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The Direction His Eyes Are Facing: An American Geography

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Critical Preface: Mapping the Essay

Most of the words which follow this preface are not my own.

Hannah Brooks-Motl published a critical essay entitled, “Michel De Montaigne, Time Traveler.” Brooks-Motl posits Montaigne, among other things, as a scribe of and a ruminator on other writer’s words. Montaigne cannot be read, she suggests, without the legacy of citations which necessarily precede, produce and succeed him: the centuries of translations and retranslations his work incited, the thousands of bibliographies to which Montaigne is entombed. Montaigne’s act of quotation—and every quotation attributed to Montaigne’s writing—is cumulative; like memory, an essayist quotes Montaigne and he is more vividly rendered and, yet, to some small ever-increasing degree, removed. “In reading, where do I end and what’s being read begin?” Brooks-Motl asks.

What separates essay from any other document of human record (like a draft-notice, like a ship-log) might be the self-consciousness with which it pays homage to, or alternately undermines, its source/sources. The essay as curator—not artifact. The Direction His Eyes Are Facing: An American Geography, was originally conceived of as an interrogation of motive: “where does the ‘conquistador’ (archetype) come from?” I posed within the proposal of my thesis back in May. “Is this archetype fully and determinately designated as the product of modernization, of European exploitation, hegemony and globalization? Or is it possible it was present before Columbus sailed the ocean blue and Magellan circumnavigated the globe?”

Obviously any single one of the above questions could be considered an albatross, a mountain peak, a bottomless crevasse, if the goal is to answer it and thereby put the asking to bed. Not to mention, many scholars, from historians to evolutionary theorists have written
extensively and exhaustively on the subject of Western Imperialism, on Spanish and English colonization of the New World. And the answers produced by their research have been multiple and contradictory and sometimes revelatory and yet here we remain, as ambassadors and inheritors of and/or writers to and from the American nation, still ritualizing, still telling and retelling, and most importantly still embodying and perpetuating the fable of exploration/discovery, penetration/conquest present in the “Digest of Columbus’s Log-Book On His First Voyage Made By Bartolomé de Las Casas.”

Luckily, the essay is wont to answer. I am fascinated by the Kenyon Review’s series, “But Is It An Essay?” Installment Three makes a case for the Voyager Golden Records, NASA’s capsule of life on earth marooned to the ether in search of an ear. Whatever my impression of the Voyager’s form, I am attracted to the image of the essay as instrument in orbit—feverish exploration without the promise to land, the promised land. Rather than locate the cowboy or the soldier or the hero or the conquistador at the mouth of his canal, my intention, or project, has been to follow, track, and identify this masculine archetype as it’s moved and emoted across a disparate and diverse collection of literary, popular culture, and mass-media sources: as it has been inflected and inflicted on living American bodies for hundreds of years. I wanted to know who read him/what he was reading. I let the conquistador Time Travel me. I invited his haunting.

A year and a half ago, I took Advanced Essay from Dr. Lakanen. One of the texts assigned the class was The Next American Essay: John D’Agata’s curated collection of contemporary American essay. Included in the collection is Paul Metcalf’s “…and nobody objected.” Metcalf’s essay is comprised almost exclusively of quotes attributed to or on the subject of Columbus;
Metcalf’s voice enters the body to invoke questions, and expertly positions the vast network of quotes he excerpts to contradict, complicate or garner momentum from one another.

“Columbus:

‘St Augustine says that the end of this world is to come in the seventh millenary of years from its creation ... there are only lacking 155 years to complete the 7000, in which the world must end.’

... condoning and justifying all brutalities against the Indians, as extreme haste must be made to convert the heathen...

Did he once chop the paws off a wild monkey and throw them to a wild pig to enjoy the battle between the two?” (284).

Metcalf’s essay positions the persona as the occupant of an obfuscated I – the essayist is organized within the body of the essay as much more subtext than text, and by that logic, seems to reduce the essay to something even more primary than Montaigne’s ruminations, more elemental. If reading the father of essay was to read him reading, than “…and nobody objected” might be understood as a stab at essay in an even purer form. But part of what makes Metcalf’s essay successful, or, indeed, possible is his subject matter: Columbus, like Montaigne (both patriarchs of their respective discoveries) has been translated, written and re-written ad-nauseum. Some of the artifacts by which his voyages were documented, like his log-book, remain un-recoverable, but in five hundred and fifty years the inheritors of the land Columbus began pledging to Ferdinand and Isabella at the close of the fifteenth century, archived, pressed, named cities after the man, the figurehead and thereby kept Columbus alive.
Fall of 2015, I began to orbit Columbus, the city, the name, as a monument to violence. My poetry professor led me to the romancías of pre-modern Spain which some scholars believe galvanized the poetry behind exploitation, galvanized the man that could cross the Atlantic, discover a shining city, Tenochtitlan, and burn it to the ground. “On board ship just before the landing at San Juan de Ulua … Alonso Hernandez de Puertocarrero came up to Cortez, quoting a snatch from one of the romances in the Castilian romancero general:

‘Look on France, Montesinos,
Look on Paris, the city,
Look on the waters of Duero,
Flowing down into the sea.
He who takes the king’s pay
Can avenge himself of everything’” (xvi Elliot).

