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New Fiction from Andrew Snover: Dana and the Pretzelman

The Pretzelman died yesterday. He was shot on his corner half a block from his home, and if he has family they'll pile stuffed animals, and one of his boys will spray-paint *RIP,* and someone will take his corner. Old ladies will sometimes mention him, but that will die out as well, and the neighborhood's memory of him will fade like the colors of the teddy bears' fur and the sharpness of the letters RIP and the

print of the newspaper clipping in its vinyl sleeve stapled to the telephone pole.

Dana knew the Pretzelman. She was a fifteen-year-old girl from up the block. She knew of the Pretzelman before he had the corner, because her eldest brother had fucked the Pretzelman's cousin for a few months, but the two of them never met until the Pretzelman took the corner and began to make himself known.

He stayed on the corner all day, unlike the men who owned neighboring blocks and took breaks on the hot days to drive around in their cars with their music and air-conditioning blasting, just to make themselves seen. He just walked down in the mornings and stayed there all day, every day. He and his boys would talk to each other, and stare down cars whose drivers they didn't recognize, and sell to those who bought.

Dana first met him one morning when her grandmother sent her out for a forty of Olde English. It was a hot Sunday, and her grandmother's favorite treatment for the brutal heat of their home was to drink something cold. The house smelled of death from the time that a great-aunt had declined and passed in the living room. Because the family had no money to keep her in a hospital, and because her bed couldn't fit up the stairs, for six months she had been in the center of all activity in the house. The stench of her sheets and her disease had slowly permeated everything, and then she had died. Dana liked being sent to the store for forties and half gallons of milk and packs of Newport 100s because it got her out of the smell.

She walked down the street, looking out for any of her friends who might be awake and out on their stoops. She didn't see anyone as she walked the block, so she crossed diagonally through the Pretzelman's intersection toward the store that stood on the corner where he usually stood with his friends. The small white awning read, "Complete Grocery and Deli," and there was a sign that said, "Hoagies Snacks Cigarettes We

Appreciate Your Business.”

Dana knew enough to know what groups of boys said to girls walking alone, and she knew that her age was no longer a protection now that her body had changed. That day there were three others besides the Pretzelman. As she walked up to them, and they looked at her flip-flops and her shorts and her beater and her purple bra underneath, she prepared herself to deliver an insulting reply to their comments, but no one said anything. The Pretzelman smiled at her, and she passed through them into the store.

She walked up to the glass, spoke loudly, “Olde E,” to the distorted image of the lady on the other side, passed through the slot the five-dollar bill her grandmother had given her, waited for her change and the brown bag to spin on the carousel to her side, and left. As she passed back through the group, the Pretzelman said, “Have a good day now,” and she didn’t say anything.

That day the heat endured, so Dana was sent back to the store two more times on the same errand, and by the last trip, she had smiled at the Pretzelman. He told her to have a good night.

The Pretzelman lived in an abandoned house around the corner that he and his boys had fixed up a little bit. He said hello to the old ladies. He threw his trash in the can, at least when he was on his corner. Dana wasn’t sure if he made his boys do the same, but there wasn’t much trash on his corner compared with the other three of that intersection, so she thought that he did.

He got a puppy from a man he knew who bred pits. It was a brown-and-white dog with a light nose and light eyes. He walked it on a leash down to his corner in the mornings, and then he tied it to the stop sign, and it stayed with him and

his boys. They fed it chips and water ice and other things that they bought from the store. The old ladies sometimes would stop and pet it.

Dana loved dogs, and she asked the Pretzelman one day if she could pet it, and he said, “Of course,” so she petted it and talked to it. After that, on trips for Newports and chips and hug juices, she would always kneel down quickly and whisper in the dog’s ear, “Good pup,” or “I love you.” The Pretzelman would smile down at her, and she would tug on the dog’s ear and then run in and finish her errand. One day as she knelt down to pet it, she looked over at a parked car and she saw a pistol sitting on top of the rear passenger side tire.

She got more comfortable around the Pretzelman through her relationship with the puppy. She asked him one day if she could see his gun. He chuckled and he said, “That stuff isn’t for girls like you,” but when she asked again a few weeks later, he reached into the wheel well and picked it up. He did something to it that make it rasp and click, then handed it to her. The weight of it frightened her, and she stared at it in her hand, thinking in a haze that it must weigh more than the puppy. She put her finger to the trigger, and the gun was so big that only the tip of her finger could reach around. She stood up and pointed the gun at the Pretzelman, and she heard her own voice say, “What now,” and she saw the Pretzelman’s face drain.

Her hand shook and her knees shook, and the Pretzelman took one step forward and snatched the gun from her hand and slapped her in the face. She didn’t cry out, but she shuddered and cried a few tears and said, “I’m sorry, I don’t like that.” She had scared herself as much as she scared him, and the Pretzelman saw this, and he said, “This ain’t no joke. Why you think I said guns aren’t for girls like you.”

She talked to him a lot about guns after that. They sat on the stoop of the house next to the store, and he told her that

most boys held their left arm over their face while they shot with their right because they didn’t want to see what the bullets did. He said that only the crazy ones or the liars said they didn’t cover their face. She asked him if he covered his face, and he didn’t answer for a minute. Then he said, “Not the first time.”

He took her behind his house to shoot the gun, because she asked him if she could try it. They walked through the high nettles and the broken glass and the needles, and he said, “Watch out for dog shit.” He made her stop and then walked ten feet and set a bottle on the back of a chair and came back and handed her the gun and said, “Here.” She pointed the gun at the bottle, and her body jerked, and her ears rang, and the smell made her eyes burn. She looked at him after the first shot, and he said, “Try again, but hurry up ’cause they’ll call the cops.”

She shot six more times and hit the bottle with one of the shots, but she couldn’t tell which one because the cracks and the flashes didn’t match up. The wall behind the bottle was soft quarried stone with lots of mica, and the divots and craters where her bullets hit were a fresher shade of gray than the rest, and they sparkled in the light. She thought through the roaring in her ears that if someone were to shoot the whole house, it would look newer than it did.

She told people about the Pretzelman because she was proud to know him. She told her friends about him and introduced a few of them to him. One Saturday night she had her friend Kiana sleep over, and they whispered about boys until late. “He don’t say anything ignorant to you, and he’s even nice to the old ladies,” Dana said. Kiana rolled her eyes.

“You know he’s too old for you. You wouldn’t even know what to do when he started to try out that nasty shit.”

Dana shrieked and rolled over onto her belly. Then she said,

“I would too know what to do. I would too.”

That night after the girls had fallen asleep, they were awoken by a string of gunshots and then tires squealing. When it ended they ran to the windows and looked up and down the block, but they didn’t see anyone. Kiana fell back asleep soon after, and Dana lay there for a long time listening to her steady breathing, thinking about situations that could be, and in them what she would do.

On her way to the bus the next morning at seven, Dana walked past the poppy store and saw the Pretzelman in his normal spot. He nodded to her, and she ducked her head. She felt a quickness in her chest and heard a buzzing in her ears. When she got on the bus, she tried to close her eyes and take a nap like she usually did on the way to school, but she couldn’t find a comfortable position in her seat.

In English class that day, Dana’s teacher talked about how the best characters always seem very real, yet a little too large for life. Dana raised her hand and said, “I know someone like that. He’s got the corner on my block, and he has this nice dog. They call him the Pretzelman because his skin color is like the pretzel part, and that stuff he sell is white like the salt.”

“He sounds like an interesting character,” said the teacher. “I would enjoy reading a story about the Pretzelman.”

After that Dana couldn’t help but think of the Pretzelman as a character. Everything he did was covered with a thin gauze of fantasy. One of the boys on the block wanted to work for him, but they already had a lookout and the boy was too young for any of the other jobs, so they sent him on little errands. One of these errands was to take the bus to Target and buy sheets, because the Pretzelman was tired of sleeping on a bare mattress. Or at least tired of hearing his girls complain

about it. The boy took the hundred dollars he was given and rode the bus for thirty-five minutes and went into Target and bought the sheets. The Pretzelman had said to him, “I don’t need no change, understand?” The boy knew that the change was to be his payment for the errand, but in order to avoid looking like he was trying to profit too much, he bought the most expensive set he could find. He brought back a set of king-size sheets and proudly presented them to the Pretzelman, but they didn’t fit the twin-size mattress. According to Dana, the Pretzelman didn’t make the boy go back to Target and exchange them because the mistake had been his to not give the boy more specific orders. They made fun of the boy and called him King Size, and the Pretzelman slept on a twin-size mattress with sheets for a king. Dana looked at sheets the next time she was in Target, and she saw that the most expensive sheets sold there had a thread count of six hundred and cost $89.99, plus tax.

Another time Dana walked down to the poppy store and came upon the peak of an argument between the Pretzelman and one of his girls. She was standing in the street screaming at him and making motions with her arms like she was throwing something at him. The motion was like a Frisbee, and the girl did it over and over again with each hand, and sometimes with both. But the Pretzelman, like a character in a different movie, was just standing against the wall of the store. He wasn’t looking at the girl, and he wasn’t looking away from her, and it looked to Dana like he hadn’t noticed that there was anyone else there at all.

There was a certain face that the Pretzelman used when he was out on the corner, but this one was different. His normal stern-faced grill would crack sometimes. The corners of his eyes would crinkle up if he caught her spitting or stopping to adjust her belt or her shorts. His eyes would crinkle, and she would know he had watched her the whole time.

This face wasn’t crinkling at all, no matter what the girl

screamed about his shithole house and his dirty, grubbing life. Suddenly Dana saw him in the same pose, leaning with his shoulders against the wall and his feet planted, but the vista had changed. The tan car in front of him and the picket fence across the street with its peeling paint were gone, and instead he was at the edge of an enormous, planted field, looking out at the work he had done and the work yet to do. Or he was at the top of a rocky hill, and he was looking down at the river below, at the cattle or the buffalo. Or he was on the balcony of a high-rise, looking past the skyscrapers toward the lower buildings, the row homes, and the narrow streets that he owned. Or he was in the tunnel at an arena, waiting to be introduced over the loudspeakers. Waiting for the roar of the crowd. The girl in the street was still yelling, her hair and her cheeks shaking with rage. He could have been made of stone.

Dana tried to talk to the Pretzelman about how she saw him, what she thought about him. Every time she tried it, her words ran into the obstacle of his eyes on her, the smile starting to play in the corner of his mouth. One time she made it as far as telling him, “You know, you’re nice. Really nice.” She wanted to continue, but she could tell he was making fun of her when he replied, “Well, some people think so. I’m glad you think so.”

In English class her teacher made the class do a writing exercise called “What everyone knows vs. What I know.” Dana continued the first sentence. “What everyone knows about the Pretzelman is his puppy, and his nickname.” She quickly wrote a full page in her looping script, smiling as she pictured his eyes, his hands.

