

A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a wooden swing hanging from a porch. The swing is made of dark wood and has a seat made of light-colored wooden slats. It is suspended by dark metal chains. The background shows a wooden railing and some greenery, suggesting an outdoor porch setting. A semi-transparent grey rectangular box is overlaid on the upper half of the image, containing the title and issue number in white serif font.

THE PORCH

ISSUE 15

A slow conversation about beautiful and difficult things

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Welcome to The Porch

Hi friends - we have a musical accompaniment this time around. Our friend Sara Mussen created a soundtrack for her article *I'll Be There When It All Gets Weird*, and we think it's a good one for this entire issue of *The Porch*.

So maybe as you read, have a listen to David Wilcox's *It's Alright*, or Frank Turner's invocation to *Be More Kind*; or try *If I Ever Leave This World Alive* by Flogging Molly. Sara likes Frank a lot (so do we), so she offers another of his songs - *The Lifeboat*, which brings us comfort and inspiration for a life facing reality, without losing track of possibility.

That's part of why we're here - we're learning to contend with living in a world whose loudest stories so often seem dominated by collapse, cynicism, and catastrophe. It can be difficult to distinguish between wisdom and propaganda, but it occurs to me that there are really only three options available to us. Either we're doomed, and there's *nothing* we can do about it, in which case, let's lead with love; or we're facing some real challenges that give rise to the fear that we're doomed, but there's *something* we can do about; that thing, of course, is love; or we're not doomed, and in that case, why wouldn't we lead with love anyway?

What do we mean by love? Obviously there are as many interpretations as there are people but let's suggest that to love others means to enlarge our sense of self to include serving the good of our friends, neighbors, and enemies alike. To love the world means to tread lightly on the earth, and allow ourselves to mingle *with* the land, not apart from, but a part *of* nature. It's not rocket science. It doesn't depend on warm feelings (although those feelings often are the outcome of loving and being loved). It's really a decision - to consider the common good instead of what someone once called the narrow circle of self. One is a prison, the other a garden. It's good to be gardening together. Thanks for joining us.

Gareth Higgins

Founder & Editor

PS: In *The Lifeboat*, Frank Turner says “*there are stories now worth being told/ there are victories to grasp more valuable than gold/that we will speak of to our children when we are old.*” We hope that **The Porch** is a kind of lifeboat - there’s room for more, so if you like what we’re doing, please tell your friends. And if you’d like to meet up in person, consider joining us for www.moviesandmeaning.com in Asheville, NC, or www.newstoryfestival.com in Austin, TX. Or you can start your own Porch Circle wherever you happen to be. [Click here for more](#) on how you can nurture life-giving community, with just three people.

Burgundy Passport - Glenn Jordan

According to the Henley Passport Index, I am in possession of the world's seventh most powerful passport. Henley measures the number of countries I can travel to

without a visa

(184, in case

you're interested)

and compares my

freedom of

movement with

other passports

from around the

world. At the

moment my passport, an Irish one incidentally, has a burgundy cover, the

same as most of the EU countries including the UK. If Brexit happens

however, the UK's passport cover will change to blue, and because this

indicates a return of national sovereignty, it is apparently a very big deal.

For some.



The passport I carry affords me certain rights which are complex but clearly outlined and honored, for the most part, across national borders. I live in the north-east corner of the island of Ireland - the part which is actually part of the United Kingdom but, since I pay my income taxes here, I have access to the magnificent privilege of the National Health Service, our version of universal health care, free at the point of need. I know that many at home and abroad criticize the NHS, but not me. Eleven years ago this summer I had open heart surgery to replace a faulty valve, and each

year I go through a battery of tests checking the functioning of the new valve. Other than the bus fare to get to the hospital (we have great public transport too), it doesn't cost me a penny.

These are some of the taken-for-granted privileges of national belonging. What is less clear though, and not often talked about, are the *responsibilities* that come with this belonging.

In the aftermath of the Brexit vote in June 2016 the rights that accrue to me by national belonging have come under scrutiny. You might just have heard of the Brexit referendum where citizens of the UK voted narrowly in favour of exiting the EU club of nations. Brexit has proven far more complicated than even the most critical observers expected, and we are still no clearer on how or when it may happen.

And whilst it was not expressly a question in the referendum, the issue of immigration became a decisive matter during the campaign and remains a core element in the debate right up to today. The UK government's own statistics show that in the years up to the referendum reported hate crime had been declining, but in the year after the referendum such reported incidents rose by 17%. Brexit has brought belonging to the forefront of our national debate.

For the last year I have been engaged in a civic conversation project around the issues of borders and belonging in an attempt to engage people in the UK and Ireland in a discussion about the kind of society we aspire to be on the far side of Brexit. To date more than 3,000 people have participated in what have been endlessly surprising and challenging encounters.

These conversations have circled round a story that is embedded in the sacred texts of both the Jewish and Christian religious traditions. The biblical book of Ruth opens with a family forced to flee across national borders because of famine, then experiencing further great personal loss despite finding a welcome in the new place. As the narrative unfolds the reader is exposed to the challenge of surviving in an unfamiliar location with unfamiliar customs and traditions. The social protections afforded by the host country need to be navigated and deciphered and whilst they provide temporary relief from poverty, there is no permanent answer to the plight of those who are marginalized without legal and structural change. This is achieved by the end of the story, but not without danger, risk and then public support for change. The reader is faced with the possibility that a community which opens itself to the outsider is a community which can renew itself, honour its history and secure a future for all of its citizens.

There are big questions in the book of Ruth about the basis upon which one can belong to a people group, but also about the social responsibility that attaches itself to national belonging.

The book uncovers for us the startling possibility that belonging can come not simply by blood but also through character, indeed it suggests that belonging by behavior may even trump belonging by blood. It opens for us the consideration that belonging can be a chosen thing and not just conferred on us by location or blood heritage.

Ruth becomes legally part of the community of Bethlehem on the basis of her demonstrable compassion, kindness and good character towards a

vulnerable citizen of that town who had fallen on hard times. What is also true in the story is that the wealth, privilege and belonging of Boaz, the key male character in the story, automatically means he has responsibility for both his distant family member Naomi and the foreigner Ruth.

The dramatic tension of the story rests on the question of which vision of society will prevail. Must this startlingly kind and generous newcomer face an endless struggle to survive and be utterly unable to escape her status as the 'other'? Or will the community find within itself the capacity for kindness and generosity to open up belonging to the stranger? The narrative alerts us to a kindness that is conferred automatically upon kin, but also to a more complicated and difficult kindness that is extended to the stranger and the foreigner. The latter is a more costly kindness.

Our conversations throughout these islands confirmed for us what we had anticipated: that austerity and economic uncertainty have reduced our store of compassion and hollowed out traditional kindnesses, particularly towards those who are not born here. It may very well be that the dimension of the pro-Brexit vote that was characterized as anti-immigration is fused with a great degree of economic and social marginalization.

Regardless of the outcome of Brexit there is a generational project for the healing of the wounds of this political, social and cultural upheaval. It will not be served well by a restatement of British nationalist values nor by hasty calls for Irish unity. Nevertheless a program for national and community reconciliation is required; one that extends beyond a simple resolution of the argument about Europe or the border on the island of

Ireland. It must restore faith in politics, address issues of social and economic inequality, and heal the divisions that have bedeviled the island of Ireland for centuries now.

That process can begin now with the moderation of language used about the 'other,' whether those on the other side of the identity question here in Ireland or on the question of Brexit in the UK. It takes courage to believe that compassion and kindness in our relationships towards one another can have a powerful, positive political impact.

We must also turn ourselves more diligently and honestly to the issue of the stranger among us.

In our various jurisdictions, law is formed for the benefit of those who claim citizenship. However the significant increase in migration in recent years has placed a strain upon all wealthy countries both economically and culturally, but also on the structures and institutions of the state. The lesson from Ruth is that the *intent* of the law matters more than its application and where the application of a law of the land results in an unintended unkindness **this is a bad law which must be changed.**

I'm not necessarily making a call for fully open borders, but it is, at least, a plea to ensure that the way we treat those and speak of those who come across our borders is honest, transparent, compassionate and kind. There is particular responsibility on the shoulders of those who have access to public platforms not to demonize or dehumanize others. In this way we can at least raise the tone of the national debate and possibly even find a better way of being ourselves at a local, national and international level.

There is a profound responsibility for kindness and generosity that comes with the immense privileges of having a passport at all, no matter whether its cover is a burgundy, or blue.

I'll Be Here - Sara Mussen

"I'll be here when it all gets weird"

- Flogging Molly *If I ever leave this world alive*

It might seem counterproductive to start a journey forward with a goal to inspire hope in others by first acknowledging that some of the things we are used to in our society, our natural world, and the very ways we structure our economy will likely, inevitably, come to an end, but that is precisely what I plan to do.

I am not here to convince you of the realities and consequences of our changing climate. Eventually, I believe, everyone will come to acceptance because it will not be long before the impacts are too obvious to deny. Things are going to get weird. We will need each other, every one of us, to get through it.

I have come to believe, and am working to accept, that civilization, as it now presents itself, cannot survive the changes that are coming, but I do not think this means the world is ending. We have a choice, as humans, to decide for ourselves which direction we want to choose, which path we want to follow, which stories will define us. I believe it is important to accept that we are going to lose some things about our world that we love. That through accepting and processing our grief over this in a healthy way we will have the capacity to move forward in a constructive way instead of defaulting to our destructive stories from the past.

No one wants to be good at handling grief. It is not a task any of us seek experience in, yet it is one of the most universal of human experiences.

