The guy was bald and in his late thirties. He wore cargo pants and brown shoes. The girl wore a pink sweater that looked like shag. They didn't fit in with anyone but each other. They seemed to like it that way.

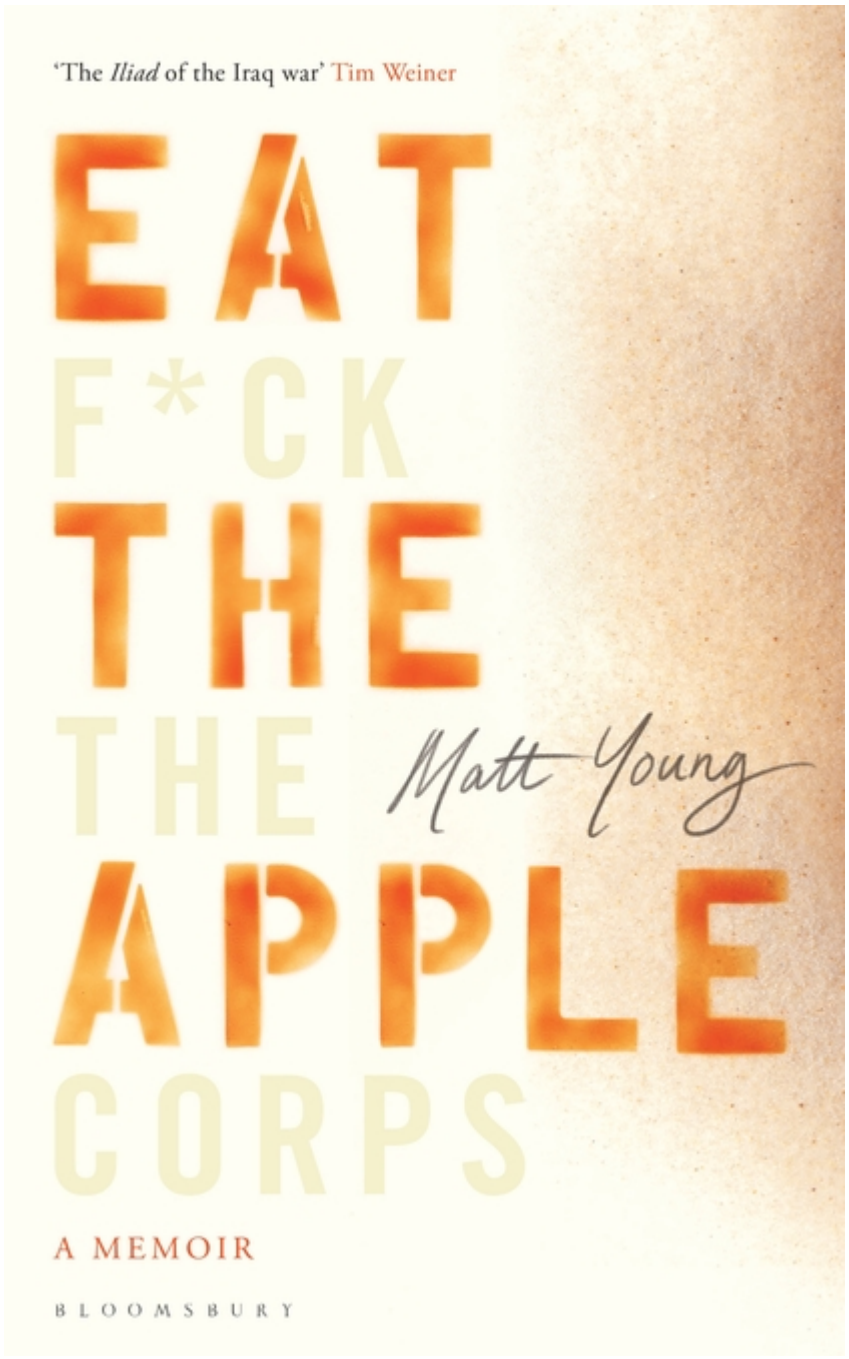
Today, we were giving presentations about our Personal Community. The guy went first, and he talked about the Army. He had a deep, loud voice. He shook a little, being at the front of the classroom. He spoke in short bursts, like a Sergeant addressing a group of young soldiers. He had to project confidence, because of his rank. He clicked through a slideshow of himself in various states of undress, posing with weaponry outside plywood buildings. The class clapped for him when he finished talking about the camaraderie he knew in Iraq.

The class was mostly queer and transgender students studying music education. The next person to speak was Skye with the green and black hair, the pierced lower lip. She spoke about her friend who leapt to his death from a parking garage. Another friend had opened the passenger door of Skye's car and rolled onto the freeway while she was driving. The people who understand Skye's post-traumatic stress, she said, are her Personal Community. Someone turned on the lights, and the classroom erupted with applause.

I stood next. I kept mine generic—my family, my friends. There was no camouflage in my slideshow pictures. I clicked through the photos as I talked. A camping trip. My uncle's '78 Nova. I imagined it wouldn't take much to make them think I was someone, a person of valor. I'd just have to show the right pictures, ones with sand and smoke in them. I could tell them the story of how Wickie became a hero. I could talk about the sound and the blood, and the way it felt afterwards. I could be anybody. I could be Wickie. It wouldn't have mattered what I told them, really. They would still applaud for me. They might even call me a hero.

I walked down the hall after class and passed the lounge. Someone had just told a joke, and there was an explosion of laughter. I thought about leaning in and knocking on the door. I thought about stepping over the threshold, pulling up a chair. Maybe they'd tell the joke again. Maybe I could hear it, too.

Interview with Matt Young, Author of Eat the Apple



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

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

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

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

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

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

than any other.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

YOUNG:

Short answer? No.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

YOUNG: Go make art and be good.

Purchase *Eat the Apple* here.