A Dispatch from Fort Atwater

Samuel Steven

Nostalgia is another word for history, but only our personal, petty, smalltime histories; history is all about the size of the frame, and nostalgia is a 3×5 photograph cropped around the perfect images of memory, and never more than in love and war. In these recent days, as veterans like me confront our old military bases named after Confederate traitors, I thought about nostalgia's allure; it's a loyalty, created by once being stationed at places like Fort Bragg, Benning, or Gordon, making us resistant to any modern change to those wartime memories we sort of loved.

In nostalgic memories, my mind's-eye zooms in tight on "Bragg." Not the person or his history, not the place, just that name; of course I'm nostalgic for the identity I found at Fort Bragg, where all Army roads lead. "Bragg" is shorthand – the real Army, the Division, the Corps. I wore airborne patches on both sleeves – never earned either one in some eyes, including maybe my own, because I never went to airborne school. An airborne sandwich with no meat in the middle is a strange sight at Bragg; yell if you want, I'm an airborne sandwich all the same.

So I know what I am trying to convey when I say, "When I was at Fort Bragg."

I know what I am trying to convey when I say, "When I was at Fort Belvoir." A sleepy post during my time there, the opposite of Bragg in every way that matters. I used to run through the leafy streets of the officer's housing and down by the Potomac's edge – motivated myself because it was the kind of post without organized PT.

When I think of those places, I don't think of William Fairfax's slaves working on his Belvoir Plantation, or of the Confederate traitor Braxton Bragg. I think of Army days when I was young and life must have been so simple. Isn't that a trick of memory, when it wants to fool us? How it smooths out the rough patches, so our life feels like a simple, straight

path to whoever we became.

My first Army assignment was to Fort Gordon, Georgia, and the Public Affairs Office where we produced *The Signal* newspaper. I would browse clippings from the 1960s that felt so ancient. As a teenager from New Hampshire, I knew nothing about the South's view of history: the 1960s were five minutes ago; the 1860s last week or the week before.

I once represented Fort Gordon, and by default John B. Gordon, the Klansman the place was named for. I was my battalion's, brigade's, and finally Fort Gordon's Soldier of the Month. Three times I stood before boards of more and more intimidating First Sergeants and Sergeants Major, answering questions now lost to my memory. I remember a question I missed: who was a military officer murdered in Lebanon? I was ashamed I didn't know, mostly because the fearsome training brigade CSM was the one who asked. While I've forgotten his name, I remember the correct answer of Lt. Col. William Higgins.

A perk of victory was attending a rotary breakfast in Augusta, Ga., where the emcee introduced me and I stood up in my Class As with a single Army Service Ribbon, and the place applauded like I'd done something. And they came up to me after and talked in strange accents about how impressed they were and I was a solid young man representing America, representing them, and for that brief time, a living, breathing representative of John Gordon, a Confederate and a traitor.

Am I angry? Of course not. I didn't care who John Gordon was. To me, Fort Gordon is a place of my first Army friends and hanging out on the second floor of those barracks, road trips to concerts in Columbia, parties at my off-post apartment, and a cute legal specialist who grew up to be a judge. Angry?

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Simplicity is another word for nostalgia. It's simple to let

Fort Gordon stay as-is, and ignore each traitor's name tacked on to pop-up military compounds during the build-up to World War II, names that stuck as the bases grew into economic engines of provincial towns. At the time, weren't they named by chance, more than any deliberate intent? They needed a name, so why not those names? Let the southern rubes have their trinkets of the past—what do I care?

Without being African-American, I think anger might feel frivolous – the Confederates are villains but they have no connection to me. It's important to maintain perspective, to let those with the moral righteousness of earned anger own this moment for themselves. What the world doesn't need is another white man making it about himself.

Still, I want to write something, about the comfort and the shame of these names, that conflict between simplicity and reality, nostalgia and history. I cared – care – about Bragg, and Gordon, they mean something to me; I want to confront that feeling, to defend it, dismiss it, deride it but at least demand that measured, disciplined, objective search inside myself. So I do some digging, to find something Civil War-related in my past, some touchstone I can build on. A great-great-grandfather was Brig. Gen. Nathan Augustus Monroe Dudley, but he was a staff officer, too above-it-all. I do a little research into Samuel Stevens, a wagoner with the Sixth New Hampshire Regiment. He was the son of my great-great-great-grandfather's brother, so a first cousin, three times removed. I want a more direct lineage fighting for the Union, and it's a sting that the family tree is so mundane.

In my wish for a wartime connection, can't I then empathize with the effort it would take from the other side, to feel forced to explain away a heritage connecting back to an officer for the Confederacy? It would no doubt be easier to lean into courage and rebellion, flawed and vile though it was. If I was from the South, wouldn't I believe some first cousin, three times removed, had courage of their convictions?

Is it so wrong to keep names from that misguided version of courage alive? Do I have a better idea?

I have Samuel Stevens. He returned to New Hampshire, died in an accident in 1866, is buried in his hometown. I know him from a daguerreotype image, tight-cropped in a small frame, a relic of family history. To my child's eye, the history of the Civil War appeared in his face, reduced to 3×5 simplicity. It's a place to start, a nostalgic place, a simple place.

Take that tight-cropped photograph of an ancestor's picture, or the name of a fort, any of that nostalgia in your mind's-eye frame and you will discover that it has edges that can be unfolded. So to find more information on the war stories of Samuel Stevens, dates, actions, I unfold the Sixth New Hampshire.

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Tim O’Brien once wrote that true war stories don’t have morals, that there’s no lesson in destruction and death. Roy Scranton lacerated the idea of heroic trauma, the rationalization that war stories can find paths to healing. They examined war stories as literature with an artistic intent, but maybe war stories are no more literature than nostalgia is history. War stories aren’t that complicated.

War stories are only Noir thrillers, pulp paperbacks with simple plots and dark results. Dialogue is the melodramatic vernacular of a particular place and time; stakes are low but personal; a lurid cover entices readers with promises of schemes and sin; in Noir, the narrator thinks he’s a hero, but becomes the rube. That is Noir’s important part: a revelation uncovers a bitter secret, changes the world the narrator thought they knew, answers a question they didn’t know they asked.

Writing a war story is writing for that twist, where the story you thought you were writing becomes the story that you are writing.

So this was never Samuel Stevens’ story.

For when I skim the Sixth New Hampshire’s roster, a single Webster is also among the names, and I’m immediately certain we share some relation. His hometown is East Kingston, not far from Hampton, where my earliest American ancestor grew my roots.

My line of Webster’s traces back to Thomas Webster, arriving to America in 1636, settling in Hampton in 1638. He had been born in Ormsby, England, where his father died and his mother remarried but didn’t change her only child’s last name. Thomas Webster journeyed overseas at just five years old. On such thin limbs do family trees continue.

Thomas and eventual-wife Sarah had nine children, with three middle sons – Ebenezer, Isaac, and John. Ebenezer was grandfather to New Hampshire legend Daniel Webster; Isaac started my line, was my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.

