

New Fiction from Matt Gallagher: “The Biggest Little City”

“Been to Las Vegas? Clean. Corporate. Sleek, serious suit. We’re that guy’s kid brother selling Adderall in the parking lot.”

That’s a line I use at cocktail parties and readings and the like. Book people – *literary* people, apologies – tend not to be New York natives (quibble away, *literary* people) so a natural social lubricant is the Where Are You From fancy dance. There are good answers: Georgetown, Paris, Hong Kong. There are bad answers: Tampa, “near” Chicago, Long Island.

And then there are strange answers, answers like Reno, which is my answer.

Home lingers in us all. Mine just happens to smell of sagebrush while sounding like slots.

Really, truly: that’s the first thing anyone notices at the airport. The cheery singsong of slot machines doling out quarters and dimes. (It used to smell like cigarette smoke, too, dense as blubber. Then bin Laden came along and something, something, travelers of the sky can only drink while they gamble. I don’t know. I don’t pretend to understand the world anymore.)

So, Reno. Born in it, raised in it. Mixed feelings galore. Left at 18 with the grace of a startled dog, been gone for about a decade. Back this evening, for reasons I’ll get to. Now, though, I’m waiting for this dear and precious Mormon family of twelve to unload themselves and their matching ash blonde hair from the airplane. They, and I, are the only passengers who remain. All this for a rear window seat.

“So sorry,” the dad says, loud fluoride shine rushing out like sword blades. “Don’t ever have kids.” He pulls down stroller number four and backpack number eight from the overhead bin. Mormons are breeding for the end of the world, and winning at it. People out east don’t know that but they should.

“It’s no problem,” I say, because I am a fake person.

He keeps talking with affection about the rigors of family life, and while I nod and smile, I don’t respond. It’s not that I mind his friendliness, aggressive though it may be, or even that I distrust it. It’s more that it’s draining. Besides, I think, I came home to reckon with the silence of the past. Nothing else.

Mercy eventually intervenes, and we empty the plane. Ascending the jetway, my ears search for the familiar jingles of the shakedown. “Hail, Hail, Hail,” they will ring. “Our hometown boy done good.” I step into the terminal. Other than the Mormons, it’s deserted and dumbstruck. The sound of a faraway vacuum cleaner fills the space between.

In my head, I say, “Hello, Reno,” like a slurring British rock star. Some horde cheers in response, made up of fuzzy yearbook faces from yesteryear. In reality, I just nod at the Mormon dad, who’s on a knee strapping in his brood. Then I follow the signs for baggage claim.

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I pass the vacant slots. I pass a stuffed brown bear that’s been an airport staple since the eighties. I pass a Kaepernick display with photo prints and a signed football encased in glass. He was a college quarterback here, a local legend before he became a national third rail. Some rube attacked the display with scissors last year. Hence the glass.

Near the escalators are neon signs pushing second-rate casino buffets and third-rate lawyers. I recognize one of the lawyers

as a high school classmate. MARCO LO DUCA, the sign reads. THE ZUMBA LAWYER. An image of Marco Lo Duca in bright fitness gear dancing in a courtroom grins down as I descend the escalator. Marco Lo Duca must be a better lover than he is attorney – the gossip cables hath informed that he's dating Sasha Caughlin.

Which is bullshit for a host of reasons, chief among them that I never dated Sasha Caughlin.

I retrieve my luggage and step outside and take a big, sloppy breath of mountain air. That, at least, is as sweet as remembered. Tonic for the body, balm for the soul. The downtown casino lights wash celestial against the dark well of vast sky. Bliss, I think. No wonder those silver miners and pioneers stayed way back when. I've long held that if it weren't for other people, my hometown would be utopia.

"Thrope!" I turn to the call of my teenage nickname. It's Ali, waving from an idling white Suburban parked illegally across a handicap spot. "You goofy bitch, over here." She's shouting four decibels louder than necessary because that's how people like Ali speak. I toss my bags into the back and get into the passenger seat.

"Greetings," she says. "Hello Ali," I say. We exchange a half-hug and she peels out for the freeway like a racecar fiend. Ali is my oldest friend (since sixth grade, we bonded over *Magic: The Gathering* cards and the discovery of sarcasm) and the bestower of my nickname: Thrope, short for misanthrope, earned after one too many ignored video-game invitations. It spread through the suburban hills like wildfire. The jocks called me Thrope. The druggies called me Thrope. My sophomore-year girlfriend called me Thrope. So did my senior-year almost-girlfriend. My own sister took to it.

Ali asks if I'm game for some beers. I tell her it's been a long day. We drive to Malarkey's, a pub in the old south. Confusingly, the district has been rebranded by the Chamber of

Commerce as midtown. Many locals view it as cynical ploy to attract hipsters from the Bay Area. Perhaps that's true. If so, it's working. Buildings I knew as seedy gas stations and porn shops are now trendy restaurants and art galleries.

"The hell is happening?" I ask.

"There is no remedy," Ali says, faux-wisdom coating her words. "If we stopped putting out all carbon, this very instant, the oceans will continue to acidify to the point that coral and shellfish can no longer exist, kicking out the legs of the food chain. Everything. Is. Fucked."

Ali's become a doom prophet in our old age. She sends occasional texts to our group chat about the coming fate of the anthropocene. (I didn't even know that word a year ago and I'm the writer.) Ali's not an environmentalist, mind you – I'm not sure she even recycles.

"Dude. I meant the gentrification."

She laughs, then points to the center console. A worn copy of my book sits there, wedged between the gear shift and a cupholder. "Gonna need to sign that." I nod. I'm not sure how Ali feels about her character's depiction. She's never brought it up, which I appreciate. She's probably pissed. Most are.

We take a corner table. Malarkey's has that chic warehouse aesthetic going on, complete with chalkboard menus. Novelty beer tap handles line the bar like sentries, little guitars and wolf heads denoting different craft brews. A mural of Kaepernick kneeling against the American flag covers the far wall, framed by an angular silhouette of Nevada. I don't know art but it seems like good art. It's also quite the political statement for a local business to make. As with the nation as a whole, Kap's anthem protests have divided our hometown.

The only other people in the pub are an old man in all denim and a cowboy hat and a group of white, bearded twenty-

some things staring into their phones. "It's Sunday," Ali explains. "Band night on the other side of midtown."

I don't know what any of that means so I order the most commercial beer I see.

The thing I want to talk about, the thing I'm back in Reno for, seems like the kind of thing to ease into. Instead I ask Ali about Marco Lo Duca, Zumba lawyer. This is the right string to pull; a holy crusade of expletives forms across the table. Ali's a lawyer, too, and from what I can tell, a good one – an assistant district attorney who has served as our group's legal counsel for years, from our friend in tech selling his start-up for *beaucoup* coin to advising our aid-worker friend through her divorce. Ali can't stand lawyers who advertise, like Marco Lo Duca. Ali can't stand lawyers with reputations for swindling lower-income clients, like Marco Lo Duca. Ali can't stand lawyers who went to shit law schools, like Marco Lo Duca, yet who still have become citizens of local renown, like Marco Lo Duca.

"And now he's fucking Sasha Caughlin!" Ali shouts this five decibels louder than necessary, causing the bartender and the man in the denim to look over in irritation. That's it, though, as Ali is 6'2 and rugby thick. "The world's a cruel and unjust place, Thrope. Beyond salvaging."

"And how's Paula?" I ask.

