

Preface

In 2015, my college history professor, Larry Tritle, asked me to write a story for an anthology called *The Many Faces of War*. I had never written creatively before, in fact, I suspected that any creative impulse in me had died long ago thanks to my decision to become a lawyer and join the Marines.

On a study abroad trip to China, however, I found the words coming to me, almost in spite of me. I rose each morning, wide awake, and clicked out a few hundred words or so until I had myself a first draft. If you need to save money on alarm clocks, I learned, become a writer. It also helps to be incredibly jet lagged.

Looking back at that story, “The War of Law,” there are some obvious deficiencies. Too much exposition, not enough character, not enough scene. There’s a tension, an immediacy to the story, though. It’s not so much the structure at work, but the confessional tone. What comes through is just how much Afghanistan affected the narrator.

I figured that story was going to be a one-off. I had tried writing before, in law school, about the time some OG pulled a gun on me in front of my house as a kid, but I felt self-conscious – like I was hamming it up for the cameras. After “War of Law,” however, I didn’t feel this nagging sense of self-doubt. On the contrary, it had awakened something in me that had long been dormant.

I now rose each day, as I had in China, though I was now a creative writing student at the Mount, and the words came, to paraphrase Charles Bukowski, unasked out of my heart, and my mind, and my mouth, and roaring out of my gut. Except instead

of scenes of artillery and hellfire, it was now homemade donuts and drive-bys. It was the sights and the sounds of my childhood.

The vignettes that came out of these early-morning writing sessions formed the core of *Say His Name*, the opening entry in this collection. I had a hell of a time finishing this story. It was a bloated first-person piece, stretching past nine-thousand words, a raging bull of a story, an ode to s-called “toxic masculinity,” which took months and months to subdue.

The next story I wrote was *The Rona*, which was originally called *The Road*. At the time, I was the subject of intense criticism in the community for my position in favor of building an emergency homeless shelter to address a burgeoning homelessness crisis. I conceived of *The Road* as a parable of sorts, along the lines of Paul the Apostle’s blinding on the road to Damascus. I was also influenced by Tolstoy’s later short stories, including “The Three Hermits” and “What Men Live By,” which are meant to be simple enough for the meekest peasant to understand. Gustave Flaubert’s “The Legend of Saint Julien the Hospitalier” was another source of inspiration.

As with *Say His Name*, I struggled to finish *The Rona*. It wasn’t until I read *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles during Literary Fiction that I was able to complete the story. By this time, the pandemic was raging, and it became an essential part of the story. We had also built a shelter and our homeless encampments had come down. To quote Alexandre Dumas: “For all evils there are two remedies -- time and silence.” With a detachment that only comes with time, I was finally able to see the protagonist with the necessary objectivity.

This detachment was equally important to my next work, the satirical buddy dramedy *Mirror Image*. With time, I was able to see the characters of Frank and Carlos in a new way. Both had been victims of their own failings all along, but I now withheld my judgment, viewing them with humor and even sympathy sort of the way David Chase made us see Tony Sopranos.

At this stage, I gave short stories a rest. But not before I finished *Grinder*, a found text tale about workplace conflict. Robert Coover's "The Brother," with its acerbic informality, was an inspiration as were the many great unreliable narrative stories in American fiction, including *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Huckleberry Finn*. I focused during the intervening period on completing a poetry collection called *Sonnets of Sin & Salvation*, an allegory in the vein of *The Divine Comedy*. Through this project, I honed my ability to create tightly packed meaning and to craft a project around a singular theme, conceptualizing partisanship as a sin that needs to be absolved in that collection. That project also taught me a lot about how many revisions it takes to write about politics without coming across as angry or cynical.

Sonnets of Sin & Salvation was heavily influenced by Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* album, which works, song after song, towards a crescendo that is both cumulative and revelatory. Lamar's next album *DAMN* was likewise a source inspiration for *Public Record*. In *DAMN*, Lamar demonstrates just how deeply an artist can infuse a piece of contemporary, popular art with meaning, drawing on numerous artistic, philosophical, and even biblical strands, creating a cohesive, eclectic epic out of a mere 14 tracks while also being pleasing to the consumer.