Those genealogies are well-researched, so new digging is not hard. There are false starts, finger pricks in information's tangled bramble where nostalgia turns into history, but my wife and I connect the dots.

We discover that Thomas' son John Webster begat Jeremiah, who begat Jeremiah II, who begat David, who begat John Augustine Webster in 1827, my fourth cousin, three times removed.

John Augustine Webster is who I find on the roster of the Sixth New Hampshire Regiment. He mustered into the unit in November, 1861, and then headed south to do his duty.

The Sixth fought at Bull Run, Antietam, the Overland Campaign, and others. On May 28, 1864, at some skirmish northwest of Richmond, near Virginia's Totopotomoy Creek, several members of Company I were captured, including John A. Webster.

From Richmond, a railroad took Confederate prisoners, like John Webster, on a week-long meandering journey through Charlotte, Columbia, Augusta, and Macon, to the terminus at Andersonville Prison.

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John Webster would have arrived at Andersonville in early June, just as summer's heat coated the open-air prison camp. Of Andersonville's conditions, Union prisoner John Ransom had written on May 28: "It really seems as if we are all going to die here. I don't seem to get hardened to the situation and am shuddering all the time at the sites."

Ransom had arrived at the prison in mid-March, 1864, and after

the war, he published his account as *Andersonville Diaries*. On June 3, he wrote that new prisoners arrive all the time; that was about a week since John Webster's capture, about the length of a train's journey to Andersonville's 27-acre swamp, where 45,000 prisoners were jammed in.

On June 15, Ransom writes, "My teeth are loose, mouth sore, with gums grown down lower than the teeth in some places and bloody." On June 28, "Can see the dead wagon loaded up with twenty or thirty bodies at a time, and away they go to the grave yard on a trot."

On July 19, he wrote that, "Nine out of ten would as soon eat with a corpse for a table as any other way. In the middle of last night I was awakened by being kicked by a dying man. He was soon dead. Got up and moved the body off a few feet, and again went to sleep to dream of the hideous sights."

His July 25-28 entries hit the bottom: "Am myself much worse, and cannot walk, and with difficulty stand up…Swan dead, Gordon dead, Jack Withers dead, Scotty dead…Hub Dakin came to see me and brought an onion. He can barely crawl himself…Taken a step forward toward the trenches since yesterday and am worse. Had a wash…Battese took me to the creek; carries me without any trouble."

Then an ever-so-small rebound.

July 29: "Alive and kicking. Drank some soured water made from meal and water."

July 30: "Hang on well, and no worse."

Ransom recovered enough to be transferred to another prison, and he escaped later that year, aided by freed slaves on his journey back to the North.

John A. Webster would make no turnaround. He had died of diarrhea on July 28.

My fourth cousin, three times removed, was laid in Plot #4156, one of 13,000 naked corpses that filled the trenches.

Imagine, diarrhea and dysentery and scurvy in the rain and the mud and the sun and the heat with the flies and the maggots and mosquitos of central Georgia in late July without toilet paper or fresh water while living in rags under a hand-sewn tent next to men pissing and shitting and stinking and dying and trying to evade former comrades turned into thieves and turncoats and murderers and hoping at the end you have a friend still healthy enough to carry you to the creek or bring you an onion.

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How do I know the fate of my cousin, John A. Webster, in Plot #4156?

Dorence Atwater, a teenage messenger boy for a Union Cavalry unit, had been captured in 1863, and arrived in Andersonville later that year. He had good handwriting, so he was tasked with keeping up with the hospital's death list. He was no fool, and knew the list kept by the Confederacy might – or might not – be seen by prisoner's families down the road. So he kept two lists, hiding his own secret list after chronicling each day's dead.

In a war with 150,000 unidentified Union dead, Atwater's list of names matched with numbers carved on wooden slats above the trenches represented the most accurate catalog of the 13,000 who died at Andersonville, and in what spot of Georgia dirt they lay.

After the war, Atwater returned to Andersonville with Nurse Clara Barton to mark out the cemetery with the proper names. The U.S. government then tried to take control of his list, not necessarily intending to publish it. Atwater was court martialed for stealing the "government property" of his own list of names. He spent time in a Federal prison before a

Presidential pardon – imprisoned by both forces of the war, devoted to his list of men killed by one side, ignored by the other.

It made some sense for the U.S. government to try and cover up 13,000 dead men – not their deaths, but where they died, in such squalor, when prisoner exchanges would have saved so many.

“Secretary of War Edwin Stanton was afraid that the public would ask who in the federal government was responsible for Union prisoners of war being abandoned to the Confederate prison system,” wrote Edward Roberts in *Andersonville Journey*. To Stanton, “it was in the interest of the Republican Party that the families of the dead men continue to assume that their loved ones died in glorious combat to save the Union rather than starving to death in a filthy Confederate prison.”

Working with Barton and newspaper publisher Horace Greeley, Atwater’s full list was published, giving families from all the Union states that final accounting. Today, Andersonville’s white headstones identify most of the cemetery’s tight-packed occupants, rows and rows of names and names.

Andersonville National Cemetery

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John A. Webster’s journey from the Totopotomoy Creek to Andersonville likely traversed Augusta, Ga., eventual home to my home for 18 months: Fort Gordon.

When we name a Fort, it’s not supposed to be nostalgic – it’s supposed to convey sprawl and history in as big a frame as one can imagine – not small men of evil causes. Patton, Eisenhower, Grant, so many better names. In 2020, Fort Gordon is now the Cyber Center; it makes no sense to leave it named after John Gordon, a failed commander, a traitor, and a Klansman.

Cyber warfare exploits the cracks in a network – finding the one place where a line of code has left a gap, an exposed breach where a careful series of actions can work through the

failed defenses. Dorence Atwater broke the code of Confederate prison guards and Union bureaucrats, exploited gaps with good handwriting and grim patience, wormed his list of names through the obstacles of distance and disease, carving a trail across a century. Atwater was a primitive cyber-warrior, teaching any young soldier that time and death are no excuse: some messages simply must get through.

Fort Gordon is named with petty nostalgia, a tight frame around a dead and useless man. Dorence Atwater is history, his list pointing to John A. Webster's grave 150 years later, one of 13,000. In my mind's eye, the frame expands, Gordon shrinks, fades, overwhelmed, forever, by Dorence Atwater.

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It's a three-hour drive from Fort Gordon to Andersonville, a doable day trip. If I had known all this back then, it's a mini-adventure I would have done some Saturday when I was bored. If I had known, I might have felt a bit of shame representing John Gordon, might have written about Dorence Atwater for *The Signal* newspaper. So I like to imagine. Nostalgia is another word for that wistful revisionism.

Now, the chance of visiting my cousin's gravestone is on the bad side of low.

I can see its picture. A white headstone, a touchstone, a keystone proving that a Webster took a stand. All the relatives of 13,000 men can say the same. Nostalgia is another word for pride, that confidence in what was right.

Nostalgia is another word for privilege, to have that backward-facing sanctuary of simplicity, safety, certainty and selfishness.