I bought a map.

Remarkably, I think the first page of The Direction His Eyes Are Facing is indicative of where I began: observer, tracker, distanced, small i.

“This wall-hung metaphor for the modern world honors in equal favor its European discoverers, Magellan and Columbus, as well as the vast stretches of then uncharted sea: the emptinesses our mystery mapmaker denotes ‘unknown lande.’ The Strange and the deep. I am reminded only a handful of themes, figures, Gods, have endured to procure the chalice of industry. Dictated its
names. Language. Peaks. Enduring myths, like this 400 hundred year old map, inherit the privilege of remaining authorless” (1).

But I wanted to repudiate that privilege: not endorse it, and remaining objective observer to blood-shed and tragedy proved impossible. I began to collect quotes for an experiment in writing essay as cartography. What would I illicit, I wondered, if I could arrange the stories of conquest across time and space, across source and intent, record and legend in parataxis to one another? If I forced bridges over divisions of unknown land? I started my research, poring over the carefully curated syllabus I had assigned myself: texts such as *Figural Conquistadors: Rewriting the New World’s Discovery and Conquest in Mexican and River Plate Novels of the 1980s and 1990s*, I felt myself lose momentum; I was drawn more and more to the texts whose authors remained unselfconscious about the use of the national mythologies they were constructing as fact and exchanging as currency. Early on in my *Geography* I excerpt a quote from Devoto’s *The Course of Empire*,

“One of the facts which define the United States is that its national and its imperial boundaries are the same. Another is that it is a political unit which occupies a remarkably coherent geographical unit of continental extent ... And [these two] cannot be separated from a feeling which, historically, the American people have always had, a feeling that properly they must become what they have become, a single society occupying the continental unit” (11).

I began to pattern the fictions beneath the facts.
D’Agata introduces “…and nobody objected” by referencing Metcalf’s ancestry. The essayist was the great grandson of Herman Melville. D’Agata recalls Moby Dick’s unpopularity, the novel’s inscrutability among fiction readers and critics of Melville’s time, “‘The author has not given his effort here the benefit of knowing whether it is history, autobiography, gazetteer, or fantasy’ wrote the New York Globe in 1851” (279).

Moby Dick according to this critic, had not adequately taught its readers how to read: leaving the text’s meditations and observations, its recreations and its research inadequately delineated, its shape ill-defined. Fact which fleshed out fiction, or fiction which reconstructed the facts? Brooks-Motl writes “Citation—quotation—is one way of marking edges: here is me, my words, and there is not me, not mine” (Brooks-Motl). The Direction His Eyes Are Facing is my attempt to remove quotes from the context by which they were originally conceived — the places they produced and reflected power—and reposition them in new situations, new sights of meaning that undermine the ways they are taught to be read. The edges which mark quotation are the same edges that police the boundary: those which assert the American empire has become what it must become.

Other writers whose methods to which this project also pays homage, like David Shields, have interrogated the boundary at its root, removed the edge altogether. “My intent,” Shields writes on the first page of Reality Hunger: A Manifesto, “is to write the ars poetica for a burgeoning group of interrelated but unconnected artists in a multitude of forms and media—lyric essay, prose poem, collage novel ... —who are breaking larger and larger chunks of ‘reality’ into their work. (Reality, as Nabokov never got tired of reminding us, is the one word that is meaningless without quotation marks)” (4).
Shields purposefully does not gesture to where he ends and what’s being read begins. It was important in the mapping of my *Geography* to attribute authorship in order to reconfigure power’s source, not just its articulation. For instance I quote President George W. Bush during the aftermath of 9/11: “Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. Targeting innocent civilians for murder is always and everywhere wrong. (Applause.) Brutality against women is always and everywhere wrong” (5). I implicate the source, in this instance, in order to name those who manufacture and produce Truth.

Once I learned how to identify the replicating patterns present in politicians as they stir the hearts of the American people with the justifications for a “righteous” war, as they are present in the cartographer’s impression of an incomplete earth on my wall, I couldn’t ignore the pattern anywhere.

2015 was an exceptionally violent year. Though the United States is predicated on and sustained by industrialized violence – the pursuit of the acquisition of land, oil, or bodies—white Americans, in particular, are rarely called upon to witness, much less experience the war that sustains their—my—privilege. When violence changes direction: when it blows West, tumbles down the Twin Towers, in those “rare” instances where the American metropole is targeted, if American Truth manufacturers acknowledge that injury as anything other than an anomaly, an aberration, Terror embodied, they are silenced, deemed betrayers of their country, or equated with Terror themselves. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in *Between The World and Me*, “My death would not be the fault of any human being but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of ‘race,’ imposed upon an innocent country by the inscrutable judgement of invisible gods. The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The typhoon will not bend
under indictment” (83). And even as the American inheritors of the legacy of conquest its ritual, as well as its fruits, are cloaked in all our protective blindness, this year, it seemed our artillery turned inward, domestic violence on a continental scale. Or perhaps this is the year I started paying attention.

