

# New Poetry by Marty Krasney: “Where We Are Now”

New poem by Marty Krasney: “Where We Are Now”

---

# New Fiction by Sándor Jászberény: “Honey”



1.

A rocket hit the village. I woke up to the sound of the explosion. My eyes widened, I jumped out of bed, put on my bulletproof vest, grabbed my helmet and boots and headed for

the door. Another missile hit nearby. The ground shook and the wooden beams of the house creaked. I heard nothing but the beating of my blood in my forehead. My nostrils flared, my muscles tensed. The adrenaline was making me unable to think. I was ready to run out into the night in my underwear.

“Calm down, there’s nothing wrong,” said Petya from his bed across the room. He was a miner from Kharkiv. A hundred and twenty kilos of fat and muscle, with dog eyes and a raspy baritone voice. When he slept, the wooden building shook from his snoring. It was like sharing a room with a bear.

“It’s ok,” he repeated. “They are randomly shooting the hill.”

He sounded as if talking to a child who had a bad dream. Not that I knew how he talked to his son, but his tone suggested the whole Russian invasion was just a bad dream, with missiles thundering down.

My mind began to clear.

I knew if the place took a direct hit, I’d be dead before I could run anywhere, and if it didn’t, it would be pretty pointless to run out into the night.

Yet this was always my reaction when the missiles hit too close.

Petya, seeing my confusion, got up, pulled his backpack out from under the bed, and took out a jar. “Come, have some honey,” he said. His English was terrible, but I hardly noticed anymore.

I got up and walked over to the window that yawned into the night. Petya unscrewed the lid off the jar and drew his knife. I took my knife out of my vest pocket, dipped it in the jar, and ran my tongue down the blade.

There was thick, black honey in the jar. Not the sickeningly sweet stuff you get in the store.

"I was dreaming about my wife," he said.

"I wasn't dreaming about anything." I gripped the knife tightly so he wouldn't see my hand tremble.

"We were in little house in Ilovaisk, the one I tell you about. Her father's house."

"And?"

"The kids were in bed and she was in kitchen cleaning up."

"Do I have to listen to one of your sex stories? It'll give me nightmares."

"Did not get to sex. I was smelling her hair when the Russians woke me up and fucked up my dream."

"Too bad."

"They fucked up your dream too."

"I wasn't dreaming anything."

"You will if you stay here long enough."

"You know perfectly well this is my last day at the front."

"What time is it?"

"The sun will rise in two hours."

There were crimson hints of dawn on the horizon as we stood by the window. We sipped our instant coffees, smoked, and watched the sparkling shards of glass in the grass under the windowpanes.

2.

They had found a bunk for me in a ghost village with the 72nd Ukrainian Motorized Rifle Division two weeks earlier. The place was on a hillside next to a coal-fired power station

lake. A narrow concrete bridge cut across the lake, the only way into the town on the far side. Wild ducks nested in the mud under its pillars.

Gray block houses stared at us from the opposite hillside. The Ukrainians had put the artillery units between the buildings, but there were still plenty of people living in the town.

In the evenings, the lights in the apartments winked out as the village plunged into total darkness, with residents avoiding any signals that could reveal the soldiers' sleeping locations to the Russian artillery.

The cannons rumbled during the day, but the real show started after the sun went down. The Ukrainian anti-aircraft guns operated throughout the nights, intercepting at least one or two Russian rockets. It wasn't safe for the soldiers to stay consecutive days in the same house. The Russians seemed content to occupy ruins.

On the front, you swiftly learn to differentiate between the sound of your own artillery and that of the enemy. After two days, I had mastered this skill. While most shells landed kilometers away from us, if one hit closer, my lack of proper military training would instinctively lead me to throw myself to the ground, always providing the soldiers with a good laugh.

3.

A young boy took me from Kiyiv to Dnipropetrovsk in a camouflage all-terrain vehicle with no license plate. The closer we got to the front in the east, the more checkpoints there were.

The boy would pull up in front of the roadblocks, roll down the window, and shout the latest password, which was sent to the soldiers every day by the Ministry of War. We set out at dawn, and by afternoon we had reached the town. At a gas

station, I had to switch cars. They put me in a car driven by two snipers from the 72nd Brigade. I shared the back seat with AKM machine guns and a hand grenade launcher all the way to Donetsk province. No one had to tell us we had reached the front. The continuous roar of the artillery made that clear enough.

For two or three hours, nobody bothered with the foreign correspondent. I took pictures of soldiers trying to fix shot-up SUVs in the yards of the houses they had requisitioned. The sun had already set by the time a soldier in his twenties who wouldn't stop grinning came up to me.

"The commander of the Unit, Nazar wants to see you now."

He took me to a two-story wooden house. The ground floor was full of soldiers eating eggs and chicken with potatoes roasted in their peels. The men were sitting on crates of NLAW anti-tank rockets pushed against the wall. The commander who must have been about fifty, introduced himself, put a plate in my hand and gestured me to sit down and eat.

I had a few bites. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room, and everyone was looking at me.

"So, you are Hungarian?" Nazar asked.

"Yes."

"I know a Hungarian."

I felt shivers go down my spine. I sincerely hoped I wouldn't have to explain Hungarian foreign policy to a bunch of armed men in the middle of the night.

"Yes?"

"The best Hungarian, I think. The most talented. Do you know her name?"

"No."

"Michelle Wild."

The men in the room who were over forty laughed. The men in their twenties had no idea what he was talking about.

"She had a big influence on me too," I said.

"Are you talking about a politician?" asked a twenty-something kid, called Vitya.

"No," Nazar replied. "Talented actress."

"How come I never hear of her?" asked Vitya.

"Because by time you were born, she already retired."

"I could still know her."

"You don't know her because you're homo and you don't watch porn."

"Yes I watch porn!"

"But you don't watch classic porn. Because you're homo."

"I'm not a homo!"

"Yes, you are," Nazar said, bringing the debate to an end.

"So what you come here for, Hungarian?"

"To film."

"Porn?" the kid asked.

"Yes."

"Welcome to Ukraine!" Nazar said.

Someone found a bottle of American whiskey, and by the time we had finished it, they had assigned me to Vitya, who would take

me to the front.

The war had been going on for eight months, and we all knew that eight months was more than enough time for people in the West to forget that the Russians had invaded a European country. Ukrainian resistance depended on getting military support. The presence of foreign journalists was a necessary evil to secure arms supplies.

4.

I met Petya upon my arrival to the frontline. Nazar assigned me to one of the wooden buildings where his soldiers slept. When I first stepped into the room with my backpack slung across my back, a huge man with a shaved head was standing in front of me in his underwear and a poison green T-shirt. He looked me up and down:

“I warn you that I snore like chainsaw.”

“It won’t bother me. Actually, makes me feel at home.”

“That’s what my wife says.”

“Does she snore?”

“I don’t know. I never heard her snore.”

“I snore.”

“No problem.”

I unpacked my stuff next to my bed, undressed, and went to bed. I listened to the night noises, the rumble of the cannons in the distance. The branches of the trees were heavy with fruit, and you could hear the wasps and bees buzzing around the rotting apples and pears in the leaves on the ground.

I had trouble falling asleep. Petya was wide awake too—I could tell because there wasn’t a hint of his usual snoring. We lay quietly on our beds for a while.

"Do you have a family?" Petya asked from his bed, breaking the silence.

"A wife and a son from my first marriage. How about you? Do you have any children?"

"Two. Two boys. Eight and twelve years old. Do you want to see picture?"

"Yes."

Petya stood. Stepping over to my bed, the boards creaking underneath him, he held up a battered smartphone displaying a picture of two little boys wearing striped T-shirts and enjoying ice cream.

"They are very handsome," I said. Then I shuddered because a shell had struck maybe a kilometer or two away.

"Do you have picture of your son?"

I took out my phone and brought up a pic of my son.

"He looks just like you."

"Yeah. Lots of people say I had myself cloned."

"My babies not look like me, good thing. They like their mother."

"Lucky for them," I said with a grin.

"You're not most handsome man in world either, Sasha."

5.

During the day, I toured the Ukrainian positions with Vitya and conducted interviews. I grew very fond of the kid very quickly. Once, right before we went to the front, I saw him wrestling on the ground with another soldier. He teased everyone relentlessly, but no one took offense at his rough



jokes. Vitya belonged to the generation born into war. War cradled his crib, and armed resistance against the Russians was his first love. He graduated from the war. At the age of twenty-three, he was already considered a veteran among the frontline soldiers. Nazar had instructed that I shouldn't be sent to the active front until he was confident in my readiness.

About ten kilometers from the front, I interviewed the medics of the battalion or the guys returning in tanks. Several times, I was assigned to kitchen duty. This meant I had to accompany one of the soldiers and assist him in hunting pheasants at the edges of the wheat fields. The birds were confused by the thunder of the mortar shells, so they would run out to the side of the road, and you could just shoot them. There was always something freshly killed for dinner. During the two weeks I spent at the front, the soldiers shot pheasant for the most part. I managed to bag some wild rabbits once. Everyone was overjoyed that day.

I usually chatted with Petya in the evenings. He was stationed at the Browning machine guns. The Russians would shell the hell out of the Ukrainian positions dug in the ground between the stunted trees and then try to overrun them with infantry. There were more and more unburied bodies in the wheat fields under the October sky.

On the third night, Petya asked if I had a picture of my wife.

"Yes."

"Show me."

I showed him one of the pics on my phone. He looked at it for a long time.

"Too Jewish for me."

"Jewish cunts are warmer, you know."

"My wife's cunt is hotter. Want to see picture?"

"Of your wife's cunt?"

"No, idiot. Of wife."

"Sure."

Petya stepped over to my bed and put his phone in my hand. On the screen was a pic of a natural blond, a stunningly beautiful woman."

"She's my Tyina," he said.

"Poor thing, she must be blind."

"Why you say she is blind?"

"She married you."

"What do you know about true love?"

"Everything. What the hell does she see in you?"

"I don't know. We met at May ball of steelwork. She was in bright yellow dress, so beautiful I could not breathe."

"What did you do to trick her into talking to you?"

"Nothing. I knew her father from factory. He introduced me. It was love at first sight. I dated her one month before she let me hold hand. No one had ever kissed me like."

"Gimme a tissue so I can wipe away my tears."

"Her kiss was sweet like honey."

"You were born to be a poet, Petya, not a soldier."

"After one year, I married her. The wedding was in Ilovaisk. And then came Petyaka and then little Volodya."

"You think about them a lot."

"I do not think about anything else."

"When was the last time you saw them?"

"Seven months ago."

"That's a lot. Do you talk to them often?"

"Yes. Every day."

6.

In the evenings, Petya talked about his family. He told me what his children's favorite food was, how his wife made it, how they kept bees at his father-in-law's place, twelve hives in all. I'd been among the soldiers for a week when Petya came to dinner one night with a bandage on his hand.

"What happened?"

"It's nothing."

He ate, drank some whisky, and went to bed. I played cards with the others.

"The Russians tried to break through today." – said Vitya when he got bored of the game.

"Did you have to give up the position?"

"Yep. Fifty rounds left in the Browning. Can you imagine?"

"What happened to Petya?"

"He's the only one left alive. A bullet went through his hand. We had to shout to get him to leave the post. He grabbed the gun, just in case."

Petya was already snoring when I got back to the room. I went to bed. I was awakened by his moaning and swearing.

"What happened?"

"I rolled on hand. Stitches are torn, I think."

The bandage was dripping with blood.

"We should go to the hospital."

The hospital was about twenty kilometers away. I knew this, because I wasn't allowed to take any pictures there. Anywhere but there. The Ukrainians wouldn't let us report their losses.

"Fuck it," he said. "Just bandage it up again."

"I'm not a doctor."

"Just bandage the fucking thing. I will go to hospital in morning."

"Okay."

"First aid kit is on vest."

I unzipped the pouch marked with the white cross and took out the tourniquets. The gauze and iodine were at the bottom. I used the small scissors to cut the bandage on Petya's hand. The stitches had torn badly. A mix of red and black blood.

"Clean it out."

I wiped the wound with iodine and even poured a little in it. Petya was constantly cursing. English has a limited number of curse words compared to the Ukrainian language. In any of the Slavic languages, you can continue swearing for hours without repeating yourself. I couldn't catch everything he said, but it seemed to involve the insertion of pine woods, John Deeres, and umbrellas into the enemy's private parts. When his wound looked clean enough, I started to bandage it up.

"There you go," I said. "But you should take better care of yourself. You've got your family waiting for you back home."

"They will have to wait a little longer."

"There's no telling how long this war will last."

"It lasts while it lasts. We will be together in end anyway."

"I sincerely hope so."

"You don't have to hope. We will be together for sure. But not now. I still have some Russians to kill."

"I hope you get home soon."

"You are a good man, Sasha."

7.

While playing cards, Nazar said, "Tomorrow you can take the Hungarian out after the attack has started." When I asked what attack he was talking about, no one said a word, not surprisingly.

It later turned out that, contrary to expectations, the Ukrainian forces had launched a successful counterattack at Kharkiv. Nazar thought that this would be the perfect opportunity to send me to the front lines and keep me safe at the same time. The offensive would distract the Russians enough to reduce the artillery fire on their positions.

We were cutting across fields of wheat, with the sun shining resplendently in the sky above us, when the Russians started shelling the position we were headed for. Two shells hit right next to our car, and it felt as if someone had pushed my head under water.

Vitya drove the car into the woods, mud splashing on the windshield from the shells. He stopped the car next to the trench where the Browning guys had dug themselves and ordered everyone out. Two other soldiers were in the car; they knelt

to the ground and listened, then ran to take cover in the trees, dragging me along.

Dusty earth and mud. The trenches were like something out of a World War I movie. Petya was grinning as he came up from underground.

“Want some coffee?” he asked.

We did. I glanced where the barrels of the Browning machine guns were pointed. The Russians were less than a kilometer away on the far side. You couldn't see the dead bodies because of the tall grass, but I knew there were a lot of them lying unburied in the field, because when the wind shifted, it brought with it the sweet smell of decay.

I had a cup of coffee in my hand when I heard the shriek of the mortar shell. I lurched to one side and splattered the whole cup on Vitya.

“That was more than ten meters away,” he said after the mortar struck, and he pulled me up off the ground. I couldn't control the shaking of my hands.

The biggest problem with modern-day artillery is that you can't see it at all. The legend that 82mm mortar shells were deliberately designed to whistle before impact is widely held. It's nonsense, of course. No engineer would design a weapon so that the targets would know before it hit that it was about to strike. Mortar shells whistle because they cut through the air and leave a vacuum behind them.

But you only hear the whistle of the shells that God intended for someone else.

The Ukrainians knew when the Russians were firing missiles. I guess the front was close and they could hear them launching. Though I'm not really sure. I only know that on the way back to the car, Vitya suddenly grabbed me and pulled me down into

a hole.

The ground shook. I heard a big crash, then nothing.

When Vitya pulled me to my feet, I was totally lost, didn't know where to go. He steered me towards the car. My ears felt like they'd exploded, but my eardrums weren't bleeding. Silence stuck around until we hit the ghost village. When my hearing kicked back in, every explosion made me feel like I was getting zapped by electricity. Trying not to hit the dirt took some work, but I held up okay unless the hits got too close.

8.

Nazar told me that there was a car leaving for Kiev at eight o'clock, and I would leave the front in it.

The brigade was hard at work. All the equipment had to be moved to a new location because the Russian missiles were getting closer and closer. Old flatbed trucks were rolling down the dirt roads, loaded up with fuel, rocket launchers, and ammunition. They drafted me to lend a hand, so I was lugging boxes too, muttering all the while about how nice it'd be if the Russians could please not fire any fucking rockets for just a little while.

The new headquarters was in a granary. It was a concrete building from the Cold War era, with bullet holes and boarded-up windows. We were still hard at work when a green all-terrain vehicle pulled up in front of the entrance.

"What about you?" I asked Petya.

"I am coming with you."

“See, I told you you’d make it home,” I said, giving him a slap on the back. “I’m good luck for you.”

There were five of us in the all-terrain, and the trip back was a good twelve hours. Wasn’t exactly first-class. I was longing to get a shower and finally take a shit in a toilet, but most of all just to stretch my legs once we reached Kiev.

But that was out of the question. Nazar and the others insisted that we get a round of drinks.

In the city center, we went to a pub called Gorky’s. It was in a cellar, with heavy wooden tables and a bar. We could barely get a seat. I was shocked by the bustle. It felt as if we had arrived in a different country, a country that wasn’t being ripped apart by war.

The guys ordered Ukrainian vodka and beer. The waiter brought dried salted fish and five shot glasses.

Nazar filled everyone’s glass, and when he was done, he raised his own.

“A toast to those who gave their lives.”

He lifted his glass on high, then poured the vodka on the ground and threw the glass on the floor with all his might. The others did exactly the same thing. The place fell dead silent, and everyone looked at us.

“Is there a problem?” Nazar asked the bartender.

“Glory to Ukraine!” the bartender replied.

“Glory to the heroes!” the soldiers said, and everyone in the pub echoed their shout.

New glasses were brought to the table. Nazar filled them.

“And now a toast to the living,” he said, and he knocked it back in one gulp.



We drank quickly, and a lot.

“And now,” Nazar said after the second bottle of vodka, “we go to see the patriotic whores.”

Since the offensive began, downtown brothels gave a 20% discount to frontline fighters due to an 11 PM curfew. Keeping the places afloat and showing patriotic devotion played a part, but “patriotic” became the buzzword.

I was dizzy from alcohol and fatigue. I didn't want to go, but I couldn't get out of it. The whorehouse was in a four-story building. We went on foot. Nazar rang the bell, and the door swung open.

The women were on the fourth floor. Two old, moderately spacious apartments that had been turned into one. There was a big Ukrainian flag on the wall in the hallway. A woman who must have been about fifty and whose cheeks were caked with rouge walked over to us and sat us down on the sofa.

She and Nazar started haggling in Ukrainian. It took me a while to realize that they were arguing about me. I was not a soldier, she was saying, and so I did not get any discount. I cast a glance at Petya, hoping he could get me out of the whole thing, but he was just staring at the wall. Eventually, Nazar must have reached some kind of agreement with the woman, because she walked over to the counter, picked up a bell, and gave it a shake.

The three doors off the hallway swung open, and soon six women were standing in front of us with business smiles on their faces. They were dressed in bras and panties.

“Take your pick,” the woman said, and even I understood.

I also understood the silence that fell over us. When it comes to committing a sinful act, no one wants to go first. Several seconds of silence passed, several unbearably awkward seconds.

And then Petya stood up. He had a bleary look in his eyes. He walked over to one of the brunettes, a girl who must have been in her twenties.

“Let’s go, sweetheart,” he said. She took his hand and led him into the room.

The other two soldiers immediately followed suit, chose a girl, and then left. I stared in shock.

“What?” Nazar asked, lighting a cigarette. “You look like you have seen a ghost.”

“No,” I replied, “I’m just a little surprised. Petya was always talking about his wife. I never would have thought he’d sleep with another woman.”

Nazar took a drag on his cigarette, grimaced a little, stubbed it out in the ashtray, and stood up.

“Petya’s apartment in Kharkiv was hit by a rocket the day after the invasion started,” he said. “His family was killed.”

He then walked over to one of the girls, took her hand, and withdrew with her into one of the rooms.

---

## **New Fiction from M.C. Armstrong: Excerpt from Novel ‘American Delphi’**

*Note: M.C. Armstrong’s new novel, ‘American Delphi,’ will be out October 15, 2022 from Milspeak Books. It has been hailed*

as “riveting, wise, and wonderful.” Please feel free to [pre-order here](#), or purchase wherever books are sold.

—

### From ‘American Delphi’ by M.C. Armstrong

“How do you tell the world that your brother is a psychopath?”

“You don’t,” my mom said. “Get away from the screen and journal about it.”

She took this black and white notebook out of her grocery bag and handed it to me like it was supposed to be the answer to all of my problems. So here I sit, notebook and pen in hand, being a good girl while Zach is standing in the kitchen literally jumping up and down about how the world is ending and how America has more cases of the virus than any other country on the planet and how he saw a video of somebody fall off a motor scooter in Indonesia and watched the guy’s face go black before vomiting blood and dying right there by his scooter and you would think, by listening to my brother describe the story, that he was talking about a corgi or some Australian getting playfully punched by a kangaroo on YouTube. But this is somebody dying and for Zach it’s like the best thing that’s ever happened. It’s like it’s confirming all of his theories about apocalypse and totally justifying all of the whips, knives, guns, and fireworks he’s been collecting in the closet of his crazy-ass bedroom upstairs.

“Buck says the virus is the medicine,” Zach said, getting up in my face and breathing his hot breath all over me.

Buck London is Zach’s special friend. Buck’s an old man who just moved into Orchard Chase and smells like mothballs, and I can tell from Zach’s smell that he’s been spending way too much time with Buck.

"Get away from me," I said. "You're not practicing social distancing."

"We are the virus," Zach said.

"You are the virus," I said.

"Nobody is the virus," mom said, tossing a salad with a bunch of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, avocado and falafel (feel awful). Mom said we should use the plague as an excuse to go vegan, but there goes Zach behind her back, just standing, smiling at me as he's shoving disks of salami into his mouth. It's like he's proving this psychopathic suicidal point by eating meat while mom is making a salad, and I said: "NINA!" because I call Mom by her name when she won't listen. But by the time Nina turns around, Zach's pretending like he's tying his shoe and I'm taking a picture of this journal just in case he kills someone someday.

\*

Mom said her biggest fear is that I end up a "twentysomething grandma" like Tanya Purtlebaugh. Mom's entire life seems organized around making sure that I don't end up like Mrs. Purtlebaugh, but I said "seems" because Nicole, Tanya's daughter, did just have a baby at seventeen and Nicole's two years older than I am and her mother is exactly seventeen years older than Tanya which makes her mother thirty-four and that's only three years younger than Mom which, if you do the math (which I do), it's pretty clear: Tanya Purtlebaugh is not a "twentysomething grandma." In other words, Mom's entire mission in life right now (and she's succeeding) is keeping me from having sex so I don't basically have a ME which, if you think about it (and I do), is really sad and it makes sense why she lies and covers up by blaming it all on a "twentysomething grandma" who's not actually a twentysomething grandma.

Mom doesn't want me to see what she calls "the elephant in the

room": Her biggest fear is actually another ME. I am the elephant. Mom is afraid she's like the virus and has passed on all her bad decision-making to me and when I told her, in the fall, that I didn't want to play tennis in the spring or take any "private lessons" with Pastor Gary, she flipped out because she basically wanted to ensure that I was constantly quarantined in clubs and sports and stupid boring activities where I was sweating and bickering with other girls instead of having "idle time" with boys, but look at everything now. What happened to the tennis team? Same thing that happened to track, soccer, drama, ballet, baseball, archery, karate, and everything else—canceled.

Everyone's in their room by themselves except Nicole with her screaming mixed-race baby, but guess who's used to being alone? The elephant in the room, that's who.

\*

"This is like a taste of being old," Mom said as we drove to the grocery store, Zach riding shotgun, me in the back.

"Nina," Zach said. "Please tell us exactly what you mean because I wasn't listening."

"Okay, Zachary," Mom said. "I mean this is what we've been looking forward to all day, isn't it? Our one chance to get out of the house, where nothing is happening, just so we can listen to some music in the car and see a few people at a store. Think about how many old people don't have soccer practice, piano, or archery."

I'll give Nina credit: she made me see things differently for a second. There was an old black woman covered in a clear plastic bag in the produce section picking through apples really slowly, and I felt bad because the one place where this old woman gets to go is now invaded with danger, and we are the danger, and I wonder how long until she gives up and has some granddaughter teach her over the phone how to have

groceries delivered to her front door by a drone?

“Off your phone!” Mom said to Zach as we passed by the meat shelves which were picked totally clean of everything except the meatless meats. So much for America using this crisis to wean itself off fossil fuels and diseased beef.

“Look!” Zach said.

Passing by a little mirror near the cheap sunglasses, I saw my stupid, long witchy nose. I hate my nose.

“Look!” Zach said.

“Look at what?” I said.

I put my palm up to my nose as if to smash it back into my head. We wheeled past the glasses and down the coffee aisle so Mom could get her “medicine” when Zach showed me a picture from MIMI of the socially distanced sleep-slots for the homeless of Las Vegas, a parking lot that had basically been turned into a dystopian slumber party for all these Black Americans who live in this city with a hundred thousand empty hotel rooms. But because we are America, we force the poor people to sleep in a parking lot, and there was this woman in a white hijab or bonnet standing over the homeless like she was some kind of monitor to make sure the poor were keeping their distance. Or who knows? Maybe she was nice and asking them if they were okay, or if they wanted soup. What was not okay was the way psychopath Zach was grinning as he was thrusting the screen in my face.

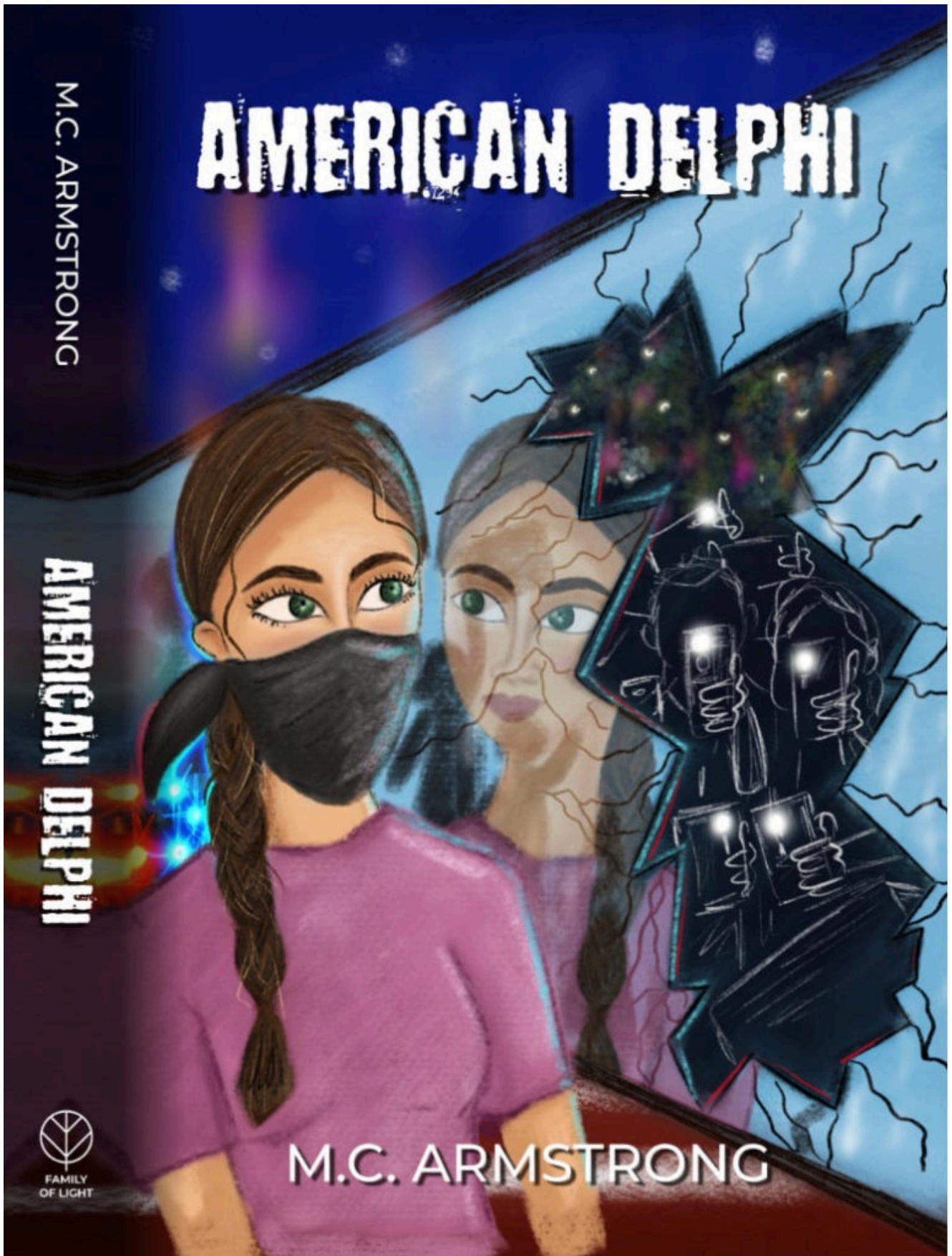
“Why are you smiling?” I said.

“He’s smiling because he’s alive,” Mom said, sweeping three bags of Ethiopian coffee into our loaded cart, and Mom’s answer would have been totally perfect if it weren’t for one thing: IT’S HER ANSWER. NOT HIS! MY BROTHER IS SICK!!!

\*

I have a wasp in my room because my window won't seal. But a wasp is just a bee, so his brain is as big as a flea, which means he won't fly through the crack, and there's a yellow jacket on the other side of the window, and he's just a bigger bee, so he's dumb too. He doesn't know he just has to fly in the little slit if he wants to see his friend or fly a little higher to show his friend where the opening is so he'll stop going crazy and bouncing off the walls. Instead, the yellow jacket just hovers and buzzes while the wasp goes nuts and it's actually kind of funny. I think the yellow jacket is pretty much watching TV, and the wasp is his show for the night, and I guess I am, too, and it's like the birds have stopped quarreling and are now laughing like a sitcom audience, like the birds know everything.

What do the trees know?



'American Delphi' by M.C. Armstrong, October 2022. Cover art by Halah Ziad. Milspeak Books.

There goes my brother running through the grass. Wonder where



the psychopath is going with his big backpack. It's like a scene from a movie. The psychopath with his backpack loaded with knives and fireworks walking through this totally dystopian, suburban wasteland of saggy porches and American flags towards this half-moon that looks like a lemon wedge while Toast, the Kagels' new corgador, rams up against the invisible fence with his special red cowboy bandanna around his neck, and how can I tell my brother's a psychopath, you might ask? God. Just look at him baiting Toast by charging the invisible fence. You can totally tell Zach loves electrocuting Toast, and you know what they say about boys who are cruel to animals. Zach is totally toasting Toast so I open up my window and scream at him to stop and when I close it back up the wasp is gone.

Mom's right. This is what it must be like to get old. I have to take my sunset walk and "get my steps in." I walked by Aria's house and then the Kagels. I called Toast to the edge but I didn't taunt him like Zach. We just sort of looked at each other, mirroring one another. Toast blinked. I blinked. Toast tilted his head. I tilted my head. Toast looked right. I looked left. Then I noticed at my feet some magenta letters. Maybe they were mauve. I don't know. The words on the sidewalk were written in this pinkish chalk and it wasn't the first time I'd seen the graffiti. For the last two weeks the parents of all the little kids have been outside drawing pictures of daisies and birds and smiley sunshine faces with their kids, and Zach and I are too old for that, but some of the older kids have been using the chalk to say other things or to mark their times on their bike races since they're being forced to exercise outside for the first time in their lives and they're actually having fun with it, but this graffiti wasn't like that.

This was different:

*Go Vegan.*

I walked a little farther and read in yellow:

*Media Lies.*

A little farther in blue:

*Big Pharma Kills.*

A little farther in red, white, and blue:

*Government Lies.*

And then in white:

*Black Lives Matter.*

And after that it was back to magenta:

*The Truth is a Virus. The Truth Leaks. Spread Truth.*

And I was like, okay. How do you do that?

How do you spread truth?

I kept walking. Now, in purple, but with the same handwriting, they said *We Need Change*. And I'm like, okay. Duh. But then, near the turnoff from Cedar to Byrd—right where you could see this big stack of logs against the side of Buck London's house—there was one more phrase before I turned around and it said: *American Delphi*.

I was pretty much across the street from Buck's, staring at this dark green holly bush he has in front of his house and this stuffed armadillo everyone can see on the chipped paint planks of his porch, but because of the huge prickly holly bush, you can't really see anything else. I couldn't tell if he was sitting on his porch in his underwear smoking a cigar with a one-eyed cat in his lap, or if he was inside on his couch looking at naked pictures of girls. I have no idea why Zach spends so much time with Buck, and I have no idea what *American Delphi* means.

But I am going to find out.

---

# **New Fiction from Andria Williams: “The Attachment Division”**

## 1. The Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety

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

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

It was Dr. Anton Gorgias—still alive, now, at one hundred eight, and very active on Twitter—who initially proposed, and

eventually headed, the Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety. The leaders of fifty-six nations came together to declare a worldwide mental-health crisis. Ironic, really, because the climate problem had been mostly solved (the U.S. being third-to-last to sign on to the Disaster Accords, just before Saudi Arabia and Equatorial Guinea. Thank God we even did, Steph sometimes marveled. She was twenty-seven; people just ten or twenty years older than she was would often tell her she was lucky to have missed the very first years of the Wars; she'd think, yes, it had all been a real joy, thank you). Nothing could be reversed, but they could buy themselves some time, maybe even a few hundred years. That was in Sweden—of course it was Sweden—and so Minnesota was the first U.S. state to grab the ball and run with it, copying its spiritual motherland with only a smidge less efficiency.

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

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

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

People complained about other aspects, too: registration was a bitch, the waiting period took at least two years and there was mandatory yearlong counseling, but, again—the numbers didn’t lie. “It Used to Be Two” was now printed on the sides of bus stops, above the seats on the light rail.

\*

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

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

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

*I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. Each day I do my job with compassion and, above all, professionalism. I am on time,*

*clean, and comforting, but never resort to intimacy. I remember that a sympathetic nod goes a long way. I do not judge or discriminate based on a Pre-Mortal's appearance, race, creed, economic status, or any other factor. I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason. I remember always that I, too, will die.*

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

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

\*

### 3. Nils Gunderson, Neighbor

Steph settled onto a green metal bench across the street from the address she'd been given, swiped her phone, and logged into her Bureau account to access the file, waiting as it loaded. A long page of text came up. Mortality Informants like herself were required to read their cases' backgrounds first,

before viewing the image, to help prevent involuntary first impressions (which, it turned out, were unpreventable).



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

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

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

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

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

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

\*

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

"Walking the cat" was an energetic phrase for her neighbor's nightly routine. He and the cat strolled, really, in no hurry, stopping often, Nils Gunderson smoking, following the gray tabby which wore a red halter and leash. Stephanie had seen him just the night before, in fact, as she'd hip-nudged shut



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

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

She hadn't, all this time, known Nils's name. But because she saw him almost daily she also saw him on the worst day of her life: the evening, six months before, when she'd gotten the phone call, at work, that her father had died. Frantic, numb,

she'd only just texted Alex to tell him, and she pulled up in front of the apartment and couldn't park her car. The space was too small. In and out and in and out she tried, yanking the wheel, blind with tears, and the man with the cat, walking by, seeing her struggle, paused to direct her into the space. She remembered him in her rearview mirror, wagging his fingers encouragingly, holding up his hand, *Good, Stop*. His supportive, pleased thumbs-up when she finally got the car passably straight. And then she whirled out of the car and rushed toward her apartment, toward the blurry form of Alex who had come out to take her in his arms with the gorgeous, genuine sympathy of some kind of knight – Alex had held her and cried; he had loved her father, too – and she'd almost collided with the man-with-the-cat, who noticed, suddenly, her stricken, tear-streaked face, and said, quietly: *Oh*.

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

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

Of course, the smoking, the lack of fitness might have contributed to Nils Gunderson's situation. Because there he

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

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

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

\*

That morning, not for the first time, she had typed a resignation letter, then deleted it. She'd just had to tell a nineteen-year-old that her fiancée would die of a sudden, aggressive leukemia; that an 80-year old woman would lose her husband of 57 years. (Parents were exempted from the program until their children were at least 18, or else the whole world would have gone into chaos.)

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

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

And here was his car now.

\*

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

There were light creases of sweat across the top of each khakied thigh.

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

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

she'd toss and turn angrily, obscurely resentful of this idiotic game. She was glad all that was over now, Alex and his dumb game, even though he had named his planet after her, which was sweet. And last night she'd been tossing and turning anyway, but because he *wasn't* there, and she'd ended up fishing his basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves out of the back of her closet and wearing it to sleep—sweet Jesus. Was there no middle ground?

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

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

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

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

He followed her a few steps, as she asked him to verify his name, address, date of birth. He answered so trustingly, his grayish-blue eyes patient, politely curious, that she could hardly stand to see (as she flashed her badge) the dim knowledge gathering around their edges and then intensifying. She told him, in the plain language she'd practiced hundreds of times, that she was a Mortality Informant, reminding him gently that he had signed up for this program, had requested notification three months before his death, that he would pass away long before his wife, and that was why an Informant had

been sent. No, she could not tell him when his wife would die, but it was far into the future. He paled before her eyes, she could see it happen, his mortality crashing in on him like the YMCA wave pool he'd later tell her he'd loved as a child, arms outstretched, staggering backwards, chlorine, briefly, in his nose and throat—the exhilaration of having cheated death, which he was not cheating now. Steph placed one hand on his thick shoulder and gave it a squeeze, one, two. She was prepared for him to cry, to ask why so soon, so young, even his dad had made it to fifty; to tell her in shock to go away, fuck her, fuck the program, he wished he'd never heard of it: some people got very upset. They wanted this information in the abstract, but not the real, or they didn't want the moment of receiving it. Several mortality informants had been punched or kicked. Devin had once been chased three blocks. Now they had an emergency button on their phones that could call for backup.

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

\*

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

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

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

*I remember always that I, too, will die.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Nils held out a cigarette.

"Yes, please," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

"She has a sister in Sheboygan," Nils began.

"We know. We have it all on file."

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

Steph shook her head. "It's a separate team. My job was only to inform you."

"I won't be able to sleep tonight."

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

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

"Well, of course. That's what I meant."

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

"We're really not," Steph said.

"Should I tell her?"

"I can't make that decision for you."

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

"That one time I helped you park," Nils began.

Steph looked at him.

"You were crying," he said. "I felt terrible. I didn't even notice until after you got out of the car."

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

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

"It was a really tight parking spot."

"What were you crying about?"

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

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

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

"He wasn't in – in the program? Like I am?"

She smiled bleakly. "He didn't believe in it."

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

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

the most informed decision you could have made. I believe that. I do, Nils."

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

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

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

She was honest: "I didn't sign up for any."

\*

#### 4. The Confession

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

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

Steph's cheeks flared as she fingered the edge of the sweatshirt, which went down to her knees. "Oh. It was my boyfriend's. Ex-boyfriend's. I shouldn't be – I shouldn't be wearing it."

Nils's eyes widened, wet. "Did he die?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But you're honest. I can tell. And I want you to be honest with me, tell me if you think it's any good. Promise me you'll listen to it," he said.

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

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

\*

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

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

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

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

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

Nils roamed on, through his toddler years, a dog bite, falling

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

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

Steph noted the time and wrote, "Sweet."

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

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

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

"The thing is, Claire," Nils went on, "you're so good. I've realized I'm not as good and I wish I could find a way to make it up to you. I know you don't sit there at the library

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

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

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

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



clothes, and drove to work.

\*

## 5. Feedback

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

"Have you told her yet?" Steph asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Steph made a small irritated sound. "Lots of things are the truth," she said. "Think about Claire—"

"All I ever think about is Claire."

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

"But it's the truth."

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

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

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

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

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

He nodded to himself, his eyes brimming again. "Well, thank you for listening to it," he said. "And for your time. I know I took a lot of your time and energy. I feel bad about that. I took a lot of your emotional energy."