Even those 13,000 white headstones are in a tight, nostalgic frame. My relative is long dead and in his place of honor, my white life safe, sound, slightly better informed. Unfold

Andersonville, all the tragedy and terror, and it becomes a white speck in the middle of a black canvas – of bodies disappeared into frog ponds and deep forest holes, of city streets hiding the wood of broken coffins and shattered ancient bones, no places or names to remember, no genealogy that can be tracked by curious dilettantes.

Like I said, war stories are Noir stories. A headstone in a far-off cemetery, low stakes, but now it's personal. Andersonville, Totopotomoy, the Sixth New Hampshire, all melodramatic language of the Civil War. The righteous schemes of Dorence Atwater. The lurid horrors of corpses in a trench. Me, thinking I was the hero, thinking I could examine my "*feelings*" about Confederate-named forts with a measured, disciplined, objective perspective. Instead, I stumbled into mysteries I didn't know I was exploring, a rube who didn't know my history.

New Nonfiction from Andria Williams: Reading Joan Didion in August 2019

In the summer of 1968, while starting several of the essays that would comprise her collection *The White Album*, Joan Didion began to suffer from a series of unexplained physical and emotional ailments. After an attack of "vertigo and nausea," she underwent a battery of tests at the outpatient psychiatric clinic at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, CA. In *The White Album*'s title essay, she shares some of the professionals' feedback:

Patient's [results]… emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitable to conflict and failure…

A month later, Didion was named a *Los Angeles Times* "Woman of the Year." It did not seem to matter to her much. Instead, what she remembers of that year:

I watched Robert Kennedy's funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai [in which more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, were murdered by American soldiers]. I reread all of George Orwell…[and also] the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child…[rescued twelve hours later] reported that she had

run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for "a long time." Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew.

She adds, a few pages later: "By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968."

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Julian Wasser/Netflix

Hyper-awareness has always been both Joan Didion's secret

weapon and her *hamartia*. Circa 1968, being seemingly everywhere at once, observing and recording at an unforgiving pace, there is no way the world could not have felt kaleidoscopic, splintered. In THE WHITE ALBUM, she attends The Doors' recording sessions (but not for long), visits Huey Newton in jail and Eldridge Cleaver under house arrest. She analyzes the California Governor's mansion, and the Getty Museum (which she sees as an artistic flub, "a palpable contract between the very rich and the people who distrust them least"); she rhapsodizes about water. The Manson murders, happening just down the street to people like her and the subject of her rumination in the title essay, seem a symptom of this summer of dread.

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That summer, Didion also, improbably, starts watching biker films, a habit she continues over the next two years. "A successful bike movie," she declares, "is a perfect Rorschach of its audience."

I saw nine of them recently, saw the first one almost by accident and the rest of them with a notebook. I saw Hell's Angels on Wheels *and* Hell's Angels '69*. I saw* Run Angel Run *and* The Glory Stompers *and* The Losers*. I saw* The Wild Angels*, I saw* Violent Angels*, I saw* The Savage Seven *and I saw* The Cycle Savages*. I was not even sure why I kept going.*

But she does know why she keeps going, and despite the humor of this absurd list and the thought of Joan Didion investing the time to consume it all (did she ever remove her sunglasses?), she begins to wonder what these storylines are giving their audience. "The senseless insouciance of all the characters in a world of routine stompings and casual death takes on a logic better left unplumbed," she muses.

But then, of course, she plumbs it, and what she observes, given the current political climate, feels almost prescient.

I suppose I kept going to these movies because there on the screen was some news I was not getting from the New York Times*. I began to think I was seeing ideograms of the future…to apprehend the extent to which the toleration of small irritations is no longer a trait much admired in America, the extent to which a nonexistent frustration threshold is not seen as psychopathic but a 'right.'*

I begin to imagine if the heroes of these bike movies had had Twitter. I decide to stop imagining that. They are people, Didion writes in closing, "whose whole lives are an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made. [These people] are, increasingly, everywhere, and their style is that of an entire generation."

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Throughout all these mental rovings runs Didion's usual vein of skepticism and aloofness. Danger, for her, is personal, never institutional. It's the threatening man on the street or the hippie at the door with a knife. She's not a revolutionary, not exactly a liberal (though she was one of the first to, in a 17,000-word essay for the *New York Review of Books*, advocate for the innocence of the falsely-accused Central Park Five). Visiting Huey Newton in jail, she mentions that "the small room was hot and the fluorescent light hurt my eyes." A reader can't help but think, at least for an instant, Suck it up, Joan! But mere pages later she's on the campus of San Francisco State, which has been temporarily shut down by race riots, and her shrewd eye sees the truth: "Here at San Francisco State only the black militants could be construed as serious…Meanwhile the white radicals could see themselves, on an investment of virtually nothing, as urban guerrillas."

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Here in the summer of 2019, I can, in at least some minor ways, relate to the dread Joan Didion felt in the summer of

‘68. Today, it is August 10th. On the third of this month, 20 people were killed and 26 others injured by a gunman who walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas at ten-thirty in the morning and began firing with a semi-automatic Kalashnikov-style rifle, aiming at anyone he suspected to be Hispanic. Hours later, nine more people were killed and 27 injured in a mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio. The Proud Boys are marching in Portland and the President of the United States has denounced only those who’ve come out to oppose them. (It should be noted that these are grown men who call themselves “boys,” and that is the least alarming thing about them.) A little over a week ago I watched Private First Class Glendon Oakley, a US soldier who had saved several children during the El Paso shooting and wept openly about not having been able to save more, stand at parade rest while the President pointed at him on live television and said, “The whole world knows who you are now, right? So you’ll be a movie star, the way you look. That’ll be next, right?”

Oakley looked stricken. “Yes, sir,” he said.

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Now it’s August 13th and there is a rally at the police station in downtown Colorado Springs. Ten days prior—the same day as El Paso—nineteen-year-old De’Von Bailey was shot seven times in the back while fleeing Colorado Springs police. I watch the unbearable video, circulating on the local news outlets, taken from an apartment security camera across the street. De’Von Bailey, young, short-haired, skinny as my son, runs across a sweep of pavement just like any you’d see in any suburban town. He doesn’t pull a weapon or even turn back to look over his shoulder. Two armed cops enter the frame not far behind him. Then, he falls, skidding in a seated position, staying briefly upright. For a moment, from this distance, in a still image, he could be merely relaxing, sitting with one arm propped behind him. Then he crumples forward and the police

close in, cuffing his hands behind his back before rendering aid. In the hospital, De’Von Bailey dies.