When I came back to *Public Record*, I thus knew I wanted to create a linked collection. I followed my thesis advisor Professor JoAnna Novak's advice and let the stories provide the direction and not the other way around. The first story that came to me was *Your Heart*, which was inspired by the drug overdose of a young single mother at a homeless encampment on New Year's Day. I didn't conceive of it in this way at the time, but there's a Freudian aspect to this story, a search for both individual and group catharsis in the tragic death of a community member.

A House Divided was clearly inspired by the protests following the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers. Much has been said of the killing and the protests that ensued. I was interested in a slightly different aspect. There is little room in any mass uprising for nuance. I wanted to know what happens when someone, the hapless AB in this case, tries to introduce subtlety into a volatile situation. I had been reading *Lincoln's Melancholy* by Joshua Wolf Shenk, which deals with how Abraham Lincoln dealt with depression. Lincoln was a master at conveying the emotional weight of the political moment. I wondered if we would kill Lincoln long before he reached the theater.

The Swamp came out of an experience I had in the Fall of 2019 when the assemblyman for my district announced he was not going to seek reelection and I nearly ran to replace him. I looked into the mouth of the beast and I didn't like what I saw, nor did I enjoy what the pursuit of political power was doing to me. I decided, like in *All the President's Men*, to find out where the truth lies, except I would take Deep Throat out of the shadows and place him at the center of my story. My experience in

Afghanistan, a place where there are no good guys, only different kinds of bad guys, was also an important source of inspiration for this story as was HBO's *The Wire*.

With darkness and satire pervading the collection up to this point, I realized *Public Record*, which was now about halfway done, needed something of a palette cleanser, an intermission. Inspired by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner, I decided to try my hand at the stream of consciousness style in the eponymous *Public Record*. I didn't want the collection to merely describe what politicians, and other political actors, think and do, I wanted to put you in their heads.

As a child, I felt like the luckiest kid in the world when my dad surprised me in the second grade with a Happy Meal and a copy of *the Death of Superman* by Louise Simonson, Lois Lane clutching a bloody Clark Kent on its cover. I stopped reading comics at some point, returning to them much later as a law student with Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. When I decided to write a story about a politician who creates crimes in order to solve them, the graphic novel seemed like an obvious vehicle. Thankfully, I have two semesters of screenwriting, and a perpetually half-finished screenplay, under my belt.

Although it is named after *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Last Mohican* is really a western in the vein of *No Country for Old Men*, a film that explores the nature of hostility, of unwanted change, and of being left behind, similar themes explored in my short story about a political insider turned outsider. Given where we are politically as a nation, isolation and alienation struck me as appropriate themes to explore.

At this point, it was clear to me that the collection was becoming fairly diverse in terms of its genres. I decided why not add a romance to the mix. *Hanging Chad* was

inspired by a personal experience in which I discovered during the 2004 presidential election, after dating my girlfriend for more than a year that she and I were from opposing political parties. We moved on from that revelation rather quickly, and never discussed it again, a situation that is hard to fathom in the highly partisan 2020s. CNN recently covered this phenomenon in a piece called “Wives of the Deplorables” about a secret Facebook society of Democrat women married to Trump supporters.ⁱ

I knew for months now that I wanted to write a story about an actual gadfly who gets elected to the city council. I sensed this would be the emotional apex of the collection, the only story that the real-life headlines would not overshadow. Obviously, I drew inspiration from Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Both are “last lap” stories in which we discover the metamorphosis right up front. The absurdity comes from a different place in *The Gadfly*. Whereas in the *Metamorphosis* the absurdity comes from the characters recognizing the transformation and going about their lives anyway, in *The Gadfly* the characters are unaware, or unwilling to acknowledge, the transformation has taken place at all. The *Gadfly* asks readers to imagine what can happen when we finally and completely give in to our partisan biases.

False Flag, which is not explicitly named in the collection, consists of the news articles and other found text entries that precede each story. These entries provide the ligature binding the twelve stories and make it a linked collection. Several rap albums that rely heavily on skits, but, for some reason, particularly *The Carnival* by Wyclef Jean, inspired me to use short interludes to provide shape to, connections among, and a higher meaning to the stories in the collection. Thanks to the False Flag entries, the collection now had a through-line. These micro-stories also convey the theme of the

work, the inversion of the concept of the public record. In these stories, what is normally private, closed off, has been made public. The truth is no longer hidden from the public and is now open to scrutiny.