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

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

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

\*

## 6. The Game

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

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

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

Her supervisor told her to pack up her desk.

\*

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

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

She looked up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

**New Poetry from Marc Tretin:**

**“Justin Alter, Slightly Drunk, Addresses Maya, Who Is In Egypt” and “Maya Ricci Alter After Excavating A Pyramid South Of Zairo”**



HOT WIRES SCALD / image by Amalie Flynn

**JUSTIN ALTER, SLIGHTLY DRUNK, ADDRESSES MAYA, WHO IS IN EGYPT**

Now as I am hungover and queasy

stumping about the tilting house  
and sappy as my face is green,  
Maya, your sculpture of Qetesh,  
that goddess of sex and ecstasy,  
whose torso of clear pink plastic  
has a heart made of puzzle pieces  
dangling from wires that run to an  
automated external defibrillator  
normally used to shock  
a rapid cardiac rhythm  
back to normal, stares at me with eyes  
filled with both desire and despair.  
Though feeling embarrassed  
I touch the pink nub you meant  
to be her clit and a soft whirr starts, then  
puzzle pieces spin so fast they tear, and scatter  
and the bare hot wires scald  
the insides of her perfect breasts.  
I pull the plug, but the smell of burnt plastic  
fills our bedroom despite the open windows.  
Why do you have to be gone so long?

## **MAYA RICCI ALTER EXCAVATING A PYRAMID SOUTH OF CAIRO**

As I stooped beneath the  
standing sun within the  
meter-by-meter carefully  
measured order of this  
archeological dig and  
brushed pottery shards  
and papyrus crumbs through  
a sieve to sift out the sand,  
the heat's strong hands  
touched me like a half-  
wanted lover, whose warmth  
is too familiar with my

body to refuse and that's  
why when Jamaal, the site  
boss said, "You look  
overheated.  
Cool off in my trailer."  
"Yes," I said, knowing I  
wanted to betray Justin  
but not knowing why, so  
after we had sex and while  
I was thinking how can I  
use this experience,  
I saw Jamaal shave with  
a straight edge then I saw  
the dead-on right image for the God Set,  
a cave-sized skull made of razor blades,  
entered by stepping  
over teeth made of sharp knives  
into total darkness  
except for a weak light  
piercing this skull  
through one of its eyes  
and in that eye is a web  
and tangled in its threads  
are Zipporah and Justin.  
Their faces, formless rags.  
Their bodies sucked out hulks.

---

## **New Poetry by Scott Hughes: "Still"**





THE FAULT LINES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

## STILL

I never thought of you  
as a hopeless romantic; this was news to me.

Are you still meditating? Meditate  
on this:

You can take the Mulholland Highway across  
the ridges of two counties  
and stay high a long time.

We parked there once in your subcompact  
in love and unconfined.

From the afternoon shade of a scrub oak  
I remember the ridge route home,  
the silhouettes of Point Dume and your profile

in the afterglow.

Since then I have been a jack of all trades  
and a master of nothing:  
unremarkable, unsubstantial, undignified;  
unresolved, unremembered, unconceivable;  
unqualified, unpublished, unreadable.

I looked for you in the county beach campgrounds  
where you went with surfers from your high school.  
I looked for you in all the places I heard you were in love.  
I looked for you where rumors sent me.  
I looked for you in the hills of Northridge  
where we walked around the fault lines.  
I looked for you among the barstools  
from Venice to Ventura.  
I looked for you in old Beach Boys songs.  
I looked for you in stacks of photographs.  
I looked for you in the bottom of a glass.  
I looked for you stranded after a concert.  
I looked for you at the Spahn Ranch.  
I looked for you in the bittersweet words in books.  
I looked for you in unsold manuscripts.  
I looked for you in the margins of old college notes.  
I looked for you in every woman who looked at me.  
I looked for you in dharma talks.  
I looked for you in shrines.  
I looked for you in my next life.

I don't think my karma is right.

Forty years on the hard roads of two counties  
and I am  
still.

---

# New Poetry by Rochelle Jewell Shapiro: “Each Night My Mother Dies Again”



FALLS ON NIGHT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

## **EACH NIGHT MY MOTHER DIES AGAIN**

Each night the phone rings—  
*Your mother has passed.*

Each night I expect to be relieved, but night falls on night.  
Each night she is the mother who makes waffles,  
batter bubbling from the sides of the iron, the mother  
who squeezes fresh orange juice, and serves soft-boiled eggs

in enchanted egg cups. Each night I squint into her face  
as she carries me over the ocean waves, her arms my raft.  
Each night she refills Dr. Zucker's prescriptions  
for diet pills and valium. Each night she waters her  
rosebushes  
with Dewar's. Each night I see her hands shake,  
her brows twitch. Each night she adds ground glass  
to the chopped liver, rubbing alcohol to the chopped herring.  
Each night she puts a chicken straight on the lit burner  
without a pot. Each 2:00 a.m., Mrs. Finch from 6G phones—  
*Sorry to say your mother is naked  
in the hallway again.*  
Each night my mother is strapped into her railed bed  
at Pilgrim State, curled into a fetal position,  
her hands fisted like claws.  
Each night she calls to me  
from her plain pine coffin, calls me  
by the name she gave me, the name  
she hasn't forgotten.

---

**New Poetry by Doris Ferleger:  
“Praying at the Temple of  
Forgiveness,” “Internal  
Wind,” Driving Down Old Eros  
Highway,” and “Summer Says”**



TURNING EVERYTHING AROUND / *image*  
by *Amalie Flynn*

**Praying at the Temple of Forgiveness**  
*for Zea Joy, in memoriam*

Last Monday you threw yourself,  
your body, dressed in red chemise,  
in front of a train.

It was your insatiable hunger  
for a more tenderhearted world,  
your husband said at Shiva.

Now no one will get to see  
what you saw from inside  
your snow globe where you lived,

shaking and shaking,  
breaking into shards  
of ungrieved grief, unanswered need.

I will remember  
how tirelessly, with your son,  
you worked to help him turn

sounds—coming through the implant  
behind his ear—into speech,  
speech into understanding.

Everyone will remember  
how you skipped across the dance floor,  
waving pastel and magenta scarves,

and prayed to angels.  
O, dear Zea, your human bones  
thin as the bones of a sparrow—

the way you could fold  
your body to fit anywhere.  
Rest now. You have succeeded.

## **INTERNAL WIND**

When you died, our son  
became *my son*; I watch  
through your eyes

and mine how he lifts  
his whole body into  
a long accent à droite,

arms taut, wrists impossibly  
rotated back, fingers and toes  
also pointed back

to all the hours, years  
of practice in turning  
everything around.

~

Over the hollow  
you left, our son stretches  
his fingers across

frets and strings  
in C minor,  
Bach's Etudes

the way you taught,  
the way you closed  
your eyes, nodded, satisfied—

our son will remember.

~

Remember how  
he watched you deep-  
breathe into yoga postures?

Now his own focused flow  
heals what Western doctors call  
*tics*, quiets what Eastern doctors call

*internal wind*. Listen  
how our son calls  
to his yoga students

what he learned  
at your knee: *Effort  
brings the rain—*

*of grace.*

~

When our son and I argue,  
I feel homeless, divided,  
until I remember how you

and I took turns massaging  
his neck that ached from its day's  
staccato singing—

~

Sometimes I can see his tics  
as flawless, meticulous,  
a body expressing itself  
with perfect diction.

#### **DRIVING DOWN OLD EROS HIGHWAY**

Me, in my Q50 with its hot flashes and warning beeps,  
heading toward Sweet Desire, New Jersey, where my love,  
soon 70, will woo me with mango, melt the mushy pulp  
in my mouth—or perhaps he naps.

You, CeeCee, painting the walls pink in the tiny house in  
Pullman,  
recently moved in with your old college flame, coming so  
easily

against his new ceramic hip, just the friction of it. You say  
your pelvis never quite fit with anyone else, including your  
soon-to-be-

ex-husband of 30 years. Me, with a G-spot suddenly. A rainbow  
of chaos tunneling through me when his fingers find it and  
flutter.

And long live the reckless tongue. The old-fashioned clit-kind  
of climax. Like a young planet rising. Oh, how old and greedy



I am

for that whole-body wave and chill and quiver and release.

You, purposely avoiding that whole-body wave of shiver,

as it reminds you of your ex's dogged insistences.

For your 60th, your daughter gifted you with a mini vibrator

on a rubber ring for your index finger. A *sex-thimble*, you  
joke.

Sex over 60 seems unseemly to talk about, CeeCee,

but it seems more ungrateful to say nothing at all.

You and I speak of what our mothers couldn't give us.

Daily I pray at the temple of Venus.

## **SUMMER SAYS**

Pay attention to

your heat, your survival—

the tree rooted in your garden

is a sequined vernacular, a cashmere sweater.

Because nothing matters in the end

but comfort and the bending light.

Summer says, I will be the room you die in.

You will dream, neither of regret,

nor in the language you were born into.

A stranger will comb your existential threads.

You had thought, for instance, humans

were gerunds or harps bent

on playing in a diner that serves

black coffee and hard donuts.

You ask, *What is the past?*

*What is it all for?*

Summer says, The wound of being  
untaught. Says, hungry.

Says, the cypress is a hospice,  
says, falter, falter, falter,  
bloom bloom bloom—too soon

a pall will keep you company.

---

## **New Poetry by Ricardo Moran: “ABBA-1975” and “On the Street”**



TAG EVERY WALL / *image by Amalie Flynn*

### **ABBA-1975**

Abba's lyrics, like water  
shot from La Bufadora,  
mingle with volcanic steam  
from metallic pots of corn.

And the scrape on my knee  
from chasing the seagulls  
bleeds, but does not hurt.

On this Sunday, the ocean breeze slips  
in gossip between vendor stalls  
as young men in speedos walk past.  
Tables of silver bracelets tap my eyes  
and ABBA's Spanish melody  
carries on my tongue

before any English syllable  
ever arrived. Before the summer ended  
when it tore me  
from the sands of Ensenada  
to a desert north of the border,  
to a land with tongues  
unfamiliar and stiff.

And now when I fall  
chasing my shadow, my ABBA  
lyrics cannot permeate  
foreign soil. Cannot stop the pain.

### **On the Street**

Run naked through the streets  
and shout, "Make love to me!"

Tag every wall in a turf war  
with quotes from the palatero,  
from the child who yearns for love,  
from the gay son who hopes his father  
will welcome him,  
this time.

With your sharp and fast tongue, mesmerize  
passersby as they get caught in the gunfire  
of stanzas and sonnets,  
popping the air.

Bellow on the street corner  
of how love abandoned you,  
how your life is empty,  
how you aborted your dreams.  
And every day it rips into you  
of every opportunity you threw away.

I want that on the wall.  
I want all the pain and hurt  
to get out of bed, to grab that bullhorn  
and run naked through the streets.

---

## New Poetry by Kevin Norwood: “Rabbits in Autumn”



THE LUSHEST GRASS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

### **RABBITS IN AUTUMN**

Who will find our bones in a thousand years,  
bleached and brittle under the unyielding sun,  
scattered in dried grasses by feral dogs or vultures?

Who will hold such curiosities, not knowing  
that we stopped here to kiss and murmur  
that our love would outlast the moon and stars?

Who will hold our bones, never to imagine  
that under the same sun, we once made love

on the lushest grass, under a sapphire sky?

In autumn, the fox lies in wait, hearing rustling in the tall grass. Having eaten, the fox moves on. There are no questions of why, or how, or when.

Smoke rises acrid in the air; the sun sets earlier each day; the grapes shrivel on the vine. Time is the fox; we are the rabbits. Please, hold me.

---

## **New Nonfiction from Jon Imparato: “You Had Me at Afghanistan”**

*“I was lying in a burned-out basement with the full moon in my eyes. I was hoping for replacement when the sun burst through the sky. There was a band playing in my head and I felt like getting high. I was thinking about what a friend had said. I was hoping it was a lie. Thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie.”* –Neil Young

k.d. lang’s voice carries the Neil Young lyrics on a mellifluous ride; notes keep swirling up as I crash to the ground. I’m clutching a wet dishcloth as if it were a rope, thinking about what a friend had said, and I was hoping it was a lie. I’m staring at the fringe tangled on my terracotta-colored sarong and my beaded anklet. I grab the heavy sweater I am wearing over my tank top to cover my face as I sob. My skin is the darkest it has ever been from traveling in five Asian countries during their summer. Being thrust into cold, rainy weather frightens me. I want to be back in oppressive heat. I am thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping

it was a lie. I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means the unspeakable.

\*

I am a radical on sabbatical. I have been working as the Artistic Director of the Lily Tomlin/Jane Wagner Cultural Arts Center for ten years. When I asked my boss for sabbatical, I was shocked when he said yes. I'm taking three months off from my job. I started out in Thailand, then Cambodia, Laos, Hanoi. (Or, as I like to call it, HanNoise. It is a city without a moment of silence, a never-ending cacophony of traffic, people, and blaring intrusions of sound.) My final destination is Bali. I have learned on this trip that most of the travel agents have never left the town or village they live in. But for some reason I think I can trust this father-daughter team. The daughter insists I call her Baby, and she calls me Mr. Delicious.

When I arrived in Bali, one of the first things I was told was that my name, Jon, meant "delicious" in Balinese. I had just come from Cambodia, where I gave a piece of my heart to a man whose long name I had a hard time pronouncing. At one point he was joking and said, "Just call me Delicious and I'll call you Mr. Delicious because that is what we are to each other...delicious." We had a brief four-day affair, a travel affair; they are so transitory and carefree, no one expects anything except the momentary pleasures.

A young girl at the travel agency loves that my name means delicious, and she thinks this is hilarious. When I tell her it also means toilet in English, I then become Delicious Toilet.

"I think you like me, Mr. Delicious, I think you do." "I like you fine, Baby; I will like you even more if you can get me onto a remote island." Baby keeps flirting with me and asking

me if I like her. She is oblivious to the fact that I am gay, and her flirting seems just to be on autopilot. Her flirting is learned; nothing about it is organic. Baby's father is watching his daughter flirt. He is in on the game; all he wants is for Baby to make the sale. We are all in on the game; everyone is trying to get what they want. Nonetheless I find myself charmed by Baby. All I want is a quiet island where I can write and stare at water while I do a slow brain drain. Both Baby and her father have assured me that I will be on a quiet, peaceful island, with a bungalow on the ocean.

I want to be face-to-face with the ocean. I want a wave confrontation. I take an hour boat ride and arrive on an island across from Lombok, Gili Trankang, right next to Bali. This is an island with seven hundred people, no cars, no motorbikes, and no police. This is not a lush resort but a Rasta party island. Visitors are met at the dock by tuk-tuk carriages pulled by very sad horses. There is poverty here, you just can't escape it. The power goes out several times a day, hot water is never guaranteed, and most bungalows have saltwater showers, very strange to the skin. Imagine someone has spilled a margarita on you and rinsed you off. My bungalow is attached to an open café with a bar painted a bright red-orange, sunshine yellow, and a deep green. The stage faces the most beautiful turquoise, sea-green ocean. Yet trash is piled up on sandbanks. You must turn your head toward the beauty, and there is plenty of it.





I am hanging out, having lunch with the reggae band and staff. They are quick to tell me that I will do very well on this island because it is filled with beautiful women. I nonchalantly say that I am gay and hope there are also lots of beautiful men. Suddenly I can feel the chill, as if a hurricane's gust of wind suddenly changed direction. Some of them are cool, but many of them are not. I quickly learn that most of the people on the island are Muslim. I have been in the accepting bliss of Buddhists and Hindus, so for the first time I need to keep a low profile about being gay. In all these travels, this is the first time that I have encountered any homophobia. The Rasta world is full of wonderful male affection—everyone calls you his brother, yet there is a homophobic and sexist element to the Rasta world that can't be ignored. It is ever-present and inescapable.

Of course, it takes hours for my room to be ready. Ganja is king here; everyone is stoned and moves at a snail's pace from the herb and the heat. They have two speeds: slow and stop. I get in the water, and I have arrived! This is the ocean I have longed for: crystal clear, warm in a way that requires no adjusting to the temperature, the color is spectacular, and it feels like flower petals on my skin. I have arrived...yet I am not happy. I miss my New York friend Roberta something awful. She longs for water like this too.

We have always shared the ocean in a deep way; when we met, we found as many ways as we could to spend time at the ocean, and I want her here with me. I want to be stupid and silly with her, laugh and splash. The ocean floor is filled with mounds of pure white coral; you can scoop it up with your hands and have little pieces of coral rain down on you. Roberta would freak. The absence of my friend is stinging. I scoop up empty water and pour it over my head as I cry, my sobbing face plunged into the ocean and staring at the coral floor. I remember that I always take a while to get my footing on my first day in a new country. I'm thrilled to get an email from a friend I met in Cambodia, named Mags. Mags is seventy-two. She has short-cropped, maroon-purplish hair. Her hair spikes up like an eighties rock star. She wears long, flowing dresses with wild prints and tons of large jewelry from her travels. She is from Queensland, Australia. She moved to Phnom Penh, in Cambodia. Mags checked into the gay hotel where I was staying. She convinced the hotel owner to let her live there. The only woman in a gay hotel where she holds court. We exchange our lives over scotch by the pool, and instantly we feel great love for each other. Everyone calls her Mum. Her daughter, Morag, will be arriving in three days. I can't wait for them to arrive on this magical island. This lifts my spirits and just knowing I will soon have some friends on the island is a comfort.

\*

I am at a place called Sama Sama. It means "same-same" but also signifies that we are all just a little bit different, but everyone is the same and welcomed. The Rasta band is really good, and there is a huge dancing-drinking-smoking scene going on. They play mostly Bob Marley covers. They tell me it is the happiest music on earth. Yet I am in my room, I am not happy. I am trying to read or do some writing, but the sound of the band is deafening. I'm mad at the happiest music, mad at Baby and her dad for sending me here, mad at feeling like an outcast, mad at the world. I finally give in and say to myself, "Get out of this bungalow and just embrace this bizarre scene."

I'd made friends with one of the bartenders, named Zen, that afternoon and he seemed cool. I sit down at the bar and drink my scotch with all this Rasta joy bouncing and swirling around me. I am certain I am the only gay man on the island and feel like I don't belong, like an island unto myself.

Suddenly, one of the most beautiful men I have ever laid my eyes on sits next to me. He is straight, no question about it. He is trying to get the bartender's attention. I shout, "Hey, Zen, can you get my buddy a drink?"

The beautiful man says, "Thanks for the hook-up." I learn he is from Canada. The best people I have met on my journey who aren't native are Canadians. They are open and sturdy. I will refer to my friend as Huck for reasons I will explain later. We start talking and within a few minutes the conversation is off and running. Our ideas, opinions, and insights are crashing in on us like the waves a few feet away. This guy is smart, insightful, and profound, and we are in deep, exchanging who we are with each other. We talk politics for a good part of the conversation: He can't stand Bush; Sarah Palin is an unquestionable joke—his views are so liberal. I tell him I often feel like I am what is left of the left, an old Lily Tomlin joke. He laughs and says he feels my pain. About an hour into the conversation, he hits a curveball in my

direction that almost knocks me off my seat. He tells me he is a soldier on leave from Afghanistan, and he goes back to war in a few days.

Traveling around Southeast Asia, you can talk to people for the longest time and, unlike in America, they don't ask you what you do. Your work doesn't define you. I would never have thought this beautiful, sensitive man was a soldier. That information seems so incongruous to the man I am talking to. I am so thrown and confused by this news. I turn and say, "Okay, let's break this sucker down." Like an archaeologist, I keep digging. Who is this guy?

Our conversation goes deep and wide, fast, and furious. It moves with speed and intention but always with grace. We close the bar; he is now even more fascinating to me. It is 4:00 a.m. and I assume I am off to bed. Huck turns to me and says, "Here is how I see it. We are not done with this conversation, and I am not done with you. Let's go get some weed and smoke a joint on the beach and talk until sunup." I tell him I am so there.

As we walk on the dark dirt road, following the sad horses' hoofprints, Huck says, "Where do you think we can score some weed?"

I point to an old man in his eighties with a Marley Rules T-shirt selling bottles of scotch, cigarettes, and Pringles. "I guarantee you he is our best bet."

Huck turns and says, "Come on, little buddy."

"Huck, I feel like Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*. Why are you calling me that?"

"Oh, it's too late, that's who you are. I like calling you that."

Scoring takes all of five minutes. Huck returns with this

sneaky smile on his face. "I not only got you enough weed for the week that you're on this island, but I also got you papers and a lighter."

I turn to him and say, "If you are trying to get down my pants, you had me at Afghanistan."

Mind you, at this point I have not smoked weed for eight weeks, and this is the first time on my trip I even feel like getting high. We sit by an ocean lit by beach lamps that keep the waves sea-green while the ocean further down is a deep blue-black.

Huck and I continue to share our lives, and I learn that he had an epiphany in Afghanistan that has transformed him. After 9/11 he felt a deep need to fight against the Taliban. Canada never went into Iraq nor would he. But fighting the Taliban was something he felt he had to do. "Little buddy, this is the way I see it. I'm young, strong, and capable. If not me, then who? I don't know how else to say this, but I had to go; it is my destiny. Believe me," he said, "it is that complicated and that simple." I don't know if I agree with him. All I know is that I want him to be safe.

Now he sees how wrong the war is. Huck explains that we are fighting a losing battle. We will never build the army this country needs. He has developed a deep affection for some of the Afghanistan children, and he no longer thinks it is right to kill anyone. He is hoping for a replacement assignment where he could leave combat and become a search-and-rescue expert for the Canadian Army. Every now and then I just burst out, "God, you are beautiful!" He lowers his head, blushes, and says thanks. In return he says, "God, you are great."

He knows I'm not coming on to him; it's clearly beyond that. Yet my appreciation for his unquestionable beauty must be proclaimed from time to time. He proclaims how great I am in return, and we laugh.

Neither one of us had known this island existed, and we have no idea how we ended up here. It was never on either of our trajectories. Our conversation just glides from one thought to another. I will show him L.A., and he will show me Canada. We talk about books, his girlfriends, my boyfriends, the demise of the Bush administration, the hope of Obama, saving lives, and living them.

While we talk the night into day, the full moon stares us down, right in my eyes. It is a bluish-gray moon that looks as if a prop person hung it between two island trees. The sky begins to turn ever so slightly into its morning yellow as the moon seems to be replaced instantly by the sun. We both have the reggae band playing in our heads. Mine is tossing around over and over a reggae version of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." Huck's is "No Woman No Cry." We joke that we will have the Sama Sama reggae band playing in our heads for weeks. As we say good night, he tells me he will be getting an enormous tattoo tomorrow and asks me if I would stop by the tattoo shack with the huge orange hammock on the porch.

\*

Lying in bed, I had been feeling sorry for myself. I have just spent five days at a gay villa, and I am longing to be around my gay brothers. I feel resentful of the homophobia I know is coming at me from many of the straight men. The last person I ever thought would rescue me from that state of mind is a straight Canadian soldier.

I stay up trying to write a short story about the encounter of Huck and Jon. In the morning I finally go to bed at 9:00 a.m. because my encounter with Huck has my mind reeling.

\*

I race over to the tattoo shack around noon. My feet can't get me there fast enough. I want to be with Huck and yet am baffled by the intense urgency I feel. It has been gray and

cloudy morning, but as I pick up my pace, the sun bursts through the sky shouting and waving hello, and I can't wait to let the water feel me again.

At the tattoo shack there is a guy with the longest dreads I have ever seen dangling through a hammock, as if long, black snakes were sweeping the old wooden floor as the hammock sways back and forth. The tattoo artist is older and seems as relaxed as a human can get. Some obscure Tracy Chapman song is playing on a radio. Huck must have told the guy in the hammock that a friend was stopping by because he just points his finger to the back room. Huck is lying on the bed in just his swim trunks. He tells me he is getting really scared because this is going to take about four hours and it's going to hurt. He is clearly freaked. The design is huge and will be on his left side, a place where people rarely get them. The tattoo artist tells him to be patient and to expect a lot of pain. In twenty-three years, he has never given anyone a tattoo of that size in that area. "It is all bone," he keeps muttering and shaking his head. "It is all bone."

I grab Huck's leg and say, "Okay, Huck, here's the deal. Do you really want this tattoo? If you do, I will hang out and keep you company. I am a really good nurse."

He nods yes, then mutters, "Stay, please." I become the tattoo nurse. I run back to my bungalow and get him some pills that will help him sleep. I make sure he drinks a lot of water, buy him Pringles (they are everywhere). I buy a fifth of scotch, tell him funny stories, put cold towels on his forehead, and basically make sure he is okay, documenting the ordeal with my camera.

The tattoo is of a devil-looking serpent coming out of the ocean. This image gives me chills. As the serpent with its sword rises, a huge splash of water hits the air. The other half is some sort of angel figure carrying a torch of glowing light. He told me it was his personal reckoning of the good

and evil inside himself. The never-ending reminder to himself...that he chose to kill. He is utterly motionless. The tattoo artist is amazed, as I am, at Huck's perfect stillness during four hours of intense pain. I think to myself, this is a soldier's story. He understands all too well what a false move can mean. He knows how to be a statue or risk being killed.

\*

Later, over lunch, I interview him for a short story I plan to write about him. I ask him for examples from combat when he had to be that still or it could cost him his life. He tells me not long ago he was searching a burned-out basement for weapons. He heard footsteps above and hit the basement floor. As he was lying there, he knew that if anyone heard him, he would be dead. It was a soldier's strength. The determination I witnessed during those four hours while he was getting his tattoo was staggering. I learned once again that the will of the human spirit is indomitable.

The tattoo shack has a back room behind the tattooing room with a mattress on the floor. The room rents out for ten dollars a night. Huck is turned on his side, eyes closed; the drugs are working. The tattoo artist was taking a break to eat his lunch. The door opens and a beautiful, young, blonde woman who reminds me of Scarlett Johansson walks in, says her name is Daliana, and she wants to rent the back room. Then she looks at Huck, looks at me, and whispers, "He is so hot." I laugh and agree. She tells me she is from Canada, and I tell her, "Don't rent that room, you can do better." Huck turns and says, "Canada, where?" Canadians love meeting other Canadians. I tell Daliana to meet us later at Sama Sama to party.

The moment she leaves I can see Huck is having a really hard time keeping it together. The tattoo artist says, "Get ready for round two," with this ominous tone in his voice. Huck's body isn't moving, but his face tells me he is in severe pain.



He turns to me and says, "You are a lifesaver. Do you realize you are saving my life? Do you get that, little buddy?"

I say, "Huck, saving lives, come on. That is what we talked about last night. Isn't that what this new friendship is all about? You went into the war to kill and had your epiphany that you are here to save lives. Now you have to stop calling me little buddy; it is way too Gilligan on this island." He shakes his head no. He flashes me that look that says don't make me laugh; it hurts. I tell him about John *Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It's one of my favorite books, and I have reread it on this journey. I explain that it is a book about the Vietnam War, God, the act of killing, and destiny. I think it's an important book for him to read. I know it will speak to him.

He told me the night before that he thinks one of the reasons we've met is so I can help him read novels again. I will send him off with this book and hope it has a deep effect on him.

\*

I am at a café on the dock with Huck and Daliana, who has become another amazing friend from good old Canada. She has also spent time with Huck. I've played matchmaker and set them up for the night. They share their own moments of exchanging their lives. We can hear the boat coming into the dock, dropping off new guests. About fifty people are walking down to the main sandy road. I hear someone yell my name. It's Mags wearing the brightest orange dress. It looks like the sun is walking towards us, giving new meaning to the word sundress. To her right side is her beautiful daughter Morag. People always tell you their kids are beautiful, but Morag had a casual effortless beauty. Everyone introduces themselves and they join us for a cold drink. Huck only has about ten minutes until he has to get on that boat, the boat that would begin his journey back to war. Daliana and I are both heartbroken to see our soldier off. As he gets up to leave, I hug him, kiss

him on the cheek, and tell him how special he is and that he is the best, most unexpected surprise on my journey.

I am crying. Hard. My dad is a Korean War vet and had to live through the horrors of that war. Several bullets pierced various parts of his body while parachuting into combat. The first five years of my life were spent in and out of VA hospitals in Brooklyn, New York. My ex-lover, James, was in Vietnam and has had to deal with the horrors of exposure to Agent Orange. I have a lifetime of connections to vets. It suddenly occurs to me that I have never met anyone serving in this current war.

I start to worry about Huck's safety and think, Okay, gods, you have played with me enough, and it has been great fun, but now PLEASE turn your eyes to my friend. Play with him and keep him safe. If he comes out of this, he could do so much good.

Even thinking the word "if" scares me. Yet his bags are packed and he's ready to go...and I can't control what I can't control. I can only say to my friends on this island: Don't say a prayer for Owen Meany; say a prayer for my new friend Huck. I tell Huck I want to write about him on my travel blog, but I need to make sure he is cool with what I write. I show him the first entry, and he blushes and said, "It's all good; just change my name." It's the weed. He asks me not to use his name and I tell him I will respect that. I say I am going to call him Huck because I just read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for the first time. He looks puzzled and asks why. I tell him that Huck was a character who initially can't see his compassion for Jim, the runaway slave, as a man, as a human being. But on that raft, he sees him as a man with a full life, finds out he has a wife and kids, and instead of getting him killed, he saves his life. The epiphanies seemed to coincide.

\*

I'm back in Los Angeles, and after three months away I could be walking on the moon. The cold weather hurts, the wet rain has no heat in it, and I am a stranger in a strange land—my own.

I can't sleep so I roam and putter around my home like a visitor getting acquainted with his new surroundings—a sixth country. Lorraine, my oldest and dearest friend since I was fourteen, has come to see me. She is a tough, smart, gorgeous Italian woman. She has the biggest eyes, brown, almond shaped, and everyone even strangers remark about them. I regale her with stories about the magic that happened. I go on and on about Huck and tell her she will die when she meets him. We are watching the Super Bowl and screaming about one of the most magnificent touchdowns in football history.

My cell phone rings. When I check the message, it is Daliana, there are five messages. She tells me that she needs to talk to me and not to mind her voice, as she has a cold. I tell Lorraine that it was not a “cold” voice but a crying voice. I mutter, “Lo, I'm scared; Lo, I'm scared.” I frantically check my email. She has sent a message saying to call her anytime, and she needs to talk to me.

We shared our love for Huck like two schoolgirls; this must be about him. Lorraine tells me to go into the living room and call Daliana.

When she picks up the phone, I yell “tell me he is okay. Tell me he has no legs. I don't care if he can't see, just tell me his brain is intact, tell me he is alive!”

She cries hard. The death cry, the hard, searing cry of sudden loss.

I say, “You got the information wrong somehow. It's a lie!”

Through her deep sobs she keeps saying, “He is gone, our friend is gone.”

I fall to the floor and feel grief and political rage collide head on. Like two boxers smashing each other's brains out, each blow numbing the other.

My friend was killed by a roadside bomb. The term almost sounds friendly, "roadside" seems so harmless. I am thinking about what a friend had said: *I was hoping it was a lie.*

I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means Huck, it means Sean.

---

## **New Fiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: "Love Engagement"**

Noor and his wife Damsa moved to Paris when the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Twenty-two years later, after the collapse of the Taliban, they returned to Kabul and rented a house with a large backyard in District Ten on Taimani Street. Withered red, blue and white roses grew beside a bare concrete wall and geckos perched between the thorns, immobile, alert, leaping at the slightest disturbance into the branches of a poplar. Fallen leaves from the tree curled on the faded tiles of a cracked terrace. One afternoon, while he was watering the roses, Noor met his neighbor, Abdul Ahmadi, and invited him for tea.

Right off, Abdul noticed Damsa in the kitchen without a burqa. She looked him up and down without a hint of self-consciousness. Another woman stood beside her. She wore a burqa and turned away when Abdul glanced at her. Damsa carried tea and a plate of raisins and cashews on a tray and sat with Abdul and Noor and lit a cigarette. Abdul could not believe

her behavior and turned to Noor. Noor shrugged.

It is no problem for a woman to smoke and sit with a man in Paris, he said.

Don't apologize for me, Damsa snapped.

I was not apologizing for you.

Yes, you were!

Turning to Abdul, she scolded, You are stuck in the old ways.

Abdul's face reddened with anger but he remained quiet. He closed his eyes as if the darkness would remove Damsa from his sight. When he opened them again, he ignored her and asked Noor about the other woman. Was she his second wife?

No, Damsa answered and laughed.

I spoke to Noor, Abdul said.

Yes, and now I am speaking to you, Damsa said. She is my friend from long ago. We were in school together.

We are not in France, Abdul said, trying to control his temper.

Yes, but you are in our home, Damsa replied.

Please, Noor said.

No, don't please me, she snapped.

When neither Noor or Abdul spoke, Damsa continued: The woman's name was, Arezo. She was still not used to the idea that the Taliban were gone and she could now show her face to men. Slowly, slowly, Damsa said, she had been encouraging Arezo to relax and trust in the new Afghanistan.

Abdul understood her hesitation. He still had a long beard and wore a salwar kameez. His friends told him to shave but his

mind did not switch off and on like a lightbulb. One day, the vice police were measuring his beard, the next day his friends were waiting for barbers to shave theirs off. It was all very sudden and as unbelievable as Damsa's behavior.

Excusing himself, Abdul returned home. He lived alone. During Talib time, when his father arranged for him to marry the daughter of a close friend, Abdul fled to Pakistan. The idea of marriage scared him, especially to a girl he did not even know. He had rarely spoken to any girl and never without an older person present. He had vague memories of playing tag with girl cousins in the back of his house when he was a boy but after he turned ten or eleven his father told him to play only with boys.

Abdul refused to come home until his father relented and promised not to force him into marriage but he did not speak to Abdul again. He moved around him like a detached shadow behaving as if he did not exist.

A tailor who owned a small shop in Shar-e-Naw hired Abdul as his assistant. When he died, Abdul took over. Then al-Qaeda attacked the United States and the Americans came. In the days and months that followed, Abdul would sit behind the counter of his shop beside a sewing machine and stare at the busy sidewalk traffic, incredulous. Young men strode by in blue jeans and button up shirts with bright flower patterns, much of their pale chests exposed. Girls wore jeans, too, and high-heeled shoes, and the wind from cars lifted their saris and they held the billowing cloth with both hands and laughed, their uncovered faces turned toward the clear sky, sunlight playing across their flushed cheeks. Abdul struggled to absorb all the changes that had occurred in such a short time.

One day a year after they had met, Noor called Abdul and told him Damsa had died. She had awakened that morning, stepped into their garden, lit a cigarette and dropped dead of a heart attack. He found her slumped against a wall, a vine reaching

above her head. Abdul hurried to his house. When Noor opened the door, Abdul embraced him.

Well, now I can watch American wrestling shows on TV without Damsa telling me it's entertainment for boys, not men, Noor said. I can play panjpar<sup>[1]</sup> with my friends and she won't tell me I'm wasting my time.

Two months later, Noor stopped by Abdul's shop with some news: his nephew, the son of his older sister, had become engaged. But it was not a typical engagement. He and the girl had decided to marry on their own. Their parents had not been involved.

My nephew calls it a love engagement, Noor said.

Their fathers do not object? Abdul asked.

No. Now that the Americans are here I think it is OK.

Noor left and a short time later Arezo walked into Abdul's shop and asked if he would mend a pair of sandals. She gave no indication that she recognized him. She still wore a burqa but she had pulled the hood from her face. Her hair fell to her shoulders. She would not look at Abdul directly but he noticed a smile play across her face when he spoke.



That night, as he got ready for bed, Abdul thought about Arezo. He wondered what it would be like walking beside her in public as young men and women now did. Just thinking about it kept him awake. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of

them on a sidewalk together, their fingers almost touching. Then he leaned into her face and pressed his mouth against hers. As their lips touched he woke with a jolt.

Night after night Abdul had this dream. He always woke up after he kissed her. Eventually he would fall back to sleep and dream of Arezo again until the dawn call to prayer stirred him awake. Then one night the dreams stopped. He woke up feeling her absence, his head empty of even the slightest impression of her. The next morning, Noor called. His voice broke. He sounded very upset. He asked if he could come over. Yes, of course, Abdul said. When he let him in, he was shocked by his friend's sunken eyes, his unkempt hair and disheveled clothes. His lower lip was cut and swollen.

What's wrong? Abul asked.

Noor did not answer. Abdul made tea and they sat on the floor of his living room. After a long moment, Noor sighed and began talking. Two days ago, he spoke to his nephew. What is a love engagement? he had asked him. It is the most beautiful thing, his nephew replied. Why do you ask? Noor told him he had fallen in love with Arezo. Sometimes, accompanied by her father, she would stop by his house with food. Damsa would want to know you are taking care of yourself, she would tell him. Noor could not stop staring at her. He wanted to speak to her father about marriage. No, no, his nephew said. That is the old way. You must ask her yourself.

With his help, Noor composed a letter. He told Arezo he did nothing but think of her all day. When he watered the roses, when he walked to the bazaar, when he had tea. *I want you to be my wife*, he wrote. His nephew shook his head.

Be humble. Ask her if she would accept you as her husband.

Noor did as he suggested and signed his name. His nephew delivered the letter. The next day, Noor woke up and found a note from Arezo's father outside his front door.



*Noor Mohammad, the letter began, Arezo loved your wife Damsa as a sister and continues to respect you as her husband. You are like a brother to her. She cannot feel anything more for you without betraying Damsa. In the future do not talk to Arezo again. I, as her father, Haji Aziz Sakhi, insist upon this.*

Noor walked to his sister's house and beat his nephew, slapping him in the face until the boy's father threw him out. Noor stormed off to Arezo's house and pounded on the door. No one answered. He paced on the sidewalk until nightfall. Then he went home but his frustration was so great he was unable to sleep. This morning, he returned before the sun had fully risen and stood impatiently across the street. As a dry, lazy heat began spreading across the city, he saw Arezo walk outside with an empty sack and turn toward the downtown bazaar. Noor followed her. When she went down an alley, he called her. She stopped and looked at him. The hood of her burqa was raised and he saw her face, the uncertain smile creasing her mouth. He grabbed her and kissed her. She stiffened in his arms, tried to shake loose from his grip and bit his mouth. He stumbled back and she ran, the burqa inflating like a balloon as if it might lift her into the sky.

\*

When he finished talking, Noor stared at his tea. After a moment, he looked up at Abdul, stood and let himself out without speaking.

Abdul followed him to the door. As he watched Noor enter his house, Abdul thought of Arezo. He hoped Noor had not scared her from his dreams. He would never hurt her.

[\[1\]](#) *A card game popular in Afghanistan*

---

# New Fiction from Jon Imparato: “You Had Me at Afghanistan”

*“I was lying in a burned-out basement with the full moon in my eyes. I was hoping for replacement when the sun burst through the sky. There was a band playing in my head and I felt like getting high. I was thinking about what a friend had said. I was hoping it was a lie. Thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie.” –Neil Young*

k.d. lang’s voice carries the Neil Young lyrics on a mellifluous ride; notes keep swirling up as I crash to the ground. I’m clutching a wet dishcloth as if it were a rope, thinking about what a friend had said, and I was hoping it was a lie. I’m staring at the fringe tangled on my terracotta-colored sarong and my beaded anklet. I grab the heavy sweater I am wearing over my tank top to cover my face as I sob. My skin is the darkest it has ever been from traveling in five Asian countries during their summer. Being thrust into cold, rainy weather frightens me. I want to be back in oppressive heat. I am thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie. I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means the unspeakable.