"That's Doctor to you, son," Ali says, raising her fingers for another beer. Paula is Ali's wife and an anesthesia resident at Saint Mary's Hospital. They're bona fide, a true power couple as these things go. Not elites – this part of the west doesn't have those, at least not in the eastern sense of the word – but still, known. Moneyed. Both families have been in the area for generations; Ali's dad is a regional supermarket baron while Paula comes from a venerated Basque clan that owns cattle ranches and produces a senator every forty years or so.

Perhaps most significantly, Paula's uncle was the head football coach of the 2001 Hidden Valley Indians, the last northern Nevada team to win state in the big-school division. (Vegas high schools dominate everything now, much to the consternation of the various has-beens and never-weres among the Reno dad population.)

Belatedly, Ali recognizes the intent behind my question. "She's fine. We're going to try again in the spring, we think." After a strained beat she adds, "She's over that business being in the book. You wouldn't be staying with us, otherwise."

"It's a novel," I say. "Fiction. Borrowing from life, it's the job."

"Mmm." Ali does something with her mouth that conveys both skepticism and acceptance. I wonder what she thinks about my use of their personal tragedy. It's maybe my second biggest regret from the book. Before I muster up the courage to ask in a roundabout way, she asks if I'm dating anyone in New York.

"Here and there," I say, which is true.

"Poor bitches. Communicating their feelings to you must be like trying to negotiate with a vending machine."

We drink two more rounds then call it a night. I ask if Ali's good to drive, she laughs and flashes her ADA badge. I stare at her, hard, until she rolls her eyes. "Seriously? Four beers on a full stomach. Wasn't *that* long ago I spent my Saturday nights out-chugging Kap's o-line. Get in the car, princess."

She may not be feeling the drink but I am. We roll smooth through the streets of Reno on a magic carpet of SUV might. I'd forgotten how quiet everything is here, the kind of quiet that chews up human folly and human triumph and spits it back out into the high desert like little bones. The Bonanza Casino shoots a searchlight from its roof, casting the strip of fast

food restaurants across from it in half-shadows. The east coast doesn't have good fast food, I think. No Jack in the Box. No In-N-Out. Carl's Jr. goes by some charlatan name which stales the cheeseburgers, somehow.

The Bonanza searchlight sweeps across the intersection to our front. We went to school with the Bonanza kids, the Rouhanis, who came and went in stretch limos. My mom likes to say that people in the casino industry don't understand *The Godfather* films are a critique and not a celebration, and then lo and behold, the Rouhani parents got arrested for federal tax evasion. I believe the kids run the casino now, which, hey, I think, good for them. As long as they're paying their taxes. Uncle Sam always gets his. Why don't the libertarians out here grasp that? Fever cowboy logic leftover from the old days.

All of this will be Great Basin fossil someday, I realize. The Jack in the Box. The libertarianism. The Bonanza limos. All like that ancient dinosaur fish whose name no one can spell. I unroll the window hoping to hear something. The churn of the river. A siren. Maybe a distant coyote howl. Instead there's only more annihilating silence.

"Good of you to come," Ali finally says. "Leaving after the memorial?"

"That evening." I pause, swallowing to wet my throat. "True he collapsed directing traffic?"

Ali nods. "Morning drop-off. Died as he lived. Yelling at idiots."

We share a laugh. Mr. Flores had indeed enjoyed yelling at idiots, something our high school provided ample opportunity for.

Ali and Paula live on a sleepy cul-de-sac in a bungalow near the river, in a neighborhood we used to call "near the river." Who knows what nonsense it goes by now. A few blocks out, we

drive parallel to Lake Street and the old city arch. “Reno,” it reads in clean steel lettering. “The Biggest Little City in the World.”



“A good title, really. *The Biggest Little City*.” There’s not a drop of inflection in Ali’s voice. “Gets at the duality of it all.” She’s talking about my book. Nevada literary legends tend to use broad, mawkish titles like *The City of Trembling Leaves* and *Sweet Promised Land* for their testaments to our home. I stole mine from the fucking arch.

“Yeah,” I say through a yawn. “I got that much right.”

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Saint Ignatius was, and remains, the only private high school in Reno. Can’t speak to the current student population, though I’d guess the makeup’s about the same: 150-ish students per grade. One-third of those from old Reno, good Catholics baptized in the church who tithe and confess with regularity. These folks form the bedrock of northern Nevada, hard middle-

class and proud Republicans since the days of Ike. Their kids skew toward nice and interesting enough, though no one's meaner than a Reno Catholic teen set on it. These select jackwagons become Saint I's linebackers and social merchants, year after year, decade after decade, rinse and repeat.

Another third of students come from new Reno, everything from lapsed Catholics to [insert prim Protestant sect here] to Jewish. (Yes, Reno does have Chosen People.) These kids come from both coin and fast crowds, so their parents determine that sending them to Saint I's will cure their little darlings of their drug/alcohol/sex habits. Problem is, other parents with the exact same issue settle on the exact same solution. It's like sending a bunch of angry young terrorists to an island prison and letting them further radicalize each other. (That's a great line, I know. Used it in my novel.) This is why Saint I's has a reputation as a party school.

The last third of students go to Saint Ignatius for academic and/or small-classroom reasons: a gray-haired band of geriatric college professors teach the honors courses. That's why I went, that's why Ali went, that's why most of our friends went. There's overlap and exceptions in that sweeping overview, of course, because life is always more complex and layered than memory allows for. But human minds must dissect and categorize, if not for order, at least for the guise of it.

Anyhow. That's the ecosystem in which we all met Mr. Flores, and where he became my mentor. He was the first teacher in my life to tell me to read widely and write free. He was the first teacher in my life to say that I possessed a gift. He believed in me, as few ever had, as few have since.

I repaid all that by making him the antagonist of my novel, severe and draconian in ways he only feigned at in real life. He never forgave me for it. Then he collapsed dead in the Saint Ignatius parking lot directing morning traffic, yelling

at idiots.

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I wake in the guestroom of the bungalow, unsure where I am. Awareness comes as I sit up and look out the sliding glass door to a narrow garden patio. The door is cracked, a low October bite nipping through it. A pile of golden-brown leaves sits in a corner of the patio, waiting to be picked up like a dutiful child after school. I close my eyes and take in a sloppy breath of clean morning air.

I'd stay here forever, I think, but for this dash of hangover lurking about my skull.

Ali has already left for work but Paula sits in their kitchen, sipping from a mug of coffee. She asks if I want one and I join her at the kitchen counter. We small-talk so we both can inform Ali later we did so.

I tap the most obvious vein first, doctoring. She hadn't gone to medical school thinking about anesthesia, she begins, and we're off. She's lopped her hair, I notice, into something like a bob. It's a striking change. Years before, a dark scarlet sheen fell from her head like a waterfall. I'd probably have fallen in unrequited love if I hadn't found something about Paula so deeply unknowable. Then I'd thought it an elusive dreaminess, the result of talking to too many horses on her family's Washoe Valley ranch. With time, I realized it was just apathy. She didn't share Ali's (and my) appreciation for whimsy and bullshit. She didn't have time for people who weren't going to help her achieve her goals. I'd admire it if I hadn't been assessed disposable.

"And your family?" she asks, bringing me back. My mind had drifted from the conversation. "How are they?"

"Same ole'," I say. My parents filed for divorce the day after my little sister left for college and both were gone

themselves within the year. My mother retired after twenty-two years as a paralegal at the local power firm Donner Douglass & Hagen, moving home to Virginia, while my father – the last Porsche executive still in Reno after the headquarters fled in 1997 – finally joined his comrades in Atlanta. A beat late, I remember Paula was one of my few friends to visit with my mother during that long year.

