# NORMA'S ROAD

by

Eric N. Atkisson
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

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Date: ___________________________ Spring Semester 2019
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Norma's Road

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Spring Semester 2019
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## DEDICATION

"And so they are ever returning to us, the dead," wrote W. G. Sebald. I have never felt the truth of that more keenly than after bringing these essays together in one thesis, for only then did the common themes of death, loss, and moving on strike me with peculiar force—as if a submerged, subconscious self had been trying to tell me something I was too dim to perceive these past few years. It seems only fitting, then, that I dedicate this work to those who are gone but not forgotten, many of whom appear in the pages that follow.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Jianying and Sophie Atkisson for tolerating my nights away at class and to Kyoko Mori and Tim Denevi for being great teachers and mentors. I also want to thank and acknowledge my mother Jean, who more than anyone in my life encouraged my love of reading and writing. Thanks, Mom.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|---|
| Abstract | vi |
| Points of Origin | 2 |
| First Blood | 17 |
| War Stories | 38 |
| Noxious Animals | 57 |
| Monuments | 73 |
| Norma's Road | 88 |
| Notes and Sources | 105 |

**ABSTRACT**

NORMA'S ROAD

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George Mason University, 2019

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This thesis is a collection of personal essays that revolve in one way or another around death, loss, history, and nature. Together they form a memoir of sorts that takes the reader from my childhood in Wisconsin through some of my military experiences and family history, to my growing interest in photography, birding, and the outdoors—and, ultimately, to Norma's Road.

## POINTS OF ORIGIN

In 1910, a German immigrant named Franz Edward Rohrbeck painted a mural in the rotunda of the Brown County Courthouse in Green Bay, Wisconsin. To those unfamiliar with the state's history the scene it depicts is a strange one, in which a mustachioed white man wearing an ostrich-plumed cavalier hat and Chinese damask robe stands on a rocky shore, enclosed by trees, with a large body of water behind him. His arms are extended up and out, and in each hand he holds a flintlock pistol discharging a stab of flame and a puff of smoke—as if signaling the beginning of some great race. Half-naked Indians surround him, in various states of calm or agitation. One of them is holding a peace pipe.

The moment Rohrbeck's mural commemorates is the landing of French explorer Jean Nicolet in 1634, at a place called Red Banks on the eastern shore of Green Bay, just a few miles from where I grew up. The robe and pistols Rohrbeck painted were not entirely fanciful; Nicolet was known to use both to overawe the natives he encountered, in what seems today like a quixotic search for a passage to the Orient. *La Baie des Puants*, he named the bay that brought him to Red Banks—literally, "the Bay of Stinkers" or "the Bay of Stinking Waters," after the odiferous green algae he found everywhere. The French sometimes called it more generously *La Baie Verte*, or Green

Bay, the name the English kept when they took control of the area in 1763, after their victory in the French and Indian War.

A short distance south of Red Banks down Nicolet Drive—one of many things now named after the explorer in the City of Green Bay, including an elementary school, a park, and a bank—the road intersects with East Shore Drive. On a cold day in the winter of 1982-83, a blue Chevy station wagon coming the opposite way turned left at that intersection. My father was at the wheel. He pulled a cigarette out of the pack of Winstons in his coat pocket and lit it with one eye on the road. The smoke he exhaled mingled with the steam of our breaths in the car. When he wasn't tapping it above the ashtray the Winston dangled from his lips, his voice a tight mumble, or sat poised between the index and middle finger of his right hand, resting on the wheel. Minor feats, it seemed to me, who at ten years old had never smoked a cigarette or driven a car. Dad—forty-one when I was born—was now overweight and balding, with wispy hair as white as the hard snow on the ground outside. People sometimes asked if he was my grandfather.

The route that day took us west, with the trees of the wildlife sanctuary on our left and to our right, visible in the passing intervals between houses, the frozen bay. A low barrier of rocks ran along the shore. Out beyond those rocks, off places like Point Sable and Suamico, there were wooden shacks and snowmobiles on the ice, even a few small cars. The men in those shacks would have been listening to radios, cooking bratwurst, drinking beer, fishing through deep holes bored in the ice.

We passed the entrance to Bay Beach Amusement Park, where rides like The Scrambler were closed, tarped over, smothered in snow. In 1934, only a year and a half into his first term as president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt stood at a podium in that park and commemorated the 300th anniversary of Nicolet's landing with a short speech, praising the state's early pioneers who, he rhapsodized, "were driven by deep desire to find not alone security, but also enlarged opportunity for themselves and their children."

We took a right, and from there it was a short drive through an industrial neighborhood of low warehouses and crumbling parking lots before we arrived at our destination: a marina at the mouth of the Fox River. Here, awaiting us, was a sight Nicolet and his Winnebago guides could never have imagined when they paddled by almost 350 years earlier, in search of that elusive passage to the Orient: the Tower Drive Bridge[*], more than a mile and a half long and a hundred and twenty feet above the water at its peak. It was only a year and a half old that day when Dad and I stood near its cold shadow at the marina. After Lambeau Field, it was already the city's most distinctive landmark.

* * *

When people ask me where I'm from, I often hesitate. To say Houston, Texas, where I was born and lived the first three years of my life, would be to imply a stronger connection to the city than I really have. I am not *from* Houston in the larger, more meaningful sense of the word—evoking a sense of belonging to, or sentimental identity

[*] Now known as the Leo Frigo Memorial Bridge, after the former president of the Frigo Cheese Corporation and founder of Paul's Pantry, one of the nation's largest programs for feeding the hungry.

with, a particular place—people seem to have in mind when they ask the question, so laden with expectations and implications, "Where are you from?"

And yet, perversely, when I lived in Green Bay I never hesitated to say that I was from Houston. *Not* being from Green Bay or even from Wisconsin made me *different* somehow, special, at least in my own eyes. During my elementary school years I even owned a Houston Oilers helmet and jersey, which must have amused the adults in my life to no end. I was too small and skinny to ever play football and had no real interest in sports—a serious character flaw in a town where the green-and-gold G was everywhere, like the graven image of some pagan tribe.

My father's profession was another source of difference, or *otherness*. When I was four or five a friend's dad once asked me what mine did for a living. "He's a doctor," I told him. "A doctor of what?" he asked. "A doctor of letters," I said. This other dad laughed. Many of the fathers worked in agriculture, as he did, or at the paper mills; toilet paper being the city's biggest export. Mine was the chair of an academic department at the University of Wisconsin - Green Bay, just a short drive up Nicolet Drive toward Red Banks; his job was the "enlarged opportunity" that brought us north. I was a professor's kid in a blue-collar football town.

It was also a hard-drinking place. Over the years I often heard others proudly boast that Wisconsin had more bars per capita than any other state and that Green Bay had more bars per capita than any city in Wisconsin. It could have been true. I never verified it at the time, but a casual internet search today confirms that Wisconsin does indeed have more bars per capita than any other state—*after* North Dakota and Montana.

* * *

Turn your right hand palm up and thumb out and you're looking at a rough map of Wisconsin. The empty space between your index finger and thumb is the Bay of Green Bay, and the lowest point of that space, where the finger and thumb form an angle of about 45 degrees, is the mouth of the Fox River and the city marina where Dad and I had just parked. It was a deserted place that winter; by all indications we were the first to set foot there in days.

I followed him along a row of large boats resting on thick, wooden cradles, their bows pointed inland and their sterns toward the river. "This is it," he said, stopping behind a 33'-long Chris Craft Roamer with the words *Mary Jane* painted on the stern. The previous owner had named it that, after his wife. Then he died of cancer and she sold it to us. A great blue tarp covered the top. It too was covered in snow.

"Whoa," I said, looking up at the boat. It seemed as big as the bridge in its own way. A monument. A wonder. An omen of things to come.

"You want to go inside?"

I nodded.

"Alrighty, then. I'll go get the ladder."

The inside of the boat was even more impressive, with a spacious cabin and berth and teak trim everywhere—like a fancy second home, if one that reeked faintly of diesel. I could already imagine our adventurous life on board, exploring the Great Lakes and beyond, retracing, perhaps, some of Nicolet's journeys. A native of Cherbourg-Octeville, France, he immigrated to Quebec in 1618 when he was about twenty and the city itself

only a decade old, surrounded by howling wilderness. In subsequent years he lived among the Algonquins, the Odawas, the Hurons, and the Winnebagos, even marrying a Nipissing woman with whom he had a daughter. When he canoed up the Fox with his Winnebago guides in 1634, they portaged to the Wisconsin River, in the middle of the state, and travelled further south until it began to widen. For some reason this inspired the eager Frenchman to believe he was near the Pacific Ocean, so he turned around and rushed back to report his discovery of a passage to the "South Sea." He was only off by about two thousand miles.

* * *

Our first voyage aboard the *Mary Jane*, five months after that day at the marina, followed part of the same path Nicolet would have taken back to Quebec: northeast along Wisconsin's "thumb," past Red Banks and places like Bayshore County Park, Dyckesville, Riley's Point, and Snake Island. At times the limestone cliffs of the Niagara Escarpment appeared, running along the Door Peninsula's western shore—rock formations so old they predated the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians. From here the escarpment stretched hundreds of miles to the north and east, sometimes visible, sometimes not, before curving south again all the way to Niagara Falls and the south shore of Lake Ontario.

Dad wore a black wool sailor's cap that gave him more than a passing resemblance to the Skipper from *Gilligan's Island*. But our only passenger that day was Patches, a golden retriever—Prince Patch of Badgerland, Dad sometimes called him, in

the mock-formal tone of a subject addressing royalty—and this three-hour tour went smoothly. Soon after we passed Dyckesville he looked at me.

“Want to take the wheel?”

“Really?”

“Of course. Just keep us pointed on this bearing”—he tapped the compass—“and your eyes on the buoys.”

He stood aside and held the wheel while I crawled onto the captain’s chair. I had piloted our previous boat, *The Moonlighter*, more than once, but it was smaller and lighter than the *Mary Jane*. As soon as my hands touched the wheel I could *feel* the weight of this steel-hulled monster, plowing ahead like a force of nature, a wide fan of wake spreading behind us. It took a while before I could relax at the helm, as Dad used the head and rooted around in the cabin below. I kept my eyes glued on the compass and the buoys. One time the previous summer, impatient and looking for a shortcut, Dad had taken *The Moonlighter* outside the buoys between Washington Island and Rock Island, off the northern tip of the peninsula. I had leaned over the edge of the boat and nervously watched the water, knowing from the nautical charts, as well as he did, that the whole area was very shallow, often no more than two or three feet deep. Sure enough, it wasn’t long before pale, irregular shapes began to shimmer and form beneath the surface.

“Rocks, Dad! Rocks!” I shouted.

He cursed and pulled the throttle into reverse, but momentum carried us forward a few moments before the propellers could do their work—just long enough for the fiberglass hull to bump and shudder against a submerged boulder. Dad cursed some

more. It was a delicate thing getting us out of there, and it left me with a healthy respect for buoys, maps, and compasses—the things that get us through life without getting lost or running aground.

That was Dad, though—always in a hurry, always rushing from one goal to the next. Born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, he graduated early from high school and lied about his age to enlist in the Army, less perhaps from an eagerness to serve than an urgent need to get away from his parents, whose unhappy, deteriorating marriage made everyone around them miserable. By the age of twenty-two Dad had already served a year of active military duty, married his first wife, graduated from college, completed a master's degree, been commissioned an officer in the Army Reserve, and fathered three children—my older half-siblings—who would, sadly, grow up in a dysfunctional family of their own, with two parents who were as ill-suited for each other as Dad's parents had been. Soon thereafter he moved his family from Oregon to Southern California, where he eventually met and married my mom, after leaving his first wife. Over the years that restless drive never let up. He was constantly grading papers, writing articles and books, serving on boards, making speeches and other public appearances, looking for that next big job, that "enlarged opportunity" of which Roosevelt had spoken, but ignoring the warning signs—the premature white hair, his weight, the effects of his chain smoking.

One Sunday morning in November, 1983, after our first and only season aboard the *Mary Jane*, which we never did rechristen, I found him in the living room at home, kneeling on the floor and clutching his chest, his upper body face down on the loveseat,

like an anguished supplicant in prayer. The EMTs listed his cause of death as a heart attack. He had just turned 53.

* * *

"Nicolet, like others we see as founders or initiators, has come to stimulate ideas about what we are, or ought to be, or could be," wrote Jerrold Rodesch, one of my father's university colleagues, in the inaugural issue of *Voyageur: Historical Review of Brown County and Northeast Wisconsin*. It came out in June of 1984, the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Nicolet's landing, at a time when Dad and I should have been cruising the waters of Green Bay and Lake Michigan—but the *Mary Jane* belonged to someone else now, who I could only hope fared better than her two previous owners.

I had come to see my father in much the same way others saw Nicolet, as a kind of personal founding figure. He was my earliest role model, my biological point of origin; he even once told me, as I'm sure other fathers tell their children, that I began as "a gleam" in his eye, as if he were some benevolent god. Indeed, at times he seemed to be that, or at least a minor potentate in his grand office on the top floor of the university's Cofrin Library, an imposing reddish-brown work of Brutalist architecture that loomed above the surrounding campus, fields, and woods like a modern-day fortress or abbey.

In the days and weeks after Dad died there were articles in the city newspapers, tributes in the university newsletter, dedications in books and theses, eloquent condolences on typewritten notes with fancy letterheads. The sentiments in each were invariably the same: shock and regret at his untimely passing, praise for his abilities and accomplishments, gratitude for his leadership and mentorship. The one word I heard most

often when other adults described him was “integrity.” He was someone who didn’t “suffer fools gladly”—a “dominant, imposing, and forceful man” as one colleague put it in a posthumous tribute. A man who had famously banged his fist on the table at a faculty meeting to make a point. A man who, though it sometimes infuriated them, almost everyone came around to admitting was right—and even if they didn’t, they *respected* him. And though I didn’t know it at the time, Dad was a graduate advisor to more students than any other professor at the university. Everyone seemed to admire him.

But Rodesch’s caution about Nicolet—that the myths surrounding him tended to obscure a “more complex and ambiguous historical significance”—could just as easily have applied to my father. For all the praise and all his accomplishments, and for a man who wrote about “natural hazard risk assessment” no less, he ultimately failed to assess the hazards he posed to himself and, in so doing, failed his family as well. More than one colleague had praised his hard-work ethic and the fact—spoken in a tone of awe, even admiration—that he died at home on a Sunday, *working*. Unmentioned in any of these tributes was the fact that his eleven-year-old son was the one who found him dead.

“If you’re one of the few that’s lost a parent so early in life, then you have gone through something that 99 percent of people your age haven’t gone through,” says an internet article today. It wasn’t hard to sense the truth of this, even then. Inevitably, the loss of my own personal “founding figure” threw my thoughts about who I was, or ought to be, or *could* be into confusion. I was in uncharted waters without a bearing. I was angry. In those first few years after his death I lashed out at every authority figure in my life but my mother—teachers and principals most of all. I hated junior high, which I

started the year after Dad’s death. I couldn’t focus. I got in fights. I grasped at one “rebellious” fad after another—long hair, pierced ears, breakdancing, heavy metal, punk rock, skateboarding—and was so disruptive in class that I was finally suspended for a week and almost expelled.

Some of this anger I directed at Green Bay itself. I had no use for the prevailing culture of football, deer hunting, and ice fishing—all things fathers and sons did together. It felt oppressive somehow. I was only happy when I was free of it all, lost in an act of deliberate escapism like reading *Lord of the Rings*, playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, or pretending to be Rambo or Indiana Jones in the woods and fields behind our house. Mom, a native Southern Californian, hated the long winters and would have moved us back to Texas, but the state’s economy had collapsed after a massive drop in the price of oil. It wasn’t a good time to go back.

So we stayed. Whenever pressed by teachers, principals, or other concerned parties, Mom just repeated her mantra that I was going through a phase. I’d get through it. And she was right, of course. As soon as I was out of junior high and into high school, my grades shot up. I stopped being a disruption in class and started writing more. I enlisted in the Army Reserve and went to basic training between my junior and senior year of high school. I even stayed in Wisconsin for college, where I studied history and philosophy and entertained dreams of being a professor myself someday. It wasn’t until 1995—a year after I graduated from college and twenty years to the month since we’d moved to Green Bay—that we finally sold the house, packed up all of our earthly belongings, and moved back to Texas.

* * *

Strangely, I have no memory of ever seeing Rohrbeck's mural in the county courthouse or of visiting the site of Nicolet's historic landing at Red Banks, where a bronze statue of the famous explorer once stood. Nicolet loomed large in my childhood, but only as a name that held no real meaning for me. Yet now, in my late forties and nearly a thousand miles away, I find myself drawn to this Frenchman who lived more than three centuries before I did, whose bronze likeness—relocated to Wequiock Falls County Park in 2009—now looks down upon the university where Dad once taught and the bay just beyond it, scenery that was once so intimately familiar to me. Nicolet, like my father, was relentlessly driven, forever on the move, forever chasing after the next big thing, heedless of the risks. Both died young. And now, thirty-five years after that Sunday morning when I found my father's body, the sad truth is that one seems just as mythic, tragic, and *distant* a figure to me as the other—not forgotten, but irrevocably lost to the past nonetheless.

I've often wondered what my life would have been like had he lived, even just another ten or twenty years. Had he stayed at the university, which seems likely, the trajectory of my life would have been different. I would not have had any reason to move to Austin, where I met the woman I married and where my daughter was born. I would not have had the jobs and opportunities I did that led me to where I am today, in Virginia. But more than all that, I'm not sure I would have been the same *person* I became. Instead of a dead father I idolized and *idealized* for many years, as those eulogies and tributes did in the days and weeks after his death, I would have had to deal with a real father—a

flawed creature of flesh and blood, with his own biases and opinions and sometimes oversized ego, who even in life could often be distant. We might have clashed, as many of my friends and their fathers did. He might not have approved of those friends, my choices, my interests. I might even have come to resent him. There is no reason to assume all of this would have come to pass, but something tells me our relationship would not always have been an easy, amiable one. Something tells me that for all the pain his death may have caused us, and for all the times I would have liked to have had a father in my life, even now, that there is no point in imagining what might have been. There is only what was and what is. My father's death is as much a part of me, of who I *am*, as the places I have lived, the people I have known, and the things that I have cherished. His death might even have been a gift of sorts—an opportunity to chart my own course in life, forever mindful of its fleeting nature and how, instead of rushing through life as he did, I should instead savor every moment of it as if were my last—a final lesson, a final handoff of the wheel while he retreated below deck, never to return.

My true point of origin.