She was still going when the teacher said it was time to begin the second part. She wrote, “But what only I know is that he…”

She stopped writing then, and thought about what would happen if she wrote what she knew—really knew—about the Pretzelman. Or if she told it to him out loud. How would his eyes look if she wrote it—all of it—and then handed this letter to him, rather than turning it in to the teacher? When the class ended, her ellipsis was still open, waiting to be filled with what she knew.

Before long the Pretzelman died, and here's how it happened. He woke up on his mattress on the floor between the sheets he got by sending his boy on the bus to Target. He grabbed his gun from the floor next to his bed. He put the leash on the dog, and he hollered to the others to get up. He let himself out the back, which is what they always did so that the front could stay boarded up and keep its abandoned look. He walked around to the front of the house. He didn't carry the dog over the broken glass, as he had done when it was a smaller puppy. He might have waved hello to an old lady. He might have stopped to wait while the dog took a shit.

As he walked down the street, he heard the engine of the car roaring, and he looked up to see why someone was going that fast. He saw clearly the face behind the wheel, and then the tires screeched, and he saw clearly the other face in the back seat, before the bright flashes. He went for his gun, but the bullets spun him around and knocked him onto his belly, and his arm and the gun got pinned under his body. The dog ran off. The Pretzelman bled out onto the sidewalk while one of the old ladies called 911, and his boys came out and saw what had happened and they ran off. Dana left her house to catch the bus and saw the cops taping off an area around a body that was covered with a heavy sheet too small for the whole creeping stain. She didn't know it was the Pretzelman until she came home that afternoon and her friends told her.

As she lay in bed that night, she thought about the dark red

color and feared that she might never be able to think about anything else. She searched her feelings, wondering distantly if she was going to cry. She fell asleep thinking, but she slept well. It rained that night and the whole day after, so the stain was gone. The Pretzelman's mother placed the news clipping of his shooting inside a plastic sleeve and stapled it on the telephone pole, with a note about a reward for evidence leading to the killers. Before long the corner belonged to someone else, and there was a colorful cairn of stuffed animals piled against the fence where he'd lain, and one of the walls nearby read *RIP*. Dana noticed these things when she walked out to the store or the bus stop, and she passed them again whenever she walked back home.

New Poetry by Todd Heldt: "This Is A Drill, This Is Only A Drill" and "Suffer The Children"

ACTION IS PRETTY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

This is a drill. This is only a drill.

They voted to abolish history.
There had been no commercials.
We didn’t know which wrong to fear most,
and nobody got the joke.
When the polls ran out of ballots,
somebody hurled a beer bottle
through a church’s stained-glass window.
Peace officers deployed

pepper spray for the white kids
and bullets for the black.
You should expect to see things
like this in democracy. Because
the cost is always
what the market will bear.
We all went home or to jail,
or to hospital or morgue, grateful.
America in action is pretty,
the Blue Angels swooping in for the kill
as spectators cheer from the beaches below.
We don’t even know who we are fighting.
Someone is crossing himself.
Someone is crossing the border.
War is just how we learn geography,
and someone scaled a wall
to pick your corn. Good people
are unarmed and
defenseless in church,
and no one will tell us straight
which group of not us we should bomb.

Suffer the Children

12000 kids in detention
300 shot dead in their schools
200 bombed by drones
the ones we don’t know to mention
and the ones the future will starve
my two who are safe in their bedroom
who cry when they are scared

New Fiction by L.W. Smolen: “Dirty-Rotten”

Where mom and dad and me used to live in the Haight, from the brush in the empty lot across his street, with a BB gun, I shot a big, scary German Shepherd guard dog — right in his gonats. Wasn’t my gun. Was a big-kids’ dare. The oldest one told me, “You’re just a dweeb fourth-grader. His tail’s always in the way. Only time you can get him’s when he lifts his leg to pee. You’ll get two, three seconds and that’s it.” So I held my fire. I waited for the Shepherd to pee, and I got him! One shot. They went, “Jeeze! The kid did it!”

I don’t know what I thought would happen when I shot the Shepherd. It yiped and yiped and skidded all around on its rear. I dropped the gun and I ran. Could hear the dog blocks away. It was awful. The big kids knew where I lived and they told my mom. Said I stole their gun.

They took ‘em both – the Shepherd’s owners did – both his gonats. The Shepherd never charged his fence or growled or barked after that – just wagged and smiled and let me pet him sweet – like he never knew it was me shot him. Like he never knew at all – just smiled and wagged, but always wanted me in particular to pet him and let him lick my hand. Nobody else. Just me. He never acted like he knew what hit him, but it was like forgiveness anyhow – forgiveness I never deserved on the dark side of the moon.

Later, coupla times, I brought the Shepherd special gizzard treats and he used to go nuts and spring his front paws up on top of his fence double-happy and smile to see me just like he knew the way how dogs know and do things, like he knew how my heart was hurting – like he knew all along I shot him.

After a while, I couldn’t stand it. Couldn’t look him in the eye. Couldn’t stand – didn’t deserve his happy dog-love – my false, trigger-happy truth stuck festering inside me.

Finally, I quit going even down that street. The big kids said I was a jerk for taking the dare and called me a dirty rotten, little gonat-snatcher twirp and worse – and it’s all true.

New Poetry from Sam Ambler:

“Gnats” and “Made Him Strong”

OUR STRUGGLING LIMBS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

GNATS

Evening fire sparking over Sutro’s rim,
igniting cirrus dragons drifting away from the sun.
Jules and I, enthralled.
Sitting placid on the stoop outside our home.
Cuddling.

They swarm out of the alley from behind.
Catching us. Latching hold onto each
of our struggling limbs.
Like gnats they buzz: *“Faggots!”*
Stuff socks in our mouths.

Drag us to dark playgrounds, the depth of sandboxes.

Fists in our faces. Cleats. Blood. Pipes.
Bone splinters under their boots.
Cold chains gird my torso. Handcuffs biting wrists.
One yanks my hair back:
“Look what happens to motherfucking queers!”

They rip Jules’ pants apart. Jules’ teeth buried in cotton.
Fingers splayed, broken. Knees popped out of sockets.
Ass opened.

Laughing. Noses dripping.
One forces my eyelids like a glassless monocle.
Jagged bottle crammed past Jules’ sphincter.
Jules passing out.
Leather circling around. Beating shafts of meat.
Ejaculating on Jules. Laughing.

Jules coughing. Crawling.

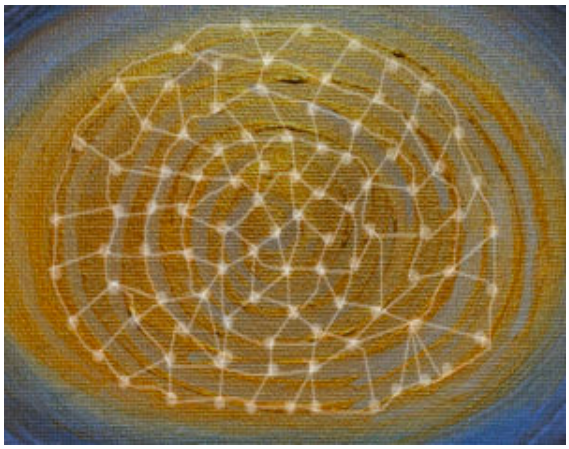
As they flit past his sod-bed,
Jules swats at gnats.

MADE HIM STRONG

From an early age, he knew he was not, could not be,
like other boys. He was fine with that. It made him strong.

Poetry by Amalie Flynn +

Images by Pamela Flynn: “#150,” “#151,” “#152,” “#153”



Flow #150

SPIDER / 150

Thick in Louisiana swamps

Atchafalaya Basin

Hot cypress shooting out

Stretching in that bayou

Where pipelines

Pumping black gold oil

Cross across the swamp

Like spider veins.

Flow #151

TRACKS / 151

How I find tiny cuts

The skin of my inner

Thighs outer lip my

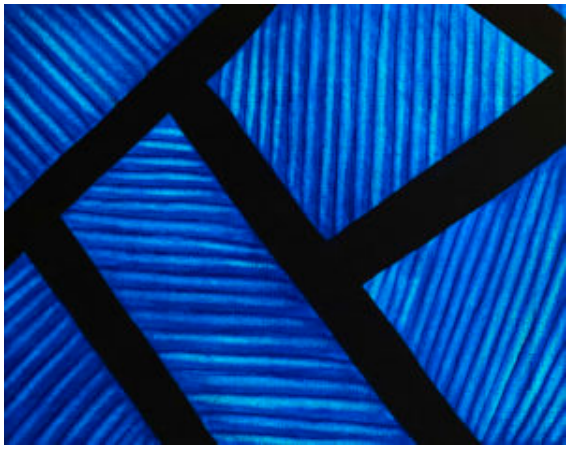
Labia

Cuts from his finger

Nails small bloody

Crescents

Like beetle tracks.



Flow #152

SPOIL / 152

Or deep in a swamp

How oil companies

Create canals

Push earth into piles

Push mud into banks

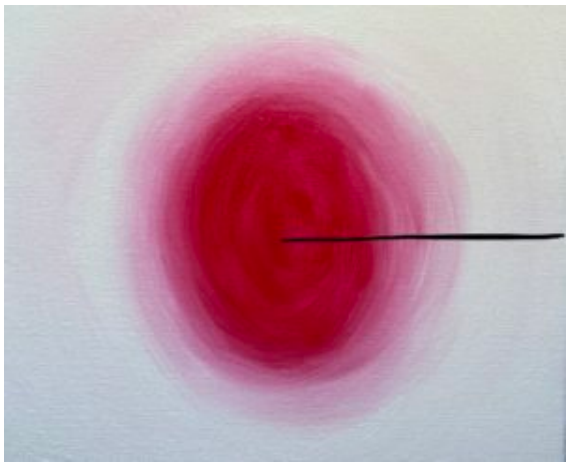
These spoil banks or

Dams

That block blocking

Water so it cannot

Flow.



