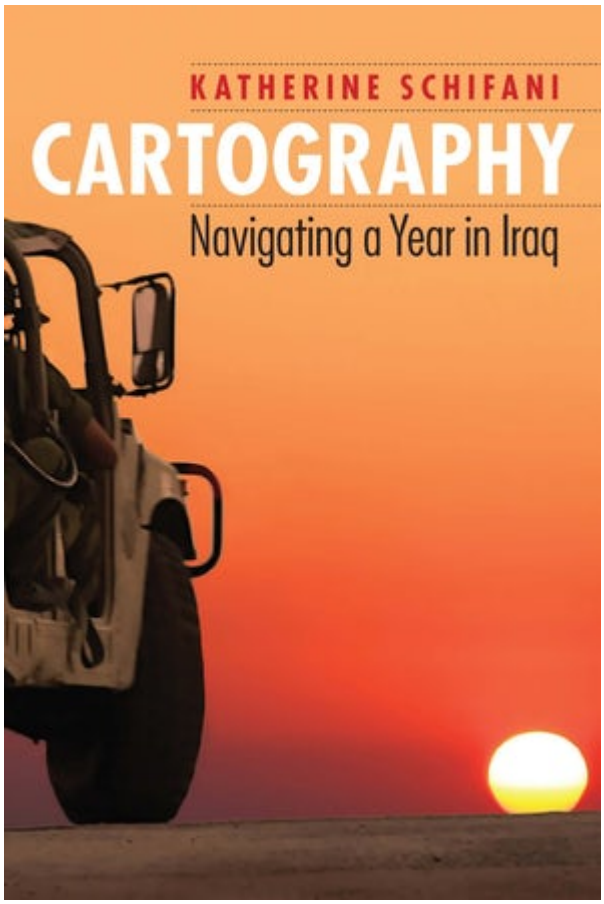
New Review from MaxieJane Frazier: “Mapping Fault Lines in Kate Schifani’s Cartography”



Kate Schifani’s memoir, *Cartography*, maps faulty practices and question of fault over her year serving in Iraq as an advisor and logistician to the Iraqi military. In her dangerous deployed experience, she excels in her ill-defined, nearly impossible advisory role while serving during the context of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” repeal that personally affected her as a gay woman. The everyday events she details build to bigger questions about the U.S. role in the Middle East and our country’s culpability for its impact on Iraq.

Schifani’s gritty, no-bullshit narrative places her voice

within the scope of widely varied war literature such as M.C. Armstrong's *The Mysteries of Haditha*, Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country*, Teresa Fazio's *Fidelis*, and even Tim O'Brien's classic novel *The Things They Carried*. A confident and unforgettable narrator, Schifani brings us down to the paperclips, dried-up Wite-Out, government pens, and the Saddam lighter in her desk drawer sketching the details of a convoluted conflict. *Cartography* leaves us grappling with the figurative (and sometimes literal) fragmented remains of the people the American military should have been protecting: Iraqi citizens acting as interpreters for the U.S. military; innocent Iraqis caught in the midst of this conflict; American servicemembers' and their families' lives disrupted by seemingly unnecessary deployment; the LGBTQ+ members of the armed forces, and more.

Cartography is a series of connected, chronological essays that highlight the *Catch-22*-esque absurdity of Schifani's experiences in Iraq which waver between outlandish cultural differences with her Iraqi counterparts to painful dissonance with her homophobic American peers. Keeping her sexual identity hidden in an inevitably misogynistic, hyper-sexual deployed environment leads readers to question if there is anywhere that this young Air Force captain does *not* face threats. The Air Force sends "a B-52 aircraft maintenance officer serving here as a logistician embedded with two dozen Green Berets" or as she puts it, "the least qualified person for this job" as an advisor to Iraqi military. She only mentions her career experience and barely highlights the possibility that these men will not listen to a young woman. Reading how she earns respect is one of the most satisfying aspects of this memoir.

We bump along early in the account through humorous stories of a forklift that turns only one direction and outdated Iraqi gym weight loss equipment that jiggles the user on a 1950s belt. Then she shifts us into more serious and heart-stopping

moments as the humor behind her experience dissipates. The absurdity never changes. The worst of Schifani's many meetings with the Iraqis she advises happen in the middle of the night, and we are like a film audience begging characters not to check out a noise in a horror movie. But she unfailingly performs her mission in the hours of darkness and pre-dawn hours, bumming rides when they lose transportation, and coming up with successes against all odds. She finds mattresses and air conditioners and all sorts of items the Iraqi military needs, even as the American people she works with marvel at her ingenuity. The tension in *Cartography* builds with such a subtle trajectory that we find ourselves longing for her tour to be finished, for her to leave this unpredictable and unwelcome deployed mission, because the bigger shoe feels constantly ready to drop.

Military readers will recognize the tightwire act Schifani negotiates of gender discrimination from all fronts during a deployment where she's making an impact and doing her job surrounded by men and hiding the fact she is gay. Already, only a few years after her experience, we're coming to believe things are better for women and for gay servicemembers. They probably aren't.

In a theme common with so many other women writing about the military, Schifani explores the sense of indoctrination into an outdated boys' club mentality. Military units, especially deployed units, flatten out individuality and make juvenile, worn out jokes about "no homo" and "your mother" along with a table-top, full-size poster "of a woman entirely naked except for a pair of shoes and a bandolier that sits between her obviously augmented breasts" unquestioned, common practices. Schifani's masterful dialogue is one of the best places we witness this smart, capable woman navigating the discrimination bombarding her from all sides. One exchange between an Army lieutenant colonel, embarrassed and unbudging, ends with her quiet victory, only marred by the overheard

“Motherfucking air force cunt waltzes in here with some haji motherfucker and tells me how to fucking count.” The stream of obscenity trailing down the hall after her feels as if it could sum up most capable young women’s military experience. But we can tell Schifani shrugs off this and most of the rest of the hostility she faces. She saves her emotions for when they matter most.

Cartography wins us over in the details as if Schifani has drawn out a treasure map with dashed lines of her experiences drawing the relatively unscathed pathway through the landmines of her deployment. Still, we dread what we’ll find when we reach “X” marks the spot. Yet, every time a sentence begins with “We shouldn’t be allowed to,” Schifani joins a chequered and popular lineage of military people doing what it takes to complete their mission while skirting around the more restrictive rules. O’Brien’s young soldiers giggle over tossing a smoke grenade between them and Fazio’s deployed boyfriend cuts deals to obtain air conditioners from the logisticians, to name just a few instances. We know there is a long history of military stories about people shouldn’t have done something, but they do it anyway. With Schifani, we learn it’s a way of life.

Schifani becomes competent at something other than her Air Force trained career path and, though she wouldn’t say it outright, damn good at her job in a way that constantly surprises her immediate superiors but that seems second nature to her. She makes the phone calls, listens in meetings, and comes up with “the goods” when everyone seems to expect her to ignore the requests. In a quiet way, she proves her gender and sexuality have nothing to do with her outstanding performance.

If the book is a map of experiences, the sense of place and movement is hard to follow in a reader’s head, mostly because her deployed location was surely classified or adjacent to a classified compound. We drive off places with Schifani, but we’re not always sure what is part of her compound, what is

out in the unprotected space beyond the compound walls, and what locations are important to pay attention to. When she takes us to a partially built building as the narrative is coming to a close, we're not sure if it's in her compound. Knowing the layout and proximity of this scene is essential to the plot. At this building, her story abruptly ends. While Schifani could be enacting the sudden way the U.S. ended the mission at her location, readers might wonder what she means when she says in those final lines "I think I did this." How metaphorical is her intent?

Schifani's memoir is a vivid book that places readers in a combat zone for a glimpse of the mind-numbing dullness punctuated with moments of paralyzing fear, the circular nature of huge bureaucracy, and the thrill of life that wavers on and off a razor-sharp edge of uncertainty. In a palimpsest of individual experience, she maps fault lines in the U.S. military Middle East involvement through the ingrained cultural narratives of misogyny from the American military and from the Iraqi people.

Cartography is a must-read to understand more about deployed military experiences. The unspoken questions are just as important as her richly rendered narrative—who lets this situation happen? Who allows both the Iraqi and American soldiers act toward this woman? Who thinks any of this is normal? And, finally, who is at fault?

Schifani offers a quiet and clear criticism of our role and influence in Iraq, questioning her own culpability for what happens in the country. As she might say herself, after her deployed experience there, *Insha'allah.*

New Nonfiction from Kristina Usaite: “Against a Cruel Society, I Came Out to Myself”

When I was losing myself, the only thing that saved me was immigrating to America. Only then, with great effort and sacrifice, I was able to come out to myself and do what we all have to do for ourselves – to be who we are. Condemnation, fear, physical injury, loss, death – these are the first words in response to the question of how L.G.B.T.Q.+ people survive in post-Soviet countries. Many of us have been beaten or killed in one form or another. Where I’m from, Ukraine, fear lives in every vein. When you are a woman who loves another woman or a man who loves another man, this is included in the category of things people don’t talk about. I grew up where the words *lesbian* or *gay* were not spoken, but other words were said I would not dare to say aloud. The traditional family was the only concept I grew up with, even though I can’t connect myself to this concept. From an early age, I realized I had unusual feelings towards women, which I couldn’t find a name for. The L.G.B.T.Q.+ topic was out of reach; I didn’t know what questions to ask to understand who I am. I didn’t know such questions could be asked.

In high school, others found me different. The stereotype that girls should wear skirts didn’t leave my classmates, but it never took root in me. I was often asked when I’d look like a girl. I didn’t know how to answer this question because I didn’t understand it. I was already a girl. In my student years, the concept of my love was becoming clearer. But that didn’t mean I could afford it. All my girlfriends lost their virginity, and I couldn’t allow myself to be looked at differently. Even a bottle of vodka didn’t help me to undress and go to bed with a man. After every unsuccessful attempt I had to lie to my friends. I had to carry condoms in my bag and show them with obvious visibility, so that no one had doubts creeping in. The fear that friends would start to despise me has always hung over me. There is a certain mentality of concepts and stereotypes that make you think that you should do the same as everyone else. In Ukraine, it is easy to surrender to society and miss the opportunity to discover who you really are.