“My mom sends her love, of course,” I manage.

“She’s great. I know you know that.” Paula liking my mother more than she likes me is one of those unknowable things I was going on about. “So. Gonna see the big sights? Saint I’s? Maple’s? Rattlesnake Mountain?”

These are oblique references to my book. Paula thinks Saint I’s is full of “privileged mediocrity.” (Did she actually say that or is it something her character said? I can’t tell the difference anymore.) My first summer job was at Maple’s Casino, where the valet overlords judged me tender because I couldn’t yet drive stick. I became a health club attendant instead, and occasionally, older gay men would hit on me while I collected towels in the locker room. This experience served as the crux of Chapter 3. Rattlesnake Mountain (a lonely, dusty hill in the old southeast) was where a young maiden claimed my innocence, a historic moment forever dignified in the final pages of Chapter 6.

“Getting lunch with Robert Bonilla, actually.”

This makes Paula smile. Everyone likes Robert. Thinking her intimations an opening, I begin to stammer out an apology. She cuts in after eight words.

“I’m glad you’re here. Say hi to Robert for me.”

With that, coffee with Paula is over.

I shower and shave and think about the nature of forgiveness,

who should seek it, who gets to issue it. I lock the front door, as instructed. The day smells of pine needle and kerosene. To the near east, saws of black smoke mark what's left of industrial Reno – most everything that can afford it has moved to rural Storey County, where Tesla's built a gigafactory. To the hard west, the snow-tipped Sierras shoot from a meadow of sun-browned tumbleweeds, giant earth castles shaped by a manic god. Today's sky is big, I observe, even by the standards of the west. On the sidewalk across from the bungalow someone has spray-painted a note in money green. "ARE YOU HELPING," the sidewalk asks. "ARE YOU HURTING."

Walking north, it doesn't take long to hear the crawl of languid water. The Truckee is more creek than river, but I don't tell that to the ducks paddling about its reedy banks. They're nostalgic holdouts, I decide, clinging to a summer that's never returning. I make a mental note to walk back this way with bread. A noon bell tolls, but from where I'm at, I don't know if it comes from a church or casino.

I find Robert on a bench in front of the old Riverside Hotel. The city was founded in this very spot in 1859 by an entrepreneur who built a log bridge over the river and began charging mining prospectors for its use. The hustle endures. A sign promoting an upcoming poker tournament at Maple's rises from a pole next to the bench, everyone in the photograph smiling with big carnivore teeth, winners and losers alike. This strikes me as off. The summer I worked at the health club, a state assemblyman shot dead a Chinese high roller in the VIP poker room. I wanted to see the body but security wouldn't let me in.

Robert's wearing new cowboy boots, faded hipster jeans, and a striped button-up open at the collar to let flow his chest hair. Dark, carefully-cultivated stubble swathes his face. He looks up as I approach and I see a pale reflection of myself in his metallic sunglasses.

“Thrope.” He puts out his hand and I help him up. “I bring bad tidings.”

“Oh?”

“Sasha Caughlin. Marco Lo Duca. It’s a belligerent act.”

“Good for them?” I try. Robert shakes his head. “The world’s beyond salvaging,” I offer next. He nods at that.

Robert’s our friend who got rich, the one who sold his tech start-up with Ali’s help. He splits his time between San Francisco and Tahoe, an amateur angel investor and ski junkie. Ali’s taken to calling him “The Baja Globetrotter” because of a predilection for the foreign-born. Like all professional romancers, Robert plays bashful when pressed on it, smiling distantly before changing the subject. He’s come a long way from the boy who flew his desk around science class pretending it was the Starship Enterprise.

The ground floor of the old Riverside is now a grill known as Comstock Willy’s. We decide to eat there, taking an outdoor patio table. Ska punk pumps from unseen speakers, a form of music you don’t hear in New York, I think. Too jumpy.

An old woman in an electric scooter rolls by, a large plastic cup of coins primed for the slots wedged into a front basket. She’s attached to a portable oxygen tank and a miniature American flag flies from the scooter on an antenna. I can’t help but notice the message on the woman’s outsized tee shirt: “SHUT UP AND STAND UP,” it reads. “KAEPER-DICK.”

“There’s no place like Reno,” Robert says, a mystical sort of irony splashing his words. “For all the mortal delights.”

This is a line from my book. I cribbed it from Didion, but the overlap of readers between her and me is limited to my mom’s book club. Robert didn’t mind his fictional rendering, unlike most, though he still insists I exaggerated his libertine

persona. Which I may have. Fact and interpretation blurred a long time ago, of both place and people.

We get beers and sandwiches and catch up in a breezy, tranquil way. Some old friendships fray, some adapt, some remain fixed and exact through time and rigor. This is how it is with Robert and I am glad for it. It's nice to pretend at being aimless again.

"I feel like we know them." I follow Robert's eyes into the grill, where a father, mother and three small children have taken nest. It takes a few seconds but I place the parents.

"Jason and Amanda Jankowski," I say. "Class ahead of us. Dated all through Saint I's."

"Ah. They look – " he shrugs. "Like each other."

"That can happen," I say. "Marriage is a face blender."

The Jankowskis' food arrives from the kitchen and they clasp hands and begin to pray.

"Stop, Thrope," Robert says. I haven't done or said a thing.

"What."

"I see the gears moving up there." He shakes his head. "Big-city writer, can't go home again."

I hadn't thought that or anything about the praying family. My mind, really, truly, had been on the river ducks, and the graffiti message on the sidewalk. I tell Robert this, and say that I admire the conviction and sincerity in an act like public prayer. Hell, I say, I could use more of both.

He just shakes his head again. He doesn't believe me.

We finish our sandwiches and get another round. Robert leans back in his chair and crosses his legs, his cowboy boots catching a glint of peeking sun.

"Flores, dead and gone." I tilt my head. "You guys ever ... " He trails off, not finishing his sentence. Whatever word he intended, my answer remains no.

"Too bad," he says.

"Yeah," I say.

"All because you made him a fake villain who shuts down a pretend student newspaper." Robert and I have had this conversation before, almost word for word, but I still appreciate his going through the motions. "So weird."

"He was a prideful man." I pause. "Though 'Mr. Flowers' as a stand-in for Flores could've been more subtle."

Robert shrugs. For him, the book is someone else's lark, someone else's ball and chain. He's like I was before, free of the burden of others' lives. It's ignorance, perhaps, though without that ignorance I'd never have been able to see it through. Maybe Ali's right about everything being fucked. Robert asks if I want to go to a party in Basque Creek that evening. "Some fancy folk will be there. Good material for your next bestseller! Text Ali, the power couple should come, too."

I don't want to go to a party with fancy folk in Basque Creek. I came here to brood and remember, not to find and enjoy. But Robert's easy swagger has infected the best of us over the years.

"Why not," I say.

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Here's the thing about the book: it did *fine*. People in publishing would call it a *nice* debut. *Solid*. Which means: *middling*. *Ordinary*. *Meh*. Which really means: *On to the next one*.

Did *The Times* review it? Reader, it did not. Did *The Post*? It did not. A Sinclair Lewis scholar reviewed it for *The New Republic* (online only) and found it “engaging in a belabored, post-ironic kind of way ... perhaps this tale of youthful blundering could’ve charmed if only its author had recognized the characters’ complete lack of stakes.” I have reason to suspect that half the hardcovers sold reside in my dad’s basement.