Flow #153

CLAM / 153

The sky is full of trees

Now after

After he hits me over

The head

With a pipe metal pipe

Hard on

The crown of my skull

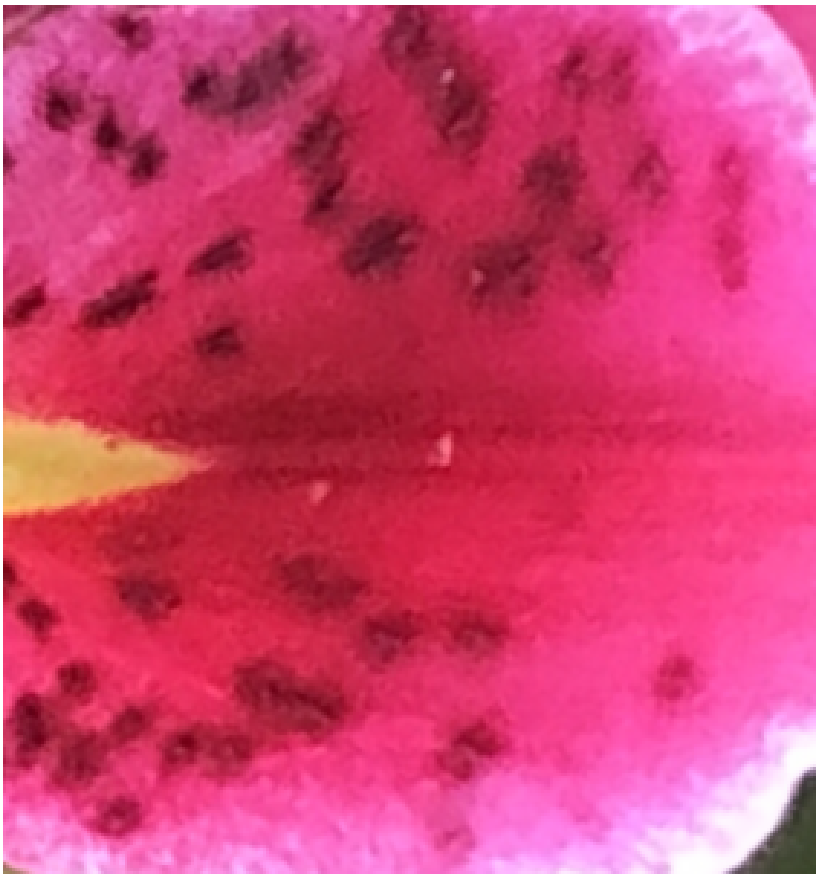
Bone and

Suture cracking like a

Clam shell.

Pattern of Consumption is a year long project featuring 365 poems by Amalie Flynn and 365 images by Pamela Flynn. The poetry and images focus on the assault on women and water.

New Poetry by Maggie Harrison: “Clutch and Bless”



MY RASPBERRY HEART / *image by Amalie Flynn*

CLUTCH AND BLESS

my heart is a raspberry
     juicy yet taut
     fragile
     temporal
     eat it now
          before it degrades   and
     leaves a tasteless
     piece
     of itself
     smeared on the basket.
my raspberry heart lives in the   moment
                        but not my gut
my gut dreams
     unpredictable
     digesting whatever latest bout
          I’ve consumed
               pandemic fear
               fear of white supremacists
               indignation
               incarceration
               playacting colonization with real guns on the range
               a night in jail to protest police violence
               hope for change
               the audacity to hold it
     all of this roils
          my gut
               terribly
tangled in the past
          it’s what I ate yesterday and am now
               transforming
                        to expel in the   future
my raspberry, my beating heart
               crush it, suck it through your teeth, and savor

New Fiction from Brian Castner: The Troll

John Gurdenson's legs weren't what they used to be, and though the veteran charged hard on the forecheck, he was slow, too heavy and slow, and all of us in the arena groaned as the puck slipped down the ice away from him again.

The opposing defenseman took control, easily stepped away, beat Gurdenson along the wall, and made a crisp first pass. The rush headed back the other way. Gurdenson swung his stick at the legs of the Pittsburgh defenseman, gave him the look and the head nod—we knew the signal and a few of us started to clap in anticipation—but the other player ignored him and skated away. Gurdenson drifted back to the bench for a change.

First line out. Tailor hopped over the boards and sprinted into the offensive zone. We all stood, every time Tailor hit the ice. His skates churned the surface with each step, as if he was grabbing great fistfuls of ice and pulling himself along, climbing a rope with his strength alone. It was beautiful to watch. Tailor was just a rookie who had found his spot in the lineup halfway through the season, after Gurdenson broke his ribs. . We loved to watch him fly, plus he had a nose for the net, and was tough and squirrelly and just a bit of a pest, the kind of guy you definitely want on your team and not theirs, which made us cheer all the more.

Gurdenson waited on the bench. Another change, and another. Third line, second line, first line, goal. Amirov, from Tailor, off a cagey steal in the offensive zone. A pretty play, the announcer said, muscle to finesse and a big finish.

We threw our hats on the ice in a shower of New Year's confetti. The home crowd, the sound we made, it was the din of starving men gorging at the master's table. We were up 4-1. We wanted five. We wanted ten. We wanted to feast until we puked. After years of losing, we couldn't get enough.

"Gurdsy, Renault, Scotty, you're up," the assistant coach yelled, calling the line.

Off the faceoff, the puck skipped past Gurdenson, his feet always stuck in cold oatmeal, but then, behind the action, an opportunity. The young defenseman never saw the thick tree trunk fall. Gurdenson's check caught him on the hip and shoulder, flipped him sideways, all legs and outstretched arms so he spun to the ice like an unbuckled passenger tossed from a moving car. The noise in the arena hadn't dimmed since the goal, but now we found a new octave. We stood up as one, pounded our seats and our fellow fans because we knew what was coming. The Troll had been our champion for a decade.

Gurdenson skated backwards away from the fallen man. A dancing

partner from the other corner approached. They shook off their gloves and each grabbed a hunk of sweater and turned on the two piston engine. We were incensed. The fighters traded right hands.

A spectacle at center ice, and all eyes on Gurdenson.

Our man absorbed three fists to the side of the head before his helmet went flying. His challenger's helmet stayed on though, and good thing too, the announcer would say. Gurdenson bloodied the lip of his younger opponent with a right and the kid went woozy and his knees buckled. Gurdenson shifted his weight, leaned back, kept the boy upright with the left hand, didn't let him fall, and then delivered another right to the mouth. Teeth flew. Gurdenson's hand split between the knuckles and his grip with his left started to falter. The kid was all limp dead weight, lights out, but Gurdenson didn't hesitate, swung and connected twice more before the unconscious boy finally slipped free, his helmeted head bouncing off the ice when he landed.

Gurdenson stood over him for a moment, and then skated away even before the referees approached.

Nineteen thousand of us chanted "Troll! Troll! Troll! Troll!" As many cell phone cameras flashed. Gurdenson pointed a finger at the Pittsburgh bench, picked his next victim, gave a "see-you-in-the-playoffs" nod, and we roared even louder. Two minutes for roughing, five for fighting, and a game misconduct. Gurdenson's night was over. He skated to the door, shuffled back to the dressing room, and waited for the rest of the team. The third period would end soon.

Gurdenson sat in front of his stall. He was the only one in the room. He gingerly removed his jersey, stretched a shoulder, checked a bruise, shook out his right hand and stuffed it in a bag of ice that quickly turned pink.

He sat and waited for his team, and it was there, alone,

helmet and shoulder pads off, towel over his neck, that it happened.

The general manager walked in from the side door that led to the executive offices. A tie and cologne and a red face and slicked back hair. It was just the two of them.

“You’ve been traded, Gurdsy.”

Gurdenson looked up at him, a moment, and then back down between his skates.

“You’re headed to the Island, effective immediately.”

Silence.

“You can get dressed.” Pause. “Thanks for everything you’ve meant to this organization.”

The general manager walked out. Gurdenson’s deliberate breath and the creak of his tightly laced skates and our dull rumble muffled all until the double-swinging locker room door burst open and crisp sticks and shouts and clatters from the team and the crowded arena behind.

The game was over. Gurdenson didn’t move. The coach gave a speech and the team congratulated young Amirov on his first hat trick and slapped Tailor’s back and Gurdenson sat and stared a hole in the plush carpet. Water bottles and the showers and sticks checked and re-taped. Then slowly, at a level below the operational clamor of full professional locker room, restrained voices passed the news from player to player. They glanced over. Gurdenson met no eyes.

The others gathered their gear and put on their suits and ties, but as they left the room, one-by-one each man walked up to Gurdenson where he still sat with his skates on, tapped him with the blade of their stick, under their breath:

“Tough one, Gurdsy.”

“Good luck, Gurdsy.”

“See you around, Gurdsy.”

The coach put a hand on his shoulder. Gurdenson couldn’t see him shake his head.

“It’s a tough deal, Gurdsy. It’s a business now, eh, but it’s a tough deal. You take care of yourself.”

The coach was the last to leave. Gurdenson again sat alone in the empty dressing room. He sat there for a long time. Then he got up, put on his suit without showering, and left out the back door of the arena where no one was waiting for him.

*****

OCTOBER 1996, SAULT STE MARIE, ONTARIO, SOO GREYHOUNDS RADIO BROADCAST:

> *Knights recover the puck, slip it along the halfwall, lose control, now they have it back, and dump it into the Soo zone.*
>
> *Robert with the puck, finds his man, Soo coming away, long pass to Paquet and OH MY Ballard just stepped into Paquet at the Soo bench.*
>
> *Paquet had his head down and Ballard just freight-trained him!*
>
> *Paquet never saw it and he’s hurt. Paquet is down.*
>
> *Play continues, puck slides into London’s end but now there’s some chirping going on and it looks like Gurdenson is challenging Ballard.*
>
> *Gurdenson, in his first game here with the Soo, he isn’t wasting any time and they throw down the gloves and here they go!*

Gurdenson and Ballard!

Gurdenson grabs on and starts throwing rights in there!

Ballard can't get his head up, Gurdenson's pummeling him with the right!

Ballard hasn't even swung yet but now he does and both men are swinging away. Ballard and Gurdenson!

Ballard connects on a right and another one but WOW Gurdenson just caught him square on the nose. Gurdenson KO'd Ballard and he's stunned. That nose has gotta be broken, Gurdenson dropped him like a sack of potatoes.

But now here comes McCarthy. You knew he was going to get involved.

And Gurdenson has got to be exhausted. He's got to be just spent, after the tilt with Ballard and Ballard is one tough customer but he is still down on the ice and you can see the blood now pooling at his knees.

They need to get in there. The officials need to get in there and stop this. Gurdenson just fought and he's got to be spent but the linesmen are distracted with Paquet and Ballard and the scrum in front of the Soo bench.

Well, McCarthy has taken exception and Gurdenson isn't backing down and so here they go.

Gurdenson and McCarthy!

Gurdenson is giving up twenty pounds easy and McCarthy has his grip with the left and here he comes with the right, over the top.

And Gurdenson is still trying to get a hold and McCarthy comes in with another right and another.

He's firing the right and Gurdenson can't get his grip

and he still hasn’t swung and OHHHHH McCarthy popped him right on the button! He caught him square with a right!

But Gurdenson is still on his feet somehow and now he comes back with a right. And another!

Both men just firing the punches in there and now Gurdenson frees his left hand and switches sides and starts going overtop with the left.

He surprised McCarthy and he caught him with a beauty and McCarthy looks dazed.

Gurdenson has McCarthy’s jersey up over his head and now the left and an uppercut and another, Gurdenson is working the side of the head and down to the ice they go!

WOW!

Gurdenson, the young kid from Detroit, a troll from below the Mackinac Bridge, makes his mark in the Soo!

He’s fighting like a troll out there.

Ballard still hasn’t gotten up yet and the trainer has come out and I can’t see his face but it has got to be a mess. McCarthy has gone straight to the dressing room with a huge cut over his eye and that’s gunna need stitches.