In my second year at university, I had my first relationship with a girl. We hid in dark corners where we could finally

breathe. We could only hug briefly when meeting in public. Our hands met in places where there were no eyes. We often had to run away, to go to other cities where nobody knew us. Where we could look at each other and hold our gaze, not arousing too much attention with the smiles we exchanged. We loved loving each other, but we could only love in lies. We even lied to ourselves, saying these feelings have no life. I wanted to believe it was not so. But she couldn't help succumbing to society. She continued to love me, but at a distance with another man. I was sure this was the future that awaited me every time. There was no one who could tell me otherwise. No one who could talk to me at all.

At the time I met my second girlfriend, she was engaged to a man. Our relationship began soon after and a month later she had to get married. The fate of our relationship took the same turn as my previous one. We kissed behind the trees. We spoke words of love through messages and then immediately deleted them. We sent her fiancé to the store to find a moment alone, hugging each other, touching our hands. She wanted to leave him, but her attempts were unsuccessful. She said, "What am I going to tell my family? What will they think of me? I love you, but I have to marry him." I was maid of honor at her wedding. Kissing him, she kissed me too. Everything happened only because we believed these feelings had no place in this world.

Nobody knew I was a lesbian, including myself. I often denied my feelings and inclinations, and questioned if I was normal. Suddenly people began to understand who I was before I knew it. By deception, I was met in the courtyard where I was met by a few men to show me their strength in opinion. After regaining consciousness from beatings behind garages, I quickly came to the conclusion this was not my place to be. It was useless to go to the police, knowing they were not involved in such matters. They would've shaken the hands of those who beat me for who I am. I had no one to expect help

from. I no longer wanted to wake up behind garages. I decided to immigrate to America.

I had to study everything again after immigrating. I learned to speak openly. I learned to feel openly. I learned not to be afraid to feel. But it took a long time. I saw L.G.B.T.Q.+ communities in America and, at first, rejected them because fear lived deeper and stronger and didn't allow me to be touched by who I was. At my first job, an employee asked me if I was a lesbian. I immediately blurted out "no." It was the first time the word *lesbian* was applied to me in a positive form. For the first time, I heard in my head "I think I'm a lesbian." Later I found out half of our staff was gay. I didn't deny myself anymore.

My mother didn't know what I was struggling with. I couldn't lose her. In America I met many people from different countries, mainly Russia, who were disowned and abandoned by their parents. The pain the loss inflicted was unbearable. For a very long time I prepared to tell my mother who I was. She and I were very close, and in the absence of such large and significant information about me I didn't feel complete. On the phone, a year after I moved to America, the conversation happened. Having said I have a girlfriend, my mother's first question was, "Is everything good between you?"

No, you can't be silent. You can't give in, giving yourself up to people. You can't play by the rules and be convenient for others. I'm glad I'm on my side. It feels good to say – I am a lesbian. What is finally more important to me is that I feel. It took a large part of my life, and chasing a new one, to finally come out to myself.

New Nonfiction from James Warren Boyd: “The Ecstasy of Sister Bernadette”

In seventh grade my Catholic elementary school received a new principal, Sister Bernadette, who strode onto the blacktop that first day like Darth Vader walking down the ramp of an Imperial shuttle. Her determined expression and alert eyes matched her gait, punctuated with her stylish yet sensible thick-heeled, closed-toe pumps. She wore what I would come to know as her signature look: a midnight-blue, knee length, A-line dress trimmed with an immaculate white collar and matching slightly flared cuffs. The fact that she voluntarily chose to wear the now-optional veil long after all but the most senior nuns had abandoned them read radically -conservative.

My experience as a child of the ‘70s in Southern California was that you could tell a nun’s temperament by what she wore. Younger nuns (and some of their older allies) in our parish wore breezy blue polyester separates, tried fervently to be groovy and relevant, and were admirably committed to social justice. Older nuns who wore THE VEIL with matching black or dark blue habits were often mean and more than occasionally violent; they generally, as I saw it, dwelled in the dark recesses of the convent and emerged to discipline and punish.

But it was these same veiled authoritarians who provided the protection I needed as an obviously queer child. In my first weeks after beginning the third grade as a new student, the boy that would become my nemesis, David, stole my thick tortoiseshell glasses, wearing them in the back pockets of his blue corduroy uniform pants, and taunting “Yeah, try to catch me, butt-face.” I was an easy mark; in part because I started 1st grade a year early, I was always the youngest and

frequently the shortest in my class. Most damningly, though, I was nelly: one of those little boys with neither the ability nor the inclination to butch it up to avoid ridicule. My parents—my mother, consumed by guilt for the queer son she thought she was responsible for creating, and my father emotionally checked out and gone a good part of the year for business—weren't much help. As a family, we seemed to be universally ashamed rather than outraged about my being bullied, convinced somehow that I or we had brought this social embarrassment upon ourselves.

Sr. Bernadette, fortunately for me, ignored and missed nothing. As we filed back to class after early-morning assembly, she witnessed one of the boys in David's posse hit another student on the back of the head simply because he was standing in front of him. Sr. Bernadette pulled both boys out of line, got our attention, and shouted in exasperation, "*This* boy," pointing at the attacker, "just HIT *this* boy," pointing at the victim, "for *no reason*. What is WRONG with you people??!!"

My admiration and respect for Sr. Bernadette deepened in her duties as the English instructor for the advanced class of our grade. While other students complained about grammar drills, essay revision, and impromptu verbal quizzes on irregular verb tenses, I savored them. I relished the diagramming of sentences, especially ones that had incredibly long phrases and clauses of Sr. Bernadette's own creation with their compound subjects, transitive verbs, overly-modified nouns, appositives, and riots of prepositional phrases. I found those graphic organizers with their sideways houses and attached ladders beautiful landscapes of thought and syntax.

I think my enthusiasm for writing and grammar put me in Sr. Bernadette's good graces, which was a blessing since she proved immune to my usual sycophantic ploys. Fortunately, she

seemed to dislike David and his clan of bullies as much or more than I did—if this were possible. Plus, although clearly a bit of a jock herself, who unlike me seemed as comfortable on an athletic field as in the classroom, she didn't seem overly impressed by David's athletic abilities. She was actually *helpful* to students like me who needed a bit of coaching (since our school had no PE teachers), and sometimes spontaneously joined us on the field and blacktop to participate and instruct.

On one such occasion she offered to be the pitcher for our kickball game. I think she enjoyed expertly fulfilling the variety of polite pitching requests from the kickers (e.g. "slow giant bouncies, please" or "fast baby bouncies. please"). Sr. Mary Bernadette even did some fielding in her dress, veil, and pumps, deftly catching fly balls and scooping up grounders while she pitched for both teams. When it was David's turn, a tense hush fell over players on and off the field; we all knew that mortal enemies were facing off. David took his time getting to the plate, trying to unnerve Sr. Mary Bernadette with his swaggering, lackadaisical lope. Despite this, her, face—framed by a few wisps of hair which has escaped the side her veil—remained unchanged; in fact, her polite half-smile may have increased slightly at the corners like a Grinch grin. Her thick dark eyebrows remained neutral, her forehead unfurrowed. Her body was still, save the slow rotation of her neck which allowed her gaze to follow David to the plate; her steely stare focused on David like a panther stalking prey. When he finally arrived at the plate and looked up from the dirt at her with a smirk, the corners of her half smile quivered ever so slightly.

"How would you like your pitch?" Sr. Bernadette asked evenly. She took a breath, and rolled the ball as requested with perfect accuracy. David watched the incoming pitch: as it neared, he rocked back on a crepe heel of his brown suede Wallabee knockoffs before taking a few leaning stutter steps

toward the red rubber ball and kicking it with all his might using the inside of his foot. His kick bulleted on the ground toward Sr. Bernadette. Despite its great speed and a weird, high bounce, she caught the ball confidently above her head with a resounding, “thwap.” We held our breath as she lowered her arms, the ball now firmly gripped in a single hand, and looked at a gaping David. She arched one eyebrow and waited for him to run. David trotted towards first, haltingly, eyes locked with hers; then he broke their gaze and sprinted. Sr. Bernadette cocked her arm with the ball back slowly, seemingly wanted to draw out David’s cringing as he ran, and when David caught her eye directly across from her, she launched the ball like a trebuchet, hitting David so hard he stumbled with its impact.

Amidst the cheers from those outside of David’s retinue, Sr. Bernadette walked back to the mound with a laugh we had never heard. Her subtle, sardonic chuckle was familiar, but this was an unbridled, throaty laugh from deep within. She lifted her face sightly to the sun in elation for a brief moment, her veil tipping back, punctuating her ecstasy. When she arrived at the mound she had regained her composure, and she turned toward David who had returned to the sidelines and asked, “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” David groused, rubbing his shoulder.

Sr. Bernadette nodded at him, and then scanned the field to see who had the ball. She made a beckoning motion to the student, and caught the throw in the air solidly with one hand.

She smiled and scanned David’s team, “Who’s next?”

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Years later I went to visit Sr. Bernadette at the motherhouse on a trip to see family and friends in Southern California. I waited in the quiet, immaculate, oddly corporate-feeling

lobby, until she strode around the corner, and exclaimed brightly, “James Boyd!” She seemed only a bit older, and I realized at that point how young she must have been when she became our principal. Gone was her signature habit-esque dress replaced with business casual separates. Gone too was the veil; she had combed-back salt and pepper hair in a short, flattering style. We exchanged hellos (my recollection is that we shook hands) and she invited me to sit with her. I asked her if she remembered our class, and she said, diplomatically, we were “a difficult class but at least we had energy.” The classes who came after us, she said, were “hard to get to do anything.”