\*

I am a radical on sabbatical. I have been working as the Artistic Director of the Lily Tomlin/Jane Wagner Cultural Arts Center for ten years. When I asked my boss for sabbatical, I was shocked when he said yes. I’m taking three months off from

my job. I started out in Thailand, then Cambodia, Laos, Hanoi. (Or, as I like to call it, HanNoise. It is a city without a moment of silence, a never-ending cacophony of traffic, people, and blaring intrusions of sound.) My final destination is Bali. I have learned on this trip that most of the travel agents have never left the town or village they live in. But for some reason I think I can trust this father-daughter team. The daughter insists I call her Baby, and she calls me Mr. Delicious.

When I arrived in Bali, one of the first things I was told was that my name, Jon, meant "delicious" in Balinese. I had just come from Cambodia, where I gave a piece of my heart to a man whose long name I had a hard time pronouncing. At one point he was joking and said, "Just call me Delicious and I'll call you Mr. Delicious because that is what we are to each other...delicious." We had a brief four-day affair, a travel affair; they are so transitory and carefree, no one expects anything except the momentary pleasures.

A young girl at the travel agency loves that my name means delicious, and she thinks this is hilarious. When I tell her it also means toilet in English, I then become Delicious Toilet.

"I think you like me, Mr. Delicious, I think you do." "I like you fine, Baby; I will like you even more if you can get me onto a remote island." Baby keeps flirting with me and asking me if I like her. She is oblivious to the fact that I am gay, and her flirting seems just to be on autopilot. Her flirting is learned; nothing about it is organic. Baby's father is watching his daughter flirt. He is in on the game; all he wants is for Baby to make the sale. We are all in on the game; everyone is trying to get what they want. Nonetheless I find myself charmed by Baby. All I want is a quiet island where I can write and stare at water while I do a slow brain drain. Both Baby and her father have assured me that I will be on a quiet, peaceful island, with a bungalow on the ocean.

I want to be face-to-face with the ocean. I want a wave confrontation. I take an hour boat ride and arrive on an island across from Lombok, Gili Trankang, right next to Bali. This is an island with seven hundred people, no cars, no motorbikes, and no police. This is not a lush resort but a Rasta party island. Visitors are met at the dock by tuk-tuk carriages pulled by very sad horses. There is poverty here, you just can't escape it. The power goes out several times a day, hot water is never guaranteed, and most bungalows have saltwater showers, very strange to the skin. Imagine someone has spilled a margarita on you and rinsed you off. My bungalow is attached to an open café with a bar painted a bright red-orange, sunshine yellow, and a deep green. The stage faces the most beautiful turquoise, sea-green ocean. Yet trash is piled up on sandbanks. You must turn your head toward the beauty, and there is plenty of it.



I am hanging out, having lunch with the reggae band and staff. They are quick to tell me that I will do very well on this island because it is filled with beautiful women. I nonchalantly say that I am gay and hope there are also lots of beautiful men. Suddenly I can feel the chill, as if a hurricane's gust of wind suddenly changed direction. Some of them are cool, but many of them are not. I quickly learn that most of the people on the island are Muslim. I have been in the accepting bliss of Buddhists and Hindus, so for the first time I need to keep a low profile about being gay. In all these travels, this is the first time that I have encountered any homophobia. The Rasta world is full of wonderful male affection—everyone calls you his brother, yet there is a homophobic and sexist element to the Rasta world that can't be ignored. It is ever-present and inescapable.

Of course, it takes hours for my room to be ready. Ganja is king here; everyone is stoned and moves at a snail's pace from the herb and the heat. They have two speeds: slow and stop. I get in the water, and I have arrived! This is the ocean I have longed for: crystal clear, warm in a way that requires no adjusting to the temperature, the color is spectacular, and it feels like flower petals on my skin. I have arrived...yet I am not happy. I miss my New York friend Roberta something awful. She longs for water like this too.

We have always shared the ocean in a deep way; when we met, we found as many ways as we could to spend time at the ocean, and I want her here with me. I want to be stupid and silly with her, laugh and splash. The ocean floor is filled with mounds of pure white coral; you can scoop it up with your hands and have little pieces of coral rain down on you. Roberta would freak. The absence of my friend is stinging. I scoop up empty water and pour it over my head as I cry, my sobbing face plunged into the ocean and staring at the coral floor. I remember that I always take a while to get my footing on my first day in a new country. I'm thrilled to get an email from

a friend I met in Cambodia, named Mags. Mags is seventy-two. She has short-cropped, maroon-purplish hair. Her hair spikes up like an eighties rock star. She wears long, flowing dresses with wild prints and tons of large jewelry from her travels. She is from Queensland, Australia. She moved to Phnom Penh, in Cambodia. Mags checked into the gay hotel where I was staying. She convinced the hotel owner to let her live there. The only woman in a gay hotel where she holds court. We exchange our lives over scotch by the pool, and instantly we feel great love for each other. Everyone calls her Mum. Her daughter, Morag, will be arriving in three days. I can't wait for them to arrive on this magical island. This lifts my spirits and just knowing I will soon have some friends on the island is a comfort.

\*

I am at a place called Sama Sama. It means "same-same" but also signifies that we are all just a little bit different, but everyone is the same and welcomed. The Rasta band is really good, and there is a huge dancing-drinking-smoking scene going on. They play mostly Bob Marley covers. They tell me it is the happiest music on earth. Yet I am in my room, I am not happy. I am trying to read or do some writing, but the sound of the band is deafening. I'm mad at the happiest music, mad at Baby and her dad for sending me here, mad at feeling like an outcast, mad at the world. I finally give in and say to myself, "Get out of this bungalow and just embrace this bizarre scene."

I'd made friends with one of the bartenders, named Zen, that afternoon and he seemed cool. I sit down at the bar and drink my scotch with all this Rasta joy bouncing and swirling around me. I am certain I am the only gay man on the island and feel like I don't belong, like an island unto myself.

Suddenly, one of the most beautiful men I have ever laid my eyes on sits next to me. He is straight, no question about it.

He is trying to get the bartender's attention. I shout, "Hey, Zen, can you get my buddy a drink?"

The beautiful man says, "Thanks for the hook-up." I learn he is from Canada. The best people I have met on my journey who aren't native are Canadians. They are open and sturdy. I will refer to my friend as Huck for reasons I will explain later. We start talking and within a few minutes the conversation is off and running. Our ideas, opinions, and insights are crashing in on us like the waves a few feet away. This guy is smart, insightful, and profound, and we are in deep, exchanging who we are with each other. We talk politics for a good part of the conversation: He can't stand Bush; Sarah Palin is an unquestionable joke—his views are so liberal. I tell him I often feel like I am what is left of the left, an old Lily Tomlin joke. He laughs and says he feels my pain. About an hour into the conversation, he hits a curveball in my direction that almost knocks me off my seat. He tells me he is a soldier on leave from Afghanistan, and he goes back to war in a few days.

Traveling around Southeast Asia, you can talk to people for the longest time and, unlike in America, they don't ask you what you do. Your work doesn't define you. I would never have thought this beautiful, sensitive man was a soldier. That information seems so incongruous to the man I am talking to. I am so thrown and confused by this news. I turn and say, "Okay, let's break this sucker down." Like an archaeologist, I keep digging. Who is this guy?

Our conversation goes deep and wide, fast, and furious. It moves with speed and intention but always with grace. We close the bar; he is now even more fascinating to me. It is 4:00 a.m. and I assume I am off to bed. Huck turns to me and says, "Here is how I see it. We are not done with this conversation, and I am not done with you. Let's go get some weed and smoke a joint on the beach and talk until sunup." I tell him I am so there.

As we walk on the dark dirt road, following the sad horses' hoofprints, Huck says, "Where do you think we can score some weed?"

I point to an old man in his eighties with a Marley Rules T-shirt selling bottles of scotch, cigarettes, and Pringles. "I guarantee you he is our best bet."

Huck turns and says, "Come on, little buddy."

"Huck, I feel like Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*. Why are you calling me that?"

"Oh, it's too late, that's who you are. I like calling you that."

Scoring takes all of five minutes. Huck returns with this sneaky smile on his face. "I not only got you enough weed for the week that you're on this island, but I also got you papers and a lighter."

I turn to him and say, "If you are trying to get down my pants, you had me at Afghanistan."

Mind you, at this point I have not smoked weed for eight weeks, and this is the first time on my trip I even feel like getting high. We sit by an ocean lit by beach lamps that keep the waves sea-green while the ocean further down is a deep blue-black.

Huck and I continue to share our lives, and I learn that he had an epiphany in Afghanistan that has transformed him. After 9/11 he felt a deep need to fight against the Taliban. Canada never went into Iraq nor would he. But fighting the Taliban was something he felt he had to do. "Little buddy, this is the way I see it. I'm young, strong, and capable. If not me, then who? I don't know how else to say this, but I had to go; it is my destiny. Believe me," he said, "it is that complicated and that simple." I don't know if I agree with him. All I know is



that I want him to be safe.

Now he sees how wrong the war is. Huck explains that we are fighting a losing battle. We will never build the army this country needs. He has developed a deep affection for some of the Afghanistan children, and he no longer thinks it is right to kill anyone. He is hoping for a replacement assignment where he could leave combat and become a search-and-rescue expert for the Canadian Army. Every now and then I just burst out, "God, you are beautiful!" He lowers his head, blushes, and says thanks. In return he says, "God, you are great."

He knows I'm not coming on to him; it's clearly beyond that. Yet my appreciation for his unquestionable beauty must be proclaimed from time to time. He proclaims how great I am in return, and we laugh.

Neither one of us had known this island existed, and we have no idea how we ended up here. It was never on either of our trajectories. Our conversation just glides from one thought to another. I will show him L.A., and he will show me Canada. We talk about books, his girlfriends, my boyfriends, the demise of the Bush administration, the hope of Obama, saving lives, and living them.

While we talk the night into day, the full moon stares us down, right in my eyes. It is a bluish-gray moon that looks as if a prop person hung it between two island trees. The sky begins to turn ever so slightly into its morning yellow as the moon seems to be replaced instantly by the sun. We both have the reggae band playing in our heads. Mine is tossing around over and over a reggae version of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." Huck's is "No Woman No Cry." We joke that we will have the Sama Sama reggae band playing in our heads for weeks. As we say good night, he tells me he will be getting an enormous tattoo tomorrow and asks me if I would stop by the tattoo shack with the huge orange hammock on the porch.

\*

Lying in bed, I had been feeling sorry for myself. I have just spent five days at a gay villa, and I am longing to be around my gay brothers. I feel resentful of the homophobia I know is coming at me from many of the straight men. The last person I ever thought would rescue me from that state of mind is a straight Canadian soldier.

I stay up trying to write a short story about the encounter of Huck and Jon. In the morning I finally go to bed at 9:00 a.m. because my encounter with Huck has my mind reeling.

\*

I race over to the tattoo shack around noon. My feet can't get me there fast enough. I want to be with Huck and yet am baffled by the intense urgency I feel. It has been gray and cloudy morning, but as I pick up my pace, the sun bursts through the sky shouting and waving hello, and I can't wait to let the water feel me again.

At the tattoo shack there is a guy with the longest dreads I have ever seen dangling through a hammock, as if long, black snakes were sweeping the old wooden floor as the hammock sways back and forth. The tattoo artist is older and seems as relaxed as a human can get. Some obscure Tracy Chapman song is playing on a radio. Huck must have told the guy in the hammock that a friend was stopping by because he just points his finger to the back room. Huck is lying on the bed in just his swim trunks. He tells me he is getting really scared because this is going to take about four hours and it's going to hurt. He is clearly freaked. The design is huge and will be on his left side, a place where people rarely get them. The tattoo artist tells him to be patient and to expect a lot of pain. In twenty-three years, he has never given anyone a tattoo of that size in that area. "It is all bone," he keeps muttering and shaking his head. "It is all bone."

I grab Huck's leg and say, "Okay, Huck, here's the deal. Do you really want this tattoo? If you do, I will hang out and keep you company. I am a really good nurse."

He nods yes, then mutters, "Stay, please." I become the tattoo nurse. I run back to my bungalow and get him some pills that will help him sleep. I make sure he drinks a lot of water, buy him Pringles (they are everywhere). I buy a fifth of scotch, tell him funny stories, put cold towels on his forehead, and basically make sure he is okay, documenting the ordeal with my camera.

The tattoo is of a devil-looking serpent coming out of the ocean. This image gives me chills. As the serpent with its sword rises, a huge splash of water hits the air. The other half is some sort of angel figure carrying a torch of glowing light. He told me it was his personal reckoning of the good and evil inside himself. The never-ending reminder to himself...that he chose to kill. He is utterly motionless. The tattoo artist is amazed, as I am, at Huck's perfect stillness during four hours of intense pain. I think to myself, this is a soldier's story. He understands all too well what a false move can mean. He knows how to be a statue or risk being killed.

\*

Later, over lunch, I interview him for a short story I plan to write about him. I ask him for examples from combat when he had to be that still or it could cost him his life. He tells me not long ago he was searching a burned-out basement for weapons. He heard footsteps above and hit the basement floor. As he was lying there, he knew that if anyone heard him, he would be dead. It was a soldier's strength. The determination I witnessed during those four hours while he was getting his tattoo was staggering. I learned once again that the will of the human spirit is indomitable.

The tattoo shack has a back room behind the tattooing room with a mattress on the floor. The room rents out for ten dollars a night. Huck is turned on his side, eyes closed; the drugs are working. The tattoo artist was taking a break to eat his lunch. The door opens and a beautiful, young, blonde woman who reminds me of Scarlett Johansson walks in, says her name is Daliana, and she wants to rent the back room. Then she looks at Huck, looks at me, and whispers, "He is so hot." I laugh and agree. She tells me she is from Canada, and I tell her, "Don't rent that room, you can do better." Huck turns and says, "Canada, where?" Canadians love meeting other Canadians. I tell Daliana to meet us later at Sama Sama to party.

The moment she leaves I can see Huck is having a really hard time keeping it together. The tattoo artist says, "Get ready for round two," with this ominous tone in his voice. Huck's body isn't moving, but his face tells me he is in severe pain. He turns to me and says, "You are a lifesaver. Do you realize you are saving my life? Do you get that, little buddy?"

I say, "Huck, saving lives, come on. That is what we talked about last night. Isn't that what this new friendship is all about? You went into the war to kill and had your epiphany that you are here to save lives. Now you have to stop calling me little buddy; it is way too Gilligan on this island." He shakes his head no. He flashes me that look that says don't make me laugh; it hurts. I tell him about John *Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It's one of my favorite books, and I have reread it on this journey. I explain that it is a book about the Vietnam War, God, the act of killing, and destiny. I think it's an important book for him to read. I know it will speak to him.

He told me the night before that he thinks one of the reasons we've met is so I can help him read novels again. I will send him off with this book and hope it has a deep effect on him.

\*

I am at a café on the dock with Huck and Daliana, who has become another amazing friend from good old Canada. She has also spent time with Huck. I've played matchmaker and set them up for the night. They share their own moments of exchanging their lives. We can hear the boat coming into the dock, dropping off new guests. About fifty people are walking down to the main sandy road. I hear someone yell my name. It's Mags wearing the brightest orange dress. It looks like the sun is walking towards us, giving new meaning to the word sundress. To her right side is her beautiful daughter Morag. People always tell you their kids are beautiful, but Morag had a casual effortless beauty. Everyone introduces themselves and they join us for a cold drink. Huck only has about ten minutes until he has to get on that boat, the boat that would begin his journey back to war. Daliana and I are both heartbroken to see our soldier off. As he gets up to leave, I hug him, kiss him on the cheek, and tell him how special he is and that he is the best, most unexpected surprise on my journey.

I am crying. Hard. My dad is a Korean War vet and had to live through the horrors of that war. Several bullets pierced various parts of his body while parachuting into combat. The first five years of my life were spent in and out of VA hospitals in Brooklyn, New York. My ex-lover, James, was in Vietnam and has had to deal with the horrors of exposure to Agent Orange. I have a lifetime of connections to vets. It suddenly occurs to me that I have never met anyone serving in this current war.

I start to worry about Huck's safety and think, Okay, gods, you have played with me enough, and it has been great fun, but now PLEASE turn your eyes to my friend. Play with him and keep him safe. If he comes out of this, he could do so much good.

Even thinking the word "if" scares me. Yet his bags are packed and he's ready to go...and I can't control what I can't control. I can only say to my friends on this island: Don't say a prayer for Owen Meany; say a prayer for my new friend Huck. I

tell Huck I want to write about him on my travel blog, but I need to make sure he is cool with what I write. I show him the first entry, and he blushes and said, "It's all good; just change my name." It's the weed. He asks me not to use his name and I tell him I will respect that. I say I am going to call him Huck because I just read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for the first time. He looks puzzled and asks why. I tell him that Huck was a character who initially can't see his compassion for Jim, the runaway slave, as a man, as a human being. But on that raft, he sees him as a man with a full life, finds out he has a wife and kids, and instead of getting him killed, he saves his life. The epiphanies seemed to coincide.

\*

I'm back in Los Angeles, and after three months away I could be walking on the moon. The cold weather hurts, the wet rain has no heat in it, and I am a stranger in a strange land—my own.

I can't sleep so I roam and putter around my home like a visitor getting acquainted with his new surroundings—a sixth country. Lorraine, my oldest and dearest friend since I was fourteen, has come to see me. She is a tough, smart, gorgeous Italian woman. She has the biggest eyes, brown, almond shaped, and everyone even strangers remark about them. I regale her with stories about the magic that happened. I go on and on about Huck and tell her she will die when she meets him. We are watching the Super Bowl and screaming about one of the most magnificent touchdowns in football history.

My cell phone rings. When I check the message, it is Daliana, there are five messages. She tells me that she needs to talk to me and not to mind her voice, as she has a cold. I tell Lorraine that it was not a "cold" voice but a crying voice. I mutter, "Lo, I'm scared; Lo, I'm scared." I frantically check my email. She has sent a message saying to call her anytime,

and she needs to talk to me.

We shared our love for Huck like two schoolgirls; this must be about him. Lorraine tells me to go into the living room and call Daliana.

When she picks up the phone, I yell “tell me he is okay. Tell me he has no legs. I don’t care if he can’t see, just tell me his brain is intact, tell me he is alive!”

She cries hard. The death cry, the hard, searing cry of sudden loss.

I say, “You got the information wrong somehow. It’s a lie!”

Through her deep sobs she keeps saying, “He is gone, our friend is gone.”

I fall to the floor and feel grief and political rage collide head on. Like two boxers smashing each other’s brains out, each blow numbing the other.

My friend was killed by a roadside bomb. The term almost sounds friendly, “roadside” seems so harmless. I am thinking about what a friend had said: *I was hoping it was a lie.*

I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means Huck, it means Sean.

---

**New Nonfiction from J.  
Malcolm Garcia: “Alabama**

# Village”

*(Editor’s Note: Some names have been changed for privacy.)*

The three white, rectangular buildings of Light of the Village ministry stand bright as a smile in the clammy humidity of a late Sunday afternoon in southern Alabama. A deep red cross rises above a stone walk where disturbed horseflies make a sharp buzzsaw of noise. On one of several bare trees, a cracked two-by-four scrawled with the message, *Holy Spirit I have You*, hangs unevenly. Arthur James Williams Sr., better known as Mr. Arthur, nailed up that sign and dozens more like it all around Alabama Village, an impoverished neighborhood in the town of Prichard.

I have just parked outside Light of the Village to meet its founders, John and Dolores Eads. They have been in Prichard since 2002 sharing their Christian faith. A friend told me about them. Before I became a reporter, I had been a social worker. Since then, I’ve been covering families who fall well below the news radar, and if in the unlikely or unfortunate event become noteworthy, are generally viewed with disdain. The residents of the Village fall into that category. Decades ago, white flight and economic downturns turned Prichard, and Alabama Village in particular, into a brutal place. Today, the chance to be a victim of violent or property crime in any given year is 1-in-19, making this town of 22,000 just outside Mobile one of the most dangerous places to live in America.

Because of the violence, some people have compared the Village to Syria. When I lived in Illinois, people called Chicago “Chiraq” because of its astronomical homicide rate—as many as forty shootings some weekends. But that was Chicago. It was hard to believe that an obscure neighborhood in an equally obscure small town would in its own way be as bad, and yet that’s what news reports implied. I’d worked in Syria as a reporter. That experience and my social services background



made Prichard an irresistible draw as did John and Dolores. To work in the Village they had to be more than do-good, Jesus people who provide free after-school programs, meals, and other services, as well as Bible study. I called John. Totally cool, he said when I told him I wanted to spend two weeks in the Village. In late February 2021, I left my San Diego home for Alabama.

\*

As I drove into Prichard, I saw the collapsed roofs of abandoned homes punctured by trees that had muscled through them. Canted doors, buckled floors, charred outlets, fractured walls. The rotted remains of broken porches turned black by weather and rot. Chips of peeled paint dusted the ground and the scat of feral dogs.. Splintered steps sagged inward. Corroded stoves dust-covered and entwined in cobwebs. Pans and pots on stilled burners. The head of a doll rested against the leg of a broken chair beside a rusted, metal bed frame. Streets that once knitted the community together had been submerged beneath weeds and heaps of abandoned couches, mattresses, toilets, boxes and stuffed garbage bags. The air smelled rancid. *Destination*, the brand of one forsaken tire. There was no sound.

Now, as I get out of my car, a man calls to me and I see John and Dolores and a handful of staff and volunteers across the street on the porch of a house newly rehabilitated by the ministry. John adjusts his cap against the sun. Casually and unhurried, he introduces me to everyone. Dolores has a dome of short, dark hair and wears wide glasses. Her voice exudes joy. Hey Malcolm! she shouts, as if I'm the highlight of her afternoon. Then I follow John back to the ministry. He unlocks the front door and we walk inside and pause beside a wall plastered with photographs of smiling children and teenagers. Some of them wear blue Light of the Village T-shirts. Other pictures show spent bullets, a splintered window, a shell casing.

One of the volunteers you just met, Jamez Montgomery, that's his uncle Mayo, John says, pointing to a photo of a grinning young man with dreadlocks. Mayo was shot. Jamez would be a great person for you to talk to you. That would be pretty cool. We got Jesse. You haven't met him. That's his mom, Cindy. She was killed. He'd love to talk to you. He's going to a community college.



Mayo. Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

John points to the photo of the shell casing.

Keeping it real, he says. We never forget where we are.

We walk back outside, squint against the glare. John shouts to Dolores, I cruise and distribute fruit.

The staff and volunteers collect boxes of donated oranges and grapefruit and load a pickup. I hop in the back with John, Jamez and Dacino Dees. Dacino works for the ministry. He grew up in the Village and had no idea what to make of John and

Dolores. He was about eight years old when he first saw them playing games with other children. Why're these white people out here messing with kids? he wondered. White people bought drugs in the Village and left. They didn't play with children. Then John walked over and talked to his stepdad and persuaded him to let Dacino join the other kids.

My birthday's tomorrow, Mr. John. Can I drive? Jamez asks.

You ain't driving.

I'll be fifteen.

Now you sure ain't driving.

Jamez laughs. He has been coming to the ministry since he was five. He has known John and Dolores for so long he calls them his godparents.

Let's roll! John shouts.

The pickup turns out of the ministry, jostling on the pitted road.

We got oranges and grapefruit, Bo. John shouts at a man peering at us from behind the screen door of a listing house.

I'll take a few.

Alright, Bo.

John calls almost everyone, Bo—men and women, boys and girls, sparing himself embarrassment when he forgets a name.

Thanks, Mr. John.

See you later, Bo!

We continue past a green house that opens as a juke joint at night. It stands in a block John calls the Donut Shop, an area used by drug dealers. Like a donut shop, 24/7, it never

closes. Shirtless young men in blue jeans linger, watching us.

Bingo, what's up, man? Want some fruit? Just off the tree.

I see the leaves on it, Mr. John.

That means it's fresh. You doing good?

Yeah.

John doesn't judge the young men before him. Drug dealing does not define the entire person. However, he does not underestimate how quickly his interactions with them can go off the rails. Christians say, God will protect you. Yes, John agrees, and wisdom too. Wisdom has taught him to linger in the Donut Shop long enough to maintain neighborhood connections and no longer.

Keeping it real, he says.

\*

After we distribute the fruit, Jamez leaves for the apartment of his grandmother, Deborah Lacey. He expects her and one of his aunts to take him out for his birthday. When he was little, they would go to Chuck E Cheese. Now he prefers McDonald's. He especially likes Big Macs. However, he enjoys Chick-fil-A, too, and might go there.

Jamez and his grandmother used to live on Hale Drive in the Village, and he often heard gunshots. If the shots sounded close, he would run into the house. If not, he didn't worry about it. He has seen people firing guns on New Year's Eve but never at people.

Jamez has lost family. His grandmother's son, Uncle Mayo, was shot. His great-great grandmother, an aunt and a baby cousin have also died.. The baby drank lighter fluid. Jamez doesn't know how the aunt died. His great-great grandmother stopped breathing. She was old. Things are cool and then the next thing he knows someone's gone.

When Mayo died, his mother called him. Your uncle's been shot at your grandmother's house, she said. Jamez started running. When he reached Hale Drive he saw everyone crying and he began weeping. Blood pooled in the yard. The family had an open casket funeral. When Jamez touched the body it felt hard and not like Mayo. Everything about him was gone.

\*

Sixty-five-year-old Deborah Lacey left Alabama Village with her grandchildren after Mayo died. She hopes Jamez lives a better life. She tells him right from wrong. His older brother, Jeremiah lives in Atlanta with his daddy. He'll turn eighteen soon and graduate from high school. He calls her every day. His younger brother, Jerry, got caught with marijuana and a judge referred him to a drug program for six months. Deborah took the boys just after they were born. Their mother, her daughter, was off into other things. Not drugs just running wild. Still is.

Mayo, her baby son, was twenty-seven when he died. He had just come from his girlfriend's place and had pulled up to his house when someone shot him from a pickup with a 9 mm pistol. Deborah spent days afterward walking and weeping. You killed him! she screamed. She lost her mind for a minute and has still not recovered. A niece took her in. Mayo sold a little bit of weed but everybody did. Deborah doesn't understand anything anymore.

A small, eight-month-old dog the size of a Chihuahua with long, brown hair scrambles in circles on her lap. Deborah bought her for company and calls her Kizzy. The dog reminds her of Mayo. Hyped up just like him. When he was a boy, he participated in the ministry's after-school programs and summer camp, and he attended church on Sundays. In those days, Deborah worked at a Wendy's and cleaned offices. Then she got shot and had to quit. It was a big help to have Mayo at Light of the Village because she couldn't handle him all day while

she recovered. It wasn't a bad wound. Bad enough, she supposes. Two people started shooting at each other just as she stepped off a bus. She hadn't walked but a minute when a bullet entered the calves of both legs. It didn't hurt, but it burned something awful. The bus driver called 911. Deborah was laid up for a good little while.

Alabama Village has been rough for so long it's hard for her to say when it started going downhill. She has seen just two shootings—Mayo's and her own—and that was enough. It scares her. She stays out of their way. She was caught in that crossfire once and that was once too many.

Deborah can't hardly remember her younger days. She grew up in Prichard but not in the Village, and was into a little bit of everything. Whatever wasn't tied down she stole, money mostly. Never broke into houses. She robbed people on the street. No guns. She was afraid of guns. Instead she used a bat or a stick, whatever was available to intimidate people. She spent five years in the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women and learned to leave stuff alone that didn't belong to her and to live a better life if she didn't want to spend it in jail. She kept her head down and got into a work release program making baskets in a Birmingham factory. Then the prison placed her with a telemarketing company that sold light bulbs. That didn't work out. People would often cuss, become irrational, and worse, and company rules forbade her to respond in kind. But she broke those rules more than once and returned to making baskets.

Deborah tells her grandchildren how crazy she was at their age and where it led. She told Mayo the same thing. Sometimes he listened; sometimes he didn't.

\*

Dacino picks me up at my hotel the next morning. He spent the night at the house of one of his sisters in Gulf Village, a

project adjacent to the ministry. They sat on the porch, heard gunshots, and hurried inside to a room away from the road.

Anybody can get shot, he tells me. When he was little, older people ran the streets. Now it's all younger people. Back in the day, they didn't shoot in broad daylight like they do now. He could play outside but was aware of his boundaries. No one told him. He just knew, like instinct passed down from one generation to the next. He'd sometimes walk around, feel uneasy, and think, Yeah, I'm not going over there.

He was eight years old when he saw his first shooting. He and his brothers, Marco and Jamichael, and their stepdad saw a man chase and shoot another man in front of a Prichard convenience store. Smoke flashed out of the shotgun and Dacino's legs turned to noodles. He had gone to the store on his scooter and after what he had seen, he couldn't move. The ambulance took a while to arrive, and the the wounded man bled out in front of the store. The storeowner wouldn't let him inside. He didn't want blood on the floor. Dacino's stepdad said, Ya'll get over here, and they went to another store across the street.

That night, Dacino refused to go outside. He didn't want to walk into something that could get him killed. He knows homeboys who hang out and sell drugs but never joins them. He doesn't go around toting a gun. Everybody knows he won't pull a weapon and try to kill or rob someone. That's not him. He's Dacino from the ministry. They do their thing, and he does his.

When he leaves the Village, the absence of gunshots unnerves him. Man, he thinks, this is too quiet for me. When he enters a building, he makes a note of every exit in case someone starts shooting, but nothing happens. He lies awake at night thinking of things he's seen. In the Village, his mind is going, going, going. He doesn't have time to dwell on bad stuff.

His mother rarely let Dacino and his siblings outside when they were young. He played on the football team at his middle school just to get out of the house. Even when the season finished, he would tell his mother and stepdad, I'll be at football practice. His parents never came to the games, so how would they know?

He never met his biological father. One year, Dacino got a text from him on April 15: *Happy birthday*. Dacino was born on March 15. He didn't reply. Dacino does remember his stepfather, though. He doesn't know how he and his mother met. Maybe he stole her heart because he sure knew how to steal everything else. One weekend, he walked into a store and left a few minutes later with a slab of ribs stuffed down his pants. No one noticed. He was that good.

When he didn't steal, he beat Dacino and his siblings until they gave him money they had earned cutting grass. I can make it work with this, he'd say, and leave the house to buy drugs. Sober, he didn't have a kind thing to say about anyone. High, he was nicer. After sixteen years, he left Dacino's family for his own in Michigan.

Dacino's mother never commented on his behavior. In fact, she rarely talked. She never whooped Dacino or got on him about not doing homework and skipping classes. He wishes she had because then he might have graduated from high school. Now, he's studying for his GED certificate and wants to earn a degree in physical therapy. About two years ago, he developed a staph infection and now he can't bend the fingers in his left hand. He would like to help others with similar problems. No one knows how he contracted the infection. His arm just started swelling one day. He went to three emergency rooms and each one dismissed the problem as tendonitis. This ain't no tendonitis, not with my arm this big, Dacino said. The doctors at a fourth ER agreed and rushed him into surgery. John and Dolores stayed with him the whole time. His mother never visited.



Sometimes children need their parents to give them a shove, Dacino thinks. Hearing his stepdad telling him he'd be nothing and his momma sitting there letting him be nothing made him think he was nothing. Dacino assumes she just didn't know how to raise kids because she lost her parents at a young age. She had her first child at fifteen. Eight followed. She moved in with her older sister and just winged it. Dacino always felt like a stranger in her house.

She's my mother, Dacino tells me, but that's it.



Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

\*

When we reach the ministry, Dacino takes me inside and shows me a wall with forty-three photographs of people who have died in the Village since 2005. He points at the pictures, speaks in a matter-of-fact tone of voice:

He got killed on D Block.

He got killed in Gulf Village.

He got killed walking to a store.

He drowned.

He got killed by his cousin.

I notice a photo of Mayo. Dacino had been on D block near Hale Drive the day he died and heard the gunfire that killed him. I hope no one got shot, he thought, and then he heard screaming from Hale Drive. He walked toward the noise and saw a man futilely giving Mayo CPR. Everybody liked Mayo. No one in the neighborhood would have shot him. It was somebody from outside the Village, Dacino feels sure, somebody he had dealings with. The guy saw him and found his opportunity. Nobody was around but Miss Deborah. Had Mayo been with a friend they could have shot back and the guy wouldn't have made it out. That was a crazy day.

Another photo shows a baby boy who died of a gunshot wound in 2020. This morning I'm meeting his father, Corey Davis, better known as Big Man. He sits in the parking lot waiting for me in a red Dodge Charger R/T. I get in on the passenger side. Big Man slouches behind the wheel, barely glancing at me. Small diamonds are set in his teeth. He wears a red sweatsuit that he says cost \$1,500. He paid \$38,000 for the car. It took him a minute to get accustomed to the push button start. He owns five other cars including a Oldsmobile Delta 88 and a 1989 Chevy Caprice.

As I begin to ask my first question, Big Man raises a hand to

let me know he will speak first. He never would have agreed to see me if Mr. John had not asked him, he says. He loves Mr. John and Miss Dolores. They help anyone. He has never seen two people give of themselves as they do. They pay bills, provide food, clothes, and talk about Jesus like he's this cool dude who lives down the block. They do more than they should, way more. Big Man will let no harm come to them.

Now he lets me talk. I ask him if he'll introduce me around in the Village. He shakes his head. No. If he took me to someone's house, they'd want to know why. They could make a bigger deal out of it than necessary and that could lead to a shooting. On the other hand, if I walk around by myself, people will want to sell me drugs. Why else would I be there? He suggests I stick close to the ministry.

Rain begins falling and he turns on the windshield wipers and the defrost, dialing down the heat when it gets too hot. He can't say how he earned his name. He weighed a few pounds more than he should have as a boy and he supposes his family decided to call him Big Man. No one uses his real name except girls. At twenty-five he has been with a few and has four children, including a baby whose photo I saw on the wall, Corey Jr.

The baby had been with his mother and her boyfriend the night he died. His mother called Big Man and told him to come to the hospital. He assumed his son had fallen, broken a bone or something. When he reached the emergency room, baby Corey's mother just looked at him. The look in her eyes told him it was worse than he thought, much worse. Something deep had happened, something bad deep. Then she told him: Baby Corey had shot himself in the head while she was in the shower and her boyfriend slept. Big Man went off, shouting and yelling and hitting walls. Two security officers held him. They told him Corey Jr. should be OK. Big Man thinks they just wanted to calm him, but they only added to his confusion. Even if Junior is OK, he thought, he won't be the same person. He was shot in

the head. Something's going to be missing. Something won't be right. Alive or dead, Big Man will have lost his son.

He called John and they met at the ministry, prayed, and talked. That was good as far as it went but Big Man needed something more. Counseling wasn't going to work. He stayed in his house for three months crying and smoking weed to ease his mind. Every time he thinks about his son he breaks down. The boyfriend is in jail for drugs. When he gets out there's no telling what Big Man will do. One thing's for sure: He'll want him to explain how a two-year-old lifted a pistol and shot himself.

Big Man has spent his entire life in the Village. His father was in and out of prison. He had two mothers, his real momma and an auntie who treated him as her own son. When he needed them, they took care of him. His father did his part when he was out. Big Man hears from him but doesn't need him now that he's grown.

He was about six or seven when John and Dolores established the ministry. His family was living just down the street. Big Man wondered what they wanted, these two white people. They helped him and other kids but once he was grown there wasn't much more they could do. No one, even John and Dolores, can tell an adult how to behave. They help families meet their needs but people will always have wants too, and when Big Man wanted something and Light of the Village didn't have it, he snatched it.

He counts on his fingers: at fourteen, he did a year in juvenile. Got out for three, four months and went back in for another year. Went back again when he was seventeen, got out at eighteen. Went in once more at twenty-three, got out at twenty-four. Most of it for selling drugs. But was never arrested for distribution, just possession.

John and Dolores would visit Big Man in prison and John would

ask him what he planned to do to be a better person when he got out, and Big Man always answered, I'm going to change. But he never did. He meant what he said, but once he hit the streets his mind moved in an entirely different direction. What made sense in prison no longer applied.

He and another dude got into it about a girl one time. The girl told Big Man she was with him and then turned around and told the dude he was her man. The dude saw them together one day and thought Big Man was trying to backdoor him. He pulled out a gun and Big Man drew his. Look, I'm going to put my gun down, Big Man told him. I ain't trying to go there with you about no girl. I didn't know you were talking to her. The dude put up his gun. You right, he told Big Man.

Sometimes Big Man wonders what would have happened if he had started shooting. Where would he be now? Where would the dude be? Would they even be alive?

Big Man likes to wash cars and do construction projects with a friend he met in prison. He does other things to make money but that's not for me to know. He wants to buy an eighteen-wheeler and travel state to state delivering whatever. See a little of the country and get out of the Village but he can't conceive of living anywhere else. How do you leave everything you know? he wonders. If he could go back in time, he'd graduate from high school, enroll in college, and be a nerd. But it's too late for that. He doesn't think he'd fit in. He's smart but he doesn't believe he has the kind of intelligence necessary for school. If he flunked out, people would know and that would affect their opinion of him. He'd have to assert his pride and that would result in a shooting. He can avoid all that by not going. However if he could get an athletic scholarship, he'd sign up for college today. But he'd have to be good. He was once but not now, too fat. If a coach told him, You work out, you can play football, he would do that. Get your body back in shape and in six months we'll let you play sports, he'd be on it. But that won't happen. No one will

say that to him. He is who he is: Big Man. That's how people know him. They look up to him. He's respected. Who would he be outside the Village?

Big Man has dreams of homeboys dying, and then they die for real. Like a guy everyone called Dirty. Big Man dreamed about him getting shot and two months later someone killed him. He has dreams of getting shot himself. The bad stuff in his dreams comes true. He wishes he could leave the Village. He wishes he could stop dreaming.

Dolores is pleased I met Big Man. Just the other month he dropped by the ministry. She hadn't seen him for she doesn't know how long. John was out. Big Man offered to take them to lunch and he would pay for it. In all their years in the Village, no one had ever offered to treat them to a meal. Anywhere you want, Big Man said.

He was blown away that they had bought a house across the street. The house, Dolores explained, would be for kids who need a place to stay. Two or three—not many—and Dacino would live there to provide supervision. Big Man told her she needed to establish rules: Don't let them listen to rap music with bad words. No violent video games. No girls in the house. Bible study should be mandatory and held every day. Rules should be posted on the wall.

He asked Dolores if she could help him apply for a commercial driver's license. Yes, she said. Whatever you need to do, let's do it.

Big Man told her that at Christmas he bought bikes and passed them out to children. When he hears of someone in need, he helps with food and a hotel room. Big Man, Dolores thought, wanted her to know he was doing good things.

John pulled up and they joked about a time when they treated Big Man and some other kids to a buffet at a Golden Corral restaurant in Mobile. Big Man was about ten. He took an entire

chocolate cake and brought it back to the table. What are you doing? Dolores and John asked. They were so embarrassed. Big Man could have cared less. He sat down and started eating the cake. We can't take you anywhere! they said.

Big Man laughed at the memory, a soft kind of laugh, almost shy. Dolores still saw the boy in him.

You're always welcome here, she said.

As he left, she had no idea when or if she'd see him again. She knew the rumors about what fueled his lifestyle. His money didn't come from selling candy, and she worried where that could lead.



Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

\*

In many ways, Dolores feels she has been training to do ministry work since she was a child. She and her family lived across the street from their parish church in Las Cruces, New



Mexico and she went to Mass with her family every Sunday and attended all the holy days of obligation. Before she met John, Dolores had considered becoming a nun.