A novel about growing up in Sante Fe came out a month after and sold eight times as many copies. It made every award short-list ever coveted. I met the author in New York at a reading. He didn’t even do me the courtesy of being an asshole.

So. *Middling*. Meh. On to the next one.

But! *The Biggest Little City* did generate some interest in pockets of its namesake. *The Reno Gazette-Journal* ran an author profile, positive enough. The *Sparks Citizen* didn’t hate it, despite the truly terrible things I wrote about Sparks. (“Reno’s crusty sock,” for one.) The alt weekly sketched out a map showing “my” Reno, buoyed by short interviews with people who knew me when, to include one Eugene Flores, honors English teacher at Saint Ignatius High School.

“He always kept an active imagination,” is the entirety of his statement. The weapon of restraint can strike so clean by those who know how to wield it.

Was my intention to malign? It was not. (With the exception of a couple minor characters from the baseball team.) I’ve just always needed to tell things as I see them, straight and clear and bemused, the way an addict needs a fix, the way Chambers of Commerce need hipster midtowns. I’m not saying it’s right. I’m not saying it’s healthy. I’m only saying it is. I’d have done the same to the moon had I been reared there.

But I wasn’t. I’m from Reno. So I wrote about it. Straight.

Clear. And so very bemused, not by place, or people, but by the strange and bitter magic of life.

(Yes, I cribbed that line, too.)

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Reno is a place of constant change, which means to survive, it must also be a place of constant reinvention. Robert reminds me of this as we drive out to Basque Creek. When an industry dies, new ones must be found. The old mines and timber mills became marriage chapels and railroads. The prewar shine of heavyweight title bouts and a divorce courthouse fit for Hollywood couldn't be golden age forever. Corporate gaming came, inevitably, for the self-made casino pioneers. Companies from Lear Jet to Helms Construction to Porsche, all local saviors of their time, all empty tombs, now. But hear the old refrain, once more: Reno's back, baby.

"Gigafactory's changed everything," Robert says through gulps of open convertible wind. "Panasonic's leasing space there, making battery cells. Google just bought a shit-ton of land down the road for a data center. Those are the direct jobs. Who's building out that road? A local company. Who feeds all those employees? Local companies. Economic impact's in the billions, easy. That's why tonight's happening. Birthday party for a Tesla exec, sure. But it's also a statement. Of what we are, what we're becoming."

I ask again about an open bar.

We're well past the city limits I once knew. My Reno ended with the waterpark off the freeway. The waterpark marked the edge of civilization. Now, the wilderness beyond has become subdivision after subdivision, sprawled across the valley in a blanket of stucco houses. It smells like drought out here.

"Might as well be Vegas," I say. Robert laughs.

We keep driving. Robert's red Miata begins to crawl up sun-scorched hills like a bug on a picnic table. We keep driving. The orange sun of the high desert fades behind us, slowly. We come to green manicured lawns and little thumbprint ponds and keep driving. Then comes a marble statue of a bighorn sheep and a sign etched from stone: Basque Creek Golf & Country Club.

I make a joke about the sprinkler bill but Robert doesn't hear me anymore. He's running his tongue over his teeth and checking his nostrils for loose hairs in the rearview mirror, making himself fancy for the fancy folk. I do the same.

We leave his convertible with college-age valets covered in tattoos and furry goatees who possess that young aimlessness I miss so much – they just shrug when Robert tells them to take care of his beloved. He hands over a twenty-dollar bill. They call him sir and say yes, no problem.

We're directed toward a dim ballroom. Hundreds of bodies mill about, the low roar of boozy chitchat ubiquitous. There's an honest to Christ ice sculpture of the gigafactory in the center of the room. Robert wiggles an eyebrow and says he needs to go glad-hand with other techies. He disappears into the throng.

Jeans and cowboy boots surround me like hostiles on an open plain. I'm wearing the only nice clothes I brought, my black funeral suit with no tie and scuffed wingtips, and have never felt so New York in my life. Someone asks if I'm the Adderall guy. I go to the nearest bar and order a local Great Basin beer to show the others that I'm one of them. Then I park myself against a column and crowd-watch, because, well. I am also Thrope.

For the many people I don't know or recognize, there are some I do. The old mayor who lived near us, which meant our neighborhood always got plowed first after a snowfall. The

fourth wife of a mafioso who inherited all that Tahoe waterfront and turned it into an environmental research center. A tax lawyer from Saint Ignatius who's gone bald. Another Saint Ignatius grad I could've sworn died of a meth overdose. The hot middle school counselor who's still got it. Channel 2's evangelical meteorologist. The trans snowboarder who brought home Olympic bronze. The libertarian radio host who went on hunger strike during a land rights dispute. Donner (Junior) of Donner Douglass & Hagen. The desert explorer who works with special needs children. And others.

It's a real cross-section of the community.

A club employee in a polo shirt finds me at the appetizer table. "So sorry, sir," he says. "The others are already in the back."

"What?" I say.

The employee's eyes splinter. "Google marketing exec, right?"

It's because I'm the only person around wearing a suit, both youngish and disheveled enough to maybe be from Silicon Valley. Before I set the kid straight, I think, *what the hell*. Some dead writer advised that still-living writers need to take chances. So I tilt my head and say, "What do you think?"

This makes the employee apologize again, and we're off, striding across the ballroom through all the high ceremony Reno can muster. He leads us to a room behind a code. This room feeds to an escalator that takes us to another room behind a code. This room snaps with the brittle chill of too much air conditioning. That's the first thing I notice. The second is that it's filled with some of the most important people of northern Nevada, movers and shakers I've never spoken with but know from reputation and news interviews.

There are about two dozen, mostly men, mostly white, mostly thick, either in the shoulders or the gut. There are the Maple

brothers, of Maple's Casino, one smart and one drunk, though no one can tell them apart until happy hour. There's Donner (Senior) of Donner Douglass & Hagen, who's made his name and fortune lobbying for tobacco and liquor. There's a man in a white stetson whose name I can't summon but know is a big land developer all over the state. (Of places like the Basque Creek master-planned community.)

I spot the Governor (Saint Ignatius Class of 1980) in a far circle near a muted big-screen turned to football. He's wearing a western dress shirt and talking with Tesla suits and an air guard general. The Governor's teeth are dentist-commercial white and I want to ask how he does it. All in this room seem very pleased with themselves, and with one another. I wonder if anyone here has read my book. It seems unlikely. I look again at Donner (Senior), recalling a story my mom told of him in a heated negotiation, reminding the other attorneys he was descended from Donner Party cannibals, and that some things were just in a man's blood.

She'd told the story with respect, proud of her firm's chieftain because he'd won. In the room above the ballroom, I feel a pang of dark regret, sudden and forceful. It's for Mr. Flores. There are so many more deserving villains, I think, than a lifelong educator who devoted himself to literature and good order.

"Mister Google." It's the man in the white stetson, pointing to me with a stubby thumb. "Enjoying the native spoils?"

He means the Great Basin beer in my hand. It occurs me that if I'm to play this role of new prospector I should do it well.

"Drink local, think global," I say. This earns some chuckles and entrance to the near circle of important men.

They're discussing Kaepernick. "Of course you have a *right* to kneel during the anthem," Donner (Senior) says, with all the understanding of a wall. I'm not surprised he doesn't

recognize me – it's a giant firm – but bothered, perhaps. My mom worked there twenty-two years. "It's still the *wrong* thing to do."