I watched shooter after shooter take aim at the classroom, the movie theater, the church. I read the Oregon shooter’s—Mercer’s—manifestos, I read him reading and found Eliot Rodger referenced and revered there, and turning to Rodger, found he too was haunted by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris who worshipped Timothy McVeigh. I saw this archetype—these expressions of white masculine conquest, entitlement and insecurity—in Owen Labrie’s rape acquittal, in Dylan Roof’s massacre at Mother Emanuel AME church. My intention by demonstrating the patterns I could locate between and among the above examples was never to homogenize or compare violations and tragedies nor their victims, but rather to negotiate the perpetrators in relation to one another instead of deferring to the paradigm of hard edges, boundary policing: the convention of alienating each to its own vacuum. I wanted to contextualize Truth’s manufacturers and their “rampage” agents within a long-standing historical/literary legacy which points to precedence.

The more I Time Traveled, the further my orbit launched me, the less I could condone my own insistence on the lowercase i. The paternal legacies expanding and contracting everything I saw, read, every artifact to which I bore witness, necessarily invaded my own domestic space as well. I couldn’t help but recall my gentle pacifist dad and the commune he fathered under the Southern Kentucky canopy in the early seventies, during the height of the
Vietnam War when I read the following quote from Toni Morrison’s essay “Romancing the Shadow,” from *Playing in The Dark,*

“This force is not willed domination, a thought-out, calculated choice, but rather a kind of natural resource, a Niagara Falls waiting to drench Dunbar as soon as he is in a position to assume absolute control. Once he has moved into that position, he is resurrected as a new man, a distinctive man—a different man. And whatever his social status in London, in the New World he is a gentle-man. More gentle, more man. The site of his transformation is within rawness: he is backgrounded by savagery” (44).

I felt compelled to research the references arterially girding the experience I navigated but had yet to cite. Like Metcalf’s disavowal of conforming to genre convention, perhaps my own desire to interrogate the conquistador, to locate him with and among the “savage” poeticized West, could only be made discernible if my own legacies were visible, woven through. Melville wrote, “[Ahab] piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down.”

As a citizen of an America in which unarmed Black men are regularly murdered by police, reduced to “thugs” and monsterized by the media— if they are mentioned at all— while white, male school shooters are humanized, rationalized, and ritually remembered, I remain, to some degree, ambivalent about my decision to give any measure of voice to the perpetrators of hate crimes and mass murder: particularly a voice that could be interpreted as sympathetic.

By humanizing these rampage murderers, my intention was to call attention to the mundanity, the normalcy of commiters of egregious, unspeakable acts of violence. The
sanctions by which this country invites and necessitates violences, and the bodies it deems targets, casualties, or innocents depending on their race, citizenship, or gender, their relative worth. As Morrison also identifies in *Playing in The Dark*, it is literary tradition among well intentioned white American writers or tellers of story to invoke Black or brown victims of racist violence as *objects* acted upon by white, racist perpetrators— the *subjects*. I self-consciously moved to disrupt that tradition by destabilizing the binary so seductive for the English language to funnel our history through, as though we are poles on winning and losing sides of a linear phenomenon called history. I have utilized and strategically positioned testimonies and literature by survivors (or their descendants): of rape, of genocide, of the draft, of warfare— citizens caught somewhere at the intersection of privilege and oppression, inheritors both of wounds and lances. My own whiteness is here. My womanhood. But ultimately the nucleus of this exploration, this essay, is centered on the architect of conquest: the ways in which he self-identifies in relation to his “savage” back ground through the project of colonization, acquisition and attempted extermination of indigenous people—and then assimilates and appropriates “savagery,” occupying the legal entitlements and privileges of an English “native” to America. I quote Thomas Hutchinson, from Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*,

> The inhabitants of the potent empire ... of the New World so far from being in the least danger for attacks of any other quarter of the globe, will have it in their power to ... reign, not only lords of America, but to possess, in the utmost security, the dominion of the sea throughout the world, which their ancestors enjoyed before them. North America ... as surely as the land is now in being, will hereafter be trod by the first people the world ever knew (56).
The authors of conquest, taught the invading “settlers,”— the white bodies necessary to pillage, to police, to curate an American nation whose immutable lines stretched from sea to shining sea—how to read the New World.

Early on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow describes,

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...(35).