She hates the idea that people think of the Village as a place to avoid. To her the families here mean more than the crime that makes the news. A person can know God and still grapple with temptation, she believes. She sees the person behind the gun. They are friendly and funny. They struggle, grieve, and yet survive. It amazes her how they persevere and look out for one another.

Her memories of each child that has passed through the ministry fulfill her. She has laughed with them, held them, taken them on field trips. The kids thought they were so tough in their little life jackets when she and John drove them to a waterpark one summer but when they saw the surging waves, the uncertainty of the water, they hesitated. Big tall boys wearing inner tubes laughing and screaming and dancing as the water lapped their feet. Kids being kids. Those memories remain among her most precious. She can see each child as they were. Like Big Man. Like Mayo. Just before he died, Mayo saw Dolores arranging a tent for a ministry event. Miss Dolores, do you need help? he asked. Yes, I do, she answered. They put up decorations and laughed, and as they laughed a boy came up and said another boy had brought a play gun onto the property, something John and Dolores did not allow. Mayo said, I'll talk to him. He took the boy with the gun aside and in a little while the boy approached Dolores and apologized. A few weeks later, Mayo died.

\*

In a hall outside the room where Dolores and I talk, twenty-eight-year-old Jesenda Brown mops the floor. She said good morning to Dolores earlier. It's the professional thing for her to do, she believes, greeting her employer. For three weeks the ministry has been a mainstay of Jesenda's startup,

Jesenda's Cleaning Service. She established a business page on Facebook to attract customers. People have called, not many, some. She has a few regulars now and intends to get on Angie's List to attract more. Then she thinks she will be super busy. She needs a car to get around and hopes to buy one in a couple of weeks. Her year-end goal: to earn \$2,400 a month. A cleaning business makes sense. She was always neat. Her life did not have much order as a child but she kept the spaces she occupied tidy. When she was on the run from foster care, she would clean the apartment of a boyfriend. Why not use that skill to earn a living? Her motto: maintain stability through responsibility. A bumper sticker slogan she repeats as if she had sat through a self-empowerment seminar but thought of it herself. She plans to buy a house in two years and get off Section 8 rental assistance. She doesn't want her three children to struggle as she does. If she provides them with stability, they can go to college and beyond. She considers her life a success because she has survived this long when many other people she knows have not. She can offer her four-year-old son and two daughters, seven and five, a future. All of them live with her; each has a different father. That doesn't bother her. People, she understands, may disapprove. They will say what they will and that's fine. She doesn't care what anyone thinks. It's her life, not theirs. Her son stays in day care when she works. Sometimes her seven-year-old cleans houses with her.

Jesenda works at the ministry twice a week; she has known John and Dolores since she was a child. In those days, everyone called her Nay-Nay after Sheneheh Jenkins, a character that comedian Martin Lawrence created and voiced on his 1990s sitcom, *Martin*. Her happiest childhood memories revolve around the ministry. Light of the Village gave her access to another world, like she wasn't in the Village anymore. Before the ministry's summer program and the field trips, Jesenda and her friends threw rocks at abandoned houses and busted out streetlights late at night. Things, she knows now, they had no

business doing.

She grew up in Prichard. Her mother died from a stroke when she was eight, and her father passed a few years later from a massive heart attack. They both had high blood pressure, drank, and used drugs. After her mother died, Jesenda lived with an aunt on Eight Mile, a stretch of road named for its distance from Mobile. Living with her aunt wasn't bad but it wasn't good either. Jesenda wanted her parents but they were gone and she didn't understand why. Her mother had problems but she was the best mom she could be. Her father may have been a crack addict but he took care of her. When her mother passed out, he made sure Jesenda was fed, bathed, and ready for school. He told her not to use drugs. He didn't follow his own advice, but he recognized his mistakes and she loved him for it.

One morning when she was in the seventh grade, Jesenda got into a fight with a boy on a school bus. He said something nasty about her hair and they had words and began hitting each other. Jesenda was a fighter. She even had a fight at Light of the Village years later when she struck her oldest child's father with a stick. To this day, John will ask, Hey Nay-Nay, you still got your stick? And she replies, I don't carry my stick no more, Mr. John, I carry my broom and mop. I'm doing my cleaning now. Oh yes, she reflects, she was a fighter. Even though she has changed, people remember how she was, and she was bad. She was horrible. She was a mean, little bitty something who didn't take nothing from nobody. She didn't care. Life was hard without her parents.

The bus fight landed Jesenda in the James T. Strickland Youth Center in Mobile. A court appointed social worker supervised her in foster care. Her foster parents were good people but they expected her to follow their rules. You have to be at home by seven, they'd tell her, but she'd come in at nine. You're not my momma. You can't tell me what to do, Jesenda would snap.

Sometimes she would get a home pass to visit her aunt. When it was time to return to her foster parents, the social worker would come to the house, knock on the front door and Jesenda would dash out the back. The social worker would eventually catch up with her and lock her down in Strickland. Eventually she would be placed with another foster family. Jesenda went back and forth between Strickland and foster care until she turned eighteen and aged out.

She believes in herself and in the people of the Village. They aren't always killing each other. Still, Jesenda would not choose to live here. The Village is no place to hang out and chill. As rebellious as she was, Jesenda could not help but notice how her foster families lived a different life. They knew peace and calm. She doesn't want her children to grow up amid chaos and violence and experience the kinds of losses she has. Her brother James was shot at twenty-three. Mayo was the uncle of her oldest daughter. A bullet took her friend Demetrius Brown, but he had also killed somebody. You live by it; you die by it. Her nephew Xavier, better known as Buckshot, killed her cousin George, whom everyone called Boo Face. Jesenda doesn't know how or why that happened. Got into it with each other and let it go too far and forgot they were family. Jesenda received a phone call from her aunt. Hey, Buckshot killed Boo Face. She rushed to the hospital in disbelief. She still can't believe it. She has dreams of Mayo, Xavier, Boo-Face, and of her family, James and her mother and father, all of them together again. All she can do is cry and pray to God, because no one else can fix it.

\*

A lean young man with a self-deprecating smile stops at the ministry. As a child he fed his grandmother's goats and forever after became known as Billy Boy. His pregnant girlfriend sits in the car of a friend who will drive her to a doctor for a checkup. If they have a girl, Billy Boy thinks he will name her Nola. He can imagine her bad little self getting

on his nerves. So he thought, Nola, for no you don't.

Billy Boy sees Jesenda walk out of the ministry and calls her name.

Girl, I just came from D block and I just seen your name on the wall of this empty house. It said, Nay-Nay and Shana.

Where? Jesenda asks.

At the end of a house.

I don't know what house you talking about.

Dolores pulls up and parks.

You look happy, Billy Boy tells her.

Yes, I am.

OK, OK, he says. You're in the game.

I decided I'm not dealing with my hair anymore so I got it cut.

Good look, good look.

Thank you. So you're here because your girlfriend needs a ride?

Yes ma'am, but she found one.

Oh good. Who is your girlfriend? Do I know who she is?

You haven't met her yet. Nobody has.

OK.

Brianna's her name.

Pretty name. Is that her there?

Dolores turns and faces the car where Brianna sits and waves.  
Hey, Brianna.

Brianna looks up. Billy Boy gives a nervous laugh. He has three children, ages ten, four and two, in state custody. He needs to find a nice little apartment and a job to persuade the court to give them back to him. Their mother is in trouble over drugs and Billy Boy has been in and out of prison. It doesn't matter what kind of a job. Billy Boy's good at whatever. More of a handyman type of guy, for real. He enjoys lifting and moving stuff. An active job that would be good, something to tie him up all day. In 2019, Billy Boy had work with a company that installed tents and booths for fairs and concerts but then the tailgate of a truck fell on his right hand and Billy Boy lost the job. He received temporary disability, and hasn't worked since. He supposes he'll have to apply for a job somewhere outside of the Village. Ain't no jobs in Prichard.

He believes he could earn big money as a rapper. Cats around here know he has talent, but he doesn't trust studios. A producer might get his lyrics, give him a little money, and make a fortune. Billy Boy doesn't have time for those types of games. If produced right and orchestrated right, his raps would be a success. His words provide him with a chance to tell his story, and the streets can vouch for its authenticity.

Billy Boy will turn twenty-eight in a few days. A lot of years, man, a lot of years, for real. Maybe not for the pretty people but for him and his homeboys, yeah, a lot of years. By pretty people, Billy Boy means suburbanites who have no knowledge and in many cases no interest in dudes like him. He doubts any of them would be surprised to see their twenty-eighth birthday. They're much too judgmental, he thinks. Billy Boy believes they can learn from him. John and Dolores, they know. They came to Alabama Village because they understood not everybody has a lot of money. In the outside world, the universe of pretty people, when someone falls, they panic. Unlike Billy Boy and everyone he knows, they ain't used to not

having. People in the Village know struggle. They were raised on struggle and not having. If they fall they know how to pick themselves up and live by scraping bottom, because the bottom has been home for a long time. This right here, the cuts, teach survival. The people who are up now should come down to where Billy Boy lives and learn something about it. He can show them how they can make it without nothing and how they can be hungry and see another day and get on with little. Little is good. That's a good day to have little. If you got little then you got something, and something is better than nothing. One day, the pretty people may ask for his help. They might be so far down they'll need to sleep in an abandoned house with no roof. He can teach them how to persevere without power, without water, without plumbing, for real, or anything to piss and bathe in. It's no big deal. Make it through that and anything above it will feel better—feel like you're kicking back with the big dogs. He wishes the pretty people would open their hearts and try to understand him. He is so curious about them and what they do. Just their normal life, man, for real. Do they go fishing with their kids? Do they wake up every day with their entire family and not find that strange? What is it like to assume you'll wake up the next day, that you'll even have a next day? Billy Boy doesn't know anyone who has that kind of peace. A typical day for people Billy Boy knows would be: Get your guns, get your dope; not, OK honey, I'm home, what's for dinner? Just a day or two around people like that would be different. To be a child growing up with all the trimmings, Billy Boy would have loved that. Like a fantasy, man, that kind of love. Year after year he would have celebrated his birthday and received gifts and taken it all for granted. Be tripping just thinking about it, for real.

In jail, he would make his own birthday cake. He took a honey bun, two Reese's peanut butter cups, some M&M cookies, and put it all in a bowl, mix in water, milk, heat it, and watch it rise. A cup of noodles on the side, and that was his birthday.

Maybe he could work at a bakery. He wants a new pair of shoes, a nice pair. People crowd him. His kids, this new baby, his girlfriend. A new pair of kicks would lift his spirits. They'd help in a job interview too. People would look at his shoes and think he was sharp. Billy Boy turns to Brianna. She watches him. He prays really hard to be successful. He doesn't want to make any more mistakes.

\*

Dacino: Early for you, Billy Boy.

Billy Boy: What you talking about? Rained last night.

Dacino: I know.

Billy Boy: Warming up.

Dacino: Around five o'clock it'll get cold again.

Billy Boy: They say it's going to stay warm.

Dacino: You know how it is down here. Be warm, at five it be cold.

Billy Boy: I want to get me a bike, man. Spandex, little gym shorts. Skinny tight kind.

Dacino: I thought you wanted shoes.

Billy Boy: Doing it all, man.

Dacino: Where would you ride?

Billy Boy: No where. I'd have a picture of it on my phone. Just to show everybody I got one.

Dacino: Ride with it on top of a car.

Billy Boy: Just for show. Me and my bike are going out.

Dacino: Tell some dude, Let me see your bike, man.



Billy Boy: And never bring it back. I got you, man. Just for an hour.

Dacino: And don't bring it back.

Billy Boy: Come back all the wheels are gone.

Dacino (imitating Billy Boy): Man, it didn't have tires when you gave it to me.

Billy Boy laughs.

## **TWO**

On a Tuesday evening, John picks up children for the ministry's after-school program. They'll play games and have about a half hour of Bible study. He drives beneath I-65 into a neighborhood of small brick houses with peeling, white trim. Bare bulbs illuminate empty porches. He turns into a housing project, parks outside a home and beeps.

Here's Morgana, Cortney, and Shalanda, he shouts at two girls hurrying toward the van, shoulder packs bouncing off their backs. What's up, Bo?

What's up, Bo? they shout back to him.

What're you drinking, bo?

Orange juice.

A little OJ. What you up to, Shalanda?

Watching YouTube cartoons.

They clamber into the van. Shalanda finds a zip-close bag with half a sandwich.

There's food back here.

We'll throw it away, John says. I tried to clean it up for you all. What kind of food?

It's a mushed something. It stinks.

We'll throw it away. Where's your grandmother?

She's not coming today. Not feeling well.

She OK?

OK.

Let's roll.

John starts driving

We have to pick up Jerome and a few others, what do you think?  
he asks.

Good.

OK. That's a good attitude.

Mr. John?

Yeah, Bo?

Rosa Parks didn't want to move on the bus, Shalanda says. We learned about her in class today. Was she and Martin Luther King friends?

No, Courtney answers.

Yes, Morgana says.

They were partners in the fight for civil rights, for sure,  
John says.

Rosa Parks was sitting down and a white person wanted her seat and Rosa Parks said, No, I'm not going to move out of my seat, Shalanda continues. You better go back there, white person, because I was here first and that is right because she was there first.

That's true, John says.

And then white people got angry and she got arrested.

Hank Aaron, we read about him too, Courtney says.

He grew up in Mobile, John says. He's from Thomasville.

He played baseball.

He was good. He had made a lot of inroads. Progress, let's call it progress, John says.

Like Rosa Parks he had to take a stand to make things for the better. You guys learned a lot.

I learned about math and science, Morgana says.

Sounds like you guys did pretty good today.

I got all Bs, Shalanda says.

I got all As, Morgana says.

John stops at a squat house shadowed by trees.

Hey, Bo! John shouts to a boy running toward him.

\*

The late afternoon turns into evening and Baldwin Drive descends into shadow. John drops the children off at the ministry. Collapsing houses sculpt the gathering dark. If these disintegrating homes could talk, they would tell stories. The old people say voices cry out from graves lost to the woods. Jamel, he was a Lacey. He got shot. Boo-Face got shot. Boo-Face was a Davis. Bam-Bam got killed. Big Terry too. Red, she died. Last name, Robbin. Everyone called her Red although her hair wasn't red. She's gone all the same. Just got sick and died. Dectoria got shot in the head. Dorian's boy, Sean, got killed. Someone shot him by a church down there on Telegraph Road. It's sad. The list goes on.

\*

John walks the perimeter of the ministry, hears the children laughing, keeps moving slowly, holding a walkie-talkie to communicate with staff inside. His gaze flits between buildings. His shoes scrape against stones. He never knows who might drop by or what their mood will be, agitated or friendly. Better to assess the situation outside away from the kids. He compares Light of the Village to a forward operating base. Over the years, he and Dolores have established codes: broken arrow means gunshots in the area, Mike Tyson means a fight. Hand signals too. Fingers shaped like a phone receiver means call 911. The codes resulted from an encounter one afternoon in June 2015 when a man convicted of murder and just released from prison drove to the ministry under the mistaken impression John and Dolores were holding his daughter.

The man's name was Franklyn. The girl had been adopted after her mother died of a drug overdose while Franklyn was in prison. No one told him. He rolled up to the ministry with his sister and a friend and her baby. They told him his daughter was at the ministry because her mother had used its services. John was inside with about one hundred children enrolled in summer camp; Dolores was outside. Franklyn got out of the car, walked toward her and put his finger to her head in the shape of a gun

Where's my motherfucking daughter? he shouted.

I don't know where she is. Dolores said, trying to stay calm, but her heart raced. She worried he might hit her. He continued shouting, shaking like he would burst through his skin. John heard the commotion and hurried outside. Franklyn spun around and faced him.

I want my child! he demanded.

John raised his hands for calm.

We don't know where she is, dude.

I want my child!

Man, you got to chill out.

John had a crazy kind of wish for Franklyn to clock him with a solid right hook and end this. Instead, Franklyn stormed back to his car and opened the back door. John followed. He saw Franklyn reach for a revolver. John had few options, none of them good: Fight, but with two women and a child in the car, that wouldn't end well; run, and risk Franklyn shooting at him and at the ministry and the children inside; or keep talking.

Dude, we don't have your daughter.

A woman named Tyra Quinie who had been studying for her GED certificate rushed outside and started shouting at Franklyn. He cussed her out and leaned into the car for the gun. John glanced at Dolores and their eyes locked and he gave her a well-this-is-it look. The thought comforted him. He stood in the presence of God, his wife, and the ministry—everything he had devoted his life to. Whatever happened, he belonged here.

We're going to get through this, Dolores told herself. It will be OK, but she knew it might not. It will be OK, she told herself again. She dialed 911. When she got off the phone, she shouted, The police are on the way!

Franklyn jumped in the car and slammed the door. He cussed out John and sped off just as the children wandered outside. Unaware of what had happened, they began playing. John watched them. He felt OK. He hadn't panicked, had stayed focused. A group of volunteers, however, left and didn't return.

Later that afternoon, a brother of Franklyn's called John and put him on the phone. He apologized. The two women, he said, had told him John had his baby.

OK, John said, let me stop you right there. The police are looking for you. You're out on parole for murder. Chill out, go to the police, and we'll come by and see you.

Franklyn turned himself in. When John and Dolores arrived at the Prichard Police Department, a detective told them that if they pressed charges Franklyn would probably do fifteen years. He cried and apologized when they met with him. He had been played by people spreading rumors about his child, he said, and one of the women in the car egged him on. John and Dolores believed him. He had a manila folder with cards from his daughter. He had brought it with him because he assumed he was going back to prison.

No dude, it's all good, John said. If we can help you get a job, whatever, come by and we'll see what we can do.

John and Dolores have seen him twice since. They said hello and nothing more. John believes that if someone commits a crime they should be punished. Throw away the key, he gets that. At the same time, inmates need to be helped when they get released. Because they will get out. Franklyn had nothing. His daughter was gone and no one had told him. John and Dolores took the brunt of his anger, understood, and forgave him. Then the three of them moved on.

\*

Tyra Quinie thinks God told her to rush outside when Franklyn pulled up. She hadn't heard a thing, just looked up from her desk and decided to take a look. Because John and Dolores believed in her, she thought of them as her parents. Her father was mostly absent from her life and her mother was around but stayed to herself because she was deaf. Tyra relied on and trusted John and Dolores in a way she never did her parents. When she saw Franklyn yelling at John, she lost it. Franklyn called her all kinds of names but Tyra didn't care. If you're going to hurt Mr. John, you're going to hurt

me first, she had yelled.

Tyra had met John and Dolores years earlier when she worked at a Prichard gym, now closed. Many of the children she supervised participated in the ministry's programs. One day, Tyra dropped by looking for two sisters. Their mother had died of AIDS and Tyra had not seen them at the gym for a while, but she knew they ate breakfast at the ministry. One of them, Shadderias, later died from a drug overdose. Her picture hangs on the memorial wall.

The Lord spoke to Tyra as she parked outside the ministry that day. She knows how that sounds but she's not asking anyone to believe her. She believes it and that's what matters. Tyra, God told her, I want you to get your GED. She was about twenty-seven and could barely read. Dolores and John told her: You can get your GED. You can do this. Dolores was adamant: If you don't try, then you don't want it. All you got to do is try.

Dolores helped Tyra study. She took the GED test but failed by eighteen points. However, she aced the reading portion. Undeterred, she took it again and passed. Then the Lord told her, I want you to go to college. Tyra told John, I don't know what it is but the Lord says I should go to college. I guess you're going to college, John said, and she did. These days, she works at Amazon. She trains and supervises drivers.

Tyra does not live in Alabama Village anymore. When she was eighteen, her family moved here from the Orange Grove projects near downtown Mobile. Orange Grove was rough but not as rough as the Village. Life is real in the Village, no joke. When Tyra first came to the ministry, the memorial wall held only one photo. Now look at it. Forty-three. It's sad. More photos will go up, she has no doubt, but hers won't be one of them. She has all that she needs, not much but enough, and she doesn't mess around. Many families in the Village have much less and therefore they have nothing to lose. That's one reason for the violence.

Tyra has seen plenty of people shot. She saw her best friend shoot another man in front of a convenience store. Nothing she could do but step back, run for cover, mourn the loss, and cry for the ones left behind. Don't be naive, John taught her, and have faith in God. Sunday is the most important day of the week for Tyra. She attends Bible study and renews her faith. Then she goes home and lives the best life she can. Many people in the Village have repented. They grew up and quit playing. No one knows what path someone will take. The boy with a gun might become the man kneeling in prayer. No one should give up on the Village. Look at her. She learned to read. Who would have thought?

\*

The death of a young man named Yellow was the first killing to insinuate itself in the lives of John and Dolores after they came to the Village. But they only sort of knew him. Certainly not well. The loss of another young man, Mook, left a deeper impression. They had watched him grow up. When they first came to the Village, they ran into him and some other kids. As they talked, it started raining and they all dashed under a porch, gray storm clouds scudding above them. Mook took pleasure showing them around. He was mild mannered but he was into drug dealing. Over the years, his temper began to tilt toward hot. He died after a former girlfriend told him she was with another man in the Roger Williams housing project in Mobile. Mook drove there and confronted him. They fought to a draw and Mook left. The man got a gun and called Mook, daring him to return. He did. The man had locked the door so Mook pulled the air conditioning unit out of a window and crawled inside. The man shot him.

The violence also can take bizarre, darkly humorous twists. Like George and the muffin. Sounds like a children's book doesn't it? John says. George was always out there a little bit and he had made enemies. One afternoon a sedan drove through the ministry playground, and the two men inside



started shooting at George. He ran behind a house holding onto a muffin. The shooters sped through in minutes, if that long. George peeked out from around the house and smiled, his gold teeth flashing. He had not dropped his muffin. It was a good muffin, he said. That stuck with people. George and the muffin assumed the status of folklore. A few years later, he moved to Florida. Not long after, his charred remains were found in a car.

Joseph Torres killed a man at fifteen. He had been involved with the ministry since he was a child. Like Mook, his moods ran hot and cold. If Joseph liked someone, he liked them 100 percent and would do anything for them. But if he disliked someone, he ignored them; they didn't exist. He knew how to take charge. If he saw kids fighting he'd stop it through his presence, by the way he carried himself, without speaking a word.

One night in 2008, days before Christmas, Joseph, his friend Johiterio, and a third young man whose name John does not remember, stopped at the ministry and said they wanted to be rappers. Joseph asked for money to buy shoes. John and Dolores didn't have as much cash as the boys needed and they got angry.

We're going to go make music, they said, and stalked off. They didn't hear from Joseph again until April 25, 2009, when he shot forty-two-year-old Benjamin Henry on D block. Benjamin didn't live in the Village but he knew people there. Joseph, Johiterio, and according to court documents, a third teenager, Antonio Hall, assumed Benjamin had money to buy drugs and decided to rob him as he sat in his car. Joseph approached the driver's side carrying a sawed-off shotgun. At some point he blew a hole in Benjamin's chest. He and the two other teenagers fled. Joseph would later claim the gun had misfired.

John heard about the killing from a couple in the Village who had volunteered at the ministry. Two of your boys killed a

guy, they said, Joseph and Johiterio. *Two of your boys*, John repeated to himself. OK, whatever. Dolores was stunned. She would not have been surprised if Joseph had been stopped for selling weed, but murder? What happened? she asked herself. What went wrong? What had they missed?

Later in the day, Joseph called John.

Hey dude, John said, we need to talk.

Yeah, Joseph said.

They agreed to meet at the ministry that evening.

First off, how are you doing? John asked him.

I screwed up, Joseph replied.

Let's pray, John said.

He noticed Joseph wasn't scared. He had never been one to show fear. What remorse he felt he kept to himself. He seemed more upset that he had ruined his future.

What do you think God wants you to do? John asked him.

I think I need to turn myself in, Joseph said.

You know what that means?

I do.

You want to turn yourself in now?

Yes, they'll blame someone else and I did it.

John suggested they call his family. An aunt asked John to take Joseph to the police.

In 2009, a judge sentenced Joseph and Antonio to twenty-five years in prison. Joseph broke down and apologized to Benjamin's family and his own; Johiterio, who had been on his cell phone when the shooting occurred, received three years.

Police arrested him soon after his release for violating parole. His sentence that time: twenty-five years.

John keeps in touch with Joseph. They talk by phone on Sunday mornings.

What's going on? I hear him say in one call. You're still in Easterling Correctional Facility? You know it's been crazy down here. There's been shootings all over the place, you heard about that? Going back and forth right now. Hopefully things will tap down a little bit but yeah it's been kind of nuts. Going on for a little bit. How's COVID? Gone through the place or no? No, that's cool. Hope it all goes away so we can get back to normal. I'm glad you called. We have to work out a visit. We'll try to work that out. It's pretty up there. I know to you it looks the same but we like it. We can travel up there. OK I'll let you go. We love you, Bo. Holler at you.

John understands people may wonder how he can say, I love you, Bo, to a murderer? He saw the autopsy photos of Benjamin with a hole in his chest. He saw his mother leave the courtroom because she couldn't look at the pictures. Benjamin had a life. John makes no excuses for Joseph. Punish him, yes, he has no problem with that, but he sees no downside to showing him love. He doesn't know a perfect person, however that might be defined. It's not about second chances. It's about chance after chance after chance. Only death closes the door.

\*

Betty Catlin talks to her incarcerated son, Johiterio, every other day. She puts money on his books. One day at a time, prayer and faith, Betty tells me.

She was born in Mobile but her family moved to the Village in the early 1980s after her grandmother passed and the family took over her house. Her mother used drugs and spent much of her time on the street. Her father drank and lived with his mother. In those days, Alabama Village had stores and houses on every block. She used to go to dances at the same gym where

Tyra Quinie once worked. She remembers a 7-Eleven and a convenience store called Bert's. A hamburger stand took up a corner behind Two Dragons, another convenience store, and a laundromat. Betty moved around Prichard. She lived on Blount Drive, Colby Street, Fayette Street, and Dallas Street. At fifteen she had the first of five children. If she could go back in time, she would tell herself to wait. Just wait, girl, but she didn't. Only so much she can do now. Looking back don't change what's done. She talks to young people. Hey, come on here and let me holler at you. You ain't got no business hanging out like this. She pulls them aside and gives them something to think about. Other mothers look the other way: She ain't my child. I don't care about her. But not Betty. Somebody's got to care about them, otherwise they'll be pregnant and become mothers way too soon and then they'll see how hard life can be. It ain't about not having enough money. It's about wondering every day if your child will come home. Their fathers are out and up to no good. It's the mothers who get the calls. One night, Betty's phone rang and the girlfriend of her son Carlos told her he was dead. Betty's heart dropped so far down she couldn't feel it beating but the girlfriend had been mistaken. It was actually another young man who had died.

The sound of gunshots terrifies her. She was at her mother's house around the corner from where Mayo lived when he died. She looked out the front door and he was dead at his mother's house. He had a beautiful smile. He could be loud. Boy shut up with all that noise in there! Mayo would laugh. She couldn't help but think: That could be one of my sons.

Betty knows how people judge families in the Village based on no evidence at all. Like Miss Mandy. She's sick now but back in the day everyone called her the Candy Lady. Children would go around the corner to her house and come back with all kinds of sweets. People joked she must be receiving kickbacks from dentists. There was also Miss Tooty. Her real name was

Claudia. She also gave out candy.

Betty used to hover about the neighborhood behaving like everyone's mother. Even though she lives in Mobile now, kids still come around especially during the holidays. They know she can cook and love her greens, macaroni, ribs, dressing, beans, roasts. Whatever she makes, they'll eat.

Most Sundays, Betty makes breakfast at the ministry. Eggs, sausage, and grits. She also prepares meals for events. She's known John and Dolores a long time. She remembers when she first saw them. They parked their car, got out, and in minutes had all these kids, Big Man, and a bunch of others hanging around. If children liked them, they got to be all right, she remembers thinking. They stopped at her house and introduced themselves.

In August 2013, Betty studied at the ministry for her GED certificate. By that November she had passed the test. Now she hopes to save enough money to buy a house and leave it to her kids so they have something they can call their own. She works as a cashier at the Springhill Quick Stop in Mobile from noon to six. She earns minimum wage and puts aside what she can.

Betty likes her neighborhood in Crighton in the north part of Mobile. It's a little more restful than the Village. She still hears gunshots but less often. In the Village, it was every day. Or there would be fights. Everybody wanted to meet in a field and have at it. You all bring your problems over here and we get all the heat, she scolded them. Look at these older people on their porches trying to relax. They ain't paying no bills to look out over a field and watch you fools fight. Girls with their children in their boyfriends' cars watching them go at it like it was a basketball game. Scar their children for life. Betty shakes her head. It's no wonder children turn out as they do.

**THREE**

Throughout his life, John has found guidance when he needed it most. He was born in Dallas and moved to El Paso at a young age. At fourteen, he enrolled in New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell and completed high school and two years of community college. He grew close to its chaplain, Vernon Edmondson. Kind and approachable, Edmondson always had a smile on his face. He encouraged his cadets to read the Bible as a book of stories and not as a weighty tome. Take it, go off by yourself, he told them. The book of John is a good place to start. He brought doughnuts to Bible study, a nice touch but for John and the other cadets, Edmondson's willingness to spend time with them meant much more. He walked the students through the Bible story by story.

The institute gave John structure. He lived in a spartan, three story barracks and learned to be responsible. He joined the boxing team, the only white kid on it. The coach was Black, his teammates Hispanic. He connected with people whose lives were very different from his.

John earned a commission in the US Army. After he completed his undergraduate degree, he earned a Masters in Business Administration and took a job in a jewelry store in Las Cruces, New Mexico where he met Dolores. They married in May 1994, a week after Dolores had graduated from college.

About a year into their marriage, they moved to San Antonio and John returned to school and earned a second master's degree, this one in healthcare administration. He and Dolores volunteered with Prison Fellowship, the world's largest Christian nonprofit organization for prisoners, former prisoners, and their families, and they also joined Angel Tree, a fellowship program that provides holiday gifts to children from their incarcerated parents. In addition, they helped with after-school and outreach programs, and facilitated Bible studies in housing projects for Victory Gospel, a Pentecostal church that offered help to the very poor. The compassion of its pastor, Donny Banks, and his wife,

Jackie, impressed them. They did not criticize homeless addicts for their drug use or require them to attend church. Instead they offered help without condition, and they were always cheerful.

In 1997, John accepted a job with the Mobile Infirmary Health System. He and Dolores remained involved with Prison Fellowship and Angel Tree. In December 2001, they began leading Bible studies in the Queens Court apartments, a housing project, after a six-year-old boy had been killed and a Prichard police officer wounded in an ambush authorities called retaliation for the shooting of three young men by undercover officers. When Queens Court closed in May 2002, John and Dolores began looking at other impoverished neighborhoods around Mobile where they could establish a ministry. By the time they drove through the Village, they had seen most of the city's housing projects but nothing had clicked. The Village did. The vacant houses and overgrown lots and dark streets spoke of a desperate need.

In the following days, weeks and months John and Dolores walked through the Village speaking to families. If we started a ministry here what would you want? they asked. Children told them they wanted a place to play and people to take them on field trips. The adults were more subdued.

Yeah, they said, that would be good for the kids.

Inspired by John 8:12, *Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life,* John and Dolores named their ministry Light of the Village. With help from a South Carolina ministry, they turned a crack house into a church, plugging gaping holes and shoring up the collapsed roof on the only building they could find that had a clean title. It's pretty messed up, one man told them. Another man agreed. Yeah, but the rafters are OK. You won't be here more than a couple weeks anyway. But John and Dolores kept coming

back from their home in Bay Minette, about forty miles away. Once a month became once a week. Once a week became every day. Every day became twenty years. John and Dolores stayed.

\*

John and Dolores attended a Baptist Church when they first moved to Alabama, although they didn't restrict themselves to a denomination. When they started Light of the Village, John wondered if he should study theology but his pastor dissuaded him. For what God has called on you to do, do you think the kids care about a degree? No, John agreed. That settled it. These days, John considers himself a layperson who practices his faith. If someone had to put a finger on it, he would say that he and Dolores are evangelicals. They take the Bible and go verse by verse, story by story, allowing it to speak for itself. They don't push it. They don't cram it. Anyone can come to the ministry. Faith or lack of it has no bearing. John and Dolores are not selling a product. John recalls a young man named TJ. He wasn't a product.

TJ rarely spoke. John heard him say six words if that. A little, shaggy black dog followed him around. TJ couldn't read so he asked Dolores to get him a recorded version of the Bible. He'd sit outside the ministry with his dog and listen to it.

John and Dolores may have been one of the last friendly faces TJ saw before he died in 2008. They had just given him a Christmas present, a pair of sneakers. Here's your gift, John said. Merry Christmas. We'll see you Sunday. TJ was shot in the head minutes afterward. John thinks someone playing with a gun probably killed him by accident. Everyone he knew liked TJ.

His death disturbed John. He thought he should have given TJ more of his time. You're one of the last people he saw and all you could say was, Merry Christmas, see you Sunday? he



reprimanded himself. Then he reminded himself that TJ had been at the ministry for years studying the Bible. In his own way, he had been talking to God up until he died. The realization didn't deaden the pain but it provided perspective and a dose of humility. This wasn't about what John should or should not have done. It wasn't about him at all. It was about TJ and his faith. He had not died alone. Still, John thought he should try to be a little less rushed with people. TJ's death was a reminder of the fragility of life in the Village.

\*

When John hears the *pop, pop, pop* of a gun, his mind flashes with questions: Where's this going? Is it someone just testing his weapon or something worse? After twenty years in the Village he has not grown used to the violence and doesn't want to, but he works with so many children who have. He recalls one April afternoon in 2014 when he picked up the Darrington brothers—Jesse, Jeremiah, and Jerel—in Gulf Village for an after-school program. Jeremiah got in the front seat. Every kid wants the front seat. Cindy, their mother, came outside, spoke to John, and left just as two men running between houses began shooting at each other. A driver behind John jumped out of his car and ran and John couldn't back out. He reached over to push Jeremiah's head down, but the boy was already on the floor as were Jesse and Jerel. John counted thirteen shots. Then the shooting stopped. Wind stirred, silence. Jeremiah sat up, broke out a juice box, and stuck a straw in it. OK, he said. We can go now.

\*

John arranges for me to meet with Jesse at the Whataburger in Saraland, not far from where he and his brothers live with their grandmother. I buy Cokes and we sit in a corner. Sunlight shines our table. Jessie watches me, fingering his plastic cup. He is soft-spoken and serious. A smile flashes across his face when he recalls a good memory but I sense a

wariness. He is waiting for us to get through the small talk for the painful questions he knows I'll ask about his mother. She was killed when he was seventeen.

Jesse grew up next door to the Village. He would walk through a hole in a fence to see his friends there. At five, he got involved with the ministry. His mother told him, There's a program where people will help you with homework and feed you. Young as he was, Jesse was skeptical. It was not that common to see white people in the Village or anywhere nearby, but John and Dolores held a six-week summer camp and it was fun, and it didn't take long for the color of their skin not to matter.

Every morning before school, Jesse's mother made him and his brothers read a chapter from the Bible. It could be any chapter. The point was to start their day with God's word and stay focused despite distractions. Jesse encountered many distractions. He never knew what he'd see when he left for school. Before he reached his teens, nine people had died in front of his house. Once, he hadn't even left for school when he saw a man on the ground bleeding from a gunshot wound. His mother and a neighbor tried to stanch the blood but he died. Jesse stayed in the moment. There's a dead man in the yard. I have to finish breakfast. I have to go to school. I have to catch the bus. He learned to smother his shock. The feelings would eat him up otherwise. So much dying. Even his brothers, they stopped feeling. They slept through shootings.

His mother understood the dangers and kept the boys in the house as much as she could. She told them to think about what they wanted to do when they were older. Avoid the lure of fast money, she warned them. Jesse promised her he'd enroll in college. He started thinking ahead to the next day, the next week, the next month. Even now as he talks to me he considers what he wants to do this afternoon. He doesn't know why he thinks this way. To stay out of trouble, maybe. He has homeboys and cousins who try to lure him into the streets.

C'mon, get in the car, Jesse. Let's do this, let's do that.

Nah, man, I'm good.

Jesse's father did not involve himself with the family, and Jesse has seen him only a few times. He thinks his father's absence forced him to become a man and assume responsibilities sooner than he otherwise might have. Unlike many of his friends, Jesse has no children. His mother and grandmother warned him against having kids unless he was married and had a job to support a family. John and Dolores told him, Don't slip up.

He pauses, drinks his Coke and watches me. I've run out of small talk. I take a sip from my glass. Setting it down, I flip to a blank page on my notepad. Then I ask the question he has been waiting for: Tell me about your mother, I say, and what happened.

A day doesn't pass when Jesse doesn't think of her, he begins. He speaks of her to anyone who asks to keep her name alive and in his heart. Cindy Denise Darrington. Everyone called her Miss Cindy. She loved everybody. Didn't matter who you were. Anyone could walk into her house for a meal. She loved to cook. People would fight over her fried chicken. She helped people get off the street. Jesse can name a handful of people who lived with them until they got right. When he was young, his mother helped a homeless lady with a few dollars and encouraging words. The words impressed Jesse. Or maybe it was how she said them. Firm but loving. Don't give up. Hang in there. Something like that. His mother would ask John to help someone if she could not. Hey Mr. John, I got so and so in my house and they need this and that. What can you do for them? She knew she couldn't assist everyone so she turned to him. Some people took advantage of her, but Jesse's mother believed that no matter their sins everyone deserved love.

She died the night of December 1, 2017. That evening, he lay in his bed chilling. Jerel warmed food in a microwave.

Jeremiah slept. No one outside, no backfiring car exhausts. A quiet night. Then Jesse heard a bang inside the house and his heart jumped. He leaped to his feet and ran toward the front door, and Jerel slammed into him running from the kitchen and knocked Jesse down. Jesse jumped up and Jerel fled into Jesse's room and dropped in a corner below a window, shouting, Momma just got killed, Momma just got killed. Jesse raced down the hall and saw a man she'd been seeing point a gun in his direction, and he fell. He thought he had been shot but he had only slipped and he leaped back up and ran to his room, closed the door, and pushed a dresser in front of it. Jerel sat crouching in a corner. Then Jesse remembered Jeremiah. He moved the dresser, opened the door, crept out, and peered into Jeremiah's room. He was asleep. Jesse tried to catch his breath, to slow the banging of his heart. He walked down the dim hall and stopped. He saw his mother on the floor, eyes open, blood pooling. The man was gone. He had no call to do this, Jesse told me. His mother never hurt anyone. She had fed this man, run errands for him, been intimate with him. Jesse learned later that the man had left the house and turned himself in to the police. People say he was on drugs. That doesn't mean anything to Jesse. High or sober, he should not have murdered his mother. Jesse's voice trails off. He turns back to his drink.

And now? I ask him.

Now? Jesse repeats. Now?

He and his brothers will continue living with their grandmother. They love her and help her clean the house and tend the yard. At night, they talk to one another to stay strong and keep it together so their feelings don't boil over and explode. That can happen. The murder of a mother can make her children lose their minds, mess with their brains in some type of way. When people get mad they don't think, they just do. Everyone has the strength to hold on. It's up to them to maintain or lose control. He and his brothers hold on.

When Jesse graduated from high school, he enrolled at Coastal Community College just as he had promised his mother. He wants to transfer to Auburn University and major in engineering. He needs to earn money first. Auburn won't pay for itself.

