

# New Nonfiction by John Darcy: “Hypothermia”

The email takes me to a link that takes me to an article displaying two mugshots. The mugshots take me back to winter. It was a southern snow day, at least five inches of accumulation and more flakes still falling. It was 2014. I believe weather records for the region were broken. I believe it was a Thursday.

In my mind the day has a mirror's shine, everything reflective. The ground stretched out in a pureness of white, like one great flattened pearl in the sun.

We were not supposed to be out. Ft. Bragg was closed. I was junior enlisted at the time, a Specialist, twenty years old, a team leader in charge of a fire team within a Reconnaissance, Surveillance, and Target Acquisition Squadron of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Mostly this meant paperwork. I never did get used to jumping out of airplanes. I never fired a shot in anger.

The 82<sup>nd</sup> is famed and storied, of course. Sicily, Normandy, Panama, Fallujah. Its mission statement boasts an ability to deploy anywhere in the world within eighteen hours. Often it's referred to as America's 9-1-1. And yet the base was shuttered and training halted for a few inches of snow.

Well, not all training was halted. We were out there in the snow.

We were lacking in cold weather gear but the Captain wouldn't hear it. Our unit's forefathers fought the Nazis without coats or gloves at the Battle of the Bulge; sometimes without boots or even bullets. Protests about weather were certainly blasphemous, possibly heretical. But the temperature was

starting to dip toward the upper teens. And it was a wet snow, dense with a chill that leached through our uniforms like a reverse blood-brain barrier, totally porous. These camouflage uniforms, of a digital pattern now retired from service for their failure to blend into any environment, were made of a mystical material that sweltered you in heat and froze you in the cold.

I was close with our platoon leader for having served as his radioman before my promotion. I told him maybe a third of the guys had the proper gear, and this was a situation likely to turn hairy and soon. He concurred, and together we got a fire going. Hypothermia lingered on the horizon like a sunset, and all of us knew it. He told me the Captain would keep us out here as planned.

One of my soldiers was back on base and quarters-confined with a staph infection. To fill some other equally random staffing issue, the empty slot in my team was filled by Private Underhill. He was a SoCal kid and five years older than me. Whenever he wasn't in uniform, he wore a flat brim hat etched with some variation of the Oakland Raiders logo.

After the platoon leader and I got the fire crackling, I went back to check on my guys. They looked frosted but generally okay. They liked to curse me for cluttering up and weighing down their packing lists, but today they were grateful, and I felt like a father finally vindicated for making his family arrive six hours early to the airport.

Underhill, prone in the snow, as a last-minute addition to my team did not have any of that same gear. Water draws heat from the body four times faster than air of the same temperature, and he was dripping, drenched. His teeth chattered with a strange music. We'd been out there almost twenty hours. His face was a glossy blue.

At the extreme ends of body temperature, motor functions begin

to fail. Underhill spoke like an Adventist in tongues. There are videos online of non-English speakers acting out what an English conversation sounds like to those not fluent. They are uncomfortably strange clips, these sort of auditory illusions, like an Escher sketch for the ears. You can feel your brain almost literally stretching out to make sense of the nonsense, so close is it to being discernable. That was how Underhill sounded. And worse than the meaninglessness was his face, serious and concerned. A face that seemed absolutely certain of his speech, awe-struck that I appeared unable to understand.

I stripped him naked but for his boots and wrapped him in my poncho—not promising, but it was the only dry item I had. I got one of my guys to collect his gear, and we started back toward the central staging area where I'd met with the platoon leader, and a fire awaited. It was maybe not quite half a mile. I was maybe not quite certain that Underhill would make it.

With the base closed, there was some hiccup in getting a medic to the scene. Underhill, now in dry clothes and around the fire, was still stammering a stream of incoherence. There are stories of people so infected by cold that, when they finally draw near to a fire, they end up singeing themselves in their desperation for warmth.

I tasked one of my guys with making sure Underhill didn't topple into the fire.

I told the platoon leader I'd never seen hypothermia, real hypothermia, before. He said that neither had he. I said I didn't know how long he'd been like that, how far along he was. I told him this was my fault for not making frequent enough rounds with my guys, which was true.