* * *

When Dad and I completed our voyage that day in the summer of 1983, we docked at a little marina called *The Moorings*, where we had stayed the previous few summers aboard *The Moonlighter*. It was in a sheltered cove called Sawyer Harbor, at the western edge of Sturgeon Bay—the crease in Wisconsin's thumb, which cuts the peninsula in half. As soon as Dad disappeared into the marina's bar and restaurant with the other men, I went back to the *Mary Jane*, retrieved a pair of oars from the boat's

cabin, untied our fiberglass dinghy from the boat, and dropped it in the water. I put the oars in and climbed aboard. It didn't take much effort to coax Patches along for the ride. He remembered the routine and crawled in after me, wagging his tail.

I rowed us away from the marina, past a cluster of sailboats moored in the center of the harbor, all the way to Potawatomi State Park on the far shore, where a thick forest of hemlock, sugar maple, aspen, birch, and beech covered a steep hill rising above us. I pulled the dinghy into the woods and hid it from sight, like an Indian of old, then led Patches up a precarious trail around a series of small limestone cliffs—another part of the Niagara Escarpment. Once the cliffs were behind us and the ground level again, we came to the edge of a parking lot and a seventy-five-foot tall observation tower. While Patches waited below, occasionally letting out a single, mournful bark, I climbed the wooden stairs from one level to the next, passing a few tourists coming down, one cautious step at a time, holding the rails tight. I pretended not to notice the tower's subtle movements, the way it seemed to sway and creak in the breeze, or my unnerving distance from the ground. When at last I emerged on top, with only blue sky above, I had to fight waves of vertigo just to approach the rail standing, rather than on my hands and knees.

It was worth the effort. Here, above the treetops and two hundred and twenty-five feet above the water, was a view unlike any other. Below was the harbor and the marina, so small the people there were barely visible. Beyond was *La Baie Verte*, the Bay of Green Bay, so wide the western shore could not be seen. To the east was the rest of Sturgeon Bay and, somewhere beyond sight, Lake Michigan—vast and restless. Nicolet, when he returned to Quebec, would have crossed the northern portion of that great lake

and passed through the Straits of Mackinac into Lake Huron, and from there to Lakes Erie and Ontario, past the great roaring cataract of Niagara Falls, and eventually down the St. Lawrence River to Montreal and Quebec City. In 1642, just eight years after his landing at Red Banks, he drowned in that same river when his boat capsized in a sudden storm.

Incredible though it seems, he had never learned how to swim.

## FIRST BLOOD

The first thing you would have seen in that small clearing among the trees and tall, marshy grass south of Morrow Street was the blood. There was so much of it there was no way to know if the body lying face up in the middle of it all—this ragged, crimson caricature of a child in windbreaker, hooded sweatshirt, and jeans—once belonged to a boy or a girl. You would have smelled it, too, as your dog had, that sweet, metallic odor mingled with the earthy scents of grass and bark and damp soil. It was morning and early spring, about fifty degrees outside, so the insects that would have swarmed the carnage in summer were dormant, perhaps only beginning to stir, but there might have been birds—crows or vultures pecking and worrying the flesh, only to erupt and scatter in a frenzy of squawking and beating wings at the approach of your dog, whose nose drew him to the grisly scene before you got there. Birds or not, you would have seen enough by now, so you rushed out to the street, flagged down the city truck that happened to be passing by, and told the driver to call the police.

Before long the place was crawling with them, scouring the woods and field, photographing and videotaping the crime scene. Squad cars lined both sides of the street. There was no way you could have known it, but around lunchtime a local woman named Joan Schroeder was driving south on Danz Avenue—along a route I remember so well that I often travel it still, in my strange, meandering dreams of Green Bay—when she

crossed over Baird’s Creek, passed Morrow Street, and saw all the police. She had a lunch date with her son Tom, who had just celebrated his fifteenth birthday two nights before. He hadn’t been seen since, and yesterday her ex-husband John had filed a missing-persons report. Joan knew this but hoped it was all just a misunderstanding, that Tom would keep their date and that everything would be fine.

But he didn’t, and it wouldn’t. Around 1:40 p.m., while Joan still fretted over the missed lunch date and her son’s whereabouts, several men emerged from the field along Morrow carrying a small black body bag to the ambulance. Photographed at a distance, from near the intersection with Danz and Morrow, it appeared in grainy black-and-white on the front page of the next day’s *Green Bay Press-Gazette*. The headline read, “Clues sought in slaying of youth.” The date was April 11, 1986. You were simply described as “a Green Bay man walking his dog,” an anonymous character in a tragic tale.

Below that and to the left of the photo was this news, which even today, thirty-three years after the crime, haunts me as much as I imagine the discovery of his body haunts you, even though you would not have known him: “Stabbing victim identified as Thomas J. Schroeder, 15.”

* * *

My one clear memory of Tom is from gym class at Edison Junior High. We were in the locker room, snickering—some wisecrack at the teacher’s expense, as I recall. He was a year older and a year ahead of me, in ninth grade, though about six inches shorter, at 5’1”. Like me he was skinny, had longish light brown hair, and wore black t-shirts with the logos of popular heavy metal bands like Ratt and Judas Priest. He had an impish smile

that was hard to forget. If I knew more about him—that he had gone to St. Bernard Catholic School, that his parents were divorced, that he delivered the *Press-Gazette* in his neighborhood—those memories didn't survive the next few decades. We weren't friends so much as friendly acquaintances. Fellow travelers. Perhaps Tom saw some of himself in me, the same way I saw some of myself in him. It stood out all the more, this genial rapport, because it seemed like every other metalhead or ninth grader wanted to kick my ass.

Edison was the worst two years of my life—worse, in fact, than anything I have experienced since. It all started on a Sunday morning in sixth grade, when I wandered into the living room and found my father dead, clutching his chest. He had just turned 53. This followed the death of his mother and stepfather, my grandparents, both within the previous year. And less than a year after Dad died, *his* father died. Death stalked my childhood.

Things only got worse at Edison. I was constantly acting up in class, being sent to the principal's office, doing time in detention. I got in fights with other kids, often bigger ones I couldn't possibly beat but wasn't afraid to insult and hit back when bullied. One time, after being ejected from class and ordered to the principal's office, I drifted aimlessly through the hallways until eventually—for reasons that elude me now and probably made no sense then, either—circling back to class. The teacher was standing outside the classroom door, talking to the head principal. When they saw me, the principal shouted "Come here!" and gestured me over. Once I was in arm's reach he grabbed me by the neck and slammed me against a locker, head first. I don't remember

exactly what he said next, but it was something like “You’re dead meat” or “You’re a dead man.” Not long after that, I was suspended for a week after flipping a desk over in a sudden rage when the study hall monitor accused me (correctly) of throwing a paper airplane across the room.

Outside of school I was into every fad the Eighties had to offer: heavy metal, punk rock, breakdancing, skateboarding, *Dungeons & Dragons*. Along with a few other neighborhood kids I collected knives, swords, throwing stars, and nunchucks, amassing an impressive arsenal of exotic weaponry. During the summers and weekends we ran around the woods outside my house with survival knives and machetes, cutting down trees, building forts, and carving spears and bunji sticks, as if preparing for war. At night we prowled around the neighborhood in ninja costumes, peaking in people’s windows, scaling the roof of the elementary school, and generally doing things that could have landed us in the back of a police cruiser or an ambulance.

Fueling all this was a handful of movies we watched over and over until we could quote them at length, classics of Eighties machismo like *American Ninja, Commando, First Blood, Missing in Action 1* and *2, The Octagon, Rambo: First Blood Part II, Revenge of the Ninja*. Vengeful commandos and stealthy assassins were our heroes, badasses who couldn’t be pushed around—who not only fought back but took out whole legions of bad guys dumb enough to piss them off. Because of these movies I became so fascinated with guerrilla warfare that I collected *Soldier of Fortune* magazine; clipped photos of lean, knife-wielding insurgents out of the *Newsweek*s on our coffee table at home; and stole every book the Edison library had to offer on the Vietnam War.

* * *

And then Tom's mutilated body turned up, the subject of shocking news reports in a blue-collar town normally more concerned with the fortunes—or more often than not, in those days, *misfortunes*—of its football team. But Green Bay was in fact reeling from *several* recent and surprisingly gruesome murders. Six months earlier, on October 3, the naked body of a high school senior named Francine Stanislawski was found behind an east side warehouse near the marina where we used to keep our boat when Dad was alive. Her murder was still under investigation. That same month, in Ashwaubenon, a southern suburb of Green Bay, an angry husband named Michael Spencer shot his wife Lisa in the head and her father John (who survived) in the chest. But both of those crimes paled in comparison to the murder of Margaret Anderson. The day after Christmas, in 1983, she was beaten and gangraped by four bikers at a local tavern, nearly beheaded, and left to die in a manure pit behind a meat packing plant about five miles from our neighborhood. During the autopsy, an x-ray revealed a cue ball lodged in her vagina.

"I don't think our violent crime rate is that particularly high," said Green Bay detective Thomas Hinz, the day Tom's body was found. "But we've had some strange homicides in the last couple of years."

As the details leaked out over the next few days, it became clear that Tom's murder was more than just strange; it was *savage*. While initial news reports said that he was stabbed as many as 50 times with a large knife, the official autopsy would reveal that Tom was stabbed and slashed a total of 72 times, including more than 35 lacerations to the arms and hands that were likely defensive, 23 stab wounds to the face and head, eight

wounds to the neck, and two each to the chest and back. According to Brown County coroner Darrell Skarphol, who performed the autopsy, as few as three and as many as six of the wounds were potentially fatal—one of which penetrated Tom's brain, another his neck, and another his mouth, severing his spinal cord.

"I was overwhelmed by the brutality," Skarphol would say a year and a half later, citing the Schroeder and Anderson murders as two of the most emotionally difficult autopsies he ever performed.

For me, at 14, Tom's murder was like something out of *Friday the 13th* or *Halloween*. In addition to the grisly details in the news there were rumors that Tom's genitals had been stabbed or cut off and that a mob of students from Preble High had descended on the crime scene that Monday, taking bloody sticks as souvenirs. The publisher of a local entertainment tabloid even alleged that Tom was working undercover for the police when he was murdered—a claim offered without evidence and vehemently denied by the police chief. At some point that week I ended up in a guidance counselor's office. The school had promised grief counseling for those who wanted it, but that's not why I was there. I was in trouble again for one reason or another, but I found myself talking about Tom one moment and crying the next. It was the only time during those two years at Edison that I succumbed to something like true despair, in spite of the many ugly encounters I'd had with principals and school bullies. The counselor gave me a sympathetic look but said nothing.

"There is no easy way around suffering and death and pain," Rev. John Bergstadt told a crowd of more than five hundred that Monday morning at St. Bernard Catholic

Church. Around three hundred teenagers from Edison and other local schools attended the funeral. I wasn't among them. I didn't feel I knew Tom well enough, and more to the point, some part of me was afraid to go. It didn't seem real that the kid I had known in PE was gone, and in such a terrible, shocking way.

* * *

Also not among the mourners at Tom's funeral was an older friend of his named Mark Johnson, whose conspicuous absence the police noted with interest. There's a photo of Mark in the April 16, 1986 issue of the *Press-Gazette*. At the time it was taken, he was wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, jeans, and work boots, although he is only visible from his beer belly up. The top of a chair is just in front of him, and it looks as if he's about to pull it out and sit down. He's standing at an angle to the camera, his hair shaggy and feathered like Bo's from *The Dukes of Hazzard*, one half of his unreadable face, along with both eyes, lost in grainy, news-print shadow. There is something faintly familiar about him, even after three decades. Maybe it's some dim recollection of the photo itself or just that he looks like so many other guys his age and size did then to me—like a washed up high school football player, a bully, or both.

Mark lived across the street from the Schroeders in his uncle's house at 1933 Oakdale Avenue—a corner property with blue paint peeling off the walls, two "Beware of the Dog" signs, artificial flowers in window boxes, and two fake swans on the front porch. The day after Tom's body turned up, Mark knocked on doors around the neighborhood, plastic container in hand, asking for donations to help buy flowers for the funeral.

At 24, he was the third oldest of six children, including three brothers, one sister, one half-brother, and one half-sister. His mother died in 1975, when he was still in junior high. He graduated from East High in 1980, worked a few odd jobs, was busted for shoplifting in 1982, and started coaching soon after that—little league for nine-to-twelve-year-olds and touch football at St. Bernard, which Tom had attended. Just a few months before Tom's murder, Mark became an assistant scoutmaster in Boy Scout Troop 1044 at St. John the Evangelist Church. He was if anything the opposite of a bully, a kind and patient mentor to younger kids.

Mark and Tom had known each other for several years. When he wasn't working, Mark liked to hang out with Tom and his friends, buy them beer, and drink with them. Later that Friday after collecting money for the flowers, he was questioned by the police; they interviewed most of Tom's close friends, including those like Mark who had last seen Tom on his birthday. As the police reviewed their notes that weekend, something about Mark's story didn't add up. There were inconsistencies. When he failed to show for Tom's funeral, the police decided to bring him in for more questioning. They found him in his car in the ShopKo parking lot along Main Street and arrested him for a traffic violation.

This time they questioned him for close to four hours, until finally, alone in a hearing room at the police station, Mark told Sergeant Richard Buss what had happened—or a selective version of it. The night of Tom's birthday, he and Tom drank some beer at Mark's place then walked about three quarters of a mile to the field and

woods near Morrow Street. Once they were there, he claimed, he knocked Tom to the ground from behind.

"Why? Why?" Tom cried, according to Mark. Then, as Tom was lying face up, Mark—who was ten inches taller than Tom and about twice his weight—began "striking" him in the face with his survival knife. When Tom stopped moving, so Mark's story went, he told him to stop fooling and get up. But Tom didn't get up, and Mark panicked. He ran home, took a shower, and hid his knife on a shelf in the basement.

"I'm so afraid… I did it," he finally told Buss, confessing to the crime without specifically mentioning all the times he's stabbed and slashed Tom, including those three to six potentially fateful blows that pierced Tom's brain, neck, and spinal cord. He said that he was afraid God would not love him for what he had done.

As for why Mark and Tom had gone to the field in the first place, why Mark had brought a survival knife with him, and why he had attacked Tom at all, his answer was that they went there to "play Rambo."

* * *

One of the stranger ironies of 1980s American pop culture is that its most celebrated action hero—whose name was and still is "used commonly to describe a person who is reckless, disregards orders, uses violence to solve problems, enters dangerous situations alone, and is exceptionally tough, callous, raw and aggressive"—first appeared in 1972, a few months after I was born, in a novel not about heroism but post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

The inspiration for *First Blood* came to David Morrell in the late Sixties while studying and teaching at Penn State. A Canadian transplant from Ontario, Morrell learned about the Vietnam War from the veterans in his classes. As he watched the violent riots of 1968 on television, he found himself wondering what would happen if one of those protestors was

> "a man with exceptional combat skills, a former member of a Special Forces team, an escaped POW… What if he'd decided the war was wrong and believed that he'd earned the right to protest against it without seeming to be unpatriotic? What if he was furious to begin with and a police club striking his skull now filled him with an absolutely destructive rage?"

Large numbers of Vietnam veterans did in fact protest the war, and the Department of Veterans Affairs would eventually acknowledge that almost 31 percent of Vietnam veterans suffered from PTSD, a condition that can include vivid flashbacks, recurring nightmares, depression, substance abuse, and other anxiety disorders. While PTSD is most commonly associated with wartime experience, *any* traumatic event—including natural disasters, serious accidents, life-threatening illnesses, physical abuse, and sexual abuse—can produce these symptoms, as can "indirect trauma exposure" like watching someone else assaulted or learning about the violent death of a loved one. Those who suffer from PTSD—including about 20 percent of Iraq War veterans, 12 percent of Gulf War veterans, and 8 percent of the general U.S. population—can also startle easily and react in aggressive or even violent ways, as Morrell's fictional character would, in spectacular fashion.

In the book Rambo is hitchhiking through Kentucky—by all appearances a drifter or vagrant, with his long hair, beard, and sleeping bag—when a small-town sheriff picks

him up and takes him to the edge of town, with instructions not to return. Rambo defies the sheriff's orders not once but twice, is charged with vagrancy and resisting arrest, and sentenced to 35 days in jail. When the police forcibly attempt to clean and shave him, Rambo experiences flashbacks of his captivity in Vietnam, fights back, and escapes into the mountains. A giant manhunt ensues, resulting—thanks to Rambo's combat skills and ruthless efficiency—in the deaths of hunting dogs, police officers, and civilians. In the novel's final battle, Rambo and the sheriff are both mortally injured, each sorry at the end for having killed the other and let the situation spiral so far out of control.

The movie came out in 1982, when I was in fifth grade. It stuck to the novel's basic plot but moved the setting to the Pacific Northwest and made Rambo a more sympathetic character. More importantly, the movie version of Rambo (played by Sylvester Stallone) doesn't die in the end. He's enticed to surrender by his former commander, Colonel Samuel Trautman (played by Richard Crenna), who in the 1985 sequel, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, offers Rambo his freedom if he agrees to return to the Vietnamese prison camp he escaped in 1971, to determine whether any American POWs still remain. Rambo accepts the mission with the ominous question, "Do we get to win this time?" Mayhem ensues, including the grisly deaths of over 70 North Vietnamese and Russian soldiers by machine gun (handheld and helicopter-mounted), rocket launcher, shotgun, arrow (conventional and explosive-tipped), Rambo's own hands, and last but not least his huge survival knife, with its 10-inch long, quarter-inch thick stainless steel, Bowie-shaped blade—which Rambo repeatedly plunges into chests and guts throughout the movie. In the end he returns with a handful of American prisoners, in spite of being

betrayed and abandoned by the bureaucrat running the operation; threatens to kill him if he doesn't find and bring back the rest of our POWs; and professes his love of country before turning his back on the base and heading toward the jungle, where his only plan is to live "day by day." Morrell, after seeing the movie, was bemused to find that his character had become a "jingoistic superhero" who "single-handedly wins a second version of the Vietnam War."

The sequel was an even bigger box office hit than the original.

"I saw a Rambo movie last night," said then-President Ronald Reagan, who made frequent references to Rambo in his press conferences after the sequel came out. "Now I know what to do the next time there's a terrorist hostage crisis." Three days before Tom's murder, a bombing believed to have been planned by the Libyan secret service killed three and injured 230 at a discotheque in West Berlin. Two of the dead and 79 of the wounded were U.S. service members. On April 15, as Mark's claim about "playing Rambo" continued to make the front page of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, the United States launched military airstrikes on targets in Tripoli and Benghazi. Among the fifteen civilians killed in the attacks was, reportedly, a baby daughter of Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi.