How do we navigate the grief that will come with our changing world while actively adapting to and accepting said change? I think we need to start now. Sometimes I am envious of the people who do not believe. They do not have to sit with and carry this weight of knowing around with them. Their present is not burdened with worry about the future. But, in the end, I would rather know. I would rather have time to grieve and say my goodbyes, I would rather be ready to let go and move on, to be open and prepared for change so when it is time for me to move or time to accept others who have been displaced I am ready.

I have had ample opportunity to grieve the changes to our natural landscape over the last few years, in a very direct and unexpected way. I volunteer at a state park with a very rare species of pine tree. A species on the edge in the best of conditions is always the first to falter when things begin to change. We have watched these trees die by the hundreds because of drought and when at last it rains, it rains so much faster and harder than normal, that the oldest, healthiest, fall.

You might say, they are just trees. I am certain there are some that will. But in their fate I see ours. I see villages built on permafrost that are sinking and people who have lived there all of their lives are having to decide to mitigate or retreat. I see island nations whose residents are watching the sea levels rise and know that their homes will be the first inundated but their voices are ignored on the global, political stage. I see what has already happened in places like Syria. I know that these changes will disproportionately impact communities and people already on the edge of survival, just like these trees. My heart feels heavy, I grieve, I feel powerless, I am afraid. I cry.

Then I seek out comfort. I see my fellow volunteers, visitors, loved ones, strangers feeling these same things. I find connection in that community. I focus on the things I can impact, locally, and discover, to my surprise, that I am not alone. That by creating a space of kindness where we focus on shared goals to make real change we not only, succeed in making change, but we also build something resilient and beautiful that was stronger than what we had before. We become the bridge to a better future. Not everyone will be willing to cross it and many will attempt to destroy it but if we can hold fast to those simple ideals, our common humanity, those shared goals guided by kindness and acceptance we will persevere. But we must first grieve. Now, while we have the time. Visit the places you love, walk in the forests, down main street, on the water's edge. Memorize those spaces so you can carry them forward with you. Be ready to let go.

If we do not prepare ourselves for the changes that are coming we will be taken by surprise, fight or flight will kick in, and we will respond from a place of fear and react without thought or care for consequences. We have seen this story played over and over again throughout human history when people have given in to fear, when they tell themselves, and others, dark stories about the future where there is not enough for everyone so we must cast out, defend, protect, divide, and blame the other. We must not give these stories any power over us. We must remember that for every dark moment in human history there have been people who were not dominated by fear, who acted in both large and small ways to fight against the violent, divisive, and destructive actions of others. People who believe that no matter what we have enough in this world for everyone to survive and thrive. These are the stories to which we need to give the most attention. These are the stories we need to tell, the stories we need to remember, the stories we need to live in order to have the courage to

confront the changes we are facing. These are the stories that will see us through the loss, the grief, and the letting go, and the acceptance that will be required of us so that we can be open to starting over in new places, accepting refugees into the places we call home, and most importantly so that we can share our resources and habitable spaces so that everyone has enough.

Now, if you are still reading, this might be the part where you expect me to talk about politics, or perhaps revolution, some massive, sudden, overthrow of all you believe and hold dear, but I am not going to do that. That is not where we need to start. We need to start with connection, building community, focusing on the simple things that make us human, that bind us to one another, sharing meals, listening to music, hearing each other's stories, sharing a drink, these are things we can hold on to no matter how much the world changes. This is where humanity can find its salvation and we don't have to wait. We can start anytime. Start with the people you encounter every day, especially those providing a service, make sure you really see them, make sure you see them as human, be kind. Enjoy the world we live in, even as it changes. Hold fast to your beautiful memories of things lost or changed, but allow yourself to make new ones. Find ways to enjoy the time you are living in because it will give you strength to carry you through the grief that will come with loss. Get out and enjoy the flowers, the water, the mountains, each other. If the worst happens, or if it does not, you will have made a life worth living. Enjoy the passing of time. Plan for the future but do not get stuck in the possibility of it. Live where you are. Find ways to make it joyful. Spread that around a little.

Currently working as a Research Associate, Sara Mussen has Bachelor's degrees in Biology and Music from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and San Jose State University respectively; as well as a Master's in Music from University of Northern Colorado.

A Gracious Plenty - Andrew Taylor-Troutman

The young, who have looked on dying,

turn back to the world ... Wendell Berry

~

I knew to find the two old farmers on the far, lonely side of the unused barn. The late fall's setting sun had bitten into the mountain range, while the tractors in the valley were finishing the last of the harvest. As I walked up to these parishioners, their weathered face broke into smiles beneath their John Deere caps. Each greeted me with a firm handshake. They no longer worked the fields, but their hands were permanently calloused. I found an old plastic bucket and turned it over, sitting at their feet. They leaned back against the barn and tilted toward each other. Between the two, they'd heard plenty of pastors over the years and seen them come and go. "Short timers," they'd say.

I listened silently to their memories of harvests, bountiful and poor, the farmer's equivalent to the size of a caught fish, until the talk turned to my second son. "A hearty boy," the shorter of them had said, causing the taller to nod approvingly. I reminded them that our second son was ten pounds at birth and the doctor had told my parents, "Congratulations. He's a toddler!" They chuckled as though they had never heard this well-worn

story. A red-tailed hawk screamed in the distance and the three of us silently watched the tractors growing darker in the shadow of the hills.

Finally, the shorter one wondered when my wife and I might try for a third child.

I shook my head, adamantly: "Two's enough."

There was a hint of a smile in the way he looked up at his old friend.

"You sure 'bout that?"

"Yes, sir, I am. We already have 'a gracious plenty,'" I added, mimicking what I'd heard them say.

To which the taller replied, "Ain't three a holy number?"

Suddenly, those two grinned like little boys.

~

They both had three children. They were both married for more than fifty years. And both had farmed their entire lives except for when they were in the Army. Neither talked about the war.

But they both loved to talk about the weather, about the goings-on of the farms, and most of all about their families. One was a Democrat, the other a Republican, and they chided each other, gently. Together, they had been members of our small rural church for one hundred and twenty years and were the strongest financial supporters. While they were no longer active in leadership, I sought their blessing for every major decision.

They loved to repeat a joke at my expense. One would ask the other if he could recall what I had preached about. “About fifteen minutes,” the other would reply. And they would giggle.

Time was fluid behind the barn. The old farmers’ memories drifted in and out of the twilight like smoke. Something would remind one of them of a story and in an instant their old friends would be there among us in colorful detail, men with nicknames like Shorty. One time a pigeon suddenly took off from the hay loft and conjured Shorty, way up there in the loft unloading one last square bale of hay, when, without warning—the old farmers recalled—he did a backflip twelve feet down to the floor!

Many of their peers had nicknames, but the title “Mr.” was reserved for their mentors. I learned that a successful farmer was made by plenty of

hard work, more than a little luck, and the generosity of the community, particularly the older men who gave young farmers a start, a loan, or forgave a debt. Both farmers would tear up at the mention of these quietly gracious men and their quirks: He always knocked his boots off away from the house when he came to visit; he smoked with his pipe clamped between his teeth; he prayed in a high-pitched, nasal voice.

“I’ve been blessed with good friends,” one of them would say.

“A gracious plenty,” the other would respond.

They were so generous to me.

~

That Advent was the year my one-year-old son contracted walking pneumonia. Then, my wife caught mono. My older boy and I succumbed to double sinus infections. All of us were miserable for weeks. Just when my wife and I would be at our wits’ end, the doorbell would ring and a casserole would be left on the back step, a friendly hand waving from the driver’s seat as the truck backed down our gravel driveway.

A few days before Christmas, my family woke to the surprising sight of a giant pile of horse manure out in our garden, a weathered shovel tied with a red ribbon sticking out of “the big *poop*,” as our oldest delighted in saying. “Black gold” was what those two farmers called it. They had another saying, that pastors were like manure: Spread us out and we can do some good, but get a pile of us together and we stink to high heaven!

By Christmas Eve, I was well enough to preach or, at least, show up. For as long as anybody could remember, the Christmas Eve service began at 8 p.m. Not ideal for young children, but the farming families all attended with their grandchildren and great-grandchildren home for the holiday. In previous years, the two old farmers would be the first ones to lift their burning candles during the last carol, “Silent Night,” signaling to the rest of us to do the same.

But this year, the shorter one was plagued all evening by coughing spells. After the service was over and candles had been blown out, a nurse in the congregation pressed him to go to the hospital. I knew he would refuse. His family was home, the youngest daughter all the way from New York City with her two daughters, her youngest named after his wife. He was sitting in the pew, protesting that he was just fine, and I knelt down to offer

a prayer. This is what you do. You show up. And you speak common words like “bless” and “heal” and “God.” You say “Amen” and you hope in the Infinite Incomprehensibility. That’s what the old farmer used to call the Lord Almighty.

But, for once, he didn’t even speak. His face glistened with tears. It was his last Christmas.

~

This was also the time when Brian Doyle, one of my writing mentors, shared publicly that he had “a big honkin’ brain tumor.” It was like him to make light of his situation, but he understood the seriousness of his diagnosis. It turned out that this would be Brian’s last Christmas as well.

Years ago, I first wrote to Mr. Doyle because I’d treasured his first-person narratives in magazines as diverse as *Christian Century* and *The Sun*. For all the charms of pastoring a rural congregation and raising young children, your world becomes pretty small. I inhaled Brian’s stories from different places and times, and I wanted him to know how much his stories meant to me.

He was gracious with his response, and every other month or so we'd mail short essays and poems across the country to each other. Born in New York, having worked in Chicago, and then living in Oregon, Brian had never been to this part of the Appalachian Mountains and was curious about the topography as well as the people, for he said that all beings are holy (except the New York Yankees baseball team).