He looks across the circle, straight at me. "Imagine Silicon Valley thinks different?"

"All depends," I say, because I imagine it does.

Talk turns to the future of the city. The gigafactory's changing everything, they agree, which means the possibilities are endless. Another youngish, disheveled man I figure to be from one of the tech companies asks about the arch. It seems outdated, he says.

"It's an icon." The man in the white stetson speaks with volume, the gobbler under his chin shaking with authority. "A reminder, in its way. Now, a new city slogan? Some of us have been looking at that."

"I still like 'Reno Rising,'" one of the Maple brothers says. Most everyone else groans.

The man in the white stetson squares himself toward me. It remains cold in the room but his eyes probe colder. He's short but broad and full like a shovel head and it's easy to understand, in this brief nugget of time under his stare, how he's attained power. "You tech kids are good at this," he says, speaking in a slow monotone packed with old Nevada cunning. "Any flatlander ideas?"

For a few seconds, I realize, I have the rapt attention of men who affect change. This is no insignificant thing. Their techniques might not always be clean and their intent might not always be pure, but hey, I think, that's life in the wild west. I want, desperately, to provide what they seek: something good and true for our city.

It comes like genius lightning.

"How about," I say, "Reno: for all the mortal delights."

A long, strained moment passes, then another, and then all the important men laugh, at once and together, at one of the most beautiful lines ever written about their home.

*

Mr. Flores –

Hope this finds you thriving at Saint I's and otherwise. All good here – New York's a beast of a city, but I'm learning to navigate it. Through much trial and error, I've taught myself how to sear pork chops and vegetables. A welcome break from Chinese takeout.

I've emailed you a couple times with no response. Did my book offend? I'm truly sorry if it did. It just kind of tumbled out that way, and I thought I'd have plenty of time to edit and revise and change things. Then it found a publisher, and things happened so fast ... the newspaper thing was unfair to you (well, Mr. Flowers). For what it's worth, you weren't like that at all as a teacher. You were judicious and thoughtful. If the character wasn't nuanced enough, the fault is mine. Like you used to tell us in class, "Be better next time." That's my aim now.

Be well, Mr. Flores.

He never replied to that message, either. So I stopped trying. What's a man to do? Mr. Flores wasn't the only one trying to reconcile hidden pride with someone else's memories.

*

I escape the air-conditioned room before the important men grasp who I am not. Talk had turned to zoning laws and Donner (Senior) seemed to be sorting my face through his memory annals. Besides, I'd gotten what I needed.

Flatlander, I think. Hurtful! But also: a great insult.

The next book will get much use from it.

My mind's whirring with plot ideas as I return to the ballroom. I look for the club employee to ask for a pen and bar napkins. So many villain options, I think. The challenge will be deciding who to emphasize. The man in the white stetson seems an obvious frontrunner.

It'll need to be third person, of course, to prove I have the range ...

"Thrope!" It's Ali, four decibels louder than necessary, standing near the ice sculpture. She's doing something with her face that conveys both amusement and alarm but it's not until I'm steps away that I realize why: the stranger she's talking with isn't a stranger at all, but Sasha Caughlin.

I remember to breathe, smile and hug, in that order.

"Hey, Thrope," Sasha Caughlin says. "Been a while."

She looks up with big, dark eyes and a coy smile, too, and glory be, those tender, pretend hopes of the far past can be realized by the abrupt present. One only needs will it to be.

"Where are you now?" she asks.

"Went east a few years ago," I say, hoping for the effect Yale grads have when they tell people they went to school in New Haven. "How are things here?"

"Freaking Ali! Freaking Thrope!" It's Marco Lo Duca, predictably ruining everything. He slaps my back and Sasha Caughlin settles into his shoulder like a Lego piece. I wonder if anyone else in the history of the world has known personal tragedy such as this.

Marco Lo Duca compliments Ali on a recent case she won before

turning his charms on me. "Great to see you, man." He sounds eager, even genuine. "Your book – what an accomplishment. Wow!"

"You wrote a book?" Sasha Caughlin sounds confused and I want to scream into the abyss. "I'd no idea."

"Yeah, babe! A novel. We have a copy at home, in the den somewhere. Funny stuff."

"He was always funny," Sasha Caughlin says. "Weren't you, Thrope?"

I only nod in agreement and stand there, open-mouthed and dead-souled, as Marco Lo Duca explains my own creative offering to the girl I spent much of my youth daydreaming about. He even gets some of it right, in a straightforward, literal-thinking, Marco Lo Duca sort of way.

"Sad that Mr. Flores took it to heart the way he did." Marco Lo Duca purses his thin, stupid lips and then finishes the question no one else has. "You two ever talk it out?"

I shake my head. "Student newspaper thing really upset him."

"Well. That wasn't quite it." Marco Lo Duca grits his teeth and sighs, in that showy way showy people will do, and launches into his tale. He and Mr. Flores hadn't been close in high school, he says, but they bonded later when the older man helped him with law school essays. Had this been around the time *The Biggest Little City* was published? Marco Lo Duca thinks it must've been. He remembers Mr. Flores being excited for me, then confused by what I was trying to say in the book. About Reno, about Saint Ignatius, about him.

"The bit about his character no longer speaking with his grown daughter." Marco Lo Duca's voice is so knowing, so certain, I want to shatter it. "Too much, maybe."

Marco Lo Duca keeps talking, but I'm no longer listening. My

novel did contain a sentence about Mr. Flowers' strained relationship with a grown daughter. A short line, a quick line, a throwaway line I'd never thought twice about. Had I taken that from the real teacher, the real man? I must have, I realize, far too late and far too away to do a damn thing about it. Ali's looking at me from the corners of her eyes with a sharpness I've never before seen directed my way.

I wish Robert was here. Or my parents. They like the book for what it is. They never expected it to be anything else. They never expected it to be anything but a book.

Ali's glare remains fixed on me. It holds and it holds and it holds. Forgiveness isn't a thing or even an aim, I think, too late, always too late. It's a process. A process without end.

Desperate to change the subject, I ask about them. Sasha Caughlin talks about her business development job at one of the casinos. Marco Lo Duca goes into detail about the rigors of Zumba lawyering. Then they say that they're calling it an early night but it was great to see us, and we'll talk again at tomorrow's memorial.

Left with nothing else, I smell Sasha Caughlin's hair as they turn to leave.

I look at Ali. She looks at me. Shame burns through me and I want nothing more than to be under a blanket somewhere, hiding from the world. Ali hails a waiter with a tray of beers. Great Basins, of course.

"Paula's not here?" I ask.

"She's not," Ali says.

"Because of me," I say.

"Because of you," she says.

I close my eyes. Ali's my oldest friend and I've hurt her

deeply. The others I'll get over. This one matters, though. She deserves more. She deserved better. I begin to stammer out an apology. She cuts in after four words.

"Another time," she says. "The fuck were you?"

So I tell her: about the air-conditioned room, and the Governor's teeth, and the man in the white stetson, and the conversation about the arch and flatlanders from Silicon Valley.

"Sounds crazy, I know," I say. "But I almost sold that Didion line."

Ali considers that, then points to the ice sculpture of the gigafactory. "Might help to think about the rising oceans and humanity's goliath carbon footprint. Little to no chance we'll slow either enough in the coming decades to keep society from total collapse. This? It's the End."

We clink our bottles together in a wordless toast.

*

Before the memorial the next morning, I borrow Ali's Suburban and drive into the foothills of southwest Reno to see my childhood home.