And this crowd is on their feet here in Sault Ste Marie as Gurdenson is still squawking at the Knights bench.

Welcome to the league, Troll!

*****

“You know, Bobby, I can’t even believe I need to make this phone call.”

“Oh lay off the bullshit, Tom. I’m not buying, you can stop selling. You and John both knew this was coming. Or you should have.”

“My client’s been with you twelve years. That should count for something.”

“It does. It means we’ve paid him a lot of money and he should be grateful for it.”

“He was with you in thick and thin, Bobby, and there was a lot of thin. And this is how you treat him?”

“For fuck’s sake, we’re making a run. You can see that. I have to do what’s best for the team.”

“John Gurdenson is best for your team. He’s given his body and soul to this team and this city and now, on your best shot at the cup in thirty years, this is when you move him?” Silence. “This game used to be about loyalty, Bobby. What happened to loyalty? What happened to veteran leadership?”

“It’s a different game, Tommy. I need goals.”

“You need leadership and toughness.”

“I need goals and toughness. You can’t have one or the other anymore. Did you see what Tailor did last night?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“He destroyed his check and then set up Amo. I never saw John make a play like that, never. That Tailor kid can fight but he can also hit and pass and …”

“And he’s only played what, fifteen games for you?”

“Yes, and so he makes fucking half what Gurdenson does! Fifteen games, four goals, five assists. For half! We needed the cap room. This is our year, Tommy, this is it.”

“The fans love him.”

“The fans love winning. The fans love the cup.”

“True, but not like John. He’s old time. He does things the old way. He’d do anything for the cup and you know it. You’ve seen it. The things he’s endured for this team. This is like, like….” He searched for the word. “… a banishment or something. You can’t do this to him.”

“Listen, Tommy, I like you. I like John. It would have been nice to keep him. If it was like a couple years ago, you know, he used to be able to chip in a couple goals a year. He had what, ten, in ‘08? Those days are long gone, Tommy, you know it. Tailor has nine points in fifteen games. John hasn’t had a point in the last twenty, at least. And he’s not nearly as tough or durable as he thinks he is. With the injury troubles too, John should consider this a hint.”

“A hint for what?”

“I wish him all the best. Tailor is our man now. Tell Gurdsy good luck.”

*****

Gurdenson read the rule book six times, but there was no loophole or caveat or mercy clause to find. The league was explicit and direct. To get your name on the cup, you had to be in the series final or play forty one games that season.

Gurdenson looked at the schedule. Sixty two games so far, but he missed two with a hip strain, seven with a busted hand that was still broken when he came back. And then the ribs, cracked in practice when Tailor hit him on a non-contact drill. Over-excited or deliberate or what, didn’t matter, Gurdenson went out five games, Tailor went in, earned a spot in the lineup. After that, the worst, the *coup de grace,* ten games as a healthy scratch. Ten games gone so Tailor could play.

Gurdenson did the math. Sixty two minus twenty four was thirty eight. Thirty eight games. Three short.

Three short, no cup.

They'd win it this year, everyone knew it. Three short. No cup.

Tailor would only have thirty six, but he'd be in the cup final for sure.

Gurdenson took another drink.

The ribs. Tailor. Three short, no cup.

He checked the schedule again, noted every game left for his old team, saw that the Island wasn't on it, and then he picked up the phone and called his agent.

*****

The closest we came to the Stanley Cup was the year before. We made it to the conference finals, the last step before playing for it all. We hadn't made the playoffs in five years, hadn't won a series in twice that. But now we had a young and up-and-coming team, a bench full of draft picks still in their diapers; only Gurdenson had endured the previous long years of toiling in fallow fields.

The first two rounds were a breeze, but in the third round the team encountered an older and tougher squad. We were hesitant and unsure, exposed as pretenders merely playing dress-up in our father's clothes. We lost that series in only five games, but no true fan among us would forget that our team's tender spines only bent and did not break, that our will was not permanently dashed, because of the actions of John Gurdenson in game three.

Our boys had been out-muscled in the corners, out-bruised in the paint, stripped and pushed off the puck, knocked about and

we boo’d them hard until, as a final humiliation, our goaltender was sent sprawling, a blind hit from behind. Somehow his mask hit the pipe on the way down. He didn’t move for several minutes. The shame was not that he went to the hospital for a brain scan, but rather that every man on ice watched it happen and did nothing.

The coach was planted behind the bench as an unvented furnace. He grew red and silent. No more shouts and mocks and cajoles of the line of smooth faces before him. He put out Gurdenson. We all knew the reason why, for the Troll but to do and…well, you know the rest.

When the puck was dropped Gurdenson ignored it. He skated directly to the opposing bench, discarding his gloves as he went. We knew what was coming, we started our chant for the Troll. His target knew as well, and was half out of his seat when Gurdenson arrived and grabbed his sweater by the outside of the shoulders and pulled him over the boards and onto the ice. The man hit awkwardly but was up quickly. He had bent over goaltenders before, and knew how to stand tall to answer for the taking of liberties.

We always loved Gurdenson because he fought like he had nothing to lose, like he wouldn’t earn his supper if he didn’t take his licks. The newspaper said he fought like a bareknuckle boxer in the hidden back room of a speakeasy, betting the rent money on himself. That he fought to win, not to prolong a show until a referee might step in. Fans knew that a Gurdenson fight meant blood and broken orbitals.

That night, when Gurdenson got to that bench, eleven years of losing poured on the head of his opponent. He pummeled the man and discarded him, but then a second contender approached, and a third. More hands reached out from the bench, grabbed Gurdenson’s elbows and collar. His left arm was pinned. He lost his grasp on the other man’s jersey. A fist swung.

There was a time, not that many years before perhaps, when John Gurdenson would have ducked his head, broken free, twisted away at the last second. But no more. The years hung from him as invisible weights on his ankles and wrists. The right hand hit him in the temple, providence fled, and then surely nothing but a few dim stars amidst the void.

Gurdenson staggered. The rest of his team watched as he was pulled into the opposing bench and gang tackled. Two men pinned his lower half, many more on top. Gurdenson never said what happened to him at the bottom of the pile; it was hidden behind the boards, away from the cameras, never appeared on a highlight reel or replay. It took several minutes for the referees to pull everyone off, and all anyone ever saw was the result.

When Gurdenson emerged he was unrecognizable. He head and face were lumpy, like a thawed Thanksgiving turkey just taken out of the packaging. Blood pooled in unnatural places behind tight skin. His eyes were swollen to blindness. His left arm hung. We were quiet. No Troll calls in the arena. He was guided to the locker room to be treated by the doctors, and would spend two days in the hospital.

The coach stalked behind the bench, slammed a heavy palm against the glass behind him, and finally opened the coke oven door:

“Now you sons of bitches will believe we’re in a war!” he roared.

*****

“You know Tommy, we could have talked on the phone,” said Tampa’s general manager, a round balding man with a stubbly goatee. “Why not that? Why fly down?”

The waitress came over and filled the two water glasses. She spilled a few drops perilously close to the big man’s lap and

he looked up and gave her a face but she didn’t notice.

“And they don’t even offer sparkling instead,” he mumbled to himself. And then, louder, “Tommy, why are we here?”

“Maybe I just missed seeing your face?” Tom said, and took a sip.

“The trade deadline is tomorrow and I have work to do. Why did you come down here?” he asked again.

Tom closed the menu.

“We’re here because you record your calls. I’d rather not have a transcript of this business when we’re done,” Tom said.

“Well, spit it out then. You have my attention,” the other man said, and closed his menu as well and placed it on the stained linen.

“I need you to trade for John Gurdenson,” Tom said.

“He just went to the Island.”

“The Island isn’t going to work for us.”

“Why would they trade him to me?”

“We’ve already worked that out.”

“Well, what if I don’t want him? He’s a has-been.”

“We’ll make it worth your while.”

“We? Who’s we? The Island is trying to put fans in the seats, they need a small time showman. I, on the other hand, am trying to win hockey games here. Your man’s got nothing left in the tank. My team’s trying to make the playoffs. You can’t make it worth our while.”

“I said we would make it worth *your* while.”

Everything went quiet.

“Tommy, what are you doing?”

Tom looked down and smoothed the table cloth with his large hands. His wrinkled fingers looked like overboiled sausages left out too long on the plate.

“I’d rather not say,” Tom said finally.

“How many other GMs have you approached?”

“Three.”

“Did they all tell you to piss off?”

“Basically.”

“And you haven’t given up yet?”

“I read in the paper about Melissa’s latest court filing, and I thought I’d give it one more shot.”

Silence again. Tom took a drink of water.

“It’s a shame about Melissa and the kids,” Tom said. “I’m sorry. I never thought it would get so ugly with you two. I can only imagine the legal fees.”

The man sat and stared at his empty plate a long time before answering.

“Will the Island play ball?”

“Sixth round pick. You won’t even miss it next year. And my client is in the line-up the rest of the season.”

*****

CHICAGO SPORTSRADIO 720 POST-GAME SHOW:

PARKER: I think he planned it.

WHITE: Oh, you can't be serious.

PARKER: He went into tonight with the idea. Two games left in the season. We're the top seed. They're going nowhere. He's going nowhere. This didn't just randomly happen in the heat of the moment.

WHITE: You don't think the booing got to him.

PARKER: Everyone gets booed when they come back to play a game in their old building against their old team. Even after twelve years, it happens. No, that can't be it.

WHITE: Well, this is a big charge, planning to do it. What's your proof?

PARKER: Go back and look at the replays of his shifts. He's completely distracted, oblivious. He's not involved in the play, he's not chasing down pucks…

WHITE: He hasn't been a scoring threat in years. How can you tell the difference?

PARKER: …he's not doing anything except waiting for that Tailor line to get on the ice. In the first period he stretched his shifts, and when that didn't work, I think he iced it on purpose. To lure them out.

WHITE: Well, I'll say this, and they showed it on the broadcast, he had no one around him when he finally recovered the puck at the end of that long stretch in their own zone. He could have skated it out, to get his line off, but he didn't, he iced it instead. And the announcers questioned that decision at the time.

PARKER: Of course they did. It was a bad play. But it meant he was stuck out there, and that we were going to put out the top line in the offensive zone, which is exactly what he wanted. That was the first time all

game that he and Tailor were on the ice at the same time.

WHITE: Is that right? Can we check that?

PARKER: This is what I'm saying: John Gurdenson meant to do it. These guys, and especially him, we saw this last year, they will do anything for the cup. But now he's gone, traded. What does the code say?

WHITE: The code says you handle it on the ice, but this went way beyond the hockey code.

PARKER: Well, code or not, he handled it on the ice alright. And someone, the league, the police, someone, is going to ask him. Did you plan to do this? Was this the plan all along? And I'm telling you, the answer is going to be yes.

*****

And then there stood Tailor, on the side of the scrum, against the boards, back turned.