Violence, genocide, rape is unavoidable from the language of origin of American democracy through to the digital age. Few can deny this country’s violent history, but for the manufacturers of Truth, the emphasis resides in the continued insistence on and presumption of redemption: the implicit and ubiquitous notion that the casualties of conquest are not only worth it, but necessary for America to become what it must.

I recall reading an article last year which discussed the controversy incited by the 2014 AP US History curriculum which threatened to revise, conservatives argued, American exceptionalism. According to Newsweek, “The Jefferson County school district in Colorado convened a board committee to review the curriculum, stating that all materials should promote ‘patriotism’ and ‘respect for authority,’ and ‘should not encourage or condone civil disorder’” (Wilking).
The tenets which bind the mythology of this nation to the elevation of history are so tenuous, not just the facts, but the light through which they are projected must be legislated from the White House to the classroom.

The issue made it to the republican National Committee, which passed a resolution accusing the AP U.S. framework of promoting ‘a radically revisionist view of American history that emphasizes negative aspects of our nation’s history while omitting or minimizing positive aspects,’ and recommending that Congress withhold federal funding to the College Board pending a rewrite” (Wilking).

The essay as curator—not artifact. I keep thinking about the Voyager and the edges it permeates, penetrates, upends. Columbus wrote letters to his king he bottled and set adrift in the current somewhere along a stretch of Atlantic between the Old World and New. History is a living document, and *The Direction His Eyes Are Facing: An American Geography*, aims to call into question, the fictions which produce the facts, the legacies by which they are fueled, and the mythologies you and I continue to live.
“The whole road is one of design ... made by hand and breaking through mountain chains and hillsides ... it is one of the greatest constructions that the world has ever seen.”

—Miguel de Estete, Noticia del Perú (News from Peru) 1535
I am sitting backwards on a rented couch trying and failing to trace the reckoning which guides the map I bought 20% off from a Half Priced Books bargain bin: a map one man once etched into sand, imagination, canvas over 400 years ago. A map rife with angels and many-tongued beasts, whirlpools and wishful thinking; I’m wondering how many times it’s been copied, reprinted, memorized to willfully mesmerize, to enchant, to instruct, inspire. This is the world the Spanish, English nation conjured into common belief for a century. The north, south, east winds all unify in this moment of divine intervention to blow West. Each angel is White, luminous, moon-skinned, large breasted, tight bellied, clinging aimlessly to the edges of an incomplete earth—each blinking away a blissful pre-breath of flat-eyed repose. Walking sleep. This wall-hung metaphor for the modern world honors in equal favor its European discoverers, Magellan and Columbus, as well as the vast stretches of then uncharted sea: the emptinesses our mystery mapmaker denotes “unknown lande.” The Strange and the deep. I am reminded only a handful of themes, figures, Gods, have endured to procure the chalice of industry. Dictated its names. Language. Peaks. Enduring myths, like this 400 hundred year old map, inherit the privilege of remaining authorless.

Joan Didion wrote “we tell ourselves stories in order to live.”

But some stories are told in order to ascend.
President Obama, on Monday, executively decreed the highest peak in North America, Mount McKinley, is to be renamed, reclaimed, returned to its Native birth, the story for which it was created: Denali. The high one.

Alaskans spoke back to the lower 48’s official recognition of a centuries-old name, seventy years after the mountain was christened McKinley by an Ohio senator nearly four thousand miles South from where the ancient Athabascan struck his spear through the gaping mouth of a giant wave:

Simply, “Denali is the true name.”
—Paul N Alberta John

“The people who wrote about Alaska said it was ‘vast wastelands’ ... they thought they were the first people.”
—Velma Schafer

“When outsiders came ... they renamed [everything]. There is a story ... Two brothers at different places ... found along the Koyukuk River ... were given different last names.”
—Dorothy Yatlin

The most commonly named cities in America reflect the idols we exchange for cigarettes and Diet Coke at Wal-Mart and CVS. 32 Washingtons. 35 Franklins. 24 Madisons. 21 Jacksons.

I attend university located just outside Columbus, Ohio: the most populated of 17.

“Tuesday, 25 September. At Sunset Martin Alonso went up into the poop of his ship and called most joyfully to the Admiral claiming a present ... he had sighted land. The Admiral ... fell on his knees to give thanks to God ... The admiral, according to his custom, told the men they
had gone [only] thirteen leagues, for he was still afraid that they would consider the voyage too long. Thus throughout the voyage he kept two reckonings, one false and the other true.”

“Wednesday, 26 September. He followed his course Westward until midday ... until they discovered that what they had taken for land was no land but cloud.”

—Excerpted from the Admiral Columbus’ ship logs as recorded by Bartoleme De Las Casas. The first voyage to the New World

My oldest brother, Cotton, lived the first five years of his life without a birth certificate.

My father, in 1973, spray painted his winning lottery number, his exemption from the Vietnam draft across the concrete wall of Towson College’s all-male dorm, before he and ten of his closest friends turned tail, broke legacy, headed West. My brother came into sun in a cabin between fields. To my dad’s unseasoned hands. Mt Aerial, Kentucky, Independence Day, 1974.