My last contribution was the epilogue, *Where you at?* Whereas the writer had been in the shadows for the duration of the collection, the epilogue places him front and center as he withstands the slings and arrows of the local critics. This is not a defense or an apology. It is an attempt to root the collection outside of mere partisan politics. It is an assertion that the goal, in the end, was to find something akin to the truth in our post-truth politics. And by this, I do not mean empirical or a priori truth, I mean something simpler, more experiential, something the average person can achieve. To paraphrase Archibald MacLeish in *Ars Poetica*, I wanted my stories to *be not mean*. I wanted to circumvent the reader's tribal instincts and remind them of the power of unity.

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My hope is that a reader who comes to the collection will find each story distinct, but, as with Lamar's DAMN, will also feel that the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. I am still fairly new at creative writing and I know I have lots more to learn. I anticipate criticism that the collection lacks adequate description, both of scene and character. Some of this probably relates to my current artistic limitations. However, much of it is a conscious choice. I purposely deemphasize scene and limit wordplay in favor of sparer, more vigorous language. I figure if people want to see a show they'll log onto Netflix or HBO.

Consumers are increasingly ditching literary fiction for genre titles, I suspect, in part because of how plodding and dense literary fiction can be. When Sean asks Will

what books he likes in *Good Will Hunting*, Sean responds, “Whatever blows your hair back.” Most people are busy. They don’t see much of a point in reading a book that doesn’t grip them from page one. A good book should leave the reader breathless, hair blown back. Bukowski is a writer who does that in my view. Reading him, and others, I have become more and more convinced over the years that, knowingly or not, we judge an author primarily based on the amorphous concept of voice. Despite relying on symbols to convey meaning, writers are able to, perhaps cannot help but, convey the essence of who they are to readers. Like Oz, strip away artifice and trickery and what you’re left with is a mere person. Instead of building up vast and complicated worlds to hide within, writers should tear down the curtain and reveal to us who exactly they are.

One last word on scene and setting. I wanted to make Wittier an everyplace, to make each character an everyman. Characters in horror movies are notoriously two-dimensional to the point that it’s almost a cliché. My sense is that this is because we tend to respond similarly to being frightened. Put characters in certain situations and most will behave in the same way. That’s one of the lessons I took from *1984* by George Orwell and from Aristotle who put a premium on plot over character and scene. My goal was for you to feel like this could be your city, your neighbors. The cost of this was less detail.

Humor is also an important part of this collection. It shows up at the most inopportune times as when the husband, Jorge, in “Your Heart,” flippantly admits he cares more about binge washing trash than about his neighbors (or his wife). It’s there in the way characters get their comeuppance, in the outlandish claims activists of all stripes make, and in the way that characters treat each other in this book. This is partly

a preference of mine. I can't stand writers who either don't take themselves seriously enough or take themselves too seriously. In writing about politics, I find that humor is especially important. Sometimes you have to laugh to avoid crying.

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I worry a little that there is a limited audience for this collection. There is some evidence that readers are just plain sick of politics. "Manifestly political novels have always aroused some degree of suspicion...but the campaigning novel seems to have been sunk from all sides, more often than not regarded with apathy or skepticism by writers, readers, critics and politicians alike."ⁱⁱ

Another cause for concern for me, rationally or not, is that there's nothing left to say when it comes to politics, no oxygen left in the room. One commentator describes 2016-202 as "Four Wasted Years Thinking About Donald Trump." My goal was to write a collection about politics that stood the test of time. But his gravitational pull has been considerable:

[W]hen I think back, from my obviously privileged position, on the texture of daily life during the past four years, all the attention sucked up by this black hole of a president has been its own sort of loss. Every moment spent thinking about Trump is a moment that could have been spent contemplating, creating or appreciating something else. Trump is a narcissistic philistine, and he bent American culture toward him.ⁱⁱⁱ

As truth has become stranger than fiction, fiction has lost market share to nonfiction. I worry my collection will be seen as a cheap knockoff of the daily political drama. "Of course, it can be thrilling when art and entertainment are politically relevant. But when politics are so alarming that the rest of the world seems to recede, it creates cultural claustrophobia."^{iv} Will readers want to be reminded of their nightmare? Or will a book like this will help wake them wake from their slumber?

ⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/29/politics/wives-of-the-deplorables-support-group/index.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/24/is-the-political-novel-dead>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/opinion/trump-arts-culture.html?smid=fb-share>

^{iv} Id.