In the mid-eighties, this was the fringe of town, the new master-planned community where all the white-collar casino families and hotshot Porsche execs were supposed to live. My mom wanted a house in old Reno, near the river, a big Colonial Revival along California Avenue. My dad came from a humbler background and besides, the suburbs were the future. The possibilities, well. They were endless.

It's a shadow blue home at the top of a hill, with a front yard of honeysuckle my mom planted herself and a rolling side yard perfect for summer slip 'n slides and winter sledding. I never thought much of it as a physical space for the eighteen

years I lived in it, it was just there. Where I ate, grew, dreamed. But now, here, I find myself thinking about things like its bright, open dining room and the way the bathroom faucet water felt in my palms and the peculiar cranny in the garage where my mom found an angry rattlesnake and then killed it by driving our Volvo station wagon over its head forty times.

I park in the cul-de-sac across the street and leave the engine running. The honeysuckle garden remains, though it's more feral than we ever let it grow. There's a strange weathervane on the roof – a black zit on a face of shingles, looking out of place in the way only reality infringing upon memory can. My sister used to rollerblade every day in this cul-de-sac, I remember, until some sixth-grade mean girl told her you can't be pretty if you rollerblade.

The return ticket to New York sits in my back pocket. I know already how today's memorial will go: there will be Catholic pomp. The Saint Ignatius community will turn out in force. There will be scriptural readings but no personal eulogies, no way Mr. Flores would allow indulgence like that. At some point I'll tear up because I'm sensitive, and people around me will think it's because of what happened with the book, but it won't be about that at all, it'll probably be because of something random like the sidewalk graffiti that demanded to know if I'm HELPING or HURTING. Then there will be hugging, much physical hugging, and maybe I'll get to smell Sasha Caughlin's hair again.

I realize my old home must be inhabited by a young family. There are play-patches in the grass and the top of a basketball hoop peaks out from the backyard. This is right, I think. Maybe it's the Mormons from the flight here. Or the Jankowskis. I'd like that.

I consider ringing the doorbell, asking whoever answers if I can look around. But I don't. This way, my old home remains

boundless.

New Fiction from Matt Gallagher: Excerpt, 'Empire City'

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Mia Tucker woke before the alarm. She usually did on weekdays. She was a person of routine and that's what routine did. Sleep whispered like a lullaby through the black morning but she pushed it away, sitting up in bed to put her mind in order. If she'd been dreaming, she'd already forgotten what about.

Monday, she thought. Cardio.

A storm had rolled through the city late in the night, leaving the brittle musk of rain. A coldness nipped at the top of Mia's shoulder. How do they keep getting in here? she wondered, rubbing at the mosquito bite. I shut the screen last night.

Jesse hadn't come home. He'd sent a few texts, first saying he wasn't sure when he'd be leaving work, then saying he wouldn't be. All-nighters during Bureau emergencies weren't unprecedented. Mia knew the deal. All part of marrying a special agent. Even if waking up by herself in darkness brought on a loneliness she didn't trust.

Mia ate a yogurt, then changed into light workout gear and fitted her running leg and sneakers. Downstairs, the summer air smelled of metal and moss. Dim streetlights lined the corners like sentries and the sidewalks had almost dried. A

garbage truck on an adjacent block groaned through the still while monitor drones pulsed red in the sky. She stretched her left leg and then her core in front of her building, looking up to watch the flag whip around atop the Global Trade. Sixty stars and thirteen stripes, pale against the dark. It didn't strike her as cluttered, anymore, all those rings and stars in the blue canton.

Mia finished stretching and tapped at her right knee. Her running prosthetic was hard and coiled, like a spring. She appreciated the city most during these early morning runs, because it was empty enough to seem welcoming, even hopeful. It reminded her of the city from her childhood. It reminded her of the America she'd grown up in.

Daybreak always ended the spell.

Cut the crap, Mia thought. These ten miles aren't going to run themselves. Then she took a deep breath, set the digital green of her wristwatch to 00:00, hit start, and began, the joints of her leg cracking with the motion while the socket of her prosthetic did the same. She headed west, toward the harbor.

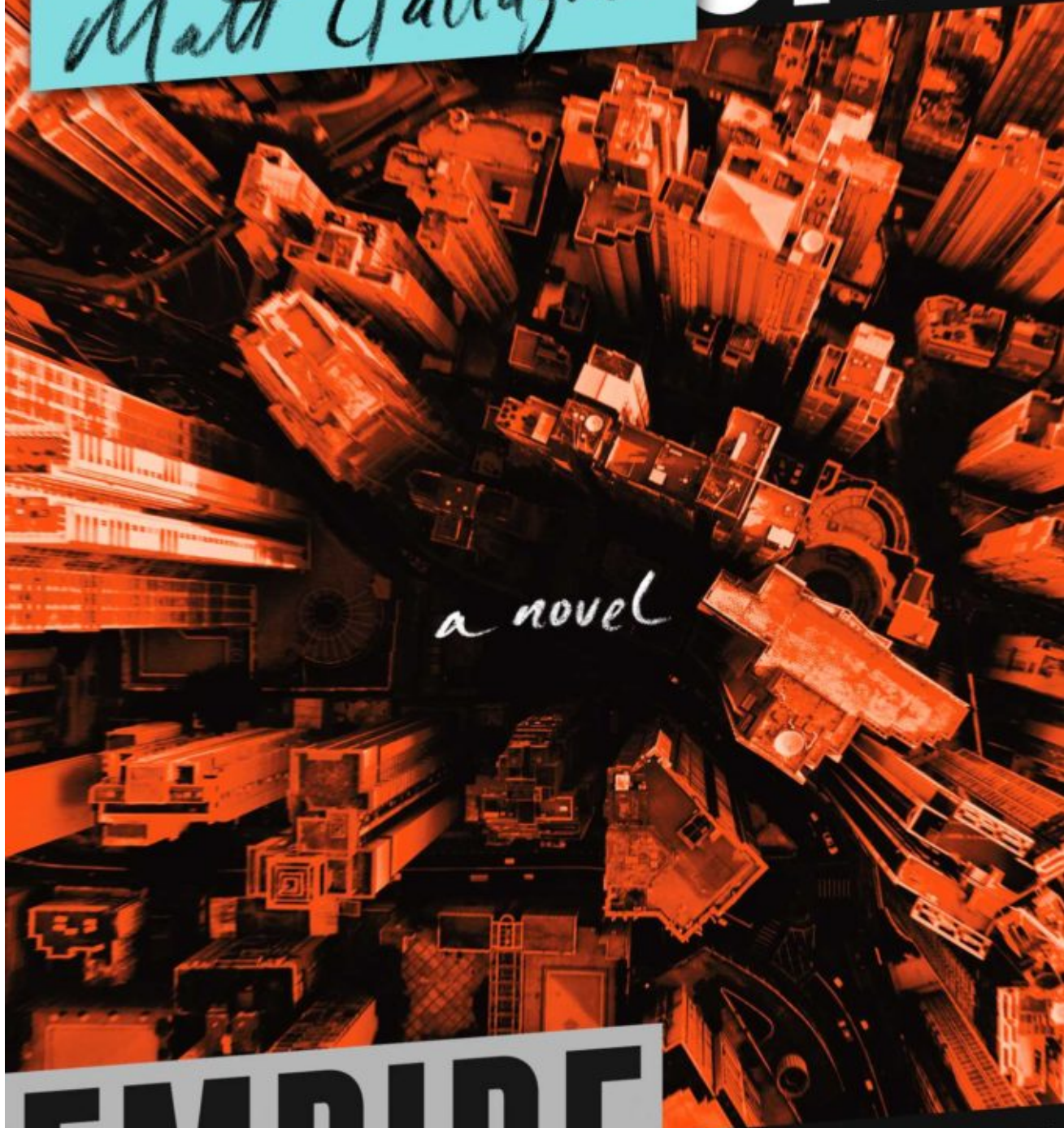
Mia had run most of her life, discovering as a girl that she was good at it and being good meant respect, and trophies, and approval. It made an object of her body, but it was a functional object, something that mattered to her even before she'd figured out why. She'd pushed herself to be very good at points in her life, competing in college for two seasons before it interfered with ROTC, and later running the city marathon her first year with the prosthetic to prove that she could. But she'd never crossed into greatness, and for that she'd come to be thankful. Mia lacked the masochism of true runners, the renegade fanatical gene to ignore and ignore all the warning blinkers thousands of years of evolution had instilled in the human brain. Bloody calluses and angry muscles were one thing. Tendons ripping from bone were another.