David Morrell, on a book tour in Great Britain, was surprised and dismayed to see the *London Times* headline: "U.S. Rambo Jets Bomb Libya."

That's how big Rambo was in the Eighties. His name and his image were everywhere. When my friends and I ran around the woods behind my house with our own survival knives and machetes, it's because we wanted to be like Rambo—not the crazed,

haunted Rambo of the original novel but the heroic Rambo of the movies: tough, smart, and, if need be, ready to kill.

* * *

Two days after the bombing of Libya, Kenneth Besaw, a police liaison officer at East High who knew Mark and was present for his confession, said that he saw no evidence of a "Rambo mentality" infecting local youth—though he was concerned about the proliferation of martial arts weapons like throwing stars in the area's schools (some of which were probably mine). A clerk at the city's military surplus store said she received calls every day from juveniles inquiring about their survival knives, while another clerk at Nickolai Sporting Goods said interest in their knives had "definitely" increased after *Rambo: First Blood Part II* hit the screen. My own survival knife had a black blade about six inches long, a hollow metal handle with some matches and bandaids inside, and a removable compass for a pommel—just like Rambo's.

That Mark had purchased such a knife and used it to far more horrifying effect than I could ever imagine was hard to square with the initial articles about him in the *Press-Gazette.*

"He was good with the kids. Super," said Jim Nelson, former commissioner for the Thursday Breakfast Optimist Pee Wee League. "He's a good coach. Lousy team, but a good coach." Though he added, "He wasn't quite normal. He drank a lot from time to time. We've had functions with coaches where he was pretty well looped."

"He was just terrific with the kids," said Bill Sonnenburg, commissioner for the Northeast Side Little League, who was quick to dispute that Mark was ever inebriated for

any official league events. “The parents thought he was excellent.” Joe Lawniczak, a friend of mine who now lives near Madison, Wisconsin, recalls his own parents befriending Mark when he was the assistant coach of Joe’s younger brother’s little league team. They had him over for dinner and beer, frequently. He even took Joe and his brother to WWF matches at the Brown County Arena and had them over to his house, a few years before the murder. Joe remembers a photo taken in the Lawniczaks’ living room, with his baby sister sitting on Mark’s lap.

“He seemed to be able to communicate with them at the kids’ level,” said Tom Lischka, Troop 1044 scoutmaster, who had only worked with Mark those last few months before the murder. “Mark did a bad thing,” he told his scouts, “but let’s remember all the good things he did.”

When asked by a reporter what kind of man his son was, Mark’s father Roland replied, “Apparently somebody I don’t know.”

That unknown somebody came into greater focus during Mark’s trial in October. While he had confessed to the crime back in April, the plea he entered was “innocent by reason of mental disease or defect”—meaning, in effect, that he was not in control of his own actions when he murdered Tom. It was the same plea Michael Spencer had entered after fatally shooting his wife and which the jury ultimately accepted as their verdict. In July, when Mark’s attorney complained that he was not fully cooperating in his own defense, the court ordered a psychiatric examination of fifteen days to determine if he was mentally competent to proceed to trial. He was found competent, and the three psychiatrists who examined him all later testified that Mark had a quick temper, below

average mental capabilities, and was “severely affected by his mother’s death 13 years ago.” But these were symptoms of a “mixed personality disorder,” they said, not of mental disease, and they all agreed that he was not mentally ill when he murdered Tom.

Mark’s attorney persisted in portraying his client as a disturbed young man who needed psychiatric help. At least two witnesses testified that Mark was addicted to violent movies like *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *Red Dawn*, a popular 1984 film in which a band of Colorado high school students wages a guerrilla war against Soviet and Cuban invaders. Mark’s uncle Darrell Trudeau, with whom he had lived across from the Schroeders since January, said that Mark would sometimes watch the same violent movie four to five times a day. “He saw some of them 20 or 30 times. I couldn’t watch them.” Shirley Van Kauwenbergh, with whom Mark had lived for about four months before that, testified that he spent “considerable time” watching violent movies.

“Those kind of movies can desensitize you to the idea of violence as a solution,” local psychologist Theodore J. La Vaque had said in the same *Press-Gazette* article investigating a possible “Rambo mentality” among local youth. La Vaque and another area psychologist, Thomas Rossiter, agreed that a violent movie—independent of other factors—could not be blamed for making someone commit murder, but that movies that glamorize killing could have a desensitizing effect.

“He’d get this funny look in his face” after watching violent movies, said Shirley Van Kauwenbergh. “I got afraid of him when he got that look in his eyes. It was like he didn’t have control of himself.” She said he knocked a hole in her door while watching the Super Bowl that year, and that he once threw her grandchild’s puppy across the room

and pulled her grandson's hair. But most ominously: "He was mad at Glenn DeCleene," she said, referring to a man with whom Mark had quarreled earlier one day. "He was sitting on the couch with his knife and he said, 'I should go over there and cut his head off. I would do it and it wouldn't even bother me.' When I asked him if he knew what he was saying, he said he didn't remember saying that."

And while it wasn't part of the trial, Joe Lawniczak remembers "one time my folks were gone and Mark was there, not really babysitting, because we were old enough to take care of ourselves, but my brother and I got into a knock-down, drag-out fight (our one and only) and Mark didn't stop us. In fact, he encouraged us to get our frustrations out."

"I always just took it as encouraging us to not back down from people or let them push us around," he added. "Kind of the whole 'learn to be a man' thing. But [now] I don't know."

Mark's attorney attempted to prove that his client did indeed suffer some mental defect, that he had *not* intended to kill Tom when they went to that field to "play Rambo"—that some combination of impulsive behavior and addiction to violent movies was to blame. The district attorney argued that the crime *was* one of malicious forethought, though if he ever offered a theory about Mark's motive for killing Tom, it was not reported in the papers. In the end the jury was not moved by stories of mental illness or addiction to violent movies; they found Mark guilty of first-degree murder, which meant a mandatory life sentence in prison instead of treatment in a mental health hospital, as his attorney had advocated. He showed no emotion when the verdict was

read. While leaving the courtroom, he was asked by a reporter if he thought the verdict was fair.

"Nope," said Mark.

* * *

Over the decades I've been surprised by how many friends not only remember Tom's murder as vividly as I do, but will inevitably say, when I raise the subject, "Wow. I was just thinking about that the other day." For many of us who went to Edison, knew Tom, or both, his murder had a lasting and deeply disturbing effect not unlike the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; "indirect trauma exposure" may be as good a term as any to describe it. But while 9/11 was for most of us distant and in some sense *impersonal*, Tom's murder was the opposite in every respect. It's like some part of us was brutalized and left for dead in that field as well.

Among these same friends there is often a vague, lingering unhappiness with the way the investigation and trial played out, a feeling that the real story of what happened and Mark's role in it was never brought to light. A lack of closure. No one believes he and Tom were just "playing Rambo" and that Mark got carried away or lost control in a moment of sudden, inexplicable bloodlust. There *had* to be another reason. The rumor that Tom was genitally mutilated refuses to die, and given Mark's obvious interest in children—Little League, Boy Scouts, drinking with younger kids—many believed he was a closet pedophile. Maybe he did lure Tom into that field with talk of "playing Rambo" or to show him his knife, but then he made a sexual advance, was rebuffed, and became enraged, with tragic and horrific results.

Yet no such allegations or evidence were ever brought forward during the trial, as reported in the newspapers. Shirley Van Kauwenbergh, who described Mark pulling her grandson's hair, offered no such suspicions, nor did his scoutmaster, Little League superiors, or any of the parents, like Joe's, who trusted him with their children. And the coroner who testified at Mark's trial—the same whose discovery of the cue ball in Margaret Anderson's vagina was public knowledge even prior to the trials for her murder—only repeated what had already been published in the news articles about Tom's murder: that the 72 knife wounds he suffered were all to his upper torso. No mention of rape or genital mutilation.

"I never sensed anything odd," said Joe, who spent various occasions alone with his younger brother and Mark, when there were ample opportunities for Mark to have behaved inappropriately. Indeed, the only memory that struck him as odd in hindsight—of Mark encouraging Joe and his brother to fight out their differences—tends to support the courtroom testimony that Mark's obsession was purely with violence.

"We want to be able to say we can identify these dangerous people," said no less an authority on violence and depravity than Ted Bundy, while awaiting his execution for the murder of more than thirty young women between 1974 and 1978. "The really scary thing is, you can't identify them. People don't realize that there are potential killers among them. How could anyone live in a society where people they liked, loved, lived with, worked with, and admired could the next day turn out to be the most demonic people imaginable?"

Something like that same question gnawed at me for many years after Tom's murder. It *seemed* truly demonic, the work of a monster in human skin whose actions could not be easily explained even by the "experts." At a time in my life when the movies I watched were violent, the music I listened to was violent, my daily existence in junior high was violent, and the world events on TV and in the newspaper were violent—all while trying to cope with the death of my father and navigate the trials of adolescence—Tom's murder was the bright red exclamation point to it all, the universe flipping a bony, blood-soaked middle finger in my face.

But there something even more to it that I was slow to realize, that only the passage of time and the benefit of self-reflection could reveal: that while I grieved for Tom and was on some level traumatized by his murder—both by the brutality of it and the belief that but for a few degrees of separation it could just as easily have been me in that field—something of the same logic adhered to Mark as well. We both watched the same violent movies. We each collected knives and fantasized about being Rambo. And in some respects we *were* more like him than we realized—not the tough, resilient, heroic Rambo of the movies, but the Rambo of Morrell's novel, traumatized by loss and capable of lashing out in a moment of destructive rage, as I did that day when I flipped the desk over in study hall and stood there shaking, consumed by a sudden, inexplicable urge to commit violence. There the similarities must end, and I know now there was something fundamentally wrong with Mark that wasn't with me. Still, part of me not only believes his story but suspects that were I to visit him in the Oakhill Correctional Institute, where he has been eligible for parole since 2016, and ask him why he did it—why he killed

Tom in that field—that he would simply shake his head and say, “I don’t know.” And that I would believe this, too.

* * *

There was a brief time in my life when I had not thought about these events in a while. I had graduated from college and moved to Texas, where, after a few unproductive years I was finally taking my first tentative steps toward a career, as it happened, in the Army—not as a Special Forces soldier like Rambo but as a public affairs officer in the Texas National Guard and as an instructor of military science at the state university in San Marcos. I was still single but had bought a house, where I lived with my two dogs, and for the first time had something close to a settled, adult life. It was then, one night around 2001 or 2002, when I was about thirty, that I had the nightmare—the first of many to come, always, invariably, the same.

I was inside a police station in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Two detectives were standing in front of me. Their faces were stern. Serious. Their terse questions concerned a brutal murder that happened when I was a kid. Although it had been many years and they couldn’t yet prove it, I was, their tone made it perfectly clear, the prime suspect. Even worse: Although I couldn’t remember this crime of which they spoke, or even the victim—whose name was never mentioned during the interrogation—I knew, somehow, with an absolute, nauseating certainty that I did it. I *was* the murderer.

And then I woke up, so badly shaken that for a few sickening moments I wondered, could it be true? Could I have killed someone and forgotten it? Suppressed the memory? No. Of course not, I kept telling myself. I’m not a killer. I’m a decent person. I

would know if I'd ever harmed someone. I would remember something that horrible. It would haunt me. Devastate me.

But why then this dream, this awful nightmare? Why were my hands trembling? Never had any nightmare so completely unnerved me.

And then I remembered: There *was* a murder, and it *was* brutal.

I haven't forgotten it since.

## WAR STORIES

The first war story I ever heard was about the Red Baron. It was around 1978, and I was sitting at the feet of my Grandpa Mac, a frail old man with a crew cut, thick glasses, and small knit blanket folded across his lap. His face was long and gaunt and his voice soft, with the hint of a rasp. The scent of his cologne filled the room. Grandma Doris was in the kitchen, making cinnamon toast. Outside, little green lizards clung to the white metal sides of their hillside mobile home in Vista, California, just north of San Diego, and the hot summer air, stirred at times by a restless ocean just beyond sight, smelled of cactus. Eucalyptus. Jasmine.

Mac, whose real name was Morris McCullough, was born in 1896 in Myrtle, Manitoba, the eighth and final son of an Irishman from Belfast and a young woman from Kingston, Ontario. He had a book or photo album he was showing me that day as he spoke about the Red Baron. While I can’t entirely trust the memory, I believe my attention soon wandered and that he abandoned the subject, resorting, with perhaps a touch of disappointment, to the funny sounds he sometimes made to amuse me, or to showing me the strange, hard shape of the pacemaker in his chest that kept him alive. If the memory is accurate, if he *was* trying to tell me about the Baron and my attention did wander, there’s a sad irony to it all given how much of my later life I spent in the military. There are so many questions I would love to ask him now.

Mac's military records, only recently made available online through the Canadian Library and Archives for the war's centennial, have since answered some of those questions. They show that he enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force on March 18, 1916, in Hanna, Alberta, a small prairie town a few hours' drive east of the Canadian Rockies. He landed in England that October with a ship full of other recruits. After a few months of training, he crossed the Channel and joined the 50th Battalion in the northernmost portion of France, near Souchez, where he had his first taste of infantry duty on the Western Front. From April 9 to 12, 1917, all four divisions of the CEF fought as a single unit for the first time in an effort to drive the Germans off a stretch of fortified high ground called Vimy Ridge that dominated the eastern edge of the Souchez Valley. At dawn on the final day of fighting, as snowflakes fell on shivering Canucks and *Deutschlanders* alike, the battered remnants of Mac's battalion, along with those of the 46th and 44th battalions, crawled out of their icy trenches. Through a blizzard of snow and exploding shells strobed by constant flares, they charged around barbed wire and shell craters toward a hill they called the Pimple, stabbing or shooting anyone who stood in their way. Within two hours every Prussian that had occupied the Pimple was either fleeing, heading toward a prison camp, or dead.

One of the great Allied victories of the war, the Battle of Vimy Ridge—fought just a few days after the United States officially declared war on Germany and six months before the first American "doughboys" would take their places in the trenches—is often considered "Canada's most celebrated military victory" and the birthplace of "Canadian national pride and awareness." But it came at a steep price: 3,598 Canadians dead and

more than 7,000 wounded. Mac was one of those 7,000, shot through his right shoulder and leg, most likely during the attack on the Pimple. He was admitted to a field hospital in Boulogne, then evacuated to England, where he spent most of the year recovering. He returned to his battalion just in time for Christmas and was present for most of the Hundred Days Offensive of 1918, including a litany of battles with names like Amiens, Second Somme, Canal du Nord, Cambrai, and Selle. By the time of his discharge, seven months after the armistice, he had risen from private, to corporal, to lance sergeant, and finally to sergeant, receiving a good conduct badge along the way.

Among the old photos I've inherited over the years is one of Mac wearing a Canadian service dress cap and jacket, with the maple-leaf insignia of the CEF on both. His rank is not visible, so it's hard to tell whether it was taken before, during, or after the war. He was a handsome, if baby-faced young man, with only a faint resemblance to the kind, ailing octogenarian I knew sixty years later. His story that day in the mobile home, or my own uncertain memory of it, left me with the impression that at some point during the war he had looked to the sky and seen Baron Manfred von Richthofen—*Der Rote Kampfflieger* to his fellow countrymen, or "The Red Fighter Pilot"—in his garish red *Albatros Pfalz* D III biplane, soaring overhead.

* * *

My older brother Noel, who was technically my *half*-brother, idolized Mac, who was technically our *step*-grandfather, Doris having divorced our biological grandfather around the time Noel was born. As a young man, Noel had all the makings of a good soldier. He was a natural marksman with a rifle, strong and burly in high school, the kind

of kid you looked at and pegged for a football player. He enlisted in the Army in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, only two weeks after the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy. In my office at home I have a photo of Mac and Doris at his graduation from basic training. Noel is standing tall and proud between them and Dad in his dress greens, smiling. But the times they were a changin', as the song went. Later that same month police and National Guardsmen clubbed and tear-gassed hundreds of antiwar demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

After basic training Noel went to officer candidate school at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, just downriver from Washington, D.C., and then to military intelligence officer training at Fort Holabird, in Baltimore. After that he was off to more exotic locales: first Panama, for Jungle Warfare School, and then South Vietnam, where he served a one-year tour at Tan Son Nhut Air Base on the outskirts of Saigon. He was assigned to the 519th Military Intelligence Battalion, a unit that maintained, among other things, centers for counterintelligence and interrogation.

Noel told me a number of "war stories" over the years, or the fragments of stories, of which I only remember a few. In one a crazed drill sergeant, soon to be relieved of duty, has his recruits dig foxholes and climb in upside down while he drops canisters of tear gas in each, causing at least one fatal heart attack. In another Noel and his companions seek shelter from a torrential downpour in Panama, only to find themselves staring across an empty hut at a crouched monkey, each side frozen in a kind of wary truce. Later Noel is lashed to a tree and left for the medics because he's too sick from malaria, dysentery, or some other horrible ailment to continue or even stand.

In Vietnam, Noel is sitting on his helmet in a helicopter to protect his groin from the metal ping of small arms fire below. He is watching the blood and gore of a dead soldier sluice off the poncho he's being carried away on. He is pulling a pistol on an arrogant, higher-ranking officer and telling him to get the hell out of his A.O. He is shooting a dog he loved because he doesn't want it to be eaten by the locals after he returns to the States.

"The thing you should know about veterans," he once told me, well after I'd become a veteran myself, "is that we lie and steal each other's stories. It's all fair game."

But if Noel himself planted that doubt in my mind about some of his own stories, there are the photos he took in Vietnam, ranging from mundane shots of baseball games and office antics—with a shy, beautiful Vietnamese woman the frequent subject of the latter—to ominous empty tunnel entrances in the jungle and the wreckage of U.S. aircraft destroyed on the tarmac by Viet Cong mortars during the Tet Offensive in early 1968.

The only photo I have of *him* in Vietnam is from when he was promoted to first lieutenant. He's in a wood-paneled office, presumably at Tan Son Nhut, with his commander, a captain, both of them laughing. In later photos, after he returned to the States and was discharged from the service—at a time when the U.S. was pulling its last forces out of Vietnam—he has a beard and longer hair. In most of those photos he's not smiling. He had a notebook of poetry he wrote after the war, he once told me, but ended up burning it to ashes for reasons left unsaid. He kept the beard and went to school to become a civil engineer.

* * *

“When Noel was your age he could put every one of his shots in that black center circle,” Dad told me. It was January 24, 1981—my ninth birthday, ten years almost to the month since Noel returned from Vietnam.

