

An aerial photograph of a dirt road winding through a lush, green landscape. The road is the central focus, leading from the bottom center towards the top. On the right side of the road, a group of people is gathered around a palm tree. The surrounding terrain is covered in dense vegetation and rolling hills. In the background, a town or village is visible, nestled among trees. The sky is overcast and grey.

THE PORCH

ISSUE 13

A slow conversation about beautiful and difficult things

Welcome from The Porch editor Gareth Higgins

Two years ago, Brian McLaren sat at my table, and with one simple sentence, he changed both our lives:

"You know, we could write a short book about the myth of redemptive violence and how to transcend the destructive stories we're telling in the world."

I responded: "Why, yes, that sounds like a good idea."

But that's not what we did.

Instead, we went on a creative journey together with the extraordinary artist Heather Lynn Harris, and dreamed up two books about "Us", "Them", and the end of violence.

One is a picture book for kids and grown-ups, the other a book of essays. Both are about the six old stories humans have developed to bring peace and security, none of which work; and the seventh story, which starts working the moment you imagine it to be true. [You can jump to find out more by clicking here right now.](#)

We call the old stories the domination, revolution, isolation, purification, victimization, and accumulation stories; the seventh is the story of liberation and reconciliation.

The Seventh Story is not a sugar-coated story, although it does bring joy; it's not a religious belief, though it does invite us to experience spirituality and mystery; it faces reality, which means both the worst and the best things that are happening; it's for rich and poor, whole and broken, alienated and integrated, those who might consider themselves veterans of the spiritual journey and work for a fairer world, and those of us just starting out.

We're honestly more satisfied with this work than most anything either of us have written before; and more hopeful that it will help people.

So if you ...

- are tired of fighting, fleeing, or freezing,
- find yourself despairing at the "news" (which should really be called the "olds", given how much history repeats itself);
- sometimes struggle to get out of bed in the morning, and maybe even wonder if your best days are behind you (not to mention the planet's)...

We wrote these books for you.

And we're writing to ask for your help. We've published the books through *The Porch* - if we're successful, it will help with our approach to others who might wish to share it in the future, and build a wider audience for what we feel is an important message. You can really help us by doing two things:

1: Order the book for yourself and loved ones. (Click on www.theseventhstory.com)

2: Tell others!

You can only get these books at www.theseventhstory.com - and we're committed to providing both books in electronic format to anyone who wants one, even if they can't afford to pay for it. Just go to www.theseventhstory.com for more, and thank you.

In the meantime, a warm welcome to this thirteenth issue of *The Porch* - with some lovely words from our friends Greg Jarrell, Jasmin Pittman Morrell,

There is a better story. We're here together to tell it.

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O DONALD TRUMP, WOE DONALD TRUMP -

Alastair McIntosh



Abandoned settlement looking down towards where Donald Trump's maternal ancestors were evicted on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland.

Donald Trump was a controversial name in his mother's home nation, Scotland, long before he ran for president. Early in the new millennium he curried political favor to impose a golf course on a pristine zone of coastal ecology that had been protected as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. When local residents objected, his people employed heavy handed tactics to try and push them out of their homes. My outrage at the way an old woman

was targeted, Molly Forbes, who lived alone with her budgerigar, drove me to write this poem drawing from quotations in the press and from the Bible. I see it as an act of liberation theology. **An approach that, as the poem concludes, is as much concerned for the full humanization and liberation of the oppressor as it is for the oppressed.**

But there is a postscript to all of this. Once The Donald ran for president, journalists and genealogists started digging up his Scottish ancestry. It turned out that his mother, Mary Anne Macleod, had been born eight miles from the village where I grew up on the Isle of Lewis. She emigrated from the island at a time of great suffering. One in five of the island's young men had died in the Great War. That was followed by the Spanish Flu, a tuberculosis outbreak that was probably brought back from the war and which especially killed young people, and then mass emigration of the young. Out of an island of about 15,000 people, in 1923 alone one thousand of the young left for America. Most of them were men. Who were the women to marry? Little wonder that Mary Anne took the opportunity to follow her sister to America where she met and married Frederick Christ Trump, leaving the rest to become history.

Why did so many of the young of her generation emigrate? This is where the psychohistory of the Trump family gets really interesting. As I have shown (with the help of a *Foreword* by Brian D. McLaren) in the American edition of my recent book, [*Poacher's Pilgrimage: an Island Journey*](#), Mary Anne's own maternal ancestors, like many other islanders, had been forced from their ancestral lands by rapacious landlords. The oppressed so easily become the oppressor, and that is part of the poorly understood trauma of our times and the reason why I wrote about the spiritual journey in *Poacher's*.

When I was a youth, I used to be a pony boy on the deer cull in the south-east of our island. Recently I went back, and in the photograph with this article, there I am, with the keeper, looking down across the abandoned lands that Donald's maternal ancestors had once farmed. As you wander about, you stumble upon the ruins of their homesteads in the heather. It's all so very sad, and all so very important that when we talk about "Scots-Irish" culture amongst white people in America, we understand some of the suffering behind it. The same goes for many other ethnic identities, but The Donald is the one from my island, and he's the one that's standing larger than life in many people's lives today. It hones an even sharper edge to my poem. This is about deep healing for us all.

Alastair McIntosh is a Scottish writer, academic, and activist. www.AlastairMcIntosh.com.

Here is Alastair's powerful poem:

O DONALD TRUMP, WOE DONALD TRUMP

(First published by [Bella Caledonia](#) in November 2011)

Donald Trump is an American billionaire born of an exiled Hebridean mother. He plans to build "the world's greatest golf course" and five hundred executive houses on a pristine beach near Aberdeen, previously viewed as a protected land. This bàrdachd arose from his attempts to evict an elderly woman who stands in his way. It is not an art poem. It is a bardic declamation coming out of a tradition that speaks social truth direct to power - hot, rough, and on the hoof.

O Donald Trump

It was my own old mother's taxi driver

on the Isle of Lewis

who said he lives next

to your old mother's house

on the Isle of Lewis

That made me think

how close we are

being separated by

just two mothers

and one Stornoway taxi

And got me thinking

of your visit to the Island

back in June 08

to your family croft home

Inside of which you stepped

(according to reports)

for fully ninety-eight seconds

And told the press

(with reference to

your true relations

which is to say

the Trump International Golf Links)

yes, told the press:

“I think this land is special.

I think Scotland is special,

and I wanted to do something special

for my mother”

To which the neighbours said:

“We never saw the likes of this in our lives”

“He’s had a lifetime to come here so why is he doing it now?”

“It’s a PR stunt ...”

... because, as a former councillor elaborated

the place was being “... cynically manipulated”

and even your own cousin said

with classic Island understatement

(not passed on in your genetic strand):

“We’re happy to see him

although the visit

is very brief.”

O Donald Trump

it is not the press before you now

nor Island dignitaries nor even me ...

I am but the scribe

moved by the land itself

that as you said “is special”

to raise my pen on its behalf

The Island too has got a voice

(though not a PR machine)

The Island too has got a view

upon the ways of such a son as you

The Island knows about your wealth

and what you did to get it

and hears you speak of Barron Trump

your own ten month wee son

paraded down the Walk of Fame

at Hollywood – you said:

“He’s strong, he’s smart, he’s tough, he’s vicious, he’s violent:

all of the ingredients you need to be an entrepreneur!”

We would have thought it in jest

were it not for the blood trail

of real estate ... (who pays rent

and who collects?)

and the casinos ...

(whose lives are spun on that roulette

both during hours, and after?)