The platoon leader said we've got to get out of here. He said the Captain was on his way, having heard the call for a medic

over the net.

When I check on Underhill, his fingernails are a color I cannot describe.

The Captain arrives with a medic, who goes to Underhill directly. I hover close to the Captain and the platoon leader, a First Lieutenant. It was like eavesdropping on my parents arguing, and I remember thinking that simile at the time.

*If we can't train in the snow, how are we supposed to fight in the snow?*

*We don't have the gear, sir. It's not that they didn't bring it, but that it was never issued.*

*I'm looking for some intestinal fortitude from the guys.*

*The base is shut down. Sir, I think we're approaching a bad situation.*

*We've only had one man go down.*

*Tell me how many need to get hypothermia before you end this, sir. Tell me what your number is, and when we hit that number I'll call you. Tell me what your number is.*

It was a clash of two commissioned tectonic plates. Hearing a Lieutenant address a Captain that way seemed like a glitch in the simulation. It was the immovable object of care for the troops versus the unstoppable force of military authority.

I was preparing myself to freeze to death so I could spite the Captain. I would have done this for my platoon leader.

The whole beating, thematic heart of the collision is best illustrated in William Styron's short novel, *The Long March*. It's a forgotten little novella that I stumbled into after I left the army. It depicts the clash between the hero, Captain Mannix, and Colonel Templeton, the villain who orders his

reserve Marines, out of shape after being suddenly recalled to duty over escalations in the Korean War police action, on a sadistic and pointless thirty-six mile forced march.

The march takes place the night after a training accident—a mortar round shot short, equally meaningless—leaves eight Marines dead. My own unit's time in the shivering snow came three days after a jump fatality occurred over Salerno Drop Zone outside of Ft. Bragg. A gruesome scene, a friend who was there told me. He used the word decapitated. Four American soldiers would be killed in Afghanistan throughout January 2014.

Captain Mannix, the obvious stand in for William Styron, confronts the hell of absurdity in a similar manner as the protagonists of Styron's contemporaries: but unlike Jones's *From Here to Eternity*, or Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Styron banishes all attempts at redemption through suffering and violence, of meaning through war, of clear-eyed stoicism in the face of the absurd. "None of that Hemingway crap for me," Mannix says to Lieutenant Culver, the book's narrator.

The tragedy of the story, of course, is that Colonel Templeton is forever destined to win—even when the Colonel himself falls out of the forced march. Mannix, who steps on a nail in the march's early miles, suffers through on the fuel of his unceasing hatred for the Colonel, even as the nail shreds his foot to a bloody scrap. A few miles from the finish, when the Colonel catches sight of Mannix's blood-sodden boot, he orders the Captain into one of the recovery vehicles. Mannix refuses. Again the Colonel orders, threatening court martial. Again, Mannix refuses. The Colonel places a hand on the pistol at his hip. Still, Mannix refuses.

Styron describes Mannix in those moments as "the man with the back unbreakable...lost in the night, astray at mid-century, in the never-endingness of war." The tragedy for me, as I sat there saturated in snow, was that I hadn't yet read of

Mannix's futile struggle with the Colonel. As I watched my platoon leader argue with my Captain, soldiers far better and braver than me were being asked to die seven-thousand miles away so that the soldiers who'd died before them didn't die in vain. Others commit war crimes that will later be pardoned by the president. I thought the situation in which I found myself, as well as the situation abroad, still possessed the capacity for a just conclusion. I believed the unstoppable force of the Captain's authority could be reasoned with, pleaded with, swayed. But this belief would become something I would look back on, marveling at how very little I knew about the world. I wouldn't understand until I read Lieutenant Culver say of the fictional Colonel and his march, that my Captain was beyond judgment, because "he was a different kind of man, different enough that he was hardly a man at all, but just a quantity of attitudes so remote from [the] world that to hate him would be like hating a cannibal, merely because he gobbled human flesh." There was no exit, no alternate paths diverging in a snowy wood. Everything Colonel Templeton and my Captain embodied, the whole sluggish wheel that turned for the express purpose of turning again, was so far beyond my comprehension that it might as well have come from another planet.