That morning Dad had filled a couple of boxes with old newspapers, pushed them up against the back wall of our garage in Green Bay, and taped a circular target to the front of the first one. I was lying on a cushion of blankets with my feet close to the garage door, my elbows on the ground, and my birthday present in my hands: a Mossberg .22 rifle. Its wood body had a smooth, glossy finish, while the long metal barrel was a dull black. I could smell the light coat of oil inside the chamber and feel the bitter cold of the Wisconsin winter trying to claw its way in from the outside.

“Wait until that pause between breaths and then gently squeeze the trigger.”

I squeezed the trigger and felt the rifle’s slight recoil. Later, holding the target in my hands, I marveled at the little puncture holes the bullets had made as they passed through. Most had not hit the center circle, but it wasn’t a bad start. As a potential marksman I showed promise.

Stashed away in photo albums and file cabinets around the house were old news clippings and photographs of Dad when he was a soldier. In one clipping, from the August 26, 1965 issue of the *San Gabriel Valley Daily Tribune*, there’s a grainy photograph of him standing between two other officers, all three in their olive drab fatigues, with Army vehicles in the background. The headline says, “Civil Affairs Soldiers Study Infiltration Tactics in Desert.” According to the article, “Initiation of the exercise began when Major Atkisson noted on a recent field trip with his scout troop that

there are numerous terrain similarities between the San Gorgonio Mountain area in the vicinity of Pioneertown and an area of Viet Nam near Saigon."

In another photo, also from when he was a major, he's standing in dress greens next to a shorter, neatly mustached colonel who's just pinned an Army Armed Forces Reserve Medal on Dad's chest. At the back of his bedroom closet that same uniform now hung in a clothing bag, musty from long disuse, with his rank, medals, and Expert Infantry Badge still pinned on the jacket—relics of a time before me. They exerted a mysterious influence on my imagination, the same way my half-remembered story of the Red Baron eventually did; I wanted to know more about them, what they meant and why they mattered.

But Dad no longer looked like the young man in those photos. There was nothing about him to suggest he'd ever worn a military uniform, run in formation with other soldiers, or been screamed at by drill sergeants. He was much heavier now, at fifty, the hair on his balding head wispy and white: the very picture of a middle-aged professor.

"Dad?" I once asked, while he was hunched over the dining room table smoking and grading papers. "When you were in the Army did you ever kill anyone?"

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Does it really matter if I did or didn't, son? Geeze." He never said much about his military service or the past in general. I didn't know that his great-grandfather had fought as a Union infantryman in the Civil War or that four of Dad's uncles had served in the Second World War and that the youngest, John, was killed in action in Germany in 1944, only a few years before Dad himself

enlisted—the kind of details you might expect a father to share with a son beginning to ask about such things.

He seemed to live in an all-consuming present; teaching public administration, grading papers, chasing after grants, writing books, running an academic department—so my mind was left to wonder and to fill in the blanks. I knew he'd lied about his age and enlisted young, at 17, before he became an officer. I knew he was a husband and father, working on a master's in political science, by the time the Korean War came around. And I knew that he quit the Army Reserve just a few years before he would have been eligible to retire. I never heard the exact reason why; only that it had something to do with his busy career in public administration, the conflict in Vietnam, or both.

* * *

Within a few years of returning from Europe with the 50th Battalion in 1919, Grandpa Mac crossed into the United States and worked a series of odd jobs in Washington and Oregon that eventually led him into the shipping business, as both a shipwright and clerk. On June 29, 1943, at the unlikely age of 47—the same age I am now—and just twelve days after becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen, he enlisted as a Seabee[*] in the U.S. Navy Reserve, with a job stowing cargo. Later that year he reclassed to carpenter's mate, second class and served in a variety of other Navy units, in New York, Virginia, and California, until being discharged on June 4, 1945—less than a month after Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender and two months before U.S. warplanes dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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[*] Nickname for a sailor who serves in a U.S. Navy Construction Battalion, or CB.

Which made the date of his death in 1982 all the more remarkable: November 11, or Veterans Day, and the anniversary of the armistice that ended the First World War. He was 86. Grandma Doris, who came to visit us in Green Bay that winter—the one and only time she ever did—was a broken-hearted woman, her long face etched with grief. She died a few months later, in April 1983, age 74, and was buried next to Mac at a cemetery in Oceanside, California.

That same year, on November 6, just a month after his fifty-third birthday, Dad was grading papers at the dining room table when he lurched to his feet, stumbled across the living room, and landed with his knees on the floor and his face on the cushions of our floral-patterned loveseat, clutching his chest, as if shot. I found him there a few minutes later, when I wandered out of my bedroom and toward the kitchen.

"Dad?"

He didn't answer.

"Dad? Are you okay?"

Again he didn't answer. There was just the two of us and this awful silence.

"Dad?"

There are moments in your life that become dividing points with a before and after, your own personal *ante Christum natum* and *anno domini*. This was mine, as I must have known even then, waiting for an answer that would never come while my limbs began to shake and I backed away, with only one thought in mind: to *run*. Which I did, straight out the front door and up the street, in just my bathrobe and bare feet. The next morning's edition of the *Green Bay News-Chronicle* included this terse line, now among

my own yellowed news clippings and mementos of the past: “11:44 a.m., squad call, 1030 Cornelius Drive, Arthur Atkisson, dead on arrival.”

* * *

“Dad was never cut out for the military,” Noel told me many years later, more amused than judgmental. “He was too much of a dreamer and an intellectual.” His memories of Dad’s military service were mostly funny, like whene the hot end of a turret burned Dad’s ass during training, or the time he took Noel’s scout troop on an Army Reserve field exercise in the mountains of Southern California, thinking it would be harmless fun. At Noel’s instigation the scouts took to their role as the “opposing force” with unusual zeal, harassing the reservists day and night with sudden ambushes and random attacks, leaving everyone, including Dad, exhausted and irritable. This was probably the same event described in the *San Gabriel Valley Daily Tribune* article from 1965, which mentions, humorously in hindsight, that “the exercise was spiced with raids by ‘guerrilla’ forces, attempts at night infiltration by the ‘enemy,’ encounters with both friendly and hostile ‘natives,’ and other devices designed to test the skills of the troops and to cause them to be swayed from their mission.”

I now know from his military records that Dad’s service up to that point had been exceptional, with his rating officers frequently praising his intelligence and initiative. But around the time of that exercise or soon after his performance began to slip. His next efficiency report noted: “As a result of serious personal and family problems occuring during the year, there were lapses in performance and dependability which seriously affected this officer’s functioning in his assignment.” His first marriage, which began

eighteen years before that report when he himself was just eighteen, was beginning to fall apart. Over the next few years, as his marriage and the conflict in Southeast Asia continued to deteriorate, his attendance at drill became more erratic. By 1970, when Noel was still in Vietnam, Dad was no longer showing up at all.

He married my mother in 1971 and they moved to Houston, Texas. Noel discharged from active duty in April of that year, at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and stayed with them for a time. Dad was finally discharged from the Army as well, a year after Noel, on April 13, 1972. Later that year, when I was still just a baby, he took my mom and I to a campaign rally for Senator George McGovern, the Democratic presidential nominee running against Richard Nixon.

McGovern's top campaign pledge was an immediate withdrawal from Vietnam.

* * *

Noel didn't learn about my enlistment in the Army Reserve until I was already at Fort Dix, New Jersey, in the summer of 1989, between my junior and senior year of high school. On August 10 he wrote me a letter expressing his surprise. "I guess that I still think of you as a little boy, and of course you aren't," he wrote. "Anyway," he added, after sharing some of his own memories of basic training, "I'm very proud of you and I know Dad would be too."

And that, I suppose, was the point of it all. On one level I had enlisted because I wanted to help pay my way through college, to take on more responsibility than I had up to that point in my life, which was thrown into turmoil those first couple of years after Dad died, as I struggled through junior high, constantly acting up, constantly in trouble,

heading—the principal was fond of warning me—toward a future of abject failure that could only bring heartbreak and shame to my mother. On a deeper level I enlisted because I wanted the approval of an absent father, whose own troubled history with the Army was mostly unknown to me then, and would probably not have mattered even if it was. War stories, or the hint of war stories in those old photos and news clippings and dress greens at the back of the closet, shaped my childhood. They seemed not only like tokens of the past, but of the future, of *my* future, of some great tradition stretching indefinitely backward and forward in time—one I could not in good conscience break, even if I *wanted* to. This, at any rate, is what I told myself. No one had ever encouraged me to serve. Dad and Mac were long gone, and Noel lived more than a thousand miles away. Joining the reserve felt like a way of being closer to them, these absent role models of my youth—of doing something they had done, living something they had lived, perhaps, in time, even understanding something of what Mac was trying to tell me that day in the mobile home and why it still mattered to him after all those years.

* * *

Iraq invaded Kuwait a year after that letter, on the day I graduated from Army ordnance training at Redstone Arsenal, Alabama as a certified ammunition specialist—a job that entailed the storage and segregation of ammunition, but mainly amounted to being a glorified forklift driver. And although I had no premonitions as I stood there in my dress greens, watching the news on CNN in the Huntsville airport while waiting for my flight back to Green Bay, it wouldn't be long before I was pulled out of my first semester of college and sent overseas to begin collecting some war stories of my own.

In one of the first I'm still eighteen, huddled in a dark high-rise apartment in Khobar, Saudi Arabia with other reservists of the 395th Ordnance Company from Appleton, Wisconsin, all of us in full chemical protective gear, all of us scared, while air raid sirens wail in the night and someone on the radio tells us war has begun—news soon confirmed by the percussive thump of Patriot missile batteries shooting down Scud missiles in the sky above our heads. A few months later I'm nineteen—still younger than Mac when he enlisted in the CEF and younger than Noel when he arrived in Vietnam—as I loiter in the middle of Al Mutla Pass where Highway 80 crosses Al Mutla Ridge and bends north toward Basrah, Iraq. The road below has been cleared by bulldozers and the major holes repaired, but the bombed and burnt wreckage of vehicles remains, scattered far and wide on either side of the highway—the victims of modern-day Red Barons in U.S., British, and French fighter jets I've seen pass over our ammunition supply point in vast formations, like flocks of roaring iron birds. Beyond the ruined vehicles, to the south, the oil fires burn, bright beacons of orange across a vast brown wasteland. The smoke churning out of those giant flames blots out the sun for miles in every direction.

Twelve years later I'm a captain and the commander of a personnel detachment—a unit of office clerks, half of them pressed into guard duty from one end of Kuwait to the other—driving up that same highway and through that same pass in a humvee, thinking the whole place looks familiar, when the memory of that day in 1991 comes back to me, and I realize with a shock that every last bit of wreckage has long since been taken away, as if the whole thing never happened. Seven years after that I'm a division public affairs officer—head of a PR and media team covering Southern Iraq—driving the same route

*again*, in a bus at night, and I'm deposited at a camp I remember from 2003 as an austere collection of tents, but there are now hard buildings everywhere and we're standing in front of a Starbucks that has Wi-Fi.

I'm driving through the streets of Baghdad in an armored vehicle, looking out through a narrow strip of glass three inches thick. I'm standing on top of as-Salam Palace, where Saddam Hussein once lived, looking at a city of giant mosques and minarets barely visible in a thick brown haze. I'm flying over Basrah in a UH-60 Blackhawk with a gunner scanning the city below and I'm thinking about the time Noel flew over Vietnam in a UH-1 Huey with the ping of small arms fire hitting the metal below him. I'm running for the nearest bunker at COB[*] Basra while a voice over the base's speakers yells, "*Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!*" followed by the thump of mortar shells landing nearby. I'm checking my email in my CHU[†] when I see a message from my sister Penny.

"Eric, please contact me," it says. "It's about Noel."

* * *

The day of his inurnment in April 2012 was cool, and the ceremony was short. As a breeze scattered pink cherry blossoms across the pavement, a lone bugler played Taps, a team of soldiers fired a 21-gun salute, and another team stood guard while two soldiers smartly folded a U.S. flag over the maple box that contained Noel's ashes. An older woman, one of the Ladies of Arlington, handed me the flag with a few kind words while

[*] Contingency Operating Base.

[†] Containerized Housing Unit.

my mother, wife, daughter, and half-sister watched on. We were the only family there. Noel died of a heart attack at home, alone but for his dogs, a divorced bachelor who never remarried.

In some respects the whole ceremony, while deeply moving and steeped in time-honored tradition, was something of a glorified practical joke, a chance to have the last laugh. Years ago I'd casually suggested to Noel that we both have our ashes inurned near Dad's at Arlington National Cemetery, to which he'd irreverently replied, "Oh, great. Everyone will think we were some neo-fascist military dynasty."

As with most of his humor it was sarcastic, and funny because it was so far from the truth. That we were nothing like a dynasty was by then obvious enough, whatever I may have imagined as a child, and in fact the only reason Dad was inurned at Arlington was my mother, who sent his ashes there a few months after his death at the suggestion of a colleague. She simply didn't know what else to do with them.

But Noel's joke cut to the heart of something deeper I was slow to appreciate over the years. I'd long since lost count of how many times someone said to me, "I can't believe you're in the Army" or, after my retirement from the National Guard in 2014, "I can't believe you *were* in the Army." Strangers, acquaintances, colleagues, teachers, fellow students—they always seemed surprised that I didn't have more swagger or machismo, that I wasn't more belligerent or narrow-minded in my thinking; that I didn't conform to some preconceived notion, some Hollywood stereotype, of what a soldier or veteran should act like.

But for me it was Mac, not George C. Scott's Patton or Stallone's Rambo, who provided my first impression of a genuine, real life combat veteran, and he was such a kind, considerate, and gentle man that even I struggle to picture him charging across No Man's Land, rifle in hand, intent on shooting or bayoneting any *Boche* in his path. He may have signed up for two world wars, but only, as far as I have ever been able to tell, to do his duty as he saw it—not for any love of war or proclivity for violence. And even Dad, whose bombast could sometimes approach the Pattonesque, had not only left the Army Reserve disillusioned by the war in Vietnam, but resigned his membership in the NRA before I was born, disgusted with its waning focus on firearm safety and its increasingly shrill, anti-government rhetoric. He still owned firearms—two old revolvers and an M-1, bolt-action rifle—and was willing to indulge my childhood desire to own one of my own and to learn how to shoot it, but he was never ambiguous about the purpose of that .22 rifle he bought me for my ninth birthday; like all firearms it existed only to kill, to take and to ruin lives—as indeed a .22 bullet took Robert Kennedy's life two weeks before Noel's basic training. Perhaps because of Dad's stern lessons my own interest in firearms soon cooled, and throughout the course of my military career I never viewed them as anything more than a grim necessity, a burden to be borne rather than a blessing. I was always more interested in the young men and women who had to *carry* those firearms, citizen-soldiers like Mac who left the comfort of hearth and home to serve their country in times of need, then returned as soon as it was over to resume their otherwise normal, quiet lives. Real people like these were what drew me to public

affairs[*], as an officer. I wanted to help tell their stories, their *real* stories, to show others what veterans were really like—people no different than you or me. People with their own unique dreams, personalities, and interests.

The spot the cemetery employee led us to now, through a maze of concrete walls and white marble plaques, was just a few rows away from the plaque bearing Dad's name, rank, years of life, and service affiliation. Although neither of them had planned it this way, Mom's decision to send his ashes here had been a good one, fitting in its own way. She recalls Dad dusting off and squeezing into his old dress greens on a formal occasion or two, like ROTC functions on campus, years after he'd been discharged and become a full-time academic. For all that had happened, no one could take away his more than fifteen years of faithful service before problems in his personal life began to overshadow everything else. He was still proud of that service, of having once done something selfless, having been a part of something bigger than himself or any president or war. And so was Noel. It didn't matter what he did or didn't do in Vietnam, which stories might have been true and which weren't. His story was mine to tell now, and this was the ending I chose to give it. A soldier's ending.

After a respectful moment of silence, a cemetery employee covered the opening with a marble plaque and swiftly screwed it into place with a battery-powered drill—sealing away not just the earthly remains of my brother, but in many respects my last living link to our father and Grandpa Mac. There are others alive who still remember them, but not the stories they told, the kind we would have told each other as veterans. I

[*] In the military, a specialty that includes journalism and media relations.

have often regretted that Noel didn't live long enough to see these military records of Mac's, for as much as he idolized our grandfather he was never sure about the exact details of Mac's service in either war. Time had obscured the facts, leaving only rumor and speculation.

And one more discovery was yet to come. Not long after obtaining Mac's Canadian military records online and learning that he served in the 50th Battalion, I purchased a used copy of a memoir, now out of print, called *The 50th Battalion in No Man's Land*, written by a survivor of the war. Somewhere in the middle of the sixth chapter I turned a page and saw the words "Red Baron" everywhere. Richthofen, the author noted, "was almost a daily sight over our lines" in the winter and early spring of 1917—the very same period when Mac first joined the 50th, near Souchez. The author's description was so specific and vivid that as I read it, heart racing, I had the uncanny feeling that I was there in the trenches with Mac, watching the scene unfold—the very same he had been trying to describe for me, in his own words, that day in the mobile home when I was just a child.

It's sunset, and far off to our right the distinctive drone of a familiar biplane rises above "the strange, mournful mutter of the battlefield." Soon enough it appears, bright blood red with the black Iron Cross on its sides, flying fast and low above Vimy Ridge, the staccato bursts of its two, air-cooled .92mm machine guns shredding Canadian observation balloons tethered at intervals along the line, raising cheers from the German trenches and futile rifle fire from ours as the flaming remnants of the balloons flutter to the ground. On the Baron flies, past the Pimple, and for a moment we catch a fleeting

glimpse of the man himself, his face largely concealed by goggles and a leather aviator helmet, looking straight at us and flinging a mock, two-fingered salute. And just like that he has already passed by and beyond our lines, receding into the distance like a fading memory, until at length he disappears from sight and Mac, grinning, claps a hand on my shoulder and gives me a friendly shake as if to say, "I told you so."

## NOXIOUS ANIMALS

On September 21, 2015, about an hour's drive northwest of Manhattan in a portion of New Jersey ringed by small lakes and thick forests, five young men were hiking into the Apshawa Preserve when they saw a black bear. Only minutes earlier a nervous couple exiting the preserve had told them about this bear; it had been stalking them, they said, and the young men should turn back. For reasons unknown but easy enough to imagine if you have ever been young and male yourself, the five men—four of whose names are not a matter of public record—decided not to heed the couple's advice and continued down the path.