As she reminisced, I looked into her eyes—framed now with soft wrinkles—still marked with a fierce intelligence, eyes that never missed a bully’s blacktop trick. But gone was the sternness I surmise was necessary as a school administrator who valued order and fairness. What was in abundance now was the once rarely seen glint of approval she gave students when a verb was conjugated or a sentence diagrammed correctly. And in the corner of her eyes as we sat evaluating each other anew was something I hadn’t seen or noticed as a child: a playful glint.

She asked about me. I told her I had moved to San Francisco and was pursuing a master’s degree in English. I told her that one of the reasons for my visit was to thank her for being the person who first got me to love the subject.

“I’m happy to hear that,” she replied with a smile, “You know, I’m not teaching anymore.”

“Really? Why not?” I think my expression might have revealed how unfathomable I thought this was, since in my mind she was *the* English teacher.

“A few years ago, the order needed someone to be the accountant and I stepped up to do it.”

“Do you like it?” I asked.

She shrugged, “One of us needed to do it.”

After a few more moments of conversation, she stood up and extended her hand again. “Well, good luck to you, James,” she said, shaking my hand, “and good luck with your studies.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Nice to see you.”

Sr. Bernadette squeezed my shoulder maternally and gave me a warm, genuine half smile before she turned and walked out of the reception area without looking back, her footsteps echoing in emptiness and deafening quiet.

I stood still for a moment in the vestibule—not wanting to move or make a noise, not wanting that pause after to end—before exiting the motherhouse to my car. As I walked, I wondered what she thought of these periodic visits of the adult specters of children past. What must it be like to meet her historic fan base, surely the former students most motivated to visit? I regret that I didn’t ask her if she, too, remembered that sunny afternoon on the kickball field when she transformed into a superhero.

New Fiction from Rufi Thorpe: An Excerpt from ‘The Knockout Queen’

The following excerpt of The Knockout Queen *by Rufi Thorpe is reprinted with permission by A.A. Knopf.*

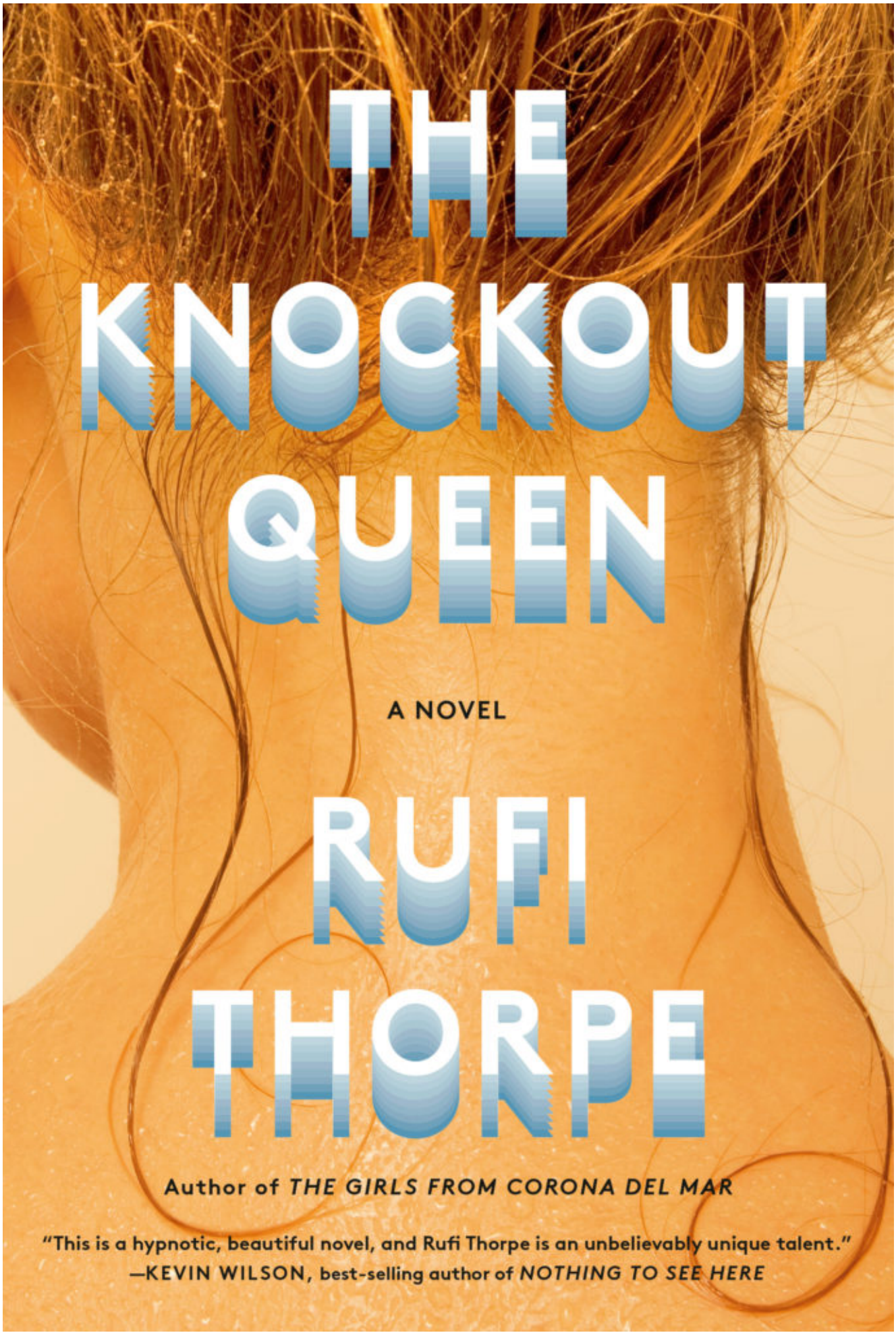
When I was eleven years old, I moved in with my aunt after my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too. Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. *Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated!* If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting. You have seen them so often on TV that seeing an actual one is grotesque: the real live lawyers, all sweaty, their dark mouths venting coffee breath directly into your face, the judge who has a cold and keeps blowing his nose, the defendants who are crying or visibly shaking, whose moms are watching or whose kids are trying to sit still in the back. It's a lot to take in when you're eleven and even just a few months prior you were making an argument that not receiving a particular video game for your birthday would be "unfair."

The town to which my little sister and I were relocated after a brief stint in foster care was a suburban utopia a la Norman Rockwell, updated with a fancy coffee shop and yoga studio. We moved in just before the Fourth of July, and I remember being shooed into a town fair, where there were bounce houses and hot dogs being sold to benefit the Kiwanis club. What the fuck was the Kiwanis club? I was given a wristband and ten dollars and told to go play. A woman painted a soccer ball on my face. (All the boys got soccer balls, and all the girls got

butterflies; those were the options.)

Bordered on the west by the sea, on the north by a massive airport, on the east by a freeway, and on the south by a sprawling, smoke-belching oil refinery, North Shore was a tiny rectangle. Originally built as a factory town for the oil refinery, it was a perfect simulacrum of a small town anywhere in America, with a main street and cute post office, a stately brick high school, a police department with predictably brutalist architecture; but instead of fading into rural sprawl at its edges, this fairy-tale town was wedged inside the greater body of Los Angeles.


THE KNOCKOUT QUEEN
A NOVEL
RUFI THORPE
Author of THE GIRLS FROM CORONA DEL MAR
"This is a hypnotic, beautiful novel, and Rufi Thorpe is an unbelievably unique talent."
—KEVIN WILSON, best-selling author of NOTHING TO SEE HERE

My aunt’s place was one of those small stucco houses that look immediately like a face, the door forming a kind of nose, and the windows on either side two dark, square eyes. She had a cypress bush in the front that had turned yellow on one side, and many pinwheels planted on the border of her lawn, the bright colored plastic sun-bleached to a ghostly white as they spun in the wind. North Shore was a windy place with many hills, and I was shocked that people could live in such a wonderful climate without smiling all the time. The air pollution from the airport and oil refinery were pushed inland by the sea breezes. Even our trash cans did not smell, so clean was the air there. Sometimes I would stick my head into them and breathe deeply, just to reassure myself that trash was still trash.

On either side, my aunt’s house was flanked by mansions, as was the case on almost every street of the town. Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor’s face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.

If there were people living in the mansion to the right of our house, I never saw them. Their trash cans did not go out, no cars parked in their drive, except a gardener who came like clockwork every Tuesday, who always gave me a nervous but friendly wave. In the mansion to the left of our house, there lived a girl and her father, a girl who, though I would never have guessed it from looking at her, so young and unsullied did she seem, was my own age, and with whom I would go to school for the next seven years. Her name was Bunny Lampert, and she was the princess of North Shore, and somehow, almost against my will, I became her friend.

One thing that Bunny and I had in common, besides being next-door neighbors, was an unusual lack of adult supervision. North Shore being the paradisiacal bubble that it was, many children walked to school or rode their bikes. But I noticed that Bunny and I were never scooted out the door by parents who rushed to remind us of lunches or fetch lost backpacks, but instead climbed out of houses empty and untended, checking our belongings ourselves, distracted as adults about to set out on the morning's commute. Perhaps it would have been natural for us to walk to school together, but this did not occur. I was invisible to Bunny, and so I came to know a great deal about her before she learned anything about me.

The first year I was in North Shore, we were in sixth grade, but even then Bunny was tall, the tallest girl in our year, but also taller than the tallest boy. I'm sure there are people who would tell you who the most beautiful girls in our school were, and Bunny would not have been found on any of their lists, and yet I loved to look at her. Not for any arrangement of features or gifts of figure, but because she was terribly alive. Like a rabbit or a fox. She was just right there. You could see her breathing, almost feel the blood prickling in her skin, her cells gobbling the sunlight.

I think, as we headed into middle school, it was this vital, translucent quality that kept boys her age from having crushes on her, crushes that required a more opaque surface that they could project onto, that evoked different things than life itself. They were interested in girls who reminded them of movies, or who seemed older, or who seemed innocent, or who seemed smart. Bunny didn't seem. She didn't remind me of anyone. I liked to walk behind her for the cute way she would pull a wedgie from her butt, the way she would sing to herself, always a little sharp, the way she ate an Eggo waffle from a paper towel as she went, careful to throw the paper towel away in a trash can when she got to school.