I sent him little notes about the old farmers. How they said about parenting that life was best between diapers and dating. How they said about snow that it was a poor man's fertilizer. How they did not like Wendell Berry, another of my favorite writers, because Mr. Berry was critical of tractors. Both of them had started farming with mules, and they remembered one of those stubborn creatures biting and kicking an innocent boy, and it would be a cold day in hell before they ever wrote poems about *them!* Brian chortled over that line.

I sent Brian a nostalgic paragraph about one lazy afternoon, before my wife and I had children, when I had stood in the gravel driveway, watching the late summer light ooze in the air like honey, listening to this old farmer (the shorter one) tell me that, when I did have kids, the school bus would come

all the way down the gravel road to drop them off right in front of my house.

In response, Brian sent me a poem called "Lily" about a father who "shambles" to his car one morning at the same moment a school bus "bounces" past him. These delightfully contrasting verbs set the scene: "a little cheerful kid waves to me." Brian's daughter is named Lily, which is apparent enough to any reader. But what happens next in the poem calls for interpretation. Reflecting on that little cheerful kid, the speaker of the poem realizes that "for a moment I am / That kid and she is my daughter and I'm waving to her / Hoping she will wave to me."

It is a mystery, these extraordinary epiphanies in the ordinariness of life, like what Brian described in his poem or like praying for that old farmer on Christmas Eve. I only know that, in such holy moments as these, I realize that eternity breaks into time and all of us are actually a part of everything and everyone else. Even the Yankees.

~

A few months after Christmas, I knew to find the taller one in his living room. After his friend's death, he no longer returned to lean against that old barn. I didn't blame him.

But, today, I had good news. The *best* news, in fact. I wasn't telling everybody in the congregation. Not yet. But my wife was ...

"Pregnant," he finished for me. "You don't say!" He started laughing, and I joined him. Then, suddenly, we were both crying, for we were grieving, too. Through his window, we watched the tractors plowing the fields in the distance. It is a grace in ministry, as in life, when you know people deeply enough to let the silence speak.

Finally, wiping his eyes, the old farmer says, "You think he had anything to do with it? You know ..."

"Us having a third child?"

He nodded, very slowly.

I shrugged. I told him I sure didn't know the Infinite Incomprehensibility. But I liked his idea. We smiled together.

"I'll bet she'll have a little girl, just like he would have wanted."

A little more than six months later, our daughter was born. Weighing a little more than eight pounds, she was not as big as her brothers. Still a gracious plenty.

Andrew Taylor-Troutman serves as poet pastor of Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, NC. His fourth book, Gently Between the Words, will be published in 2019.

The Name - Laura Hope-Gill

I don't know after how many nights of starfishing I started to kneel on the beach on Sequim* Bay. Like everything else that happened outside the classroom afternoons on Mondays-through-Thursday after teaching at the tip of the Olympic Peninsula, a lot just blurred between day and night, sea and sky, earth and tide, me and whatever other me was there as well. In low-residency graduate school at the time I had to write poems and essays and email them to my teacher every three weeks. This left me with a lot of time to sit on a fallen tree in the tide and stare at water. I had not ever been told that gazing, loosening focus, letting the mind wander could also open doors to consciousness. There really just wasn't anything else to do there. I did it often. I did it for sometimes three or four hours. When the sun had left the cedars, the volcano, the sea, I moved inside my cabin. There the solitude deepened even more.

I sat at my little 1950s dining table beside the 12-foot window pane. Between lines of poetry, I looked through the glass at the water, darkening, receding. I learned the name of the lowest tide possible, minus tide, and watched it recede all the way out of the bay to the strait. I walked the murk and delivered stranded starfish to the sea. They wrapped themselves around my forearms and wrists, sometimes eight or ten of them. I took this on like a job for something to do. Time could float, I learned. I needed a buoy to keep me from drifting too far out. Saving starfish was the best I could do.

The question was, for whom was I doing this job. A sense of servitude embraced me, and this evolved into worship. Praying made

sense more than anything had made sense before. It was a circular kind of speech for me—I didn't think about the words but rather felt that they were circling through me, coming from within me, moving outside of me, but echoing within at the same time. As though I were empty of everything, except the words. They taught me what to say.

So, on a drive back from Seattle one perfectly blue late afternoon before the rains and darkness, having finished some McDonalds fries from "the last McDonalds for 50 miles," it wasn't entirely out of character for who I was at that time to see an interesting series of cloud formations in the otherwise perfectly clear sky.

"Read it with your heart," said a voice that was the voice when I was praying.

My starfish detail had grown so familiar to me as a task to complete and then to be rewarded with this deep sense of connection with some inner-outer voice through prayer, that at this point I was open to anything strange. In fact, the strange had grown marvelously familiar.

I ought to insert here that almost all my students were of the Salish nations—Suquamish, S'Klallam, Quileute. This isn't to say I was identifying as Native-American. I had been reading books about these nations, books I picked up at Elliott Bay Books on the Sound in Seattle when I went in. It is to say that having a small sense of how vast the traditional cosmology could be allowed me a lot of space to consider as being a part of the world, as opposed to grounds for opening DSM-IV. I liked what I felt happening to me as I loosened deeper into natural time, sat

longer and longer on my fallen tree, had come to recognize the patterns of partridge, heron, seagull, otter, eagle, and seal.

I pulled my car over and peered through the tinted windshield at the formations. They looked like whatever the letters in the Hebrew alphabet or the Arabic alphabet might be called. I didn't know if they were pictographs like in Mandarin or a cuneiform or what. But clearly I wasn't going to get that answer "with my heart."

"With my heart," I said out loud. "Okay."

I peered.

Instantly, the word formed in my mind. I wrote it on the McDonald's napkin. They were white and square then. There in the corner, the giant golden M I'm only realizing now.

Of course, I thought I was going bats.

I didn't really have a way to tell whether any of what world I was half-creating, as Wordsworth says, was grounded in reality at all. I had also, I should tell you, taken to standing next to blackberry bushes in the woods behind my cabin (where the partridges nested, where a giant buck once emerged upon me and I think I may have flirted) and waiting for the ripest blackberry to "tell" me which one it was. I am okay with telling you this now. I wasn't hurting anybody. I may or may not have been having an encounter with the spirit world, I thought as all these things happened. I may or may not have been crazy.

I prayed that night on the shoreline. I prayed to the voice that did my praying to let me know if I was letting things get too far. In short, I was praying to God to be rational, which makes no sense. I was hedging my bets with the dealer Himself.

I woke in the night with a vision from a dream. It was of a poem I'd written a few days before, and there was a light shining down the middle of it. I lit a cigarette and searched my papers. I didn't have a computer yet. Everything was typed. I found the poem and stood in the middle of the one room that was living room, dining room, and kitchen and looked down the middle of the poem. There was the word I'd written on the napkin.

"Okay, so it's an anagram. A trick of the unconscious." I wrote the poem the day before and somehow it had snagged in my unconscious which had projected into a naked sky. Truthfully, though, not believing the word, the name meant something felt much less reasonable than believing in it. What could the harm be, adopting a name from the clouds? Wasn't that something that was supposed to happen? A wheel-a-rollin? A sign? Here was a sign. I could follow it or dismiss it. Dismiss it and the world drains of its music and magic. Follow it and see what's next to open.

I stayed out in Sequim until the following autumn when my position was deleted at the college, and there weren't other jobs for a poet floating around the Northwest. Up until I left, I prayed each night to that name and asked whoever was on the other side of it to guide me, show me. The name was a comfort. It was a line across not to God—I didn't let myself presume such a connection—yet to a deeper aspect of being; whether within or without me did not matter. The first time I went to a co-instructor's house,

just after I arrived in Sequim, I saw on her wall a framed definition of the word “genius.” It was three things: the wisest aspect of the self, the genie that can be accessed as a guide, and it is the connection between the two. I resolved, as I left, that this is what it must have been.

In November and living West Lafayette Indiana, and considering doctoral programs, I was seated at a dinner across from a Hebrew Scholar. During a break in a multi-directional conversation, I withdrew the paper napkin from my purse and slid it across the table toward him. “Does this word have a meaning in Hebrew?”

The scholar looked at and asked, “How do you know this word?” My mouth grew dry, and it was difficult to speak. “I think I’d rather not say,” I said. “I’m just curious to know if it’s a word.”

The scholar cupped his hands together, “This word means ‘message,’ or ‘gift.’ It could be ‘gift-bringer—” Refills of water arrived. “Do you read Hebrew?” asked the scholar, and the rest of the conversation was quickly swept away into the sea of the other conversations going on around us. As I sipped from my glass, I remembered that beautiful afternoon driving from Seattle and the peculiar experiences I encountered both in my classroom and in that larger classroom of the wilderness around my cabin, and I was grateful I had chosen to accept the sign of the name in the clouds however insane that choice felt at the time.

Three years later, shortly after September 11, I was in London for a poetry festival where I befriended a Dabke dancer from Gaza, who was living in England on an artist’s visa. After a week of roaming the city like

we had been friends for life, I wrote the name on a napkin in our host's apartment and passed it to him.

"How do you know this word," he asked me. Again, I did not say.

"Does it have a meaning in Arabic?" I asked him.

"Yes, this is very unusual you know this word. It is almost a slang word, we use it with friends. It means, "I am with you."

Since that time in Sequim, the place named for the tears you cry when peeling onions, I have read and heard more about spirituality and mysticism. I see posters and flyers for workshops and retreats. I don't know, and can't know, what other people's version of starfishing would be that would move them into that wandering state of worship I found myself in. I haven't returned to Sequim, but I see that the John Wayne Marina now owns the now-called John Wayne resort that includes my cabin on Sequim Bay. I look at pictures of my cabin, and I remember gazing out those long windows over the water. I still use that name I saw in the clouds when I pray. I use it to denote either myself or the one to whom I'm praying. I've seen words in texts that sound close to it. I don't attach more meaning to it than this. The name itself is a gaze, unfixed, unfocused, untamed. I carry it with me everywhere.