When they first spotted the bear it was about three hundred feet away, watching them but showing no overt signs of aggression. Instead of turning back the young men pulled out their cellphones and began to photograph it. The bear ambled toward them until it was about a hundred feet away, partially concealed behind a fallen tree. The young men took more pictures. The bear kept coming. Finally the young men turned around and began to walk back the way they'd come—briskly, one assumes, glancing over their shoulders and muttering nervous profanities.

The bear was still following them.

Contrary to the popular impression of bears as slow, lumbering creatures—which to this point the bear in question had only reinforced—*Ursus americanus*, the North

American black bear, can run at speeds of up to *thirty-five miles per hour*. By way of comparison that's as fast as a whippet, jackal, mule deer, or rabbit and faster than a giraffe, kangaroo, or white-tailed deer, which clock about thirty miles per hour. The fastest human speed on record, by the Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt in 2009, was just shy of twenty-eight miles per hour. The math is irrefutable: bears are faster than people. But these young men didn't know that, and they were scared. Their hearts were pounding, their adrenaline rushing. When the bear was about fifteen feet away they broke into a run, scattering in five directions.

*I don't have to be faster than the bear*, goes the old joke. *I only have to be faster than* you.

In this case the unfortunate *you* was Darsh Patel, a 22-year-old senior and information technology major at Rutgers University, last seen climbing a rock formation with the bear close behind him. He yelled at his friends to keep running, and they did. Once they were a safe distance away one of them called 911, using the same phone he'd been taking bear photos with just a few minutes earlier.

The police came, and about four hours after the call they found the bear, a 302-pound adult male, circling Patel's lifeless and partially eaten body in a grassy ravine. For about thirty minutes the bear squared off with the search-and-rescue team, refusing to leave, until the police finally blasted it with shotguns through the shoulder and the jaw, killing it with the second hit.

The most basic details of which ran through my mind about eight in the morning, August 23, 2017, only a minute or two into a hike of my own, on the White Oak Canyon

Trail of the Shenandoah National Park, in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. About a hundred and fifty feet away, across a dry, rocky streambed, was another black bear, watching me. It was big—adult or near-adult size, probably more than two hundred pounds.

There was no one else around, no one to outrun if it came to that. It was just me, the bear, and wilderness in every direction.

"Shit," I muttered.

* * *

My sixth-great-grandfather Thomas Meacham knew a thing or two about bears. A history of Franklin County, New York published in 1918 had this to say about him: "He was not identified at all conspicuously with public affairs, but was notable as a hunter and trapper. His earnings in bounties for noxious animals in the forty years of his activities must have aggregated thousands of dollars, as his obituary, written by a townsman, states that he kept accurate account of the number of the larger animals trapped or shot by him, and that the totals were: Wolves, 214; bears, 210; catamounts, 77; and deer, 2,550."

One might assume that with hardy men like Meacham running around the backwoods of North America, making a literal killing from animal pelts, the country's population of black bears would have been depleted to nothing in short order. In fact it almost was, though it took another hundred years. By the middle of the twentieth century the indiscriminate killing of black bears and the systematic destruction of their habitats, through timber cutting and development, had "nearly extirpated" their population in states like Maryland and reduced them to an endangered species. New protections and

regulations, prompted by the concerned activism of conservationists, environmentalists, and responsible outdoorsmen, reversed the tide and have, in recent years, restored the black bear populations to healthier levels.

"By current estimates, more than 900,000 are living today on the continent with 5,000 to 6,000 of those in Virginia," according to a website maintained by the Shenandoah National Park. "We believe that the black bear population within the Park ranges from the low to high hundreds, depending on the availability and distribution of natural forage, particularly mast crops, the degree of annual recruitment and mortality within the population, and seasonal influences such as breeding cycles, juvenile dispersal, and hunting pressure from adjacent lands."

Among the park's tips for "Enjoying Bears Safely at Shenandoah" is this advice:

> **DO NOT run from a bear**. Bears will pursue prey and flight is a signal to them to start pursuit.
>
> If a bear approaches and you have no escape route, stand tall, wave your arms, yell, clap, and throw rocks to deter the bear.

Further down is this final tip, for when all else fails and a bear actually attacks:

> **Fight back!** In rare instances black bears perceive humans as prey - if you are attacked by a black bear always fight back. Try to focus your attack on the bear's eyes and nose.

I hadn't read any of this before Patel's tragic death, though I already knew as much from other sources I'd encountered over the years—articles, documentaries, and word of mouth—which made the incident in New Jersey all the more baffling to me. "Why didn't they stand together and make a lot of noise?" I asked my older colleague John Palafoutas, over lunch at the Patent and Trademark Office in Alexandria, Virginia.

“Maybe wave some big sticks? I’ll bet they could have scared that bear away, or at least better defended themselves.”

To which John shrugged and replied, “Because they were college kids?”

He had a point. John and I were both Army veterans. When we were their age, John was preparing to enlist and ship out for Vietnam and I was already a veteran of the Persian Gulf War, enrolled in ROTC to be become an officer. And now, after twenty more years of reserve duty and several wartime deployments, I was thinking about this like a soldier—*strength in numbers*, *form a perimeter*, *the advantage of a defensive position*, and so forth. But in fairness Patel was, notably, the first and only known fatality by black bear in the state’s history. It was a fluke event. There was simply no reason a college kid within the New York metropolitan area would normally have to worry about black bears, much less what to do when threatened by one.

But still there was something that nagged at me about the incident. I couldn’t quite pinpoint or articulate what it was—only that it seemed to gesture at a larger, more perplexing problem that I couldn’t find anywhere in the news accounts of Patel’s death or others like it.

* * *

A bit closer to the heart of that elusive problem was a photo I first saw online a year or two earlier. In it, three golfers, all men, were moving in various states of undignified haste toward the camera. Beyond them, on the edge of the green with a wall of wild forest behind it, was a roaring grizzly bear. It was and still is hard not to laugh at the photo, given my admittedly jaded perception of golf courses as stuffy, sedate country

clubs for the wealthy and powerful. The sight of three such men having to flee a grizzly bear was, on some visceral level, morbidly satisfying. Naturally I assumed the photo was a fake.

But according to Snopes.com the photo is in fact real, taken by Charles Lindsay at the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Montana. It first appeared in the 2005 book *Lost Balls: Great Holes, Tough Shots, and Bad Lies*, “a humorous and inquisitive foray into the hazards where golf balls are lost—rough, woods, bunkers, and wetlands—as well as unexpected encounters with wildlife on and off the green.”

Following that same morbid instinct I showed the photo to another colleague, Chris, a political appointee who also works at the Patent and Trademark Office. Born and raised in Montana, where he previously served as executive director of the state’s Republican Party, he is also a hunter—mainly of deer and elk, though he did once try to hunt a black bear, he told me, only to find that he and his companion were tracking it in circles while the bear hunted *them*. With snow falling and daylight fading, they wisely decided discretion was the better part of valor and hurried home.

“I believe it,” he said of the golf course photo. “I’ve been on that course. It’s up in the mountains and surrounded by wilderness. There are a lot of grizzlies around there.”

Around the same time he and I had this conversation, there was a viral video online in which the largest alligator I have ever seen, perhaps fifteen feet from snout to tail, waddled with sublime indifference across a golf course in Florida, like something out of the early Cretaceous, while startled golfers stood back, at a safe distance, in dumbstruck awe. Not that my reaction would have been any less startled, were I took to

take up golfing and suddenly stumble across a huge bear or alligator in the course of my game, but why, I found myself wondering, should wildlife encounters like these be "unexpected"? To say that either golf course is *surrounded* by wilderness is to suggest that there is a definitive boundary where civilization ends and wilderness begins. Yet even I, who've never played a round of golf in my life, can see this is clearly not the case. During a recent trip to Orlando with my wife and daughter, I spent some of the mornings and evenings walking along the edge of the golf course next to our hotel, photographing ibises, wood storks, and wild turkeys strutting across the green with impunity, as utterly oblivious to that supposed boundary between civilization and wilderness as the red foxes, raccoons, possums, and groundhogs that frequently cross our backyard in the suburbs of Northern Virginia.

* * *

Which in a roundabout way brings me to the subject of *Grizzly Man*, an award-winning 2005 documentary by Werner Herzog. If you're familiar with his work, you know that Herzog has an almost unseemly fascination with obsessive people and harsh, remote environments—an eccentric aeronautical engineer flying a teardrop-shaped airship over the rainforests of Guyana, fearless scuba-diving scientists in Antarctica, Siberian hunters and trappers living in Russia's remote Taiga region. In the case of *Grizzly Man*, the character at the heart of the documentary was Timothy Treadwell, his obsession was grizzly bears, and the remote environment he inhabited, for at least part of the year, was the so-called "grizzly maze" of Alaska's Katmai National Park and Preserve.

I say *was* because even if you're not familiar with Herzog, the documentary, or Treadwell, you'll have already guessed that his obsession didn't end well. Every summer for thirteen years he lived in the grizzly maze, following the bears, filming them, studying them, even *talking* to them. He gave them names and considered them his friends. For all these reasons and more, including Treadwell's childish personality and mannerisms—*Treadwell* was the stage name he adopted in Los Angeles, hoping but ultimately failing to break into acting—it's easy to walk away from the documentary thinking he was a naive fool who met an all-too-predictable demise. That, at any rate, has been the reaction of virtually everyone I know who's seen the film.

But Herzog didn't dismiss him so casually. During those thirteen summers Treadwell managed to amass some extraordinary photographs and footage, which Herzog made ample use of throughout the documentary. During the school year Treadwell would travel around the country sharing his work with children and educating them about bears. He'd finally found his passion in life, his calling, and he was good at it. He even had some sensible rules he followed in the grizzly maze, including where he camped, what time of year he went, and how close he would get to the bears. The grizzly that killed him wasn't one of his "friends." It was an older, meaner bear that was looking for food at a time of year when Treadwell was normally on his way back to California and all the grizzlies he knew were heading up into the hills to hibernate.

As Herzog himself points out, however, in his paradoxically earnest yet sometimes maddeningly monotone, German-accented narration, Treadwell *was*, in a larger sense, dangerously naive about the natural world. There's a scene in *Grizzly Man*

in which he finds the remains of a young fox, half eaten by wolves—a particularly painful moment for Treadwell, given his affection for several foxes that followed him around the grizzly maze year after year like pets, even lounging on top of his tent and playfully running off with bits of his gear. He of course gave them all names and talked to them, too.

"Oh, God," says Treadwell softly, in his high-pitched, oddly endearing voice, petting the fox kit's remains and choking up. "I love you. I love you and I… don't... under… stand."

"Here I differ with Treadwell," Herzog cuts in, bleakly, with a line that would linger in my memory long after I'd seen the film: "He seemed to ignore the fact that in nature there are predators. I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony but chaos, hostility, and murder." The Grim Reaper has spoken.

Intellectually, though, I couldn't help but believe Herzog was right, or at least more right than Treadwell. The universe, while neither sentient nor intent on murdering us (as far as we know), *is*, according to all the lights of science, a fundamentally violent and chaotic place, from its explosive origins billions of years ago, to the formation of stars and planets, the geologic forces churning beneath our feet, and the indifferent cruelty of natural selection and "survival of the fittest." Every living thing on this planet eats some other living thing to survive, and the killing isn't always just about food or survival. Consider the horrific scene witnessed by zoologist Hans Kruuk in Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater, where during the course of a violent thunderstorm he witnessed a pack of spotted hyenas attack a herd of disoriented Thompson gazelles with such ferocity

they left a total of *eighty* gazelle carcasses in their wake—far more than they could ever possibly eat. Kruuk named this behavior, which has been observed among other species of predators, "surplus killing." According to Alison Deming, who shared Kruuk's story in an article for *Orion Magazine*, "for an animal that must kill to live, it makes sense for the hunt and the kill to be pleasurable… [a]nimals engaged in surplus killing may simply be thrilling in their physical being—their skill and strength and muscular joy."

Or consider Stephen Paddock, the 64-year-old white male who in 2017 killed 58 people and injured more than 800 others from the balcony of his thirty-second-floor hotel room in Las Vegas, using semi-automatic rifles and "bump fire stocks" to approximate fully automatic fire. "What we have been able to answer are the questions of who, what, when, where and how," the Las Vegas sheriff announced ten months later, at the conclusion of his office's investigation into the murder. "[W]hat we have not been able to definitively answer is why Stephen Paddock committed this act." With no solid evidence of mental health issues and no discernible motive, Paddock would seem to be a living avatar of Herzog's homicidal universe, an unfathomable agent of chaos and random, inexplicable violence. On a more primal level, though, Paddock's crime bears at least some resemblance to the orgy of surplus killing in the Ngorongoro Crater. One can just as easily be reduced to an act of appetite as the other, the only difference being the hyenas *needed* to kill to survive. The idea that Paddock, a man of enormous appetites who made millions in real estate and was an avid gambler and hard drinker with two ex-wives, might have craved yet more—a feeling of power perhaps, akin to the joy the hyenas seemed to take in their surplus killing—is not one that satisfies us any more than the

explanations of Ted Bundy or John Wayne Gacy or Jeffrey Dahmer did. Deep down we just can't bring ourselves to admit what science and the long record of human history prove without question: that people are animals, with the same basic cravings as the beasts of the wild—only more lurid, violent, and bizarre in some cases because of our capacity to imagine things that animals cannot, and because some of us lack the capacity or desire to keep our wildest animal instincts in check.

Compared to such horrors, fatal bear attacks seem like a relatively benign and almost quaint statistical anomaly. Since 2010 there have been more than 120,000 homicides in our country—a number larger than the total of U.S. fatalities in every conflict since the Second World War—compared to only nine fatal black bear attacks in all of North America. The number of fatal grizzly attacks is only slightly higher, at eleven. The majority of both kinds happened out west, in places like Alaska, Montana, Wyoming, Alberta, and British Columbia. The outliers were Patel's death in New Jersey, a 2011 black bear attack in Arizona, and a 2010 black bear attack in Ohio. That last one involved a captive bear killing its owner, whose exotic pet license had recently been revoked.

* * *

When I was eight or nine years old, some friends and I found a snake basking on a rock near the house in Green Bay, Wisconsin where I grew up. Without much thought or discussion we promptly commenced to smash it to pieces with large rocks, exalting in our power over what we rationalized was a potential threat—though in fact it was a harmless garter snake. I can still remember, after all these years, the thrill I felt in the moment of

raising that large rock and bringing it down for the kill. Although I didn't know the word then, it was a *rush* killing that snake. But it was a rush that didn't last. That night as I was taking a bath, I began to cry. When my mother came in and asked me what was wrong, I only cried harder and told her about what we'd done. She tried to console me, but nothing could ever wholly erase the remorse I felt that day. My sixth-great-grandfather Tom, who died alone in a log cabin at the age of seventy-nine, with his impressive ledger of animal kills near at hand—and a lake in the Adirondacks soon to be named after him—would no doubt have been ashamed to call me kin. The truth is I've always *liked* animals and *disliked* the idea of killing them, unless out of dire necessity—in self-defense, for example, or as a last resort for food if it ever came to that. And in spite of serving twenty-five years in the Army Reserve and National Guard, my attitude toward firearms and weapons was never more than indifferent at best. Like eighty percent of everyone else in uniform, I spent most of my military service in non-combat specialties—in my case public affairs, where I felt my passion for writing, photography, and storytelling could be of more use to the Army than my ability to pull a trigger.

In fact I was in Florida on Army business in early 2008 when my interest in wildlife photography first took off. During some time off I bought my first digital SLR camera, a Nikon D-40, and took it with me on an airboat ride in the Everglades. The photos I came back with that day of alligators, herons, storks, and a variety of other birds were surprisingly good. I was hooked. As I continued to pursue wildlife photography in the years ahead, I came to understand some of the allure of hunting—the pleasure of being outdoors, of tracking "prey," of coming home with something to show for it. Of

*proving myself* in some mysterious way. It was exhilarating. I wanted to "shoot" more wildlife, including bears.

The psychologist and sociologist Erich Fromm seemed to put his finger on it when he wrote, in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*: "In the act of hunting, the hunter returns to their natural state, becomes one with the animal, and is freed from the burden of his existential split: to be part of nature and to transcend it by virtue of his consciousness. In stalking the animal he and the animal become equals, even though man eventually shows his superiority by use of his weapons."

Finally, that early morning in the Shenandoah National Park, I had my best chance yet to do just that. The irony is that I'd gone to the White Oak Canyon Trail to photograph waterfalls; there are six of them along the 4.5-mile hike uphill toward Skyline Drive, ranging from thirty-five to eighty-three feet high. But I'd also *hoped* to see a bear. I'd been to the Shenandoah maybe twenty times since moving to Virginia in early 2009. I'd seen bear scat, bear tracks, bear claw marks on trees, and plenty of people who had *just* seen a bear or a family of bears, but I'd never seen one with my own eyes. Not in the wild and not until that moment, just a minute's hike from the gravel parking lot I'd left behind. When I muttered that profanity, it wasn't because I was scared. I was *unprepared*; I had a tripod over one shoulder, and I hadn't put the telephoto lens on the camera before leaving the parking lot—an inexcusable oversight for someone who enjoys photographing wildlife. I put the tripod down and fumbled in my camera bag for the lens while the bear watched me. In the amount of time it would have taken my sixth-great-grandfather to blow it away and get out his skinning knives—or for the bear to charge

within mauling distance of me—I finally managed to switch lenses and take a few hasty shots.

Victory! A rush of excitement. I could share the photos online when I got home, "mounting" the bear's image for all to see, memorializing my conquest. I had, in a sense and to echo Fromm, become the bear's equal by standing my ground and successfully photographing it, if even from a distance. As if to confirm these delusions, the bear turned and lumbered off deeper into the woods—though in truth it didn't look humiliated so much as bored or indifferent. The bear was done with me.

But I wasn't done with the bear. I wanted *more* photos. I wanted to get *closer* and shoot it from every possible angle. I knew I was unlikely to see another bear on this hike or any time soon—in fact I haven't seen one since—and I didn't want this moment to end. I wanted us to continue this dance, as equals, or even as predator and prey, with me as the predator. Strange as it sounds, my instinct in the moment was to *follow* the bear, to stalk it and keep shooting, as I do all the time with birds and other animals closer to home—barred owls, red-shouldered hawks, black rat snakes, even some of the foxes that prowl our neighborhood and the adjacent woods.