The Trump World Tower

The Trump Star Tower

The Trump Elite Tower

The Trump Palace

The Trump Taj Mahal

and Trump Marina

far from the chip shops of Stornoway Harbour

And your name golden everywhere

hi-rise windows glittering

“with Viracon’s 24-karat gold-coated glass”

not from you “cold shoulder gold”

but, a Liquid Gold Bodywrap

with a 24 Karat Gold Facial

at the Trump Tower Spa

which according to publicity

(that surely speaks the Truth as much as you)

soothes away the wrinkles

by immersing crinkled body parts, I quote

“in pure gold minerals and Egyptian chamomile”

and “muscle soothing massage with oils

infused with golden particles,” and:

“to top off the opulent treatment

guests are dusted in shimmering,

iridescent gold powder”

... thereby offering

“... discerning spa guests

the ultimate combination

of optimal skin care

and *guiltless decadence*.”

O Donald Trump

of Midras hubris, Golden Calf and Babel Towers

who with your trumped up politicians

(a disappointment to our Scottish soil)

stand bunkered, as the prophets say

“convicted by their convictions”

or the deficit thereof

It is not I that prosecute

but the Island - of your mother and my youth
whose skeins of calcium and phosphorous
were knitted through our fledgling frames
from out of herring bones and sheep and milk and oats
You stand accused, Donald Trump
... Stand up before the Court!
the Island's court
... of forcing golden facials
on nature's long protected countenance
at Menie Links by Aberdeen
to make for tourist golf a course
with calls for airport fairways stretched
to fly the face of global climate change
To trumpet up a way of life
this world no longer can sustain
(for the Earth can no longer afford the rich)
To force your way bulldozered in
by forcing others out
although you hid the might of clout

and spun the spin which said:

“The Trump Organisation

has no Compulsory Purchase Order powers.”

You stand accused, Donald Trump

of seeking to evict

eighty-six year old Molly Forbes

and her son, and the budgie perched on her shoulder

who says about her place:

“I don’t want to sell it.

It is my paradise.

I want to live in it.

Why should some of those top knobs

in Government with their crooked ways

of claiming money

get legal aid

but I can’t?

I think I can’t get any

because I’m too honest.”

To which your sugared growlers say:

“It is regrettable that an elderly woman

Has been used to front

this frivolous court action.

There are consequences

for filing a baseless claim

and her son and lawyers

should pay the expenses.”

Oh really, Donald?

Consequences!

to seek protection from the law

of human rights

so not to be cleared out

from her own wee but and ben

for your greed, not need

with legal costs of up to 50k

more than she is maybe worth

but not as much as principle

(in case you fail to understand)

O, Donald Trump!

Woe, Donald Trump

... Woe ... woe ... woe ...

There are “consequences” indeed

for what you do

The Island from within

sees the likes of you

The Island names, unmask, engages with

the likes of you

who take its name in vain against the grain

The Island has a context

into which to place the likes of you

I quote, again

from the Island’s own ... publicity:

“Woe to you, scribes ... hypocrites!”

For ye devour widows’ houses...

For ye are like unto whitened sepulchres,

which indeed appear beautiful outward,

but are within full of dead men’s bones,

and of all uncleanness.”

Woe to you, Donald Trump:

“Woe unto them that add house to house,
that join field to field, until there is no more room,
and that ye dwell yourselves alone
in the midst of the land!”

Woe to you, Donald Trump, for:

“The Lord preserveth the strangers;
he relieveth the fatherless and widow:
but the way of the wicked
he turneth upside down.”

Woe, woe and three times, woe!

O, Donald Trump ...

be not mistaken

The Island does not cast a curse
does not return the shameful act with evil eye

Sufficient that it just ...

withdraws its blessing

T'is you who stand yourself accursed
and drains the flow of life ...
the artery cut that curls and tightens
dreadful back upon itself
The Island stands not for a curse
but only to forgive
to draw back in its Prodigals
“not seven times” they say
“but seventy times seven times”
You told the world you loved this land
and wished your mother’s memory
(though naming your development
we have perforce observed
not after Mary Ann MacLeod
but after ... Mr Trump)
Don’t make for her a bunker ...
... from the plunder of another woman’s world
... from beauty’s desecration of true nature free and wild
... from climate change vainglorious in “guiltless decadence”

Come home, Donald ...

Come home in your mind!

Come home to gentle honest folks!

Come home to nature's guileless way!

without greed

without force

without tears

Renounce the rootless sands of capital and pride!

Renounce the decorated corpse of suppurating wealth!

Renounce those "vicious ... violent" so-called winning ways!

... Come home, o Donald Trump, come home to this new start

... and build a golden Tower to be your greatest work of living art

... that rises from the fairway as the meteoric human heart

Transmuted ... Transfigured ... Transubstantiated

Come home, Donald ...

just come on home

AROUND THE TABLE - Teri Farless

I thought she had lead poisoning. It was the only explanation I could come up with for my mother's behavior - at 56 she was forgetting, repeating the same sentences, struggling sometimes to find words. They lived in an old pre-Civil War farmhouse in Georgia. We just needed to get to Lowe's and buy test strips. That would likely solve it...but the walls and plumbing were clean. It wasn't lead. Two neurologists and months later we had a diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's.

I can't remember what any of us were wearing the day the doctor told us what was happening. I can't remember what he looked like or the shape his mouth made when the words came out. I can remember that my mother was asked to draw the face of a clock as part of the evaluation which made me shake my head. She'd been an elementary school teacher for 35 years. Even late in the game...she could draw the damn clock.

The next few years were sad and tender and sometimes funny. She bought cartloads of things she could remember she at one time had needed. There were endless boxes of chocolate pudding in the pantry and a lot of Windex.

She was the youngest of 8 children and invited all her siblings and their spouses to a Christmas lunch and then forgot she'd invited them. We scrambled when people started showing up and ended up serving leftover vegetable soup and Kraft macaroni and cheese.

I took her to Sears for new clothes as she had a hard time remembering to eat and had dropped a lot of weight not knowing yet the careful attention

she needed. She came out to the doorway almost to the store floor in her underwear to show me that the shirt I'd suggested to her was a little loose in the arms.

She loved Audrey Hepburn movies so of an evening when it was just the two of us, I'd pull one out and pop in a tape but would end up pressing pause again and again as she asked who the characters were and what exactly they were doing.

She had always had a thing for trashy romance novels (my step dad called them soft porn) but she became obsessed with buying more and more reading 2 and 3 at a time although she could not keep the storylines straight. When she began hallucinating, those stories took on a new life as she described to me a new neighbor walking into the yard from down the street and dancing with her in the driveway.

My cousin told me she saw my mom in the grocery store long after my mom should have stopped driving. My cousin said they would run into each other in every aisle and my mom would forget they'd just had a gossipy conversation about neighbors and family...then they'd have it again. My cousin said, "I just remember feeling loved every time Barbara greeted me with such joy as we rounded each aisle. It is one of my favorite memories of her."

One time I blanked while we were traveling down a long stretch of highway. I blurted out, "Are we going the right way?" After a long pause my mother looked at me seriously and said, "We're going the same way as all these people beside us."

In a moment of utter exhaustion my stepfather said to me without a trace of irony, "She could hide her own Easter eggs."

The *Lord of the Rings* movies came out while all of this was happening. I came to think of people with Alzheimer's as the dark riders. Once proud and strong but drifting into the shadow until they were unrecognizable.

As the disease progressed it became harder to take her out. We'd enter a store and fear would cover her face. She couldn't remember where we were or why we were there. She'd be upset by passing cars asking with complete frustration, "Why are they flashing their lights at us?" when their turn signals were on. She needed someone to sleep beside her so that she wasn't scared. It got worse...a lot worse.

So when I tell you that if you are a child of a parent with early onset Alzheimer's you have a 50% chance of getting it yourself, you will understand that I have no illusions about what my future could hold. My mother was symptomatic at 56. I turn 50 in January. The next decade of my life hinges on the flip of a genetic coin.

Alzheimer's used to paralyze me. Now it just kind of pisses me off. As a nurse, I often see folks for whom illness is a stunning, unwelcome surprise. Sometimes they don't want to discuss the specifics of the disease they just need to process how their body could go so wrong.

The gift my mother left me was that I know it's coming...if not Alzheimer's then something else.