“He said, ‘I’ll give you five thousand dollars right now if you don’t join.’

“I said, ‘Dad, this is something I have to do.’

“He said, ‘I’ll give you fifteen thousand.’

“I said, ‘Dad.’

“He said, ‘I’ll give you forty thousand dollars to not die for their bullshit.’

“I said, ‘Dad, I don’t care about the money. I need to do this.’

“He said, ‘when you die for them you’re going to regret it.’

I went to sleep. The recruiter came to pick me up the next day.”

—I Am Sorry To Think I Have Raised A Timid Son
T.S Eliot once wrote “The war of the seventeenth century ... has never been concluded.”

The story goes that the Christian Lord swallowed the Spanish armada whole.

Some say President McKinley woke one morning with the dimming edges of a dream on his breath: The Lord bade him go to war with Spain, to betray his alliance with the newly founded republic of the Philippines, to invade.

Soldiers on the ground were ordered to slaughter every child over ten.

Joseph Campbell asserted that the ascension of mountain peaks was a universal human theme. He believed that once the earth had been colonized, turned over, every mountain climbed, men would cease to remain satisfied with conquering the earth’s natural awes and commence with inventing their own.

Once, we climbed the mountain in order to hear God better.

Then we built the temple in the image of the mountain in order to worship the Word of God.

Then we built the chambers of law in the image of the temple in order to worship the Words of men.

Now we build the corporation in the image of the law. The corporation worships no word whatsoever. The dollar speaks for itself.

These visages, finally, begin to scrape against something like sky.
President Bush spoke the following to the graduating class from Westpoint, June 1st, 2002. 9 months after the residents of lower Manhattan licked the remains of the World Trade Center from their upper lips.

“Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree.

(Applause.)

Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities.

(Applause.)

Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. Targeting innocent civilians for murder is always and everywhere wrong. (Applause.) Brutality against women is always and everywhere wrong.

(Applause.)

There can be no neutrality between justice and cruelty, between the innocent and the guilty. We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.

(Applause.)”
Sigurd, of Norse mythology, aimed to reconcile destiny, ascend to the hero his father bade him be. Unlike the swarthes of dragon slayers before him, Sigurd didn’t just take the great beast’s life nor simply make off with his spoils, gold. When the time came for the boy to kill something fire-breathing and therefore ascend to manhood, he cut out and ate the dragon’s heart— and in so doing assimilated its intuition, language, prominence amongst the other creatures of the forest. After the ritual feasting, Sigurd could identify his challengers by how much they resembled himself.

“When I was actually over there, it wasn’t how I’d thought it’d be. It wasn’t romantic. Not noble or ideological. You weren’t fighting for your country. It was a group of guys in the mountains trying to kill another group of guys in the mountains. You and a group of guys who are like you, fighting against a group of guys who aren’t like you. In the midst of all this, civilians die because of you. People are killing kids. Are these people a threat to the United States of America?

Nah, dude, they don’t even have shoes.”

—I Am Sorry To Think I Have Raised A Timid Son

“When the news spread through the distant provinces that Mexico was destroyed their Caciques and lords could not believe it. They sent chieftains to congratulate Cortes on his victories and yield themselves as vassals to His Majesty, and to see if the city of Mexico ... was really razed to the ground. They all carried great presents of gold to Cortes, and even brought their small children to show them Mexico, pointing it out to them in much the same way that we would say: ‘Here stood Troy.’”

--Bernal Diaz del Castillo, Conquest of New Spain
After Eric Garner’s strangulation at the hands of White cops. Mayor De Blasio surfaced to tell the outraged masses of New York City’s Black lives, both living and dead, “The weight of history can’t be our excuse.”

“‘My dear young friend,’ said Mustapha Mond, ‘civilization has absolutely no need of nobility or heroism. These things are symptoms of political inefficiency ... Conditions have got to be thoroughly unstable before the occasion can arise. Where there are wars, where there are divided allegiances, where there are temptations to be resisted, objects of love to be fought for or defended—there, obviously, nobility and heroism have some sense. But there aren’t any wars nowadays. The greatest care is taken to prevent you from loving anyone too much.’

—Brave New World

Too much.

In 1932, Huxley’s vision of dystopia: a peace wrought by sedation, a state civilized through mechanized sanitation, could carve out room for neither excess. War and love, Huxley wrote, each, edited from this someday by their bedding with passion, their mirror “savageries.” Framed like conjoined sins written into man’s pre-verbal nature, his “innocence”—both are, Huxley seems to advocate, the pillars of mankind: that which separates the inhalation/exhalation compelling a lover’s chest from the inhalation/exhalation propelling the bellows in a pressure gauge. And in 1932 we were in danger, the author decreed, of evolving beyond unrestrained passion to an industrialization of humanity Huxley feared might warrant a much more sinister regime of mankind.