Gurdenson skated alone from center ice, eyes on his target only, skating more quickly now, silently gathering momentum as a pendulum released. At the last moment he pushed off, left his feet, and raised his elbow. Tailor's back was still turned. Gurdenson caught him at full speed, full body, along his left shoulder and hip, Gurdenson's elbow on the young man's left temple. Tailor's face hit the glass, he momentarily went unconscious, and in that second, fell to the ice like a butchered cattle carcass let off the hook.

In the arena, we shouted and jeered. Tailor was our man now, and we pointed at the officials to intervene and yelled for our boys to step in. Gurdenson shook off the hit. Hands clutched at him but he jerked loosean elbow and swung at his restrainer behind him and dropped the shocked and unprepared

referee. Every other player was paired off with an opponent, locked in entanglements of gear and jerseys and arms and legs, wrestling or recovering.

Gurdenson was alone, free. He loomed over Tailor, who was still face down, groaning and only slowly moving to his hands and knees.

Gurdenson raised his stick and then swung it like an axe down on the back of Tailor's head. The stick shattered and Tailor's helmet flew and he dropped to the ice again. Gurdenson carefully took off his gloves and picked the kid up by the sweater and spun him so they were face to face. Tailor was in and out. He tried to get his hands up but he was too limp to fight back and he fell at Gurdenson's first blow. So the big man rolled the kid over and sat on Tailor's chest and began to beat the boy's unconscious face with his bare scarred hands. Tailor came to and started to twitch but he was pinned. Sweat and spit and snot and then nothing but blood, a wet slap with every impact. Gurdenson threw rights until he felt the bones in Tailor's face yield to gritty mush. He didn't stop, not even when the nose tore, revealing a cavern, and boiling blood erupted everywhere.

Tailor screamed.

Gurdenson never slowed. He swung again and again and again and his jersey dripped gore. We stared in silence. Tailor's cries rang in the rafters and then faded to a gurgle, and his red hot blood melted the ice beneath his sprawled body. The benches emptied, and security ran on the ice, but not in time. The Troll leaned over and whispered into what was left of Tailor's ear.

"No cups for us."

New Nonfiction: Soft Target

When I was nineteen years old, in 2016, I joined the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). I sat at my family's kitchen table, holding in my hands a contract for 13 years (standard length for a 00178 Armour Officer), over the moon with happiness and excitement. My family stood around me, confused and apprehensive but trying hard to be supportive. I could feel their unsaid thoughts: *you are making a mistake.*

I signed the papers.

I felt logic leave the building, felt a scorpion made of bullet casings climbing up my back.

*

At twenty, I went to basic training. In the CAF, it's called Basic Military Officer Qualification (BMOQ, say "bee mock") and it takes place in a giant, 14-story grey zigzag a full kilometre long. The building is officially known as the Batiment General Jean-Victor Allard Building, but its nickname is the Megaplex, or simply the Mega. "Megaplex" is also the name of a Furry convention that has taken place annually since 2002, in Florida. Perhaps I should have gone there.

My BMOQ course was taught by a rotating stable of instructors, all colourful characters in their own rights. One went by "Bear" and had had his nipple piercing torn out during a parachute jump, one was a cheerful master seaman who was into RuPaul's drag race in the creepy way straight men sometimes are; another couldn't stop talking about killing children. He wasn't the only admitted war criminal who taught us, but he was the one who made the biggest impression.

He was a big guy, exuberant, dramatic, profane, broken. He had gone to Afghanistan twice, and he had killed Taliban child soldiers there, and now that he was back in Canada teaching recruits, he just could not shut up about it. Killing children, he told us, was easier than killing dogs. He had done it and he would not hesitate to do it again. When everything else from that course fades into an age-hazed blur, I will still see him standing by our sixth-floor window, talking about how easy it is to kill a child.

Banksy, Bethlehem street art.

Other candidates could laugh it off, ignore it, giggle at it, whatever, but I was the one whose brain it stuck in. After basic, no one mentioned it at all. Sometimes want to ask my former coursemates, “Did he really say those things? Did he kill those children? Did you forget? Did I hallucinate?” The instructor will probably die before me, and when he does, I may be the only one on the planet, aside from the parents, who remembers that those children ever even existed.

Things vanish like that, in the army. Uncomfortable moments, questionable incidents, they all disappear. The moment passes, the words fade, and then it’s back to business, back to the military’s hollow approximation of normalcy. Things vanish because they need to vanish, because if they didn’t vanish, every soldier would end up like me, overburdened by memories, struggling to parse or even comprehend what they experienced. Under heavy physical weight, limbs fracture (mine did); under heavy mental weight, minds will do the same (mine did).

*

Before I joined, I interviewed a family friend for a school project. He had been one of several “mission monitors” authorizing NATO airstrikes in the former Yugoslavia during that nation’s protracted collapse. This is how it worked: pilots enforcing the no-fly zone would see something suspicious– the four barrels of a ZPU anti-aircraft gun, or a Serbian attack helicopter spinning up its rotors– and radio the NATO control centre in Verona, Italy, asking for permission to destroy whatever they had spotted. Based on their information, he would say “yes” or “no”.

From 35,000 feet, it’s hard to get a full picture. Bombs sometimes don’t fall where they’re aimed. The ZPU turns out to be a playground, the helicopter is taking off near a mosque. You know how it goes. “I estimate I killed about 200 kids over there,” he told me “but you can’t let that catch up with you, or it’ll kill you.” Everyone knows someone whose deeds have

caught up with them. Things vanish because they need to vanish. You forget, or you die.

There's a famous Mitchell and Webb sketch where two SS officers are nervously chatting during a firefight. "Are we the baddies?" one asks, in his charming British accent. "Our hats have got little skulls on them!" We laugh, but it's really not that funny. The British Royal Lancers wear skulls on their hats, skulls and two crossed lances and their motto *Or Glory*. American soldiers graffiti Punisher skulls on their helmets. Canadian soldiers wear them on their t-shirts.

"Are we the baddies?"

Yes. Of course we are. We've always been that way.

In the army, beneath every normal-seeming moment lurks the possibility of unimaginable violence, of cruelty beyond measure. Robert Semrau is a former Canadian army captain convicted of "mercy-killing" a wounded Taliban fighter, of shooting a dying man in the head with his pistol. I bought his book before my second army course, Basic Military Officer Qualification-Army (BMOQ-A, say "bee mock ah"). If you read the book, it's very clear that Robert Semrau had a pretty good time in Afghanistan, except for the whole murder trial thing. What's subtle, what whispers to you underneath each page, is that Robert Semrau cannot understand why he was arrested at all. What did he do that was so wrong? Only shot a wounded man to death.

Violence without thinking, cruelty as a reflex. The army puts enormous effort into making sure its soldiers are capable of these. Military training is a process not of breaking down and building up but of warping under pressure, the way plastic does when it's bent. Like plastic, the warping process leaves its stress marks on the brain. Like plastic, if you try and bend the soldier back into the position he was before he got warped, sometimes he will break.

*

BMOQ-A is what's known in the CAF as a "cock course". "Cock" is an acronym; it stands for "confirmation of combat knowledge". A cock course is a military training course that is designed to suck as much as humanly possible. It's meant to harden the soldier against all physical and mental torment, designed to produce in him, her, or them the ability to be instantly and reflexively violent.

At the beginning of BMOQ-A, a friend asked me something about the army. I don't remember what he asked, but I remember what I told him: that for me each day in the army required constant buy-in, that as soon as I woke up each morning I had to convince myself that everything I was going to do that day would be morally acceptable to me. "Are we the baddies?" I asked myself every single day, and I didn't have the spine to answer "yes."

It is the narrowest of all possible lenses. If I had asked myself whether everything I was going to do that day would be morally acceptable to the families of the civilians killed by NATO, by ISAF, by the IDF, maybe I would have had my realizations sooner.

*

In the middle of BMOQ-A, my platoon was getting inspected by the commandant of the Infantry School and his regimental sergeant major (RSM). The RSM was a sturdy French-Canadian, and he walked from soldier to soldier, tapping us each on the chest and asking us why we joined. When he got to me, I babbled something about how interesting tank combat was to me (I'm an armour officer, remember) and my desire to lead men.

"You do not have *it*," he told me simply, and moved on to the next man, asking him the same question.

"RSM," bellowed the young officer. "For queen, god and

country, RSM!”

“You have *it*,” the RSM said.

It: that precious ability to be cruel without thinking, to commit violence in the name of ideals that were never worth anything in the first place. To absorb and replicate the violence around you, to live in it, marinate, become it, and never ever even think of being anything else. *It*, the desire never to question but only to serve. I don’t have *it*. I never had *it*. I’m too soft, and I couldn’t harden myself, not the way they could. Some people have tried to reframe softness as strength, as necessary and worthwhile, but to me it never felt like anything but failure.

“I’m showing you my ‘girl side,’” said the strikingly handsome young infantry officer, tall, with honey-tan skin and warm blue eyes. His “girl side” was the side of himself that he showed to girls he was hitting on. “Maybe I’ll start hitting on you next.” Was he joking? Wasn’t he? I fell regardless. I fell despite myself. For the rest of the summer, he told me how much he loved spending time around me, how highly he thought of me. He ruffled my hair and flashed me tender smiles and for just a moment I forgot we were learning how to kill people.

We were in the woods on a five-day navigation exercise, and the sergeant was showing us how to put a grenade under a water jerry can so that if someone goes to get water, the grenade explodes. If a civilian is going to use that water, we have all just committed war crimes.

On the last live-fire range of the course, I mistook the realistic human targets for real people. I turned to the man next to me and was about to tell him to stop firing, that there were people on the range, but then I realized I was already shooting.

*

Sometimes I wake up panicked and sweating, thinking I'm back on BMOQ-A and late for formation.

Sometimes I think about the senior captain who paused a Russian propaganda video right as it was talking about "sexual degeneracy" and said *doesn't this make you wish you were Russian?*

Other times I remember the corporal who said *I'd rather fuck a five-year-old than a tranny, because at least the five-year-old is a real girl*, to a quiet smattering of laughter that accepted the joke.

It's really enough to make you want to scream. I want to go up to every CAF member I see in the hallways of my workplace and tell them *Listen buddy, I feel it too. I feel that growing gnawing sense of wrong. I hear your doubts in my own head! Give in, man, give in, let's leave this place together, let's those quiet doubts dominate our brains until it forces us to be the opposite of what the army wants. Please, just take my hand and let's get out of here! Let's build something outside this, something real and not based on the logic of cruelty. Let's do it! We can do it, if we really want to.*

If you say that to a soldier, of course, they'd think you're crazy. So I want to say it to you.

This essay is for you. It's for you to read and feel each wrong, for you to get to know the absurdity of this system the same way I have, for you to realize there is nothing, not one scrap, not one shred of it worth saving. It simply shouldn't exist.

I hope that if you take nothing else from this, you take that. I hope it stays with you. I hope you do something with it.