But this was all meaning I created in hindsight. In the wet expanse, that freezer of snow where the leaf-shedded trees jutted up from the white like mutated limbs, I focused on keeping my team's temperatures up. It would be many years before I began to free myself of Mannix's Hemingway crap. I fall victim to it still.

A second truck arrived, with a second medic, who soon whisked Underhill off. The first medic told me there was no doubt that I saved Underhill's life. That before my speedy intervention, Underhill was nearing a point where his body would have no longer been able to correct its inner thermostat. At the very least he would have suffered what the medic called a traumatic

cerebral event. To have saved a person's life—possibly, probably, most likely—at the age of twenty. It felt to me like no small achievement. To have saved a life that—certainly, absolutely—should never have been endangered in the first place? This seemed, somehow, even more significant. A kind of mortal déjà vu, the sort of moral underpinning that always nagged at me, later on, when faced with the trolley problem in ethics classes; that is, in the simplest terms, why did all these people need to be in harm's way?

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The article's mugshots paint a picture and a cruel one. After the army, after college, after my father fell ill, suffered, and passed away, I was living in the mountains of Virginia. A slanting summer rain fell in sheets outside my window as I read. I remembered meeting Underhill's wife when a group of us went out to dinner before my discharge. But in her mugshot she seemed changed—straight hair shortened and tinted bright red—as if the night we met she'd been wearing a disguise. Underhill looked the same, though, and I felt that I could almost hear his brain-chilled babbling.

All of the charges are felonies. Battery of a minor. Child abuse inflicting serious bodily injury. Conspiracy.

There are a few other local news bulletins. Bail set at \$150,000. The infant son on a ventilator at UNC Chapel Hill, critical but stable. The four-year-old daughter, mercifully, already recovered from her injuries. The *Fayetteville Observer* quotes a police report of this girl saying she was hung upside-down until "red stuff" came out of her nose. Another says she was so afraid of Underhill that, long after her rescue, she would wet herself at the mere mention of his name.

It's skin-chilling stuff, grizzly. I scour through the sixth, seventh, eighth page of the search engine results. I can't

find any subsequent articles about the married couple's sentencing, even now, four years after their arrest. As if they'd been whisked out of sight in the very same manner as the medic truck saving Underhill from the cold.

The whole scene really does present itself as a sort of one of a kind trolley problem made just for me. What I don't mean to do is impose an ex post facto morality. Underhill had been a friend of mine, awkwardly unfunny with his rehearsed punch-line zingers, a quality that endeared you to him instantly. And with this comes a certain feeling of being tricked, had, swindled into camaraderie by some cunning master of sociopathy.

It's the sensation, even now, of being the neighbor interviewed on the nightly news, who never could have seen it coming.

In a way it makes me feel a troubling exclusion from myself, a split-screen personhood in which each side communicates with the other. One hemisphere says stop, enough, what could you have done, it's a horrific thing but the guilt is fake, or worse, the inserting of yourself into a tragic story that should be centered on what those two children faced, and what they will have to face, as they grow up haunted by a life tinged early with unspeakable trauma; because what could you have done, let him freeze? Let him topple into the fire you made? You couldn't have let him die even if you *had* known, which means you ought to stop creating a moral quandary where none exists; how many times do you think you've held the door open for a murderer?

This hemisphere is my own personal Mannix. Righteous and reasonable, always seeing through the fray and telling me the truth in no uncertain terms.

And yet. If this is my Mannix, that makes it the doomed hero, a voice who can't alter its own fate any more than it can turn



iron into gold.

Because the other side of the screen, that other hemisphere, sings a far simpler tune: you saved a man's life and that man went on to torture his children, and something is owed for that, regardless of whether you understand what it is. Responsibility proves boundless. My own personal Colonel, who speaks inside my skull-sized kingdom with a voice oddly reminiscent of my Captain, issuing order after order inside my brain's confines with the volume fully cranked. The unstoppable force of some echoing and illusory guilt that forces me to march ever onward, further and further, with a pack whose weight never stops increasing, a march for which there's no chance of rest or respite in sight.