The baby, or not-baby, entered Mia's mind. She focused on her breathing. Then came General Collins's job offer. She focused on her breathing.

The first scratches of sun were tracing the water. Lady Liberty rose in the distance, droopy torch in her right hand. The whole statue needed repair, though how, and when, had become a political hot potato. Decades' worth of money allotted for national monuments had gone to the Council of Victors, toward honoring the triumph of Vietnam. No one wanted to be the congressperson who redirected funds from that.

EMPIRE CITY

Matt Gallagher



a novel

EMPIRE CITY

by Matt Gallagher

A lot of citizens had come to loathe the statue, considering it an eyesore. Mia's father thought it a sentimental leftover. She sort of liked it, the way a person enjoys a musty childhood blanket found in storage. She remembered climbing to the torch on a field trip as a girl, through a staircase of graffiti and rickety metal, seeing the city from an entirely new angle. A snapshot of old American might, sealed in memory.

They'd closed the torch after the Palm Sunday attacks, then the entire island. Students like her adolescent cousins wouldn't ever see Empire City as she had. No one could now. The sad, corroding statue was their normal. It was all they knew. In the meantime, Lady Liberty sank slowly into the island it rested on. Turned out it'd been set on sodden ground.

Mia adjusted her sports bra and glanced at her watch. A mile in, which meant her warm-up was over. She lengthened out her strides.

She turned north along a waterfront path, moving into the bike lane to dodge fallen tree branches and loose rocks. Other than the occasional taxi striking through the predawn and a man in rags watching the city from a bench, she was alone. The wharf across the river jutted out like a broken jawbone, suggesting a past when its docks did more than shuttle around office workers and tourists.

The city changed like a photo album, slowly and slowly and then all in a rush. Repair shops became delis. Parking garages became art studios. In the water a flotilla of coast guard barges that'd been restored as restaurants and pubs drifted to and fro. Steel and glass high-rises gave way to the architecture of the last century, rowhouses and squatty brick apartments. The streets narrowed, a few dotted by tidy cobblestone. The waterfront path leveled off, though Mia kept her strides long. She knew an incline awaited. She wanted to meet it in force.

Sunrise arrived somewhere between miles three and four, stained-glass clouds chipping the sky. Mia passed a vomiting young man in a sport jacket too large for him. Probably an intern for one of the banks, she thought, before turning around to make sure it wasn't one of hers.

"Call in sick!" she shouted. He raised his fist and managed a weak "Defy!" before purging again. The motto of the old radicals' caucus in Congress. Funny, Mia thought.

Another mile on, Mia ran into a short concrete tunnel. The tunnel lay underneath an abandoned railway line. Sunlight filled it with a fierce yellow shine. Around ten feet long, the sides and top of it had been covered in graffiti, dozens and dozens of circles of different colors and sizes. Just about every inch of available concrete had been tagged, leaving a sort of rainbow mosaic. Each of the circles contained three arrows pointing down and to the left. The job was fresh—Mia could tell by the tint to the spray paint. She came to a stop in the center of the tunnel, her breaths sharp but controlled. She rubbed a hand against a small purple circle. It smeared across her palm.

I know what this is, Mia thought, looking at her palm, then at the purple circle, sifting through her mind to place where. It took a few seconds, but she remembered a course in modern European history, and this shape and question from the final exam. The antifascist sign, she thought. From Nazi Germany.

A gust swept through the tunnel, and Mia smelled storm from the night before. She fought off the urge to shiver. It was going to be a cold summer day.

*

Most mornings Mia turned around and headed home on the same pathway, but the tunnel had spooked her. She pushed east and then south instead, running the sidewalks. The light and the city rose slow, together. A medley of urban noise was

beginning to tune and it sounded mostly like construction din. There was order within the mayhem; one just needed to know the refrains. Mia did. She made it back to her apartment building on time, stopping only to remove her running leg before showering and dressing for work. She was back out her front door sixteen minutes later.

The air had turned and smelled of humid dew. Mia decided to walk through Vietnam Victory Square. Under the gaze of the Four Legionnaires sculpture, a couple of kids had waded into the fountain, laughing while splashing water at each other. Across from them, a tour group stood in front of the grand white marble wall with the simple words: "Praise to the Victors/In Honor of the Brave Men who went forth to Vietnam/1955-1981." The guide was explaining why the inscription stopped there, despite the insurgency continuing after in parts of the north. He was stumbling through the history and Mia wanted to intervene. Because wars have to end, she thought. Just tell them that.

Coffee-charged angst and white-collar id crackled along the streets, bankers and lawyers and digital communications associates hustling to be at their desks before the workday siren sounded. As she turned onto Wall Street, Mia passed the brownstone Trinity Church she attended every month or so. She'd considered herself an atheist since her tour to Albania, but she still appreciated the ceremony of church and the sense of renewal it allowed for. Her family had fled to America in 1620 for that ceremony and sense of renewal. She wouldn't give up that heritage for something as banal as not believing.

Then there was Jesse. "Jesus's heroin needle," he liked calling Trinity's Gothic steeple. The church's adjacent cemetery, where a slew of American founding fathers and Union generals from the Civil War rested? "A yard of goy bones."

And he's all mine, Mia thought. Trinity was an option for their wedding, though her family wanted it held in

Connecticut. One more decision that she needed to make, and soon.

Mia's bank was located in the Westmoreland Plaza, a mass of skyscrapers bundled together at the end of the island. As she neared it, a vast, bright fire engine came into view, its lights twirling and flashing like a hallucination. A row of police barricades separated the vehicle from the street, uniformed officers turning away confused citizens trying to get to work. Mia joined the crowd.

"No one's allowed in the plaza today," a cop was saying, not for the first time. "And yes, that includes you." His eyes lingered on Mia's blouse, and she stared at him flatly until he looked away. Her grandmother had taught her how to do that on her fourteenth birthday. It worked in Empire City boardrooms just as well as it had in aircraft hangars along the far edges of the world.

"Ms. Tucker." A man shaped like a square wearing a ruffled dress shirt and overlong tie called to her from a corner of the barricades, close to a large bronze globe. It was the security director of her bank. He looked wired to Mia, even eager. "Ms. Tucker," he repeated. "The office is closed today. Your father sent out a message to everyone—work from home, as you can."

"Hadn't checked my email yet." This didn't make any sense. The office, as far as Mia knew, had never closed. Finance didn't "work from home." That was for other people, other jobs. "What's going on?"