Some of his classmates don't know about the Village, but it's never far from Jesse's thoughts. He has flashbacks of the night his mother died and tries to subdue the trauma so he doesn't go crazy. His brothers have bad dreams. Anyone who thinks about something real hard, of course they're going to dream about it. Everyone has nightmares.

\*

Morgan Carnley, a ministry staff member, takes a break outside. I join her. A few men stroll by and we listen to their low laughter, muted chatter. After they pass, I ask Morgan about Cindy. I was home in Mobile when I received a text from John that Cindy had been shot, she tells me. She remembers what she wore, a red flannel shirt and blue jeans, and her hair was up. I have to pray now, she thought, for Cindy and her children. They've been thrown into a whirlwind. All of them are doing as well as can be expected, she tells me. Jerel went through a rough patch where he rebelled a little.

It can be so challenging working with these kids, Morgan continues. At a recent Bible study with a group of teenagers, she said women should not have children outside of marriage. That hit a nerve. Not one child in the room had parents who had been wed. How does she express herself without sounding accusatory? How does she raise uncomfortable topics? She has worked with these kids for fourteen years. When she considers that they come from generations of single mothers and absent fathers, she feels overwhelmed.

Morgan grew up in Enterprise, Alabama, about 160 miles east of Prichard. She majored in music at the University of Mobile. In the fall of 2007, during her freshman year, a college friend invited her to lead a music class at Light of the Village.

Morgan had no idea Prichard existed. It's hard now to remember what subsequently drew her back. The kids, she thinks. How they thrived with just minimal attention. John and Dolores too. Their quiet yet determined belief in their mission. But it was difficult. She didn't understand street slang, had never experienced the kinds of losses the children had. She doesn't recall feeling shocked but she assumes she was.

Morgan hopes that the children will find an alternative to violence. Not getting shot. Not committing a crime. Making a choice to leave the street. Those feel like achievable goals. Then perhaps college, a job and a two-story home. For the next generation, or the generation after that.

\*

Dacino thinks Jesse has it pretty together. Sometimes he's weird, but who isn't? He stayed in school, that's good. Funny how he controls his anger. No one knows why Miss Cindy's killer did it. In the house, in front of the kids. That was shocking even for the Village. It just happened and he turned himself in. Miss Cindy was cool. Everybody knew and liked her and her boys. She was always at the ministry on Sundays. Dacino suggested to Jesse he see a counselor but he played it off like he was busy. Probably doesn't want to talk about it. He might be waiting on the right trigger and not even know it. Just happens and he goes nuts and shoots someone. That scares Dacino.

Dacino recently moved into the house across from the ministry. It has new hardwood floors, sliding doors, a living room with a fireplace. Huge kitchen and three bedrooms. A washer and dryer too. And new furniture. Dacino has never, and he means never, lived in a house so nice. He still can't get used to it. He won't sit in the living room because he doesn't want to break anything. He has such a large bed, he jokes, rolling to the other side is like exercise.

Dacino had his own apartment and a job until the COVID-19

pandemic. He has worked since he was a kid. As a boy, he cut grass. When he reached his teens he cooked at Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen in Mobile. At seventeen, he moved to Spanish Fort for a job at a movie theater. On his first day, the boss lady asked him, Do you know what you're supposed to be doing?

This, Dacino said, indicating the broom in his hand. Cleaning. I read the job manual.

Nobody ever reads that, she said, and promoted him to cashier. Over time he became shift leader and then manager. He stayed on for six years until he accepted a job with the Wind Creek Casino in Atmore. Three years later, he became the manager of Premiere Cinema in Spanish Fort and worked with an older woman named Rosie. Then COVID struck and Dacino lost his job and apartment. He couch surfed between among three of his sisters, sometimes sharing a bed with one of his nephews, and volunteered at the church to fill his time. One day, Dolores asked him, Why don't you work for us? Come back tomorrow. Dacino assumed she was joking and didn't return.

I thought you were going to work for us, Dolores said when she saw him again.

You were for real? Dacino asked.

The next day, he showed up.

Dacino would never speak to John and Dolores when he first started coming to the ministry. He wasn't shy; he didn't trust them. They'd leave, he assumed. Every other church group had. Black, white, it didn't matter. They left. No way were these white people going to stay. Why're they doing this? he wondered. What do they want? How long is this going to last? Dolores approached him when it was just the two of them, and then he had to talk. Dang, this lady's going to want to talk to me, he thought. He never disrespected her but he did laugh a lot in her classes, goofing with other boys. Dolores would pull him aside and look him dead in the eye, a smile on her face. She never got loud or mean. You know what you're doing,

Dacino? Do you want to be disruptive? She wouldn't speak another word until he answered. She'd wait. And wait. And wait until he finally spoke. He knew he'd, better have the right answer or she would look so disappointed he would want to cry.

These days, alone in the house after work, Dacino sometimes wonders what kind of parent he would be. He had a son when he was twenty-two, Dacino Jr., but he died. Dacino was young and dumb, in the moment, and then just like that his girlfriend was pregnant. He vowed that unlike his father he would be there for his son.

A week before the baby was due, his girlfriend traveled to Jacksonville, Florida, to visit family. She called Dacino one afternoon and told him she had passed out and had been rushed to a hospital. The doctor told her the baby had a faint heartbeat. What do we need to do? Dacino asked. I need to stay in bed and chill, she told him. The next day, Dacino Jr. was stillborn. Dacino didn't know what that meant until he asked one of his sisters and she told him.

Dacino took the death hard. Angry at the world, he didn't want to talk to anyone, including his girlfriend. The baby was so small. Had he lived, Dacino probably wouldn't be working for the ministry because he'd require a bigger salary to support a family. His child would need attention, and he wouldn't have time for ministry kids. The money needed to study physical therapy would be spent on his family. Tragedy happens for a reason, he decided. It took him a long time to reach that conclusion and even longer to accept it.

Many of his homeboys have kids. They speak to their children but they don't take them out or live with their mothers. They'll say, These are my kids, and that's it. Dacino doesn't think having a child has anything to do with status. If they can sleep with a girl they will, and if she gets pregnant, oh well. It's not about the number of kids who are born but the number of girls they sleep with. They live for the moment



because life can be that short.

Dacino doesn't want children now. He sees his sisters with all their kids, how they can get stressed running them around, and he thinks, I don't need to take that on. He has his hands full at the ministry. Those kids, man, they can be so bad. He's OK giving them back to their mothers. But he would have loved his son. He carries a photo on his phone of Dacino Jr. swaddled in white cloth. The baby's mother got married. Dacino talks to her from time to time. He's happy for her.

\*

Evening. Wilson Avenue, Prichard. Dacino cruises, no destination in mind, just driving, thinking. The walls close in sometimes being alone in the house. Darkened storefronts stand in the shadowy glow of streetlights. Building a new Popeyes, Dacino notices. And a new car wash over there. Wasn't there the other day. Tony's Car Wash. Back in the day, Tony was always drunk. Morning and night he was full. In 2008, he told John and Dolores, I got to kick this life. The next day, they put him on a bus to San Antonio and Victory Gospel Church. He stayed ninety days and renewed his faith in God. Now, he has his own business. Twenty dollars a car, no charge for vacuuming.

There's Fry Daddy's, a restaurant. Order today, get your food tomorrow. That's how slow they are. Fry Daddy's and Fat Boy's restaurants nearby. They're not bad. Dacino turns onto U.S. Highway 45, a road that runs from Prichard into Saraland. There's another car wash. Next door, Dacino sees the store where he first saw a man shot to death. My Boy's Food Market it's called now. His stepdad made him ask people for money. No one will give a grown man money but they will help kids. Dacino hated it. He felt so embarrassed.

#### **FOUR**

I move in with Dacino the second week of my trip to better

experience the Village. As night approaches, a pale light illuminates the porch. I see the dim outline of one of Mr. Arthur's signs. Wandering around, I notice many more: *Praise God; Holy Spirit I have you; Let It Shine, Lord; Wow, God Is Intense*. Any number of his signs fill the road to Restoration Youth Academy, a closed juvenile bootcamp in the Village that shelters a homeless man, sixty-three-year-old Tommie Bonner. Since I once worked with the homeless, I decide to meet him. I take a road to the cracked drive of the academy. Shoulder-high grass and weeds shroud the buildings. I walk past a charred school bus covered with vines. Corroded ammo casings litter the pavement. The air left a bitter taste.

I shout, Tommie Bonner! several times before I hear a hoarse reply, Yo! A concrete walk leads through chest-high shrubs to a one-story building where I find him standing on a landing.

You made it, he says, as if he had been expecting me. Stroking his gray goatee, he runs his other hand through his thick hair. A worn black sweatshirt and two long sleeve knit shirts cover his narrow chest. He watches me wipe sweat from my forehead.

We'll get another frost in two, three days. It's coming, he says. Then you'll be wishing you was hot. Not summer yet.

He adjusts a clutter of pots that hold the rainwater he uses to wash dishes and points to a bare patch of ground he's cleared to plant onions and watermelon. He should have waited until June. It's just March now. Frost will kill them, he says.

Tommie discovered the bootcamp by chance. One night in 2018 he had stopped in a field to sleep. About two in the morning it started raining. Crawling out of his sleeping bag, Tommie got on his bicycle—something he found, doesn't know the year but he knows it's old—and started riding in no particular direction seeking cover. Through the rain, he saw the square

shaped buildings of the academy. He rode toward them and has been here ever since. Took him a minute to clean out the large room he now calls home. He moved mountains of debris, mostly broken ceiling tiles, and piled them in a hall where they remain today, a testimony to his labor. Then he swept and swept, dust pluming around him, until a blue carpet emerged. He hung plastic sheets where there had once been walls for insulation.

He has a sleeping bag and a mosquito net inside an oblong tent. Like crawling into a coffin, he jokes. He shows me a radio. As long as he has batteries it will provide him with company. He'd be talking to himself without it. A firepit lined with aluminum siding takes up one corner where he also keeps rodent traps. He gets rats, big ones, and hears them in the walls. One of them walked into a trap about three in the morning. Tommie didn't get up. Hours later, he kicked out of his sleeping bag and checked the trap but it was gone. Must've been a huge rat to run off with a trap.

I'd be back out in the field, I tell him.

Tommie laughs. You've never been in the rain with no place to stay.

Fishing calendars cover one wall. The owner of a hardware store in Chickasaw gave them to him. The calendars help conjure up good memories. Tommie loves to fish. He once caught a barracuda in the Gulf, not a great eating fish and the big ones have a lot of mercury. Same with tuna. The bigger they are the more mercury they carry. He has caught redfish, a good eating fish. Croaker, too, a better eating fish. He likes sheepshead almost as much. He snagged one the size of a plate years ago, a big son of a gun.

A grocery basket holds wood for cooking. Tommie won't burn treated wood; the fumes knock him out. One window provides light and overlooks his vegetable garden. He used to see

rabbits but hasn't seen one in five months. Coons, possums eat all the trash, he says, and scare away everything else including dogs. All the birds have left too. Won't be long before someone comes and hauls the burned bus for scrap and then it, too, will be gone.

A meth head named David used to live in one of the buildings behind Tommie. He's been gone now for a minute and Tommie doesn't miss him. He believed in Satan. He had written, *I love Satan* on the walls. All night long he was in and out, in and out. Weird, man. Satan didn't teach him to clean. He lived worse than a pig. It was a good day when David left and the devil with him.

Tommie shows me an office he uses as a prayer room. A crucifix and a picture of Jesus hang on the wall. Lying in his tent one night, Tommie heard the Holy Spirit tell him: Build you a room to pray, and he did. Every morning, before he does anything else, he stops in his prayer room and reads the twenty-third Psalm. *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want/He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters/He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake/Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me/Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over/Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

After his prayers, Tommie rides his bike to collect cans. He makes about thirty-seven cents a pound. In the evening, he smokes his room to discourage bugs. He sits in the warmth of the airy heat looking at gathering shadows before he douses the fire. He does not want the flames to attract the wrong people.

He has grown used to the sounds of gunshots at night and the

noise no longer bothers him unless bullets strike close to his room. A bullet pierced six stucco pillars outside his door one time. Bam, bam, bam. Tommie dropped and rolled against a wall. Then the shooting stopped. A lot of people tote guns. He wonders how they afford them. Bullets ain't cheap. Big guns too: .357s, .44s, and others like machine guns.

Tommie was born in Choctaw County way up Highway 45 a good three hours from Prichard. He and his mother stayed with her father. They moved to Crichton, Alabama, in the early '70s. In his mother's final years, Tommie lived with her and worked as a maintenance man, painting and installing pipes. One evening, he returned home and his older sister asked, Where you been? I found momma on the floor. She's been like that all day. Tommie quit his job to care for her. When she died, he drifted from one temporary job to the next.

A white guy he knew from Daphne, Alabama, told him he needed someone to watch his own mother, eighty years old. Why don't you stay with her? he suggested, and Tommie agreed. She lived in a trailer and he moved into an RV nearby. She had rare plants, the names of which Tommie no longer remembers. At least she said they were rare, and she owned twenty-five little dogs, Chihuahua-like things. She wasn't the cleanest lady. In the evenings, they would drink a little wine and she'd smoke a cigarette surrounded by dogs and plants and talk him to death. Her son-in-law, however, didn't like the idea of a stranger staying with her and Tommie left. It only takes one person to ruin a good deal.

I ask him if he has noticed Mr. Arthur's signs. Ray Charles could see those signs, he tells me, they're everywhere. He thinks he may have met Mr. Arthur. A Black guy big on Jesus stopped him one day and gave him fifty dollars. Just up and gave him the money and kept going on about Jesus.

I'm blessed, thank the Lord, I'm blessed, he said.

Pray for me, Tommie asked him.

I will, brother, the man said. Pray for me too.

Tommie never saw him again. He stretched that fifty like a rubber band.

\*

Dolores tells me she worries about Tommie. She wonders what he does for food, how he keeps warm in the winter. He doesn't seem to want help. She enjoys talking to him. He's very sweet and polite and appears at peace. One time he had trouble with his bike and she and John replaced a tire. When he stops and checks in, she gives him food. Mostly she tries to be kind and offer him company.

She hopes Big Man will drop by again. Was he going to call them about going out or were she and John supposed to call him? She can't remember. Big Man was always a good kid but the streets exerted their pull. He wanted money for shoes, outfits. Every holiday he'd ask, Miss Dolores, can we get me an outfit, get me these shoes? He wanted to leave a store wearing new clothes. The Fourth of July was not about fireworks or cookouts but walking around in a fresh outfit. Big Man never outgrew that.

She remembers when he called John about his son, Corey Jr. She doesn't think he understood what happened. She doubts he asked himself how he might have contributed to the situation. Every young man she knows in the Village believes they love their kids. She doesn't blame them for not trying harder. They never had an example in their own lives. They don't know about birth control, something Dolores chides herself for not emphasizing more. She doesn't believe they have kids so they can be eligible for higher welfare benefits. They may do some things with the wrong motive but who hasn't? They live lives different from what most people know.

Now, Jesenda dotes on her children. Dolores remembers how she

used to be. Jesenda could fight and she would fight. Once that switch turned on, good luck turning it off. Nothing could stop her. She has come a long way. She exudes joy and Dolores is so proud of her. Jesenda is smart, always has been. People don't mess with her.

Cindy, Jesse Darrington's mother, could not have been more devoted to her children. She wanted her boys to receive an education, but she also allowed kids into her house who sold drugs and had dropped out of school. Her home became the center of all this junk. Jesse and his brothers had to navigate all that, the different guys she dated, and not good guys either. Jesse would say, I don't like them. Dolores never understood why she let just anybody in. She was so nice, too nice. She couldn't say no and do what was best for her. But she loved her children and they adored her. No one questions that.

Dacino has traveled far. He was always polite. Quiet, but polite. His stepfather, a wiry skinny man, didn't really like John or Dolores. She remembers when she first saw him with Dacino and his brothers. Dolores asked if she could get them water. Their stepdad said yes and then let them play with the other children. He could be nice in a condescending way. Dolores put up with him so Dacino and his siblings would come back. Dolores has no doubt Dacino will be a great physical therapist. He is compassionate, committed, and disciplined.

I ask her about Mr. Arthur. He was a gentle soul who professed a deep faith, she replies. He died in 2020 and she misses him. He loved God but he drank until he was intoxicated and then he beat himself up for displeasing God. He had a huge heart but he was torn. He told Dolores he wanted to do better but his alcoholism held him back. He was a big, balding man, about six feet one, but not heavy. What hair he had he tied into a braid. His expressive eyes danced with joy or drooped with sorrow depending upon his mood and the amount of alcohol he had consumed. He could fix things and helped out at the ministry. He dropped by and swept and mopped according to his

whims. He would arrive in a good mood or walk in weeping. Dolores would take him in a room, give him Kleenex, and they would talk and pray. He spread the Gospel with his signs. It's almost impossible to drive through the Village and not see one. Dolores wrote what he wanted to say and he'd copy it onto a board with markers she provided. It amazed her how many he put up. He used discarded boards he found in the woods. In the fall and winter the bare branches holding his signs declared his faith. *Oh, Lord, I'm Coming Home*. When he died in 2020, Dolores believed he did.



Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

\*

Billy Boy stops at Mr. Arthur's house on Hale Drive and walks around the porch to a back door. The swollen wood sticks and he tugs on the knob with both hands until it opens. He knew Mr. Arthur well and likes to hang out with older cats like him, guys in juke joints. Chill, drink-a-shot-or-two type of guys. Mature kind of dudes. Billy Boy doesn't worry about them. They



won't go off into nonsense and shoot their friends. Billy Boy prefers them to younger cats. Mr. Arthur's house became one of Billy Boy's go-to places. If his family couldn't find him, they knew where to call.

Mr. Arthur and those older dudes were drinkers. Outside of the juke joints they put down the wine, man. Started early and didn't bother to eat. Billy Boy used to get on Mr. Arthur about that. Whatcha doing, Mr. Arthur? I know you ain't got no wine in your hands. Not at no eight o'clock in the morning. Mr. Arthur made Billy Boy mad, killing himself like that.

Sometimes Mr. Arthur burned trash in a barrel outside of his house. Billy Boy would warm his hands and then walk inside without knocking, just give a shout, Hey, Mr. Arthur! He used to watch him put up his signs. That was all he did. Hammer and nails. Real old school. Signs everywhere, man, like weeds. He put one on a tree in his front yard where a young woman died. *O, yes, Jesus loves Dectoria.* Billy Boy knew her. Some guys started shooting and she got caught in the crossfire and dropped as if a hand rose out of the earth and yanked her down. That was a very bad day, Billy Boy says. Three people were wounded and Dectoria died.

Billy Boy feels Mr Arthur's presence. One of his rooms has a desk and a lectern where he'd preach to whoever dropped by. A deer head stares out from its spot on a wall, cobwebs laced around the dusty glass eyes. In the dark kitchen, a rusted can of cranberry sauce stands alone on a warped shelf, the oven lost in a corner, the cabinet doors shut. Billy Boy walks down a hall, the sound of each step filling the house. Dark suits and a hanger full of colorful ties crowd a bedroom closet. A dresser stands beneath a mirror. Sheets and blankets cover a bed as if just made. The smell of mildew hangs heavy as fog. Only thing missing is Mr. Arthur. Billy Boy takes a couple of shirts and jackets. They'll go to waste if he doesn't. Mr. Arthur would want him to have them.

Sitting on Mr. Arthur's bed, Billy Boy looks out the bedroom window at the backyard, sloppy with water from a recent rain. He remembers how thunderstorms flooded streets when he was a boy. He'd drag an old mattress from a trash pile and do somersaults into the water and play for hours. The sight of garbage brings Billy Boy home, makes him feel like an eight-year-old again. Much of the trash, he thinks, doesn't come from the Village. Contractors who won't pay to use a landfill instead treat the Village like a dumpster. To Billy Boy it's beautiful. He can hear his scrawny boy's body splashing in the water, smell the stink of it and the odor of the funky mattress on his skin. He felt a kind of freedom. If he had an opportunity to go back in time and put it on camera and record it, he would. This is where he came up, amidst all this garbage, and felt joy.

A homeboy, Sean, died in the yard next to Mr. Arthur's house. He had wandered around to the back and saw some guys he did not like. They felt the same toward him and started shooting and Sean ran and fell beside a trash can. As he bled out, people say he called for his mother, and the guys who killed him are dead now, too, shot. What goes around comes around. Mr. John has a photo of Sean on the memorial wall. Another homeboy got killed on First Street not far from Hale Drive. He said something to a dude that the dude didn't like, *Bro what you say?* and the dude had a big ass gun and shot him. Billy Boy didn't see it but he heard the shot and was ready to throw down. If there's going to be a war me and my homeboy are going to win the war, he thought, but that's not how it went. Homey died; war over.

Billy Boy knew another homeboy who died in front of a convenience store, Two Dragons. He tried to shoot a dude but his gun jammed and the dude turned around and shot him. That was the first of many deaths Billy Boy witnessed. A bunch of dudes chased another friend and shot him when he tried to jump a gate. Not too long after that, Billy Boy got together with

two homeboys. They got carried away teasing each other; the joking started getting personal. Went from laughter to serious malice. Emotions got involved and then bullets flew and one of them died. After so many years of killing, Billy Boy has no expectations. He was exposed to death early before he knew what death was. Before he knew the word for it. He wonders when it will be his turn. He has been involved in a couple of shootings but no one died. So many of his homies have been killed that Billy Boy's like, I know I'm coming. Y'all make some room for me in heaven because I know y'all're all up there and there ain't no place else for me to go because I know I'm coming. He has reached a point in his life that he can't make friends because of the love, man, because he loves so hard. He's afraid he'll lose them. He tries to put restraints over his heart, hold back on the love and not feel. He keeps to himself. It's too late in the game to play.

Billy Boy thinks that if people fought like the old guys did back in the day, the shootings would cease. But if a dude doesn't know how to fight, what're they going to do? They got a reputation to uphold. Imagine a guy with diamonds in his mouth like Big Man all beat up from losing a fight. He wouldn't be able to ride around all falsey like that without people laughing at him. So now when he throws down he reaches for a gun. No one says, Hey, man, remember when we went to school together? Remember when we played basketball at Light of the Village? No one says any of that. They shoot.

Billy Boy leaves Mr. Arthur's house. Knee-high grass brushes against his pants as he walks through an empty lot, flies scattering. He considers himself a backstreet mover and prefers paths and alleys in and around the Village instead of streets. Safer. If he sees somebody he doesn't know, he worries, drops down to a crouch, watches. Don't too many people move off the main roads. If it's an older dude, cool, but a young cat will make him paranoid. Why's he out here? What's he up to? Billy Boy has learned to be alert. Anything

he sees that doesn't feel right or look right or feels out of place arouses his suspicions.

Billy Boy was born in Sacramento but moved with his mother and grandmother to the Village when he was five. His grandmother was from Mobile and he presumes she wanted to come home. His father stayed in California but called every so often. Hey, his father would say, I'm going to mail you fifty dollars tomorrow then Billy Boy wouldn't hear from him again until the next time he offered to send money. His mother used drugs and would leave him alone in the house. I'm going out to eat, she'd say, and he wouldn't see her for weeks. But he'd die for her. Even though she wasn't there for him, she's still his mother.

He relied on his grandmother, Miss Annie Marie. She was a sweet old lady and gave him what she had even if it wasn't much. By-the-book kind of lady. She made sure Billy Boy attended school and showed respect. Chores and keeping the house right. She was big on house cleaning. One time a lady made her so mad she tried to fight her from a wheelchair. Billy Boy laughs. Miss Annie could act crazy, man. Billy Boy called her momma. She died when he was ten and Billy Boy moved from one aunt to another. He dropped out of school at thirteen and began hanging out with older cats and learned to sell drugs. Use your instincts, they told him. Follow your gut. Hesitate, you die.

When Billy Boy turned fourteen, the police busted him with a gun a friend had given him, a .22, little thing. Watch your back, his friend had told him. Don't let nobody do nothing to you, you feel me? The police took him to Strickland. His mother and father didn't attend his hearing. A judge sentenced him to the Lee County Youth Development Center where he served thirty days. Since then Billy Boy has been in prison three times: in 2012 and 2014 for robbery and in 2016 for robbery and assault.

He did not steal because he needed money. Sometimes he would have a pocket full of cash and still rob someone. The thrill drove him—and his anger. Billy Boy has a temper. Today he keeps that side of himself chill. Someone would have to physically assault him for it to kick in, but his anger scares him because he gets hot pretty quick. He copes through prayer. All he does is pray. It's not on-top-of-a-roof praying, but it's prayer. He prays for his safety, his family's safety. He prays to God that he has the wisdom to identify danger. When he was in jail, he prayed with other guys. They had faith to a certain extent but too many of them lost it when they got out. The world of faith ain't the world of the 'hood. Billy Boy tattooed a cross between his eyes. Every time he looks in a mirror he sees it as a reflection of his love for God.

Billy Boy feels the weight of the spirits and ghosts of the dead, like Sean and another homey, Cyrus. Billy Boy and Cyrus were like brothers. They protected each other. Watch-my-back, watch-your-back kind of love. One time as he sat in a car with Cyrus, a dude pulled up next to them and gave them a troubling look. Damn, Billy Boy thought, there might be some shit, and cocked his .45, but nothing happened and Cyrus pulled off and cruised to a Burger King. At the drive-through, they asked for two Whoppers. Billy Boy reached into his pocket for change and nicked the trigger of his gun. Boom! The bullet went through the floorboard and into the right front tire.

We got to go, Billy Boy said.

Hell no, I want my food, Cyrus screamed at him.

Man, these people are going to call the police.

Not before I eat, Cyrus said.

They bought their food and limped off. The police never did catch them. Those kinds of stories, Billy Boy says, become legend in the Village.

He had a dream recently about playing basketball with Cyrus.

Then he dreamed about Sean. He asked him how death felt. Chill, Sean said. Billy Boy has been dreaming about dead people since he was little. He spoke to prison counselors about his dreams but they told him they couldn't provide the help he needed. After a while, Billy Boy embraced his dreams. They remain the one way he can still see dead friends, and they feel so authentic. In one dream he wanted to warn Cyrus he would get shot but he didn't want to upset him. So Billy Boy stayed quiet and then, as in the real world, Cyrus died.

\*

John and Dolores have known Billy Boy since he was a child. He always had a mind of his own and wanted to be seen as a hip, cool dude. However, people in the Village watch his actions more than they listen to his words. He doesn't command their respect. They see he doesn't work or take care of his kids. He has to change his life before he can be a role model.

That's the sad part, John tells me. Billy Boy knows what he should be doing. He talks about it but he doesn't follow through. John and Dolores have sent Billy Boy to several job programs but he always walks out. It's tragic, really. Billy Boy is bright and has insight. His observations about people can be spot-on. John recalls one afternoon when a preacher approached the basketball court behind the ministry. Guys from all over Prichard were playing. The preacher said, Stop. I want to share the word of God with you. Bow your heads. Who here wants to go to heaven? The players looked at John and he nodded, indicating they should do what he asked in the hope he'd leave. The preacher led them in a prayer of repentance. Billy Boy shuffled next to John. What do you think? John asked him. Is he leading them to Christ? He's not leading them very far, Billy Boy said.

When Billy Boy was eighteen, John spoke by phone to his father in Sacramento.

I'm ready to be a dad, his father said. Send me a picture of him.

John did.

Oh he looks great, his father said in another call. He gets that from me.

John and Dolores bought Billy Boy clothes, had a big send-off for him at the ministry and drove him to the Mobile Bus Station the next morning at eight o'clock. Fifteen minutes before departure, his father called.

I don't need him right now, he told John. Better stop him.

John told Billy Boy. Billy Boy shrugged. Disappointed, yes, but not surprised.

## **FIVE**

On a Thursday night, Billy Boy hangs around the ministry. He talks to Dacino and follows him to the house across the street, where John sits on a porch swing. Dacino tells him Billy Boy wants to buy shoes for his birthday.

How you going to buy shoes without any money? John asks him.

I don't know, man.

How much are the shoes?

Eighty dollars.

C'mon, Dacino you know you're flush, John says.

Who?

You.

Man, I don't have it. I'm going to stand by the dumpster and smoke a cigarette.

That's where your money's going.

John looks at Billy Boy.

What's going on, Mr. John? he asks.

I'm getting ready to go pick up kids for the after-school program. What have you been up to?

Walking around the Village. It's my birthday coming up. Kind of special to me.

Yeah, I know, but here you are.

I ain't in no trouble.

That's a plus.

I got nowhere to stay. I need a room.

You going to hang out while I figure out something for you, Billy Boy?

Yes sir.

I'm going to pick up the kids now.

Billy Boy walks behind John to a van and gets in with him. John backs onto Baldwin Drive. Billy Boy stares out a window. The night sky dances with stars.

Somebody got killed last weekend, he says.

Been a little shooting today, yeah, John says.

Got to be careful at nighttime. It's crazy. Do a lot of shooting from the bushes. After my birthday, I'm going to go out of town.

Where?

I don't know. Somewhere. Anywhere. Start over. Be something positive. I need work.

A birthday is a good time to get a new direction.



That's what Miss Dolores says. She gave me a good talk today. She'll tough-love you, man.

John picks up the children and drives back to the ministry. He gets out and the children follow. Billy Boy stays by the van. Minutes later John walks out and calls to Dacino.

I got a hundred bucks. That should handle the shoes. I'll tell him and then you want to run him up real quick to the store?

If it wasn't his birthday, I wouldn't do it.

Dacino looks at him. John shrugs. Does he just write Billy Boy off? Say, I don't want you around here anymore? John doesn't see how that would help. Enabling, the textbooks call it. It's easy to sit at home and recite academic rules of social work about what should and should not be done. In the field, that is much harder to do. John deals with people, not words on a page. They aren't canned goods with a shelf life. Billy Boy certainly isn't the only one. Many people see the ministry as an ATM. John tells them to text him. It's a lot easier than listening to their spiel: How are you, Mr. John. So glad you guys are here. John doesn't need the small talk, the false praise. Get to the point: What do you need? The manipulation is so obvious. He gives them what they want. It gets exhausting saying no all the time. At some point he'll cut off the spigot and Billy Boy will leave angry, hurt, and confused but not surprised, and that's sad too. It's just shoes. A fleeting moment of happiness. Why not? Enabling. That's a good term. John supposes it applies to him.

Go get you a birthday gift, he tells Billy Boy and hands him the money. Dacino will take you. Then we'll deal with finding you a place to stay.

Billy Boy looks at the ground and runs a foot over pebbles. He takes the money almost self-consciously, perhaps a little ashamed, without looking up.

Ya'll going to make me cry, he says softly.

I don't know about that.

Thank you, man.

Alright, Bo.

I love you, Mr. John.

We love you too, you know that.

\*

John walks through the Village early the next morning. He strolls behind the ministry and crosses a highway to the Donut Shop. On his way home last night, John noticed it was packed, the green juke joint filled with cars, the empty homes around it frantic with activity. Trap houses, people call them, places to stash drugs. No one steals because someone would rat them out and lethal repercussions would follow. Quiet now. John thinks he should call the Donut Shop something else. A donut shop never closes. Sure feels closed now.

What's up Bo? John shouts to a man peering out the door of a ruined home.

He doesn't answer. A dog barks.

John walks through the Donut Shop to other neighborhoods. The wind stirs, the air damp but warm, sunlight poking through clouds. A stop sign on a street named Madison Avenue carries graffiti: *PA for Life*. John thinks it means *Prichard, Alabama, for life*. Like a prison sentence. There had been houses all the way through here at one time. Nothing now except the rusted frames of stolen cars.

He walks to Big Man's house, a gray trailer home with a small front yard. He's up and busy, everyone coming around. Cars out front for only one reason. Got to get it. Early bird gets the

worm. Big Man holds a shoebox where he keeps his money, or so rumor has it. Rides around with it too. Doesn't leave it at his house, a precaution against burglars. He leans into the passenger window of a car. After a short moment, he jogs into his house.

What's up? John calls out to him. It's early, Bo, too early to be up.

Big Man glances at him without expression.



John, Dolores, and Big Man

Dude, I like those pants. I gotta say, you looking good, Bo.

A kid named Elijah lives with his grandmother around the corner; another boy, Daniel, nearby. He'd come to the ministry with Elijah. Elijah's aunt brought them but Elijah hasn't been around for a good while. Maybe because of COVID; John doesn't know. A dude named Diamond Dog lives not far from here. He

serves as the Village mechanic.

John keeps walking. He remembers the early years of the mission. He and Dolores were suspect then. Everyone was friendly but people did wonder about them. After twenty years, a few still do. Other people, too, wonder. Some of them think he and Dolores want to save souls and charge their egos. If anyone thinks they drive home at night feeling empowered, they don't know, they really just don't know. More often than not John feels deflated. It sucks, caring about people who self-destruct. Sucks big time. So many people have died.

It should be me up on the memorial wall next, he has said more than once in Bible study. At fifty-six he is much older than the young people staring back at him but he knows the chances of him dying before them remain slim. An argument over a girl, or someone feels insulted, a robbery gone bad, or something equally tragic and stupid will result in death. John feels immense joy and immense sorrow, most days not in equal measure. He and Dolores stay focused on the mission: Show love, hope, and faith. Let the Bible speak for itself, see who it touches. Listen, encourage. Be consistent and genuine. Tell the truth in a kind way. Don't condemn or judge. Help in whatever way possible. Come back. Be consistent. Be present.

John relies on scripture, 2 Timothy 4:5: *But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don't be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you.* He tells anyone who will listen, If you feel compassion for something, don't ignore it. Explore it. You don't have to go all Mother Teresa and run at full speed but you can investigate it. What do you feel compassion for? Search for it, embrace it. What moves you? The answer, he believes, is a gift from God.

\*

*Postscript*

On March 12, 2021, two days after I left the Village, I received a text from John: *Very sad news this morning. Apparently Big Man (Corey) was killed this morning.*

The shooting occurred in the Donut Shop about ten o'clock. He was shot in his red Dodge Charger R/T. Dacino called John. Dolores heard the ring and thought, Oh, crap. She saw by the expression on John's face that someone had been shot. He drove into the Village, Dolores stayed home. She usually doesn't go to murder scenes. At that point all she could have done had been done. Big Man was in God's hands now.

Everybody liked him, even the person who witnesses alleged shot him. This person some say hung out in the Donut Shop as much as Big Man. He stopped at the ministry every so often to wash his car and John would talk to him. He was wounded on Hale Drive one year and John visited him in the hospital. His vital signs were crashing more from panic than the seriousness of his wounds, and the doctors asked John to calm him. He was pleasant like Big Man. His kids participated in the after-school programs. No one knew the why of it. It may be that Big Man broke up a fight between him and another young man. It may be that Big Man said something that humiliated him. That's all it takes, injured pride.

The Donut Shop turned into a ghost town. John wondered who would fill the void.

In some ways, John told me, Big Man's death was a story that has been told many times, only every retelling is different because each person is different. He was more than a statistic, more than a number. When John thinks of Big Man, he sees the boy who snagged a cake from a restaurant buffet. He always had a young face, a kid's smile. John can still see his hurt when he talked to him about his son. Are you at the church? Yes, John said. I need to talk to you. Sure. Big Man had just come from the morgue and looked bewildered. How does a two-year-old shoot himself in the back of the head? he asked. He was upset, his pain palpable. The ministry was the

one place he could let down his front and be Corey instead of Big Man, a grieving father, exposed and vulnerable. Just the other day, John told me, when Dolores took some children home, DT, a young man who had been shot four weeks earlier, flagged her down. Leaning on his walker, he showed her his wounds like he was baring his soul.

I recalled my conversation with Big Man as we sat together in the same car he would die in. At one point, I asked him what people should know about him. He said he was a good person. Not a perfect person but a good one. Friendly, kind-hearted. But he would not let anyone disrespect him. He had a bad temper, he admitted, but believed he had it under control. I told him I thought it spoke well of him that he had sought out John after his son died instead of retaliating. It seemed at that moment, no matter how brief, he had sought an alternative to violence. Big Man stared out the windshield, his right hand resting on the wheel.

Maybe, he said.

---

## **New Fiction from Adam Straus: “ANA Checkpoint”**











Sergeant

Reiss insisted on giving a full patrol order every time we left the wire. I thought it was overkill, but I didn't mind as much as some of the other guys. Haggerty especially was always going on about how it was a waste of time. It's not like there was anything else to do, but he was obsessed with efficiency. Back in Twentynine Palms, he had a million little projects he would work on in our barracks room during the endless hours we spent waiting to be told what the plan for the day was, waiting to be released in the afternoon, waiting to deploy. While I'd sit and play video games like a normal person, he'd try (and fail) to learn foreign languages, do hundreds of pushups, and pace like a maniac. Haggerty just couldn't accept that some time wasn't his to spend.

On deployment, he had the bunk above mine in our squad's platform tent. Inside, there were six other racks and a beat-up TV that the guys we relieved had left for us. Outside sat a generator that sometimes coughed exhaust into the tent. Our stained sagging mattresses had been around since the war started, and I could feel the bedframe's springs under my ass as Haggerty and I sat side by side on my rack, taking notes while Sergeant Reiss briefed.

"Fuckin' simple shit tonight, gents," he began. "We're going to depart the east ECP, swing by the ANA checkpoint on Highway 1, and return via the airfield. Orientation remains the same. We've still got Little to our east, the highway to our north, Big just past that, and fuckin' nothing to our west and south. Weather tonight will be clear, with 6% illumination..."

I copied down all of the meteorological data, along with the same enemy situation and the same friendly situation that had held true for the previous three months of deployment. I wrote word for word "the Taliban are active throughout Washir. I expect them to mass to fireteam size in order to carry out hasty ambushes if they are alerted to our presence" and "the ANA maintain checkpoints along Highway 1. At night they are

often high or asleep, so we can't count on them for help. 3<sup>rd</sup> squad will be on QRF and they'll be able to reach us within 30 minutes." I glanced over at Haggerty's field notebook. All he'd written down was "ANA checkpoint, Highway 1." In his defense, that was all any of us really needed. We'd already done this exact same patrol at least ten times.

Sergeant Reiss read off our mission statement ("On order, 2<sup>nd</sup> squad interdicts the Taliban in the vicinity of Highway 1 in order to deter enemy activity and strengthen our partnership with the Afghan National Army") and walked us through the patrol route, using empty cans of dip to signify our vehicles on a mockup of the surrounding grid squares he kept in the middle of our tent. He finished by listing all the frequencies to program into the vehicle's radios (the same frequencies we'd been using the whole deployment) and telling us the succession of command, in case he went down. Sergeant Reiss asked for questions. There weren't any.

"Alright. Check your shit, then get some sleep. We're pushing out at 0200 so I want everyone at the vehicles by 0130."

The brief over, we turned to personal preparation. My pre-patrol routine was automatic: I kept my kit staged in the same spot, with my rifle hung from the same bedpost and my boots pointing the same way with one sugar-free RipIt (the caffeine equivalent of two cups of coffee) stashed in each of them. Everyone had their own way of getting ready, from the rosary Schumacher prayed to Doc Warrington's habit of jerking off before bed. Whatever it was, we'd all had plenty of practice, and 30 minutes after Sergeant Reiss' order ended, the squad racked out with our alarms set for 0100.

\*

Everyone killed their alarms on the second or third ring. We got dressed and kitted up in silence, each set of bunkmates in an island of light from the bare bulbs that hung from the

canvas above our racks. I chugged one of my RipIts and pocketed the other, in case I started nodding off later. The center of the tent was still dark.