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Growing up in Nebraska, where I lived at Underhill Avenue as a kid, we had a small, hardcover book not unlike a pocket bible that concerned itself with famous coincidences and wild convergences of fate and fluke. Kennedy's secretary. The final recorded fatality of the Hoover Dam's construction being the son of the first recorded fatality, deaths separated by fourteen years to the day.

One of the anecdotes in this book of strange happenings took place as the Civil War was beginning to subside. On a train platform in New Jersey in the early days of '65, a man watches his train approach as others watch his face, stunned to be in the presence of a celebrity. His name is Edwin Booth. Considered America's greatest actor, he would go on to be seen as the most acclaimed Prince Hamlet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When the train pulls into station and bodies begin to flow from the doors, Edwin sees that a man has become caught at the far end of the platform. Edwin hustles to the man as the train begins to breathe the steam of impending motion. He manages to free the stranger, saving his life. Edwin learns some months later, after a friend sends a letter commending his swift action,

that the man on the platform was Robert Todd Lincoln, oldest son of Abraham Lincoln. The whole affair was said to have given Edwin solace after his brother, John, assassinated the president.

There is, I learned, great solace in reading about other of occasions of blind, incomprehensible chance. Because without other wild strokes of chance, all of these curving occasions and flashes of happenstance threaten to create a worldview in which the universe is constantly arranging itself in purpose-giving shapes, constantly formulating patterns and events which set me at center stage. And to believe in a universe like that, where the infinite cosmos align themselves through chance of circumstance to inform and elucidate me, to create my meaning—that's a nasty business. Having company in coincidence helps me avert my eyes from the arrangement of events that took me from Underhill Avenue to Private Underhill's random assignment to my fire team and his unforgivable crimes that were, in some secondary respects, facilitated by my actions, which extended his life. From plucking Styron's novella off the library shelf, a total coincidence, and having the book flood over me with snowy meaning. Or this: A year and a half after the snow, on the same Salerno Drop Zone where the gruesome training accident took place, myself and a man I didn't know saved the life of one Lieutenant Pedilla. We'd all jumped from the same airplane. A gust of wind on the drop zone screamed up to inflate Pedilla's parachute upon landing, dragging him ragdoll-like over the shorn grass, and preventing him from unhooking himself as the paracord risers lodged around his neck with tension. The man I didn't know chased after the billowed chute to smother it, while I launched onto the purple Lieutenant to jostle the cords free from his neck. I came to know Pedilla afterwards. I met his wife and kids. They live in Miami now, I think. Happy as happy can be.

This, however, is me waving a wand at the karmic tally, trying

to cook its books. Because the voice of the Colonel makes it clear that the internal ledger is no palimpsest. There are no revisions here. It is often said that the paths of life are winding, but this is a misconception. There is only one direction. Only the painfully straight route of a forced march.

How dearly I would like to be the Mannix of this story. To be the man with the back unbreakable. But against the flow of all my striving, I find myself dominated by the Colonel, by my Captain; bogged down inside the villain's view and ruled by an unswayable voice completely immune to reason. What would Mannix do in the face of such bewildering randomness? He'd keep walking. He would understand that the searing pain in his foot, or in his soul, or in his heart, was nothing more than passing show. No sensation can last forever, even if it insists, in its screaming immediacy, that it will. For Mannix, there is no chance. Only what should be done. And it is in Mannix's knowledge of those things which should be, which could be, and which didn't need to be at all that I find, if possible, solace. There is a kind of quiet grace in accepting the world as it is without sacrificing, in that most idealistic corner of your mind, the thought of how it might be. What if I hadn't saved Underhill's life? Well, what if the Captain hadn't put his life at risk in the first place? It isn't that these questions have answers. They don't. It's that, should I find myself some bright, snowy day not even bothering to ask them in the first place, then I know that something sinister has taken hold; that, without introducing the proper moral checkups, I might be on my way to becoming the Colonel.

And as far as the Colonel goes, I have little doubt that, faced with an event whose randomness made him question his place in the world, he would try to kill it.