*Pronounced *Squim*

Laura Hope-Gill directs the Thomas Wolfe MFA at Lenoir-Rhyne University in Asheville, NC

Waverley Bridge - Gareth Higgins

Chapter One

It was a school trip to Scotland, and I was 15 years old. We were staying at an outdoor activity centre - abseiling, rock climbing, archery, and the like. It was a Scripture Union trip - bible studies, prayer meetings, and what we used to call *good living*. And we had a couple of day trips on a bus - one to Glasgow, and one to Edinburgh.

On the Edinburgh trip we arrived late morning, dropped off on Waverley Bridge, just above the ramp that leads down to the train station. We were told to be back at the top of the ramp by 5.15pm. I remember going to the Tea Rooms across from the dark and imposing 200 feet high Scott Monument, whose soot-ridden stones really do need a good clean. I wandered around the big HMV record store, for it was the olden days, when record stores were big. I'm sure I ended up in a bookshop or two - I don't go to cities without checking out the bookshops. And when it was nearing a quarter past five, I made my way back to Waverley Bridge.

When I got to the top, I saw that most of my classmates were already assembled; about thirty of them, strangely in a circle. Getting closer I saw that they were passing something around - maybe a bag of sweets, or a city map or something. Some of them were pointing and laughing. Of course I wanted to know why, so when I got up to the circle I tried to find a space to get in. The energy seemed to change, and while some of my classmates kept laughing, some looked at the ground. *What are they looking at?*

*

Any guesses?

*

A couple of days previously, I had stepped out of the shower at the outdoor centre, and was surprised by a light flashing out of nowhere, then disappearing. I didn't know what it was, and I was so used to living in fear of the world, I didn't want to ask. But it turns out that Edinburgh had a one hour photo place. One of my mates had decided a good prank would be to take a naked photo of me, get it printed, and share it with the class. Hardly the worst thing kids have ever done to each other; but when you're the kid getting done, and you're already living with an overdose of shame and fear of the world, seeing a picture of your naked body being passed around by your classmates on Waverley Bridge is, shall we say, unexpectedly dramatic.

Terrifying, actually, if I'm to be honest.

I had been so afraid of my body, so protective of it after it was hurt by others, and so desperate to have some autonomy; I felt clumsy at the easiest of times, targeted at the hardest. I was terrified that people would discover that I loved boys *and* girls, that I think all genders are gorgeous; that they would know that, in the eyes of the world I knew, I was not a real man; not a real *person*, even. I wanted to keep my secrets. Sometimes it felt like my secrets were all that I had.

My heart started racing, my legs felt like they would give way beneath me, my face burned. My shoulders sagged, and I just froze. I couldn't speak,

and there appeared to be an invisible forcefield surrounding the circle, repelling me. It reminded me of the times other boys had done the thing where they invite you to throw a ball around, but they keep throwing it at each other to taunt you. You know the thing? Like most of us, I'd been on both sides of that equation. I knew there was no point in trying to get the photo back. It would just expose me to more insults.

So I got on the bus, and asked one of the older teenage leaders for help. He's the hero of this story. His name is Graeme. He saw how scared I was, he told me he thought what they were doing was wrong. I could sense the anger in his voice. He asked me *Would you like me to get the photo for you?* Yes, I said, *and the negative too please. But don't make a fuss about it.*

When we got back to the centre, I had the photo, and the negative, and all I wanted to do was to burn them. But there were no matches to be found. So, in an unintentional invitation to scholars of Carl Jung to find a new metaphor for repressing the shadow, I took them out into the woods, tore them up, and literally buried them. I covered them over with some leaves, and ran away.

Years later I read a Flannery O'Connor story called *The Turkey*, which ends with the boy running away home, under pursuit, although nothing is chasing him other than his own story. It followed me for years, this story - that because they had seen me naked, they had seen *into* me. I believed then that what was in me was bad - I knew I loved both boys and girls, and the only vocabulary I had for this was "sin", "sickness", "dangerous". My membership in the community I most cared about depended on denying

who I was. I was desperate to hide - but the photo was only one manifestation of how exposed I already was.

And that was the great unexpected gift of Waverly Bridge.

*

Chapter Two

It's November 2010, and I'm in Northern California, visiting my friends Rick and Amy. We're sitting on the patio in front of their house, by the sea. The rather impressive Pacific Ocean, to be precise. Though the Pacific Ocean is no Pickie Pool, I'll tell you that. It's a balmy night, and we're drinking wine from oversized glasses. We get into conversation about important things, very personal things. After a decade or so together, this is Rick and Amy's ancient argument about what they want in life, and how they can't agree about it. Neither of them is right or wrong, both have a point, both are scared and sad. And on this night the pain and distress of the world seems as nothing compared to the pain and distress of Rick and Amy. Rick solidifies his posture, seeking resilience against the sorrow that lives inside him; Amy looks like she's going to cry. Rick's hand starts to tighten on the glass, and I fear that he's going to throw it at the wall.

So I say, *Rick, could you put the wine glass down?* And he says, *I don't know. I just don't f-ing know.* And I begin to edge up against panic. So I say *Would you like to go for a walk, by yourself, or with Amy, or with me?* And he says, *I don't f-ing know.* And I'm scared now, and I see the pain he's in, and I fear broken glass and damaged hearts, and in the turmoil somehow I knew exactly what to do.

Sometimes life gives you what you need a long time before you need it.

Sometimes, on Waverly Bridge.

So I said, *How about if I took all my clothes off? Do you think that would help?* And Rick says, *Yeah, I think that would probably help.* And I know that if I'm gonna do it, I've got to do it now. So I stand up on their patio, with folk walking past the front of the house, and take off all my clothes. I sit down, and say, *Do you think it would be a good idea if you took all your clothes off too?* And he says, *Yeah, I think it would.* So he does. And Amy smiles. And we talk for three hours, two of us naked, three of our hearts open, all of us safe, vulnerability exchanged for aggression, as the pain of the past - theirs and mine - finds a container that will not only help soothe, but transform it.

Chapter Three

I still go to Edinburgh when I can, and when I do, I find myself stopping on Waverley Bridge outside the train station. And in honor of the fact that sometimes the safest thing to do is to take my armor off, I step forward by stepping back, and I redeem what happened, nearly thirty years ago. I don't exactly reenact what happened the last time, but I do, at least flash a bit of ankle. You never know who might need to see it.

Gareth Higgins is a northern Irish writer, and founder of The Porch, Movies & Meaning, and co-founder of the New Story Festival

Nowness - Why Debra Granik's Movies Matter - Kyle Meyers

Debra Granik is a true independent filmmaker, who has a gift for working in collaboration with her ears and eyes open. All her work, including her best known films *Winter's Bone* (2010) and *Leave No Trace* (2018) bring a rare generous and trusting approach; let's call it *wholehearted*. When discussing her recent work with Gareth Higgins, she highlighted the idea that "people are very open to conversing with someone who is curious about things....and not being jaded is, maybe, one of the baselines for love. When we're jaded, we're kind of hard, crusty, or calcified." After investigating the last decade of Granik's work, it's very clear that curiosity is a core principle in both her life and art. Her films are poignantly illuminated by Andrei Tarkovsky's idea that "Hardness and strength are death's companions, while pliancy and weakness are expressions of the freshness of being."

Granik's adaptations become reasons for her to engage culture and subculture with such a non-jaded, pliant baseline. When she made *Winter's Bone*, shot on location in Southern



Missouri, she not only invited locals to act in the film, but embraced their input and influence on character development. She was interested in understanding their perspectives and experiences, merging them with her own script. She attunes herself to the actual environment, allowing it to inform the setting, the characters, and the story itself. (This is a far cry from

a more recent film that used Missouri as a fictional setting, appropriating the location for "calcified" political purposes, with no evident regard for the actual people and place.) Granik's immersive approach looks like cultivating an adaptation as an anthropologist, collaborating at every level, and simply seeing what emerges. This is a more spiritual type of storytelling that moves from "I have a story to tell" to "I'm going to hold the narrative loosely, explore further, and see what is revealed".

In *Devotional Cinema*, Nathaniel Dorsky discusses two types of time in filmmaking. The first is "relative time, which is how any film progresses from the first shot to the last." The second is absolute time, what Dorsky describes as **Nowness**. He says, "Experiencing Nowness in a work of art allows you to participate directly with the very heart of that work and its maker. You are right there with them, sharing their vision." This experience of absolute time requires a few things, I believe. It begins with an invitation from the artists (for them and us) to be open and honest, with a willingness to see and be seen. This is unfortunately, rare, as we too often seek escapism and consumption, and movie companies are all too happy to oblige, creating a kind of codependency. Worse than that, there are far too many movies from the past five or so years where I felt held at a distance or even punished for showing up and watching, while some others desired to teach me a lesson. These are not invitations, but forms of protest that exploit the audience at worst or preach to the choir at best. Debra Granik, on the other hand, is less concerned with mind control or emotional abuse. She warmly invites us to come sit around the campfire, have a drink, and listen to stories told and songs sung. Your own story might even be welcome there, which reveals the other requirement for Nowness. Trust.