Her father, though I hardly ever saw him, I saw everywhere. It

was his wolfish grin on almost every dangling for sale sign in the town, his arms crossed over his chest, his white teeth showing in a friendly laugh. He was on for sale signs, but he was also on banners at our school, where he sponsored a seemingly endless number of fund-raising events. He was on the city council and so his name was further attached to every fair, carnival, rally, or Christmas parade. Ray Lampert was inescapable.

I had seen him at that first Fourth of July fair, a huge sign with his headshot on it at a booth where a pretty blond woman gave out picnic blankets with his company's logo stitched on one side. Two Palms Realty. I was afraid to take one of the blankets, even though the pretty blond woman manning the booth told me they were free. In my child gut, I believed they were sewn with some kind of voodoo that would ensnare anyone who touched them.

I often passed by his office, which was on Main Street. He was never in there, though I grew used to seeing the blond woman I had met at the fair, wearing her headset, tapping keys on a space-age-looking computer with a monitor bigger than our TV at home.

Because our houses were next door to each other and on rather narrow plots, the bedroom windows were directly across from one another on the second story, and so I had a literal window into Bunny's life, although I could not see her without being seen myself. When she was home, I kept my blinds carefully closed, but when she was not at home, I would look into her room and examine its contents. In fact, I looked in all the windows of their home, which was decorated with a lavish '80s decadence: gilt dining chairs and a gleaming glass-topped table, white sofas and white rugs over dark, almost black, mahogany floors. The kitchen, which I had to enter their backyard in order to properly examine, was a Grecian temple of white marble, though they never seemed to cook and what was obviously supposed to be a fruit bowl was filled instead with

junk, papers, and pens and keys.

They had no dogs or cats, no hamsters, not even plants. Nothing lived in that house except for Bunny, and presumably her father, though he was never at home. As to what had happened to Bunny's mother, I knew only that she had died and that there had been some air of tragedy about it, a suddenness, not a prolonged illness, and I was in high school before I learned that it was a car accident. I found this explanation disappointingly mundane. Why had a simple car accident been so whispered about, so difficult to confirm? My informant, a glossy, sleazy little imp named Ann Marie, the kind of girl who is incessantly eating a sucker or popsicle in hopes of being seen as sexual, giggled. "That wasn't the scandal," she said. "The scandal was that her mother was fucking a day-care worker at the Catholic preschool. Mr. Brandon. And he was only like twenty at the time." Where was Mr. Brandon now? He had moved, had left town, no more was known.

I often walked by that little preschool, attached to the Catholic church, which was a lovely white stucco building on a corner lot with a playground and red sandbox, and wondered about Bunny's mother and Mr. Brandon. No one could tell me what he looked like, but for my own reasons I pictured sad eyes, too-low jeans, ice-cream abs begging to be licked. Perhaps I imagined him so only as a foil to Bunny's father, whose salt-and-pepper chest hair exploded from the collar of his dress shirt in that ubiquitous head-shot. Everything else about Ray Lampert was clean, sterilized, the bleached teeth, the rehearsed smile, the expensive clothes, but that chest hair belonged to an animal.

The gossip about Bunny's father was that he drank too much, and specifically that he was a regular at the Blue Lagoon, a tiki bar tucked a few blocks off Main Street, though he was what was referred to as "a good drunk," beloved for his willingness to spring for pizza at two in the morning and

listen to the tragic stories of other sad adult men. There was further supposition that his incredible success as a real estate agent was due to his habit of frequenting drinking holes, making friends with anybody and everybody. Having spent many years observing their recycling bin, I can attest that such a justification would be a bit economical with the truth. Ray Lampert was turning his birthday into a lifestyle, to quote Drake. Each week there would be two or three large gin bottles, and then seven or eight wine bottles, all of the same make, a mid-shelf Cabernet. Perhaps he bought them in bulk. It was difficult to imagine him shopping, wheeling a cart filled with nothing but Cabernet and gin through the Costco. How did someone with such an obvious drinking problem go about keeping themselves supplied? Or rather, how did a rich person go about it?

In my experience, addiction was messy. A pastiche of what you bought on payday as a treat, and what you bought on other days, convinced you wouldn’t buy anything, then suddenly finding yourself at the liquor store, smiling bravely, like it was all okay. What did the cashier at the 7-Eleven make of my own father? Did he note on what days my father bought two tall boys and on what days he bought the fifth of cheap bourbon as well, and did he keep a mental tally of whether he was getting better or worse, like I did? Or did everyone buy that kind of thing at 7-Eleven? Perhaps my father was so unremarkable in his predilections as to avoid detection at all. And what was happening to the children of all those other men? Buyers of beef jerky and vodka, peanuts and wine? What did a 7-Eleven even sell that wasn’t designed to kill you one way or another?

Most scandalous to me, and yet so alluring, so seductive, was the possibility that Ray Lampert felt no shame at all. That a rich man could stroll through the Costco, his cart clinking with glass bottles, and greet the cashier smiling, because she would just assume he threw lavish parties, or that he was stocking his wine cellar, that these dark bottles were just

like shirts for Gatsby, talismans of opulence, but whatever it was, even if it was weird, because he was rich, it was fine.

The first time I met Bunny, or what I consider to be our first meeting, because we did encounter each other at school from time to time (in fact we had been in the same homeroom for all of seventh grade, and yet never had a single conversation), we were in tenth grade, and I was discovered in her side yard. I had taken to smoking cigarettes there, and I kept a small bottle of Febreze hidden behind a piece of plywood that was leaning against their fence. The side yard itself was sheltered from the street by a high plank gate, and then was gated again before it led to their back yard, and because it ran along the side of their garage, there were no windows, making it a perfect hiding place. Bunny and her father kept their bikes there, but neither of them seemed to ever ride, and I had been smoking in this part of their property for years now without having been detected, so I was startled when she opened the gate, already wearing her bike helmet, which was pink.

She was surprised to see me and she jumped, but did not yelp, and swiftly closed the gate behind her. She tipped her head, made comically large by the helmet, and looked at me. “What are you doing here?” she whispered.

“I smoke here,” I said, bringing my cigarette out from behind my back.

“Oh,” she said, looking around at the fence, and the side of her garage. “Can’t people see the smoke as it rises above the fence?” Her first concern seemed to be abetting me in my secret habit.

She was neither offended nor concerned that I had been breaking into their property and hiding in their side yard.

“So far as I know,” I said, “no one has. But usually I kind of crouch with the hope that it dissipates. And I always figured

people would think it was you."

"Your name is Michael," she said with concentration, dragging my name up through the folds of her memory.

I nodded.

"My name is Bunny," she said.

"I know."

"I'm just getting my bike." She started to walk toward her bike, which was just to my right.

"The tires are flat," I told her, looking down at them. They had been flat for almost a year now, and I wondered what had possessed her today of all days to take a ride. There was a gust of wind then, and the fence groaned a bit, and we could hear, rather than feel, the wind rushing over the top of the fence, making a sound like scissors cutting through paper.

"Oh."

"Where were you going to go?" I asked.

"To the beach."

"By yourself?"

She nodded. "You know, I could put a chair out here for you. Like a camp chair."

"That's all right," I said.

She put her hands on her hips then, and twisted her torso with such strength that I could hear every vertebrae in her spine crack. She was perhaps five inches taller than me. "Do you want to come in?" she asked.

"To your house?"

She took off her helmet. "No one's home." There was a babyish

quality to Bunny's voice, perhaps because it seemed too small for the size of her body, and she spoke as though her nose was always a little stuffed. Of course, I wanted desperately to see inside her house up close, and so I put out my cigarette and hid it in the Altoids tin that I also kept behind the plywood, and she watched as I spritzed myself with Febreze, and then we let ourselves out the back gate and into her yard.

"This is our yard," she said. "There's a pool."

I said, "Oh wow," though I had swum in her pool several times when she and her father had been on vacation. I had climbed the fence from my aunt's yard and dropped down into hers, which was dark, since no one was home and the outside lights seemed to be on a timer, and the pool, instead of being a lit rectangle of blue, was a black mass of reflected stars, and, shaking, I had taken off my clothes and slipped naked into the warm water and swum until I felt erased.

She opened one of the French doors that led onto the patio, and we entered the hushed cathedral of her living room. She closed the door behind us, as though it could never be left open. The outside, with its scent of grass and sway of water, its gauzy light and chafing winds, would destroy the interior, the careful, expensive furniture, a pretend world that had to be exactingly maintained.

She gave me a tour of the house, showing me her father's office, with its many bookshelves filled with leather-bound books I doubted he had ever read, and the marble kitchen. She offered me a Pop-Tart, which I declined. She opened one of the crinkly metallic packages for herself, and then, to my horror, spread the two Pop-Tarts with butter and slicked them together as a sandwich. She led me upstairs, taking bites of her Pop-Tart sandwich along the way, and showed me the spare room, decorated in an Oriental style with a disturbing red satin bedspread embroidered with cranes, and the connected bathroom, which had a shiny black vanity and sink, a black toilet, and

black floors. They were ready for Madame Butterfly to commit suicide in there at any time. While the house was uncluttered, I noticed that it was also not exactly clean. Gray trails marked the highest traffic routes on the white carpet, and the sink in the all-black bathroom was spangled with little explosions of white toothpaste.

She gestured at a closed door and said, “That’s my dad’s room,” and then took me into her own bedroom, which was done up, as I already well knew, like a much younger girl’s bedroom, with a white canopy bed and a white dresser that had been plastered with My Little Pony stickers. There was a small white mirrored dressing table with a pink brocade bench. Where there should have been makeup and bottles of fancy perfume, Bunny had arranged her schoolbooks and papers. There was a bookshelf that contained not books but trophies and medals and ribbons, all so cheap and garish and crammed together that it looked more like installation art than a proper display. On one wall, there was a bulletin board that I had not been able to see before as it was on the same wall as the window. At first, it appeared to be a Hydra of female body parts, but as I looked closer I could see that they were all women playing volleyball, and then, as I looked yet closer, I could see that they were all the same woman playing volleyball, carefully trimmed from newspapers and magazines.