February nights in Helmand are cold as fuck, and we shivered underneath our flaks and kevlar during the five minute walk to the motor pool where our up-armored MaxxPros sat waiting. Haggerty and I took our seats in the back of vic one, with Sergeant Reiss in the passenger seat as vehicle commander, Donahue driving, and McClellan in the turret.

Our interpreter Aziz was already in the vehicle. He rolled with our fireteam, but he never came to Sergeant Reiss' briefings. He'd already been working out of our FOB for nearly two years. His job was to sit inside the vehicle, get out when Sergeant Reiss told him to, repeat whatever shit Sergeant Reiss and the Afghans were trying to say to one another, and then get back in. He was older, with bifocals and flecks of gray in his well-trimmed beard, and he wore a knit sweater under his castoff flak. He looked like a college professor.

Like Aziz, Haggerty and I didn't have anything to do until we got to the checkpoint. There, our job was to get out with Sergeant Reiss and Aziz and make sure none of the ANA shot them in the back of the head. An implied task was to not get ourselves shot either.

While Sergeant Reiss got comm checks with the operations center and requested permission to depart friendly lines, Haggerty bent towards my jump seat and motioned for me to lean in.

"I think Gabby's cheating on me."

"Are you serious?"

"I mean, I'm not 100% sure. It's just little things. Like I saw on her Instagram story that she was at a party on Saturday night. When we talked on Monday and I asked her what she'd

done over the weekend, she said 'nothing.' And the other day some dude commented on one of her photos. I asked her who he was, and she said it was one of her cousins. But I remember her telling me like six months ago that all of her cousins are girls. My point is, why lie if there's nothing going on?"

"Fuck, dude. Do you know anyone she's going to school with who could keep an eye on things for you?"

"The only people I know there are her friends, there's no point asking them."

"Fuck. I don't know what to say."

I really didn't. But I did know that Gabby was a junior at UC Riverside. She had two older brothers that she got along with well, her parents lived in Palm Springs, she was majoring in biology, she wanted to be a doctor someday, and she played on the club volleyball team. She was tall for a girl, she almost always kept her hair tied back in a ponytail, and she wore the same floral perfume as my sister. Gabby chewed gum constantly, which made kissing her taste like spearmint.

Haggerty knew all of this too, except for the fact that I knew any of it. He turned to our terp.

"Aziz, you're old. You got any girl advice for me?"

Aziz laughed. "I am maybe not the best to ask. My wife, I have not seen her in more than one year. The Taliban came to my house and said they would kill me next time I come home. So she tell them I'm already dead. Now, she pretends to be a widow until I make my three years and get our visa. Then, both of us go to America." He wiped his glasses on the sleeve of his sweater. "I still send money home and we talk on the phone. So that is maybe my advice to you. Call on the phone and send money."

"Goddamn Aziz, you always keep it heavy."

He shrugged. "You ask me, this is what I tell you."

We fell silent, listening to the low throb of the MaxxPro's engine as we left the FOB. Our route took us through what used to be the largest American base in Helmand. We'd turned over most of it to the Afghans, and our perimeter was now a square postage stamp in the corner of their envelope. The Afghans manned the outer fence, sort of. In between our walls and theirs was a wasteland of materiel: Old canvas tents, rusted out vehicles, coils of barbed wire protecting nothing, long-empty concrete bunkers. The Afghans had taken anything worth the effort years earlier, when the American tide had first receded. All that was left now were the equivalent of tidal flats, wide expanses of dust reeking of dried piss and rotted wood.

We crossed this nothingness and reached a small guard post with a metal arm blocking the road, the main entry control point for the Afghan base. Beyond was Afghanistan. The real Afghanistan, not the FOBs on which most Americans spent most of their time. To be fair, in our armored vehicles and flaks we were basically tortoises who took the FOB with us like a shell. Still, beyond the ECP was something closer to reality. A small Afghan in tattered camouflage trousers and a yellow t-shirt that glowed under the shack's lights jumped up from a plastic chair and lifted the arm for us.

"MANANA!" McClellan yelled from the turret. Sergeant Reiss was big on making us say "thank you" to the Afghans. He was kind of a boner about counter-insurgency stuff. The way I saw it, if saying "please" and "thank you" was all it took to win this war, we would've been out of here fifteen years earlier. But it couldn't hurt, I guess.

No matter how many times I'd done it, I still got a bit of a rush from leaving the wire. Even though there was no real difference between the desert we'd just crossed and the desert we now entered, there was something unmistakably different on

the north side of that guard post. An undercurrent of electricity ran through the air. We were out and about in Helmand Province, Afghanistan; anything could happen. It could be the last ten minutes of our lives and we might not even know it. I straightened in my seat and craned my neck to see out the MaxxPro's portholes. I could just discern the outline of a cluster of mud huts some 800m distant, the hamlet we called "Little" (to distinguish it from "Big" on the other side of the highway).

Even outside the wire, Haggerty couldn't keep Gabby off his mind. He whispered now, having gotten bitched out by Sergeant Reiss plenty of times for talking about bullshit on patrol. Haggerty was saying something about how he didn't want to waste his time, and if they were going to break up, they might as well do it sooner rather than later. I pretended to listen, muttering that if that was the case he shouldn't date anyone he wasn't going to marry. But the truth was I couldn't keep Gabby off my mind, either.

I remembered sitting across from her at a table in the back corner of a bar, comparing the fake IDs we'd used to get in. Hers was from New Jersey; it was a joke between her and her cousins (yes, they were all girls) that they'd used the same uptight single aunt's address in Cherry Hill for their fakes. Mine was from Minnesota, a hand-me-down from one of the older mortarmen. It'd cost me \$100. Gabby's had run her five times that, and it was laughably bad. But a perk of being a girl that looks the way she does is that bouncers could give less of a fuck whether her ID is any good. So we'd both gotten into this bar, a fifteen minute walk from her dorm and a two hour drive from my barracks. I'd insisted on making the trek, partially to be a gentlemen and partially on the off-chance she'd invite me back to her place. After a round of drinks, she was laughing at my jokes and leaning towards me while she compared our IDs side by side.

"This doesn't even look like you," she laughed.



“At least it looks like an ID. Yours looks like one of those fake permission slips kids try to make where they sign their mom’s name in crayon, saying they were late to school because their dog escaped or whatever.”

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad. It worked, didn’t it?”

We mostly just joked back and forth like that. It wasn’t one of those epic first dates you read about where the couple talks until dawn and gets married as soon as the courthouse opens the next morning. But we didn’t hate being around one another and she was seriously cute, both of which are big wins whenever you meet someone off a dating app. Still, we only had two beers, because I was driving, and there can’t have been more than an hour between our awkward “nice to meet you” hug and when I settled the tab.

The part I think about the most is the last twenty minutes or so, beginning with when I asked to walk her back to her dorm. It was the sort of thing I thought grown men were supposed to do. The entirety of my experience with women up to that point consisted of a long-term high school girlfriend and a handful of one night stands in San Diego; I didn’t know how to handle a real, no-shit date. But walking Gabby back to her place felt right, and she agreed at least enough to have me along.

I still had some vague idea of fucking her, but as we traced the leafy edge of her campus, it became more like a fantasy than something I could be doing within the next hour. I felt like I was carrying a priceless Ming vase in my hands, and the only thing on my mind was not messing it up. Not tripping on a crack in the asphalt and splitting my face open, not saying the wrong thing, not pushing too hard too fast.

When we reached the stone steps of her dorm, Gabby paused, looking down at her feet. My heart pounded in my ears and I found myself breathing hard, like I’d just run the half-mile from the bar to her place.

“Well, thanks for the drinks. I had a nice time.”

I don't think I said anything back; I just kissed her.

Normally, driving up the hill to Twenty-nine Palms is the most depressing shit in the world. First the road weaves between these angry-looking mountains, and then for the last half-hour civilization slowly fades away until you find yourself in Two-Nine, a town with a “Hundred Miles to Next Service” sign on its far edge. But for once I didn't mind the desert. I was blissed out, my truck's engine wailing to maintain 85 MPH going uphill. I thought I'd found an oasis with Gabby, I really did.

In a different desert, far from the smooth asphalt of Highway 62, we turned off the gravel access road leading in and out of base. Our command didn't want us driving on the Ring Road itself. The shoddily constructed highway could barely handle the weight of our vehicles, and the few long haul truckers who kept Afghanistan's economy running hated having to slow down for our convoys. At Sergeant Reiss' direction, Donahue eased our MaxxPro onto a washed-out dirt path that led to the Afghan checkpoint we were visiting. As we bounced along, I could hear the occasional truck fly by on the highway 200m to our north.

The checkpoint consisted of two buildings, a new guard shack made of corrugated metal reinforced with sandbags and an old, abandoned mud hut that the Afghan soldiers had claimed as their hooch. Our squad seamlessly brought the three vehicles into a tight 360 degree security perimeter between them, forming a peace sign if viewed from overhead. Donahue lowered the back stairs, and Haggerty, Aziz, and I walked out to link up with Sergeant Reiss and head inside.

I dropped my night vision goggles down for the short walk. Our NVGs worked by magnifying ambient light, but it was a new moon, and with no light to magnify, I could barely make out where the buildings ended and the sky began. Looking up,

though, I could see all of the stars that were normally too dull to be visible. I thought of an old Incubus song I'd liked in high school: *The sky resembles a backlit canopy, with holes punched in it... I wish you were here.*

I pulled my NVGs up and off my face when we arrived at the guard shack. The four of us stepped inside and were greeted with the overwhelming smell of hashish. An Afghan soldier sat on the floor, reclining against the sandbags that lined the wall. His back was to the highway.

"Salaam aleikum," Sergeant Reiss said, placing his hand over his heart in the traditional Afghani greeting. The Afghan nodded and smiled. He didn't stand or gesture for us to sit. Sergeant Reiss told Haggerty to post up just outside the door. He'd brought both of us because there were supposed to be two ANA soldiers inside.

With his own knowledge of Dari exhausted, Sergeant Reiss turned to Aziz to translate. They made small talk with the Afghan, discussing how cold it was outside and how much traffic had been coming by on the highway. The purpose of the checkpoint was to deter the Taliban from moving around freely on Highway 1, but short of stopping every vehicle and ripping it apart to search for weapons, there was no real way to do this. The actual value added of this particular spot was to serve as a bullet sponge, drawing attackers away from the larger base half a mile to the south. This guard shack was a reincarnation of one that had been leveled by a vehicle-borne IED a year and a half earlier. The Afghan seemed to accept this, replying to Sergeant Reiss' questions with the tired air of a man who knows his answers don't matter. Or maybe he was just stoned.

Sergeant Reiss eventually cut the shit. "Aziz, ask him why there aren't two guys in here. Tell him we know they're supposed to have two guys in here."

Aziz and the Afghan went back and forth in fast, lyrical Dari. The Afghan punctuated his sentences with a series of shrugs and flicks of his hand.

“He says it is because two of their men are home on leave,” Aziz explained. “They were told to be back two days ago but they could not travel because of violence. At the checkpoint, they do not get a replacement and now only four are here. If they have two awake all night then there is no time to sleep.”

“Alright, whatever.” Sergeant Reiss shifted his shoulders under the weight of his flak. “Ask him all the oversight questions. You know, last time he was paid, last time he got leave, last time one of his NCOs came out here to check on him, all that shit.”

While Aziz and the Afghan talked, I continued to scan the room. Besides a ceramic bong, the only other furniture was a chamber pot. Thankfully, it was empty. The walls were lined with sandbags stacked up to waist height. A light machinegun stood on a fixed post, pointed out along the short strip of dirt road that led from the checkpoint to the highway itself. It wasn't loaded. Belts of ammunition sat coiled in a rusted can on the floor.

Aziz finished with the Afghan and turned to Sergeant Reiss. “He says they were paid last week but not enough. I do not know if this is true or if he just wants more money. They have not seen any of their leadership in two weeks. He says it is because they are with the operation in Marjah right now. And he has not been home in six months. He is from the north, near Mazar-e-Sharif he says, and he wants you to know that there, the people are very good, but here, in Helmand, they are very bad.”

Sergeant Reiss nodded. “Alright. Tell him we say thanks for his time or whatever. Let's get the fuck out of here.”

We said our goodbyes and filed out the door. I went last. The

Afghan stared up at me from the floor, and before I turned to leave, he flashed a toothless smile. I waved back awkwardly and closed the door behind me.

Haggerty was waiting for us outside. "Sergeant, are we going to go over to the other compound?"

"Nah, they're just sleeping in there. No point in waking them up."

"Good to go, Sergeant."

Donahue saw us coming and dropped the stairs. We took our seats and began the drive back to our FOB. While the vehicle turned, I looked out the porthole and caught a glimpse of the Afghan highlighted through the checkpoint's window. He was standing up now, but instead of watching the highway, he was watching us drive away. I thought to wave again, but he had no way of seeing me in the dark.

"Anything happen in there?" Haggerty asked.

"Nah. You see anything?"

"One of the guys from the hut got up and took a shit, like, right outside. That was it."

"Cool."

"Yeah. I got some good thinking done, though."

"Yeah?"

"I'm not gonna break up with Gabby."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, what's the point? I'm over here. There's nothing I can do about it. I guess it's nice having someone to talk to. I'll see what the deal is when we get home."

“I feel that.”

“It’s not like I have any other options, you know?”

I told him I did. I hadn’t chosen to end things with Gabby, either. We’d actually made plans to hang out again the weekend after our first date. She was going to take me to a house party off-campus. I wondered what she would introduce me as. Friend? Acquaintance? Something else? We’d be drinking, obviously, so she probably didn’t expect me to drive back to Twenty-nine Palms that night. I hadn’t told any of the guys, not even Haggerty, because I didn’t want to jinx anything.

But then one of my seniors decided he wanted to go to LA that weekend, and he voluntold me to stand duty for him on Saturday. Gabby was busy Friday night, and I would be in the field the following weekend. So we had to slow our roll for two weeks.

And then two weeks turned into forever. It was day three of the field op we went on the week after I had to stand duty. Our platoon had some downtime between shooting all day and shooting all night, and a bunch of us were hanging around on our packs. Haggerty was bragging about this girl he’d been talking to on Tinder, an absolute dime he said, and he passed his phone around so we could all admire her profile.

It was Gabby. I didn’t blame her for that; I still don’t. We’d only hung out once, it wasn’t like we were exclusive. And I know that’s how the game works, that you have to keep your options open until you really commit to someone. I just felt weird about the whole thing. Which is why I tried to change the topic every time Haggerty brought her up after that, why I made a point of being at the gym while he got ready for their first date, why I avoided hanging out with them on the weekends once they started seeing one another, and why as far as Haggerty knows Gabby and I have only met each other once.

The one time he knows about was impossible to avoid. She came

to our farewell before we deployed, and I obviously had to be there, too. The parking lot cordoned off for our goodbyes was pure chaos. Some of the wives were bawling, a bunch of overtired toddlers were running around, and guys were trying to chug final beers without their leadership seeing.

Haggerty, of course, insisted I meet Gabby. I followed him to where his truck was parked. I realized that, for the moment, I was more nervous about seeing her than deploying. She seemed at ease, though, sitting on the tailgate, chewing a stick of gum and kicking her feet in the air.

“Gabs, this is my roommate Joey that I told you about.”

A flash of recognition crossed her face. Having had more time to prepare for our reunion than she had, I covered for her by introducing myself and saying I’d heard so much about her. The three of us made small talk, trying to focus on anything other than the fact that Haggerty and I were potentially heading off to our deaths and that the last time I’d seen Gabby she’d been running her hand through my hair while we made out.

Our platoon sergeant saved us from any further conversation, shouting with his gravely former drill instructor’s voice that we had two minutes to get on the fucking busses.

“Well, you two keep each other safe over there, ok?” she said, voice quivering.

We both nodded. I took the hint and boarded the white prison-style bus to allow Gabby and Haggerty a private goodbye. Somehow, I managed to resist the urge to spy on them through the window of the seat I’d claimed. Haggerty seemed shaken when he sat down next to me.

“You good?” I asked.

“Yeah, man.”

And then the bus lurched forward and we were gone. Gabby stood

in the middle of the crowd of crying women, waving goodbye until they melted together and vanished behind us into the desert. I thought to myself that I'd see her again at our homecoming.

\*

The same Afghan with the yellow shirt let us back into base, but this time we took a hard left along the fence line. Sergeant Reiss refused to take the same route out and back, so even though we were inside the Afghan wire, we had to take a dog leg by the airfield. Our FOB was too small for anything bigger than an Osprey to land, so we still relied on the Afghan flight line for most of our troop movements. They were supposed to have a guard posted 24/7, but as we drove by, the tarmac was empty. A random assortment of runway lights blinked on and off. The control tower was chained shut.

"You see anyone, McClellan?" Sergeant Reiss asked.

"No, Sergeant."

"Fuck it, let's just head back to the FOB."

Donahue reversed our MaxxPro onto the muddy road that skirted the perimeter of the airfield and turned towards home. I caught myself starting to drift off, but I didn't want to drink my second Rip-It this close to the end. Instead, I smacked myself in the face twice, hard enough to make my eyes water, an old stay-awake trick I'd learned in boot camp.

"Are you alright?" Aziz asked me.

"Yeah, just trying not to fall asleep."

He laughed. "Yes, I know you do not want to miss a second of this." Aziz spread his arms wide to encompass the MaxxPro, the checkpoint, all of Helmand Province, the whole country, the whole war.



\*

It was almost dawn when we got to the tent and dropped our flaks with a collective groan of relief. Sergeant Reiss told us to hang out for a minute while he went over to our platoon commander's hooch to debrief the patrol and get some word on what was next for us. While he was gone, I brushed my teeth with a water bottle and got into my sleeping bag, ready to pass out the moment we were allowed to. By the time Sergeant Reiss returned ten minutes later, I was struggling to keep my eyes open. He said we were going to the same checkpoint on our next patrol, departing at 2200 that night. I rolled over and went to sleep.

---

## **New Flash Fiction from Drew Pham: "On Their Lips, the Name of God"**

This is the memory that stays with him as his blood abandons the body and life fades—this, the one comfort that will carry him into the next life. Dawran had waited beneath a mulberry tree in May of last year. He'd come to love mulberries in a small way—they'd always kept him company through the boredom of waiting. It was still cool in the mornings and evenings, the breeze shaking the branches, dropping the still tart clustered berries. So strange that trees bearing fruit must sacrifice their children to live. How an animal carries that seed away—the length of a kilometer, a province, a nation, to plant and bloom again. In this way, the child's sacrifice meant something. He'd liked that.

He remembers Zafar's simple house. Not more than a small

compound with a low wall and one building, one shed. The gate opened, Zafar standing there in the vestibule with his daughter propped on his hip; the dim outline of a woman behind them. A handsome woman and child. Zafar put the girl down, kissed her once on each cheek, on the forehead, and on both cheeks again. He turned to his wife, and the woman smiled. The sight of Zafar's family brought Dawran thoughts of the future, of blooming. At least, that's how he likes to remember it—a smiling wife, a doted-upon child. Things he'd hoped to have one day, but never would.

Zafar took him up to the mountainside, where they could see the whole valley. They took a small bag. Some naan. Dried nuts and fruit. Rice. They had some work to do. Checking vantage points, watching the Americans and the government troops and police, drawing up maps of the improvements the Americans made to their little outpost. These soldiers were tired or lazy or scared, so they rarely ventured out, and the summer that followed was as quiet and peaceful as anyone could hope. Before they began their descent down the mountain, a pair of shepherds came across their path, offered them a little food and tea. They sat in a little basin in the foothills, where soil had accumulated over the years from all the sediment washed down from snow melts. While the flock grazed or huddled together or slept, the men sat around the fire, telling tall tales, reciting couplets of poetry, and resuscitating dead memories. They ate, drank tea, watched the half-disc moon crawl up the sky, trading places with the sun. The insects in the green valley below sang their song. Torch flies lit the marshy canal beds and mountain streams. A stray dog howled, and Dawran felt himself fortunate for his belly, now full with warm meat and gravy.

He remembers being thankful for Zafar, who'd had always been a patient eater. Methodical. Careful. And Dawran loved watching his mouth take some things whole, tear other things off in small bites, and seeing the thin film of grease form, his lips

reflecting a little of all that moonlight. In the dark, his commander's skin seemed more like polished stone than flesh. More than that, he loved listening to Zafar speak. He told a story about a book his father had brought back from Russia, about a giant fish and the mad fisherman who'd pursued it. *We do such insane things for love*, he'd said, tracing the outlines of the mad seaman's obsession. He'd said it was love that'd driven him to madness, that he'd loved hunting the enormous fish, for it was the fish that gave him life, it was the fish that'd given him purpose.

Dawran remembers all the questions he'd had of the strange tale, questions that, when he gazed at Zafar, he knew he already the answers to. He had thought on that while the meal warmed his belly, and the fire drying the sweat from his clothes. Love deriving from purpose comforted him. It meant he could say he loved Zafar, this man who'd given him purpose, given his life meaning. And he'd learn how far that insane love would take him, but he'd stay loyal. He would slaughter a fat landlord with a knife, bomb his countrymen, and in his last living moments, watch his beloved commander flee from the field. He remains, above all things, loyal.

Even with the moon, they'd climbed high enough to not want to risk broken bones on their descent. So they spent the night there, camped with the shepherds around their little fire. They had only one blanket—Zafar's—and Dawran was happy to let him have it, despite the night's still chilly air. But the man told him not to be foolish, it was common practice for fighters—indeed a common practice among soldiers everywhere—to make spoons of their bodies and nestle close to share heat. He'd assented, curled himself in his commander's embrace, his body like that of an infant in the womb, and listened to Zafar's strong, steady breath, took in his musk—smelling of damp soil and leather and burnt powder—and fell drowsy to the steady metronome of Zafar's heart against his ribs. They slept the whole night through, neither man moving a centimeter from

the other. Through every challenge, every moment of doubt, every difficult choice, Dawran remembers this night above all nights. When the rooster woke the morning, Zafar shook Dawran awake. Soon, they heard the muezzin in the valley below singing the call to prayer. The two stood side by side, knelt in unison, their bodies bending as one, and on their lips, the name of God.



Photo by Drew Pham

---

# New Flash Fiction from Elise Ochoa: “Desert Crossing”

If you’ve never seen a desert, I mean, a *real* desert, you’d think the sand looks like murky brown water rippling in the wind. Sometimes I would tell myself that, as I traversed the barren land of sand and dunes. I wandered the desert for so long, my face was wrinkled around the eyes from squinting through the sun. My eyebrows were always raised; my forehead had ripples too. Did I see Someone?

On the days a light breeze brushed the sand, I imagined the dust rising like ocean spray after a wave. But then my tired feet would burn with the heat, and I’d have to keep trudging. Occasionally there would be people: tourists, scientists, gypsies. They’d pass me water. I’d take it without a smile. I always left them with my lips as dry and cracked as they were before. I never got hopeful when I crossed these types. They weren’t you.



My lips were waiting for you. My lips were waiting for your cool, sweet dew. When my heart began to tell me you were near, I would go whole hours sitting in the sand, just daydreaming of you. I twirled my long, knotted hair around my fingers. I cradled piles of sand in the form of you. Those days, it was even harder to set out across the barren land than during the hottest sun-drenched days.

My heart told me you were coming. And my heart found me the oasis. It told me where the palms were. It told me where the underground spring was bubbling up. When I found the tall green palms and the low green shrubs, my hunchback straightened. I no longer needed to bow against the wind. I stood tall; my eyes widened.

Tangled among the shrubs were myriad silks, pillows, jewels. I untangled the silks, polished the jewels, scrubbed the pillows until they shone as bright as my eyes. I worked day and night,

drinking from the natural spring, energized, building for you. I grew dates and pomegranates and juicy melons. No longer skin and bones, I had hips for you to grab from behind and caress.

I saw you coming from many dunes away. I knew your heart was leading you to the oasis, to me. It was a windless day. The air was clear. I saw your strong shoulders first, then your long legs, then your touseled hair. Details came slowly. I bathed in them all.

Soon, you weren't just a shadow. You were a man. A man with scruff. Thirsty, like I once was. But, unlike me, you were confident. Lost, but not *lost*.

As you approached, your thin sandals kicked up the sand behind you. I stood at the entrance of the palms, with lavender silks, gold cushions, white melons surrounding my beautiful silhouette. With my elbows at my sides and my palms up, I opened myself to you with a smile.

You squinted in my direction. You coughed, dry, short. My smile faltered slightly. You wiped your forehead with the crook of a glistening arm. My heart fluttered. I ran for the fresh spring water. I ran toward you with the water. Like gold, I offered it.

But, like the heat, I must have wavered in your eyes. A fiction.

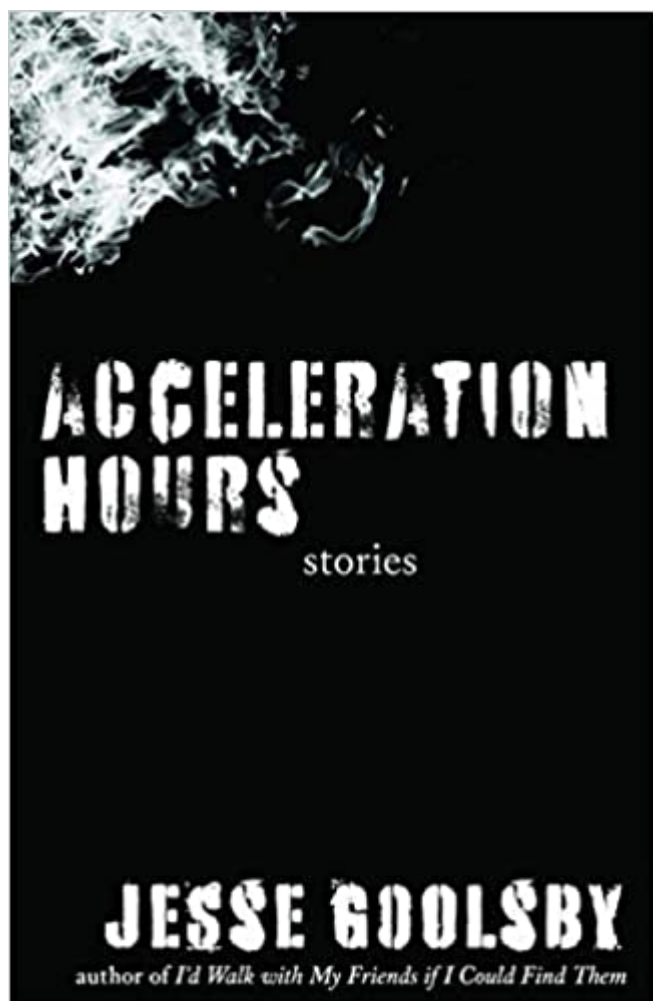
You blinked me away. Just a dune.

Your form grew smaller and smaller to my eyes. They bleared until you disappeared. Invisible, I cowered like Romeo, slowly dying at the feet of your not-coffin.

---

# New Fiction from Jesse Goolsby: “Anchor & Knife”

The first time I met you I fought your father in the driveway. He fisted a tire iron, but he'd been drinking and he only clipped my forearm with his looping swing. That's really where my scar comes from. The afternoon had been nice, your mother made kabobs, but you wouldn't touch the green peppers, and you wouldn't speak to me, so your mom brought the soccer ball out and we kicked at it in the small backyard and I pretended to know something about Pelé, and she made you hug me before I left out the front door, running into your dad, who had spied our embrace.



You're ten. You stood in front of our autumn oak, your white-casted right arm at your side above the rocky ground that



shattered your elbow on your fall from the old tree. I warned you about climbing the dead branches, and still I ran to you when I heard your animal groan, your dangling lower arm, inverted, twisting, and I waited to take you to the hospital and belted you first because you never listened to me, a stepfather, and it felt good to whip that leather at your lower back, to hear sharpness in the air, and see your body quiet and stiffen.

Sometimes you'd crawl into our bed and curl into your mother. You looked just like her, and I'd imagine you seeping back into her womb, breathing her liquid, splitting into cells, into her egg, his sperm, but when I'd slip into half sleep I'd feel your fingers on my anchor-and-knife tattoo, tracing the shapes.

You tried me two times when you were sixteen, and each time I let you get the first jab in, just so you thought you had a chance. I remember the living room: the worn gray carpet, little bay window; I remember choosing where to land the next blow, then wrestling you down to the floor, lying on top of you, your mother pulling, yelping, pleading as I took your arms above your head and locked them with one of my hands, feeling your helpless slither underneath me, knowing none of it mattered because you weren't mine.

You're twenty. You lifted your sleeve at the dinner table, unveiling your mother's name on your bicep after your first tour in Iraq. When she asked you if you'd killed anyone, your mouth was full of mashed potatoes and you said *I'd go back*. And when you volunteered to go your mother refused to see you off, but I was there, standing and cursing you in the midday heat, watching the C-17 take you away, staying until they began folding up the plastic chairs.

When you called before the battle at al-Qai'm you asked for your mother, and she sobbed and shoved the phone at me, so I took it, and you told me you loved me. You thanked me for the

fishing trips on the Truckee River, for sitting in the stands at miserable band performances, for toughening you up for the Marines. And after the battle you told me you'd lied, that you didn't love me, that my belt and fist still filled your dreams, and fearing death had made you say things you thought God wanted to hear.

Your mother and I were pulling weeds in the front yard when the chaplain's clean blue sedan edged up to the curb. He asked us to step inside, but your mother wouldn't budge; she took the news on the sidewalk with a fistful of crabgrass. I drove through a lightning storm to the green bridge we used to fish below. It's where I taught you to smack trout heads against the large black rocks before slicing the guts out.

Once, we tried to catch them with our hands, and I showed you how to reach into the water and rub their soft bellies, lulling them for a moment before the surprise clench and lift. I told you I'd caught hundreds of trout this way, and that my scar was from wrestling a twenty-pounder on the rocks. For all I could tell you believed me.

Your mother fell apart. She locked herself in our darkened bedroom, taking small meals there. She didn't talk to anyone, but on the third day she came to me: *Tell his father*, she said. I waited a couple of hours, and after cursing and circling town, I drove to his place by the lumber mill. My hand gripped the car door handle, but I couldn't pull the damn thing, and I sat there for twenty minutes, his dog barking the whole time. Finally, your father emerged and slowly approached my rusting Ford. He carried a baseball bat in his strong hand. I didn't fancy up the news. *He's dead*, I said, and drove away. I drove until I ran out of gas on a dirt road out by where we shot at clay pigeons. I walked the eight miles back to town.

When I arrived home, your father's truck rested in our driveway. As I passed the truck I looked inside the cab on the chance that he had just arrived, that maybe he was sitting in

the driver's seat, buying time, but it was empty. I walked up the steps you helped me build and stood at the threshold with an overwhelming urge to knock at my own door.

*Excerpted from "[Acceleration Hours: Stories](#)" by Jesse Goolsby. Copyright © 2020 by University of Nevada Press. Excerpted by permission of University of Nevada Press. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.*

---

## **New Poetry from Michael Chang**





i say i got called for jury duty and explain what  
that is  
simon says you have the right to remain  
silent he bursts out laughing  
i reveal that lobsters are the kings of secrets they have  
dirt on everyone  
the hoovers of the ocean  
he thinks i mean the vacuum i guess that makes sense too  
for my birthday simon brings me a red velvet cupcake  
my favorite kind  
he asks how old i am turning  
i say 30 wow! that's old! he says  
i tell him that whales live up to 200 his eyes  
widen  
what will we do when we're 200, he asks as i  
wipe the tear from my face

### ***fists of harmony and justice in 3 acts***

i really believe in cities and  
connecting people you say real  
heartfelt  
make me your nasty woman i say staring into your eyes  
my intergenerational trauma is my parents live in  
silver lake you say earnestly  
mmhmm i say not objecting because  
you are cute  
so this is what it means to have a  
moment of madness  
you have come to the right place you have  
so much to hide  
perpetual war tell me your

secrets

get me in trouble

obsessed

paralyzed

the roll

the clerk will call

\*

i regret to inform you that  
home

you will not be

in time for dinner with your wife  
she calls

no matter how often

you will put  
vibrate

your phone on  
then turn it off

you will stay over  
will happen

we will get drunk

things

then you will leave  
still thinking about me

swallowing you  
eclair

like an

\*

in the movie of my life

i would like to be played

by emmy-winning actor

james spader

although i am not white

as they remind me

at every turn

***statement of evil corp***

for immediate release

press contact :: lucifer morningstar  
(666) 666-6666

new york, ny :: we do not comment on personnel matters : but we will train our gaydar on you : hands steady like a surgeon's : locked and loaded : prickly pear margaritas : we are certified analytical geniuses : with an absolute pitch for fine poetry : objects in the mirror are closer than they appear : due to a lack of evil representation in the media : we have no equivalent : who the hell is from chambersburg, pa : we guess someone must be : thank god it's not us : haha god : we will make you famous like rodney king : a splash of the coffee : grey flannel by geoffrey beene for men : when we think of our life together : we imagine you in a suburban parking lot : loading seltzer into the trunk : looking fresh to death : you have to buy our product to know what's in it : we won't get into specifics : we don't want to set a timeline on this : who gave you that information : we'll have to refer you back to them : it's early days : this is going to be a process that takes place over time : we were for it before we were against it : there have been discussions : we will not entertain hypotheticals : we are not going into tactics techniques or procedures : this may be an iterative process : that is above our pay grade : we want to stress that this is pre-decisional : there is a plan but plans have to be flexible enough to survive first contact : it may be OBE (overcome by events) : we have not been given release authority : it is not yet approved for action : we are on a conditions-based schedule : all options are on the table : we will continue to engage with alliance partners on a range of activities that will ensure maximum lethality : please only quote us as senior evil corp officials or persons close to senior evil corp leadership : 9 out of 10 dentists choose evil corp : we are your anger managers : very legal and very good : our revenge makes us wise : let us look at you through our designer shades : our product has been endorsed by kate bush : no, she is a freshman at kennesaw state university : a real georgia peach :



we find your () faith disturbing : your lack of taste does violence to our senses : your very being is inimical to our existence : go somewhere else for that washer and dryer set : bitch : we will take you to the cleaners : what do you love : what do you hate : if you could live inside a tv show which one and why is it lucifer on fox : who are you : what do you want : we are on pace to find cadence : the quiet you hear is progress : thank you for shopping at evil corp

***october 6, 2019, remarks as prepared for delivery***

i informed mister river barkley last night that his services are no longer needed in my life. i disagreed strongly with many of his suggestions, as did others in the administration, and therefore i asked mister river barkley for his resignation, which was given to me this morning.

although i appreciated his jfk jr vibes and his assertion that his dick is his biggest muscle, he never did my laundry. he failed to deliver to me macaroons in every imaginable color or call me his pocahontas and he my settler.

he cast serious doubt on his intelligence by detailing the depth of his feelings in support of the vietnam war and the draft. the public was regularly informed of this.

his choice of veal over fish was totally inexcusable. i was equally appalled when i encountered tickets to mariah carey in his diary stained with sperm and electric blue ink.

he never recovered from the unusually loud guttural noises he made during sex. he was unconvincing when he said he loved me, often in a voice that suggested he was far away or underwater. his declaration that tulsi gabbard should win the democratic nomination was similarly off-putting.

he was unable to tell me how many planes are in the sky or if it is true there are more people alive now than have ever

lived. he declined to feed me more jello shots despite our school motto *possunt quia posse videntur* (they can because they think they can).

he embarrassed me by getting into that fight with his truck and losing. subsequently he had his arm in a cast which stank to high heaven.

admittedly i will miss the firm underside of his thighs and the steady scaffolding of his sex. i am however comforted by the truth that nothing is better than breadsticks with the menendez brothers.

i thank mister river barkley very much for his service to our country and my happiness. i will be naming a new mister river barkley next week.

thank you!

(don't pretend you're sorry□□)

### ***acid taste like***

He started seeing Sam everywhere.

Sam, who called him 'beautiful,' eyes like liquid smoke.

Sam, who stood perilously close as they poured the wine.

Strong yet gentle, blond-dusted hands.

Sam, who wore the plaid shirt, frayed khaki shorts, and beat-up loafers on their bodega run.

Chestnut-brown bedhead, cheeks rosy on their porcelain face.

The one he wanted to hold him, the one he hoped to make less lonely, the one he followed home.



Life was hard enough without a Greek chorus of Sams second-guessing his every move.

Haunted by his exes, he wanted significance.

He cried into his champagne, tired of questioning, tired of pushing back.

Acceptance sounded so good, like a drug.

Boy was with Girl.

Kind, inquisitive eyes the color of concrete.

Brown hair (of course) slicked back, shoulders firm, torso wide.

Girl freaking out, some low-rate drama.

Boy's body, a boar ready to charge.

Girl in the bathroom, Boy's expression softened—

Freed,

Granted a reprieve,

From performing masculinity.

Boy looked over, smiling as if he understood.

So tantalizingly close,

All he had to do was reach over,

Before Boy slipped back into character.

He imagined bringing Boy dinner, roast chicken and potatoes.

They would eat in silence, as if any stray sound might tip her off.

Bellies full, side-by-side on the bed—

Striped pajamas,

Sheets that smelled like her,

Growing braver in the dark, bodies ablaze with feeling.

Skin, lips, tongue, there for the taking.  
He raised a finger to Boy's lips and gently pried his mouth open, inserting his finger.  
Play it safe or swing for the fences?  
Snatching Boy's receipt off the table, he felt a sickening swirl of desire—  
Like standing in the eye of a hurricane.  
This little victory made him happier than he'd felt in a long time.

Throwing up in that Waffle House, acid stinging his throat.  
Outside for a smoke, his socks mismatched and his hair wild.  
GO BACK TO CHINA, someone yelled, speeding past.  
Possessed by cultural restlessness,  
Always searching for a way in, a way out.