"Nowness is tainted by the need to accomplish something, to stay in control." It's difficult to trust others, be spiritually open, or be intuitive when we need to maintain jurisdiction. Granik's relationship with Ron "Stray Dog" Hall (whom she had cast in *Winter's Bone*), naturally became a documentary as they became friends. Titled *Stray Dog* (2014), it's often described as a contemplative portrait of a Vietnam Veteran. The film resists agenda, accomplishment, or even a directed voice-over. It simply feels like Granik came along with her camera to quietly, affectionately observe and listen. His story is told with real vulnerability, never indulging in self-pity, but illuminating what Granik describes as "scrappy survival". A work of authenticity that would have not come to pass if Granik and her team had not trusted local people to participate, engage, and influence the storytelling process of her previous film. Nor would it have happened if Ron had not extended the invitation into his own life and community. This is how bridges are built.

The last scene in *Stray Dog* ends with the first notes of Springtime. (*Winter's Bone* as well, with baby chicks - visualizing the "freshness of being") A flowering young fruit tree is being visited by bees. Ron excitedly tells the camera, "That little bee's in there speadin' the pollen for me." After reaching

his hand out to the bee, it buzzes off. Ron tries to make peace, saying, "I ain't gonna hurt ya little feller, I need you." It's only a subtle moment, but it encapsulates the whole documentary. More than that, this pollinating image will



become the emotional fertilizer for Granik's next film, *Leave No Trace*, continuing her journey of listening closely and saying yes to this experience of communion-based storytelling.

Leave No Trace (2018) directly counteracts George A Romero's popular, tweet ready quote; "I've always felt that the real horror is next door to us, that the scariest monsters are our neighbors." Much of the tension experienced in the film is the anticipation of such horror. The story follows recent war veteran Will (Ben Foster) and his thirteen year old daughter Tom (Thomasin McKenzie), living illegally, but efficiently on public land in Oregon. We journey with them after they are arrested by State authorities and put into a housing re-entry program. Because of Will's anxiety from Post Traumatic Stress, he and Tom leave their placement home, heading back into the cold, damp forest with very little. Throughout the film, they encounter park rangers, police dogs, social workers, church folks, empty train cabs, truck drivers, marginal communities, and even stay for a night in an isolated "cabin in the woods". At every plot turn, I wondered who would be the enemy, villain, or monster. Fascinating to me, none were to be found. Instead, Will and Tom were graciously offered various forms of

hospitality and support. I discovered the suspense was only within. I had carried it into the theater with me.

I had brought a few other things as well. I'm not a war veteran like Will, but experiences in my own life had left me "jaded, crusty, and calcified". A few months before seeing the film, I journeyed to New Mexico for a ten day



wilderness experience. The essence of the retreat was like a personal Nowness, moving out of your head and into your heart. From talking to feeling, basically. ("Is not most talking a crazed defense of a crumbling fort?", asked Hafiz many centuries ago.) It took a few days, but my own fort began to crumble. Upon returning, it was both good (I was more gentle, open) and not so good, as my emotional wounds were still very close to the surface.

Fortuitously, I had no idea how much of a mirror the film was going to be. Will lives in the wilderness, but for him it's about survival and disengagement from civilized culture. That was true for me also, but only internally, as I was still trying to function in my established roles. Seeing him so humanized by Granik's non-judgmental lens allowed me to remain open to the abundance of natural metaphors he and Tom encounter. As the narrative unfolds, the core struggle is between Tom's growing desire for stable community and Will's need for independent solitude. After Will

experiences a life-threatening injury in the forest, he and Tom are taken in by a local trailer park (another influence from *Stray Dog*). During his recovery time, Tom connects with members of this small, friendly community. One of them maintains bee hives.

Another solid example of collaboration, Granik hired an actual beekeeper, Susan Chernak McElroy, for the role. Her bee training with Thomasin revealed a variety of emotional metaphors. Because so many bees are working together, you can feel heat coming from the hive, a warmth generated by purpose. If your

presence is anxious or calm, the bees will likely mirror that. Like most other living creatures, you have to earn their trust. McElroy iterates, "When a bee stings, it dies, so they don't want to sting you. They want to land on you and get to know you".



In the film, after Will has healed enough to walk, Tom wants to show him what she has learned. With bee suits on, she becomes the teacher, and he the student. Together they feel the warmth of the hive. She tells him that "a person can withstand five hundred stings". (At that moment in the theater, I began experiencing lots of feelings, realizing I had left my defenses back in New Mexico) Asking him to close his eyes, she quietly takes off her bee suit. When he opens them, she stands before him, communing with the bees, trustworthy, without anxiety or armor. She gently tells him, "See, you don't need to be scared".

My emotions thought she was speaking directly to me, so I didn't get to see the next scene. It was a bit like, "Give me a minute, let me get it together. Just gotta pick myself up off the floor." (Dylan) In a moment of true Nowness, my own wounding and lack of trust (in people, not bees) was laid bare. I wanted to be like Tom, as I had been many years ago, curious, open, and hospitable. But like Will, I often experience the fear of being stung, or simply misunderstood. I sometimes just stare in silence, desiring the wild simplicity of the southwestern desert, not just for survival, but for solitude and balance. It often feels far away, but that seems okay, as "The world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our feet, and learn to be at home." (Berry)

Will remains burdened by his trauma and decides to leave the community, which I can empathize with. Tom leaves with him initially, but then chooses to return, no longer able to carry the weight with Will. This moment of differentiation between them is wrenching, but feels emotionally mature. Just before they depart from one another, Tom gives Will the magnesium spark they use to ignite kindling for campfires. It's a practical item, but also a Spiritual one. Like the Light of Eärendil, it offers "a light in dark places" (Tolkien), both internal and external. Will wears it as a necklace, and the spark hangs like a cross. Granik allows the scene to breathe with all the truth and integrity of an artist who is also a mother. The sequence is one of the most serendipitous moments of cinema this decade. A gift we don't necessarily deserve, but Granik (and her collaborators) generously give us anyway. It's the fruit of keeping her feet

to the ground for more than a decade, looking for things hidden or (often) unseen in otherwise abandoned places. Her faith in storytelling, trust in people, and ability to hold together suffering and hope illuminates the way forward, both in life and art, hopefully for decades to come.

Kyle P Meyers is a husband, father, and Marriage & Family Therapist, living in Columbus, OH. An avid lover of cinematic expressions, you can follow his film loving thoughts here - <https://twitter.com/ftoncinema>

Difference - Mike Riddell

Recently my wife and I travelled in Morocco. We stayed in Marrakesh for two weeks, and pretended to be locals. Not that it fooled anyone.

Wandering along the stalls in the Medina, we would be the subject of a guessing game by the shopfront vendors. "English?" they'd cry out as we tried to avoid eye contact.

When that failed to gain our attention, they'd try new options.

"American?", "Canadian?", "Australian?" One ambitious man went left-field. "Nigerian?" he laughed. That earned him a chuckle and a turn in his direction. By the time we departed the wonderful city, they'd worked us out. "Kiwi!" they'd call every day as we walked by.

My miserable Arabic was limited to "*As-Salaam-Alaikum*". Although after doing a cooking class and shopping for ingredients, I did learn the very useful "*affark attine wahid kilo sardine?*". Roughly translated, *I'd like a kilo of sardines*. Handy to know in an awkward situation. Mostly I relied on schoolboy French to get me by.

On a fine clear day we hired a driver and headed for the hills – or to be more specific, the Atlas mountains. It was the day before Ramadan, and we questioned Omar, our driver, as to how he would cope with the daily discipline of not eating or drinking between sunrise and sunset. It was hard for me to imagine what it must be like over a period of a month.

"The purpose of Ramadan," he said, "is to experience a little time like someone in poverty. "We do it only for a month. The poor man must live

every day without food. We can go back to eating – the poor man cannot.” His eyes shone with kindness and compassion. His mother is exempt from Ramadan because of her age. But she has the responsibility to provide a meal for a beggar (or money to buy one) every day of the celebration.

Across the divide of language, culture, and religion, we make a connection. He is gentle and respectful. Omar didn't have the luxury of an advanced education, but is making sure his daughter attends university. Whatever the source of his spirituality, it is deep and sincere. It's a joy to share his local insights as we travel, and simply to meet a good man in a land far from ours.

* * *

We are in an age when differences are accentuated and made to seem threatening. Many people cope with this by huddling in cohorts of similar thinkers. Social media platforms use algorithms to group us with those who think the same as we do. The advent of gated communities has divided residents into 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. In such a world, difference is threatening.

At one time villages were geographical centers. Now they are pseudo-communities of the like-minded. This seems to me to be a dangerous trend. The foundation of prejudice and hatred is dehumanization. In order to persecute people, it's necessary to make them 'other' than us. Then the inevitable trend begins, in which they are seen as a threat to our security and well-being.

The failure to engage with difference salts the world with bigotry. The one certainty in the mystery of humanity is that we are no two the same. This is a fact that generates either celebration or terror. A generation ago it seemed that we were heading toward the end of tribalism and its consequent violent conflict. Now I wonder if we're not developing an even more sinister form of it.

We are largely siloed from each other, living as if our existence were self-contained and our views self-evident. I don't watch television or listen to talkback radio. But the vitriol that pours out online is enough to demonstrate the fragile nature of our sense of identity. The attacks on others who exhibit different opinions or lifestyles is both extreme and dangerous. Self-harm and suicides litter the wake of our fears.

Diversity is a precious but vulnerable gift, easily damaged. Beauty is not the result of perfect symmetry, but of the combination of contrasts and accents. Driving down the valley the other day, we passed a field of impish deer foraging in a fenced pasture. Just to one side of them stood a horse and a sheep, in seeming communion with each other. When we passed them again on the way home, they were still together enjoying each other's company.

Should we rail against this crossing of the species barrier, or marvel at the way that animal friendship can transcend differences in form, shape, and size? For my wife and I, it was a sight that inspired great joy. Any great forest is full of a myriad shades of green, each complementing the others around them. What would we be without diversity?