I knew a lawyer in Kentucky who was fearless in confronting people in power on behalf of folks who were getting screwed over. I asked him about it...how he got so brave. He told me about his young wife dying of cancer shortly after their marriage began. He said, "When the worst thing that can happen to you has happened, you just aren't scared anymore."

I'm not there yet. I still get scared a lot, but I have made a lot of decision based on this question...if I only have a few more cognizant years left, is this how I want to spend my time?

I try really hard not to go to meetings. I try to listen to people, especially family when they are speaking. I try not to get too upset at what people say on Facebook. I take a nap on Saturdays AND Sundays. I drive with the windows down so I can feel the air on my skin.

I went back to school to be a nurse at 42. I was lucky and privileged but it was also a little ballsy, me with my old middle-aged-might-get-Alzheimer's-brain running with those 20 somethings. I am proud of that. I tell my family every day that I love them and I've told them what to do with me if the Alzheimer's comes, and how I want to be buried, and what I want done at my funeral. I am proud of that too.

Here's the gift my mom gave me that I am passing on to you...You are dying. Maybe soon maybe later but your time is short. Go live the life you want to live. Love the people you want to love. Be a good brave human right now. You have permission. And when you have embraced your own sweet existence, give others the permission to do the same.

A RIFF OF LOVE - Greg Jarrell



Since 2005, my wife Helms and I have been neighbors and ministers in an economically poor, but asset rich, neighborhood in Charlotte called Enderly Park. We are consistently delighted by the gifts that our neighbors share with us, so we put ourselves in

positions to get to experience those gifts as often as possible. During one summer, we are with our youth group of one dozen teens at Mars Hill College, a small school in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. We have come to join with fifteen other groups for the 2008 edition of summer youth camp. The week promises to be the perfect mix of spiritual growth and teenagers pushing every conceivable limit. There is no reasonable explanation for why otherwise sensible adults continue to put on summer camps. Yet here we are again, for another week of collectively holding our breath. I am partially responsible, having helped to plan the camp and signed the youth up to come. And despite my anxiety, I expect that this week will help to grow some imaginations and to plant some new thoughts in these young people about how they might develop and utilize their gifts.

Following an early wake-up call at home, we drive up hours ahead of registration time in order to hike a spur of the Appalachian Trail called "Lover's Leap." We have picked a beautiful day for the hike. It is dry, a

little cool for June, and clear. The trail is perfect. It is short, and becomes steep quickly, almost immediately after the trailhead. Within just a few feet, we already seem to be deep in the forest. The air is different in these woods. It is damp and cool. Sunlight peeks between leaves, dappling the trail under our feet. We are nestled into ancient and wise hills. They offer themselves to us, slowly revealing their rugged charm as we wind higher.

I think these youth catch the difference in the air also, or at least I hope they do. But that in no way slows their obscene amount of complaining. Jarrett knows that we brought him out here to kill him. Crystal is sure that the bears are just behind that tree over there. Camille has to stop every ten steps to rest, and she is just not sure she is going to make it. The youth have all learned the survival skill of turning fear into humor, which means that despite the bellyaching, the trip up is fun.

Our calves are burning, and poor Camille swears she is going to pass out, when the trail flattens out. We have come up the backside of the hill, and now we are cresting it and approaching the overlook. The noise stops. A moment of holiness descends. We survey the French Broad River a thousand feet below us, the river valley giving way to mountains, row after row of hulking shoulders, the sky blue and crisp, holding the impossible together. The moment is brief, but the discovery sparkles in their eyes. How could this place even be here? And can we even believe that we climbed all the way up this mountain?

The moment ends when Camille announces that she could never live here because it would take too long to walk to the corner store. But the mystery touches us, nestled here in the hills. The mystery still holds us, I remind

myself sometimes. We head down to the river to dip our feet in and to commune over sandwiches.

At the end of the first day of camp, we are settling down in the dorm back at the college. The boys and the chaperones take some time to reflect on what we have done over the course of the day. They are all very excited. They tell me about the friends they remember from last summer, the girls they have seen, the basketball competition they have been sizing up, the ice cream included with every meal. Even ice cream for breakfast. We make bets about who will eat the most over the week. We talk until lights out, and then the chaperones double check to be sure that everyone is in their rooms.

I have been a youth minister for long enough—and a youth recently enough—to recall that there are two nights at youth camp where things are most likely to go awry. The last night can be trying for a chaperone, because no one has to give a damn about what the adults say anymore. Everyone is simply riding home the next day, so there is no reasonable punishment to be administered. As a chaperone, there is nothing to do but hope for the best.

The other worrisome night is the first night, when the hormones and energy that always rage through teens have kicked into warp speed. A week of thrills awaits. The freedom of leaving behind families and entering into new turf with hundreds of peers is present. This is no time to sleep. The party must begin.

My first-night-of-camp policy is for chaperones to take up residence in the hallway. We are ready to greet any would-be ruffian or reveler who happens to be slipping through the hall. I grab a journal, a book, and a cold drink, and settle in. Making sure everyone is in bed might take a while, so we are ready. But after a half an hour has passed, all seems to be going pretty well. There is not much noise, and while the lights are still on, no one has yet tried so much as dashing across the hall. We are all tired after a long day, and the bed is beginning to call to us. We decide to give it five more minutes when we hear a disturbance in the stairwell. I look up, ready to respond to someone else's youth out making mischief. Instead, towards me marches the dorm's resident director, the only woman in the entire residence hall. She is clearly unhappy. She stops in front of us and points to what I thought, until this moment, was a well-behaved room of my guys. "Who is responsible for these gentlemen?" she asks, pointing to Jake and Shawn's room. "I'm directly under them, and it sounds like a drumline rehearsal in there."

"I am," I answer. "But we have been sitting a couple of feet from their door for nearly an hour now, and we haven't noticed any noise." I am legitimately curious, ready to defend my youth but also ready to establish to them from the first day what my expectations are and exactly how I want them met. She insists that Jake and Shawn's room is the guilty one, so I make my decision. These boys are going to know that I am in charge and that I expect full compliance when it comes to bedtime habits. Roused from my reverie, I puff out my chest, hike up my pants, lower my voice, and pound on the door, ready to set the tone for an orderly, well-behaved week

.

“Fellas, what’s going on in here? This poor lady is complaining about the noise she hears from your room. She says y’all are louder than a herd of elephants.”

Shawn and Jake look innocent enough. They are in bed, and seem not just a little surprised that I am questioning them. They deny causing any noise. “We’re just laying here, Greg,” Shawn says. At first glance, I think that maybe the resident director is imagining things. Nothing appears unusual. The guys are quiet, and I know them well enough to sense that they are telling me the truth. This is a tight spot for me—who am I going to side with? The angry Resident Director, who is in charge and able to make complaints to our camp leadership? My young men, who are trying to make it this week in a world far from home in almost every way, and who are trusting me to keep them safe? Or my own gut, which senses that something is not right about the accusation, but also needs to set clear boundaries?

A second look around the room reveals where the noise has come from. Shawn and Jake decided to do some redecorating in their dorm room. They rearranged the furniture. The desks are piled in one corner, the wardrobes in another, and the beds are shoved together in the leftover space. This strikes me as odd. Shawn and Jake grew up on one of the toughest streets in Charlotte. At fifteen or sixteen years old, they have cultivated a correspondingly tough image. And as straight teenage boys, I suspect that the intimacy of sleeping so close together might be a bit uncomfortable for them.

The noise complaint makes sense now. The sound of furniture being pushed across their floor, which was the resident director's ceiling, created a lot of racket. I'm not upset at this point, just curious, and I am absolutely going to side with my guys. So I ask why they have redecorated the room. Shawn jumps to explain. "Now, Greg, don't get mad about that. It's just that Jake forgot his blanket, so I told him that we could push our beds together and I would share mine."

The friendships that I witness and am a part of in Enderly Park are part of the story of my salvation. They are the clearest way that the good news is at work in my life. Jesus calls in gentle and surprising ways that move me to deeper love of God and neighbor. Jake and Shawn are two friends who witness to God's tender love for all creation. As I pound on their door the first night of camp, I am ready to be a teacher and disciplinarian. I am prepared to assert my leadership and to show Jake and Shawn the error of their ways.