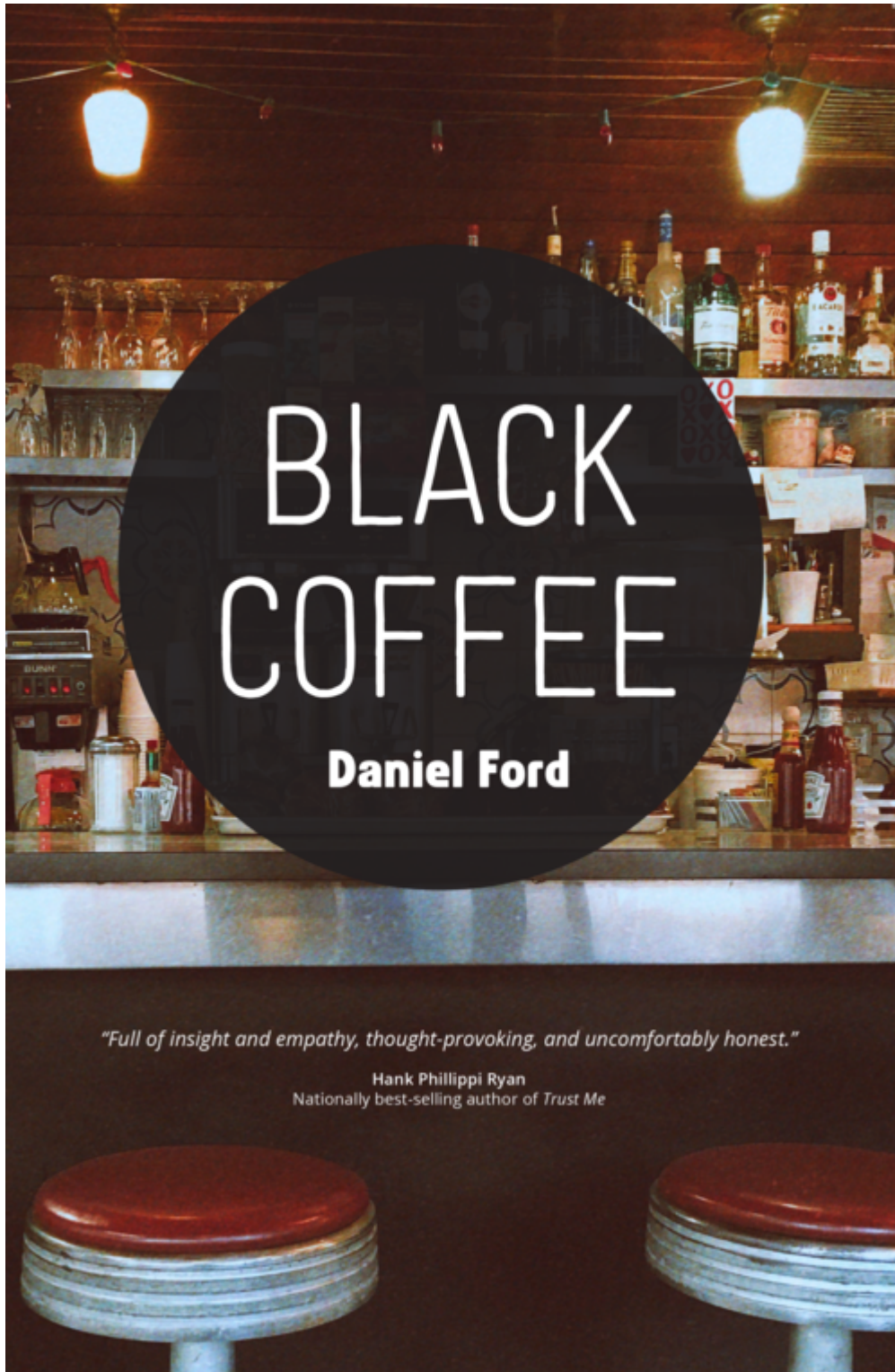
He decided that his favorite word was 'possibility.'  
Even hope doesn't seem as surefire a thing.  
Possibility is hope plus.  
Nothing out of reach.  
Maybe.

He unfolded the receipt, admired it.  
CUSTOMER: SAM \_\_\_\_\_, it read.  
He noticed the digits, the urgent scrawl.  
Penmanship tight, compact, economical.  
CALL ME, it said.

---

## **New Fiction from Daniel Ford: BLACK COFFEE**

*Excerpted from the collection [Black Coffee](#) by Daniel Ford, September Sky Press, June 2019.*



*"Are we ever going to leave this bed?"*

*"God, I hope not."*

*"We have to at least attempt to do something today."*

*"I'd argue that we've done plenty already."*

*"I mean real things."*

*"That all seemed pretty real to me. Seriously, what could you possibly want to do out there when you could keep making love to me in here?"*

*"You're insatiable. Aren't you hungry? I'm hungry."*

*"One of us can go get food and the other could stay here and hold down the love fort."*

*"Don't say 'love fort' ever again."*

*"Roger that."*

*"Trying to get used to the lingo already? Can you believe the draft went that high?"*

*"With our luck, yes."*

*"The news says things are improving, but now we need more muscle over there?"*

*"I'll give you a full briefing when I get back."*

*"I prefer you give it to me right now."*

*"Yes, ma'am."*

*"Ugh. 'Ma'am' doesn't sound good on me."*

*"Everything sounds good on you."*

*"He bedded the girl and is still in hot pursuit. You're not going to use those lines on other women over there are you?"*

*"Come on, give me some credit. I'd never reuse old material."*

*"Bastard."*

*"We're not going anywhere, so get back under the covers."*

*"Fine, but only because I'm chilly."*

*"Pretty sure all my heat is gravitating to one place at the moment."*

*"Well, I'll just have to go where the heat is, I guess. Consider this your incentive to come home."*

*"Yes, ma'am."*

*"Now I'm using teeth."*

\*

Mike's fifth therapy session didn't go well.

He didn't mind talking about things, which made his panic attacks even more arbitrary. If he were anyone else, every session would feature a breakthrough. For him, it was chatting with a therapist who seemed just as disappointed that they hadn't found anything close to a root cause.

*Damn my parents for being loving and supportive, Mike thought. Would have been easy to pin all this on an abusive mother or absent father.*

"Are the attacks happening more or less frequently?" Ernest asked.

"Same amount. More powerful."

"Takes time."

"I've been back a while."

This room reminded Mike of most of the accommodations over there—federally mandated gray walls and IKEA-like furniture built by the lowest bidder. Ernest didn't have a beard, which unnerved him a little bit. The guy could probably go a month or two without shaving.

*How much knowledge and life experience could he actually have without the ability to grow facial hair?* Mike thought.

Ernest paused his questioning to write a few more illegible lines in his notebook. He did a lot of writing during these sessions, which also caused Mike anxiety. His pen movements were swift, especially when he was crossing out full paragraphs. Mike was impressed that someone could think out loud and on the page simultaneously—even if that person was wrong most of the time.

“Do you feel like killing anyone during these episodes?”

“No. Feels more like high school heartbreak.”

“Did someone break your heart in high school?”

“Of course. Feels like we’re fishing here.”

“We are. Could you possibly have anything else to reveal?”

“I was an altar boy as a kid.”

“Did you get molested?”

“No.”

“Too bad. You’d be rich.”

Mike had told him about the killing. The fear, the sweating, the loneliness, the firefights, the bullets he took, the blood, her death, the crying. The ability to open up about it all only provided more questions.

Ernest rubbed his cheek where his therapist beard should have been.

“Can you still get it up?” he asked.

“You’re pretty old. Can you get it up?”

“Nothing wrong with your sense of humor. So you didn’t think



of any fresh ideas?"

"It's pretty random."

"Like the duck?"

"Like the duck."

"Thinking about her doesn't necessarily trigger an episode then?"

"If it did, I'd be in an asylum by now."

"You think about the good and the bad?"

"Everything. I cry about it. I have a drink. I usually don't have to flee the premises or check myself into the emergency room."

"You don't remember going?"

"Not until I regained consciousness. Woke up to a pretty hot nurse. Wish I hadn't soiled myself when I walked in."

"What were you doing before?"

"Can't remember. In line for a movie maybe? I vaguely remember a woman screaming into a phone."

"How many of your buddies died over there?"

"We lost guys too fast. I didn't have time to make friends. I can't picture faces. I only have snippets of a couple of guys. How he was shot. What info was on his dog tags. A hometown or two."

"Ever feel guilty you survived?"

*More old territory, Mike thought. Spinning in circles.*

"Yeah, but I've always had bad luck. I guess I was saving up all my good luck to make it back. Living and carrying on

seemed the best way to honor those guys who didn't make it. Certainly better than being angry all the time."

"Damn."

"What?"

"You're well-adjusted."

"I know. Pisses me off, too."

---

## **New Fiction from Roz Wiggins: "Lucky"**



I.

Under a ceiling topped by swirling fans and surrounded by walls whose windows had no glass, the Private lay on the bed like a slab of stone as hands went about the routine tasks that evidenced that, despite all probability, he was still alive, even if no longer whole. The hands stuck a thermometer in the Private's mouth, which opened instinctively, and fastened a cuff around his bicep, then inflated it with a *whoosh, whoosh*. The hands searched his wrist for a pulse, and paused a while when it found one. They patted and tugged at the bandages that covered his pelvis and thighs, not in an intruding manner but with inquiry, before retrieving the thermometer from between his lips.

The hands were soft and delicate with smooth short fingers and nails that occasionally scraped the Private's skin. Sometimes, before leaving him, one of the hands would rest gently for a few minutes on the mound of bandages that encased the Private's face. Then the soft hand would seek out that small

square of his cheek that had been left uncovered like a forlorn orphan. The fingers would stroke the Private's cheek as if to convey to him that they knew he still existed, that he still was there, somewhere under the mountain of gauze and adhesive and plaster.

Several times a week there were other hands, meaty and calloused, that would grasp the Private and roll and lift him on and off a bedpan. Other times they would lift him onto a gurney and set him aside while they changed the bedsheets stained with the blood and slime that oozed from his wounds or and with urine and shit when he had gone without the pan being under him. The strong hands would wipe along the exposed parts of his body with deliberation and efficiency, but with no more tenderness than if he was a tub that needed scrubbing. While he was set aside, they would change the sheets and then lift him roughly and return him, like an item being restocked, to his place in the middle of a bed smelling of bleach.

These things were happening to the Private in the dark silent space that he had come to inhabit ever since the day he had been on a hill in Kaesong with Randall. One minute they were trudging up the slope same as any other day, then there was a click—just a low barely audible sound, like snapping with butter on your fingers—and he had been thrown into the dark silent void.

Sleep came and went for the Private in the dark space, but there was no rest. Sometimes in the void, the Private smelled his Momma's buttermilk biscuits baking in the oven or his Pops' corncob pipe rich with his special blend of tobacco that he made from the first leaves of the harvest, which he reserved for himself and cured with slices of apple or pear until it had a sweet intoxicating aroma. And when the void seemed too deep and so dark that the Private was sure he might never leave, the musky scent of sweat that rose from Marren's cleavage just after she came held him from the abyss. All through basic training at Fort Jackson, all during the long

trip to Kaesong, and the stops at places with names he could hardly pronounce or remember, and then, even into the darkness, he had remembered lying beside Marren after they'd gone at it like a couple of rabbits in heat. He would close his eyes and suddenly he would be beside her watching her ample chest heave and inhaling her special scent.

The Private hoped that maybe one day he would have enough strength to leave the dark void. He was willing to go to Hell and back just so he could bury his soul in Marren's plump soft breasts until the light came again.

\*

One day the Private heard a woman's voice singing "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound," and it was like the voice of an angel because it had been a very long time since he had heard anything at all.

And then there were other voices—the fast, accented repartee that went along with the meaty calloused hands that lifted the Private on and off a pan several times a day and instructed him to piss or shit, which the Private sometimes did, and sometimes didn't. When he didn't, the meaty calloused hands were accompanied by foreign curses.

Most of the time what filtered through the Private's dark void was a general chattering and a low dirge of constant moaning. But from time to time, he would hear a car horn or a scratchy radio station, and all too often a nightmarish wail. Nighttime in the ward brought the low hum of the man who mopped down the floors with a strong ammonia odor that whipped across the Private's nose when the man splashed the mop under his bed. Then, the man's melodic self-serenade floated over to the Private like a jazz riff demanding to be heard.

Less frequently, other voices came; deep and authoritative, they invariably sounded irritated as big words flowed out. These voices were accompanied by the ruffle of papers,

unanswered inquiries put to the Private, hurried questions to the singing voice, a few pokes and prods and occasionally the splat of a dropped metal chart.

“Now keep your eyes closed,” one of the deep voices said one day as it unwound the bandage that had been tight around the Private’s head and eyes. “The glare may hurt at first, but you will get used to it. You won’t notice at first that the one is not there but eventually you will realize that you have a restricted view.”

The Private struggled to open his eye lids against the crusty muck that had built up across them and the tears that flowed without effort. He finally succeeded with the help of a warm cloth pressed to his face. After a minute, he saw a midget of a man with very hairy eyebrows looking back at him. The doctor stretched to shine a small flashlight into Private’s remaining eye and squinted through another instrument causing his eyebrows to move like fuzzy caterpillars.

“How’s it look, Private?” said the doctor. “Looks pretty good to me.”

The Private didn’t say anything because he didn’t know what to say. Didn’t the doctor know that at that moment anything, everything, *looked* good to him?

“There’s some shrapnel in your eye, but it’s too risky to try and remove it. You’re lucky that it’s not worse. Over time your vision may worsen as it moves around. Can’t say how long before you notice a difference. Could be years, could be a decade. But it’s just too risky to try and get at it.”

The midget doctor continued with his detailed explanation. He was an animated fellow and his face and caterpillar eyebrows bounced up and down as he looked at the chart then back at the Private throwing out words that pained the Private’s still recovering ears.

In response, the Private looked all around the ward trying to figure out just what he could see, and what he could no longer see, now that he was a one-eyed jack. The room's lights cast an irritating glare that stung like a lightning bolt. It caused him to keep closing his eye even though that was the last thing he wanted to do.

The Private heard the singing voice approach and turned to face a petite woman the color of toast, not Negro Colored like him, but different with a generous length of wavy black hair that fell down her back like a fine mule's tail and almond shaped eyes, very pretty.

"Good to have you back among the seeing, Private," the singing nurse said patting him gently on the arm. The Private looked down and saw the smooth delicate fingers that he had previously only felt.

"Maybe now, we can get you to say something too?" the nurse teased.

The Private watched the nurse with the singing voice as she cleaned up the spent bandages and scissors and returned the metal chart to the foot of his bed. She arranged his sheets and fluffed his pillows. Pausing by the head of the Private's bed when she'd finished, she smiled down at him. The smooth square of his cheek that had not been covered by bandages now lay in what would have passed more for a plate of raw hamburger than a face; red and craterous.

"I guess you'll just talk when you're good and ready, and not before," she said squeezing gently his hand that swallowed hers.

Once the singing nurse had left, the Private raised himself up the little bit he could; and saw what he had before only felt, the bulkiness of a cast that started under his armpits and ran down the length of his torso. He gingerly lifted the sheet and saw other bandages, great white mounds that were fitted

uncomfortably around him like a diaper (but open in the middle), and which spread down his right leg, devouring his knee but not his calf. His breath quickened at the sight and he hurriedly dropped the sheet letting it hide the mess he had become.

Later, when the Private felt that he had to pee, he wasn't on the pan and the men with the calloused hands were long gone. They had told him someone would come if he called. But he didn't. Maybe he wasn't thinking clearly. Maybe he was so messed up from the torrent of drugs that they were giving him to dull the incessant pain that he didn't know what he was doing. But some part of his brain told him that a man did not piss lying down flat on his back. So, he was determined to try.

The Private struggled out of the bed and onto his feet. It was rough going because the body cast did not allow him to bend. But he managed to get his feet to the floor and to grab hold of a chair that they had planted beside his bed. Placing all his weight on to it, he proceeded slowly like a bruised leviathan, stopping every few feet as he crept towards the light that signaled the bathroom.

At the bathroom door the Private stopped to heave breath into his lungs, exhausted. His atrophied muscles were overwhelmed by the effort and the weight of the cast. He almost hadn't made it the twenty feet. He backed into the bathroom pushing the door with his ample body weight. He reeled and almost lost his footing from the harsh storm of whiteness that assaulted him. Glare from the fluorescent lights bounced off the white tile that covered the floor and crawled up the walls, where it met white paint. Along one wall were a long porcelain trough and a row of sinks, all white and shiny. The Private turned the other way, towards the stalls, barely seeing through his half closed eye. It was not the manliest approach, but he needed to sit. Suddenly, a blurry image in one of the mirrors above the sinks caught his attention. He had thought he was



alone. Out of instinct, despite the pressure in his bladder, he shuffled closer to it and as he did, the image multiplied into the neighboring mirrors. He rested a hand on the sink below him and leaned into meet the image, trying to make sense of it, and gasped. Then he lost his grip on the sink, and then the chair started to slide away from him. In the next instant, just as he lost his footing, and right before the floor became stained with his urine, his consciousness also fled as he realized that the horrific one-eyed monstrosity squinting back at him from the mirrors was, of course, him.

## II.

It had been a crisp sunny day when the Private and Randall had started on the recon mission shoulder to shoulder, slowly winding their way up a craggily path on the side of a foothill that had been used by local farmers and their goats for centuries. The hill ringed their main target, the Hook, the bigger mountain in the distance outside Kaesong where the Communists were taking a stand even though they had heard solid rumors that a ceasefire would happen any day. where Movement on the backside of the hillock had been reported and the Private and Randall were just going up to scout the area. It was to be just a quick reconnoiter mission and back down to report. They hadn't even been told to expect mines.

About half-way up the path narrowed, and Randall took the lead. A few minutes later, the Private bent to tie his boot and Randall got ahead of him. When the Private heard the click, he instinctively looked up and reached out to Randall, but only grabbed air. Randall turn towards him as if in slow motion and mouthed the words, "Oh Shit!" Then, the Private saw Randall explode, his arms and legs flying in different directions, a bloody burnt hole where his chest used to be. In the next instant he saw that Randall had no more mouth, no more head; there was no more Randall. There was just a mass of

bloody slime where he had been and then the Private felt that bloody slime all over his face and body and felt it choking him, and felt a thousand pieces of shrapnel and rocks cut into him like a storm of bees. He flailed about and screamed trying to escape but it propelled him to the ground and then into the dark space where he couldn't see, couldn't hear, and couldn't think or move.

\*

The Private had liked Kirby Randall, a gangly white boy from Minneapolis, Minnesota with enough height, at six foot five, to look him in the eye when most other men of any age or persuasion couldn't . Randall would hang out with the Colored soldiers, drinking beers and listening to their special brand of foolishness that was so new to him. None of the other white boys hung out with them in Mr. Truman's newly-integrated army.

Before Randall, no white boy had ever walked right up to the Private and offered him his hand like he too was white as rice, not in his whole seventeen years of living. But that's just what Randall had done when he had first entered the barracks in Fort Jackson and saw the Private rearranging his army-issued supplies in his footlocker next to the only open bunk on account that there was sure to be an inspection that afternoon. Even though they were in South Carolina where folks just didn't do that kind of thing, Randall had done so like he didn't know no better. Right then, the Private had said to himself□ maybe this army gig was going to be all right after all, if he could just manage to stay alive.

After a few weeks, the Private had come to believe that the real reason Randall acted like no other white man he had ever met was that Randall just didn't much care for the south's special brand of divisiveness. He hadn't known any Colored folk in Minneapolis, but his parents had been committed Lutherans who taught him to honor the dignity of all men since they were all God's creatures. So, much to the chagrin of most

of the other white soldiers, Randall treated the Private and the other Colored soldiers like they too were human and like he might one day soon need to rely on one of them to save his neck.

### III.

The Army patched the Private up. The eye doctor returned bearing a replacement made of glass that filled the caved-in socket on the right side of the Private's face. They sent another doctor for his hearing who shouted that there was not much that could be done there. Likewise, for the discolored blur resembling raw hamburger that now was the right side of his face. They said that it would just take time. Shrapnel was like a million little red hot daggers; it makes a mess. In time they would know how much more they might be able to do for him.

The next doctor was the one who carved patches of skin from the Private's buttocks and thighs and grafted them onto his torso to close up deep rips in his skin the exploding mine had left. He chatted away at the Private like he was a tailor who routinely applying patches to the elbow of a coat.

And then the Army sent a doctor who removed the Private's diaper bandage and pronounced that he was still a man after all.

"It could've been worse", said the doctor while casually tapping the Private's thigh with the little metal instrument that he had used to lift his penis and examine the underside while straddling a small wheeled stool in front of the examination table. The room was cold and the Private felt colder down there without the bandage diaper.

"You're a lucky boy. You are," the doctor went on. "We've seen much worse."

The Private didn't respond as the doctor lifted his Johnson, moved him about, and then scribbled notes on his chart. Instead, he ignored this doctor whose teeth flared out like a mule's and were way too close to where they were never supposed to be. He focused his one eye on the rows of bottles filled with colorful pills inside the cabinet on the wall behind the doctor. The doctor scooted back his wheeled stool and stood up, checking his notes and nodding in that way that indicated that he was satisfied with the job he had done.

"Here's the deal, Private," he said while loudly snapping off his rubber gloves. "You took a bad hit down there, lucky to still have it, you are. But there was lots of shrapnel. We did the best we could. Had to take one of your testicles; it was just shredded, a damned mess. But we managed to save the other one. The swelling and discoloration you see, that should go away over time."

The doctor paused and waited for the Private's response but the Private was trying to ignore the chill on his Johnson and was desperately taking inventory of how many bottles in the cabinet on the far wall held the all green capsules and how many held the half-orange, half-blue ones. He wondered what they were for and just how many of each, separately, or in combination, he would have to take to die.

"Private, I know this is hard," the doctor continued. He moved closer and laid a hand on the Private's shoulder and the Private realized that the mule teeth came with sour breath. "But you need to understand what's what, so I'm going to give it to you straight," the doctor continued "It could've been a lot worse."

Maybe, the Private thought, if he just swallowed a handful of each color, that would be enough. It would be a coward's way to die, the way a woman would take her life. He wished he had his pistol. One shot to the head and all this talk about whether he was or was not a man would end. But they must have

taken his pistol so here he was contemplating the pussy way out. He'd just take the whole bottle, that should be enough to do the job.

"Once the swelling goes away, you should be able to go at it. Even with just one testicle, you should be able to get an erection and ejaculate," the mule teeth and sour breath droned on. "It might take a while for you to get your confidence back, that happens, the body has to remember. But physically you should be OK. Remember that... I gotta be honest though, son, your sperm count, it's just not there. . . But you never know, Private, these things sometimes work themselves out. You have fun trying. With your luck, you just might be OK. It could've been a lot worse."

\*

They said the same thing again and again at every hospital over the next two years. The Private came to believe that it was something doctors were taught to say no matter how bad the injury—Tell the patient it could have been worse. The Private wondered—How? Lose two eyes. Have half his face blown completely away instead of being roasted and riddled by a storm of red hot shrapnel? Lose a leg? An arm? One of each? Loose both testicles and end up a total freak? How could it have mattered anymore?

They said it to him in Guam, Hawaii, San Francisco, Kentucky and Virginia—"You're a lucky boy. You are. We've seen much worse."

The Private had never believed them. Their words had never held one ounce of comfort for him. He had never reconciled to this luck that everyone spoke of. He was nineteen. He'd been in the Army just eight months and in country only thirty three days, and just days before the whole damned shebang was over, his life had been torn apart. Some fucking luck!

#### IV.

The Army sent him home, back to the tobacco farm he loved and loathed because it was home and because his family had worked it for a white man for generations, something he'd vowed never to do, which was why he had enlisted in the damned Army in the first place. His ten younger brothers and sisters acted skittish around him, even though his mother, who had given him his stature, kept telling everyone to stop being foolish. She insisted that he was the same boy who had gone away; the same giant manchild who could wring a chicken's neck by the time he was seven, hand as many rows of tobacco as she by thirteen, and consume half a dozen of her buttermilk biscuits nonstop. She would not admit the truth to herself, even as she slathered fatback on his mottled patched skin and calmed her littlest ones when his screams in the night woke them.

But his father did. And this small man, from whom the Private got his redbone coloring and his fierce wanting for more, this man with a frame made smaller from years of bending to the tobacco plants and hands grizzled from tussling with the red earth and wrenching a life from pure adversity, he knew immediately that his first-born had left a great deal on that hill in Ko-re-a. He would load his giant of a son onto a wagon hitched to a tractor or a mule and drive him out to the backfield where the constant acres of cash crop finally broke and a kitchen garden bloomed.

In these alone moments, the Private's father would roll cigarettes with his special tobacco and they'd take long drags as the cicadas sang their forlorn song and the bees violated one flower after another with impunity. In the shade provided by the full leafy crowns of the clustered trees, with the air swathed in the sweet aroma of the tobacco, the father would go to work.

"Son," his pops would say, " You got to talk about it sometime. You got to get it out of you." He'd pull a long drag

on his cigarette before continuing. "I'm not saying you can make the memories go away. Cain't no amount of talking make something like that go away. But you needs to talk about it, to get some of it out, or it will just become a big pile of rot inside of you. It will rot *you* if you don't get it out."

The father would let his words sit with his son as he wandered back among the garden rows to find the perfect melon. He would quarter the cantaloupe, scoop out the web of seeds and hand the fleshy orange quarter-moon to his son. Under the cool of the elms, away from the blazing sun and everyone, they would slurp mouthfuls of the delicate fruit with gusto, wiping their mouths with the back of their hands. And eventually, the father would listen while the Private poured out some of the horror that was inside him. Then the father would hold his son as he shook with the dry crying that men do only when they can no longer stand the pain. It was his father who convinced the Private that life, though different, could still be worth living.

\*

V.

The first time the Private rode to town with his father, children started to cry at the sight of him and even adults shrank away. It didn't matter one bit that he was a war hero who'd been awarded a Purple Heart, that he had been injured fighting back the Communist hordes, protecting the American way of life and keeping the world, their world, safe for Democracy. After that, the Private shrank into himself a little more and when his Momma hid his pills that kept the pain at bay, he tried to drown out the world with bourbon.

He waited for Marren to come see about him.

She was the only girl that the Private had stayed with for more than a couple of months after she'd let him go all the way. Even at sixteen she had a way of making a man believe

that Heaven lay right between her size 38D breasts and plump but sturdy legs.

The Private had hooked up with her at the beginning of his junior year of high school and spent the Fall driving her around in his pick-up truck, which was a hideous green color and rusted around both front fenders. But that didn't matter to the Private. He had bought it for only one hundred dollars with the money that he made the prior summer washing dishes at a beachfront hotel in New Jersey with his cousin Ray-Ray. The Private had brought Marren RC Colas for months before she finally gave up her stuff after the Christmas social at the Shiloh Free Will Baptist Church.

By the next summer, when he left for the Army, the Private had made up his mind (but had not told Marren) that he would marry her when he got back. He thought that maybe they'd move north where his cousin Ray-Ray said he could get them even better jobs working indoors wearing uniforms and waiting tables; they could make tips in addition to a wage. But he'd grown impatient waiting for Ray-Ray to send word to him and joined the Army instead.

Marren didn't write to the Private while he was away. She wasn't good at words or writing, but that he forgave. The other stuff he could not.

He knew that Marren knew he was back as soon as he arrived. Everyone knew; it was a small, tight, community that prided itself on caring for (and gossiping about) one another fervently. About a week after his return she had sent word to his house that she was sick, then, that she had to tend to her sick mother, and then, that she had to watch over her sick brother. Well over a month passed before the Private had his brother Odell, who was just fourteen months younger and whom folk often mistook for his twin, drove him over to her place because he just couldn't believe what he already knew to be true.



By then, the Private's face no longer looked like raw hamburger, but it didn't exactly look like a face either. The chickens scattered as Odell brought the truck to a stop under a crooked old oak tree whose long branches spread majestically to overhang the front porch thankfully shading most of the dusty yard. It had been scorching hot for the past few days and everybody was craving any little piece of shade.

Odell climbed down first and went around to help his brother out of the truck, but the Private gently pushed him off even though he had to stop every few minutes to steady himself, holding tightly to and leaning on the Moses-like staff his father had fashioned for him. He hobbled to the house and made the Herculean effort of climbing the two squat steps onto the porch, pausing to catch his breath before moving to the screen door that had seen better days and which was clearly losing the battle to the flies and mosquitoes that snuck through its many rips. He banged on the screen door, too loudly and too urgently because of the tremor in this hand, which he fought to control even as he desperately grasped his staff in the other.

"What y'all banging on my door like that for?" Marren said sashaying towards the door full on like he remembered her. She was wiping her hands on a dish towel head down as she came but paused midsentence when she looked up and saw him. She finished wiping her hands deliberately before tossing the towel aside and closing the distance between them.

"Heyyyy TJ, I heard you was back, " she cooed smiling brashly from behind the screen door. She didn't rush to give her big teddy bear baby a welcome back hug and kiss and press her soft body into his as had been their usual greeting when they'd spent any time apart.

"Been back over a month," he mumbled. "Thought I'd a seen you before now."

“Oh, you know how it is, folks getting sick. I’ve got to take care of them, she protested. “I didn’t want to come over there and bring all kinda germs on top of all that you got going on.” She narrowed her gaze and took a step backwards before looking him up and down, as if she could see just by looking at him all that he had going on. Satisfied, or unable to reach a conclusion, she started to fan herself with her hand. “Sure is hot today.”

“All that I got going on,” he replied with a half-hearted chuckle, “ain’t none of your germs going to make a difference.” He shifted his weight from one side to the other trying to keep the staff out of her view.

He saw that she’d put on a few pounds, which only made her curves more curvy. She wore a thin cotton dress, a slight, sleeveless number in a muted yellow with tiny red flowers all over. The dress had a deep “V” held together by four small white buttons that looked totally inadequate to the task of containing her glistening cleavage. It fell over her body perfectly, across her flat stomach and broad hips, ending at her calves.

“You look good Marren,” he said with as much of a smile as he could muster considering the scarred skin of his face, which at that moment felt like there were maggots crawling all over it. “How you been?”

“You know, been fine. I’m fine, about the same. This my last year; graduating in the spring. Class of 19-55!” She did a quick twirl and raised her arms in celebration, before coming back to face him full of giggles.

“Yeah, that’s great. I knew you’d make it,” he said with a sigh. “Kind of wished I’d stayed and graduated.”

“Don’t you tell that lie, TJ,” she said sucking her teeth. “You been places, done things. You always wanted to go somewhere, and you did. TJ You’ve seen the world! Not many

folks round here been to New Jersey and Ko-rea.”

She fanned her face and let out a few deep breaths. Then she rested her arms on top of her head. “It sure is hot as hell today.”

It was a habit of hers, unusual for a colored girl. They were usually so finicky about their hair, especially after pressing it with a hot comb. But Marren had just enough Cherokee on her father’s side, and enough gumption of her own, to make her auburn hair loose enough so that she didn’t bother with that. She stood winding her fingers in her thick braids and shifting her weight from one trunk-like leg to the other. The Private couldn’t help noticing that her arms had been bronzed a deep chestnut color by the sun and now gleamed with perspiration. He loved how the sun just kissed her all over glorifying her even more.

Each of her armpits sprouted a tuft of curly auburn hair and every time she lifted her arms they flashed a torturous musky scent at the Private. Every time she took a breath, her glistening cleavage threatened to pop the tiny buttons that barely contained it. Her nipples pushed at the thin cotton as if desperate to escape.

Without warning, she lowered her arms and leaned against the door-jamb. For the first time, she looked him full in the face and in the eye, “What was it like?”

He looked down at her and tried not to be too obvious about sucking the sweltering air. For a long minute he couldn’t bring himself to answer as the sweat ran down his temples and beaded up in his crotch and armpits. A bee buzzed at the screen door agitated that it couldn’t find one of the tears to enter through and finally moved away.

As he stood there, the Private admitted to himself that he had never looked at Marren’s eyes much before, but now he did. They were a warm brown, large and doe-like, surrounded by

thick lashes and set deep in her beautiful dark face with its slightly broad nose and full lips. He saw genuine curiosity there in her eyes, but he was hoping for so much more.

He shifted his weight from one side to the other and then back again, and opened and closed his right hand to calm the tremor before speaking.

“It was war,” he finally responded flatly, not wanting for a minute to sully her with even the slightest hint of what he had done and witnessed. “War is hell. Don’t let nobody tell you different.” He inhaled deeply, stopping himself from saying more and fighting the ache that was beginning to burn in his right side.

Marren crunched up her nose at his confession and twisted her mouth around as if tasting his words and considering what to make of them. “That’s all?”

“I thought about you every day, every minute of the day,” he blurted out. “I just wanted to stay alive to get back here to you. You kept me alive, Marren.”

He poured out his heart to her, blabbering on through the screen. He stood there like an idiot and clutched his staff as if for dear life, no longer able to obscure its presence. He tried not to show how badly he hurt just standing there mustering every ounce of muscle strength to stay on his feet and still the tremor, so he didn’t appear a spastic moron.

He knew he was losing the battle as he reached up with his trembling hand to wipe the sweat from his face. “I came back for you, I did.” Spent, he lowered his head and took a few deep breaths inhaling her scent as she fidgeted and played in her hair. She bit her lip and started to speak a couple of times but managed nothing but fidgeting.

He waited, wishing for the courage to reach out, yank open the door and pull her towards him. He so wanted to sink to his

knees and bury his face, scarred and mutilated as it was, in the sweat of her cleavage for one last time for one fresh memory of the feel of her to go along with the memories that had sustained him through those cold wet mountains in Korea and then the dark silent void of a dozen hospital beds.

But the strength eluded him as did the courage. What if he toppled over when he went to reach for the door? What if the door was latched? Which almost nobody did, but he couldn't be sure what all had changed in the three years that he'd been away. If he reached for the door he could miss and punch through the flimsy screen. And even if he did open the unlocked door and reach for her, would she recoil from him as so many did?

"I'm sorry," Marren said finally. She peeled herself from the door jamb with an audible sigh and began shifting her weight from one leg to the other, which he saw were just as bronzed as her arms, and which ended in bare feet whose stubby toes were painted a harlot's red.

"I missed you too, TJ. I really did, " she purred benevolently. "You was my first and some of the best loving I ever had." She closed her eyes for just a moment, and he saw her tongue slide absently across her full lips before she looked at him again. "Not that I got whorish since you left," she quickly added. "But I've grown up. I'm graduating. I'm a woman now, and I got to think of my future. . . .I just needs me a whole man."

The words, coming out of her succulent lips, out of that beautiful dark face that he knew so well and loved with all his being, cut into him like the storm of shrapnel that had attacked him on that hill in Kaesong. For a minute, he stopped breathing. Then he started coughing and he desperately, jerkily, fought to regain his breath while fighting not to lose his footing. After a moment that seemed like an eternity, some instinct of self-preservation gave him back his breath

and compelled him to retreat. The color of auburn and the smell of seduction painfully blended into one and chased after him like a taunting demon.

The Private lumbered down the stairs like the rejected, defective soul that he was, tilting heavily. Odell rescued him as he started to shuffle across the dirt yard. He had waited just five minutes as their momma had instructed him before getting out of the truck and standing at the ready. Equal in stature, he caught his older brother's weight, and this time the Private did not resist as he bore him the remaining yards to the truck. As Odell reached for the truck's door handle, they heard the screen door screech open and slam shut. Looking back, they saw that Marren had now dared to venture beyond her threshold and was standing at the edge of the porch.

"You lucky, you know," she called after him, as if tossing a stray dog a bone. "You could've died over there. Don't know what yo Mama would've done if you'da died over there."

## VI.

The encounter with Marren chilled the Private for a long time and almost knocked him back to the dark void. It made him remember the stink of human flesh exploding and suffocating him on a hill in Korea and hospital beds that he knew only by their feel. It made him struggle with the taste of a revolver, steel mixed with bourbon and self-loathing. It made his momma order his ten siblings, from Odell down to three-year old Little Bit, to never leave him alone. And Little Bit, who had fearlessly taken to chasing the chickens around the dirt yard like a demon as soon as she could walk, took her instruction extremely seriously. She became her brother's anchor and his shadow. When he woke up, she would be perched on the edge of his bed staring at him. When he ate, she ate. When he headed

out to the outhouse, he had to convince her that no, she could not come into the little shed, but had to wait outside until he returned.

Over time, the Private somehow managed to push the haunting thoughts that plagued him back to a far corner of his being. He knew he needed to stay out of the dark silent void. He knew with certainty, without knowing how he knew, that the next time he went there, it would be his coffin.

Eventually, he began to tell himself what his parents had been saying all along, that he wasn't dead. He could hear most things. He could see out of his one eye. Thanks to the Army plastic surgeons, his face looked less like raw hamburger as time passed. He didn't yet know if he could get a woman, but at least he still had most of his equipment so maybe he could, and maybe one day it would work properly again.

Little by little, day by day, the Private went on living. He limped around leaning heavily on his staff with Little Bit skipping beside him. And then he hobbled along without it. And then one day, after Marren and the Class of 19-55 had made their ceremonial walk down Shiloh's center aisle, with the whole community, except him, cheering, he shuffled down to his old school and asked the teacher to help him study for his diploma.

Mrs. Ruby Dee Jackson had received him with perturbation and reticence, rather than sympathy and enthusiasm. She had chastised him about going into the army in the first place. She had even driven out to the farm to try to convince his parents to forbid him from enlisting.

"He should at least wait until he graduates," she had plead. "A high school diploma is a valuable asset, especially for a Negro. TJ is a smart boy. He could make something of himself, if he applied himself."

But he hadn't listened, and his parents had backed his

decision.

Now, he spent hours listening to Mrs. Jackson, who had a face as plain as a paper sack but a mind as full as an encyclopedia, read him his lessons. She had graduated from Howard University in Washington D. C., and when she read to him the books and problems that he was to figure, her voice sounded like a news broadcast on the radio. His eye tired easily as he struggled to make out the words on a paper held an inch from his face and his damaged hearing was challenged to grasp the words as they tumbled out of her thin flat lips that she always colored in cherry red lipstick. But he persisted.

They spent months with her patiently repeating a passage or stopping to explain a word that produced in the Private (who despite her high opinion of him had never been more than the most average student) only a blank look of confusion or a frustrated pounding on the desk. But over time, he absorbed enough, and he finally became a high school graduate years after he had become a disabled veteran.

The day after he received his diploma, the Private counted his discharge pay and the money the Army had been sending him. It wasn't much in the big scheme of things, certainly not enough to compensate for all he had lost, maybe not much to somebody else, but it was something to him. The Private used some of the money to buy his parents the first Frigidaire they ever owned. And to show his gratitude, he bought Mrs. Jackson a handkerchief on which he had her initials embroidered and a hat with a real ostrich feather sticking out of it that he sent for all the way from Raleigh. Mrs. Jackson burst out in laughter when he presented the hat to her and she caused quite a storm when she boldly stepped into the Shiloh Free Will Baptist Church with it perched on her head.

Mrs. Jackson told the Private about the G.I. Bill and how this time they were even letting Colored soldiers benefit



too. She said that it could pay for him to go to college. He hooted at the thought, remembering the long painstaking hours it had taken for him to earn his diploma. "Don't tell me you want to spend your whole life reading my lessons to me."

Mrs. Jackson assured him that as much as she liked him, she had other plans for her life. But she also told him that he could get a job with the Veteran's Administration and a loan to buy a house. That got the Private's attention.

"Now you talking," he exclaimed, with one of his still infrequent grins. Since he was going to go on living, he would need a job. "Hell, that's why I joined up in the first place. So, I wouldn't have to hand tobacco for some white man all my life. Any job with the VA got to be better than that."

And why shouldn't he take advantage of all the VA could offer him, after all that he had been through? And as for the house, he hadn't thought much about it. But when he did, he wasn't thinking to live with his parents all his life. As far as he knew, none of his kin had ever owned any property; if there was a way that he could be the first, he might just have to do that too.

In the following months, as Mrs. Jackson and he worked through all the required forms and applications, the Private would often whisper to himself *-I'm alive. I'm going to go on living.* He said it to fix it in his mind and to firm up his resolve.

But there were moments, despite his new-found prospects, when waves of despair would bulldoze him. Some new insult from someone in town would compel him to go out to the back field to sit alone and eat cantaloupe fresh off the vine, his body and soul aching so much that he often vomited. Or he would masturbate for what seemed like an eternity, until his flaccid penis was raw, without relief, which even a river of bourbon could not provide. At such times, the Private's thoughts

would roam back to that hill in Kaesong and to that day that had changed everything. He knew in his mind he was lucky to be alive; but often he didn't *feel* lucky. He could walk, but now his journey through life was an obstacle course paved with hot coals and barbs he had to navigate barefoot, scarred, half-blind and half-hearing, maybe always alone. He didn't even know if he was truly still a man.