It was only after a few seconds of genuine anguish that I realized how crazy it was that I was even *considering* such a thing. The memory of Patel and his friends came back to me again, of their decision to continue on in spite of the couple's warning, to photograph it with their cell phones even as it approached them, and, worst of all, to *run* when they should have stood their ground, shoulder to shoulder, made a lot of noise, and if necessary fought the bear off. And yet I was on the verge of making an even worse

decision, given that I was only one person, not four. Whatever those young men were guilty of, whatever Treadwell may have been guilty of, it wasn't just ignorance, I could see now. It was a kind of hubris, though not one for which they alone can be blamed. It's a *learned* hubris that comes with being a "civilized" human, born and raised in the midst of a society that believes it has "tamed" and driven back the wilderness and created something else, or *other*, in its supposed absence. The hubris of assuming that *because* we are human, or American, or technologically savvy creatures of the modern world, or all of the above, we are not only "better" than the animals but somehow immune to the arbitrary, indifferent violence of nature.

*It can't happen to me.*

But there is no separation, dear reader, no *other*. The boundaries between civilization and wilderness, people and animals—these are the products of our imagination. We *are* animals, and as such we don't exist apart from or above nature; we are in it, always, and it is always in us. Think what you will about the hunter, but give him his due; he suffers no illusions about this. He more than anyone perceives the true nature of Herzog's homicidal universe and our place in it—and, within healthy limits, learns to embrace it, even to recognize himself, at times, as an agent of it. Even armed, my colleague Chris and his hunting companion chose to head home when they realized they were being stalked by a bear. Armed with nothing but a camera, I almost chose to stalk one.

In the end, of course, I didn't. I came to my senses and continued up the trail in search of waterfalls, but for the better part of an hour I kept looking back, kept doubting

my decision to press on alone in bear country, sure that I'd just heard a grunt or the snap of a twig, rehearsing in my mind what I'd do if I *did* see a bear following me.

Stand your ground, I told myself. Make a lot of noise; hell, roar like a cornered catamount with its hackles up. And if necessary—if all else failed, and the bear still came for me, unrelenting—swing my tripod with a vengeance and hit that homicidal universe square in the goddamned face.

## MONUMENTS

In the heart of Alexandria, Virginia, about a mile east of the Patent and Trademark Office where my wife and I both work, a lone figure stands in the center of the intersection at Washington and Prince. His arms are crossed and his left foot is slightly forward. In his right hand he holds a wide-brimmed hat. A satchel and canteen rest against his right hip. His face is downcast; above a thick mustache his eyes, unfocused and contemplative, convey the impression that he has lost someone or something he loved. Time and exposure have given his once bronze form a rich turquoise sheen. On the southern face of the gray, Georgia-granite pedestal beneath him are inscribed these words:

ERECTED<br>
TO THE MEMORY OF THE<br>
CONFEDERATE DEAD<br>
OF ALEXANDRIA VA.<br>
BY THEIR<br>
SURVIVING COMRADES.<br>
MAY 24TH 1889

An historical marker explains that the monument—the work of one Caspar Buberl, a Bohemian immigrant who sculpted dozens of monuments after the war—is of a Confederate soldier facing the distant battlefield where General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia on April 9, 1865. Hence the monument's official name: *Appomattox*. It also marks the spot where local volunteers of what became

the 17th Virginia Volunteer Infantry Regiment, or "Fairfax Rifles", mustered on May 24, 1861, prior to evacuating the area. Later that day thousands of federal troops crossed the Potomac River, and Alexandria became the first Southern city occupied by the Union army. The eastern and western sides of the pedestal bear the names of the one hundred Alexandrians who perished in the war.

The first thing I learned about the monument when my wife, daughter, and I moved to Fairfax County at the end of 2008, as the nation's first African-American president was about to take office, was the importance of the direction it faces; while the Confederate soldier faces south toward Appomattox, he was also placed with his back to the North, and most immediately to Washington, D.C. The significance of this was understandably lost on my wife, a native of the Shanxi Province of China, and even more so on our daughter, who was only three. For me, though, the significance was of a more immediate and personal nature. I was a major in the Army National Guard then, doing a one-year tour at the Pentagon—five miles north up the George Washington Parkway—for the same government the Confederates had rebelled and fought against in the four bloodiest years of our nation's history.

I was also a Yankee by disposition, born in Texas but raised in Wisconsin, with a father from Nebraska and a mother from California, ignorant for much of my childhood of all but the most basic details about the war and my ancestors' role in it; I only knew that a great-great-grandfather on my mother's side had fought for the Union, along with two of his brothers—each of whom lost an arm to the war. By the time we moved to Virginia, though, I was in my late thirties and a veteran myself, of two wartime

deployments to the Middle East with a third on the way. I was also by then a bit of a minor Civil War buff, in part because of my education as an Army officer; required reading like the memoirs of Ulysses Grant and *Killer Angels*, Michael Shaara's fictionalized account of the Battle of Gettysburg, had led me to other books on the war and its various protagonists or antagonists, including James I. Robertson Jr.'s massive, 950-page biography of Confederate general Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson.

Because my father died of a sudden heart attack when I was eleven, I knew almost nothing about my Atkisson ancestry—only the name of my paternal grandfather, which was easy enough because my father was a Junior and his father a Senior. Beyond that I knew nothing. Which made the story I learned from an elderly cousin of my father's, in the mid-1990s, all the more fascinating. According to the tale in her letter, there were six Atkisson brothers who served in the Civil War, all but one of whom fought for the Confederacy, while the youngest, my great-great-grandfather James Pleasant Atkisson—or *Plez*, as he was known to his immediate family, to distinguish him from his father James—was sent to live with a sister in Ohio but wound up being conscripted into the Union army as a drummer boy and "marched with Sherman to the sea."[*] When James returned from the war, so the tale went, he found the family's East Tennessee plantation in ruins and dismissed the freed slaves who had, for some reason, remained.

In spite of these wildly improbable details and the disconcerting news that I might be descended from slave-holding Southerners, the story captured my imagination. I

[*] A reference to General William T. Sherman's famous (or in the South, *infamous*) destructive march from Atlanta to Savannah, Georgia in November and December of 1864.

wanted to know more, but the means to do so were not easily available then, when the internet was still in its infancy. By 2009, as we settled into our new life in Alexandria, it was a different situation thanks to resources like ancestry.com, with its hundreds of digitized collections ranging from U.S. census records to Civil War pension applications and more. The fact that the Pentagon was a short Metro ride away from the National Archives gave me access to another gold mine of other Civil War records as well. Between extended lunch breaks there and internet research at home, I began to peel away the layers of myth and to discover the truth behind the old family tale—which, it turns out, was mostly if not entirely wrong.

* * *

To begin with these Atkissons were neither rebels nor, strictly speaking, Southerners. Plez was one of nine children and the youngest of *four*, not six, brothers, the eldest of whom were born in the hill country of East Tennessee while the younger two—Plez and Billy—were born on the flat farmlands of Jefferson County, Illinois, where their father James had moved the family in 1839. They moved twice more, to Lee County, Iowa and Grundy County, Missouri, where their mother died in 1858. Their father remarried a widow with several young children of her own, but a nineteenth-century *Brady Bunch* was out of the question; James—a farmer, miller, and lay preacher of limited means—could not support such a large family, so he sent several of his own children off to live with various in-laws. Plez went back to *Iowa*, not Ohio, to work on the farm of one brother-in-law, while his older brother Billy went east to work for another by the name of Benjamin Franklin Cozad, or Frank, whom they had first met in Iowa but

who—not long after marrying Sarah Atkisson, their sister—had returned to his native Virginia to care for his ailing father and manage the family property, in Lewis County.

At some point between 1860 and 1862, Plez journeyed eight hundred miles east to join Billy, Frank, and Sarah on the Cozad farm in the hills of western Virginia. His timing couldn't have been worse. After months of mounting tension following the election of 1860, the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln, and the subsequent secession of several Southern states, including South Carolina—whose attack on Fort Sumter in early April 1861 prompted Lincoln to issue a call for enlistments that only further enraged the South—Virginia formally voted to secede from the Union that same month. The decision didn't sit well with loyal Unionists in the western counties, whose delegates met in May for a series of conventions that ultimately repealed the Ordinance of Secession and led to West Virginia's admission to the Union in late June. But this turn of events was not universally popular among West Virginians, either. Probably with some exaggeration, a captain in the Fifteenth West Virginia Infantry later claimed that "in the western part of old Virginia, where Union men were so greatly in the minority, they frequently had to leave their homes at night and take to the woods upon the approach of marauding bands of guerillas, or bushwhackers, who waged a constant depreciatory war upon them. There were numerous bloody encounters and several shocking murders committed by partisans of both sides..."

Faced by simmering discontent within its borders and an enemy army without, one of the new state's most pressing tasks was to raise and organize military forces for its own defense. The Union army's failed attempt to take Richmond, followed by General

Lee's march toward Maryland with the Army of Northern Virginia, bestowed a new sense of urgency to the war effort and prompted an aggressive new wave of recruiting across the North. A company of soldiers was raised in Lewis County, including Billy, who signed a three-year enlistment, followed the next day by his younger brother Plez, who either loathed the prospect of being left behind or was perhaps conscripted after all, as the family tale went; although the muster roll listed him as eighteen, he had in fact only turned seventeen the day before. And gone was the childhood name of Pleasant, or Plez; he was James P. Atkisson now, a young man about to go to war—not as a drummer boy but as an infantryman. According to the regiment's records, my future progenitor stood five feet, five inches tall with blue eyes and light hair.

Two weeks later, a force of five hundred Confederate soldiers and sympathizers stormed through the county and raided stores for supplies, highlighting the state's vulnerability and the urgency of training new soldiers. On September 8 in Wheeling, Billy and James mustered as privates in Company D of the Fifteenth Regiment, West Virginia Volunteer Infantry. The weather was fine during their stay in Wheeling and, perhaps because of Lee's defeat at Antietam later that month, the sense of urgency diminished somewhat and events proceeded slowly, almost pleasantly; the soldiers drilled during the day, proud of their new uniforms, and patriotic ladies "cheered the boys by words and smiles, and ofttimes with more substantial presents of inviting delicacies for their mess."

In October the regiment left Wheeling for New Creek Station, near the Maryland border, to assume their first official duty guarding the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. There

they stayed until late December, receiving their “first real taste of the severity of camp life, owing to the rigorous inclemency of the weather.” Next they proceeded east to Sir John’s Run in Morgan County, where foul weather continued to torment the soldiers, and they could “do but little drilling, as the getting of fuel, doing of picket duty, and strict adherence to a daily routine of cleanliness in person and accoutrements” occupied the majority of their time.

On February 20, 1863, Billy became the family’s first casualty of the war when he was shot in the foot and admitted to the regimental hospital. There is no indication of whether the shot came from an enemy rifle, a friendly one, or was perhaps self-inflicted, accidentally or otherwise. Whatever the cause, the injury was serious enough to sideline Billy for the rest of the war; he spent a full year at an army general hospital in Cumberland, Maryland before transferring to the U.S. Veteran Reserve “Invalid” Corps, whose soldiers served as nurses, hospital attendants, guards, and the like. In the meantime Plez soldiered on without his brother as the Fifteenth West Virginia moved south and fought several battles in the area around Lynchburg, Virginia. In mid-July 1864 the regiment moved into the Shenandoah Valley for some of their fiercest battles to date, culminating near Opequon Creek in the Third Battle of Winchester on September 19, 1864. General Philip Sheridan ordered the largest cavalry charge of the war that day, fully two divisions in size, resulting in a decisive Union victory that routed the Confederates from the field and “electrified the country.”

Among the Confederate dead left on the battlefield was Colonel George S. Patton, grandfather of the future general, and among the many wounded on both sides—

including Robert E. Lee's nephew Fitzhugh, who 25 years later would be present for the unveiling of the Confederate monument in Alexandria, as Virginia's governor—was Private James P. Atkisson, ignominiously trampled in a cavalry charge (possibly by his own side in all the mayhem and confusion). He spent several months at a field hospital in Winchester before being transferred to the Union hospital camp at Frederick, Maryland. While he languished there among the sick, mutilated, and dying, the Fifteenth West Virginia Infantry marched on to join in the final pursuit and defeat of Lee's army and the surrender at Appomattox.

* * *

All of which was more than enough information to satisfy my curiosity and, I suppose, a vain desire to know that my paternal ancestors had done their own small part in preserving the Union and ending slavery—regardless of whether that was their personal desire or just a role imposed upon them by events. But the biggest surprise was yet to come. What had started as an obsession with my family connections to the Civil War soon became a larger genealogical project, and while tracking down what became of each of Plez's siblings and their respective spouses, I came across this 1906 obituary from Florence, Colorado:

> **DEATH OF B.F. COZAD**
> **Cousin of Stonewall Jackson**
>
> Last Wednesday evening, at nine o'clock, p.m., Benjamin Franklin Cozad, one of the old residents of Florence, died.
>
> Mr. Cozad was born in West Virginia on the 30th day of September, 1828, and was past 77 years of age. The deceased was a first cousin of Stonewall Jackson and served

> in the confederate army under the command of his cousin during the whole war.
>
> The funeral will take place from the residence on Union avenue this afternoon at 1 o'clock. Two confederate and two Union veterans of the Civil war will act as pall bearers.

According to another article, written after the funeral, "Deceased was a first cousin to General Stonewall Jackson and the local deceased fought through the civil war with the general." Both articles were obviously wrong on at least one point: *no one* could have served with or under Jackson "during the whole war" or "through the war" because Jackson died almost two years before it ended, after being shot in the dark by his own troops at Chancellorsville, in May of 1863. Nor could I find any record of Cozad having served as a Confederate soldier. What I did find was that a B.F. Cozad of Lewis County, West Virginia was captured in Randolph County as a "supposed spy" about six months after Jackson's death. From there he was sent to Camp Chase, on the western outskirts of Columbus, Ohio, where thousands of Confederate prisoners languished and in many cases died over the course of the war. Two months later Cozad was released, after taking an oath of loyalty to the U.S. government.

A little more research—including a quick look in the same massive tome of a Jackson biography I had read years earlier and that still sat on a sagging bookshelf at home—confirmed that Cozad and Jackson grew up less than ten miles apart, and their respective family trees confirmed that they were indeed related, though by marriage not by blood; Frank was Jackson's grand-uncle through the marriage of his aunt, Elizabeth Cozad, to Jackson's great-uncle Jonathan Jackson Jr.

All of which made for a great story, or the hint of one—there was still much I didn't know, including what if anything Cozad had actually done as a "supposed spy"—even more interesting than the old letter that led me down this rabbit hole in the first place. But it also left me with a new mystery to ponder: Cozad was by all appearances close to his father-in-law and my third-great-grandfather, James Atkisson, whose four sons had all fought for the Union. In addition to Plez and Billy, their eldest brother Isaac served as a sergeant in a Missouri militia unit and the second eldest, John, actually did "march with Sherman to the sea," as a soldier in the Fourth Iowa Infantry. If Cozad really had served the Confederate cause, as a spy or soldier, wouldn't this have strained his relationship with his wife and in-laws?

Perhaps it did, but the records of their movements and whereabouts in the years that followed suggest otherwise. The Cozads didn't linger in Virginia after the war but instead moved west again, first to Nebraska and then to Douglas County, in the Colorado Territory. Billy, however, remained in West Virginia the rest of his long life, most of which he spent as a preacher, while Plez prospered in the railroad business and spent his final years living a comfortable retirement in Los Angeles. But that was still well in the future when, at some point between 1870 and 1875, the elder James Atkisson and his wife joined the Cozads in Douglas County, where James—now a dedicated Baptist minister, as Cozad's father had been—applied for a homestead. County records show that he performed a number of marriages in Douglas County as early as 1875, with the Cozads looking on as witnesses. He died in 1880, and within a century the Civil War service of his four sons was by all indications completely forgotten, even conflated with

the Confederate loyalties of his son-in-law, whose family tie to Stonewall Jackson made him a celebrity among his in-laws as well as his neighbors in Florence, Colorado.

* * *

When the first Southern plans to memorialize Cozad's "cousin" Jackson with a monument came to the attention of Robert E. Lee in June of 1866, Lee's response must have surprised and dismayed his correspondent; citing the impoverished condition of many Southern families, Lee wrote, "I do not think it feasible at this time." To another correspondent that year he wrote, "As regards the erection of such a monument as is contemplated; my conviction is, that however grateful it would be to the feelings of the South, the attempt in the present condition of the Country, would have the effect of retarding, instead of accelerating its accomplishment; & of continuing, if not adding to, the difficulties under which the Southern people labour."

As for when he thought it *might* be feasible to build such monuments, Lee's answer might surprise many Confederate apologists today. "I think it wiser moreover not to keep open the sores of war, but to follow the examples of those nations who endeavoured to obliterate the marks of civil strife and to commit to oblivion the feelings it engendered," he later wrote, in declining an invitation to speak at a Gettysburg memorial association that wanted to erect monuments on the former battlefield.

But Lee died in 1870, and his attitude toward monuments does not seem to have been widely shared on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line. By the mid-1880s monument mania was in full swing, both on and off the battlefields, though most of them built until then, like *Appomattox*, tended to be memorials that mourned the dead. From the 1890s to

the 1950s—when the last of the Confederate veterans passed away and the United States Supreme Court began striking down Jim Crow laws—the majority of monuments built in the South tended to celebrate the Confederacy and its leaders. In the early 1960s, a number of Southern state capitals even began flying the Confederate battle flag—partly in defiance of the federal government's attempts to end segregation, and partly in honor of the Civil War centennial. There they remained until 2015, when an unemployed, socially withdrawn, 21-year-old South Carolinian with a history of obsessive-compulsive behavior and a conviction that African-Americans were "taking over the world" and "raping our women" walked into a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston and shot nine people to death, including the senior pastor and a state senator. All of the victims were black. According to the manifesto Dylann Roof left on his website—which included photos of him posing with a gun and a Confederate battle flag—he was angry about the media "blowing up the Trayvon Martin case while hundreds of these black on White murders got ignored". Someone had to do something about it, he argued, and it might as well be him.

The Charleston church shooting sparked an emotional debate across the country that continues to this day. One by one, in the immediate aftermath, the state capitals lowered their Confederate flags, and in time several major cities like New Orleans chose to remove and relocate some of their most prominent Confederate monuments, sometimes in the dark of night. As of 2016, according to a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, there were 718 Confederate monuments and statues on public property across the United States, most but not all of them in the South. Two years later, the SPLC

reported that 110 Confederate memorials had been removed since the shooting, including 47 monuments and four flags, as well as name changes for 37 schools, seven parks, three buildings, and seven roads. My birth state of Texas led the way with 31 removals, followed by my current state of Virginia with 14.