I spoke to my mother on the phone a few days back. We were reminiscing about the Nebraska house on Underhill Avenue. It

was the quickest of corrections. Wood, she told me. Not hill.  
Underwood Avenue.

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## **New Nonfiction from Philip Alcables: "Peppina"**



## 1. A Child

A neglected box in the back of my closet contains a collection of items from my father's apartment, I find. In the midst of a stack of curling black-and-white photo prints there is one that I don't remember having seen before. About two inches by three, it's a photo from the war. My father's war, the one he referred to as "the" war. It's a picture of a girl of eight or nine or ten, a bow on the right side of her dark hair, her mouth wide, dark eyes squinting slightly into the sun. She's wearing a pinafore that is just a little too big for her. She is sitting tenuously—posed?—atop a low wall. On the back of the print, written in cursive in a feminine hand, is one word: "Peppina."

Who are you, *signorina*?

The photo is clearly from Italy. My father had been a bombardier-navigator on a B24 crew in the 15<sup>th</sup> US Army Air Force, based at Pantanella, east of the Apennines. It would be 1944, then. In the photo, the sun is shining bright, casting onto Peppina a shadow of the trunk and limbs of a tree that must have been behind the photographer. In the background, an American enlisted man in a flight cap and leather jacket is leaving a building, oblivious to the photographing going on nearby. He's also squinting against the Italian sunshine.

Who took your photo? Definitely not my father: he hated taking photographs, all his life. From the war, he kept photos of himself, his plane, his crew, some pictures of bombing targets, a few shots taken through the right-side waist gunner's window of the other B24s of his squadron, up above the Alps. But why did my father have your photo at all? And why did he keep it for so long—for the sixty-eight years remaining to him?

I wonder if you were one of those poor *bambini Pugliese*, the ones whose hunger and misery he mentioned often during my

childhood, especially when I wouldn't finish my supper. But in the photo you look clean and your clothes aren't ragged. You seem healthy.

Were you the daughter of someone who worked at the base, maybe a cook or a cleaner? My father was always at ease with children (far more so than he ever was with adults; he always seemed to feel that adults had some racket going). Children's openness to the world matched his. Children are ever on their way to becoming something but never there yet.

Or were you the younger sister of an Italian girl he loved? My father grew up speaking *Ladino* (or Judaeo-Español), late-medieval Spanish with some Hebrew, Arabic, and sometimes Greek or Turkish mixed in. His parents were Sephardim born in the Ottoman Empire, who had come to New York in the 1910s as teenagers. Speaking what his family called *Spanyol*, he understood enough Italian, and could make himself understood. And he *looked* Italian: black hair and olive skin, a slim boy with kind eyes (and a handsome uniform). So was there a girlfriend? Other, I mean, than the young woman back home in Queens who would become his wife and my mother. Were you the sister of a Laura, a Rafaella, an Antonella—someone he couldn't speak of?

Or had your photo originally belonged to an unlucky buddy of my father's? Did one of the bombers miss the landing strip? Was the photo retrieved after the men of the 777<sup>th</sup> Squadron brought in the bodies of the dead, after someone went through the pockets of their charred uniforms and gave the snapshot to my father for safekeeping? Did he keep it for so long because it was a memorial to a dead friend?

## 2. Fate

Early on, I learned that a person in war needs luck. The belongings of the dead signal something about luck in the drama of Fate. To discard what the universe has touched is to

play with Fate. When I was growing up, my father had no patience for men who proclaimed their heroism in WWII. *His* treasure was, forever, a specific commemoration of the play of Fate: eating real (i.e., not powdered) scrambled eggs after returning from a mission. Eating scrambled eggs was not just a pleasure for him, but a kind of celebration of good luck. Call it grace.

My father said he had been lucky to be on a crew whose commander was a competent pilot. The man was a “son of a bitch” (the third most disparaging epithet my father could bestow, after “bastard” and “prick” but before “schmuck”), but he was a good leader. My father was also lucky not to have been a gunner. He was 5 foot 6, there weren’t too many men who were shorter than he was, and the shortest gunner was generally assigned to the ball turret. Even before I read Jarrell’s poem, I knew what happened to ball-turret gunners.