* * *

I'm standing at the bar in our tiny village. The man drinking next to me is sexist, racist, and homophobic. He's lived in a rural community all his life, whereas I moved here less than a year ago. What should I do? Call him out on his prejudices, and start an argument? One part of me feels that injustice should be confronted at every opportunity, and here's one staring me in the face.

But we're not on Facebook here. We're members of the same small community, destined to live side by side on a daily basis. I choose to continue our fledgling friendship, trusting that over time and interaction we will begin to inevitably influence one another. This man has a backstory – one that I'm only just beginning to learn. He's been shaped by his environment, and experiences I can only guess at.

In community it's not possible to hide differences, nor to surround yourself with people who think the same as you do. That's both the gift and threat of sharing one's life with people. Just as in marriage, the work of love doesn't start until the commitment has been made. My bar friend and I will reveal our stories over meals, conversations, working together, and sharing common experiences.

No doubt we'll both be changed by this interaction. I'm no savior to come and correct his perceived bigotry. We're in this life together, and our differences are what make us unique. Relationship is more likely to engender change (on both sides) than ideology and confrontation. I feel

supremely lucky to be living a life of close encounter and thus be forced to befriend people I wouldn't necessarily choose to be my neighbors.

But for all of us, it's only by venturing into new territory and encountering difference that we overcome our fears. When truly secure in my own skin, opposing views become a source of enrichment and discovery, instead of a threat to my well-being. The question as to "*who is my neighbor?*" results in a surprising answer in Christian scripture.

When we returned from our trip into the Atlas Mountains with Omar, we embraced. Across the seeming barriers of culture, religion, and geography, we'd forged a connection. It was a small and insignificant encounter in the greater scheme of things. A tiny seed, that might either perish or grow to bear fruit. Friendship isn't about results, but the enrichment of love.

Mike Riddell is a Kiwi writer.

Trains Being Trains - Morgan Meis



When one gazes upon the world in love, even (or perhaps especially) when this happens through the impassive eye of the camera, everything is permeated with a surfeit of tenderness and care; a caring that cannot be attached to any nameable source.

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The motion of a train is of the hurtling sort, giant machines belching smoke and fumes flying through the countryside with speed and violence, yet contained along tracks. A train cannot go anywhere but down those parallel lines of metal that beckon from the horizon. Sitting in a train compartment, the scenery glides by, smooth, silent until that moment when the full force of the motion hits you, walking between train cars, the scream of the wind, the screech of the wheels, metal on metal as the machine

strains against itself just holding to the track at high speed along the parabola of a wide curve.

Consider the opening shots of the movie *Human Desire*, directed by Fritz Lang and released by Columbia Pictures in 1954. We see a man on a train. He's the engineer. He sits at the front of the train, driving it along the tracks. His demeanor is one of comfort and ease. Then we move to another shot. The camera has been positioned at the side of the train looking forward. Another train comes into view moving toward us, on the opposite track. It seems, for a moment, that there is not enough space for the two trains to pass one another safely. A collision is imminent. But then, with a whoosh, the trains pass one another without incident. We've all experienced this fear as two trains pass at high speeds. The margin of error is so small. The violence of the rush of air smacking both trains is startling.

The first few minutes of *Human Desire* are a study in the joys and contradictions of train travel, back and forth, back and forth between the scary almost overwhelming power of this form of locomotion, and the quiet contemplation that is the unexpected byproduct of a train's motion along its fixed track. Finally, the train pulls into a station. It is difficult to describe the sense of comfort and completion in this final terminus. And then the giant hanger looms into view, ushering the train into a place of rest.

These opening scenes of *Human Desire* are a direct tribute to another film. That's *La Bête humaine* by Jean Renoir (1938). Fritz Lang's film is essentially a remake of Renoir's, with the plot transposed into an American context, set in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War. The plot of both movies

revolves around three characters, two men and a woman, drawn together by a homicide on a train.

The actual story of *Human Desire* is pretty dull. Sure, there is murder and intrigue and betrayal. But the human drama, in this film, simply does not stand up to the drama of the trains. *La Bête humaine* does somewhat better in this regard than *Human Desire*. The character of Jacques Lantier, the engineer, is unforgettably portrayed by Jean Gabin. This role made him a working class hero in France, or so the story goes. The film contains a now-famous scene where Lantier and Séverine (Simone Simon) make love for the first time, and the camera cuts to the bucket of overflowing water.

And there are a few excellent scenes between the train engineer (Glenn Ford) and the femme fatale (Gloria Grahame) in *Human Desire* too, though, overall, one never quite believes that these two characters are passionately drawn to one another. Indeed, for any sense of actual passion I'd say it is Ellen (Kathleen Case), a young girl with a crush on the train engineer, who steals the show in *Human Desire*, with her outwardly chaste approach that just barely suppresses a pathetic desperation and downright horniness that percolates on the screen for a minute or two. But these scenes don't last long, and then we are back to Glenn Ford moping around for endless stretches of time. You drift off again. Until the train comes back.

The trains are the real stars in both movies. I want to see the tracks and the rush and the roar of those monsters, and then the smooth moments too. I like the shots of the muffled interiors, and I like the shots when people are walking around the train yards. It is inherently interesting to watch people walking down or across train tracks. The scenes in the train yards, in both movies, are fraught with an indistinct tension. That's because you never

know just where the trains are. You never know if someone will step out onto the track and get whacked by a passing locomotive. For that reason, *Human Desire* and *La Bête humaine* are both wonderful, because we get tons of shots of trains being trains, inside and out, of people being around trains, inside and out, and of trains and people interacting. I could imagine a re-edited version of the two movies where all the other stuff is taken out, and we just get the scenes of trains and the scenes near trains, all of them spliced into one another in an essentially plotless (but I would wager fundamentally thrilling film) I'd be happy to watch again and again.

Funnily enough, both *Human Desire* and *La Bête humaine* get their plot from a novel by Emile Zola. I say this is funny because Zola's novel is itself, like the two movies, a not-very-interesting novel in terms of its plot. More than that, the novel is loaded with all manner of clunky symbolism. For Zola, the story of animal passions and trains was supposed to represent something important about the primal instincts of human beings, and the way such instincts are just barely tamed by civilization. Big ideas. There are tons of books and scholarly studies, too, on Zola's political ideology and how the train in *La Bête humaine* represents industrial civilization, and maybe also mechanized war and the collapse of the Second French Empire during the Franco-Prussian War. All of the scholarly studies are surely correct in one way or another. But they don't make the novel good. The fact that Lantier has some sort of alcoholic blood in his veins, a curse passed down through the generations, which is an idea that Renoir picked up from Zola and used as the epigraph for his film, is not particularly interesting either.

What is interesting and beautiful about *La Bête humaine* the novel, are the scenes where he describes trains. Those are the scenes where the clunky

overdetermined symbolism of the plot backs up a step or two, and Zola's writerly skill gets a chance to jump to the foreground. Suddenly, Zola is wrapped up in describing the mood and feel of the train and the atmosphere around trains. He gets lost in his own prose and there is nothing better than prose that can, at least for brief periods, get lost in itself. Here's an example:

Trains moved about unceasingly in the deepening shadows, amidst the inextricable tangle of rails, between the rows of stationary carriages parked in their sidings. One left for Argenteuil, and one for Saint Germaine; another arrived from Cherbourg, a very long one. There was signal after signal, whistles blew, hooters sounded; from all directions, one by one, there appeared red lights, and green, and yellow, and white; it was all a jumble at that murky twilight hour, when it seemed as though everything should collide, and yet everything passed, and slid by, and emerged, all at the same gentle crawl, vaguely, in the depths of the dusk. (trans. Roger Pearson)

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I want to transition here into a short discussion of the great French film critic André Bazin. Of course, having a 'short' discussion about André Bazin is completely impossible, especially since I want to talk about Bazin's theory that film has a special relationship with 'reality', whatever that is. And that's the problem, of course. What reality is. What is reality? I'm not going to answer that question in a short essay that is mostly about how I like watching trains in movies. Let's also just face the music: There has been great sport in film theory over the last fifty years in laughing at André Bazin and making fun of his naive realism. Of course, this 'sport' has been going on in the 'field' of film theory, so it usually isn't very much fun at all,

and the 'laughter' is in scare quotes. Nevertheless, this 'laughter' has been going on for decades and Bazin, so the mockery goes, has been exposed as having the hopelessly gullible view that film captures unmediated reality by the very nature of its photochemical process. Like photography, film just grabs a chunk of reality and then shows it to us on the screen. And film is just a little bit more remarkable than photography because film adds motion to the mix. With film, we get an objective look at what reality is like in real time. That's what Bazin is supposed to have said, and that view of realism has been mocked for being stupid. Don't be such a sucker, the theorists have said to Bazin (since Bazin died in 1958, the conversation has been tremendously one-sided), don't believe the hype when it comes to photography and film. These media are, so the critics of Bazin say, not so innocent. They do not give us some unmediated view of reality as such. Photography and film, by contrast, are precisely the culprits by which we construct reality. And by the way, all reality is constructed, mediated. Don't be so silly, Bazin. There is no objective stance by which we could see reality as it is in itself. Film, contrary to your simplistic view, is the very model of reality as a complex simulacrum through which we project a 'reality' that has been thoroughly manipulated and manufactured.