My parents had me late in life. We were sprawled across two queen sized beds in a Holiday Inn somewhere east of the Mississippi when George Bush declared that the War on
Terror, The War on Afghanistan, now translated into an invasion of Iraq. “Peaceful efforts to disarm the Iraqi regime have failed again and again,” the president lamented,

“Because we are not dealing with peaceful men.”

I remember my dad didn’t say anything to the proclamation. Maybe he sighed. Maybe he shook his head. Michael Gramling had not voted in a national election since Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. I don’t know if he was surprised. My mama cried.

“I had so much hope that you and your sister wouldn’t have to grow up with a war.”

The future of civilization, of empire Huxley warned against in 1932 in part relied on a future devoid of poetics. John the Savage can find no hearth for Shakespeare in the Brave New World: only drug or lust induced escape. Babies are born without mother or father or legacy, nobody hungers or grows arthritic or regrets. Nobody asks for final rights or incantations. Nobody prays for the soldier’s safe return.

President Bush was back dropped by symmetries of stars. “The United States and other nations did nothing to deserve or invite this threat. But we will do everything to defeat it. Instead of drifting along toward tragedy, we will set a course toward safety. Before the day of horror can come, before it is too late to act, this danger will be removed.”

“All right then,’ said the savage defiantly, I'm claiming the right to be unhappy.’
‘Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat, the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be
tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.’

There was a long silence.

‘I claim them all,’ said the Savage at last.”

— *Brave New World*
“The United States of America has the sovereign authority to use force in assuring its own national security. That duty falls to me, as Commander-in-Chief, by the oath I have sworn, by the oath I will keep.”

—Bush
“The United States of America has never fought a war for territorial gain.”

– Obama,

Roosevelt,

Wilson.
The preface to Devoto’s *The Course of Empire* begins, “One of the facts which define the United States is that its national and its imperial boundaries are the same. Another is that it is a political unit which occupies a remarkably coherent geographical unit of continental extent ... And [these two] cannot be separated from a feeling which, historically, the American people have always had, a feeling that properly they must become what they have become, a single society occupying the continental unit.”

Once, maybe, these borders were hungry: mutually devouring their own lack of order of becoming, but by 1952, dictated by the force of a singular feeling, the border lay flush, uncontested, in accordance with the logical conclusion of destiny.

Maria Lugones theorized that by the reckoning of the colonizers, the “bourgeois white Europeans were civilized” and therefore “were fully human. The hierarchical dichotomy as a mark of the human also became a normative tool to damn the colonized. The behaviors of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful ... Hermaphrodites, sodomites, viragos, and the colonized were all understood to be aberrations of male perfection.” Ungendered. Inhuman. Aberration—both *Savage & Sinful*. War without nobility. Fucking without love. It is no mysterious authorship, then, that Huxley’s “savage,” John, in order to access the innocence of a premodern society, and yet retain his Christian goodness, must be inscribed with White skin:

“There was a thing called Heaven; but all the same they used to drink enormous quantities of alcohol."

...

"There was a thing called the soul and a thing called immortality."
"But they used to take morphia and cocaine."

"Two thousand pharmacologists and biochemists were subsidized in A.F. 178."

"Six years later it was being produced commercially. The perfect drug."

"Euphoric, narcotic, pleasantly hallucinant."

"All the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects."

"Take a holiday from reality whenever you like, and come back without so much as a headache or a mythology."

John unselfconsciously assimilates the symbolic elements of "savagery" without the conditions of its defect.

De Voto in his assessment of empire also collapses the figure of the Native American in with anomalies of geography, a pre-condition to a stretch of land whose destiny was always going to be made manifest. "History is not geography, it is men and the events they produce ... A river or a mountain range will not stop a society that has a strong enough desire to cross it, or a sufficiently compelling dream." The Native has no history.

The Native cannot dream?
N. Scott Momaday in his memoir, *The Names*, writes the migration of his grandfather, “Just before Mammadat’ys time, the Kiowas had been brought to their knees in the infamous winter campaigns of the Seventh Cavalry, and their plains culture, which was relatively new to them, virtually destroyed. Nomads, they had come upon the Southern Plains at about the time of the Revolutionary War, having migrated from the area of the headwaters of the Yellowstone River ... by way of the Black Hills and the High Plains. Along the way they had become a people of the deep interior, the midcontinent – hunters, warriors, keepers of the sacred earth. When at long last they drew within sight of the Wichita Mountains, they had conceived a new notion of themselves and of their destiny.”

— *The Names*

“By the second half of the nineteenth century, myth and history had evolved further, and Europeans began employing the distinction between the two to justify their colonization of the world. Myth, like the people who produced it, was childlike, irrational, and primitive; history, like those who wrote it, was sophisticated, rational, and civilized.”