He was lucky that his plane didn’t malfunction, drop out of the air, skid off a runway. He was lucky when cloud cover hid his plane from radar. He was lucky that the flak (he tended to refer to it with the onomatopoeic “ack-ack”) never brought his plane down. He was lucky that, after his crew came back over the Alps into Italy, fighter planes piloted by Tuskegee Airmen—the Red Tails, as he called them, whose record of safely escorting Army Air Force bombers was the best of all fighter groups—brought him back to base safe.

He was lucky that he didn’t fall out through the open bomb bay doors. Sometimes a bomb would get fouled on the rack and fail to drop. It was the bombardier’s job to walk out on the narrow catwalk (no parachute because he couldn’t fit through the hatch with it) and finagle it loose with his boot, the terrain of Czechoslovakia or Romania rushing past a few thousand feet below, just a skinny young man in a lined flight suit, freezing air, wind, gravity, and luck.

He was lucky to be a Jew. The story, which he told more than



once, was that a flight-training commander, a Southerner whom he knew to be an anti-Semite, had flunked him out of pilot training after only one trip up in the open-cockpit trainer. You were supposed to get two chances, he said, but this guy ("the bastard") had learned that he was a Jew and failed him after only one flight. The Army sent him to navigator and bombardier training instead, and then shipped him to Italy. The luck of it, he said, was that if he had become a fighter pilot, he was sure, the Messerschmitt 109s would have made short work of him.

My father's universe was thoroughly perfused with mystery, although nothing made him like religion, not even being shot at. He never prayed in any conventional way. Religious rites to him were a kind of farce: people put on costumes and bow or kneel, fast or feast—putting on the agony, he always called it, from a 1920's music-hall song: "puttin' on the agony/puttin' on the style." Making too much of yourself. As if, for *you*, the universe cares.

Fate is the universe's lack of interest in you. You do your best, you live your life, and the universe either looks after you, or it doesn't. My father's mother died of a heart condition when she was 23 years old. His mother's father had a heart attack on the stairs to the Third Avenue Elevated not long after that. He died, too. My father's aunt Fortunée, who had moved from the ancestral home in Edirne, Turkey, to France in the 1930s, survived the Nazi occupation in Paris by passing for a gentile. Her brother, his uncle Gabriel, died in the camps. My father was not yet 4 when his mother died, but he lived to age 89.

When my father did die, in a hospice in the Bronx, Hurricane Sandy blew into New York. Trees fell. The seas overtopped the land. It has made me feel that he was probably right about the universe and Fate.

### 3. Children

Even before I knew anything about fighters and bombers, battles, missions, weapons, camaraderie, uniforms, or luck in battle, I learned that war is about children. I learned that I was fortunate beyond measure to live without either war or poverty. I was a child myself, probably 5 or 6 years old, when my father first told me about the ragged children of Apulia. I had decent clothing and I didn't know real hunger. My father had been poor as a child—raised, as he liked to remind me, in a walkup tenement whose residents shared toilets, one water closet in the hallway on each floor, near the stairs. Those Italian children around his base were even poorer than he had been.

That my father was barely more than a child himself when he flew on bombing missions, that the bombs he dropped from his airplane onto oil refineries or marshalling yards must have injured or killed people and that some of those people were children—those things only dawned on me later. That his airman buddies would also have been barely out of childhood. The girls in Naples, where he went once on leave, must also have been children, too. Sexually knowledgeable, but still children.

When I was in my teens, “the war” was the one in Vietnam. To my view, it involved American children, not much older than me, killing Vietnamese children, as well as adults, with horrific weaponry. The son of my mother's friend, a boy two years older than me, flew with a Medevac helicopter crew; they shipped his remains home. When I played second base, the shortstop was a classmate whose older brother had died in Vietnam. Among us 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, arguments for and against that war were so *personal*. War seems like something that 14- and 15-year-olds shouldn't have to know about. Yet so often it's their whole world.