Of course, the critics are not wrong. Bazin did have some clunky ideas about reality, and about the way that film gives us unmediated access to that reality. He was, at times, every bit the naive realist that he's been accused of being. But there is an aspect of his work, I think, that cannot be dismissed so easily. Whatever our metaphysical views about the true nature of reality, we can all agree that the world is resistant to us. Reality, even if it is 'fully constructed' and never confronted 'as such', is still constructed in such a way that we confront it as largely indifferent to our individual wills. I may be living in a simulacrum, but for me, the

simulacrum is determining. It is bigger than I, and it has more power. It shapes me far more than I shape it. I am still but a twig floating along on the river of 'the real' regardless of the metaphysical status of 'the real'. This puts me in the existential position, as it were, where I am always tantalized by the possibility of glimpsing the world from a standpoint that transcends my own particular perspective.

The real importance of the 'realism' of film, which so fascinated and intrigued André Bazin, comes from this very possibility, the possibility that film can upend perspective. In a normal scene in any normal film, we see life from the perspective of a subject looking out at reality, a standpoint from which we ourselves confront the world day after day. But films can also, if only for brief moments, swing that perspective completely in the other direction. Suddenly, it is as if we are looking at the world and looking at ourselves from the standpoint of all the stuff out there, the complex network of objects and flora and fauna and air and earth and sky and whatever else. We suddenly inhabit the standpoint of the world looking back at us, or just looking wherever it may look. When Jean Renoir, and then Fritz Lang, affixed a movie camera to the side of a train and let the film roll along with it, some essential element of human control is finally released. Something magical happens. There are moments like this in many films. I'm thinking right now of a scene in *Cleo from 5 to 7* where Varda lets the film roll on Cleo as she is walking down a nondescript street in Paris. It's a throwaway scene, at first glance. But the scene has so much power to it. It's like the camera has been wrested from Varda's authorial control and given to the street itself, like the street is showing us how things look. That scene takes your breath away. To call this 'realism' in the strong sense misses the point. The scene is completely mediated in every way. It is part of a very conscious project in which Varda is painting a picture of a specific

kind of woman, and the specific way that woman walks and talks and inhabits the world. But it was Varda's genius, her art, to allow this scene also to slip out of her control, letting the camera look with its own eye, letting the world look back at us on its own terms.

Bazin was not shy in connecting this sudden lack of control, this magical effect that happens when film suddenly shows us the world looking at itself, with religious mysticism. Bazin's classic essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" contains plenty of dubious ideas, precisely the sorts of naive realist ideas that get him in trouble, and a fair amount of material that makes little sense at all. It is a mixed bag of an essay in every way. But it also contains the following three sentences:

It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflexion on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, are able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. By the power of photography, the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can know, nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist.

By saying that the "impassive lens" strips the object down to its "virginal purity" (an unfortunate metaphor) Bazin is once again in the territory of a potentially untenable realism. But I don't think that's what he is really getting at in this passage. Because the point here is not objectivity as such. The point, you may have noticed, is love. And that's not what your typical metaphysical realist is after.

The lens of the camera, as Bazin sees it, does not give us some kind of proto-scientific and objective look at reality the way it really is. Rather, it gives us a glimpse at the world, at all of Creation as deeply in love with itself and constantly percolating in that mytho-poetic state of generative and ecstatic love. Most of the time, Bazin suggests, we are completely blind to this fact. Thus the power of the lens. The lens does not share our blindness, having never been trained in blindness. So, sometimes – and often more or less by accident – the lens gets a chance to be the portal, the guide into the way of love, showing us the world as an infinite mystery of surprising, uncategorizable love. By ‘love’ I mean a state in which there is no way fully to disentangle subject and object. When one gazes upon the world in love, even (or perhaps especially) when this happens through the impassive eye of the camera, everything is permeated with a surfeit of tenderness and care; a caring that cannot be attached to any nameable source.

The truth of film, what it can really show us, as Bazin saw it, is thus always going to be a truth difficult to describe. In the end, this truth can only be gestured at poetically, which is why the best passages in Bazin’s writing have a poetic quality that falters as soon as one attempts to translate these insights into an argument or a position.

Perhaps the person who came closest to making the argument that Bazin wanted to make is William Blake. Here are a few lines from the text of Blake’s early illuminated manuscript *There is No Natural Religion*:

Man’s perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception. He perceives more than sense (tho’ ever so acute) can discover. ...

*The desire of Man being Infinite the possession is Infinite & himself
Infinite. ...*

*Conclusion. If it were not for the Poetic and Prophetic character. The
Philosophic and Experimental would soon be the ratio of all things & stand
still*

The filmmaker becomes this Poetic/Prophetic character when they find ways to shake the “spiritual dust and grime,” as Bazin put it, from our perceptual apparatus, allowing us to see life as if for the first time. Both Renoir and Lang had the intuition that our seeing transforms when a camera is mounted in various places on a train, put into a long focus, and then simply allowed to capture the footage that emerges. An entire film shot this way would, of course, begin to wear at the eye and mind. But for brief moments, the effect is startling and intense. The snapping in and out of the different levels of the gaze feels like revelation. We see the train from the engineer’s perspective, then from the perspective of the director who is establishing the characters in the film, and then, wonderfully, from what seems to be the gaze of the train itself. The gaze is restless and jumpy. And the effect is visceral. Watching the trains, your whole body electrifies in those moments, those brief moments when the gaze jumps out of all control and we are looking at the world looking at itself. We cannot help, then, but care about the world with every molecule of our being, we cannot help but be, for that tantalizingly compressed handful of seconds, completely and totally smitten, head-over-heels in love with everything that is. And then, inevitably, the dust and grime returns. The tired, cynical eye returns. The world snaps back into our control and goes gray. But not completely. Not ever completely. Never completely once we have seen the glimpse of the great boiling billowing beauty through the gaze of the infinite eye. Or, as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it:

*Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise
You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size
At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile
's not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather — as skies
Betweenpie mountains — lights a lovely mile.*

Morgan Meis is a contributor at [The New Yorker](#). He has a PhD in Philosophy and has written for *Slate* and *Harper's Magazine*, among many others. He won the [Whiting Award](#) for nonfiction in 2013.

The Words of My Father: Love and Pain in Palestine
Reviewed by John Little

“To discover my own humanity and to know that my apparent enemies were also human was my father’s most important gift to me.” – Yousef Bashir

When I think of Gaza, I think of border walls, of Palestinians crammed into checkpoints, struggling to make their way to their daily bread. I think of Israeli soldiers standing high above, assault rifles clenched across their chests. Yousef Bashir’s inspiring memoir, *The Words of My Father: Love and Pain in Palestine*, opens with a picture of a different Gaza, a pastoral scene of verdant farmland, figs and guavas plump on the limb, dates and olives ripe for the picking.

This seeming idyll is the Bashir family farm, where the author and countless generations of his family were raised, where bees buzz past, their pollen-dusted legs ensuring all will be well for another generation. But when Bashir pans back, the larger picture comes into focus. Across the highway lays an Israeli settlement. Next door stands an Israeli military base, its watchtower scraping the blue sky above, casting a long shadow below.

In the ‘90s, when Bashir was young, many Palestinian families fled their homes for fear of violence. But not Bashir’s. They remained. His father insisted upon it. Even when Israeli soldiers pounded at their door, demanding they leave, Bashir’s father, an ardent believer in peaceful coexistence, stood firm. Rather than rebuking the soldiers or taking up

arms, he offered them hospitality; he opened the door and invited them in as guests.

In they came, and in they stayed. For five long years Israeli soldiers occupied the top two stories of the Bashir family home. Broken plaster scattered across the floors as they knocked holes in the walls to set up gun positions. The house darkened as camouflage netting was lowered over the windows. Soon the family would be forced into a single, common room. There they would live, three generations of Bashirs, sleeping together, eating together, hoping, dreaming, and mourning together, all under the watchful gaze of a rotating cast of soldiers. All but captive in their own home, even trips to the toilet required a soldier's permission—and an escort. The situation improved slightly when the international press descended on the farm, hoping to document the plight of a Palestinian family living in a home occupied by Israeli soldiers.

Through all the indignities, the gentle, steadfast presence of Bashir's father, Khalil, kept the family strong. When he returned from the local school where he was headmaster, tired from a long day's work, soldiers demanded he strip. He complied. When Bashir and his siblings fumed about the soldiers' behavior, Bashir's father replied, "They are just children, forgive them." Even when Bashir was shot in the back by an Israeli soldier, his father preached forgiveness and understanding. "Do not be angry with the soldier who shot you," he said. "Do not wish him evil. Challenge him to ask himself why he shot you, why he shot a boy who did not and does not wish him evil."

As an adult, Bashir would find great wisdom in his father's words. But as a teenager, he struggled to reconcile his father's loyalty to non-violence with the bullet that had struck his back, leaving him partially paralyzed.

Ironically, it was through his father's connections as a peace activist that Bashir came to be treated in an Israeli hospital. It was there, while convalescing under the attentive care of Israeli nurses and therapists, that he caught his first glimpse of the borderless love of which his father so often spoke; the nurses and therapists that cleaned his wounds and taught him to walk again were Israeli; overcoming political antagonism, their compassion knew no bounds.

The experience proved pivotal for Bashir. It was the beginning of a long journey away from anger, towards the peace his father so eloquently embodied. Now a peace activist in his own right, *The Words of My Father* is the moving tale of Bashir's struggle to understand and then live up to his father's remarkable example.

The Words of My Father inspires and challenges in turn. It inspires me to believe that peace is possible, and challenges us to make it so. Rather than parsing policy solutions, Bashir focuses on the role of individuals. He implies that no lasting peace will be forged by politicians alone. If peace is to be made, and kept, we must all play a part.

The humble and persistent non-violence of Bashir's father is the model for such individual engagement. He participated in multi-faith groups advocating for non-violence, but also went a step further. He embodied peace. Non-violence was, for him, more than a strategic weapon

brandished to achieve a political end. Peace was more than mere policy goal. It was a way of life, a foundational orientation, the impress of which was discernible in the way he approached the Israeli soldiers who occupied his home, as well as the way he raised his children. His example reminds us that, in order to transform our world, we must first transform ourselves.