The Appomattox monument in Alexandria was not among those 14, though not for lack of a vigorous debate. On September 29, 2015, a year after I retired from the National Guard and put away my own Army uniform for good, the Alexandria City Council voted to establish an Ad Hoc Advisory Group on Confederate Memorials and Street Names. The group held five public hearings between January and June of 2016, featuring more than 60 speakers, and received more than 150 public comments online.

After considering impassioned arguments for and against removing the monument, the group issued a draft report on June 6. In describing the background and history of *Appomattox*, the report noted that the statue is "the lone public recognition to Confederate veterans" in a city with "far more Federal memorials and interpretations of slavery" than Confederate relics, and that its "creation and positioning not only have a significant historical context for the City, but also reflect the national experience of the war." Furthermore, the report added, the statue

> should be treated as part of a complex story as one of many historical assets we offer as a witness to the American experience… We do (and have done so as a city) a poor job making the Civil War explicable beyond pointing at a spark and obvious open wound. The war was and is an important thread in our ongoing local and national history, and we must understand it through treating it in the entirety of our national story.

In spite of the report's recommendations, the city council voted three months later to move the statue to a nearby museum, a decision that would have required, by state law,

the approval of the Virginia legislature. On November 29, 2016, State Senator Adam Ebbin informed the city council that he and the other state representatives from Alexandria would not make that request of the state legislature unless the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who own and maintain the monument, supported the move. They did not support it and still don't, so the *Appomattox* monument remains where it has stood—aside from an unfortunate incident in 1988 involving a drunk driver—since 1889.

As far as Confederate monuments go, Alexandria's must rank among the most benign; there is no Confederate symbol anywhere on it, nor does it celebrate any of the Confederacy's military or political leaders. Most passersby, like my wife—who has long since forgotten my long winded explanation about it—aren't even aware that the figure on the pedestal, who carries no weapons, is a Confederate soldier. Unlike most of the controversial Confederate monuments in the news, which were built in the early twentieth century to celebrate the Lost Cause or to make a political or racial statement, this one actually *does* have some intrinsic historical value, marking, as I have already noted, the site where the Fairfax Rifles first mustered and noting those Alexandrians who died in the war.

Over time, my feelings toward the statue have softened. The idea that his back was placed to the North as a symbol of unreconstructed defiance seems less plausible to me now than it once did; after all, he could not very well face south toward Appomattox, where his army surrendered, without turning his back on the north by default. And even then, one has to wonder, is he facing Appomattox because he laments the death of the

Confederacy or because of the friends he lost on blood-soaked battlefields from Manassas to Chattanooga, Shiloh, and beyond? As a veteran myself I can't help but think his face betrays the answer. It's a face I've seen before, on other men—some of whom served in Iraq before I did, under far worse conditions, and some of whom served in Vietnam. In fact the face and the pose of *Appomattox* are strikingly similar to the subject of Lee Teter's oil painting *Reflections*, a man who, like the Confederate soldier of *Appomattox,* is looking down—in this case, with a slightly more pained expression. His right hand is braced against the Vietnam War Memorial, and touching his hand from the other side of the polished black granite is the ghostly reflection of a soldier in olive drab, surrounded by several others like him, the fallen friends of this now graying, anguished veteran who has not forgotten them.

There is something we can learn from those two faces, something worth studying and reflecting upon, as I hope my daughter will one day, now that she is almost old enough to understand. As for the role her paternal ancestors played in the events of that distant cataclysm, the details of who served where, who fought who, and what scars they may have carried from it—these things are less important than the larger moral of the story to be gleaned from their lives afterward: *they moved on*.

## NORMA'S ROAD

Along a trail in Huntley Meadows I spot them: two Eastern bluebirds—*Sialia sialis,* in the more elegant Latin—perched within a shrub, leisurely picking at the few barberries that still remain. Not wanting to scare them off, I stop and watch. If I were Iroquois, I might view this chance encounter as a good omen, or at least a hopeful one, for the people of that mighty confederation believed the call of a bluebird could ward off the power of *Sawiskera*, the spirit of winter, evil son of the Sky Woman. I am not Iroquois, nor even remotely American Indian—just a bastard mix of English, Scottish, Irish, German, and Swiss. Even so, the bluebirds are a welcome surprise on this cold winter day. Pleased, I raise my camera, focus the telephoto lens, and begin to photograph them.

And then something even more remarkable happens: amid a sudden chorus of high-pitched whistles and trilled *bzeeee*'s, a mob of about a half dozen other birds descends on the shrub. These are not bluebirds, nor any other species of bird that I recognize. Their feathers are a glossy, scintillating blend of brown, gray, and greenish-yellow. The insides of their wings are pure gray, with brilliant-red droplets on the outside, and the tips of their tail feathers are a bright yellow. Most striking of all, however, are the swept-back crests and rakish black masks that give them the rather delightful appearance of stylish bandits. The poor bluebirds suffer this intrusion in stiff

silence—much to Sawiskera's wicked delight, I can only imagine—while I hold the shutter-release down and my Nikon fires away, capturing vivid shots of these new birds in various attitudes of mid-flight.

After hurrying home, downloading the photos, and flipping through my Audubon field guide, I find a mugshot of the perpetrators in question. Cedar waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) of the waxwing family:

> 7". Adult back and pointed crest brown; fawn-brown chest grades to yellow belly; wings gray, with waxy red tips on secondaries; black eye mask, edged in white. Rump and tail gray, with yellow tip. Usu. in flocks. VOICE Call: high thin zeee. HABITAT Woodland edges, gardens. RANGE Aug.-May: entire region; breeds erratically inland, mainly in mtns.

It is not the first time I have photographed a "new" species of bird, nor, I am certain, will it be the last. I am still new to birding, having only recently taken it up after a class at Huntley Meadows with my wife and daughter. Something about the hobby appealed to me that failed to excite as intense a passion in my wife, who was born and raised in China, or in our preteen, thoroughly American daughter at all. Partly I just enjoy being outside and always have, since childhood, when my playground was a forest that loomed over the back of our house in the outskirts of Green Bay, Wisconsin. And partly I just need the quiet time, away from people, the news, and my deskbound work as a speechwriter at the Patent and Trademark Office. But more than all that there is something I find genuinely thrilling about a discovery like this, of *noticing* an unusual bird for the first time and learning its proper name. Of adding something new to my knowledge of the world. *Cedar waxwings*. The name even has a peculiar charm to it.

*   *   *

There is nothing especially meadowlike about Huntley Meadows Park, where I first encountered the waxwings in early 2017, a couple of weeks after my forty-fifth birthday and a little less than two years after retiring from the Army National Guard, which allowed me to devote more time and energy to my hobbies and my family.

Aside from a few grassy clearings one might accurately describe as meadows, most of the park is a damp, tick-infested forest littered with rotting timber and spikey sweet gum balls. Close to fifteen hundred acres of densely packed beech, maple, oak, and the ubiquitous sweet gum, the park sits on a wet lowland in Virginia's Hybla Valley, just south of Alexandria and Washington, D.C. Tens of thousands of years ago the valley was an ox bow of the ancient Potomac. Today, within the park, there is no distinctive terrain of any kind—just a few narrow streams like Dogue Creek[*] and Barnyard Run. It would be easy to get disoriented and lost in these woods if one was to wander off the beaten path, as I often do in the winter months when the thick undergrowth has died away and I want to leave the trails behind. But for the occasional plastic bag, water bottle, or rusted can blown or washed in from the surrounding neighborhoods, it is also easy to forget that these fifteen hundred acres are surrounded by development: mostly suburban neighborhoods, with a landlocked Coast Guard facility on the west and a wearying line of strip malls just past the residential areas to the east.

[*] So named after the Doeg, an Algonquian-speaking people that once lived in what is now Maryland and Virginia.

Because our neighborhood sits along the park's northern edge I can walk into it whenever I please, sometimes with my wife and daughter, but more often than not with just our dog, a little black-and-white terrier mix I call the Black Fox of Huntley Meadows but whose actual name is Cookie. These frequent hikes within the park take us, first, across the faded remnant of an old maintenance road long since abandoned to nature. The trees crowd in upon this track so tightly that, together, they form a kind of cathedral-shaped tunnel through the woods, the whole length of which is carpeted with dead branches and fallen trees. On occasion, when I opt to hike this road rather than delve deeper into the forest, toward the center of the park, I have been startled by a herd of deer bolting across the trail or a black rat snake slithering through the grass, or delighted by the furtive appearance of a red fox, which will inevitably pause to study me, as if assessing whether I am friend or foe, before slinking off, somewhat mollified. Because it lacks a name or a presence on any map now in circulation, I tend to think of this arboreal avenue, in honor of our late neighbor, as "Norma's Road."

* * *

Eulogized by her daughter Lisa as a "tiny woman with the heart of a lion and the spirit of a child," Norma Doris Hoffman was born in Boston in 1925. A talented dancer from an early age, she helped support her family during the Great Depression by performing in the city's Latin Quarter cabarets alongside celebrities like Milton Berle, a comedian, actor, and America's first major television star. Norma's skills caught the eye of at least one Broadway recruiter, who offered her a role, but Norma chose to marry instead and moved to the D.C. area with her husband Fred, who fought in the Second

World War and worked for many years thereafter as a reporter for the Associated Press and later still as a spokesman for the Pentagon. Norma, meanwhile, went to work on Capitol Hill, first for Congressman Isidore Dollinger of New York and then for Congressman Christian Herter, who later served as Governor of Massachusetts and Secretary of State in the Eisenhower Administration. Norma managed Senator Hubert Humphrey's presidential campaign in Alexandria in 1968 and, in 1970, the campaign of Ira Robinson, the first African-American elected to the Alexandria City Council since Reconstruction. Eventually Norma left the Hill to work for the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, which gave her first-hand exposure to environmental protection issues.

Her family had only just moved to the house next door to ours, in the 1970s—though ours did not yet exist, nor were my wife and I more than toddlers at the time—when plans to build a highway through Huntley Meadows were gathering steam. To protect the park and its wildlife from the adverse impact that would have, Norma founded the Citizens Alliance to Save Huntley and enlisted the pro bono legal assistance of a prestigious law firm. It was the beginning of a decades-long battle under her leadership—involving hundreds of scientists, lawyers, and concerned citizens—that not only stopped the construction of the highway, along the exact same path I now call Norma's Road, but generated a renewed focus and appreciation for the park and its value to the surrounding community.

"Have a *happy* life," Norma told me more than once, with genuine sincerity—less a pleasantry than a benediction, if not a gentle command. It was how she ended every conversation with strangers; and in the five years we lived next to one another, beginning

in 2012, I was *always* a stranger to her, someone who had entered her life past the point when she could still remember new names and faces, from what I assumed was the onset of a mild dementia that nevertheless failed to dim, in any way, her obvious, innate kindness. The first time we met, she looked me very earnestly in the eyes and asked me the kind of question by which she seemed to measure others: “Have you been to Huntley Meadows yet?”

At the time, ironically, and to my great regret, the answer was no.

* * *

There is a meandering trail that intersects Norma’s Road near where I usually enter the woods—the very same, in fact, upon which I encountered the waxwings. If it is a good day for birds I will hear and see the woodpeckers first as I wander along it, the Black Fox running ahead of me with her nose low to the ground, treeing every squirrel and chasing after every deer. Downey, red-headed, and red-bellied woodpeckers abound in these woods, flitting and chittering among the branches. At times I will hear the piercing, vaguely exotic *ack, ack, ack, ack* of a pileated woodpecker and see a black, white, and red flash swooping from one tree to the next, always on the move, often just beyond the reach of my camera. Once or twice I have even seen the more elusive northern flicker, there one moment and gone the next. That’s five species of woodpeckers alone in Huntley Meadows. Some days the staccato hammering of beak on wood is so intense and so prolific it sounds more like a military rifle range than a forest.

There are other birds, of course. In the first part of my walk I often see robins, white-throated sparrows, song sparrows, Carolina chickadees, tufted titmice, blue-gray

gnatcatchers, and an occasional goldfinch, golden-crowned kinglet, warbler, hermit thrush, or yellowthroat. I have even seen Cooper's hawks, red-tailed hawks, and red-shouldered hawks roosting in the branches above and caught fleeting glimpses of wild turkeys or pheasants darting off in the underbrush below. A few hundred meters south the trail ends at a T-intersection with a paved, mile-long track that cuts into the park from the South Kings Highway entrance. Where that track ends, at the center of Huntley Meadows, is a wide pond—first started by beavers in 1978, when they industriously dammed up Barnyard Run—with a half-mile boardwalk on the far side, several observation points, and more than two hundred species of birds that call the park home, for at least part of the year.

Here, great blue herons and great white egrets wade in the shallow water, spearing for fish and taking to the air with loud, ungraceful squawks that sound vaguely prehistoric, like modern-day pterodactyls. There are also green herons and belted kingfishers, perched on uprooted stumps or the tops of beaver lodges; sometimes the herons even strut along the park's boardwalk, as if they, too, are just taking in the sights like any other two-legged visitor. Last year, while walking on the far side of the pond, just beyond the boardwalk's end, I saw a juvenile, yellow-crowned night heron, a rare treat as equally surprising and delightful as the cedar waxwings were.

Waterfowl abound in this hidden wetland, including the ubiquitous Canadian geese that turn the boardwalk into foul minefields of excrement and the commonplace mallards one would naturally expect anywhere there is fresh water. But I am always more interested in the *less* common species of waterfowl, most of which I never knew existed

until encountering them for the first time at Huntley Meadows: northern pintails, northern shovelers, black ducks, coots, and my two personal favorites, for their beautiful colors and oddly shaped heads: hooded mergansers and wood ducks. The mergansers have a fan-shaped, collapsible crest that gives them an utterly unique appearance; as the Cornell Lab of Ornithology puts it, “Adult males are a sight to behold, with sharp black-and-white patterns set off by chestnut flanks.” Their praise of the wood duck is no less effusive: “The Wood Duck is one of the most stunningly pretty of all waterfowl. Males are iridescent chestnut and green, with ornate patterns on nearly every feather; the elegant females have a distinctive profile and delicate white pattern around the eye.” Not surprisingly, my Audubon field guide has a male wood duck on its cover.

This bewildering diversity of ducks, herons, woodpeckers, and other birds often leaves me contemplating, in awe, how little I really know or understand about avian wildlife. It’s not just that I am a newcomer to birding; it wasn’t until my late thirties, well after a bachelor’s degree in history and a master’s degree in politics and government, that I began to develop any interest at all in the sciences. Consequently, with such a weak grasp of biology, I struggle with questions like how a male wood duck can end up with such brilliant colors and patterns. As best I can tell, from what little I have picked up over the years, a colorful bird like the male wood duck looks the way it does because of bird ancestors beyond count, over many millennia, acting on instincts beyond their understanding.

During one investigation of this kind, a line in a *National Geographic* article jumps out at me. I lean forward and read it again, several times. It mentions

*Archaeopteryx*, the “first wing” or “first bird,” an avian ancestor that lived more than 125 *million* years ago, in the Late Jurassic, in what is today southern Germany—but at the time was a string of islands in a shallow, tropical sea, much closer to the equator than it is now. These few facts alone give me duly humbled pause. But I press on with another quick search: the oldest known *owl* fossils are 70-80 million years old. And a final search: *Homo sapiens* have only existed for about 300,000 years, with evolutionary origins going as far back as 16 million years. My own math: the earliest ancestors of humans came more than a hundred million years *after* the “first bird” and more than fifty-five million years *after* the first owls.

Seventy million. Eighty million. One hundred and twenty-five million. As years, these numbers are beyond my capacity to fathom. Contemplating the enormity of it all—the immense stretch of time and diversity of life on Earth that preceded me, to say nothing of the infinite universe beyond our planet, with hundreds of billions of galaxies as big as ours or larger—is like staring into an abyss that stares back until I flinch and shrink away, almost regretting that I ever looked in the first place. At times it’s enough to make me feel like the psalmist who, I imagine, raised his eyes to the heavens and rent his garments in despair as he cried, “What is man?”

What, indeed. Quietly, in a daze, I close my laptop and retire for the night.

* * *

Concealed within the depths of Huntley Meadows, away from the trails, are relics of a more recent past: bundles of old fence, rusted axles, and long berms and ditches that run for hundreds of yards. These last were dug by one of the property’s earliest owners,

or more precisely his *slaves*, to drain the land for the farming of corn, rye, wheat, and oats. George Mason first purchased the land between Dogue Creek and Little Hunting Creek in 1757. A member of Virginia's wealthy planter class, in early 1776 he penned the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which inspired fellow Virginian Thomas Jefferson—who decades later, as president, entertained the whimsical notion that Lewis and Clark might encounter live woolly mammoths or giant ground sloths in their great westward expedition—to plagiarize it for portions of the Declaration of Independence. Mason was also one of only three delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 who refused to sign the Constitution, in large part because it lacked a Bill of Rights.[*] While this act of curmudgeonly defiance consigned him to less renown than the other leading men of his generation, his legacy endures in an eponymous state university in nearby Fairfax, where I study creative writing; his home at Gunston Hall, about a thirteen-mile drive south of Huntley Meadows; and to a lesser degree at Historic Huntley—a country house built by his grandson Thomson between 1825 and 1830, just uphill from what is now the park's official entrance at the L intersection of Lockheed Boulevard and Harrison Lane.[†]

The land remained in the Masons' hands until the Civil War and thereafter through a series of other owners over the next century, including a rather colorful, if highly checkered character named Henry Woodhouse. Born Mario Terenzio Enrico

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[*] The Ten Amendments we now know as the Bill of Rights were passed by the First Congress under the leadership of James Madison, in large part to mollify anti-Federalist critics like George Mason.

[†] In addition to her crusade against the highway through Huntley Meadows, Norma also organized a successful effort to get the Fairfax County Park Authority to acquire Historic Huntley, which was then in neglect and disrepair. Now open to the public, it's listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Virginia Landmarks Register, and the Fairfax County Historic House Inventory.

Casalegno, he emigrated from Italy to the United States in 1904 and began his career in a New York restaurant, where in the course of a disagreement with the head chef he murdered him with a kitchen knife. After four years in prison Mario anglicized his name to Henry Woodhouse and began, for one reason or another, to write about aviation, a field then still in its infancy, and quickly established himself as an authority on the subject. From there his life continued on the kind of improbable trajectory that only seems plausible in a lurid novel or the United States of the early twentieth century. In 1915, Woodhouse co-founded the American Society of Aeronautic Engineering. During the First World War he served on committees dedicated to national defense. As his wealth and influence grew, he speculated in oil and real estate. In 1919, he began to purchase hundreds of acres of farmland in Hybla Valley, eventually totaling about two thousand, with dreams of building the largest airport in the world.