Morally outraged by the war in Vietnam, preoccupied with it, and of course mortally frightened that I might be drafted and

forced to fight it, I asked my father what had prompted him to volunteer for the military in *his* war. At first, the answer was that he had always been fascinated by airplanes, and wanted to be a flier. Another answer was that he didn't want to be drafted; once the war broke out, he knew that draftees would go into the infantry or a tank unit. Later, he said that he had had to "fight Hitler." By the time he was in his eighties, the reason had been that he had felt he had to stop Hitler from killing Jews.

I'm sure he meant all of those. Motivations are complex, after all, and elusive. The poignant one, never expressed to me but always evident, was his connection to a universe that was magically full of possibility. America should stand for something—something that Europe had lost, or reneged on. Not freedom, which everyone talks about. Something more like fairness. Or just beneficence, spread as widely as could be. Which amounts, I suppose, to *hope*. Strange as it sounds, I think my father fought for hope.

I watched the 1968 Democratic National Convention on the TV in our living room with my parents and their friends Stan and June. The set was tuned to CBS; the avuncular Walter Cronkite was in the broadcasting booth in Chicago. I remember the night air, the August humidity, the front and back doors open in hopes of catching a breeze, all of us drinking the lemon-flavored iced tea that my mother let me prepare from a Lipton packet and tap water, poured over ice into tall glasses. Maybe the green floor fan, much older than I was, was moving some air around the room. The adults were talking about Hubert Humphrey and LBJ; about Allard Lowenstein, a friend of friends of theirs and a delegate at the convention; about the war.

The televised coverage cut to scenes on Michigan Avenue, where policemen were pushing young demonstrators to the ground, clubbing them—even the girls, to my astonishment—and hauling them into vans that would take them to jail. Beating American children on live television. Not Black children in Alabama,

which my parents decried but seemed to attribute to a system that they were sure would soon collapse, but *white* children. Kids who looked like me, just a few years older (indeed, some of them were the older siblings of friends of mine). Beating children not in Montgomery but Chicago.

I stood up from the floor, where I had been sitting, my mouth fallen open, speechless. My father stood from the sofa where the adults were seated. "No!," he cried out in the hot night. "Not in America!! This is *America*! We don't do that *here*! It's not what we fought for!" Anguish was in his voice, heartbreak on his face.

White kids beaten by police and arrested, Black kids beaten by police and arrested. In our largely Jewish neighborhood of small private homes with neat yards, my father was among the outspoken upholders of civil rights for Black Americans. I know he was furious at the Jim Crow laws down South, lynchings, assaults on civil rights demonstrators. Among all the disturbing news in the papers in the 1960s, it was the brutality of Southerners toward Black citizens to which he always drew my attention. Separate water fountains. Beatings, dogs, and fire hoses. We studied the civil rights movement together, he and I. He explained to my friends the civic and moral value of social programs, why they weren't just for "freeloading" by "the Negroes." He complained to our local civic association about their pressuring homeowners in the neighborhood not to sell to Black families. When he finally moved out of the house, he sold it to a Black couple.

Yet, it took police violence against white kids to break his heart. My father and his buddies, all those middle-aged men I knew who, in their late teens or early twenties, had waged the Second World War—Irv on a PT boat, Gene in a tank, Cousin Willie with the infantry landing at Normandy, my father in his B24, and others—they saw the campaign for Black rights as akin to their own. Akin to, but not *of*.

#### 4. Becoming

I sensed that my father and his friends had always known what they were fighting *against* in WWII. But if they thought about what they were fighting *for*—and I'm not sure it was ever a conscious thought, perhaps just a kind of embodied drive—they would have said that they aimed to uphold something that was inchoately American. Hence my father's anguish at the police riot in the streets of Chicago in 1968. But also something still incomplete. This incompleteness of the American project distinguishes it from the fully fleshed-out process that makes Germany German, France French, or Hungary Hungarian, or can seem to. An Englishman might yearn for the "sceptered isle"; Americans have nothing to yearn for, so we must hope.