Today, the attorneys for De’Von Bailey’s parents are holding a press conference outside the police station downtown. The Pike’s Peak Justice and Peace Committee has put out a call for citizens to show their support for the Baileys and their demand for an unbiased investigation. I like the Justice and Peace Committee, a group of tenacious old-timers who sometimes, at unpredictable intervals, convene to hold a giant sign in front of the Air Force Academy that reads, “WHAT ABOUT THE PEACE ACADEMY?” They mostly get yelled at from car windows. They have used the same sign for years; the phone number at the bottom has been whited over and repainted several times; it is canvas, more than five feet tall and probably ten feet long, printed with perfect spacing and propped by two wooden posts, so as to be quickly unrolled and then rolled back together for a quick exit as necessary. I joined them in a protest once, this past April, when Donald Trump spoke at the Air Force Academy commencement. I held one end of their sign. I was the only military spouse there, though there were a couple of long-haired Vietnam-era veterans. A man offered me eight hundred dollars to help pay our rent if my husband would divest from the military. “Just until he can find other work,” he said. He said he was helping another service member get out now, a chaplain. This man was incredibly earnest, thin, gray-haired, in jeans and a flannel shirt, with no pains taken over shaving or hygiene; I believed him. I thanked him, knowing full well my husband, an officer, is comfortable in his job and does not want to leave, knowing this man would be disappointed in what that says about us; and he shook my hand and said to call him, the church would help get us out when we were ready. I did not know what church he meant, but I am sure its people are good.

So if the Justice and Peace Committee wants me to show up for De’Von Bailey’s family, I will. I scrawl a hasty sign on a

piece of foam core I bought at King Soopers: “NO POLICE BRUTALITY.” On an investment of virtually nothing, I drive downtown to the corner of Nevada and Rio Grande to see the street blocked off with traffic cones and police cars, a crowd visible already in front of the brick police station. Parking on a side street, I take my sign and head there on foot, along sidewalks with cracked concrete and sun-bleached grass growing up between the paving. I try to face the words on the sign away from scrutinizing traffic. I pass the bail bonds shop from which Dustin and Justin Brooks, 33-year-old twins, set forth a week prior, wearing bulletproof vests and brandishing their handguns, to confront these same protestors. (Dustin and Justin Brooks are what Joan Didion might call men with an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.) That was three days after De’Von Bailey’s murder. The brothers intimidated the predominantly black gathering until finally being arrested, shouting “All lives matter!” as their hands were pulled behind their backs. Seventeen riot police were dispatched in the skirmish, standing behind plexiglass shields. Hopefully the irony was not lost on anyone that a black boy had been killed for running from police unarmed and two white men could walk around waving handguns and shouting in a crowded area and simply be arrested, off to live another day. If the Dustin-Justin brothers hadn’t been shouting, they may not even have been arrested. Colorado is an open-carry state. Who feels safe in an open-carry state varies widely depending upon circumstance. On November 27, 2015, shortly after we moved here, an armed, agitated older white man was seen pacing around outside the CO Springs Planned Parenthood building at 11:30 a.m. Concerned employees and passers-by called the police, but were told there was nothing they could do. “It’s an open-carry state,” police said. Eight minutes later, the man, 57-year-old Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., burst into the building, shooting three people dead and wounding nine others. One of the employees killed was a Filipina-born Navy wife, who had enjoyed her new job in the Springs, her husband’s duty station. The Planned Parenthood location here

has been changed at least three times, and the address is not advertised on their web site.

All this crosses my mind as I walk toward the police station. I do not feel at all in danger, and I know that statistically, I am very safe – far safer in virtually any situation than the other protestors, mostly people of color, gathered on the sloping space of lawn. Still, because of men like Dustin and Justin Brooks and Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., I have left my children at home.

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The rally is peaceful, and sad. Greg Bailey and Delisha Searcy speak about the loss of their son. Their lawyers reiterate a demand for an independent investigation. Young boys hold signs: “Please Let Me Live Past 19.” “Hands Up Don’t Shoot.” Several signs say, “Imagine If It Were Your Son.” The black families console one another, embracing. Three black reverends are there. Their mood is markedly sadder than that of the “allies” like myself who have shown up and for whom the event, though attended with the best of intentions, could be described as almost recreational.


JUSTICE
DEVON

Rally for De’Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

A prominent local Unitarian clergywoman – lean, energetic – is there in street clothes and her rainbow stole, wearing sunglasses, her short gray hair spiked. If not for the stole she might be some fitness celebrity, or a badass chef. There’s a contingent from Colorado College. A tall, thin young white man holds a sign that says, “JAIL ALL KILLER POLICE.” The Justice and Peace Committee is scattered around (I don’t see my military-liberator friend from back in April), but they have (appropriately) left their “Peace Academy” sign at home.

After half an hour or so, as the press conference seems to be wrapping up, the crowd is less quiet, some people whispering to one another. I strain to hear the voice of an obviously distraught black woman who’s questioning the Baileys’ white attorneys. “How do we know,” the woman is asking, “that any investigation will be impartial? How can it possibly be fair?”

(Next to me, three of the “Moms Demand” moms ask a bystander to take their picture. They turn, their blond ponytails swinging, to beam at the camera with the crowd behind them. I feel, almost desperately, that this is not the right time.)


R.I.P
JEFFREY
DO JUSTICE
LOVE MERC
WALK HUMB
NOW.

Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

"How will we know it's fair," the woman calls over the crowd, "if the committee is made up of all white men?…" Suddenly her voice catches, and a pause hangs in the air for just an instant. "…White *women*?"

She sounds so hopeless, so angry, so deservedly frustrated and hurt. I can feel the sharp point of tears gathering in my throat. I report this not so anyone will feel sorry for me but because it happened. I can't hear what response the woman is given. People begin to drift away. It was the last question.

For the rest of the afternoon, I cannot get that moment out of my mind, the way the woman's voice caught, her split second of hesitation before she said "women." Before she said "white women." What was it that gave her pause; was it some vestige of sisterhood-loyalty that she realized no longer applied? I'd been hoping to briefly throw white men under the bus, let them take the fall. I wanted to huddle in my sense of at-least-some-shared-experience. It would have eased my discomfort. My discomfort does not need easing. My discomfort is no one else's problem to solve. Anywhere from 47 to 53 percent of white women, depending on whose poll you believe, voted for the current president. 95% of black women did not. When she let the word "women" out, when she let the words "white women" out, it was the tiny slap-in-the-face of realizing the intersectionality you champion may not want you back. I am glad she said it. And for a moment– and I think it's okay to say things we are ashamed of – I'd been hoping, so badly, that she wouldn't.

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That night I chat with my husband about Joan Didion and the late sixties and ask him if he thinks the upheaval we're feeling now is anything like what people must have felt in

1968, when it must have seemed in some ways that the world was ending. He was a history major in college, so he tends to have a good perspective.

“No, not at all,” he says almost immediately. “Because think about 1968. Think about the instability. I think it was much worse then. The draft was still going strong. You could basically be called up from your own house and have to go fight a war with no choice at all.”

I recall Didion’s essay “In the Islands,” which I’ve recently finished, one section of which she spends watching the funeral of a young soldier at the military cemetery in Oahu, in the dip of an extinct volcano crater called Puowaina. He was the 101st American killed in Vietnam that week. 1,078 in the first twelve weeks of that year. That essay, however, was written in 1970. Maybe 1968 felt somehow quaint by then. Maybe, by then, people were wishing they could go back.

“And you had Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death, RFK’s,” my husband is saying.

“And the Civil Rights Act had only been signed four years before,” I add. I have always liked brainstorming.

“Sure. Now I think it’s the onslaught of information, all this instantaneous, inflammatory news, that makes us feel that things are really unstable.”