“That’s my Misty May-Treanor altar,” she said. “She’s a volleyball player.”

“Not creepy at all,” I said. I would have asked her why she had invited me in, or why she had shown me around with the thoroughness of a realtor, except that I already knew, for her loneliness was so palpable as to be a taste in the air. I had been many places in my life. Apartment buildings where babies free-ranged, waddling down the halls with dirty hair and diapers needing to be changed; houses like my aunt’s, where everything was stained and reaching between the couch cushions to find the remote left your fingers sticky. Bus stations, and

prison waiting rooms, and foster-care homes, and men's cars, and men's houses or apartments where there was sometimes only a mattress on the floor, and none of them had scared me quite as much as being in Bunny's silent, beautiful house.

"I've never had a boy in my bedroom before," she said, a little apologetically, and she sat on the bed, as though she expected that I would fuck her right there on her white eyelet duvet.

"I'm gay," I said, my affect as flat and casual as I could manage. I had never spoken those words to anyone before, not in that way.

"Well, I've never had a gay boy in my bedroom either," she said, and flopped backward, finishing the last of her Pop-Tart sandwich, licking the butter off her fingers. She contemplated the ceiling and I began to wonder if I could simply leave. I was fascinated by Bunny and I liked her, but I was beginning to realize I liked her more from a distance than I did close up. It was too much, being in her room, smelling her smells, hearing her breathe. "You probably think my room is stupid," she said, still staring up at the ceiling, her legs, in their athletic shorts, agape on her bed in such a casual way that it was almost lewd, even though technically nothing was showing.

"It's a room," I said. "I'm not the room judge sent to adjudicate your decor or whatever."

"It is stupid," she said. "My dad keeps saying we should redo it. But I like it. I like it just like this."

"Well, thank you for showing me around," I said, trying to indicate that I would like to leave, when we both heard a door slam downstairs. Bunny sat upright on the bed, and I froze as we listened to the thumping of feet on the carpeted stairs. And then there he was, a man I had only ever seen in photographs, his giant head wedged between her door and the wall. "You're home!" Ray Lampert cried, giddy. "And you have a

friend! I thought we could get Chinese—do you feel like Chinese?”

“Ugh, I’m starved,” Bunny said. I, who by fifteen was already a neurotic counter of calories, almost gasped at this statement, having witnessed the 700-calorie Pop-Tart sandwich.

“And you’ll join us, obviously,” Ray Lampert said, turning to me. He was substantially fatter than in his picture, and whilethere were dark puffy bags under his eyes, the rest of his skin tone was so peculiarly even that I could have sworn he was wearing makeup. His blue dress shirt was unbuttoned a scandalous three buttons, and he was wearing a ratty red baseball cap. It occurred to me that I had probably seen him dozens of times and had just never realized that it was the same man as in the photograph.

“This is Michael,” she said. “Were you thinking Bamboo Forest?”

“No, I want good, really good, egg drop soup. Bamboo Forest is so watery.” He turned to me. “Don’t you think it’s watery?”

What I thought was that I didn’t know anyone was such a connoisseur of egg drop soup. To me it just came, like napkins and forks. “I should probably get home,” I said.

“You don’t really have to go, do you?” Bunny said with sudden, cloying desperation. “Say you’ll come with us!”

Ray reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “He’s got nothing better to do, right, son? Don’t tell me you’re one of these overscheduled kids that’s got back-to-back tutoring and chess club right before you off yourself because you didn’t get into Harvard.” He had found me unattended in his daughter’s bedroom; I stank of cigarettes and was wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and eyeliner, and I had a septum piercing. My hair was loose and went halfway down my back. It was unclear to me if his remarks were meant ironically or if he was actually blind.

“Let’s make it a party!” he said, slapped me on the back, and headed downstairs, shouting that he would meet us at the car.

Bunny turned to me and said in a low voice, “My dad’s kind of weird, but I promise it will be fun.”

And I thought: If Ray Lampert was one of the men I met on Craigslist, I would be too scared to ever get in his car, because he was the kind who would lock you in a closet or put a gun in your mouth and then cry about his ex-wife. Bunny took my hand and twined her fingers through my own. And she looked at me with eyes so hopeful that I nodded.

Honestly, I probably would have let her take me anywhere.

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Thorpe, Rufi. *The Knockout Queen* (Knopf, April 2020).

Author photo by Nina Subin.

A Review of Rufi Thorpe’s New Novel ‘The Knockout Queen,’ by Andria Williams

“Who deserves anything?” asks Lorrie Ann, one of the protagonists of Rufi Thorpe’s first novel, *The Girls from Corona del Mar* (Knopf, 2014). She’s putting the question to her stunned-into-silence friend, Mia, who has so far known Lorrie Ann only as something of a saint, a martyr of circumstance, the golden child from a perfect family ruined by terrible twists of fate—until the two women meet up suddenly after years apart. Lorrie Ann pops a baklava into her

mouth—she's a junkie now, to Mia's shock; she only wants to eat sugar, she's raving a little—and she demands, "Do we deserve the spring? Does the sun come out each day because we were tidy and good? What the fuck are you thinking?"

Even when the line is delivered by a young heroin addict whose husband has been killed in Iraq and whose father was a Christian rock musician, it's an important one to Rufi Thorpe's writing. The question—"who deserves anything?"—permeates all three of her books, which also include *Dear Fang, With Love* (2016) and *The Knockout Queen* (April 2020). Her characters, sometimes taken far astray by life, puzzle over what they have done, or what has happened to them—has it made them good or bad, or is that a spectrum like anything else?— or maybe their worst fears really are true, and good and bad are terrifyingly, irrevocably definitive.

Lorrie Ann, former evangelical, junkie, cuts through all that with her blunt, manic aphorisms and her baklava-smeared fingers. She knows how the historical intersects with the personal. She's seen it herself. Still she wonders, Do we deserve the spring? What are we all thinking?

*

In Thorpe's most recent novel, *The Knockout Queen,* our narrator's name is Michael. He is (at first, briefly, before we inhabit his teenage self) eleven years old, and his mother has been sentenced to three years in prison. Michael is looking around at a world that makes no sense:

When I was eleven years old, I went to live with my aunt when my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to

allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too.

Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated! If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting.

This is the lively, engaging, youthful, and astute voice we will hear from Michael throughout the rest of the novel. As a young teenager he is already aware that perceptible deviance will assign you blame. Women fare horribly in domestic violence cases, he knows, because no one expects a woman to be the aggressor. No mind if she has put up with years of abuse, prior—there's just something that's not right about it. (But are we *sure* that we can place any blame on President Bush?) With his mother gone, he has been taken in by his exhausted Aunt Deedee and is sharing a room with his cousin, Jason, "an effortlessly masculine and unreflective sort…who often farted in answer to questions addressed to him." Jason's also got a mean homophobic streak that only makes life harder for the closeted Michael. Finding it hard to make friends, Michael turns to a dangerous habit: meeting much older men online.

This is Orange County, California, circa 2010. Michael has the internet and a false sense of confidence, or maybe hope. He has seen how history intersects with the personal. Still, with the sun glaring outside his window, he aims for privacy in the darkness of his room. He reaches out. Maybe there's someone on the other side. His tension and longing are a tender thing, snappable. What will he find, or who will find him?

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Across her three novels, Rufi Thorpe's characters share a common childhood in the sun-drenched, high-wash landscape of Southern California, often pre-or-mid-dot-com, when some normal people still lived in normally-priced houses. Michael, for one, does, now that he has moved in with his Aunt Deedee. But she's working two jobs—at a Starbucks and at the animal shelter—just to pay her mortgage and to provide some kind of future for that aforementioned, flatulent meathead son. Michael observes that she has a personality "almost completely eclipsed by exhaustion."

Still. Still. It's California. A reader can almost feel that legendary warm air coming off the page, the smell of hot asphalt, car grease, stucco, sea salt, chlorine, oleander on the highway medians, bougainvillea; the too-prickly, broiled grass in small front yards. I've read that Thorpe's novels have the quality of a Hockney painting-turned-prose; they do, the brightness, the color, the concrete, the sky—the scope and scale—but there's also a nostalgia, a tenderness, and a cellular-level familiarity in her writing that's capable of delving even deeper into that locale, and which can probably only come from having had a California childhood. I could almost feel my eyes burnt by the bright white sidewalks, the way, as a kid walking home from 7-11 or Rite Aid, you'd have to look at something else for a moment, glance at the grass for relief but still see the sidewalk rectangles bouncing vertically behind your eyelids.

Our teenage narrator, Michael, muses that he can't believe anyone could live in a place with such terrific weather and not simply smile all the time. However, at this point California is already changing. "On either side, my aunt's house was flanked by mansions," Michael describes.

Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor's face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.

*

Though she lives in one of the hulking new-construction mansions next door, things are not much easier for Michael's

neighbor, Bunny. Bunny is the tallest kid in their class. Soon she grows taller, to her own horror, than all of the teachers and parents as well. This is not something that she can help. When she meets Michael stealing a smoke in her side yard—not knowing he's also been swimming in their pool whenever she and her father go on vacation, though she'd hardly care—the two strike up an easy and natural friendship.

Bunny lives with her father, Ray, one of those realtors "smiling toothily" from billboards, and perhaps the most ubiquitous of them all, having risen to the highest ranks of his toothy, hustling kind – his face plastered on bus stops all over town, attached to every holiday and parade, to the point that he seems to Michael a sort of local, B-grade royalty. Off the billboards, the real Ray is a somewhat fatter, puffier iteration of his entrepreneurial visage, and he has a bit of a drinking problem as well as a fixation on his daughter's future in sports. (This last bit will become important.) He will also be, under Thorpe's skill, an intermittently hilarious, bizarre, very deeply flawed delight to read.