To me, the most important thing about the experience of this first night is the establishment of a hierarchy, the clear communication that my trust of them will be built on their willingness to do what I say. They are being rude, I plan to say. They are not following my instructions. But my priorities for them are not their own priorities. They have other work to do, the kind that Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount when he teaches his hearers not to do their good works in public, looking for affirmation. Instead, do them in secret, without seeking recognition. I suspect that Shawn has practiced this way of goodness for so long that it never occurs to him to do anything else. Shawn does not talk much about Jesus, but he lives in a way that shows deep theological knowledge alive in his body.

I knock on Shawn and Jake's door unaware that I am entering sacred ground that will train me into the meaning and practice of friendship. This will not be a class in friendship as an idea. There will be no philosophical theory of friendship. It is far more personal than that. Jake and Shawn are teaching me what kind of friend I am, and what kind of friend I could learn to be.

I am learning that I am the kind of friend that, had Jake told me about his lack of covers, would have responded immediately. But my response would have been based out of pity for him, and a chance to be a hero for myself. I would have seen him as a charity case, and would have gone out quickly to buy some stuff for him. I believe in Visa as my Lord and Savior, Wal-Mart as the manifestation of God's abundance on the earth. The following morning I would have acted a little tired so that I could quietly tell a couple of other chaperones about my midnight run. I would have pretended not to make a big deal out of it while not keeping it totally secret.

Having a friend who can and will buy you a blanket when you need a blanket is not without value. A good friend will want to do that for you if they can. In a one-time situation, having a relationship where you can confide a need to someone who is willing to utilize their own resources to help is a beautiful thing. Everyone needs to be in relationships like that, on both the side of giving and the side of need. But that is not what is happening here. Jake does not confide in me. In fact, he chooses not to. Perhaps he knows I will turn him into a charity case. Perhaps he senses that I cannot be fully trusted with such sensitive information about his lack of

resources. Maybe he just does not think about it, because a lack of resources has always been the norm for him. In a situation where he lacks what he needs, he uses what he has—a friend. He confides in Shawn with the trust that their growing up together has created a solidarity whereby Shawn will take Jake’s problem and turn it into his own, at which point the two of them can work together to solve the problem.

This is the kind of friendship on display at Mars Hill College on this night. Those young men lie down together in solidarity, where the problem of one becomes the problem of both. Theirs is the kind of friendship that Jesus, the enfleshed God who “moves to the neighborhood,” embodies in the gospel. Jake and Shawn are preaching the good news to me, with their lives.

From *A Riff of Love: Notes on Community and Belonging* by Greg Jarrell, published November 2018 by Cascade Books.

Y...M...I - Jasmin Pittman Morrell



Trotting down Eagle Street, I half-walk, half-run away from the Aloft hotel parking garage off Biltmore Avenue where I'd finally managed to find parking in downtown Asheville on a gray weekday afternoon. Roy Harris stands waiting for me under a tree in front of the YMI building, coffee in one hand and a wrapped slice of banana bread in the other.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I say, breathless. "I had a hard time finding parking."

"Don't you worry about that," he replies, "You got to get lucky to find parking down here."

He gestures to Pennycup coffee shop. "Do you drink coffee?"

I nod, grateful for the offer of a pick-me-up. As we walk toward Pennycup, I notice that we're in the minority—his caramel toned skin,

almost the same complexion as my own, is pronounced against a white polo shirt. There's a young woman with Kool-Aid pink hair dressed in what look like pajamas sitting on the corner across from us. She's joined by someone with a forest of a beard sprouting from his chin, his hair tangled in wheat-colored dreadlocks. For present day Asheville, this isn't unusual—you don't find many black folks downtown anymore—but it's especially haunting in the midst of what used to be the city's black business district. Tucked back on South Market Street, Asheville's downtown is also home to one of the oldest African American cultural centers in the southeast: The Young Men's Institute.

Mr. Harris holds Pennycup's door open for me. This is the YMI, too, he explains. Having lived in Asheville for most of his life, he's something of a local historian. Mr. Harris has heard the community's old stories, and he has watched the sweeping changes blow through the streets.

The Young Men's Institute, originally commissioned by Biltmore Estate's George Vanderbilt, was built in 1893 as a social, educational, business, and cultural gathering space for black men and boys. It was designed by the same architect responsible for Biltmore Village; the two spaces share pebble-dash brick facades, red-trimmed windows, and a sense of grandeur. Massive wooden beams lend warmth to the auditorium, which has more than 2,000 square feet of floor space and can seat around 200 people. It's easy to imagine the young black men who gathered here: giving speeches, performing plays or playing music in this dignified setting. It's a place that invites dreaming, a space that whispers: *you can grow here.*

But in a city that relies heavily on tourism as a sustaining economic force, the YMI is now surrounded by the hallmarks of “urban renewal,” or “*Negro removal*,” as Mr. Harris jokes. Finishing our coffee, we walk outside and down the street to a mural painted on the wall surrounding Triangle Park. Laced with poetry by Langston Hughes and the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., the mural celebrates the neighborhood’s history. As Mr. Harris explains the stories behind each scene, I lean in, finding it difficult to hear him over the grinding noise of construction. Just across the street, beside and behind the YMI, another hotel, as well as luxury apartment buildings, rise against the skyline. It’s hard to say how much room there is for black growth here anymore. After my tour of the YMI, I say goodbye to Mr. Harris, grieving the erasure of what was and hoping that the spirit of the place could be kept alive.

When my family and I decided to move from Raleigh, North Carolina to Asheville, the first question out of my friends’ mouths was: “But how will you feel?” followed by the timid assertion, “There are no black people in the mountains.” Roughly, they were right. U.S. Census data predicts that the number of African-Americans living in Asheville is dropping and will continue to drop in the coming years. The black population was already small compared to similarly-sized Southeastern cities.

Very soon after moving, I discovered that when the Asheville days grow warm and sunny, the French Broad – the third oldest river in the world – might be dotted with hundreds of multi-colored tubes carrying people floating lazily downstream. Standing on top of the River Link Bridge and looking down at the river, the tubes resemble confetti scattered for an outdoor party. When the city swells during tourist season, Asheville

is a funkier version of a Gatsby-esque blowout. It just might be the quirkiest city in the Southeast: “Keep Asheville Weird” is a popular local slogan. With its stunning views of the Blue Ridge Mountains and impressive array of restaurants, breweries, and art studios, Asheville was hailed Lonely Planet’s #1 Best U.S. travel destination in 2017.

Kaliyah Gore is 16 years old and a Squad member with Word on the Street, a social justice non-profit focused on empowering the voices of black and Latinx youth. She worries that the emphasis on catering to tourists has made the city government forget about the people without economic privilege who already live in Asheville.

“When something’s getting built it’s probably a hotel. We’re so focused on tourists and new people moving here. We’re forgetting about the people that already live here,” she tells me.

In the tradition of most American teenagers, she likes to hang out at the mall or go to the movies, but wishes there were more things to do, more places where she felt welcome to simply *be*.

Kaliyah does like to hang out with friends at the Arthur R. Edington Education and Career Center on the Southside of town. Besides housing programs for youth like My Community Matters and Word on the Street, it’s an easy spot to text a friend to hang out on the basketball court or grab a bite to eat at Southside Kitchen, which serves donation-based meals to the public. When in season, flowers from the Center’s community garden grace the tables and there’s a palpable sense of familial hospitality in the dining room.

Another vestige of Asheville's black community, The Edington Center was originally a neighborhood school, but after integration, it was turned into a city Parks and Recreation facility. When the Asheville Housing Authority purchased the building in 2012, Shuvonda Harper, a Southside native, helped bring the building back to life.