I think he’s right. This is no summer of 1968. I start to believe that Joan Didion, less threatened by the events of the time than many, but more observant than most, held up pretty well, considering. And over time at least a few of the problems she was experiencing, some attributed to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and treated with lifelong prescriptions, waned. Others didn’t. She’s not a calm person by nature; she’s anxious; I imagine she cannot turn off her brain. She’s 84 now. She’s survived the loss of her husband and her daughter.

I’m not sure how. I do know that ten years after the events she describes in the title essay of *The White Album*, finally completed in 1978, she ends with the admission, “writing has not helped me to see what it means.”

*

Even later that night, as she has all summer, my youngest daughter wakes me at exactly three a.m. She appears by my bed in pajama pants and a short-sleeved shirt, clutching her stuffed animal. The animals change nightly. Tonight it is Joey, a seafoam-green sheep. She whispers, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

She does have to go to the bathroom. But more than that, this is her new ritual, exciting for her, a very mildly transgressive foray into the dark of night, in which I stumble groggily behind her and she switches on every light in the house as she goes, Joey under her arm, chatting up a storm. It’s as if the hours of sleep she’s had already have bottled up a torrent of potential communication, and she wants to tell me everything. She had a dream where she was drawing faces on paper plates. She had a dream that we all got ice cream. She talks and talks, all shaggy red hair and freckles like tiny seeds scattered across her sleep-pinked cheeks; expressive, energetic eyebrows. Her mood is tremendously good. She washes her hands, dripping water even though I say dry them all the way, please, and I switch off lights as I go to tuck her back in. She is perfectly happy to go back to sleep; this was all she needed, this little check-in under the pretense of a bodily function; and so I have made no move to curb this new habit, and in fact almost look forward to it, sometimes waking up just moments before she comes into my room.

As I start to shut her bedroom door she calls out, “I’m excited for tomorrow!”

I turn around, laughing. “Why?!”

She laughs, too. “I don’t know!”

I quietly close her door and wander into the kitchen, where there’s only one light still on, above the sink. I stand and look at the few dishes and mugs there, then out at the dark, flat yard. There is no way I can go back to sleep, and it does not, now, seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 2019.

New Poetry by Sherrie Fernandez-Williams

she be like, damn

she be all tired.
she be like a flattened house shoe
she be full of compunction
she be remembering what was said.
she be told what she deserves.
she be believing everybody.
she be weepin’ in the bathtub
she be like her momma,
she be lying.
she be saying it’s the arthritis
she be talking like it ain’t her head
she be actin’ like hurt don’t bother her.
she be actin’ like she foolin’ somebody.
she be foolin’ no damn body.
she be scattered.
she be slidin’ across marbles.
she be grabbin’ onto nothin
she be almost breakin’ her wrists.

she be lying on the floor
she be holdin’ her stomach
she be trying not to vomit soggy cake
she be wishin’ she ate almonds instead.
she be losin’.
she be wantin’ rest.
she be told she ain’t gettin’ shit she want
and she be still wantin’ shit.

Annibale Caracci, circa 1580s.

juanita

juanita put on her tap shoes and danced in her kitchen,
in her living room, she composed. and into her gilded bathroom
mirror, she gave monologues before powering on
her home recorder that, in those days, weighed a sailor's
duffel bag.
debuted films at thanksgiving, after feeding a houseful. she,
in a
form-fitting black dress made of sturdy garbage bags.

"i am more than wife, mother of ten, church organist."
then, she started with captain and tennille, followed by neil
diamond.
nieces, nephews elated. her children feigned embarrassment,
but devotees, nonetheless.

a woman from disbanded and reshuffled peoples. owned by a
garden variety, bearing traces of many countries,
the dominant, the birthplace of black magic.
what might have been if they hadn't
made us afraid of our gods? she could have
been another brooklyn starlet, sing stormy
weather like lena horne in the movies. what *if* we harnessed
the power of our goddesses?

you favor her. nearsighted. prone to excessive
pounds in mid-life, obsessed with communing
with the dead. her grandfather, angel, the cuban cigar maker,
joined in the chorus of *guantanamera*, and when she strummed
like memphis minnie, nada, rocked back and forth

the way grandmothers do when they are stirred.
all principle and heart—that one. sung *time
in a bottle* with sam, her second husband.
sam on guitar, juanita at piano. time was
a real question for those graying lovers.
never enough time for a woman
whose first husband tried to reduce her
like soup stock. being mad took more time

than she could give. so she produced.

wrote about an urgency for peace,
though we were not the ones who begged for war
but in 1984 she scribbled in “jesse.” argued
about the virtues of speaking one’s mind
to punks who called it a wasted vote.

you hold onto the ways that you might be like
juanita, though you know you are dot’s child.
in a family large enough populate three small towns. you
were never one to be known in these townships. not like aunty,
who mailed everyone copies of her latest records,
performed at all family gatherings, taught whosoever will how to play.

when there are so many, there are so many to lose.
juanita weeped the longest over all bodies—ah, yes,
another way you are like her. your spirit, too, is made
of blown glass. at the last burial before her own,
she warned those within the sound of her voice that she was tired.
you were young but old enough to know the weight of words.

juanita is a starlet. it is time for another moment under glaring lights.
it is quiet on the set, a recreation of 1943. she is small-wasted again,
and in high heels. she looks directly into the camera, then up,
when studio rain hits her face.

hot tea

precious one, emancipate your feet. stretch
your soles from here to far from here,

across acres of african moons.
young dignitary, miles of highway
know the impression of your shoe
by heart. it is tender at your core.
the injured hum their names in
your ear like seraphim. faces soaked
up by the cortex for sight cannot
be unseen like the ground where
they last stood cannot not absorb
a life poured out. this agony, you
haul with all subtle movements
and speak at movements of
national proportions. in squares,
your voice expands beyond
itself and crescendos into a whispers.
hot chamomile with lemon and honey
will help. i have prepared this for you.
sit as we remember our future. rest
until you are well again. and you
will be well again to move us further.

tony

this father’s son is loved not only by this father
but by the holy angels too, and by a few demons
who step to him on the street to give him what-up
jabs on the shoulder. i do not mean to compare
this father’s son to the son of the father, but that is
what this father’s son had been to sisters.

one came to him at night spooked by utterances
in her own head. one saved for him her best jokes.
another came when broken by a boy. the last placed her
report cards on the table just before he sat down to eat.
all waited for his perfect response, better than imagined.

to sisters, this father’s son was close to the son of the father
when this father/a daddy departed. not to be with the father,
but to be with a woman he met in night school.

to sisters, the one who gabs with the unseen, the formerly broken,
now zealot, the first to die, a comedian and especially, the last,
the critic of religious patriarchy, who loved showing off
her report card, this father’s son, a shepherd. for that moment
in time, sisters, not yet knowing what else they could be,
were lamb.

inflammation

1.
something almost remembered
then, pushed away for a later date
only to finds its way into the body, dawdle there
and hope to be recognized, assessed, sifted through
for what good it carries, then separated from its waste.

if left alone for too long it splinters
into the convolution gray matter
latching onto cells weakening them

sometimes it arrives as a simple question
while listening to gossip radio, while not
wanting to be bothered by anything too
onerous like separating sewage from my
cells while driving home from a hard-day’s work

the words link together and i remove them
like a chain from the bottom of my belly,
straight out of my mouth—

“what do i do with the men?”