At moments such as these, the Private would think that maybe Kirby Randall from Minneapolis, Minnesota was the lucky one. Randall, who was crazy about his mother and his Labrador Spike and who carried pictures of both in his fatigues, whom the Private had called friend and seen become a flying mess of bloody body parts the instant before his life changed forever, who had been granted the dignity of a body bag and a closed coffin in lieu of the best medical care the U.S. Army could provide—maybe Randall had been the lucky one.

Maybe.

---

# Japanese Poetry Never Modifies

August 2011

I remember when you first joined, I used to tell you that the Army would be four years, the way that college had been four years, and that really used to help you. These days, I'm not so sure. You called me this morning on my way out the door.

You know the routine, the sun's still not out yet so I go out onto the landing looking down on the parking lot to wait for the carpool of teachers so we can drive the hour north to Clinton. Closer to Mississippi than Baton Rouge, but we don't pick where we're assigned, you of all people know that. I was smoking my morning cigarette—God, I'm turning into my mother—when you called me and told me you'd killed a man. I didn't know what to do with that—I don't know what to do with a lot of the things you tell me. So I told you to wait, wait until you got home. We would deal with it together. You said you didn't feel anything, weren't you supposed to feel something? But then Jimmy and Becky and Mormon Rick showed up in the carpool, headlights jumping at the speed bump and I told you I had to go. You said you knew. Hung up.

#

So why did I stay with you? Maybe because I remember the string lights hanging above us like torch flies when we'd kissed. The smell of the East River as you'd walked me to the train. The sound of your voice after midnight, how it felt like biting into something alive. The vacuous kinds of things people with marriages that never last say. Maybe because I looked at you, and there was a sadness on your face that you'd been born with, like the freckle beneath your eye or your fullness of your lips.

You told me about your mother, your father during the war, and I envied them. I thought your parents took up so much space in your heart, and I wanted to take up as much as they did, to be carried as you carry them. Maybe I'm just another white girl with a savior complex, but then, all those Peace Corps kids can always go home. It can't be like that for me; I need you. I'm struggling to figure out why. If you would just talk to me again in that open way you do like when we'd first met and it was like I'd known you all my life, if you'd topple those walls of sandbags and pull away those spirals of razor wire you put up around you, if you'd fucking say just one honest

thing to me instead of going out there every day, rifle in hand, and pretending like you're doing something good even though you know you aren't.

When I hear your voice, I know that something else sits there in your heart, beside yours parents' memories. I should've known it was never them—a woman I'd met twice, and a man I'll never meet—who'd, like a festering tumor, plastered itself to that beating organ. It was always war, wasn't it? It grew, it grows, it will grow, and one day it'll kill you. I shouldn't have to compete with something so big for possession of you. Any sane woman would be long gone. But I wonder if that's what love is, a kind of insanity, an irrational urge to never wash your pillowcase and sleep in the dip you've left in the mattress. A mnemonic kleptomania of the way your hair feels between my fingers, the way your sweat smells stuck to all those worn out shirts, the way your eyes look in the sun—not black, but a deep, warm brown masquerading as the absence of color. A manic episode of binging on the way you smiled. A depressive plateau when I realize I may never see that smile again. I hoard these pieces of you and each one slices into me, bleeds me. It's the only thing that's real anymore, the pain of it. And I fear if I ever let go, I'll be letting go of a piece of myself.

#

Things That Quicken the Heart

(After Sei Shonagon)

How fewer egrets there were after the oil spill. Imagining you with an infant on your chest. Laying down to sleep and dreaming about waking up from this life into another. Looking into a broken mirror that splits me in two. A beautiful woman with a simple request who makes me forget you for just a moment. The weight of a camera, to spool a ribbon of cellophane into it and walk out onto a strange boulevard

somewhere, and even if I'm nowhere special, I feel a drunken kind of pleasure knowing I can capture thirteen moments in time. After all this waiting, on a night someday soon, knowing that, like the summer rain, you'll come back to me and drown the stifling sun with the heat or cold of your body, making my heart quicken.

#

You disappear for days or weeks at a time, and when I don't get an email or a phone call, I'll make whoever is driving us to work or home turn the radio to NPR so we can catch the BBC World Service or Steve Inskeep and Renee Montagne read the news. I'll hear things like, *five dead in Kandahar, drone strike in Helmand, bombing outside the embassy in Kabul*, and Becky or Mormon Rick might say, *oh God*, but I'd tell them it had nothing to do with you—probably. I often stew over their ignorance, tell them for the fiftieth time you're in Wardak province, *Wardak* goddammit, and they forget again the next time, but I guess I can't really blame them. They don't have maps of Afghanistan pinned to the walls of their bedrooms.

There was the week you sent me a short email, told me to check the news, and I looked up the *Times* and there was a developing story about that helicopter full of SEALs that'd been shot down, how it was the biggest loss of life in a single day since the beginning of the war. You called when you got back, told me how, on the last day there in that valley, you'd killed that dog—a *bitch* you called her. But then you surprised me and said you wished you hadn't. You said there were pieces of men scattered all through the branches like Christmas ornaments; how the valley smelled like raw crab and you didn't think you could ever eat crab again. I didn't know what to say, then. I guess I don't know what to say still.

Then there was the day bin Laden died. I came home, turned on the news, watching those fraternity bros and sorority girls partying in the streets. I thought, they're the ones who

should get drafted and they're the ones who should be sent over there, because I wanted you back here with me. It should be them, not you, over there fighting. But you don't know that, do you?

We say so little when we talk, always speaking around and past and between one another. You want to know more about home, and when I tell you what's happening in Louisiana, back home in New York, it only makes you seem further away than ever. I want to tell you, instead, how tragedy magnifies beauty, how this pain stitches us together, how I hope that someday all this distance and lack and yearning will be useful, one day. I want to tell you that you need to survive so we can start a family together, like we always wanted. I want to tell you that I know you'll be a good father, no matter how afraid you are of becoming one. Instead I just talk about the radiators in my classroom cranked up to eleven and phone bills and what so-and-so said at that party I'd half forgotten because I drank too much. If I could go back, change anything, I think I'd like to say what I feel more often.

#

At the beginning of your tour, when we spoke on the phone, it felt like you were right next to me. Now you sound like you're on an entirely different planet.

#

July 2011

When you told me Sergeant Finley died, I thought of his straw-haired wife, that EMT. I wondered if she would get a flag at his funeral, seeing as they'd been divorced. Or would they give it to her boy? I wanted to give you all the time and space in the world to grieve, I wished you would cry, if only to remind me that the man on the phone was the same man I'd fallen in love with. It's selfish, I know. But you didn't, so I cried for you.

#

*There's still time*, that's what I kept thinking the whole time you were on mid-tour leave. Then it ran out and we missed our chance. Now, with all this—a dead man on your conscience, all that fighting, all those moral compromises that have shaken you, I can't help but think of where I went wrong, what I could've done differently to persuade you to run across the Canadian border. Now I worry that even if you make it home in one piece, it wouldn't matter, because I've already lost you.

I know there would have been consequences if you had run. Maybe you would never be able to come back to the States. But it was never your country—not really—anyone could see that. Just a flag and a bunch of stupid rules everyone agreed to. But then again I'm not one to talk, am I? I pay my taxes and have a bank account and drive a car to work every day, I follow the rules just like you, like everyone else. Sometimes I wonder if you think I'm a hypocrite, turning my back on my convictions. You used to say my life was politics, but now, I wonder if you think you couldn't trust a college anarchist who'd once shouted about abolishing the state, only to become one of its many drones. Maybe I'm projecting. Maybe telling you to run was selfish of me, a way for me to stay true to the woman I'd used to be. Or maybe this was a way to keep you all to myself.

I thought I knew your heart well enough—you were always selfless in a way that you refused to see—and if you didn't do it for yourself (how could I ever believe you'd do something for yourself?), then at least you'd do it for me. I forgot about your boys. You were thinking about them after Finley died, weren't you? What you could have done differently. But if you'd gone AWOL, you wouldn't have been there and it wouldn't have been your fault and you wouldn't have to carry that around with you.

I also forgot about Afghanistan. The first few weeks you were

there, you'd write me, saying that you hoped there'd be peace soon so I could see it. *No place as beautiful in the world*, you'd said, *you could understand how people believed in God—just seeing how small it makes a man feel*, you'd said. Sometimes you'd write angry e-mails or be flustered on the phone over how the people around you refused to see the Afghans as people. Mothers and fathers and children just like us. You'd wanted to do everything to help them, and I was proud of you, but now I wish I hadn't told you that, because I know your heart is over there, and not here with me.

Sometimes, I dream that you did run off, go AWOL. I see you rowing the little aluminum boat up Champlain, going north, and I'm worried you'll get lost or caught, but I'll remember that you're a soldier and I should have faith in you. In the dream, I wait months or years—impossible to say in that floating life—but I find you, we start our lives over. I go on teaching, you become an artist, we start a family—in Montreal, maybe. I dream our kids have miraculously red hair and wide smiles and you see them and forget all about that faraway country and the mountains that made you feel small. I dream this dream, and when I wake up, I half expect you to be in the kitchen making coffee, frying eggs.

#

I worry sometimes that you'll kill yourself and leave me all alone to put the pieces back together. Maybe you wouldn't do it by your own hand, but let the enemy do it for you. That way you get to die a hero. I think about you, sitting on the bank of the Mississippi in New Orleans, before you deployed. We watched the barges and container ships easing past as slow as honey. You joked that if you were killed over there, I'd be able to pay off my student loans with the life insurance money.

#



I've been thinking of writing poetry, like Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*. I like the idea of a book composed of lists. I like the way that, in Japanese, every word stands on its own.

#

June 2011

When you were on leave, we developed rolls of your film and I saw all those smiling girls in the school you've been helping to support. I wish I could speak Dari and I didn't have asthma and I could come to Afghanistan and teach in your girls' school. I would teach math, just the same as I do here, teach them to make cranes from square sheets of paper, how to make garlands of them to hang in the classroom. We might have to share the same discomforts and dislocations and disappointments, but at least we would be sharing them together. At least that way, I'd be making a difference. Not like teaching to a test my kids will fail because they've got bigger problems, like grandparents on dialysis and electricity getting turned off and their unemployed parents and the revolving door of principals at the school.

If we actually did what we said we were supposed to—get kids to graduate and go off to college and rise out of this backwoods Jim Crow town, that'd put this whole white savior factory out of business, wouldn't it? I fantasize about flying away from this place every time I go to the dollar store to buy school supplies to send you. When I pack boxes full of crayons and notebooks and pens and coloring books, with a carton of cigarettes or a can of shag tobacco on top for you, I feel like I'm sending myself over there piece by piece. I wish that were truly the case; that I could just mail myself out of here.

I used to look forward to teaching, but these days I'm just looking forward to the end of the week. One of my kids has been acting up since her father left, and one day poured a

soda out on one of her friends. I didn't want to send her down to the vice principal's just to get smacked around a bit. I told you about the vice principal, didn't I? Has this big paddle hanging on the wall with air holes drilled into it and a handle wrapped in leather. My student's grandmother, who has taken over raising her, told me just to whup her right there in front of the whole class. That's what she'd said, *whup*. Said if I didn't want to do it, she knew enough teachers who'd be glad to. I thanked her and hung up. When I told it to one of the other teachers—a scab like me—she said I should've let the vice principal take care of it. *These kids can be animals*, she said. Her eyelids have become a sleepless shade of red, her skin—I used to marvel over how it was so clear she never had to wear foundation—was caked to cover up the way her skin looks like spoiled milk from all the stress. When she said, *animals*, there was a rusty creak in her birdsong voice. We were all so idealistic when we'd started. How much a year can wear on you.

I don't think you remember when I told you this on one of the nights we talked. Our conversation lasted only a few minutes—you'd just gotten back from a long patrol rotation. You didn't say much, but when you spoke, I heard that creak in your voice too.

#

May 2011

After you started helping that Afghan school, I felt something else. A little worse than envy. It seemed like your work was the most important thing in the world and I took a back seat. You, playing the man, the savior, the martyr, the hero. You get to be Odysseus. I'm typecast as Penelope.

You fucker, can't you see how hard I've tried, how much work I've done for you? I do the taxes, I pay the bills, I go apartment hunting, I manage the bank accounts. I'm the one on

the phone with the rear-detachment commander every time we get a red message, a white message, seeing if there's anything I can do for the families of those dead and wounded boys. I'm not some shrinking violet in the damn wives club, and even if I were, they've got kids to raise while you men are off playing GI Joe. Can't I be the hero of my own story?

But I don't suppose you know that. A little like how I can't know what combat is like, how I can't feel it in my veins. So how could you ever know what it's like waking up every morning and wondering if today will be the day two men arrive on my doorstep to tell me you're dead? How do we balance the two? How do we reach across these shores?

If I were the hero of this story, it would be the war at home, not the one over there that I'd fight. We'd march on the Capitol, throw off the government and hang the profiteers and politicians from their neckties, line Pennsylvania Avenue with their corpses and leave them for the crows. I'd build schools where we taught girls and boys that life isn't money; it's clear September days and the way the leaves are most beautiful before shedding in death and how finishing a book is as bittersweet as saying goodbye to a friend. If I were a hero, I'd go over there and rescue you, my damsel, and all the soldiers toiling and bleeding and dying. If I were a hero, I'd have a little agency, a choice to make, a journey with arcs and morals and an ending well earned, but this isn't that kind of story.

#

March 2011

Here is a List of Things That Make My Heart Lurch:

- Strangers' footsteps in front of my door.
- The country code +93 before a number beckoning on my phone.

-The word *Afghanistan*.

-The words *America* and *liberty* and *freedom*, and how I don't know what they mean anymore.

-The words *Standardized Testing*.

-How the word *rifle*, which figures so heavily into the stories you tell me, is so violating, as if a stranger goes through my things each time I hear it.

-A scowling parent and/or guardian.

-The sounds of police helicopters overhead and how I look up and wonder if you too are looking up at a metal bird beating its wings.

-The way I sometimes confuse your dismay at what you're doing over there with my dismay at what I'm doing here.

-Other couples with their cliches, couples who wonder if their lovers are looking up at the same moon. For you and me, that's impossible. The moon can't show its face to both of us at once, and my day is your night.

-Sleep deprivation combined the hour long commune to East Feliciana Parish at 5am.

-What waiting feels like.

-What nothing feels like.

-What knowing that no matter how hard I try, I'll fail feels like.

-The nightly news.

#

February 2011

There's one memory I save for special occasions. I hide it

away, use it sparingly to keep its blade sharp. It comes out when I'm alone and the night is cold like it had been the night we'd met. When I see a couple all tangled up in one another's arms. When the news reports six dead in a suicide bombing at a remote forward operating base. In it, you walk me to the train. I wear your coat. You even swiped onto the platform to see me onto the car. Then I gave you my number. Then the train took me home. You forgot to take your coat back. Then you called the next day. No one does that.

#

January 2011

I wish my great-grandmother Ada were still alive today, so she could tell me what it was like to see her husband enlisted in the Navy and sent off to the battles on the Atlantic. I wish I were as lucky as she; to learn that the war had ended ahead of schedule, sparing my great grandfather, sparing the generations that followed from meeting our ends at the hands of a German submarine captain. I'd want to ask her what was in my great-grandfather's heart when he'd sworn that oath of enlistment to a country that hadn't considered us Jews any more American than they consider blacks or Latinos or anyone or Vietnamese. I'd want to know what my grandfather's skin felt like when they reunited, if the sun had tanned and cracked his face, if ropes had calloused the palms and fingertips his large hands, if there were other changes—in his heart for instance—which took years to undo, changes which could never be undone.

#

November 2010

I sometimes wonder if it was right to follow you to this place. I wondered it the day you left, and I saw you march to the buses that'd take you to the plane that'd take you away. I had to drive the two hours back to Baton Rouge to get to work

on time, and I got lost in a cornfield because I couldn't stop crying long enough to notice I'd taken a wrong turn, and I thought why the fuck did I follow you here? I don't mean Louisiana.

#

October 2010

I hadn't been able see you when the whole brigade assembled on Honor Field, patchy with carcinomas of dead grass and barren dirt. You said you you'd be in the first rank, and that may have been true, but I didn't see you. You said you saw me there, in my green dress with my Yashica in hand, waiting to snap a six by six of you, my soldier husband. I thought I'd show it to our children one day, and they'd say it was funny how daddy's body blended into the bodies around him, your uniforms melting into the half-dead landscape. A hot day, and the medics had their hands full with soldiers passing out from standing in the sun so long. Everyone wore those bladders of water on their backs, and you seemed less like brave soldiers and more like brigade of hunchbacks. They played some Sousa march from speakers hooked up to a CD player. It reminded me of high school football games. I thought of our future children again, and what you said to me when your orders came through for Afghanistan—there was more danger here, in America. That I ran a higher risk of dying in a car crash than you did in combat. Look at the numbers, how few people died anymore. Saved by the wonders of modern medicine, all the clotting agents and cargo planes turned into ICUs and little strips of velcro and ballistic nylon used to stem blood from severed limbs. You told me about all these things that were meant to reassure me, but didn't. You marched past and I couldn't find you, so I snapped a photo of a row of soldiers, their heads turned to face the reviewing stand.

#

September 2010

At the cavalry ball, you men all wore your ridiculous cowboy hats and silver spurs on your shoes as if they made you like those horse soldiers on the plains, as if they tied you to history. It would've been amusing if I was drunk, but I stayed sober so I could drive us the hour home. I stewed. At our table, Barker kept making jokes about the red snapper, and I told him to shut his mouth. I think his wife, Kelly, smiled at that, but I can't be sure. She didn't say anything all night.

You sang your damn songs and waved your damn flags, and I thought it was all a nice bit of trickery, all this ceremony and pomp. What is it Napoleon said, that he could persuade a man to die for a pretty piece of ribbon? You were getting drunk with your soldiers, who had their arms around you, pulling you towards the dance floor, and I could see how uncomfortable that made you; how you couldn't tell where the line was between fraternal love and fraternization. But they were—we all were—just a bunch of dumb kids.

I didn't talk to the officers' wives; we didn't have anything in common, not really. Tupperware parties and boozy breakfasts and needlepoint or whatever it was they did with their time. The enlisted wives—who were covered in tattoos with jobs as bakers or smile-worn shop girls or soon-to-be de facto single mothers—all reminded me of people back home, a little creased and windswept, even though they were, for most part, youngish. Two of them were still in their teens; they could've been plucked out of the graduating class of my anemic Upstate high school. They were both knock-kneed and vine-armed and clinging to each other while their husbands—barely old enough to drink themselves—fed them booze for what I'm sure they thought would be a romantic night. They reminded me too much of home, so I kept to myself. I was alone, even then, even with you just a few yards away. That's not why I came to shindig, to sit by myself and watch a bunch of grown men act like kids who'd broken into their parents' liquor cabinet.

You and I used to sit in laundromats and make up stories about strangers passing by the big storefront window or eavesdrop on diners in the restaurants we could barely afford, whispering jokes about their problems and arguments and bougie sensibilities. We'd been so sure we would never be those people. I remember once, it had rained while we were out buying books and it didn't let up, so we'd had to spring to the L and rode home soaked. You put my book—I can't even remember what I'd bought—and stuffed it under your jacket so it wouldn't get wet. We stripped out of our clothes when we got home and you made tea. I lay in bed naked, thumbing through a graphic novel—*The Photographer*—and there was something about all those images, the real contacts sheets and fictive illustrations, and the way the protagonist cried that'd given me the idea to give you a camera to take with you over there. You brought in the tea and we drank it. Got under the covers of your thin twin mattress, and stayed up talking about all the nothing we'd do after you were done with the Army, talking about where we'd live and what our kids might look like—if we wanted them. We'd talked about how, sometimes, the most important thing in an image wasn't its subject, but what lay just outside the frame. We'd talked until we stopped, and we stopped because we slept, and we slept through the soundless night in your windowless room and it felt like the world had ended and it was just the two of us in our abandoned city. When I woke, I was disappointed to hear your roommates shuffling around outside the door, to hear that life had continued without us.

Here it was again, all this life around me marching forward, but this time I was alone. Your men kept pressing drinks on you, and each time you refused, but took it anyway, and you were all were singing, *I wanna be in the cavalry, if they send me off to war*. So I went to have a cigarette, out in the air, which was somehow as sticky hot as inside, and found a bench out front. I hadn't noticed that Barker had followed me out. He asked me if I was okay, and I just shrugged, and didn't say



anything. I gathered he wasn't used to that—not being listened to. He started talking about my dress, if this was one of those ironic things people my age did. Something about making a statement by dressing like a flapper instead of wearing a ball gown like all the other women. It was an A-line, a formal mid-century modern piece I'd found in a thrift store, but I didn't bother to correct him. I was a little afraid of him, the way he looked at me, the way he swayed ever so slightly. He was drunk, and I might be able to throw a mean punch, but he's a large man and we were basically alone. I crossed my arms, like I was cold. He offered me his jacket, which I didn't want. He sat down beside me, fanned himself with his Stetson. He said I shouldn't worry, he'd do what he could to bring me back. He said it'd be hard, what I was about to go through, told me how when he'd come back after Iraq, *things with Kelly, well they'd never gone back to the way they'd been before*. I thought these were just the musings of a drunkard who'd stayed in the Army too long, who'd lost touch. These days, I wonder if he was trying to warn me.

#

~~Here is a List of Things I Would Do if I Left You:~~

Here is a List of Things I Would Do if You Died:

~~Drink~~ Find something less cliché to do, something warm and numbing, something that feels like early-onset dementia—and permanent.

-Find someone new to sleep with and feel nothing.

-Gather up a handful of blow-flowers and instead of doing what the name commands, set them on fire.

-Think about suicide without making a plan.

~~Eat a handful of pills.~~ I *could* eat a handful of pills, but someone would find me because I'm a broke-ass teacher and we

share everything, like cars and bar tabs and apartments and a pool of school supplies which always comes up short when you go looking for another manila folder or calculator battery—and yeah, we share pills too—so that’s out.

-Think about suicide and try not to look at the Huey P. Long bridge—the second smaller one, its steel bones oxidizing to death—or the Mississippi. Think about how stupid people are when they believe water will somehow be softer than concrete at that height.

-Go to the funeral.

-Push everyone away.

-Quit TFA and leave all the future politicians padding their resumes and the twenty-two-year-old scabs who don’t know better and the white saviors with their Jesus complexes behind.

-Nothing.

-More nothing.

-Enough nothing to get behind on the rent, which, as you know, is not at all like me.

-Live out of my car for a while.

-Consider moving to Arizona like my doctor had suggested when I’d been hospitalized for asthma for the fifth time in a year. Consider doing something with turquoise, maybe. Remember how much I hate sand and heat and the sun and fucking turquoise.

-Move back in with my parents.

-Climb the Adirondacks

-Try not to think about suicide when I make a climb in the rain. Try not to hope for an accident, a slip, a broken neck, a painless death.

-Write poetry, let one be titled: *Here is a List of Things I Would Do if You Died.*

-Write a poem titled: *Here is a List of Things I Would Do if I Left You.*

-Burn everything I'd written.

-Never write poetry again.

-Never shave a hair on my body again.

-Never date another man again.

-Never look at anything that reminds me of you.

-Never start wearing makeup.

-Never date.

-Never say never.

-Drink, and try to think of less cliché things to do with grief.

-Apply to every job that'll take me to the place that took you from me.

-If rejected from every job for which I'd applied: book a ticket to Kabul anyway.

-Make a list of things to pack. A camera will be at the top of it.

-If visa to Afghanistan gets rejected, buy a ticket to Pakistan, plan to sneak across the border.

-Come home alive or die there or never come home at all or abandon all those plans—I haven't decided yet.

-Buy a hairless cat, name him/her/they Gefilte Fish. (I've always wanted a cat.)

-Live longer than my cat; remember that nothing lasts, especially not love.

-Find the shoeboxes and musk-laden clothes and books and 35mm negatives that remind me of you and start a fire and burn it all and immediately regret what I've done.

-Find some small town—preferably in Vermont—with an empty role to fill, a need, a lack. Occupy that unoccupied space, and with time, become a familiar fixture, a woman with graying hair, a woman past her prime and alone. Become someone everyone wonders about, worries about. Become an enigma, a mystery. Let them say, *there's Old Lady Fishman, off to the library/animal shelter/schoolhouse/tollbooth, what a sad story*—even if they can only speculate. I'll put my lights on at Halloween and give out full-sized candy bars. I'll put out food for all the neighborhood strays and the town will try to stop me, but they won't succeed. I'll teach a class to the local kids on how to photograph, just like I'd taught you; I'd teach them to think about the picture plane and what lies outside it and how absence is sometimes more poignant. Maybe I'll find another lonely woman, let her fall in love, never her tell her anything. (She'll leave eventually.) And when I'm in my autumnal years, I'll think of how trees are most beautiful before they die and think about you and not think about suicide and fade and fade and finally go, and I'll die thinking that if I can let you go in this life, it'll make the next one, our next meeting, our next reunion, that much more sweet.

#

March 2010

Our honeymoon was one night in a fancy hotel. The next day, you drove two days south to your new unit.

#

Our wedding day, in the living room of my parents' creaky old farmhouse, was a string of mishaps. It was rushed. So much went wrong. My mother was sour that we hadn't asked the rabbi to conduct the ceremony, but a county judge. At least he looked Jewish, she said. When your family arrived, your grandmother brought me a jade bracelet as a wedding present, but it wouldn't slip over my knuckles, not even with a little grease, so I couldn't accept it. Then I heard your little brother whisper to my brother how he'd just enlisted, and to not tell you, because last time you saw him, you'd told him not to join. Then we even saw each other before the ceremony, and my mother rushed you back into my bedroom where you were changing. It's a stupid tradition to keep bride and groom apart, but I guess that's what I'd signed up for. Some anarchist I am. Just to make sure, you practiced breaking the glass under the *chuppa* half a dozen times, and each time you did it perfectly.

But then none of it mattered, because I saw the tears in your eyes and heard the shudder in your voice when you recited our vows. I wasn't thinking of tomorrow or the next day, just this moment together. If you weren't wearing your dress blues, we could've pretended we were just like any other couple in the world. But I hold onto that moment, that idea that a wedding ring represents infinity—I hoped, for once, one of these damn symbols would hold up. My father put the glass on the ground. You brought your foot down on it, but it slid off, breaking only the stem. I wonder now if it was an omen, but you'd always been the superstitious one, not me.

#

After we got our marriage license, we threw ourselves a little engagement party. You were on leave. The old rad crew was all there, belting out *Defiance, Ohio* songs and dancing like the tomorrow would never come to that indie electronica garbage you like so much. There were gifts, even—like we were real adults. Sara brought us that Spanish wine that we didn't know

would, turn to vinegar during the move to Louisiana. Daria brought us pralines from New Orleans without knowing I was allergic to all those tree-nuts. We got a few cards, a leather-bound edition of *Arabian Nights* from Ranya, which, if you're wondering, I call dibs on if we ever get divorced. I don't know why I joke like that. I don't know if I could've stood any more gifts than that, and thank God all our friends lived on day-old bread and bottles of Four Roses and were too broke to give us anything but their presence—or pretended to be that poor, at least.

Everyone marveled at how we were getting married, how young we were—I was 21, you were 22. I guess we're still young, in a way. I know some people judged us for it. Judged me, really. They were my friends, anyway. All those dreadlocked boys with their bandannas tied around their necks like their convictions and girls who'd thought freeing the nipple was the first step towards the revolution. That's the thing, we were so young, believed so ardently that things like matrimony and jobs are quaint antiquities that belong in museums. But that's not real life. They didn't have to worry about the things we did to pay for college like holding three jobs or joining the military, and still leaving with tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt. If I told them how it is now, waking up in the night, thinking there's a knock at the door, and two men in their blues are waiting outside, what would they say? If it were them, what would they do? Anyway it was my choice.

Arianna was there. You already know all about us. You already know she was never right for me. But she's loyal, and my friend, and I couldn't just throw that away. She watched the two of us dancing our asses off, dancing and drinking because it all hurt so much was already on our shoulders. I found her crying in the stairwell, her voice bouncing off the breezeblocks. She'd told me she asked you why you were doing this—the Army and all that. You said you had to go. She told me, *he's got you, Mir, and now what're we going to do?* I

didn't know what she was talking about, but she was drunk, and I pulled her up and folded her into my arms. She held the hug for a little too long, pressing her nose into my hair. She pulled back and looked at me with her head tilted to the side, her eyes half-closed. I don't know when I'll ever get around to telling you this, Dave, but she tried to kiss me. Like it was the easiest thing in the world to get me back, like real life and marriage and hardship and poverty were quaint things best left in museums. I dragged her back inside, told her she was drunk.

#

November 2009

I decided we'd get engaged, there in the whispering gallery with all those Metro North commuters buzzing past. We were going to my Aunt's place in Westchester. You were on pass; flown in from Armor School for Thanksgiving. I was thinking how we had so little time, how fast life was moving—and wasn't it crazy that two kids had to rush like this? But it wasn't rushing, it was the right time. How we knew, and couldn't explain it, but we did. I was thinking, *at least if he gets hurt, I'll get to come to the hospital. At least if he dies, I'll get a folded American flag. A Gold Star in my window. The excuse of a lifetime.* I was thinking how I'd look in a black dress and a black veil and what it'd feel like to watch your body lowered into the ground and how selfish I was—that's what came to mind, selfishness—to fantasize about your death.

And/or I was thinking of simple things—the ways your eyes snatch the light out of the room, how your face opens up when you see a film, the way your hair feels between my fingertips. How our words curl and nest into each other's and I feel like something missing had been found. Does that make sense? Let me try another way of saying it. When you speak, I can't help but listen. When I talk, I can't help but feel heard. And without you, I'm mute to the world, deaf to its music. How no one else

in the world can do that to me. Fuck me, I'm drunk and you've got me talking all purple. I've always hated over-qualified language. But it's always the small things, the details.

I thought these things, and decided—in a split second—to tell you to stand in one corner and press your ear to the tiled wall. I hushed my words up the vaulted ceiling and over the bustling commuters' heads and into your ear. I slipped those words in like my tongue, and I could almost taste the bitter wax and delicate hairs when I said *marry me*. I thought about how I could stick my tongue in your ear, and that's all I needed to get you going. I was thinking how much like foreplay it was. How our children might look, what features they'd steal from you, from me. What your body would look like beneath a closed casket, because I can't imagine it being anything but closed. How there'd be a hunk of me carved away and how I'd wake up each morning you were gone and be surprised that I'd waken up at all.

#

October 2009

As a birthday present, I sent you a copy of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*. You said it was the best gift you'd ever received. Then, you sent me the diary you'd filled since you'd started training. I was dismayed at how often you'd sketched scenes of your own death.

#

August 2009

You went back and forth between the city and all those joint bases and forts and posts where you'd trained. Each time, you'd come back to me a little changed—though I don't think you'd noticed. After Fort Benning, your manner had stiffened. You told me how one of your training sergeants said you were too polite, that it just wouldn't do in combat. They asked



which branch you'd been assigned to, and when you told them Armor and Cavalry, they laughed. No room for good manners among tankers and scouts, they'd said. Still, you spent nearly all your pay on flights back to me when they gave you the rare weekend pass. I thought that'd be enough to keep us—this—going.

#

July 2009

There's a photo you took of me in Montana, on the first leg of our cross-country road trip. That was supposed to be our send-off. The last hurrah between college and the real world. We'd agreed that this was how our relationship would end. I look at that photo now; I use it as the backdrop for my computer, and sometimes I think it's a kind of self harm, like I'm carving hatch-marks into my skin every time I set my eyes on it. I'm the subject in the photo—a strange sensation. I'm wearing your plaid flannel, cleaning my camera. There's a layering of images—you're on the other side of the motel window, the reflection of a parking lot of cars superimposed on our room, the ghost of your silhouette imprinted on the pane of glass. I see me as you see me, and that makes the distance harder. Don't ask me to explain how that works. I'm looking at the photo, and it's only been a year, but I'm already thinking, *I used to have such good skin*, I'm already thinking, *we used to be so young*.

We went out to dinner that night at the motel bar, where they served us steak and fries, and when we were done, we got a six-pack of that skunky beer they called Moose Drool, which I hated, but which you liked just fine. When we finished it, we had sex on the motel bed with a movie flickering on our bodies, and it felt desperate, like something out of a neo-noir film, like we were on the run from gangsters or cops or both, and of course they'd all have ridiculous accents. *Cawfee. Shawtgun. Brawd*. I wished it was real—that we were on

the run, I mean. And if the villains caught up to us at the end and we made our last stand in some seedy parking garage staring down a dozen goons with automatics, that would be fine by me.

At the time, I was thinking about how far we'd come to just end it. It couldn't; I couldn't. We saw Ohio and all that flat farmland, Chicago on the shore where you reached down and dipped your hand into Lake Michigan, the Twin cities where we imagined ourselves settling in a brick house if New York ever sank into the Atlantic, the Crow Reservation where I wanted to go one day, to teach, and past Billings and Bozeman and Butte and Missoula and into the Rockies. How much further we'd go. Past the mountains, into Idaho, through Coeur d'Alene, where you'd be terrified of the way down, coasting the whole winding descent. We'd strike forth into the Eastern Washington scrublands and desert, into the Redwood forests and onto the coast, the briny-aired Pacific coast. And I'd imagine it'd be a new beginning, just the two of us. I would've let that air stay in my lungs forever if I could, but it wasn't the start of a new life, just a brief interlude.

When you reported to your first duty station—a temporary posting to train cadets, just like you'd been a year ago—I flew back to New York to my para job at PS 21 and the ICP gig. You'd given me all those rolls of film and all those moments from our trip, and when I developed them, I was surprised to see how many you'd taken of me. That image of me in your flannel, the ghost of you on the window. I thought about asking you to marry me.

I'm thinking about that damn photo, and thinking about taking it down, replacing it with a black field, because when I look at it, I remember that what I'd felt when we drove across the mountains and forests and plains and cities of this God-forsaken country, how I felt like the last woman alone left on Earth with the only man in the entire world, and that hurts, Dave, you can't imagine how much that hurts.

#



May 2009

I gave you my dad's old 35mm before we graduated, and we went out into Carroll Gardens to practice shooting. You didn't load the film right—the sprocket holes hadn't lined up. I took it to the dark room and found one long, empty strip. I still have photos of you from that day—you on top of a traffic light control box, you at the edge of the F and G train tracks, you in front of Rocketship Comics aiming your lens at me. You thinking you'd captured all these moments.

#

I try writing about things, like they'll make them easier to say. All that comes out is bad poetry, fragments of memories.

#

Do you remember how you'd been saying that you knew distance

was hard? You never said you were thinking about your parents, about the day your dad had left.

#

Do you remember our first date, not the time we met at the Waverly, but our first real date? Film Forum was showing *Sans Soleil*. You left the theatre in a haze.

#

I can't seem to describe a sun as a sun unless it's radiant. A spring is not a spring unless it's limpid.

#

I remember the first time you said, *I love you*. It wasn't when you thought, not at the top of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, but in your sleep when you came to stay the night in the dorm where I RA'd.

#

January 2008

I follow my friends to your place for a party, a rent party they called it. There you are, thinking you're so smooth, but you're drunk off your ass. Handsome in your own awkward kind of way, and not stringy like all the beanie bearded hipsters. At least you're not dangerous. At least I've got my friend around me. You ask if I'm Jewish, and I think that's an odd kink. I want nothing to do with you; I'm looking to hook up with another girl. I'd broken up with Arianna a few days before, but I won't mention that. And you're still here, acting like a schmuck. The music's playing, some David Bowie cover band. You pour me a beer that's ninety percent foam, grinning at me the whole time.

A few minutes later, I witness you making out with someone else. (Did you forget you'd been hitting on me?) You had the

nerve to come back, trying your bungling German pickup lines (I'd told you I spent a semester in Berlin). I was a little down, and hell, you ask nicely, so I let you kiss me. We make out, and it's nice because I can forget about my two jobs and student debt and financial aid and Arianna. I can forget, and you've got wide, soft lips, and the press of your fingertips just wrap me up in this second. You try to convince me to stay the night. I laugh, tell you I've got work in the morning (I lie). Just a little make out session, that's all it's supposed to be. That's all I need. But you sober up. We talk a little, dance a little, there's a DJ on now. When I want to go home, you offer to walk me all the way to the train in the snow. It's not snowing, but it's a nice flourish, and that's how I'll choose to remember it.

You wear your flannel shirt, and I wear your workman's coat. The streetlights all take on fuzzy haloes and toss our shadows far ahead and behind us. You tell me you listen to electro-clash and hip-hop and folk music. I stare at the warehouses that go for blocks, the ones under demolition and the fishbowl condos taking their places. You tell me how when you hear Pete Seeger play Frank Proffitt's "Going Across the Mountain" the banjo sounds just like a *dan nguyet*, how that song about the Civil War might as well be a Vietnamese song. We're all wrapped up in history, I say, and you ask me if you can hold my hand and I say yes. A hipster dive is still open on North Fifth. A Polish bar is still open on Bedford Ave. But they'll be closed soon. We're racing daylight for a few hours of sleep. The warehouses end on a block of vinyl-sides row-houses and shutters shops and restaurants. I expect you to leave at the corner of the station, but you walk down. I expect you to say goodbye at the turnstile, but you swipe in. We wait on the platform and I tell you about folk-punk, which you think sounds a little funny, but say makes sense anyway. You apologize for being so forward at the party, and ask to see me again.

The train won't be here for another fifteen, and you tell me about your future, what the next couple of years hold. The Army. I write my number in the notebook I find in your coat pocket, a fresh one with a few sketches—a dead rat, a woman holding a child, the facade of a brownstone being demolished, but the rest is still fresh, blank. It's the empty sheets of paper which appeal to me the most. I say I'd like to see you again, but what I say is overpowered by the announcement that the train is here. It howls into the station and the doors open and I enter and you're on the edge of the platform and I'm on the edge of the car and for a moment that's nothing between us and you ask to kiss me and I nod but the doors close. I try to tell you that we have all the time in the world for a kiss, but the announcer is too loud, the doors too thick. Then the train takes me away.

*"Japanese Poetry Never Modifies" first appeared in the [Columbia Journal](#), November 12, 2018.*

Photo courtesy [goodfreephotos.com](#).

---

## **New Poetry by Aidan Gowland**



René Magritte, Not  
to Be Reproduced,  
1937

### Breathless

If you say "I am not a monster"  
Into the mirror and turn around three times  
A better version of yourself will start to take root in your  
heart.

If some nights you cannot make your mouth say the words,  
If you cannot make your lips make the sound,  
It is okay to say "I am not *always* a monster".

If your friend tells you that you need to forgive yourself  
Before you are consumed by the weight of your own actions  
It is okay to drink until you believe them.

If you have pushed all your friends away and are standing on  
the edge  
of a bridge and a voice in your head says 'Don't jump'  
That voice is your friend  
and it is okay to listen.

### To the Woman Who Finds My Ex

You will find him shaking on the couch  
With his hair plastered to his forehead  
And his body covered in sweat.

He will say

*Help me*

But he won't want your help.

You will think of the words

*Addiction*

*Overdose*

*User*

But you will stop short of death.

He will glow in the dark.

He will take pleasure in his pain,

Smear it over his life with a spatula

And call it impasto,

Call it progress,

Call it hope.

He'll say the drug is the only love that he believes in,

The only love that hasn't let him down.



You will think of the words

*Betrayal*

*Ungrateful*

*Sacrifice*

But you will stop short of leaving.