"The Housing Authority got grant funding to do this project. The community did it. The community is in here. This is what the community wanted...I love when [the city] comes to the space so that they can see the beauty of the space and how it transformed. The old windows were knocked out and we got these new windows in. The foyer area was lifted up and opened up. It brings in a lot more light, whereas it was an institution before. It was narrow. It was dark. It was that institutional blue," Shuvonda explained from her seat at a picnic table outside of Southside Kitchen.

Shuvonda now works for the Housing Authority and is largely credited for creating the bustling center of activity that the Edington Center is today. With a pink flower from the garden tucked behind her ear and a quick laugh, she had the kind of bright energy of someone in love with her home, intent on making it a beautiful and comfortable space for family to visit. She is just the kind of woman I'd hoped to find here in the mountains. She invites me to come back for a meal at the Kitchen, and I promise to be back.

Several weeks later, I sit in the dining room waiting as my stomach growls. Ramona Young directs her kitchen with the grace and authority of a symphony conductor. She is tall and trim, dressed in jeans and a black

chef's coat, braided hair wrapped in a silk scarf. She leans over a stainless steel industrial cart to check a tray of turkey bacon that her student just pulled from the oven.

"We aren't serving that bacon, it's burnt up. Take it to the back," she says firmly but kindly. He immediately obeys.

It's 9:45a.m. on a Friday at Southside Kitchen, and brunch service starts in 15 minutes. Five students and several volunteers dance around each other, sandwiched between gleaming steel counters, hot ovens and sizzling fryers. Rap music from a speaker at the back of the room vibrates in the air.

"Can I get a wipe down?" Ramona shouts, arm extended and finger pointing at a spill on the counter.

Octavius wheels himself to the target, rag at the ready. He commands his wheelchair like someone who has spent most of his life navigating tight spaces. Several years ago, he was playing basketball at an outdoor court when he was collateral damage from a drive-by shooting; getting used to the chair was tough. He'd been a cook at the Aloft hotel before the shooting, and he wasn't ready to give up his dream of being a chef.

"I can still cook my ass off," he says.

Octavius graduated from Kitchen Ready, a training program created by Green Opportunities, one of several non-profits housed at the Edington Center. Southside Kitchen, where he is now Ramona's second in command,

is the program's home and is often a stepping-stone to jobs in Asheville's bustling restaurant scene. Kitchen Ready teaches culinary skills and graduation requires passing muster as a certified ServSafe food handler – a credential that managers value.

“Ten minutes until brunch,” Octavius calls.

“Heard!” everyone responds.

Ramona turns to the sink and fills one pitcher with water infused with holy basil from the Center's community garden and another with apple juice. “Let's go ahead and get the line set up,” she says over her shoulder.

Her students load big metal serving pans with steaming eggs, creamy grits, round pork sausage patties, bacon, perfectly fluffy, apple-stuffed French toast casserole, and fried fish seasoned just the way my Granddad would've made it. Weaving in and out of each other, they carry the dishes to the flat stainless steel table for serving.

Southside Kitchen serves brunch or lunch several days each week, and their food draws a crowd. It's bargain at the suggested donation of five dollars.

“It's ten o'clock, doors are about to open!” Octavius signals.

There's a line outside the dining room doors and when they open, several men – joking and laughing – pour into the room, followed by a

woman wearing an indigo shirt, brilliant against her beautiful ebony skin. The Kitchen Ready students heap food onto their guests' plates, and soon the dining room – which seats over 40 people – is almost at capacity. The noise level rises as people eat and talk.

Ramona finds an empty seat, taking a minute to grab a few bites of eggs and grits. The din reminds me of a family reunion, and Ramona's mouth is curved in a slight smile as she eats.

A woman with pale white skin, blue glasses, and a cloud of graying hair stands up from a table in the corner where she's been sitting with men in khakis and collared, button-down shirts. The lanyard around her neck bounces on her chest as she walks briskly toward Ramona.

"Can you turn it down?" she asks, gesturing toward the speaker at the serving station. "We're trying to have a meeting."

Ramona's smile fades, but she is polite and accommodates her guest's request.

This is a request that the African-American community in Asheville is used to hearing. Turn it down. Better yet, disappear.

Although the Edington Center plays a vital role in the community, despite the efforts of an organization like GO, equitable access to economic resources and opportunities remains challenging for Southside residents.

The brunch hour winds down and guests trickle out, but not before they bus their own tables. Ramona's students box leftover food in take-out boxes and stow them in a cooler outside the kitchen. Kids who come to the Edington Center for sports or afterschool programs know that they're welcome to take a meal. Other visitors can help themselves as well.

"Let's clean up and get ready for the lunch," Ramona tells her crew. The Kitchen Ready students also run a catering business and they have another gig lined up for the afternoon.

Ramona eyes two large plastic bags filled with green peppers, another plastic bin filled with arugula, and several pounds of sweet potatoes that were donated by a local friend of the program. She's thinking.

"We're going to use this up somehow," she says. "We won't let it go to waste."

Octavius and the others swing into action, and I thank Ramona for feeding me.

"I'm stuffed," I grin, "everything was delicious. Being in this kitchen was like heaven."

A quiet smile returns to Ramona's face. She cranks the music up again, turns on her heel, and gets back to work.

COMMUNION - *Simona Chitescu Weik*

My child kicks my ribs, a popcorn *pop!*
a long sigh. Inside the body's cage, pain
traverses from ligature through the hive
of nerve endings straight to the brain.
It nestles there with memories of hot bread
melting our plastic bags on our way home
from the grocery store, my mother putting
out a spread as if for a multitude, though
we only had two loaves, and a few curls
of butter, and a fig or two to spoon onto
our steaming slices. We burn our mouths
in that high of bread we swallow in chunks
on the floor of the living room, with the balcony
door thrown open, and our neighbor, Mihail,
whistling *Don Giovanni* arias while shaving
at his window. He can smell our bounty, hear
the crust's crackle on our milky white teeth
and we wave him, his wife, his children over.
He invites the kid with the lame leg who hangs
in the stairwell, going up and down, *practicing*.
Our two loaves have now turned into a thousand,
as everyone sits on the ground. Gabi, Mihail's wife
passes a flask of wine, or is it something stronger?
I am eight years old and I take a secret sip.
I know it dims the hunger, so I give it to my sister.
A few drops and something akin to happiness travels

those zig-zag pathways to the brain. *Pop!* Another heave and my rib cage opens like the pearly gates, my daughter so near now, pushing my heart into my sternum, my lungs into the vertebral column, and the chiropractor folds me over like cloth, hooking something in here, unbuttoning something there, the grind of bone against bone, a hymn ascending through this column of tissue and glia cell, his fingers, a bow to make my skeleton dance. Vibrato of hollow bone, the dulcet sighs of marrow, those two cords of life, mine and hers, that merge into communion.

THE GIFT OF MY HATE - *Buddy Wakefield*



At the Concert for New York City in Madison Square Garden five weeks after 9/11

Richard Gere stood in front of millions of viewers and said

*We have the possibility to turn this horrendous energy we are all feeling from violence and revenge into compassion into love into understanding.**

The crowd

booed him

loudly

as if to say,

Hey!

Buddha Boy,

We will not be caught dead acting like Jesus Christ.

As if Christ only published concepts he wanted us to thump instead of experience.

Granted, *compassion* is a wounded word. It gets banged around in the junk drawer.

It is not an entitled driver. Would not survive in California.

Compassion is often the last player picked. So maybe Richard Gere should have used the word *rest* to suggest that we curb the poison of reacting so fast.

But journalists insisted Richard Gere's proposal for love and understanding was the *wrong time, wrong crowd, wrong message*.

I remember being 27, watching this, feeling like some fathers do not tell their children *I am proud of you*, like an entire city had learned the language of a well-disguised suicide smothered in clever headlines and a swarm of stagy news reporters who failed to mention that a French man named Antoine Leiris lost his wife and the mother of his child— with whom he was madly in love— to the terrorist attacks in Paris last week.