2.

i know what the question means.
you get rid of them. i said “rid” motherfucker, rid of you.
 praise be to—
well, not all of them, of course.
i love daddy. he was forty when I was born.
when i turned forty i was the adult daughter.
tenacious. never falling apart for too long, anyway
since enacting my three day rule
three days to be dumbfounded, three
days to panic, three days to flounder
full recovery occurs on the fourth day.
too goddamn much to do to flounder four whole days.

so by the fourth day I am fortified,
and so daddy shares with
one part regret, one part pride
in his accomplishments of bedding women
sometimes a handful in one weekend. some
served with him on neighborhood watch. most
were the mothers of the pta, he was president, and
a poor man with classical tones resounding from his
long,̧ thick cords; like blues from a cello
and, women moved to the sound of him.
bed became a verb that broke my mother.
but she’s dead now, so what does it matter. daddy’s nearly ninety.
growing older provides perspective. distance
dilutes notions about what to do with the men.

3.

the question is absurd.

4.

there were four of us girls. i was the baby.
the others had me my by eight, ten, and eleven
years so i benefitted from my sisters' skill in hair braiding
and designing clothes. my favorite was the red jumpsuit with
shoulder ruffles. i looked like a five year old disco queen
the day i wore it for my birthday. one sister picked my hair
out.

i do not blame any of them for their lack of warning
about life in a girl's body; the ownership some feel they
have.
to take without permission. they never spoke of rape by the
neighbor or by nana's boyfriend. "it's just the way it was,"
one sister
told me. "it was our job to be okay."

I do not want to answer. I'm done being a traitor
It is difficult to defend this place where I enter the story.
I am middle aged, not a helpless girl.

real women grow up and care for the most devastated among us
and I already decided a long time ago that I would be the
giver
not the taker of care. not the interminably wounded
and, I love a woman so what does any of this matter to an old
dyke like me?
feminine discomfort is an act of treason.

5.

I know the forces against my man-child—

6.

the one long gone was the easiest of all.
a stack of papers, a hearing or two, the crack of a gavel
and it was done. i did not wish a brother dead.
and every day, i am reminded, i forgive him and
every day i am reminded, i am the one who is sorry.

7.

i have chosen the path of the giver.

Shh…i will only say this once. do not repeat this to anyone.
the leading cause of death for
young black women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is intimate partner
violence. *Four times greater for black than it is for white. The consequences for*
perpetrators of intimate violence is less when the victim is black than when she is white.
shh… i will only say this twice. the leading cause of death for young black women between
the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is intimate partner violence. one last time, i will say, the
leading cause of death for young black women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is
intimate—

Brie Golec trans woman of color stabbed by her father,
Yazmin Vash Payne trans woman of color stabbed by her boyfriend,
Ty Underwood trans woman of color shot by her boyfriend
within days of each other—
debbie and i once made soup out of dirt and rain.
as teens, she had ramell. i had an on again,
off again, thing with jesus. between debbie and ramell,
were ramell's hands that behaved any which way they pleased
especially when clenched into spherical solids.
my hands secured notes in white envelopes.
"god loves you," my hands told the pen to tell the paper
to tell debbie. no wonder debbie cut her eyes at me
whispered loud enough for me to hear her talk about my
whack old lady clothes to the other girls. ramell and i both lost
the battle against our powerless hands. i was outcasted.
ramell and debbie made a baby.

when debbie’s little brother became a teen his hand held heavy steel to the face of his pretty boo across the street. when the steel
exploded with one motion of a rogue finger little brother’s hand
brought the steel to his own face. however, that time the rogue finger
refused. it triggered the same dumb ass question.

long before any documents were filed, i recognized
the man i married had hands like ramell,

but the righteous knows what’s up.
race matters. gender belongs to somebody else.
i know men who want to reclaim their innocence.
deemed guilty without due process. I will speak their cause,
but speaking mine would perhaps pose a conflict of interest as
the earth collapses between us.

8.

the body becomes inflamed in the protection
of itself swelling occurs while the question is held in the nerves.
i sit on the floor of my bedroom and in four square breathing
i release the question back out into the air to revisit at a later date
man-child barely knocks. i struggle to my feet. open the door.
taller than me, he lowers his head to my shoulder. “goodnight mom,”
he says. n four counts, i release the question and hold him.
i hold him as the question finds its way back into my body.

demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be—shhh…. do not repeat this to anyone.

Blood Money: C.E. Morgan’s ‘The Sport of Kings’

On May 17, 1875, under blue skies and wearing the flapping green-and-orange silks of his legendary employer J.P. McGrath, a diminutive, tough, whip-thin African-American jockey named Oliver Lewis, weighing little more than a hundred pounds, careened to the first Kentucky Derby victory on a chestnut Thoroughbred with a white blaze and two white socks named Aristides. Thirteen of the fifteen jockeys surrounding him as they thundered down the home stretch were also African-American. In fact, black jockeys would dominate the sport in the south for another thirty years, winning 15 of the first 28 Derbies.

Aristides’ trainer, Ansel Williamson, had been born a slave in rural Virginia. Purchased by a wealthy horse breeder, he learned the art and science of groomsmanship, and was eventually hired by J.P. McGrath, of the famed green-and-orange silks, who’d been born dirt-poor but, after winning $105,000 in a single night in a New York gambling house, started a Thoroughbred farm that went on to become one of the most famous of its time.

1887. Eadweard Muybridge. Wellcome Gallery, London.

That a former-slave-turned-Hall-of-Famer trained Aristides—whose statue now stands at Churchill Downs—and an African-American jockey the size of a young girl rode the pounding horse to victory, hints at the intrigue, breathtaking chance, and monumental toil involved in the sport of horse racing. It also, for novelist C.E. Morgan—with her sharp comprehension of history and a penchant for literary gambles of her own—sparked the genesis of a brilliant, winding epic novel of a racially and economically fraught America: *The Sport of Kings*.

Spanning over 200 years as it moves back and forth through time, *The Sport of Kings* opens in the mid-1950s. Henry Forge, a restless, ambitious teenager schooled from birth in the racial politics of the south, sets in motion a shocking crime against his father's black groom, Filip. The event is one of several sharp seismic blips in the bedrock inequity of Forge

Run Farm, initially founded by Henry's great-great-great-great-grandfather, Samuel Forge, who came on foot from Virginia to Paris, Kentucky in 1783, accompanied by one slave. On such an act of claim and hubris the farm was built; and, as author Morgan levels her steady eye at the parallels of human history, a nation.