I hope I do too.

New Poetry from Liam Corley

In Which I Serve as Outside Reader on General Petraeus's Dissertation

[The current version of the Army's Field Manual on Counterinsurgency, FM 3-24, originated as a doctoral dissertation written by David Petraeus at Princeton.]

Premise flows from premise like water over the edge
of a waterfall, entrancing those not caught
in the turbid spray, those not lingering in the limestone
chutes that channel the first descent. *Dulce et decorum*,
those molecules in free fall, powerless to reverse

dictates of gravity, whether they be composed
of dollars or bodies. A theorist must maintain sense of scale,
must view war at an appropriate distance, so that its beauty
may emerge like a cold, perfect moon that draws the restless
from their beds with dreams of space flight. The best way to lie
is to get one big whopper on the table and move on quick
to crystalline truth after truth in a train of plausibility
so compelling we don’t see how down becomes
up, so convinced are we by the quality of our reasoning
that be leads to see and eventually to eff and tee, and the best
first lie aligns with ones we’ve already bought, like how we cheer
Frost’s traveler in the yellow woods longing for the road
not taken, nodding along with his glib boast that non-
conformity explains contingency because we can accept
failures chosen on noble grounds more than unforeseen
leaf-covered ways that erupt when footfalls complete
the circuit of pressure plate IEDs. Mr. Petraeus, your counterinsurgency
tools could only work in countries we didn’t create, republics not birthed
by death from above, and so I regretfully conclude
this dissertation presents the naked assertion of imperial power
as the contribution of a helpful guest, final proof that
intelligence and gulled innocence, in general, betray us.

Double Rainbow at Dawn, 15 North at the 10

The rubberneckers slow down
as they do for other hazards,
brake lights merging into
the penumbra of a double rainbow
due west of the traffic lanes,
while in the East the rising sun

irradiates vapor-soaked air.

We are all late, looking askance
at the fireworks of nature,
wondering how our priorities
match up with this display.

Double, not just one: two arcs
of vibrant color proclaiming
peace on earth if we
don’t kill each other
trying to take it in.

New Essay by Patrick Medema: Being Acquainted with Violence

I was in junior high the first time my friend was bullied. This was during the late 1990s, before we could maliciously attack someone from our phones or smart devices, when belittling someone took a personal touch, away from keyboard. I wasn't there but the bully had hit my friend, nothing serious, no broken bones, just a little hurt pride. However, when his father found out, he got in touch with my father and together they agreed that my friend and I needed to learn how to defend ourselves. I wasn't asked, I was told that I would learn to fight. Thus began my acquaintance with the practice of violence.

I've never thought of violence as being "evil." I was taught that violence is a tool, the same way a gun or a knife is a tool. And while violence isn't the solution to every problem, the proper application of violence can be a good thing. There are limits though, a time and a place to call it quits before violence begets violence or you find yourself on the wrong side of a jail sentence. That being said, I've never understood pacifism, the idea that violence serves no purpose

or that civilized society has no need for violence is a joke and a poor one at that. Violence can be a good thing, a necessary thing so long as you understand its proper application. It’s a thin, hazy line at times but a line nonetheless.

After the decision was made, my first acquaintance with violence came in the form of a boxing ring. Boxing, or Pugilism to the sophisticant, is an art. There’s a finesse to it that is lacking in the more popular mixed martial arts. It’s hard to explain to someone that’s never done it but it’s like a dance, a graceful and violent series of motions, second nature to the practitioner but magic to the people watching.

It’s easy throwing a punch but throwing a punch well, that’s the trick, and it’s not all about throwing punches. The secret to being a good fighter is making the other guy miss, going blow for blow with a guy doesn’t mean you know how to fight, all it means is that you can take a beating. Sometimes that’s enough but there’s a difference between a brawler and a fighter. This is the way I was taught to fight, with style and finesse and, most importantly, with my head. But, for all the talk of magic and finesse, boxing is all about the show, it’s a sport. Two equally matched fighters in a ring with a referee and gloves isn’t the same thing as a brawl in the street. In the ring, your title may be on the line but odds are that you’re going to walk away afterwards. There is no such security in the real world, a fight in the street or a brawl in a bar could end up costing you your life, whether that means a cell or a box.

Knowing how to fight in a ring or an octagon doesn’t means you can handle yourself on the streets, where we visit violence upon each other not for sport but for real, where anything can happen and anyone can catch a beating. The man that places all his hopes in his ability to perform is a fool, especially when violence is involved. Just because you can fight, doesn’t mean you should. There are no guarantees in a fight. It doesn’t

matter if you're the greatest fighter in the world; if you go looking for a fight, you're going to find one, one you might not be able to win.

The thing about violence is that even when it's justified, it doesn't mean that your problem will be solved. In life or death situations, violence can save your life. In a combat zone, violence is a daily occurrence and while you are justified in defending your life, or the life of your comrades, there are consequences. The harming of another human being is anathema to our souls. The long-term effects of war and posttraumatic stress disorder are only now being fully realized as so many of our veterans are struggling to overcome the mental and emotional scars of facing and perpetrating violence. Even a simple street fight can have long term repercussions. A fist is a little like a bullet, once it's been fired, everything else that happens afterwards is on you, the good and the bad.

My father was, and is, an old-school kind of guy. His father, my grandfather, was a cold man, detached and distant from his children, a veteran of the Korean War and a champion fighter. My father grew up in a time when streets and neighborhood were sacred and you defended them at all costs. My father was a good fighter and good fighters earn a reputation. There's a certain mystique when it comes to neighborhood tough guys, those guys that people cross the street to avoid, the way the room gets quiet when they walk in. It's intoxicating, the kind of power you can cultivate with the threat of violence. But neighborhoods don't last and when the neighborhoods went away and he was forced to participate in society, my father brought his reputation with him. And, as a teamster in Chicago during the 80's and 90's, a penchant for violence was a good thing.

Thus, a man who thrived on violence, or the threat of violence, and who chose to isolate himself from others raised a son to believe that violence was an easy way of getting what he wanted and that people in general were only useful if they

served your needs. If they couldn't help, then they were discarded. If they could, then they were cultivated. And, if they threatened you, you hurt them. Growing up, it got to a point where it was easier sizing a person up for a fight rather than getting to know them. I'll be honest, I'm not sure which came first, the ability to commit violence or the ability to isolate, but it's a symbiotic relationship. Turn yourself off to people and you start to lose interest in their well-being. Once that happens, hurting them isn't all that difficult. Not when you're the most important person you know.

When violence is an easy means of dealing with a person, that person's value as a human is diminished. The amount of time you're willing to invest in a person is directly proportional to the value you attribute to that person. Why waste the time talking to them, understanding them, empathizing with them, if it's easier to just shut yourself off? It's a lot harder learning to live with someone instead of just hurting them when they don't do what you say or want. It's a time saver too. It's much faster to hit someone than it is to sit down and talk with them.

Devaluing a person means deciding that they are not worthy and therefore require minimal effort on my part. This is hubris, believing that I'm better by virtue of who I am and what I've accomplished, as if such things hold any real meaning. The funny thing about arrogance, you're never really as good as you think you are and there is always someone better. Diminishing a person's status to that of a "thing" is unnatural, it's a conscious act driven by our selfishness or, if we're being really honest, our insecurities and fears. This is what relationships are all about, sharing who we are, imperfections and all, and having that vulnerability reciprocated. I dare say that kind of rejection is more painful than a punch to the face.

It wasn't until years after I'd joined the military that I started seeing people as being meaningful, not just "useful."

So many of my problems with relationships were a result of my belief that people were just “things,” an attitude I had chosen to pursue for so long. It sounds silly to say aloud but people have value, even the ones that you don’t like. And while I still struggle to build and maintain relationships, they are worth the investment. And not only that, what kind of life is that, plotting, manipulating, using people to your own ends? Pop culture wants to glamourize it on T.V. and in movies but like everything else pop culture produces, it’s a bunch of lies. Think about all the craven, sycophants trying to earn their way to the top. Is that how you see yourself? Is that how you want others to see you?

As long as we exist in relationships with each other, violence is a possibility. If we agree that some violence is acceptable, how do we avoid unnecessary violence? Who is our enemy? The guy that talks shit about you behind your back? So what? The guy that cut you off in traffic? So what? Your shitty neighbor down the block? Call the police if you have a problem. What good is violence in any of these situations? It’s satisfying, or it can be, hurting someone. But what does it accomplish? What does it do for you other than cause more problems? In the right situation, violence can save lives. In the wrong situation, it can ruin them. If we value people and want to avoid violence then we must be willing to humble ourselves, to quiet that nagging voice that tells us every slight or perceived insult should be answered with violence. Life cannot be spent sizing people up in preparation for violence. Man was never meant to live that way.

I’m not an expert but it takes someone acquainted with violence, comfortable with violence, to know when it’s appropriate to use it. I feel bad for people that have been sheltered from violence all their life. These people are ill prepared for the reality that violence is an inevitable part of life. I don’t think we need to revel in it but we need to be prepared for it. This isn’t a rally cry for the Second

Amendment or a revitalization of the “Affliction” mixed martial arts culture. If anything, it’s an appreciation for those that accept violence as a part of life and are willing to use violence to protect others, our military, and our law enforcement.

But, even amongst our armed forces, what percentage have actually taken part in violence? And of that percentage, how many have the requisite maturity and experience to apply violence in an appropriate manner, enough to save lives but not so much as to appear savage or malicious. Ditto for our law enforcement. We want to believe that those charged with the use of necessary violence are grizzled, battle tested, level-headed men and women but the truth is that most of them are no different from they people they “protect.” An oath of service or a badge doesn’t mean you are exceptionally qualified to use violence. I’d go so far to say that the majority of controversy surrounding excessive force and wrongful deaths is not only a failure of judgment on the part of the individual involved but a lack of preparation on the part of law enforcement in general when it comes to the proper use of and application of violence in a high-risk situation. And I don’t mean to second guess anyone, I won’t play armchair officer, but we owe it to our police, and our military, to prepare them as best we can for a job only a few are willing to undertake.

I think it would be great if we lived in a selfless society dedicated to the preservation and betterment of man, where egos are non-existent and where people are valued as equals rather than treated like “things.” But that just isn’t the case. Ego is a part of who we are. We can fight against our baser instincts but inevitably we all give into selfishness. In “civilized” society, there are times when the need for violence seems so distant but I urge you not to be so naive. The need is real. It’s with an appreciation of this truth that I continue boxing, attempting to perfect the art I started so

long ago. The capacity for violence is like a cushion, a safety net designed to protect me and mine from the uncertainties of life. The trick is not losing sight of the fact that there is still a cost even if justified. This is how we keep our humanity while still being acquainted with violence.

New Fiction by Helen Benedict: WOLF SEASON

STORM

The wolves are restless this morning. Pacing the woods, huffing and murmuring. It's not that they're hungry; Rin fed them each four squirrels. No, it's a clenching in the sky like a gathering fist. The wet heat pushing in on her temples.