It was no more excruciating than what happened in Baghdad, Beirut or the West Bank during the same 24 hours. The difference

is that five days later Antoine Leiris was the only man
to post a love letter for his son on the BBC,
an open message to those responsible for killing his wife.
He looked directly into their hungry little pain-bodies and told them
I won't give you the gift of hating you.

Pussy.

Pathetic propagandist.

Candy-ass liberal...

The insults that followed Antoine's moment of peace made me realize
Love – wounded a word as it may be – *Love* can see *all of it*
but *Anger* – anger is only concerned with what it thinks is fair,
narrow like the barrel of the NRA,
like the blueprints to Russia's femininity, to China's childhood,
to North Korea's private parts, to the bruised music of the Confederate flag
states
still singing like a drunk Englishman in a Tibetan monastery, loudly,
louder, *Hey!*
I'm the Over-Compensator! The Great Annihilator!
Cross me and you will know my pain!

In each of us

lives a small man

with a

good heart

and an ego the size of

Hitler.

Why are we not fighting fire with water?

Compassion will not make us lazy.

It is okay to cross these borders. It is okay to stay awake
to love our own ignorance enough to look at it square in the wise guy,
in the bright side, at the parts we are terrified to acknowledge
because of the work it will probably cause us

because there is a chance we have been your own terrorists.

There is a chance we are a failed relationship.

There is a chance that every single day

we are the reason millions of animals actually weep before slaughter
and we do not get to make up for it by watching adorable YouTube videos
while stuffing our face with their death.

It is more than some sellable cliché that –

through these bodies – we are rooted to the same source,
that we have arrived on this planet to experience form.

Now that we've had some time to do that, please,

let us reintroduce the idea of *questioning everything*.

Excessive packaging. Planned obsolescence. Breeding... Planned
obsolescence.

Identity. Fining people because they didn't have enough money in the first
place.

Anything impractical to the eradication of suffering.

Like denying refugees. Like putting a fence around freedom.

Like the oceans of care we keep for this world getting so landlocked in our chest
that when the answer tries moving over all the God dams built across our flooded hearts
to surprise us with consciousness
it might look like we are spitting back entitlements at the Earth.
Stand down. Stay still. Gather your wits. Find their ends.

Pull out the slack and say clearly

Yes.

Compassion.

Love.

Understanding.

Go ahead. Call me another cliché.

Stick your violence in my meditation.

The worst you can do to me for not joining the gangland war on Christ's behavior

is shoot me in the look on my face, the one that says, *I am not afraid to understand you. Or to stop you.*

In *A New Earth*, Eckhart Tolle calls us the noisiest humans in history.

Some things do not need to be fact-checked.

Stop backing up so loudly. You screaming siren on a cell phone.

You heavy-footed upstairs neighbors. Bloated bodies of anger

belting out boos the size of Madison Square Garden rejecting Richard Gere, who I know very little about,

but who I suspect, like most humans, is part saint
part fraud, and who reporters had to admit rebounded rather nicely
when he acknowledged that what he had to offer was *apparently unpopular*
right now—

Like taking away your child's assault rifle.

Like the color white.

Like the color brown. Like supporting
the man in Nigeria who found the cure for HIV.

Unpopular is compassion. Like a savings account in Greece.

Like the topic of trafficking Stockholm Syndrome
all the way back from New York City to right here down the West of me

where I am determined to see all of it
because I don't get to go blind again, not without
carving the word *coward* in holy brail on every pen I will ever use
to point out how pain cannot digest love. It works the other way. My body
no longer loves writing poems for mass consumption.
It does not believe in blowing apart.

But I am still right here behind its habits,
stacks of ground down teeth and a mashed-up forehead of rolling credits,
working to see all of it, which I suspect is more productive than giving you
the gift of my hate.

GALATEA: AN AWAKENING - *Simona Chitescu Weik*

Act I

It's like moonlight ransacked her skin,
Pygmalion, feeling god-like removed
the last marble splinters from the curve
of her neck, beheld her in all her glory.
She was at eye level, her gaze fixed
him in place, and it was love at first
sight. Pygmalion had never felt this,
after all, *he* had made her according
to his vision, his mind, the primitive
longing turned virtuous by exercise
in marble and marvel, and what the gods
couldn't, he had done – dreamt the perfect
woman. Friends told him there was
no such thing. That his mind had gone
haywire. When he began giving her gifts –
amulet bracelets for her gracefully long
arms reaching for him day and night,
tunics woven with spun gold, dyed
carmine, lapis lazuli to encrust
her sandaled feet – they shook their heads.
But when he began feeding her, grape
juice staining her benignly upturned mouth,
bread and choice meats set reverently
in her hands, they began beseeching the gods

on his behalf, and urged him to do the same.
Aphrodite heard and was amused. After all,
it was her birthday and she was the goddess
of love and beauty, and could there be life
without those? *and why not, why not grant
life to a creature of stone?* and Aphrodite adorned
herself in gossamer and jasmine, perfumed
her neck and wrists with sea mist and went to see
what all the fuss was about. She found
Pygmalion running a brush over his woman's
calcified locks. She had entered as a zephyr,
and surrounding Pygmalion in the gust of her body
she whispered, *kiss her*, and the sculptor-king
not knowing what hit him pressed his lips
to stone, full of hope and ache, and oh!
breath met him back, beneath the skin he had
caressed for weeks, a thin line of pulse,
blood, sinew, bone, and she, Galatea, milky
white, as he had named her stretched and smiled.
Aphrodite stole away with a smile of her own.

Act II

There was a wedding in the presence of the befuddled
friends, lovemaking, and a child, and Pygmalion
who thought the world was of his own making,
began the faithful work of settling
down. Until his docile, smiling wife

began to steal away at night. He found her
in the kitchens kneading bread, her face obscured
in clouds of flour. Later, when he begged *why*
she held up her fingers raw, her nails chipped
from that morning's wash, where she had beat
the cloth against the stones as she had seen the others
do, she said *I wanted to know*, and there was laughter
in her voice. From there, all hell broke loose,
she lay in the sun like the village girls until her skin
browned and her eyes turned gold; she went about
the palace barefoot, conjugating to herself noun cases,
verb declensions, she picked fruit for their table,
and traveled to the Aeropagus alone. Pygmalion despaired,
and when there was talk of a university,
of special faculties and a soul, he knew
he had been duped, the gods up to their old tricks.
Even now, the king of Cyprus is face down
on his marble floors, beating the stone with fists.

Shame - Simona Chitescu Weik

To feel guilt or disgrace, to lose esteem
or reputation, or be the unfortunate
recipient of circumstances; to be bashful,
to cover oneself; an attempt at modesty;
or surprisingly, synonymous with private parts.
It began this way: when noticed, the nakedness
in Eden yields the first blush, the quick
sewing of leaves, the terror of exposure,
a grown man and a grown woman, birds
of paradise, trepidating to re-assemble
their plucked feathers, but not in the same
configuration, for what human can remember
the garments of innocence? From there, it is
called ignominy, humiliation, or some who thought
such a shame i.e. pity or misfortune, but after
the fig leaves dried and the animal skins tattered,
after the trek east and the settling, the coupling
and multiplying, the uncovering and covering,
it began to abate. New words re-formed
all things from galaxy dust to human skin,
and lovers began whispering to each other
fernsterln, German for entering through a window
and making love to your sweetheart,
while her family in the other room
doesn't know. Or *silm*, the Anglo-Saxon word
for the dampness between a woman's thighs, the same

as for the shimmer of moonlight on water.