"I shouldn't say," he said, in a tone that suggested he very much wanted to.

"Mum's the word," Mia promised. "I'll be finding out, anyhow."

"A threat," the security director said, his voice low and hushed. "Whole plaza. Homeland marshals got it last night."

“Oh.” There’d been a few lockdowns in Empire City over the years, for both real and false alarms, but Mia couldn’t recall any of them shutting down a main cog of the Finance District. “Must be some kind of threat.”

The security director looked out the corner of his eye to make sure no one else was listening, then pulled out his cell phone and read.

WITH FIRMNESS IN THE RIGHT AS GOD GIVES US TO SEE THE RIGHT,
LET US STRIVE ON TO FINISH THE WORK WE ARE IN, TO BIND UP THE
NATION’S WOUNDS, TO CARE FOR HIM WHO SHALL HAVE BORNE THE
BATTLE.

MAYDAY, MAYDAY. FROM THE ASHES, HOLY REDEMPTION.

“Mean anything to you?”

Mia shook her head.

“The first part’s from a speech Abraham Lincoln gave. Used to be the motto of the old Veterans Administration. The second part . . . I don’t know. The distress signal or something.”

Mia contemplated that. “There’s a Council of Victors office down here. Some crazy’s angry about the colonies again?” She tried not to laugh but couldn’t help it. “It all needs to be taken seriously, of course. But shut down the plaza?”

The security director shrugged. “Federals think it means something. The Mayday thing, especially.”

“I see,” Mia said, wondering if this was the Bureau’s emergency, and if so, why Jesse hadn’t said anything to her. He worked intel analysis, not counterterrorism. Though he hadn’t always been behind a desk.

Gallagher, Matt. [Empire City](#) (Atria Books, 2020).

New Fiction Review: Matthew Komatsu On Matt Gallagher's 'Empire City'

As *Avengers* was wrapping up last year, I mentioned how excited I was to see the finale to a friend, who responded with a barely suppressed sneer. Granted, it's the same friend whose Blu-Ray copy of Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* I've had for nearly six years, never watched, and now that I think about it, *might* have been in the console of the car my wife and I just sold.

"Superheroes? Really?"

The question dogged me for the past year. 2019 marked the end of the seventeen-year *Avengers* franchise, the release of *The Joker* to immediate Academy Award buzz, HBO's critically acclaimed re-imagination of Alan Moore's graphic novel *The Watchmen*, Netflix's superb adaptation of *The Umbrella Academy*, and Amazon's remarkable superheroes-gone-bad-and-wild series *The Boys*. And it is into this tableau of a fanboy and fangirl paradise in which all our favorite comics and graphic novels are finally seeing the cinematic treatments that seemed impossible at the turn of the century, Matt Gallagher's second novel, *Empire City*, has sauntered.

EMPIRE CITY

Matt Gallagher

a novel

EMPIRE CITY

by Matt Gallagher

[Empire City](#) is an alternate history of present times, one that through rich world-building and attention to all the right details, asks us to imagine a world in which the US won (sort of – an insurgency is still ongoing) the Vietnam War through the heroic efforts of something familiar to anyone paying attention to our very real, very present Forever War: a military force of volunteers who, in a unique twist, are comprised of internationals serving in the hopes of US citizenship. The victory in Vietnam has been elevated and lionized so much that a “Council of Victors” would appear to control the national military narrative in its entirety. In this world, the present is, too, an unending global war against terrorism. With a wrinkle however. Our protagonists – three veterans and one civilian – have superhuman abilities.

The abilities appeared after they survived a friendly fire “Cythrax” bombing during a direct action mission gone bad. The protagonists who are veterans call themselves “the Volunteers” in a nod to our world’s all-volunteer military, and are drawn into a conflict brewing in “Empire City” and perhaps across the country, as the social order of over-the-top military veneration is challenged by a growing movement of disaffected veterans organizing around someone who might not be entirely unlike the Volunteers.

Gallagher’s three main narrative protagonists have relatively hum-drum abilities as far as superheroes go. Sebastian Rios, a bureaucrat and one-time war journalist who was a hostage at the hit site compound when the Cythrax bomb was dropped, can disappear. Mia Tucker, a pedigreed Wall Streeter who piloted a helicopter on the raid, can fly. And the immigrant soldier, Jean-Jacques Saint-Preux, can move at super-speeds. Which made me wonder why Gallagher would choose such recognizable abilities at all.

The answer of course goes back to my friend’s question earlier this year: it’s not about the abilities. OK, I’ll revise that statement: it’s not *just* about the abilities. The superhero

phenomenon have always been about investigating what makes us human through a speculative lens. Even in the golden age of comics, when Jack Kirby and Stan Lee and all the old hats realized that giving human characters super abilities, and presenting their stories in graphic format, was a fun idea, they were doing things in their serialized stories to give them gravitas. We all know Superman can fly, that he's a Man of Steel with x-ray and heat vision. So it's not a surprise when he uses those abilities to crush the bad guy. It's the story behind that counts: how does one live one's life given these abilities? What does ultimately tell us about humanity? Marvel's mutant X-men were thinly veiled discussions on the human invention of race; DC's Batman questioned the role of privilege and social order. Time now, superhero tales grant creative permission to carry out discussions that need to happen within society writ large, by attracting us with a wow factor (Check out character A! They can do B!) and sucking a consumer into a story in which that wow factor fades behind a substantive investigation into very real, very everyday, human dynamics. *Watchmen* – racism in America; *The Boys* – the fundamental question of whether a human would choose to apply their superhuman ability towards good or evil; *Umbrella Academy* – the unique dysfunction of the modern American family: we want to be drawn in as viewers and readers, but we also want something deeper to sink our teeth into.

Empire City succeeds in a similar fashion. Veterans, already totemized in the real world, are taken by Gallagher one logical step further and given abilities that set them apart from the rest of humanity. But that's just the appetizer. What's really happening in the book, as our heroes find themselves thrust into the beginnings of conspiracy set off by the potential presidential election of a retired general officer – one that threatens to unravel a modern social order that entirely revolves around the veneration of military service – is an investigation of our troubled real world. Less than 1% of the US have, are, or will serve in the military.

The national has waged nearly two decades of war across the world with little accountability to an electorate willing to write a blank check to it, no questions asked. Veteran has become an identity, a flag around which to rally political and cultural inclinations. War criminals have become public figures and welcome pundits. Given what's happened in the real world, is it so far a narrative leap to consider a veteran with superhuman abilities?

The book isn't perfect; Gallagher's first novel, *Youngblood*, had a tighter story arc, and the effort he takes to build a convincing world in *Empire City* sometimes feels like overkill. But it's a fascinating narrative. I've seen other readers comment on the novel's relevance – the whole thing has a *Man in the High Castle* feel to it. Recognizable as almost being our current reality, but tilted towards frightening. But the novel's relevance will hopefully fade over time, if the country can come to realistic grips with its military reality. What stands out to me about Matt Gallagher's second novel is that he was willing to do the legwork necessary to give contemporary war fiction a speculative edge, which puts it in territory more closely aligned with Joe Haldeman's graphic novel *Forever War* than it does with *Youngblood*, and enviable terrain if Gallagher is willing to claim it.

When I reviewed *Youngblood* a few years ago, I wrote that it delivered what we needed from contemporary war literature because it shunned the stereotypical war story for something more unique. With *Empire City*, Gallagher has reinvented himself yet again and produced another fresh, and timely perspective on the consequences of war.