Young Henry Forge turns the family's tobacco farm into a Thoroughbred empire where the green grass is "the color of money." His frustrated cosmopolitan wife, Judith, leaves him before too long and, in a deeply un-maternal move, also leaves their sole child, Henrietta, for him to raise. (One can't help but wonder if Henry and his daughter, or at least their naming scheme, are a nod to legendary horse trainer Leo O'Brien and his daughter, Leona; or if, given Morgan's divinity school background and this father-daughter pair's ruthless streak, it's more of a Herod/Herodias sort of thing.) Henrietta is bright, offbeat, and enthusiastic in youth, qualities that

become warped into a strange, intellectual coldness by her father's intense, even immoral, over-involvement in her life. When Henrietta blurts a racial slur at school and is penalized, her father, irate, decides to homeschool her on a strange curriculum of evolutionary biology, manifest destiny, and horsemanship.

Henry Forge is, to put it mildly, obsessed with genetics. He's especially intrigued by the strategy of linebreeding: the idea that doubling down on a certain lineage can perfect and purify it, yielding—if the circumstances are just right—the ideal

specimen. (Even today, the odd, invisible world of dominance, alleles, and zygotes is a hallmark preoccupation of the sport, so much so that even the casual gambler can combine mares and stallions on fantasy web sites such as TrueNicks.com to produce virtual "nicks," foals with an edge on wins. The site's slogan could have come from Henry Forge himself: "Do more than just hope for the best.")

The cloistered universe of Forge Run Farm is rendered in such careful and specific detail by Morgan that its sheer particularity could become claustrophobic—even her other characters realize how deeply weird the Forges are and try to get away from them, like the salt-of-the-earth veterinarian, Lou, who skitters to her truck to escape "these crazy people"—if it's not for the sea change the author delivers halfway through the book, when Allmon Shaughnessy arrives on the farm.

Allmon is a 24-year-old fresh off a seven-year prison sentence, schooled in the Groom Program at Blackburn, and an undeniable talent with horses. He's the only child of a wandering, handsome, alcoholic father, Mike Shaughnessy ("known in high school as that Irish fucking fuck") and a caring but overburdened African-American mother, Marie. At fifteen, Allmon is noticed for his athletic promise and brought into a pre-NFL program, the Academy for Physical Education, where the coaches' focus on phenotype is not so different from the horse breeders' whom Allmon will encounter later ("'How big was your dad?" "Six-two." "Good….I want you big, fast, and I want you mean").

But Marie's chronic health problems, revealed to be lupus, are sinking the household. As with Erica Garner—the daughter of Eric Garner who was killed by police violence in 2014 for selling cigarettes without tax stamps, herself dead at 27 from a heart attack after childbirth—a legacy of racism and poverty live in Marie's body, the "gendered necropolitics" of anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence, the sequelae. "Make me an

animal," Marie begs, in a heartbreaking prayer, "so I won't know anything. Make me a man, so I won't give a damn about anyone."

Her son Allmon does give a damn, but he is orphaned too young to know what to do with his anger and his aching heart. He is led into crime by older boys on the street; tried as an adult for possession of narcotics, an illegal firearm and a stolen car, he is sentenced to seven years, some of which is described in horrifying detail as he learns to defend himself.

The introduction of Allmon to the farm—their first ever black groom, hired by Henrietta without the blessing or even knowledge of her father—will change the course of the Forge family forever. Most likely not in the way you, avid reader, are thinking, because Morgan will not give the reader what he or she expects. But—and there's that wink at history

again—change is coming, and change is, as Lyell and Darwin would agree, nature—and therefore man's—most unstoppable force.

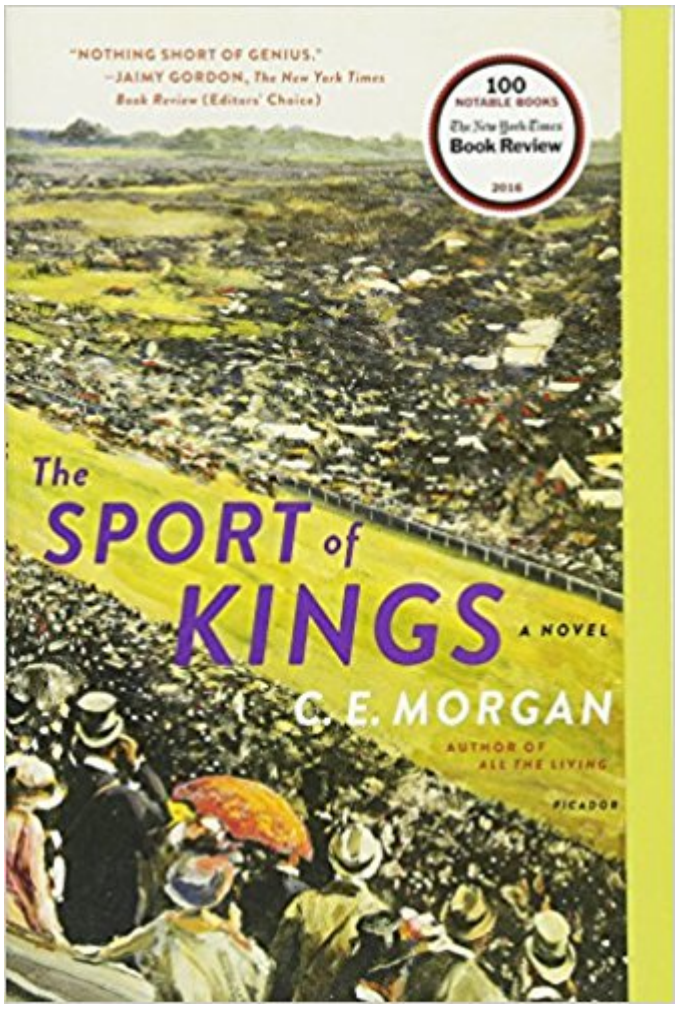
—

C.E. Morgan was born and raised in rural Kentucky. She attended Berea College, a tuition-free institution founded as an abolitionist school in 1855, and later, Harvard Divinity School. And like Allmon's mother, Marie, she is no stranger to chronic pain, as indicated by this interview with *Commonweal Magazine*:

> *Anyone who lives with poor health or chronic pain, or who has endured poverty—real poverty—knows what it is to live with lack and a resulting fear so incessant that it becomes thoroughly normalized, invisible in its ubiquity. If you're lucky enough to have that fear begin to ease, which it has for me only in the past year, it's an odd experience. A stranglehold eases off your entire body.*

An essay Morgan wrote for the Oxford American, "My Friend, Nothing is in Vain," suggests that her own brand of chronic pain may, like Marie's, be auto-immune in nature, like lupus.

But it's important to keep in mind that a novelist need not have experienced firsthand that which they write into their work, and Morgan's first preoccupation is with the way she renders her subjects. "Evil's breeding ground is a lack of empathy," she explains. "Evil acts reduce the other to an object, a being to its component parts, and obliterate subjectivity….So I locate moral beauty in an other-regarding ethic."



She's also concerned with the notion of "attunement": "Humans struggle to remain attuned to one another—they want to turn away because of fear, or ambition, or boredom, or some lure of the ego. It's difficult. It requires radical vulnerability, radical risk."