Woodhouse was enamored with dirigible airships, which he believed, along with many others at the time, to be the aircraft of the future. His plans for the airport progressed as far as the construction of three long runways, a few buildings, and a plywood entrance beneath a sign that read "George Washington Air Junction."[*] In 1929, Woodhouse even held a christening ceremony for the "air junction," with descendants of the Washington family present; ultimately, however, the project failed. The Hindenberg disaster in 1937—in which a German passenger airship caught fire and was destroyed,

[*] So named, according to some sources, because at least some of the land once belonged to George Washington. This is possible, as Washington and Mason were neighbors and one may have sold the land to the other. It is also possible that Woodhouse simply chose the name because Washington was by far the more famous of the two and lived close enough, in his time, to merit the honor; Mount Vernon is almost half as close to Hybla Valley as Mason's Gunston Hall.

with a loss of 36 lives, while attempting to dock with its mooring mast at Lakehurst, New Jersey—marked the end of the airship era, and after a series of defaults, foreclosures, and lawsuits, the federal government acquired Woodhouse's Hybla Valley property. Woodhouse himself went on to amass a collection of historical artifacts, documents, and signatures, some of which turned out to be his own forgeries, and spent most of his later years defending himself in lawsuits. He died in 1970, a couple of years before I was born.

Over the decades the government would find a variety of creative, if utilitarian purposes for Woodhouse's former property. During the 1940s the Bureau of Public Roads used it to test asphalt surfaces. At the height of the Cold War, in the 1950s, it was the sight of an anti-aircraft battery manned by the Virginia National Guard. Between 1958 and 1971, the Navy cleared and drained the area the beavers would later turn into a pond and built two circular antenna fields, for classified radio communication research. At the end of their research the Navy abandoned the property and declared the land surplus. In 1975, as part of the Legacy of Parks Program, President Gerald Ford signed it over to the citizens of Fairfax County. Having anticipated the transfer for years, the county had already conducted a feasibility study and now proposed a four-lane highway to connect Lockheed Boulevard and South King's Highway—the very same one that Norma defeated, and upon which I sometimes spot foxes, snakes, and deer while walking the dog.

* * *

None of this long, colorful history is ever far from my mind as I hike through the woods looking for birds, a camera hanging from my neck and the Black Fox of Huntley

Meadows never far from sight, while above us the distant roar of jets coming and going from Reagan National Airport, about seven miles up the Potomac, reminds me of what this land might have become had Woodhouse prevailed. Several times last winter as I wandered along the faint berms and ditches left by Mason's slaves, lost in such thoughts—my feet crunching against a thick carpet of twigs and dead, brittle leaves—tiny flakes of snow began to fall from a leaden sky.

There is something perfectly enchanting about the woods in a snowfall that is difficult to explain even if you have experienced it yourself, as I did many times in Wisconsin, as a child and young man. At an early age I came to know every square foot of that forest behind our house and could walk or run with confidence through it at any time of day or night, sometimes with friends, sometimes with just my dog, a dark red golden retriever named Patches, and sometimes just by myself. In those moments when it snowed, it felt as if the world beyond my immediate sight had simply dissolved and I were walking in a world unto itself, outside of time and space, cleansed and made new by the cold, white curtain of flakes descending upon and through the branches with a gentle hiss.

I have never experienced anything quite like it since leaving Wisconsin more than twenty years ago, but once or twice in Huntley Meadows I came close as a sudden, light flurry caught me by surprise. Invariably this triggered memories so vivid it would not have surprised me to see that my companion was no longer Cookie but Patches, or for us to emerge from the woods with a view of cornfields, Highway 57, and the frozen Bay of Green Bay in the distance. Instead, each time, I stumbled in this strange twilight state to

the edge of the wide pond at the center of Huntley Meadows. There, on one such occasion, I beheld a great blue heron hunched atop a beaver lodge, with a coat of snow already settling upon its back. On another I spotted two juvenile bald eagles engaged in aerial combat over the pond, one of them clutching a fish in its talons.

My mind in these moments was adrift, reeling, untethered from time. I thought about the Paleoamerican nomads who hunted here ten thousand years before Christ, wondering if they ever paused to take in this same scene, or one very like it, and of the Doeg Indians long after them but well before the first white man ever set foot in this valley. I imagined the land later still, transformed into a treeless expanse of corn, rye, wheat, and oats, with Mason's slaves toiling in the fields, as oblivious to the great gulf of history behind them and the vast unknown ahead as those earlier Americans had been. Could even Mason, who more than most had the luxury, time, and inclination, have foreseen the future, or possible futures, any more than we can discern ours? Could he imagine the asphalt roads, the anti-aircraft guns, the ghostly outline of zeppelins drifting through the air like ponderous, prehistoric fish—and at the center of it all, the dreams of a Henry Woodhouse and a Norma Hoffman all tangled together, like these two eagles, in some otherworldly struggle one might even call a *dance*—the outcome of which perhaps even the Sky Woman, in all her glory, could not foretell?

I cannot imagine that he did. As I watch the eagles disappear beyond the distant treetops it occurs to me, with startling clarity, that there is only *this*, the present. There is only *ever* the present. Everything else belongs to the realm of imagination: the future, the past, even my own memories of the people, places, and moments that were once so clear

to me but are now slowly fading away, like the great, unspoiled wilderness that once stretched from here in every direction, teeming with wildlife, but which can never be wholly restored—only fragments of it, like this, restored to some semblance of what once was. Perhaps this is why I enjoy photographing what others, like my wife, are content merely to observe, through binoculars or their naked eyes; what I photograph I can never wholly forget. I can preserve the moment. I can even, I would like to imagine, stop time itself.

* * *

Near the official entrance to Huntley Meadows is a small modernist structure built in 1983, expanded in 1990, and now thoroughly enclosed by trees. A wooden sign outside reads, “Norma Hoffman Visitor Center.” Beaming, happy, surrounded by friends and family—and wearing a teal-colored sweater embroidered with the image of a male wood duck—Norma was present for the dedication ceremony in 2014, if no longer altogether *there*. Her decline over the next two and a half years was slow but inexorable. She passed away last June, just two weeks shy of 92. Her husband Fred survives, now in his late nineties, awaiting the inevitable moment when his time, too, must end.

It was in that same visitor center, a couple of summers ago, that my wife, daughter, and I took the amateur birding class, sponsored by a nonprofit called the Friends of Huntley Meadows Park. Co-founded by Norma in 1985 and “dedicated to the protection of Fairfax County’s premier wetland wildlife sanctuary,” it has since become a model for other Friends groups throughout the county, educating citizens about birds, wildlife, and the larger importance of wetlands.

The instructor introduced us to a variety of field guides and binoculars and then led us on a hike along the park's boardwalk, during which we identified about thirty different species of birds, checking them off on a yellow trifold brochure as we went. Among the species of bird listed but not spotted by us that day were barred, great horned, and Eastern screech owls. I had never seen an owl in the wild that I could recall, but I had *wanted* to see and photograph one since not long after we moved to the neighborhood in early 2012. At night we could sometimes hear the distant, distinctive *Who, who, who, who cooks for you?* of the barred owl, coming from Huntley Meadows. One night in 2014, before a family trip to China, my wife and I awoke to a pair of them excitedly making the call in the giant maple tree just outside our bedroom window.

"Is it a bad sign?" asked my wife, who had been brooding about the long trip ahead of us, including more than twelve hours over the Pacific Ocean and a train ride from Beijing to the Shanxi Province, where she was from.

"No," I said, peering through the dusty venetian blinds, hoping but ultimately failing to spot the moonlit silhouette of an owl on one of the branches. "They're a *good* sign in this culture, not a bad one. A symbol of wisdom." I said this less out of genuine conviction than to reassure my wife, though I was thinking of Greek mythology, in which the owl was the symbol of Athena, goddess of wisdom. The truth, of course, is more complicated. The owl as a symbol of knowledge or wisdom *has* taken root in many cultures around the world, including our own, but it often co-exists uneasily with older superstitions, like those in ancient China or medieval Europe, where the owl was viewed

as an ill omen, a harbinger of calamity. Even among the Indians of North America the owl's symbolism varied from tribe to tribe, often in equal extremes.

We survived our trip to China and back without calamity and close to three years passed, including our birding class at Huntley Meadows in 2016. Then, one evening early last year, as I was heading home from yet another hike in the park, I turned onto Norma's Road and looked up, as if by instinct, toward the treetops. There, on the short, broken branch of a gnarled oak tree, lit in a warm glow by the setting sun, was a barred owl: "*Strix varia*. Dark brownish gray with paler spots above, heavily striped below; dark barring on upper chest; facial disk gray, ringed in black. Eyes brown…" Staring right at me. Utterly undisturbed by my presence, as if it had been waiting there since the dawn of time. The very picture of serenity; even, perhaps, of wisdom.

Hands trembling, I raised my camera, focused the lens, and began to photograph it.

## NOTES AND SOURCES

### *Points of Origin*

Unless otherwise noted below, my details on Jean Nicolet came from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Nicolet), *American Journeys* (http://www.americanjourneys.org/aj-043/summary/), and the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/nicollet_de_belleborne_jean_1E.html).

4 "were driven by deep desire": The text of FDR's speech commemorating the 300th anniversary of Nicolet's landing is available, courtesy of the American Presidency Project, at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-delivered-green-bay-wisconsin.

10 "Nicolet, like others we see": From the article "Jean Nicolet" by Jerrold Rodesch, printed in the inaugural Spring 1984 issue of *Voyageur: Historical review of Brown County and Northeast Wisconsin*.

11 "dominant, imposing, and forceful man": From the dedication to my father at the beginning of *Politics and Economics of Earthquake Hazard Mitigation*, written by his colleagues Dan Alesch and Bill Petak. Dad had started the book as his own but died before completing it.

"more complex and ambiguous historical significance": Rodesch was referring, among other things, to the fact that Nicolet left no written records of his travels and that he was a loyal servant of the Catholic Church and Royal France, whose interests diverged somewhat from those ascribed to Nicolet by FDR and others.

"If you're one of the few": From "20 Bitter Truths You'll Face If You Lose a Parent at a Young Age" by Chris Bedell, available online at https://thoughtcatalog.com/christopher-bedell/2015/02/20-bitter-truths-youll-face-if-you-lose-a-parent-at-a-young-age/.

### *First Blood*

Details of and quotes relating to the murders (and murderers) of Thomas Schroeder, Margaret Anderson, Francise Stanislawksi, and Lisa Spencer came from *Green Bay Press-*

*Gazette* articles I accessed through newspapers.com. The specific issues that covered Tom's murder (and the October trial of Mark Johnson) were published in 1986 on April 11-18, April 23-24, May 9, July 15, July 23, September 9, and October 5-10. The August 16, 1987 issue included Darrell Skarphol's comment about being "overwhelmed by the brutality" of the Anderson and Schroeder murders when performing their autopsies.

The unidentified "you" I address in the first section of the essay is a local man named John Wenk, who found Tom's body and flagged down the city truck driver who called the police.

25 "used commonly to describe a person": The details of how Rambo's name is commonly used came from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Rambo.

26 *the Department of Veterans Affairs would eventually acknowledge*: My information about PTSD came from the Department of Veteran Affairs at https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp and Anxiety.org at https://www.anxiety.org/ptsd-non-veteran-ptsd-post-traumatic-stress-disorder-civilians.

26-28 *The inspiration for* First Blood: Details about David Morrell, his inspiration for writing *First Blood*, his thoughts about *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, President Reagan's quote, and Morrell's reaction to the *London Times* headline about the U.S. bombing of Libya came from Morrell's essay "Rambo and Me" that appears at the beginning of later editions of the novel, after the character had become a blockbuster movie sensation.

28 *The sequel was an even bigger box office hit*: Information about the production costs and box office revenues of *First Blood* and its sequel can be found at www.boxofficemojo.com and Wikipedia.

30, 32 *Joe Lawniczak*: The quotes from Joe came from a private Facebook conversation I had with him on March 18, 2018.

31 "Those kind of movies": Earlier drafts of this essay had more information on the effects of watching violent movies, from the American Psychological Association at https://www.apa.org/action/resources/research-in-action/protect among other sources.

33 *Among these same friends*: I base this claim on conversations I've had over the years, and more recently when I decided to research and write about the murder, with a handful of friends who knew Tom better than I did. Almost every one of them still believed that Tom had been genitally mutilated, even though there is no report of that in any of the newspaper articles about the investigation or the trial.

### *War Stories*

My details about Mac's military service came from his personnel records at the National Archives of Canada and the United States. Details on my father's service also came from the U.S. National Archives. The details about the Battle of Vimy Ridge came from a combination of sources, including:

- The Vimy Foundation (https://www.vimyfoundation.ca/learn/vimy-ridge/)
- The Canadian War Museum (https://www.warmuseum.ca/the-battle-of-vimy-ridge/)
- The *Canadian Encyclopedia* (https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/vimy-ridge)
- *The 50th Battalion in No Man's Land*, a memoir by Victor Wheeler.

55 "the strange, mournful mutter of the battlefield": From Douglas MacArthur's speech accepting the Sylvanus Thayer Award at West Point in 1962, online at https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/douglasmacarthurthayeraward.html.

### *Noxious Animals*

My descriptions and dialogue of Timothy Treadwell and Werner Herzog came from Herzog's fantastic documentary *Grizzly Man*, released by Lions Gate Films in 2005. My information about the 2015 bear attack at New Jersey's Apshawa Preserve came from these news articles:

- Augenstein, Seth. "Bear mauled hiker to death in West Milford, autopsy says." *NJ.com* 20 Oct. 2014.
- Augenstein, Seth. "Hiker snapped pictures of bear before fatal attack in West Milford." *NJ.com* 25 Nov. 2014.
- Corcoran, Kieren. "Pictured: Menacing approach of 302-pound killer black bear, captured by the 22-year-old hiker it mauled to death minutes later." *DailyMail.com* 24 Nov. 2014.
- Kleimann, James. "10 things we've learned about the suspected fatal bear attack." *NJ.com* 9 Oct. 2014.

59 "He was not identified at all conspicuously with public affairs": The details about my ancestor Thomas Meacham came from Frederick J. Seaver's *Historical*

*Sketches of Franklin County and Its Several Towns: With Many Short Biographies*. Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1918.

"nearly extirpated": The information in this paragraph came from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources at http://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/Pages/hunt_trap/bblivingwith.aspx.

60 "By current estimates": This came from the National Park Service at https://www.nps.gov/shen/learn/nature/black-bear.htm.

"DO NOT run from a bear": This also came from the National Park Service, at https://www.nps.gov/shen/learn/nature/bear_safety.htm.

62 But according to Snopes.com: This information came from David Mikkelson's article, "Approach Shot: Does a photograph show golfers fleeing from the approach of a grizzly bear?", published on Snopes.com August 3, 2005.

66 "For an animal that must kill to live": This came from Alison Hawthorne Deming's wonderful essay "Spotted Hyenas" in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2015*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2015.

69 "In the act of hunting": This came from Erich Fromm's *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, published by Random House in 1978.

***Monuments***

77 "in the western part of old Virginia": This came from Michael Egan's *The Flying, Gray-Haired Yank*, published by the Edgewood Publishing Company in 1888.

78 *According to the regiment's records*: I retrieved this information from the 15th West Virginia Infantry's regimental descriptive book at the National Archives.

"cheered the boys by words and smiles": Egan, *Yank*, 97-98.

79 "first real taste of the severity of camp life": Ibid, 103.

"do but little drilling": Ibid., 106

"electrified the country": This came from the *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses Grant*, published by Konecky & Konecky.

81 *A little more research*: The book I refer to in this sentence is James I. Robertson's *Stonewall Jackson: The Man, The Soldier, The Legend*, published by Simon & Schuster Macmillon in 1997.

83 "I do not think it feasible at this time": My quotes from Robert E. Lee come from Jonathan Horn's article, "What Robert E. Lee can teach us about Confederate Memorials," published June 11, 2016 at https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/11/opinions/confederate-symbols-opinion-horn/index.html.

84 "taking over the world": This came from Rebecca Hersher's article, "In Taped Confession, Charleston Church Shooter Says 'We All Know I Am Guilty'," published by NPR December 9, 2016.

"blowing up the Trayvon Martin case": This came from Brendan O'Connor's article, "Here Is What Appears to Be Dylann Roof's Racist Manifesto," published by *Gawker* June 20, 2015.

85 "lone public recognition to Confederate veterans": This came from the Ad Hoc Advisory Group on Confederate Memorials and Street *Final Report to Alexandria City Council*, published August 18, 2016.

86 "On November 29, 2016": This came from Patricia Sullivan's article, "Not so fast: Alexandria's Confederate symbols will stay put for now," published in *The Washington Post* Novevmber 30, 2016.

### *Norma's Road*

Most of my biographical information about Norma Hoffman came from the Friends of Huntley Meadows website at http://www.friendsofhuntleymeadows.org/Norma.html and her obituary in the June 16, 2017 issue of the *Washington Post*. The details about Henry Woodhouse came from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Woodhouse_(forger). For the history of Huntley Meadows I consulted and drew from these sources:

- The Historic Huntley website at http://www.historichuntley.org
- A website on the "Abandoned & Little Known Airfields" of Virginia by Paul Freeman at http://www.airfields-freeman.com/VA/Airfields_VA_Fairfax_SE.htm
- A "Little History" of the park by Shirley Scalley at http://www.historygems.com
- *A Photographic Journey of John's First Year of Birding* by John Nolley II, published in 2006
- Historic displays inside the Norma Hoffman Visitor Center at Huntley Meadows

Specific citations are as follows:

89 ‘‘7’. Adult back and pointed crest brown”: This came from my copy of the National Audubon Society’s *Field Guide to the Mid-Atlantic States*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1999.

91 “tiny woman with the heart of a lion”: From Norma’s obituary, published in *The Washington Post* June 16, 2017.

95 “Adult males are a sight to behold”: From the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s description at https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Hooded_Merganser/id.

“The Wood Duck”: From the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s description at https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Wood_Duck/id.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Eric N. Atkisson was born in Texas, grew up in Wisconsin, and now lives in Northern Virginia with his family and Cookie, aka *The Black Fox of Huntley Meadows*. A retired National Guard officer and veteran of three wartime deployments to the Middle East, he is the author of several published magazine articles, one essay, and the continuing adventures of Crazy Snake, published by *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*. When he's not reading, writing, hiking, or taking pictures of wildlife, he works in public affairs and communications at the United States Patent and Trademark Office.