Juney feels it, too, her head swaying, fingers splayed. She is sitting on the wooden floor of their kitchen, face raised, rocking and rocking in that way she has. Hair pale as a midday moon, eyes wide and white-blue.

"It smells sticky outside, Mommy. It smells wrong," she says in her clear, direct voice, no hint of a whine. Soldiers don't whine. And Juney is the daughter of soldiers.

"Nothing's wrong, little bean. Maybe we'll get a summer storm, that's all. Come, eat."

Juney is nine years old, the age of curiosity and delight before self-doubt clouds the soul. Fine hair in a braid to her waist. Bright face, wide at the temples, tapering to a nip of a chin. Delicate limbs, skinny but strong.

She lifts herself off the floor and wafts over to the kitchen table, a polished wooden plank the size of a door, where she feels for her usual chair and settles into it with the grace of a drifting leaf. Starting up one of her hums, she dips her spoon into the granola Rin made for her—sesame seeds, raisins, oats, and nuts, every grain chemical-free.

“More milk, please.”

Sometimes, when Rin is not hauling feed, chopping wood, weeding, or fixing some corner of their raggedy old farmhouse, she stands and watches Juney with wonder, her miracle daughter, and this is what she does after pouring the milk; she leans against the kitchen counter, still for a moment, just to absorb her. Juney moves like a sea anemone, fingers undulating. She can feel light and sun, shadow and night, and all the myriad shades between.

“I want to go weed,” she says when her bowl is empty, sitting back to stretch, her spindly arms straight above her, twiggy fingers waving. The scrim of clouds parts for a moment, just enough to allow a slice of sun to filter through the windows, sending dust motes spinning and sparking into the corners of the kitchen. She rocks on her chair inside a sunbeam, hair aglow, fingers caressing the air. She can hear their cats, Purr, Patch, and Hiccup, stretching out on the floor. Smell their fur heating up, their fishy breath slowing into sleep.

“Me, too,” Rin says. “Let’s go.”

Juney was born in the upstairs bedroom, amid Rin’s outraged yells and the grunts of a stoic midwife; she knows her way around their ramshackle house and land as well as she knows her own body. Rin only helps by keeping unexpected objects out of the way, as even the dogs and cats have learned to do. No tables with sharp corners; no stray chairs, bones, mouse corpses, or drinking bowls. The house itself might be a mishmash of added rooms and patchwork repairs, windows that

won’t open and trapdoors that will, but everything inside has its place.

Out in the backyard, Juney stops to sniff the thickening heat—the clouds have closed over again, gunmetal gray and weightier than ever. “Itchy air,” she declares, and makes her way to the vegetable garden. Ducking under the mesh Rin erected to keep out plundering deer and rabbits, she squats at the first row of tomatoes. Weeding is Juney’s specialty. Her fingers climb nimbly up the vines, plucking off the brittle spheres of snails, the squishy specks of aphids. Her palms caress the earth, seeking the prick of dandelion leaves and thistles, the stubs of grapevine and pokeweed, and out they come, no mercy for them.

Her father loved planting. Jordan Drummond was his name, Jay to all who loved him. Jay, flaxen-haired like Juney, face white as a Swede’s, eyes set wide and seaglass blue. Tall and rangy, with enormous feet, and so agile he might have been made of rubber. He, too, was born and bred on this property, back in the time when it was a real farm. Helped his parents raise cows and corn all his life, until the farm failed and drove him into the army. When his platoon razed the date groves around Basra, acres of waving palm trees, their fronds a deep and ancient green, their fruit glistening with syrups—when they ploughed those magnificent trees into the desert just because they could, he wept as if for the death of a friend.

Now Rin arranges her days around forgetting, pushes through a list of tasks tough enough to occupy her mind as well as her muscles. Juney comes first, of course, but her wolves take concentration, as do her chickens and goats and vegetables. She has staked out her ground here with all her companions. If anyone wants to find her, they have to negotiate half a mile of potholed unpaved driveway, barbed wire, electric wire, a gate, and her four dogs, who are not kind to strangers. Not to mention her army-trained marksmanship.

Juney feels her way around the spinach and carrots, pulling and plucking. “Mommy, what are we doing today?”

“Going to town. The clinic. Not till we finish the chores, though. Come on, let’s feed the critters.”

“Which clinic?”

“Yours.”

She hesitates. “Have I got time to do the birds first?”

Juney’s favorite job is tending the bird feeder. Rin wanted to throw it out after that mama bear knocked it off its squirrelproof stand, plunked herself on the ground and dumped the seeds down her throat like a drunk—Rin watched the whole thing from the kitchen window, describing the bear’s every move to Juney. But the feeder means too much to Juney to relinquish. She judges how empty it is by feeling its weight in her palms, plants it between her feet to hold it firm, fills it to the brim from the seed sack, and deftly hangs it back up. Then she sits beneath it, head lifted while she listens and listens. “Shh,” she says this morning. “There’s a nest of baby catbirds over there.” A faint rustle, the quietest of hingelike squeaks. “Three of them. They want their breakfast.”

Leaving her to sit and listen, Rin kicks the sleepy cats outside to make their way through the day and eases her car out of the barn. The barn sits to the side of her house, on the edge of a flat field that used to hold corn. Beyond that, a hardscrabble patch of rocks and thistles meanders up a hill to scrubby hay fields and a view of the Catskill Mountains to the south. Otherwise, aside from her yard, the ancient apple orchard in the back, and the vegetable patch, she is surrounded by woods as far as the eye can roam.

Ten acres of those woods she penned off for her three wolves, leaving them plenty of room to lurk. Wolves need to lurk. They

are normally napping at this time of morning, but the seething heat has them agitated and grumbling. Rin can sense their long-legged bodies moving in and out of the shadows, scarcely more solid than shadows themselves. Even her absurdly hyperactive mutts are feeling the unwholesome weight of the day, but instead of expressing it with restiveness like their cousins, they drop where they stand, panting heavily into sleep.

Frederic Remington. *Moonlight, Wolf,* 1909.

The entire compound is preternaturally still. The yard, the woods, the porch cluttered with gnarled geraniums and fraying furniture; the rickety red barn with its animal pens clinging to its side for dear life; the piles of lumber and rusting

machinery—all are as somnolent as the snore of a summer bee.

Rin looks at her watch. “Time!”

Juney straightens up from under the bird feeder, wipes her earthy hands on her jeans, and walks toward her mother along the little path planted with lilac bushes, a path she memorized as an infant. She puts her head on Rin’s chest, reaching the exact level of her heart.

She smells her mother’s fear even before she hears it in her voice. The sweat breaking out slimy and oyster-cold.

Juney was conceived in the back of a two-ton, Camp Scania, Iraq, under a moon as bright and hard as a cop’s flashlight. A grapple of gasp and desire, uniforms half off, bra up around Rin’s neck, boots and camo pants flung over the spare tire. Jay’s mouth on her nipples, running down her slick, sandflea-bitten belly, down to the wet openness of her, the salt and the sand of her, the wanting of her, his tongue making her moan, his fingers opening her, his voice and hers breathing now and now and now.

Wartime love in a covered truck, that desert moon spotlighting down. His chest gleaming silver in its glare, eyes glittering, the scent of him sharp and needing her, the voice of him a low growl of yes like her wolves.

But even through the slickness, even through the wanting and wanting, she felt the desert grinding deep into her blood. Toxic moondust and the soot of corpses.

As Rin drives her rackety maroon station wagon along the rural roads that take her to town and the clinic, Juney hums again beside her, rocking in her seat, her warbly tune following some private daydream. The windows are open because the AC refuses to work and the sweat is rolling down Rin’s arms, soaking the back of her old gray T-shirt, the waistband of her bagged-out work pants. She glances down at herself. She is

covered with dirt from the yard. Probably has burrs in her hair. Once she was slim with just enough curve and wiggle to make Jay smile. Long hair thick as a paintbrush till she cut it for war. These days, squared-out by childbirth and comfort food, she looks and moves more like a lumberjack. Still, she should have had the decency to shower.

Juney is mouthing words now, rocking harder than ever to her inner rhythm. Rin should teach her not to do that—it makes people think she's retarded—but she doesn't have the heart. Juney rocks when she's happy

"Tweetle tweetle sang the bird," she croons in some sort of a hillbilly tune.

"Twootle twootle sang the cat.

You can't get me, sang the bird.

I don't want to, sang the cat.

Tweetle and twootle, tweetle and—"

"Juney?" Rin is not exactly irritated but needs her to quit. "You're going to be okay at the clinic, right? No screaming like last time?"

Juney stops singing long enough to snort. "I was a baby then. And they stuck me with that long needle." She takes up her song once more, then stops again. "Are they going to stick me this time?"

"Soldiers don't mind needles. It's just a little prick, like you get every day in the yard from thistles."

"Yeah. Who cares about needles?"

"It's just an annual checkup to see how much you've grown. Nothing to worry about. They'll probably tell you to eat more, skin-and-bones you."

“That’s ’cause you won’t let me have candy. I’m going to tell the doctor to order you to give me candy.”

This is an old battle, Rin’s strictness about food. She is strict about a lot of matters. No TV, no cell phones. No radio, either, not even in the car. Yet there are limits to how much even she can cushion her daughter. Thanks to the law, she is obliged to send her to school, and there, as if by osmosis, Juney has absorbed the need for the detritus that fills American lives. Despite all Rin’s efforts, Juney has caught the disease of Want.

Rin wonders if Juney’s daddy would approve of how she’s raising her: Jay, the only man she’s ever wanted, ever will want. Jay, gone for as long as Juney has been alive. And look what he left behind. A broken soldier. A fatherless daughter. The wolves who patrol the woods like souls freed from the dead, their thick-furred bodies bold and wild—the ones who won’t be tamed, won’t be polluted, won’t be used.

It was Jay’s idea to raise wolves. His plan was to do it together once they were done soldiering—he had always wanted to save them from extinction, the cruelty of zoos and those who wish to crush them into submission. “They need us, Rin,” he said to her once, his big hand resting tenderly on her cheek. “And we need them.” So when she found herself alone and pregnant, she decided to carry out the plan anyway. She tracked down a shady breeder over by Oneonta and rescued two newborn pups, blue-eyed and snub-nosed, blind, deaf and helpless, their fur as soft as goose down, before he could sell them to some tattooed sadist who would chain them up in his yard. One was female, the other male, so she hoped they would breed one day. As they did. “Never try to break wolves,” Jay told her. “They’ve got loyalty. They might even love you, who knows? But we must never tame them. They’re wild animals and that’s how it should stay.”

Her guardian angels. Or devils. She hasn’t decided which.

“We’re here!” Juney sings out. She knows the town of Huntsville even when it’s midmorning quiet and raining: the asphalt steaming, the wet-dust funk of newly soaked concrete.