PEARS - *Simona Chitescu Weik*

We wander the market stalls for something sweet,
between rows of green and ruby mangoes, figs swollen

with lust and honey. I place a handful in our basket
and sneak one in my mouth. We move to the pears,

you examine each, your hand an instrument for measuring
weight, firmness. I gravitate toward the brown and freckled,

ones where the skin is torn, the ooze of juices sticks
between the fingers. Like a child, I lick them. You tell me

lovers shouldn't eat pears. That in Chinese, the ideogram *li*
means both pear and separation, that we're risking the fates

turning against us. *What fates? And what if it's the perfect pear?*
He thinks I've said pair, but before either of us can clarify,

I've filled our basket with them: d'Anjou, Forelle, Starkrimson.
Pears to feed an army for days, bruised and soft, green

as if straight from the bloom, round and pointed, pears to fill
your empty hands, and mine. When Plutarch asked the boys

of Argos about their strength, they said they'd been nourished
on wild pears. Later we sit on the grass and you use your pocketknife

to open them, some blooming pink like a girl's mouth. You bite those first. I think of Eve, the handing of forbidden fruit to Adam, he accepting just to please her or, like some commentators say, afraid of facing paradise alone. Or St. Augustine, fourteen and brash, stealing pears with his friends, to write a treatise about them later. Such pleasure, frenzy, and deceit! Or Erik Satie, frustrated by the critics' accusations that his compositions were formless, wrote *Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear*. If we could separate time from happiness, shadow from light, the ripe from the withered! If all of it could be this, a parallelogram of light on the wet and fragrant grass, and you eating pears docilely out of my hand.

BIRD BOX, AND WHAT I DIDN'T SEE - Steve Daugherty

Netflix's *Bird Box* has been hailed by the company as their most-watched week-of-release film ever. I was one of the tens of millions who tuned in. And I did so mostly because I had already tuned in to the story three Decembers earlier.

I consumed Josh Malerman's debut novel, *Bird Box*, in three sittings. A nimbly paced, time-hopping thriller about a mother getting her two children down a river to safety as the world falls to malevolent beings who make suicide an

irresistible impulse, the

book was a decent addition to my shelves.

Malerman leaves the right questions unanswered à la McCarthy's *The Road*, and gave me an overall impression that the

young author had

graduated from a Stephen King writing school and was passably trying out his wings. The characters were somewhat flat, and I twisted my ankle on several plot holes (how does knowledge of the *creatures'* method of killing people get transferred, since seeing them renders one immediately unavailable for comment?), but overall I enjoyed the ride.



Three Decembers later, and here I was enjoying it yet again—on screen. That is until I wondered if my enjoyment was a feature of my own unseeing ableism.

The movie largely follows the book's plotting and characters, with no severe insults to any purists. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* is honored well enough I suppose, although the genre of depicting someone desperately journeying from a dystopian A to B with little more impetus than not dying may need a reboot. It's getting harder to care. Netflix has conditioned us to imbibe dozens of episodes and multiple seasons of a character's experiences, with a sum of several days of our lives engaged in caring about them. A two hour movie, such as *Bird Box*, may challenge our modern notion of how long it takes to love a hero, since 120 minutes is now the equivalent screen time of a bit-part player in a box set binge who lasts only an episode or two.

That said, casting Sandra Bullock as Malorie was a direct hit. A soft heart wrapped tightly in uncompromising necessity, Bullock's Malorie is the grown up Katniss Everdeen I didn't know I needed to check in on. I've enjoyed watching her save herself from a collapsing space station, Los Angeles from a bus, and literally *all of us* from the internet. But her groping her way through hell may be my new favorite. As a bonus, the fraught stuttering Bullock often uses to emote mental stress in her characters—as much a hallmark as a Tom Cruise sprint—has transformed; Malorie repeats entire phrases as though stuck in a loop when under pressure. I enjoyed the evolution.

Sarah Paulson, as Malorie's sister, Jess, was sadly only on camera for a few moments, and her demise contradicts my early statement about our having time to emotionally invest. Paulson is the kind of actor who can invest real weight into seconds of screen time. She helped invest *me*, early in the film.

John Malkovich played John Malkovich with the pseudonym *Douglas*, a logical survivalist whose career as a lawyer eliminated any concern he might have once had about seeming like a sociopath. Delightful as ever. And there's able support in the form of Trevante Rhodes, a perfect complement to our protagonist, neither outshining Malorie (my wife may disagree here, even with the TV muted...) nor leaving her to her calculating Darwinian reductionism (she named the kids *Boy* and *Girl*, for goodness' sake.)

The rest of the cast provide a bit more dimension than the book, as well as the necessary genre tropes: a real-life rapper trying out his acting chops, a no-nonsense elderly lady who will hit you if she must, a surprisingly astute grocery clerk possessing otherwise unavailable answers (donning his red grocery vest until his death, as if to prevent us forgetting that pre-apocalypse, we had ignored him to our discredit.)

Bird Box the movie is periodically tense and thrilling, but for me it fell short of being as scary—certainly not as *terrifying*—as has been insisted by audience members sounding off online. As the easy-to-recognize progeny of Shyamalan's *The Happening* and Krasinski's *A Quiet Place*, *Bird Box* was also only about as frightening, and I didn't lose sleep over either. The

movie's true impact on me was something other than what director Susanne Bier probably intended.

A full day after the credits rolled, I felt like a blindfold had been lifted, so to speak. Apart from whether the movie was enjoyable, scary, or could be bothered to explain how Felix was capable of having enjoyable sex with Lucy despite all the demons and corpses on the front lawn, I realized I had just been entertained by something that made mentally ill and blind characters into props. Dare I conclude that I had just been an unseeing participant in ableism?

Throughout the film, mentally ill people are the malevolent entity's malevolent henchmen. They require no shielding of their eyes. They have seen the monster, but because they were already mentally "askew", they don't experience any suicidal impulses. In fact, they see no monster when they look at all, but ineffable beauty. They drive about the countryside now, thriving in stolen cars and in functional collaboration with one another, forcing the good sane people's eyelids open to see the unseeable and take their own lives, rejoicing in their renewed purpose. Or, shorter: hey all the crazy people who perhaps make those of us whose mental conditions are more conventional feel funny when we're around them, they were best suited to work for the devil.

One thing should be obvious: the difficulties of living with mental illness of varying type and degree are compounded by stigma. *Bird Box* capitalizes on this stigma. These dear people, and I mean "dear" not to condescend, but as I would of anyone about who deserves care, attention, respect, suffer social distancing, isolation, and prejudice that may cost them the

opportunity to make a living or enjoy connection with others. Sadly, fear of these difficulties causes a majority of them to not get the help they need out of the hope that unacknowledged illness can't and won't be stigmatized.

Our culture has already trained many of us to distance ourselves from those labeled weird or crazy. Major news outlets and films reinforce our whole lives that mental illness is equivalent to *dangerous*. Think of it; soon after news breaks of a mass shooting, a debate ensues about whether the shooter was a terrorist or was mentally ill. As if there were no other option.

I wonder why *Bird Box* didn't do a better job of dignifying the people that seemed to serve an outmoded caricature. The toll mental illness can take on those burdened, and their loved ones, and how aware of this the rest of us have become; I had the sense that *Bird Box* had ultimately proven to be a \$20 million punching down on those it could have just as easily, and perhaps more interestingly, lifted up. And not just the mentally ill, either.

Frankly, where the hell was Daredevil?

You know, the blind superhero that Netflix showed us was capable of kicking ass and taking names? Perhaps changes like this would've put the movie on a totally different set of tracks. Note that *Bird Box* comes to its credits with blind folks turning out to have had keys to the kingdom all along, but they play no role in the heroics of the movie before this point. They simply live — with the help of the seeing of course — at the end of the river that Malorie must brave. The story has it that they've been there for four years: so for nearly half a decade, why did the blind not venture out to help in a world that they have always thrived in anyway? Couldn't

Bird Box have been, in part, the story of so-called disabled folks proving to be able, or even the most able? I don't know. I'm able-bodied and may have just moved the disabled-folks-as-props problem one seat over. Alas, my visually impaired, blind and mentally ill friends and family must tire of being popularly portrayed by people who don't seem to understand them.

I don't know if *Bird Box* discriminates against blind folk, or consents to blindfolding itself to get a bunch of us down the river, but the outcome is the same: an interesting story propped up by a problematic one. Maybe even a bad one. As a neurotypical man, I'm trying to do better than ask whether a movie is a good movie, but also whether it is good *for* us. Because if these end of the world tales are showing us anything, it's that if it ultimately enshrines a stigma rather than deflates it, it isn't.