— Saunt

“The Kiowas could not remember a time of glory in their racial life; they knew only that they were the ‘coming out’ people, according to the name which they gave to themselves, *Kwuda*, who in their origin myth had entered the world through a hollow log.”

— *The Names*

Humanist Juan Gines de Sepulveda believed that Native American art was “no proof of higher intelligence, for do not bees and spiders make beautiful things human beings cannot entirely emulate?”
Mammedaty “worked hard and believed in his work, and yet there were more important things in his life. It was in his nature to be religious, and he looked deeply into the spiritual part of things. For a time he wore a medicine bottle around his neck, and he prayed to the sun ... He was a peyote priest in his prime and a Christian in his last years. His character was such that it could not have been easy for him to give up the one way for the other; he must have been for a long time on the edge of eternity.”

The preface to a 1947 Western novel, Big Sky, reads, “In a region only three generations from the total wildness of buffalo and horse Indians, everything, including history, must be built from scratch. Like any other part of a human tradition, history is an artifact. It does not exist until it is remembered and written down; and it is not truly remembered or written down until it has been vividly imagined. We become our past and, and it becomes part of us, by our reliving of our beginnings”

Or

To remember, we must first dis-member.

Enter the stage of chrysalis. The white conqueror (read: hero) whose nobility and honor solidifies that which makes him good and that which makes him vicious as mutually productive and self-replicating under the excavation of empire. The heartbeat. The battle drum.

What makes a dream sufficiently compelling?
“Why did we become what we are and not something else?” De Voto asks.

“Was it the rude half-civilization of the Kentucky frontier that had made him what he was, or his years with the red Arabs of the plains? Watching him ride ahead, his strong shoulders loose and his body giving to the pace of his horse, Peabody concluded he was more Indian than white man ... One of gentler breeding sometimes felt uncertain and impotent in his presence, as if the strength and forwardness and primitive masculinity of the man dwarfed any disciplined powers.”

—Big Sky

Andrew Jackson was rumored to have said during the peak of his presidency, "John Calhoun, if you secede from my nation, I will secede your head from the rest of your body."

It was such
A long winter
When the ice had thawed
There wasn't much that survived it
It takes more
Than a strong swimmer
To stay above water
With a body divided

—Mutual Benefit, “Strong Swimmer”

In his early twenties, my dad felt his lungs lose grip on breath’s invisible rhythm.
A small row boat my grandparents tethered loosely to the shore hemming in St. Andrews Inlet, Panama City, was swept free by a wind too persistent for the season. Michael was a strong swimmer. He struck out into soft waves: his arms, making metronome from the imperceptible magnetic rift bisecting water/body. But the row boat kept pace: bobbing against something like horizon, giving distance in the water, a distortion. The metronome slowed, then faltered. My dad was equi-distant from two shores. Peeking under his left arm between strokes, he could just barely make out my grandfather, small, hand cupped visor-like to filter sun. John Gramling enlisted in the air force at the onset of the US entrance into WWII, began making sons the year he discharged, the year he married Vera, but now, a silhouette, middle aged, shallow breathed, his heart, even then sowing blockages that would come to fruit in a decade, John could only stand, riveted, immobilized, on the shore. My father’s legs locked up.

He would reach the boat or he would drown.

“When I was a kid I asked my grandpa once if he ever killed any Germans in the war. He wouldn’t answer. He said that was grown-up stuff, so so I asked if the Germans ever tried to kill him. But he got real quiet. He said he was dead the minute he stepped into enemy territory. Every day he woke up and told himself, ‘Rest in peace. Now get up and go to war.’ And then after a few years of pretending he was dead he made it out alive. That’s the trick of it, I think. We do what we need to do and then we get to live. But no matter what we find in DC, I know we’ll be okay. Because this is how we survive. We tell ourselves that we are the walking dead.”

—Rick Grimes, The Walking Dead
My dad tells me it was this realization, this instant of corporeal panic, he felt himself, for the first time, a man. John wasn’t coming, could only witness from the safety of dry perch. Who was protector? Savior? Compass?

Michael let go, closed his eyes, mouth mirroring the sky. Floated until, once more, he attuned his chest to the pulse underneath the atmosphere. Then he struck out, shoulders allied with the wind.

“Now and then I ask myself why I was so fascinated by the trails ... the ‘Highways of Conquest’ ... I was following. I knew that, for some time, the number of people they carried was small. Between 1840 and the California Gold rush, fewer than 20,000 men, women and children followed those roads Westward. – a handful compared with the hordes then flooding the Mississippi valley, or the hundreds of thousands crossing the Atlantic in search of a better life in the New World. Yet the story of the overland trails was told a thousand times for every one telling of the peopling of the Midwest.”

— *Trails West*

“I lost my ID twenty years ago, and haven’t been able to get a new one, so technically I don’t exist. But for the record--- I do exist, my name is Paul Ambrose, I was born on July 4th, 1948, I grew up in Tennessee, and on the day Martin Luther King was killed, I said ‘fuck this shit’ and bought a bus ticket to New York City because it was 20$ cheaper than a ticket to California.”