I've never seen the dialectical nature of hope that white Americans, including those WWII fighters whom I came to know, have so clearly as I do today, with marches for Black Lives Matter. It's never been so clear to so many white Americans that the double edge of the hope we harbor needs to be examined. We who have been admitted to the club of whiteness are free to wonder whether the political norms, cultural traditions, and economic verities of American life really do constitute progress toward a more justice society, and therefore grounds for hope—or if no republic and no set of mores can withstand the ruthless demolition of civilization by the historical engine of capitalism, and therefore that hope is beside the point. This dialectic is a luxury, however lugubrious the debate sometimes feels.

If hope is the residue of an inner sense that the American project is incomplete, then the failure to extend that project to Black Americans—the unwillingness of the Army to integrate until it was forced by Harry S. Truman; the persistence of Jim Crow in the South despite America's ostensible victory over tyranny in the war; the even longer persistence (to this day) of unequal opportunities for education, housing, and employment between Black and white Americans; and the mass

incarceration of Black men—has amounted to a refusal to include Black Americans as fully worthy of considering hope. That is, as fully American. To say that Black Lives Matter is, in this sense, to assert not merely the simple truth that the count of Black bodies slain by police ought not to exceed that of white or other bodies, but that the meaning of American life, which is supposed to be to question whether there are grounds for hope, has been denied systematically to Black Americans.

I think it was hard for my father and his liberal friends to see how to complete the American project. I think it was hard for them to acknowledge just how excluded Blacks were, and how systemic that exclusion was. They were young, for one thing. My father and many of his friends were highly educated by the time I got to know them in the '60s, but back when they had been in the armed forces during WWII, they were just out of high school. Most had never been outside of New York, let alone North America. They thought they wanted the best for everyone, but the "everyone" they knew were Jews who had struggled, Italian-Americans who had struggled, Greek-Americans who had struggled. People who were in the process of becoming white. That Black Americans were still struggling meant, I'm sure they believed, that things would eventually turn out well for Blacks, too, just as things had turned out well for their parents, their friends' parents, and themselves.

To my father, that was the luck of being born in America: *things could work out*. You had to be on guard for hate, but the Constitution and the laws would spread justice. The system would work for Black Americans. (The truly unlucky, to liberals of my father's crowd, were the ones born in Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and so forth: even those who hadn't been extinguished by the Nazis were impoverished by the broken postwar economies, subjugated by authoritarian governments, sentenced to the Gulag for crimes they weren't aware of, etc.

*Theirs* was the bad luck of birth.) Black Americans, to them, had been as lucky as they had. Their time would come. "Their," not "our."

There is also the naiveté. Not just of those boys fighting WWII who couldn't quite see that they were not fighting for *all* Americans, but the necessarily naïve illusion behind the whole American project. There is only one way to accept America as a work in progress: that the country is essentially ahistorical, that America has no historically constituted Truth, only the remnants of yesterday and a weird, often unsatisfying, and hotly debated vision of tomorrow. To include Black Americans means recognizing multiple visions of tomorrow, differently burdened by yesterday. To include all Americans is to act like a small child, making new friends at the beach or playground, naïve to differences of upbringing because of a focus on rebuilding the sand fortress or taking turns on the slide.

To my father, the world was populated by beings who are continuously *becoming*, never fully complete. Did this come from his experience in WWII? From observing the play of Fate, the universe's mocking of human self-importance, the seriousness of small children with too little to eat?

Beings who are always becoming. I haven't known war first-hand. I envisage it as an elemental state, a naked encounter with an unforgiving universe. If you are not becoming something, you are dead. If you are lucky, you are alive. Nobody gets to be who they aren't, but if they're lucky they get to keep becoming. You live your best life and the universe does what it will.

Is this why wars are always about children? Because children are always in the act of becoming and war separates becoming from being? I still wonder why my father, believer in Fate, spoke of children and not of death. Peppina, enigmatic child of war, what were you becoming in 1944? Did Fate, in the form

of war, deal you a favorable hand? If you had the luck to survive, then you would be 85 years old today, or thereabouts. What do you tell your grandchildren about the war, the American airmen you met, their naïveté, their hope? Knowing what you know, what are you becoming now?