A GUIDE TO SURVIVING DISLOCATION -

Simona Chitescu Weik

Turn every bitter memory into a funny story. Begin with, *when I used to be an FOB ...*

(fill in the blank differently each time) I didn't own a blow drier. I didn't shave my legs.

I thought Oprah was opera, and in an effort to connect talked nervously about Rigoletto

for ten minutes. Laugh along. Never mind the teasing, the glances sharp as lemon slices

on the tongue, a prick that makes the eyes water. Blink it away. Never mind the waking

nausea in the mornings of each first. Day of school, doctor's visit, mock congress

debates, camp. Forget those very public slips into the registers of your mother language,

*where you become tongue-tangled, pitch-knotted, fuschia-faced. Because to you *live* will*

*always come out as *leave*, the long vowel sounds that lilt from your tongue inserting*

themselves into English's plain speech. Don't let on that you think and rethink a simple

sentence. You'll want your prepositions to stay and not fall out of your mouth, inserting

*themselves in the wrong grooves, denting your speech. When in doubt, add an *ly* to show*

you know the difference between adverb and adjective, because to add a syllable would be
to learn that your life isn't just a series of subtractions, abstractions, disambiguations,
that with each verb correctly described, your throat widens, your chest fills, the bones
of your face rearrange themselves in an architecture you stop recognizing. How after you
tame your hair, become fluent in *Oprah*, something more mysterious shifts, your grip
on the intuitive knowledge of your birth language, the thin calligraphy of meaning that has crenelated your reality. It's a new self that balloons up
from this stop bath of words, pure verb, or verve. Now, you've got to let this language into your dreams.

HE DOESN'T GET IT, BUT DO WE? - Gareth Higgins

An old friend of mine used to say that *the duty of privilege is absolute integrity*. Those poetic words turn out to be revolutionary. They can change the way we think about life, which is really the same thing as changing the way we live. What they mean, I think, is simple: what we're supposed to do with our lives is to ask two simple questions:

What resources do I have, and how can I use them to serve the common good?

What lack do I have, and how can I ask for help?

These two questions apply equally to all humans, no matter what our power or status may be. All of us have some resources, and all some lack; all of us can make our mark on the world through service to the common good, and all need support in the areas where we can't do it ourselves. We're living in times where despair is easy to come by; some of us fight back with rage against authoritarian policies or dehumanizing rhetoric, some of us are frozen amidst the overwhelm of where to even begin, some of us want to run away or bury ourselves in distraction.

But the only way out is through: oppositional energy may be necessary to hold boundaries of protection around vulnerable people and ecosystems, but ultimately only doing something better in its place will help us move beyond the current crises.

And of course the current global crisis is a crisis of storytelling - who are we, what is our place in the universe, what are we for? Considering the two

questions above can open a path to an answer, beyond individualism, beyond selfish ambition, even beyond fear.

In recent news the two questions could be applied to the men in public life who have yet to make amends for the harm they have done, but who seek to maintain privileged positions. Kevin Hart isn't going to host the Oscars, because he has rejected invitations to make adequate amends to the LGBTQ community for dehumanizing comments he made in the past. He seems to think he's being victimized here, targeted by a conspiracy of trolls who seek to take him down. I don't know about the trolls, but I do believe that public harm warrants public amends, and that a couple of statements about how he wouldn't repeat these remarks because "the times weren't as sensitive as they are now" and how he's sorry that his words hurt people aren't enough. But I do also believe that the problem is bigger than Kevin Hart and the LGBTQ community - dehumanizing words affect everybody, including the speaker; and to contribute a better world for us all, there's a deep need for a public path beyond fight, flight, or freeze. Kevin Hart could have become - could still become - an example of someone who made public mistakes, caused public and private harm, publicly apologized, and then took the step that seems least understood: made amends that are at least as public as the original harm.

* He could enroll in LGBTQ ally training, and pay for a hundred others to do the same.

* He could offer to fund scholarships for underserved LGBTQ young people.

* He could pay for therapeutic and restorative support for those of us who are seeking to address the wounds of being bullied, silenced, considered less-than, refused the right to marry, told we were demon possessed, or worse.

* He could champion the work of LGBTQ comics and other artists.

And as the first step on this path, he could ask the LGBTQ community what we might want him to do that would help us feel heard and respected. He might find a surprising welcome. He could also ask other straight folk who have been down this path before, learned from their mistakes, and become our allies. He would surely find allies of his own. The path beyond that might not lead him back to hosting the Oscars, but I imagine that truly seeking to understand the lives of folk to whom he caused harm would lead to an even richer reward: he would have made new relationships, he would experience the immense transformation possible when you look in the mirror and know that you have received mercy, he might even own more of his story. And maybe he could help lead others to do the same.

*

I speak as both a member of the LGBTQ community who has been affected by Hart's earlier remarks, and curious about his own apparent lack of curiosity about their impact, and inadequate amends. I'm also just as guilty of saying harmful things. So to address the first question: what power do I have, and how am I using it?

I don't have the same public platform as Kevin Hart, of course, but that doesn't absolve me from the responsibility that my old friend invites. *The duty of privilege is absolute integrity* presents the same question to all of us: what impact am I having on the world, and what support do I need?

I want to take responsibility for the consequences of my words and actions, whether intended or not. Saying sorry isn't enough; making amends without asking the folks I've impacted what they think isn't either. Part of what we're dreaming about in the **New Story Festival** is a world in which consciousness about the impact of our words and actions, followed by living amends, becomes second nature. We would teach it in our schools, we would talk about it in our art, we would model it in public life.

As for the second question, well, to be honest, while LGBTQ lives are more visible and respected than ever, homophobic jokes do tire, and sometimes distress us; and they are part of the structure that allows real harm to target people. America is a safer place than many to be queer, but it's still a daily struggle to go out into a world that still has to earn my trust.

I don't like to live with an invisible wall around me, but the trauma of growing up queer in a homophobic culture has a long-lasting legacy. I've experienced huge debilitating impacts from emotional bullying and the internalized message that there is something wrong with me. I've been receiving treatment for post traumatic stress disorder for three and a half years. The years in which I was unable to resolve this struggle cost me a lot, causing pain to me and others; this happened partly because I didn't know where to turn for the kind of support necessary to navigate the minefield of sexuality, masculinity, religion, culture, and my own emotional terrain.

Until my mid-twenties, every conversation I had about my sexual orientation was with someone who told me there was something wrong with me. I'm in my mid-forties now, out and becoming proud, yet still there is a wound to be healed.

But the only way out is through.

So here I am. Seeking to transcend fight, flight, or freeze. Kevin Hart is my brother, he's a talented comedian, his friends say he's generous and kind, and he has also contributed to painful and even harmful experiences for vulnerable people. I am one of those people. I think he should listen to us, and take steps to learn and live meaningful amends. But we should not define him by his mistakes.

And here I am again. Seeking to transcend the victimization story, and recognize my complicity in painful and even harmful experiences. I've spoken ill of folk. I've mocked people to their faces. I've lied to avoid facing responsibility. I've often not thought about my impact on others. But I want to, and I'm committed in my personal life, and in my writing and speaking to learning to ask of myself what I'm asking of you:

What power do I have, and how am I using it for the common good?

What do I lack, and how should I ask for help?

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Thanks for reading!

Join us at www.theporchmagazine.com

And here are some options for pursuing this conversation further - you're wholeheartedly invited:

The New Story Festival, March 29-31, in Austin, TX.

www.newstoryfestival.com

The Seventh Story books - two books our editor Gareth Higgins has co-authored with Brian McLaren, offering a lens through which everything can change. www.theseventhstory.com

Porch Circles - regular gatherings hosted by friends of The Porch, building community, unlocking from oppositional stories, and moving beyond fight, flight, or freeze. <https://www.theporchmagazine.com/porch-circles/>