Such total commitment to peace set me reflecting on my own life. I believe in non-violence. I favor restorative over retributive justice. I support non-violent protest and peaceful resolutions of international conflict. As a parent, I teach my children to use their words, not their fists, when tensions flare. Yet, I know that's not enough. I know barbed words can cut deeply too. Though I forgo meat and refuse to act in violence, I know my words often harm those around me, and my thoughts often do myself damage. It is the example of people like Bashir's father that remind me that non-violence is not only a worthy goal for nations, but for each one of us. More than that, he reminds me that it is not enough to embrace the principles of non-violence. I must enact them, moment to moment, day in and day out. As the great Buddhist writer and monk Thich Nhat Hahn says, "peace is every step."

Of course, Bashir's writing does more than call us to individual responsibility, it also pushes for political change, if only implicitly. With Gaza and Israel clashing violently once more, *The Words of My Father* couldn't be more timely. Its portrayal of life in Palestine is a moving reminder of the price that every day people pay when governments are unable to make peace, or simply refuse the pursuit.

For writers committed to non-violence, *The Words of My Father* also asks us to consider the role of the written word in sparking and perpetuating violence. More specifically, Bashir's work raises the question: can we *write* non-violently, particularly when reflecting on trauma or oppression we've suffered? How can we write about such experiences without vilifying those who have caused us harm?

The Words of My Father is particularly telling in this regard. Bashir individualizes those who have done violence to him by showing their actions as theirs alone. He takes great pains not to suggest, either explicitly or implicitly, that the offending individuals are representative or reflective of larger groups, be they a military organization, nation, or religious group.

He accomplishes this effect by presenting us with a great number of different Israelis. He shows both the soldiers who occupied his home, as well as hospital staff whose care and consideration nursed him back to health. It would have been easy to vilify the former and write off the latter as exceptions, but Bashir doesn't take this route. It should be said that Bashir paints the Israeli soldiers who occupied his family's farm as, generally, less than sympathetic characters. That said, he does not treat them as a wholly undifferentiated mass. We see soldiers who take to their work with sneering relish and soldiers who all but shrug and drag their feet.

Writing non-violently means not violating the individuality of those engaged in oppression; but neither should we ignore the violence they've done. A depiction of our shared humanity—this is what all non-violent writing must strive to pass on. Bashir says, "To discover my own humanity

and to know that my apparent enemies were also human was my father's most important gift to me." With *The Words of My Father*, Bashir has passed this gift on. It would be fitting to respond in the spirit of a gift to friends, by reading this book, then passing it on to them.

Jon Little is a writer from Murfreesboro, Tennessee. More of his work can be found at MindfulDaddy.com where he writes on mindfulness, fatherhood, and faith.

The Sovereign, Regina - Jasmin Pittman Morrell

Her middle name was Regina.

Somehow, uncovering this tiny bit of information felt like spying on Edna Lewis, an award-winning chef who, in the same vein as Julia Child, brings an irresistible warmth and attention to beauty to the pages of her cookbooks. I typed Lewis' name into Ancestry.com's search engine, along with the other facts I knew off the top of my head. Her date of death, 2006. The search bar for a place she might've lived momentarily stumped me. Without thinking, I'd typed "Freetown, Virginia." But then wondered if this community, established in 1865 by newly emancipated Africans, Lewis' grandfather among them, had been formally recognized as a town. It hadn't, but I still found her easily in a sea of records for other Ednas, which must have been a popular name for baby girls in the early 1900s when Lewis was born. The first result was a social security application. I skipped over it, because even though it's public, it felt like an invasion of Lewis' privacy. The third result populated from *Find A Grave's* Index, and in this record, her middle name seemed to pull me into a curiously intimate embrace.

In his *New York Times Magazine* article, "Edna Lewis and the Black Roots of American Cooking," Francis Lam notes that almost everyone who knew her described her as regal. "It's almost as if her parents knew," Lam writes, "when they gave her the middle name Regina." I'm a home cook with no professional aspirations, but I crave being baked into Lewis' lineage. Perhaps that's why I turned to Ancestry as one source to find out more about her—not because I hoped to find an actual link by blood, but because I want to hold her as an ancestor nonetheless. She honors Southern

cooking, black, rural Southern people and their deep connection to the land as something sacred.

Lewis' *The Taste of Country Cooking*, originally published in 1976, describes a life growing up in rural Freetown that strikes me as idyllic, even as I take care not to romanticize the past. The cookbook is divided into seasonal recipes, and A Spring Breakfast includes instructions for the perfect time to gather honey from woodland bees. Through Lewis' words, I can see her father under a canopy of green-gold light on an early June morning. He carefully searched the hollowed trunks of oak trees, ears alive for the hum of bees. Eugene Lewis almost certainly didn't wear the protective white suit of a beekeeper, and I imagine he was stung a time or two on these ventures to secure a treat for his children. But despite the inherent pain of his hunt, it seems clear he knew what the true treasure was: the delight he brought home as they drizzled the sweet, amber liquid over a cloud-like biscuit, fresh from the oven.

I love peering through this small window into black, Southern life because it shows me (and the rest of the U.S.) the presence of black fathers, subverting the dominant narrative of absenteeism. Lewis also reminds me to include pleasure as an ingredient of activism. When Knopf published *The Taste of Country Cooking*, twelve years after the glowing birth of the Civil Rights Act, black Americans had witnessed the deaths of both Malcom X and Martin Luther King, Jr. True social and economic equality, in a nation pledging "liberty and justice for all," was frustratingly, and at times, deathly slow to ripen. But Lewis chooses, in a deliberately meditative way, to extol the dignity of poor, black life, recalling the joys of living in rhythm with the earth and the arms of a village. It's as if she wants to nurture not just through the recipes, but also her stories of the past. *The Taste of Country Cooking* is a kind of holy communion, where I'm asked to

remember the toil and beauty of liberating work, alongside the sustenance of steamed whole hominy and wild strawberry preserves.

On a Sunday in late June, I walked several blocks downtown to attend the first protest I have in several years. The news highlighting conditions in our detention camps—children denied soap, or shackled to fetid, heavy diapers, or sleeping on concrete—along with a report that ICE planned to raid western North Carolina again, had left me tightly cradling my youngest daughter at bedtime, tears pooling at the corners of my eyes. I was grateful that I could hold her, but angry for the mothers denied the luxury of burying noses in their own babies' hair, all because they'd hoped for asylum. Instead, they were torn from the very ones they'd hoped to keep safe. I'd donated money for legal aid, but it didn't feel like enough. How can we claim freedom if we are not all free? On the steps of City Hall, brown, black, and white folks stood in a loose semi-circle as beads of sweat formed across our foreheads. Some people hoisted "Abolish ICE" and "No More Deaths at the Border" signs over their heads, framed by a cerulean sky. Local activist leaders shared a microphone, outlining the ways, both political and social, we could work to keep our communities safe. Cars passing by honked in solidarity, some people shouted slurs from open car windows. When the rally came to a close, some of what appeared to be the younger folks in the crowd, pulled metal barricades from the sidewalk and into the street's intersection, creating a "wall" while chanting against the proposed U.S. border wall. The street light cycled through green, yellow, red, and green again. Cars lined the road and soon the traffic jam prompted a police car to show up on the scene. A young man, fair-skinned and gangly in his uniform, reluctantly swung himself out of the car and edged his way into the crowd, in attempt to reach the protesters blocking the street. He came face-to-face with a black man in a tomato red shirt and

shoulder-length braids, and in a moment fear spilled from their bodies and crackled in the air between them. They wordlessly pushed passed one another, but the brushstrokes painted clearly: **this is America**. But the story - and certainly the way we tell it - must not end there. For the protest itself is also America, and the reason that immigrants come here is also America, and the sovereign Edna Lewis, and I myself.

I left wishing I could gather them all—organizers, protesters, and asylum-seekers—into a room dominated by a beautifully-set table and filled with the aromas of Lewis’ menu for Sunday Revival Dinner. She writes during Revival week, “memories of slavery lingered with us still, and Revival was in a way a kind of Thanksgiving. There was real rejoicing: The fruits of our hard labor were now our own, we were free to come and go, and to gather together for this...celebration.” And later I wondered, what if that gangly, uniformed young man was invited, too? How could things be different in our neighborhood if we all sat down to plates piled high with sweet, creamy corn pudding, delicately sliced tomatoes, tender green beans studded with pork, refreshingly tangy pickled cucumbers, pillowy yeast rolls, and ham lined and baked with freshly-grated crumbles of white bread? Freshly-squeezed lemonade, prepared as Lewis preferred, with water drawn from a deep well? Caramel layer cake, fluffy and oozing with promises of gratification? Eating together might as well be considered *resiliency training*, a healing balm for the wounds that plague us.

In my neighborhood, the fireworks popped and boomed several days before the Fourth of July. On the birthday of our nation, I decided to bake blackberry cobbler in honor of Edna Lewis, since it seemed like one of the best ways to celebrate what was good in our corner of the world. After I washed the berries, I spread them across a kitchen towel, some of them staining my fingers purple. I shaped the dough, a mixture of flour, butter,

salt, sugar, and cream, and once everything was assembled, sprinkled sugar over the top. “Everyone looked forward to a cobbler during the season,” Lewis writes. Later, friends poured into our kitchen, and in that fleeting moment, helped by vanilla ice cream, we were satisfied with the bounty of the season.

Jasmin Pittman Morrell is a writer and editor living in Asheville, North Carolina with her husband and two daughters. She enjoys facilitating healing through creativity, imagination, and deep listening.

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