Complicating factors, there's cruel gossip circulating around the death of Bunny's mother in a car accident some years before.

So life is hard for Bunny, too, and her friendship with Michael becomes a once-in-a-lifetime sort of friendship, which will be forged even stronger when Bunny does something irrevocable, sending both of their lives spiralling. This is an often sad, and not an easy book, but I can say with confidence that their rapport, due to Thorpe's seemingly-effortless skill and sparkling dialogue, is a joy to read.

*

Thorpe's novels grapple, frequently, with what it means to be "good" – for women, men, kids, parents. What happens to girls

and women who aren't seen as "good," boys who are not tough enough? (What happens to the boy who cannot, in fact, fart on cue?) What happens when there are deviations from the strict masculine and feminine markers our species depends upon to send immediate signals to our poor, primitive basal ganglia? Some people – the unreflective sorts, maybe, the Tarzan wannabes like Jason, the ones who take solace in the bedrock of their own infallible outward markers—could get upset.

In Michael's case, his cerebral nature and his kindness may be nearly as dangerous, at least in high school, as his sexuality. "The people I had the most sympathy for," he thinks, "were almost never the ones everyone else had sympathy for."

Still, both Bunny and Michael want, the way most teenage kids want, to be good—to be liked, to be happy, to have positive relationships with their friends and parents; to be, in the ways that count, *pleasant*. Here's Michael:

[It] was a popular take when I was growing up, among the post–Will & Grace generation: Fine, do what you want in bed, but do you have to talk in an annoying voice? I did not want to be annoying, I did not want to be wrong, I wanted to be right. And yet I knew that something about the way my hands moved betrayed me, the way I walked, my vocabulary, my voice. I did not consciously choose my eyeliner and septum piercing and long hair as a disguise, but in retrospect that is exactly what they were.

"As often as I was failing to pass as a straight boy during those years," he later thinks, "Bunny was failing to pass as a girl. She was built like a bull, and she was confident and happy, and people found this combination of qualities displeasing in a young woman."

Through the figure of Bunny we see, then, what qualities might instead be pleasing in a young woman. Contrast Bunny with her

volleyball teammate Ann Marie, as seen through Michael's eyes:

Ann Marie was a special kind of being, small, cute, mean, glossy, what might in more literary terms be called a "nymphet," but only by a heterosexual male author, for no one who did not want to fuck Ann Marie would be charmed by her. She was extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine, a creature white-hot with lack of irony. She was not pretty, but somehow she had no inkling of this fact, and she performed prettiness so well that boys felt sure she was.

Thorpe stays impressively in Michael's voice: only a young man of his very-recent generation would speak so easily about lack of irony and "performing prettiness" in the same breath as "extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine" and "fuck." Her mention of that "heterosexual male author" with a nymphet preoccupation is also a smart nod to a later scene in which Bunny's dad, Ray, somewhat drunk (as usual) and sentimental (less usual), sits Michael down and strong-arms him into looking at an old family photo album, a socially awkward and therefore very funny situation several narrators across multiple Nabokov novels have also faced. It's equally funny in *The Knockout Queen*. But Thorpe gives the monumental authority of the male gaze a clever twist, for Michael, unlike one of Nabokov's middle-aged narrators, is not at all titillated by these photos of Bunny but instead empathetic, fascinated by his friend's life before he knew her, before her mother died, before her whole world changed.

I wished I could go back and really look at the divide in her life: before her mother's death, and then after. When she ceased to be part of a scene that her father was documenting and began to be posed artificially, always on her own. Was I imagining the sadness I saw in her smile? Or was it an effect of the camera flash, the glossy way the photos had been printed, that made her seem trapped in those images, sealed in and suffocating behind the plastic sheeting of the photo album?

“Thank you for showing these to me,” I said.

Michael marvels at the loving photos he sees of Bunny’s mother, decried as a slut by the gossips in town, her death whispered “suicide.” Do these images tell the truth, or do they lie as much as any other, prone to the bias of the photographer, prone to distortion? Michael feels that the tenderness he sees in them is genuine, even though he knows how easy it is for a certain angle to tell it wrong. Where he feels the distortion has occurred is on the outside of this album, this family, in the crucible of group thought. (There’s a joke both in Nabokov as well as here about the distorting power of the visual: in *The Knockout Queen*, a Facebook photo of the high school volleyball team goes viral because, due to perspective, Bunny erroneously looks fully twice the size of any other member of the team. In Nabokov’s *Transparent Things*, the slim and attractive Armande in an early photo is given, “in false perspective, the lovely legs of a giantess”). As with Hugh Person, in *Transparent Things*, or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, the camera and the idea of a photographic memory eventually lose some of their stability, some of their complete control—and so, through Thorpe, does the male gaze and the historical power of the speaker, or of the loudest one in the room. There are hints of knowledge, Thorpe suggests, that evade group accusation, that dodge the iron maiden of a harsh mainstream and even the seeming authority of daguerreotypic capture: like motion, or like memory.

It would be hard to write three California novels without the specter of Joan Didion hovering overhead, so Thorpe leans into this, as well, with the addition of a grisly, community-shocking murder that seems to come right out of the *White Album*—the sort of local tragedy Didion might have learned of while floating in her Hollywood rental home’s pool. With this event, too, Thorpe challenges what we think we know from the outside.

There are real problems in this paradisical California town.

Racial inequality, homophobia, the fact that fewer and fewer people can afford their own homes. A salacious news story is a most excellent distraction. But Michael, young as he is, feels the sick appeal of the outside verdict and tries to resist it. Yes, everyone's talking about the murder with concerned gravity—*so* grave, *so* concerned— at every Starbucks you wait in line at, everyone whispering, *Can you believe it? It happened to someone from here? How could she have let that happen to her?* But he senses the *tsk* of judgment in their analyses. Why would anyone let violence happen to them?

We needed to pretend violence was something we could control. That if you were good and did the right things, it wouldn't happen to you. In any event, it was easier for me then to demand that Donna [the victim] *become psychic and know how to prevent her own murder than it was for me to wonder how Luke could have controlled himself. It was easier for all of us that way.*

Luke, here, the killer in question, is a sort of (pardon the comparison) George W. Bush, perplexed by his own power, almost a victim of society's forgiveness for what is already understood and comfortingly masculine and clear. (It seems intentional that the victim's name, literally, means "woman.")

Isn't it easier to cast your lot with someone who seems to have control – even if they can barely understand it – rather than the weaker person, the one still striving?

*

Bunny and Michael decide to play at "realness." It's a term they've gleaned from the drag queen documentaries and the reality TV they love to watch—RuPaul, and *Paris is Burning*—where Michael can practice at performing and Bunny, riveted, can "deconstruct" femininity, which still eludes her even as she longs to attain it. They crack each other up to the point of tears with their impressions of people they know,

at which Michael is very good and Bunny just abysmally horrible.

One of the terms we stole from RuPaul's Drag Race was the concept of "realness." They would say, "Carmen is serving some working girl realness right now," and a lot of the time it just meant passing, that you were passing for the real thing, or that's maybe what the word began as. But there were all different kinds of realness. In Paris Is Burning, which we must have watched a hundred times, a documentary about New York City drag ball culture, there were drag competitions with categories like Businessman or Soldier. Realness wasn't just about passing as a woman, it was about passing as a man, passing as a suburban mom, passing as a queen, passing as a whore. It was about being able to put your finger on all the tiny details that added up to an accurate impression, but it was also about finding within yourself the essence of that thing. It was about finding your inner woman and letting her vibrate through you. It was about finding a deeper authenticity through artifice, and in that sense it was paradoxical and therefore intoxicating to me. To tell the truth by lying. That was at the heart of realness, at least to me.

I loved this, as a fiction writer. The fun of pretending, how it can be an empathy, or a skewering. The wildness of that ranging, creative, odd and hilarious act—trying on voices, affects, personalities, lives. Trying your hand at fiction.

To tell the truth by lying. What is "realness," then, but a mission statement on writing fiction? On invention, on possibility?

And it feels so very Californian, in a way, adding gravitas to Thorpe's chosen locale, to "[find] a deeper authenticity through artifice." Ray laughs to Michael, "No one was born in North Shore!" There are plenty of people who were born in California and live there now, but also a huge number who were

not. Isn't that, in a sense, passing? What separates one kind of passing from another, makes it more or less acceptable? How could some transplanted midwesterner who adopted whole-hog the California lifestyle judge a gay kid for wearing eyeliner?

What is the line between authenticity and fiction? What do we do with what is given to us?

*

At the end of the day, Michael and Bunny are two kids whose parents have royally screwed up, probably because someone also screwed up when *they* were kids. So it goes, on and on. *Amor fati*, reads the tattoo on Lorrie Ann's slim shoulder, which, as Thorpe points out, is just another way of saying "embrace the suck," and which Nietzsche re-purposed from the Stoics.

Why tell these stories, I wondered, if nothing is ever going to change? After all, *amor fati* seems a last resort. Lorrie Ann's husband dies in Iraq. George W. Bush and Michael's dad both get off scot-free. The outsider kids will always be bullied. In Thorpe's second novel, *Dear Fang, With Love*, the narrator, a young-middle-aged college English professor named Lucas, who has been exploring both his family's Holocaust-razed past and his daughter's newly-diagnosed schizophrenia (and who sounds, here, influenced by T.S. Eliot) thinks:

Our family had been jumbled by history, by war, by falling and rising regimes, by escapes across the world, by drives through orange groves and trips to Disneyland and the slow poison of sugar flowers on supermarket cakes.

America was not safe. We would never be safe. The danger was within us and we would take it wherever we went. There was no such line between the real and the unreal. The only line was the present moment. There was nothing but this, holding my daughter's hand on an airplane in the middle of the night, not knowing what to say.