Rin drives down the main drag, a wide, lonely street with half its windows boarded up and not a soul to be seen. A Subway on the left, a Dunkin’ Donuts on the right, its sign missing so many letters it reads, duk do. The CVS and three banks that knocked out all the local diners and dime stores. A Styrofoam cup skitters along the gutter, chipped and muddied by rain.

Pulling up the hill into an asphalt parking lot, Rin chooses a spot as far away from the other cars as she can get, her stomach balling into a leathery knot. She hates this town. She hates this clinic. She hates doctors and nurses. She hates people.

Pause, swallow, command the knot to release. It won’t. She sweeps her eyes over the macadam, down the hill to the clinic, over to the creek bubbling along behind it. Back and forth, back and forth.

“Mommy, we’re in America.”

“Yeah. Sorry.” One breath, two. “Okay. I’m ready.”

If Rin could walk with her wolves flanking her, she would. Instead, she imagines them here. Ebony takes the front guard, his coat the black of boot polish, eyes green as a summer pond, the ivory curve of his fangs bared. Silver brings up the rear, her fur as white as morning frost, her wasp-yellow eyes scanning for the enemy, a warning growl in her throat. And the big stately one—the alpha male, the one Rin named Gray, his body a streak of muscle, his coat marked in sweeps of black and charcoal—walks beside her with Juney’s fingers nestled into the thick fur of his back, his jaw open and slavering, ready to tear off the head of anyone who so much as looks at her.

With her invisible wolves around her and her daughter gripping her hand, Rin plows through the now-strafing rain to the clapboard box of a clinic and up to its plate-glass front, on which, painted in jaunty gold lettering, are the words *Captain Thomas C. Brittall Federal Health Care Center's Pediatrics/U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*.

"Department of Vaporized Adolescents," she mutters, pushing open the cold glass door and its cold metal handle. They step inside.

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Naema Jassim is standing in the white starkness of that same clinic, suspended in one of the few moments of tranquillity she will be granted all day. Her hands, long-fingered and painfully dry from constant washing, press down on the windowsill as she gazes into the hot wetness beyond. The sky has turned an uneasy green, tight with electricity and tension. Even from inside her clinic office, the air smells of singed hair and rust.

"Doctor?" Wendy Fitch, the nurse, pokes her head into the room. "Your nine a.m.'s here. We have four more before we close. TV says the hurricane's due around two."

"Yes, the rain, it has already come." Naema turns from the window, so slight she is almost lost inside her voluminous white coat, her black hair gathered in a loose knot at her neck. Face long and narrow, eyes the gold of a cat's. A star-shaped scar splashes across her otherwise smooth right cheek.

Behind her, a sudden wind catches the weeping willow outside, sending its branches into a paroxysm of lashing and groaning. But the tightly closed windows and turbine roar of the clinic's air-conditioning, set chillingly low to counteract the bacteria of the sick, render the premature storm as silent as dust.

Naema slides her clipboard under her arm and moves to the door.

Outside, the trees bend double and spring back up like whips. The clouds convulse. A new deluge drives into the ground, sharp as javelins.

A mile uphill, the wind seizes a tall white pine, shaking it until its ninety-year-old trunk, riddled with blister rust, splits diagonally across with a shriek. It drops onto the Huntsville Dam, already thin, already old, knocking out chunks of concrete along its crest until it resembles a row of chipped teeth.

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Rin grips Juney's hand while they sit in the waiting room, her palms sweating as she scans every inch of the place: walls too white, lights too bright, posters too cheerful, a television screen as big as a door blasting a cooking show. But she refuses to look at the other women. Their calculating eyes. Their judgments. Their treachery.

The monologue starts up in her head, as it always insists on doing at the VA, even though she is only in an affiliated pediatrics clinic, not a full-fledged hospital full of mangled soldiers and melted faces. She fights it as best she can, trying to focus on Juney, on her wolves growling in their hot fur by her feet, but it marches on anyhow, oblivious to her resistance: *Where were you ladies when I needed you, huh? I saw you fresh from your showers; I saw you listening. Scattered, every one of you, like bedbugs under a lamp. Where were you when, where were you. . . .*

"Stop." Juney pulls Rin's hand to her chest. "Mommy, stop."

Rin looks for her wolves. They are crouched around her still, tongues lolling, their musky fur and meat-breath reassuring. She should have brought Betty, her service dog. She keeps

telling herself she doesn’t need Betty. But she does.

Juney lifts her nose and Rin can tell she is smelling the medicinal stinks of the clinic. All scents are colors to Juney, an imagined rainbow Rin will never see. The disinfectant in the wall dispensers, sickly sweet and alcohol sharp—this is her yellow. The detergent of the nurses’ uniforms, soapy and stringent, she calls bright orange. The chemical-lemon odor of the floor polish: purple. The pink of freshly mown grass, magenta of oatmeal, green-bright breath of their cats, black of their dogs panting. The glaring white of her mother’s alarm.

Rin sends her mind to her hand, still clasped against Juney’s narrow chest. Juney’s heartbeat reminds Rin of the chipmunk she once held in her palm, soft and weightless, alive and warm—a tiny bundle of pulsating fluff.

Another soldier mother is squeezed into the far corner, holding a feverish infant to her breast. A second sits by the wall with her child, its back in a brace. A third walks in with her toddler daughter, whose right hand is wrapped in a bandage. The beams of the women’s eyes burn across the room, avoiding one another yet crossing like headlights, smoldering with their collective sense of betrayal.

Time inchworms by.

Finally, a hefty nurse with frizzled blond hair steps through the inner door, the name fitch pinned loudly to her bosom. She runs her eyes over Rin and Juney and all the other mothers and children suspended in this stark, white room. “Rin Drummond,” she calls.

Rin cannot speak.

“Mommy?” Juney lifts Rin’s hand off her chipmunk heart and jumps down from her chair. “We’re ready,” she tells the nurse and pulls her mother’s arm. She and Rin follow the nurse’s

broad back down the corridor and into an examining room.

“Just strip to your undies, honeypie, and hop up here,” the nurse tells Juney. “Doctor Jassim will be here in a jiffy.”

“Thank you. I know what to do. I’m nine years old and my name is June Drummond.”

“Of course it is,” the nurse says, unruffled.

“Did you say ‘Jassim’?” Rin asks, finding her voice at last. “Who’s he?”

“Doctor Jassim is a woman. She’s been a resident with us for half a year now. She’s very good, don’t worry.”

“Where the fuck is she from?” Rin’s hands curl up tight and white.

“Mrs. Drummond, relax, okay? She’s the best physician we have here. You’re lucky to get her.” The nurse leaves, closing the door with a snap that sounds more as though she is locking them in than giving them privacy.

Juney peels off her T-shirt and shorts and kicks away her flip-flops. Both she and Rin are dressed for the heat of the August day, not for the clinic’s hypothermic AC, so her skin is covered in goose bumps. Rin finds a baby blue hospital robe hanging on the back of the door and wraps Juney’s shivery body in it before lifting her onto the plank of the examining table, its paper crackling beneath her. She is so fragile, her Juney, a wisp of rib cage and shoulder blade, legs pin-thin as a robin’s. Rin holds her tight, not sure who is comforting whom.

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The wind rampages through woods and parking lots, streets and gardens, seizing sumacs, maples, and willows and shaking them until their boughs drop like shot geese. Up the hill, the

rain-bloated creek presses its new weight against the crumbling dam, pushing and pounding until, with a great roar, it bursts through, leaps its banks and rushes headlong down the slope toward the clinic; a foaming wall of red mud, branches, and rocks flattening every shrub and tree in its path.

Inside, the air-conditioning hums. Voices murmur. Babies whimper.

Wendy Fitch hovers by the door of the examining room, checking her watch. Dr. Jassim might be great with her patients but the woman has zero sense of time. Whether this has something to do with her culture or is only an individual quirk, Wendy doesn't know, but the doctor needs to finish up here and fetch her son from his friend's house, the boys' summer baseball camp having sensibly closed against the impending storm. The rain is beating on the windows now and Wendy can feel the patients' parents growing more restless by the minute, as eager as she is to get back to their canned food and bottled water, their batteries and candles. Her pulse quickens. As a lowly nurse, she has to bear the brunt of the parents' ire, and these are no ordinary parents, either. They are all military veterans, half of them ramped up or angry. Like that pit bull of a woman, Rin Drummond.

"We better hurry, storm's coming on quick," Wendy says when Naema emerges at last from the first examining room. "Watch out for this one," she adds in a whisper, touching her temple. "Room three."

Naema nods with a resigned smile and walks toward the door.

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Rin can't believe they gave Juney an Arab for a doctor. Typical of the VA to hire the second-rate. The woman probably bought her certificate online, did her training on YouTube. Probably blew up some sucker of a soldier or two on her way

here, as well.

“Mommy, what’s wrong?”

Rin takes a breath. And another. “It’s okay. It’s just this place.” She strokes her daughter’s hair and pulls her close once more, feeling her frail body shiver.

A knock on the door. Gentle, yet it sends a spasm through Rin’s every nerve.

The door opens and in walks a woman in a white coat, as if she’s a real doctor. No head scarf, at least, but there’s that familiar olive-brown skin and blue-black hair. She’s carrying a clipboard file, which she reads before even saying hello, which Rin considers damned rude. Then she looks up.

A splattered white scar on her right cheekbone. Most likely a shrapnel wound. Rin would know, having some fifteen herself.

“Good morning,” the doctor says to Juney, voice snake-oil smooth, accent not much more than a lilt but oh so recognizable. “You are June, right?”

But Juney isn’t listening. Her head’s up, cocked at the angle that means her mind is elsewhere. “Mommy?”

Rin is shaking. The face. The scar. Her breath is coming short and airless.

“Mommy?” Juney’s voice is more urgent now. “I hear something.”

“There is no need to be frightened, dear,” the doctor says, and Rin can’t tell whether she’s talking to Juney or her.

“Mommy!” Juney jumps down from the examining table, her robe falling off, leaving her in nothing but white cotton underpants, skin and bone. “Something bad’s happening!”

“Get out of here!” Rin yells at the doctor.

“What is the matter?” The doctor looks confused.

“No, not her!” Juney cries. “Run!” And she hurls herself into the dangerous air, unable to see the metal table covered with glass bottles and needles, the jutting chair legs on the floor.

Rin reaches out and catches her, but she wriggles free in true terror. “Let us out!” she screams, and the doctor turns around, bewildered, saying something Rin can’t hear because at that moment the window bursts open and a torrent of red water crashes through, smashing them against the wall, knocking them over, pounding them with a whorl of mud and branches and shattered glass. . . .

Rin’s soldier training, her war-wolf heart, these are not in her blood for nothing. She struggles to her feet, seizes Juney around the waist and forces the door open, kicking away the flailing doctor tangled in her white coat, her long hair, her scar, and her legacy.

Rin slams her face down in the water and steps on her, using her body to lever her daughter through the door and out of the water to safety.

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