Writing so boldly outside one's historical period, race, and gender also puts the novelist in a position of "radical vulnerability," and the whole thing can only work if it is a radical risk: the author wholly invested, putting her emotions and reputation on the line, tapping into voices that are not her own. It's a gamble with a nearly paralyzing moral and ethical obligation, and that's before you even get to the whole issue of "craft." But if the stakes were not so high, how else could Morgan have propelled herself to create a character as stunning in thought, action, and voice as "The Reverend," Allmon's restless, glittering-eyed, charismatic

preacher of a grandfather? (Morgan is excellent at writing convincing, multi-dimensional characters of faith, and their sermons; her first novel, *All the Living*, a quietly gorgeous, small-scope book taking place over only three months and focusing on just three characters, features pastor Bell Johnson, whose words read much like Morgan's prescription for novel writing itself, her "other-regarding ethic": "My heart was like a shirt wore wrong side out, brothers and sisters, that's how it was when God turned me, so that my innermost heart was all exposed.") But The Reverend is a different kind of preacher. An urgent, assertive, slightly wild and dogmatic man with an Old Testament streak, he has chosen a life of urban poverty and service. He harshly judges his own daughter, Marie, for her decisions, and is easier on his flock than his own family, much like John Ames's grandfather in *Gilead.* He also speaks many of my favorite lines in the book:

> *"Y'all act like Jesus is dead! Well, let me ask you this: Is Jesus dead in the ground? 'Cause I heard a rumor Jesus done rose up from the grave!"*
>
> *A woman cried out, "He rose!"*
>
> *"And how come he rose up out of that dark and nasty grave?"*
>
> *"Tell me!"*
>
> *"How come he said, 'Eat my body and remember me?'….Because my Jesus, my Jesus is the original Negro, and he said, only I can pay the bill…"*
>
> *…Now the Reverend stopped suddenly, plucked a pink handkerchief out of his suit pocket, and mopped his streaming face, and when he spoke again his voice was conversational: "Now eventually somebody's gonna tell you Jesus ain't had no brown skin. And you know what you're gonna say when they tell you that? You're gonna say: If Jesus wasn't born no Negro, he died a Negro. What part the cross you don't understand?"*

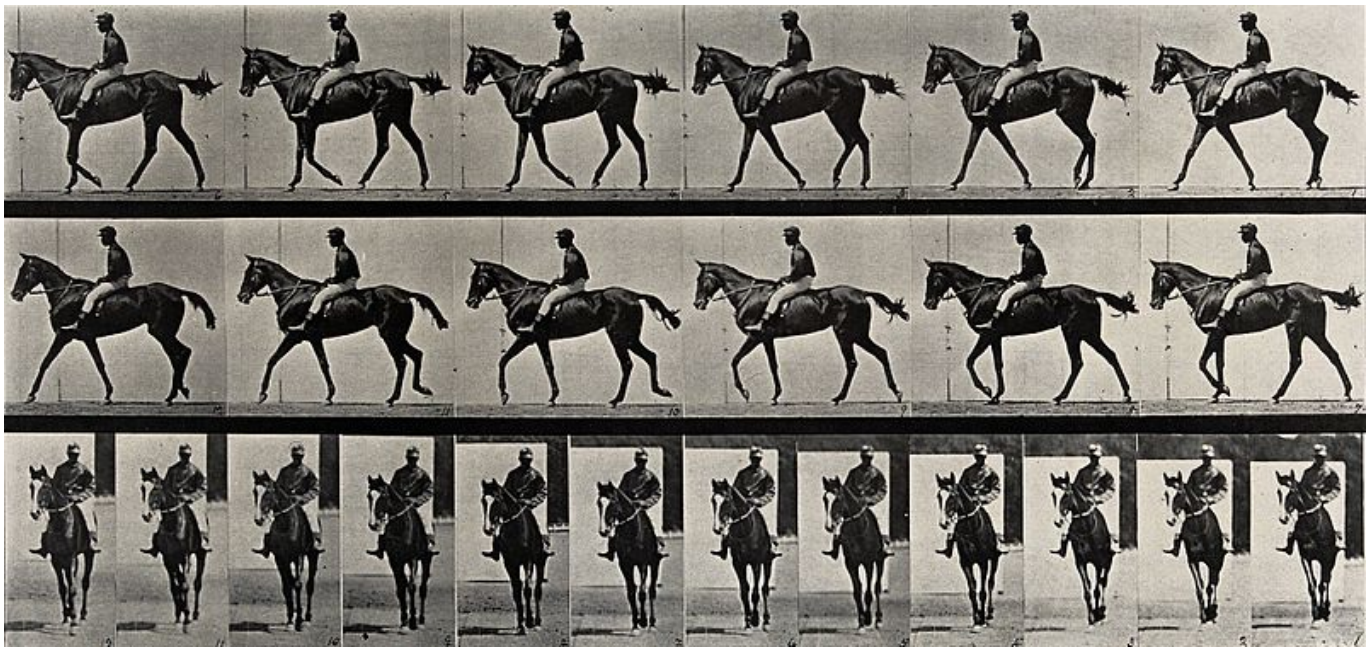
—

The Sport of Kings is by no means a “perfect” book: its arc treads a little too close to Philipp Meyer’s *The Son* to feel wholly new, and at one key section, delving back into the early days of slavery on Forge Run Farm, the novel takes a sudden dive so immoderately Faulknerian—all dark and lushly incestuous and overwrought—that it threatens, like kudzu, to choke up the whole book.

But *The Sport of Kings* possesses a certain perfection of spirit, a reckless authorial gamble. Something special happens when a novelist combines that gamble with a terrific intellect and a heart for human suffering. We end up with a book that’s one in a million, a Secretariat, a Hellsmouth, pounding for the finish.

—

And what of those African-American jockeys who dominated the sport of horse racing in its early decades? The athletes like Isaac Burns Murphy, whose 44% win rate has never been surpassed, and whose earnings would have made him a millionaire if he lived today; or Jimmy Winkfield, who won 220 races in 1901 alone, every one of them a threat to life and limb?



Sadly, Jim Crow racism, and sometimes direct sabotage, thinned their ranks. The Irish jockeys of the northern states were not, on the whole, kind. Isaac Burns Murphy was once discovered, apparently drunk, on the back of a horse prior to a race; it was later proven he'd been drugged by an opponent. Winkfield escaped segregation in the United States with a successful second career in Russia, winning the Russian Oaks five times and the Russian Derby four; but when he was invited back to the States for a *Sports Illustrated* gala in 1961, he was told he could not enter through the front door.

No African-American jockey has won the Kentucky Derby since 1902, though Winkfield placed second the following year.

The sport is now dominated by riders from Latin American countries, immigrants from Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, rural gauchos of small stature and true grit. (Leona O'Brien, that daughter of famous horse trainer Leo O'Brien, whom I mentioned earlier? She went on to marry her father's jockey, the Puerto Rican-born John Velazquez, now the highest-paid in his sport; they have two children). Morgan gives these newer jockeys a brief nod in *The Sport of Kings*, and a reader can't help but think that fifty years from now, there will be a novel in their story, too.