Thorpe understands the way trauma makes its way through society and through an individual life. Trauma is not always the blunt instrument; or, even if it started that way, it may not be, forever. It can be sly and nuanced. It can be both traceable and unknowable, brutal and delicate. Do we try to pass, within it, above it, until we are all okay? What if we know that not everyone will be okay, even though they try, even though they deserve to be?

There is a Bunny who exists outside the gossip against her, separate from her jarring appearance and possibly, Thorpe suggests, even separate from some of her own actions. "You don't have to be good," Michael tells Bunny. He means she doesn't have to be socially acceptable, she doesn't have to be fake-good, girly good. She already is good. They both are.

Thorpe, Rufi. The Knockout Queen. A.A. Knopf, 2020.

The Knockout Queen *is now available anywhere books are sold.*

"All. art. is. political:" An interview with Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales

Our two featured poems for the month are selections from Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales's anthology, *Pulse/Pulso: In Remembrance of Orlando*. Here, WBT editor Andria Williams interviews the two editors about this unique, gorgeous, and necessary passion project. As Morales describes,

> *The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify*

those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.

ANDRIA WILLIAMS: Roy, one entry point into this discussion might be to start with your 2016 poem, "Restored Mural for Orlando." The poem is beautiful and gutting. You have a masterful way of building the emotional investment with each turn, opening with the shooting itself, and then moving into a fond, pragmatic, and even tenderly humorous portrait of your family on vacation in Orlando. On that trip, you reflect that Orlando is where kids go to "fantasize about the childhood [they] didn't have;" you're surprised by the sight of your mother on a rollercoaster ("because she's always been ashamed of her weight"), and note somewhat humorously that your parents ended up "buying a timeshare by mistake/ not really by mistake…."

As a non-poet but a fiction writer, I was simply impressed by the way you allow the "character" of yourself to guide us through the poem, which somehow, almost counter-intuitively, increases the intensity.

Can you talk a little more about the myth of Orlando for you, as a child, and how this mythos worked its way into your thoughts about the tragedy?

ROY G. GUZMÁN: First of all, thank you for your generous reading of my poem and, as a fiction writer, for noticing these rich aspects about the poem. I think one of the most important things I had to negotiate during the writing this poem was my position in all of this. I kept returning to that image of the club, to the colors, to what the victims and survivors might have been wearing, to the sounds. Those sensory details invited me into that space, but I had to figure out what I'd be doing in the reimagining of that space. I had to turn the gaze on myself. That is when a lot of these

autobiographical details suddenly became important to my approach to the poem. I had to honor the victims and I had to be as clear as possible about my relationship to Orlando. As someone who grew up in Florida, I was affected in so many ways.

Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Roy G. Guzmán.

The mythos of Orlando was important for me to talk about. I can’t remember how many times my friends and I would just drive up from Miami and stay in a hotel and do all kinds of

stupid things. Most of us were teenagers. I probably went to Orlando a few times before I even set foot in Disney World. The timeshare event affected my family and me greatly. I'd just gotten my first job out of college and I wanted to treat my parents to something meaningful. I remember being in the info session for that timeshare and running all kinds of figures in my head to possibly work out this possibility. Obviously, I was naive and the people running the info session took advantage of that with false promises. Till this day my mom tells my stepdad and me that she never wanted to sign that contract, that we pushed her to. And she's right.

2) AW:

In "Restored Mural for Orlando," you write:

"I am afraid of attending places
that celebrate our bodies because that's also where our bodies have been cancelled / when you're brown & gay you're always dying
twice"

What was the particular importance to you of publishing an anthology – specifically of Latinx and LGBTQ+ writers – about the shooting?

In their poem "straight partner of ten years and anyone else," Nicole Oquendo writes,

"do not erase my grief. there is a galaxy of this
spreading out inside my chest."

Did you feel that the stories, the grief, of members of your community were not being heard in the aftermath of the shooting?

RG: We were totally not being heard. We still aren't. It's appalling how that's always the case when tragedies affect marginalized communities. Again and again we see scholars and

researchers build careers out of Black and brown pain, and whatever money they make hardly ever makes it back to our communities. This year, for instance, marked the second anniversary of the massacre. Instead of promoting queer and trans voices of color that responded with care and tact, most of the writing community decided to promote another cis white writer and what they've written about others' pain or how they want to make the world a better place. I'm tired of this pattern. It's enough to make me feel cynical. But we're told to shut up and be grateful we're still alive. That's what the writers in this anthology are trying to resist.

MIGUEL M. MORALES: Pulse affected us all in ways we'll be discovering for years to come. QTPOC weren't being heard before the shooting, in the aftermath,or even today. But just because we aren't being heard doesn't mean our voices aren't out there.

QTPOC communities across the country immediately felt connected to the shooting because so many times we've been relegated to the occasional "Latin Night" and even then, those spaces are filled with others trying to excoticize or fetishize us. No matter how comfortable we try to make those spaces, we are still being policed, attacked, and victimized. But through it all, we always – *always* – have each other. Honestly, it hurt to see so many commemorations of Pulse exclude our voices but we did what we always do, we buried our dead and made our own space. That's what we wanted to convey with *Pulse/Pulso*, we have each other.

3) AW: Miguel, I know that you grew up in Texas and worked as a migrant farmworker beginning quite early in your childhood, that you lead writing workshops for farmworkers in Missouri and Kansas, and that you're also an accomplished poet and fiction writer. Can you talk about how you initially connected with Roy to work on the Pulse/Pulso anthology, and about your own passion for the project?)

Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Miguel M. Morales.

MM: I followed Roy on social media, but we didn't interact much. Not long after the Pulse shooting, my friend and poetry sister, Sarah A. Chavez, asked if I knew Roy because he had a piece about Pulse that was going viral on the internet. It was "Restored Mural for Orlando" and I didn't even finish reading it before I sent him a message thanking him for the piece. We began chatting and I shared with him how I wished someone would put together an anthology of brown queer voices responding to Pulse. That's when he said a press approached him about doing that very thing. He said he was wary because he wasn't sure how much he could commit to it because he was in school. But, like me, he wanted something to happen. I'm not sure who brought up the collaboration first but it was obvious that we were meant to work on this together.

Many of us endured sustained losses of loved ones during the AIDS crisis of the ’90s. Some of us have never come to terms with those losses. I didn’t want that to happen with Pulse. All I could think about in those first hours and days after the shooting were of the names of the victims. I wasn’t prepared for how similar they would look and sound to the names of people I loved. I had to do something even if it was simply to encourage/nag/beg action from more accomplished Latinx writers. As with most forms of activism and leadership, it didn’t come down to big names. It came down to us.

Everyone in this book stepped up when presented with the opportunity to honor the victims. Each of us relied on family, friends, and strangers for help. The enduring legacy of Pulse and of the lives lost is not of grief but of gratitude for the communities that sprung up across the country in the aftermath. The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.

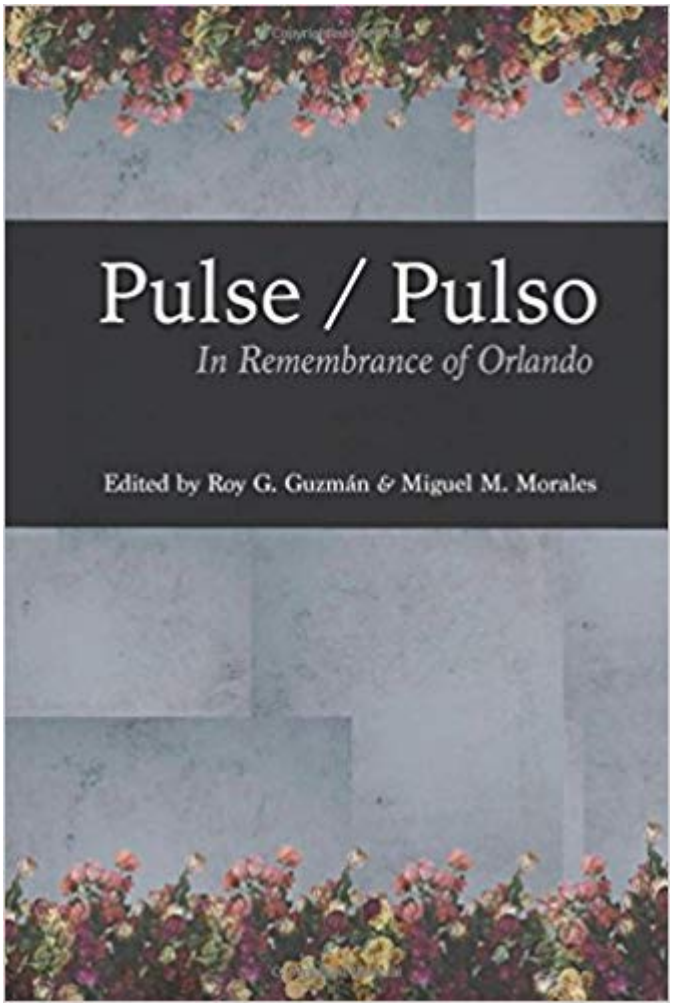
4) AW: I love the variety of the poems in Pulse/Pulso; some are quiet and sad; others, like Maya Chinchilla’s “Church at Night,” has moments that I would love to hear performed out loud (“Queerly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life….”) How did you decide how and where to place the pieces? Did an order reveal itself as you were editing, or was it more like fitting puzzle pieces together at the end?

RG: The organization of the anthology felt very natural in how it came together. As we accepted pieces, we’d add them to a file. I remember mixing a lot of these pieces and not thinking much about order. What was interesting is when Miguel and I came back to the document, months later, and found that somehow the order we’d put the work in worked. We came up with a lot of reasons for why Chinchilla’s “Church at Night” would

go where it ended up and, for instance, why Chen’s work appears where it does. I’d like to believe something greater than us helped us with that order.

MM:I don’t remember us officially having to plan out the order, much less have a disagreement on the pieces we selected. It’s easy for editing teams to agree on which pieces make it into a collection. What really tests the team is when they come to pieces on which they disagree. I was waiting for us to have that disagreement but it didn’t happen. I think that’s because we stayed focused on honoring Pulse and while there are some pieces I wish had made it into the collection, I’m extremely happy with what we curated.

From the beginning, Roy and I worked to have our submissions include new, emerging, and established QTPOC voices. We worked even harder to make sure those voices filled the anthology. Of course we had to examine those terms because someone like Joe Jimenez is seen as emerging but many of us in the community know Joe as an established voice. And since we put out the call in 2016, some of the people who submitted have since become important and emerging voices. We also included writers who have never submitted work anywhere. Including them was essential to the tone of what we wanted to reflect. I’m so proud of everyone who submitted work whether it made it into the anthology or not. They all helped shape *Pulse/Pulso* into what it is.



5) AW: Julia Leslie Guarch's poem, "Shh. Shh. Be Quiet" uses the last text messages of victim Eddie Jamoldroy Justice, sent to his mother as he hid from the shooter in a bathroom. ("Mommy I love you./ He's coming. Im going to die.") The effect is brutal. But such messages have also become familiar, as one public shooting after another rocks the US. How do you think Orlando fits into the larger discussion of gun violence in this country?

MM: It is clear that so many of us, especially QTPOC, are not safe living our lives, telling our stories, dancing in clubs, shopping, walking, driving, standing, sitting, praying, laughing, or breathing. Gun violence is the focus of so many these days due to the immediate and imminent threat of death that it poses, and it should be. We have to shut that shit down. Gun violence is violence.

The Pulse shooting is just another example, though a rare and

extreme one, of the violence queer people, especially queer/trans people of color, face daily. Violence against us is dismissed by the authorities and eventually even by ourselves. Trans women are being slaughtered. Our vulnerable queer youth and queer elderly face violence and threats by those who are supposed to take care of them. We are targeted for sexual violence and other forms of sexual assault that go unreported, unacknowledged, and unrecognized.

In some places queer people are not legally safe in our workplaces or walking down the street or using a public restroom or in our homes. And even in the places where we are legally protected, we're still not safe.

I am not attempting to dismiss the loss of the 49 lives and the injuries of the 53 others that happened on June 12, 2016. I'm saying that our survival is much larger than gun violence. If we only focus on bullets, we ignore the beatings, the bashings, the bullying, and hundreds of other ways the blood of LGBTQIA+ people is spilled every moment of everyday. Ignoring these forms of "everyday" violence gave permission to perpetrate the violence that happened at Pulse.

6) AW: Roy, in an interview in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, you have said, "[Intersections of identity] are something that unfortunately in the U.S. [do] not get to exist simultaneously. Either people want you to wave the immigrant flag and that's it, or wave the student flag, or wave the poet flag, and a lot of institutions prevent people from having all these different identities coexist. And for me it's like, because I exist, I exist already within all these different identities."

Can you speak a little more about this? Do you have any insights into how this problem might have developed, and whether any progress is on the horizon?

RG: Thank you for bringing me back to what I said in that

interview—for which I remain grateful. I just got back from a research trip in Honduras, so a lot of what I experienced there is going to speak to how I respond to these particular questions. I find that a system built on colonization, classification, surveillance, torture, and power is going to want to control and stratify identity. Although I noticed these problems in Honduras, in a place like the United States, where people care so much about individuality and wealth, you can't have layers of gray. Complexity isn't valued because American society wants the world to speak only American English. Privilege isn't recognized when people obfuscate different levels of hardship. Something that gives me lots of joy is seeing Black women, for instance, run their own successful businesses. But immigrants, at least those from Central America, are still treated like disposables. Our laws continue to see us as barbaric, social leeches, and unable to govern ourselves. The progress I want to see happen has truly yet to come.

7) AW: Miguel, you had a fantastic poem, "This is a Migrant Poem," a couple of years back in Vol. 29 of *The Green Mountains Review.*

"This poem is a gift of a strong back, of sturdy legs,
of silence, of patience.

And a never-ending work ethic
a never ending work ethic
a never ending work of ethics."

We are, as a nation, failing to deal ethically with people trying to enter this country, and now are being led by an administration that seems obsessed with and increasingly hostile to immigrants altogether. Can you talk a little about your understanding of the "zero-tolerance" policy, the effects you've seen? Has it been hard to keep writing and making art in a national climate that's this openly hostile, or do you

feel that the hostility has always been there and it's only the openness that has changed?

MM: I grew up in Texas but I live in Kansas. While the first is a border state, the second acts like it is. They are remarkably similar in their geography and in their approach to immigration and to those they regard as "others." Kansas is one of the states receiving migrant children forcibly separated from their parents at the southern U.S. border. Like any other community we are doing our best to keep eyes and ears on these children, hold each other up, and push back against those who advocate for this monstrous policy and shame the cowards who keep silent.

Because hate and hostility have always been there, and will always be there, the Latinx community has learned to pick and choose its battles. Though now we're facing what we thought was far behind us – emboldened, willful, vile ignorance and an increase in extreme anti-brown violence. As an artist, it's hard to find the moments to create in this environment. But I came of age in the AIDS activism of the 90s and that oppressive, destructive, and deadly time gave us some of the most powerful and creative moments in queer history. That's the challenge Latinx artists, and all artists, face in these exponential series of crises. We're also learning to embrace our anger and our rage. We're channeling it into something positive.

8) AW: Miguel, in a 2014 blog post, after the Ferguson riots in St. Louis, you wrote

"…. there is… beauty in pain. We … have a gift and sometimes that gift requires sitting in our pain, processing it, and putting it through the artist's lens.

It means taking what's inside our hearts, inside our heads and on our tongues and putting it in words, on canvas, or in clay – that's our ability, our gift. It's our super power. In doing

so, we can help others process their feelings. We can stand as examples to young people on creative ways to deal with these difficult emotions that make so many turn to, and live in, rage or to simply shut down.”

I’d like to close with [both of] your thoughts on what it means to write with a political consciousness. What does political art achieve when it is doing what it does best?

MM: All. art. is. political.

People who say otherwise speak from a place of invested privilege where their politics are so deeply inherent that their positions are seen as default and apolitical. Those individuals are deluding themselves and desperately want to conscript you into any and all efforts sanctioning that delusion.

For me, art has the most impact when it meets and merges with activism. As artists, we are tasked with holding a mirror up to society. We reflect its darkness as well as its beauty. Right now, in this moment, we have an abundance of both. Every artist strives for the apex of creativity. We are there. We are standing in a vulnerable sacred space that comes along once in a generation. We just have to be bold.

RG: I’ve been writing poetry consistently for about 6-7 years, though I’ve been reading it for much longer than that. Most of my first poems primarily came from restlessness and a need to heal. I’m not sure how much has changed for me since. I think the best art operates between imminence, urgency, and compassion, as the works in this anthology claim. However, I strongly believe that any kind of embodiment must begin away from the page. If you are not doing the work your words claim you do, then it’s hard for that work to connect with readers. It’s hard for you to even connect with what you’re talking about. I’m not implying that fiction writers engage in fiction

because they themselves can't do the work urged by their words; on the contrary, the best fiction does not come from the "best gaze" but from the best embodiment of those words. You can't claim community if you've never provided community for others. If we are saying that all art is political, what we are also saying is that our words carry all kinds of responsibilities and possibilities.

One time I met with author Jeanette Winterson and she said that anything she writes, regardless of the genre, is an extension of herself, a preoccupation she wants to unpack, the self wanting to grow and learn.

I think about that often. How do we want to grow? What are we consuming? When will you be ready to give back?

New Poetry from Nicole Oquendo and James A.H. White

The following poems are reprinted with permission from the anthology *Pulse/Pulso: In Remembrance of Orlando* (Damaged Goods Press 2018), edited by Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales.

to be born

by Nicole Oquendo

my spine is queer, curved enough
to hold me up while the news bends

and sways us. every day we die, and
one day it will be me, though statistically,
according to these headlines,
it’s more likely to happen soon.

but there’s new life to look forward to.
last year, my family taught me how
to press my chest and sculpt my own form.
i make love now by giving and taking in equal measure.
my brothers and sisters and those in between
see me standing next to them, signing all of my names.

Stained Glass

by James A.H. White

Fifty—the number of years my mother has lived. The number of paper clips currently interlocked in a small tin bucket on my work desk. According to motivational speaker Gail Blanke, the number of physical and emotional ties you should throw out of your life in order to find it again.

Some say many of them knew each other. It's often like that in our community. It's often like that in a nightclub. We recognize each other. There's no darkness dark enough to interrupt that.

The Orange County Medical Examiner's Office, with assistance from Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System, identified, notified, autopsied (if needed) and released all bodies to next of kin within 72 hours of the incident. That is, all but one victim, whose father wouldn't claim his gay son.

Phonesthesia is the term for sound symbolism, or, relating shapes to sounds. I see shame played like tetherball, see it shaped like the tennis ball as it flies, bound, around that metal pole, hear it on the slap of the child's open hand or deeper-chorused fist. I see shame falling on that victim's burial like the kind of rainstorm written into movie scripts—dark and heavy. I think of it registering unfairly on the faces of the closeted's families when they saw their loved one's body and recognized it for the first time.

An installation at Chicago’s Contemporary Art Museum featured a row of bodies lined
across a gallery and blanketed by white sheets that peaked at the noses and toes hidden
but assumed molded beneath. A girl nearby says it all makes her sleepy before she falls
to the floor and pretends to sleep—like the dead. On the morning of the shooting, I
think of my brothers and sisters inside, not lined but scattered, sleep I imagine made
clearer to the young as something much nearer, perhaps much whiter.

I break down hearing about the group that hid in the bathroom but were found then
fired on, a couple in a stall injured not only by bullets but shrapnel from the wall and
door. Suppose the bathroom stall like a closet. Do you remember huddling? How about
holding onto yourself beneath a traditional Jibarro straw hat or flower bonnet? How
long did you wait before the car horn outside announced it had come to take you out
dancing?