— Humans of New York

“Why Kentucky? I tell ya it could have been in Puerto Rico. It could have been in Canada. We really had no notion of where the farm was, but we’d sit around and talk about it. We’d talk
about the Frog Farm, and all the things we’d do there. People who would come over and visit us would think that we already owned a farm. It was kind of the way we talked about you before you were born. It sounded like you were already there ... We just had this dream.”

—My dad, Michael Gramling

“When I first rode off for a 5 week bicycle trip and had to negotiate where I slept, what I ate, how to deal with the weather. I remember being on the Eastern shore of Lake Ontario, with the wind and rain pelting down and basically destroying our tent. I broke the lock on an empty cabin in the state park there so that we’d have some protection from the rain. It was that moment, I suppose, but also the whole experience of negotiating the world on my own. I don’t know if that’s so much ‘becoming a man’ as just plain growing up.”

—Terry Hermsen, poet

My dad made it to the shore. Nearly dying in pursuit of a row boat seems arbitrary in nature, hardly worthy of Huxley’s nobility or heroics, but we don’t often get to choose the dreams we die for: those that reveal themselves to be “sufficiently compelling.” My Granddad could see more clearly from his vantage point the rate at which the row boat eluded my father, the futility of his own intervention. When Michael finally grabbed hold of the rope, the make-shift anchor, and floated, he gave his body over to the breath propelling bellow. But for my Grandfather, this victory looked like surrender. Why did my dad hesitate? Why didn’t he climb aboard? John lost sight of his son’s movement, and therefore, briefly, Michael’s life. My granddad didn’t or couldn’t express any of this fear in so many words when my dad made it back to the shore.

John told his son, “It looked like you were in some trouble. I lost you for a while.”
“We were just ... I don’t know. What were we thinking? None of us had even lived on a farm. None of us had jobs or had finished college. But we were all going ‘what now? Where do I fit in? Where is there a place for me in this world?’ I had started college thinking I was going to be a school teacher, but I only had to take one education class at Towson to see how brain dead of a job that would be. And I just screwed around in college for four years. I would try one major and then another major. Completely aimless. We were all aimless. So the farm gave us something to do.”

“They were heeding Horace Greeley’s advice not just to ‘Go West, young man!’—but to ‘Go West, young man, and grow up with the country!’”

—Trails West

“I kind of looked at the world and thought, you only have two choices. You can either be one of the exploiters – every time you access the consumer economy you’re exploiting somebody – or you can get a job, and submit to your own exploitation. I wanted to be politically off the grid. I didn’t want to be a part of capitalist America or imperial America. And I really, really thought at the time – so naïve – okay. It’s a movement.”

—Michael Gramling

The Oregon Trail is referred to by the authors of Trails West as “The Road to Destiny.” Wallace Stegner wrote, “The Western two-thirds of the trail runs through my native country. Its colors and distances are what I recognize; it’s hard, brilliant light is the first light I remember ... If I never sat out in one of those [electrical] storms in a covered wagon, I have done so in a 1919 Model T Ford, the isinglass side curtains blown out, the magneto box crackling with blue sparks,
my hair on end with static and the singed air smelling of ozone. ‘Well,’ my father said afterward, ‘That wasn’t exactly like going to Hell, but it was close.’”

“The American people having derived their origin from many other nations, and the Declaration of National Independence being entirely based on the great principle of human equality, these facts demonstrate at once our disconnected position as regards any other nation; that we have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any of them, and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes.”

Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place ... There can be no neutrality between justice and cruelty, between the innocent and the guilty. We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.

“On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity.”

—John L. O'Sullivan, 1839

“So I think I understand this national experience of the trail in personal ways. Up here on Bonneville point, it comes over me anew. There go the white-topped wagons down the gray hill. There go the skillful drivers, the patient passengers, the restless outriders. This place, like many others I have seen marked and protected along the 2,000 miles of the trail, is dense with
their history and their hope. The wheel marks heading purposefully for the river are the tracks of a strenuous dream.”

—*Trails West*
I woke to an October finally cold enough I smelled the heater curling on. I woke from a dream weaving in the slatted red/blues of ambulance sirens. Woke to a country that had lived to report the casualties of another mass shooting. 10 dead at a community college in Oregon. The father of the deceased, nineteen year old, Lucero Alcaraz, “Fought back tears and anger outside of their Roseburg home.

‘There is no sense in talking about it. It's in vain,’ Ezequiel Alcaraz said in Spanish.

‘What's the point in showing our pain?’”

I make coffee.

What’s the point?

I make coffee. I wonder how many have, like me, begun to become numb to this story.

Two hundred and sixty two school shootings since Columbine. This shooting was not exceptionally bloody, its victims were not exceptionally young: there is no indication coming through the photograph of young, White, male Mercer’s eyes that reveals the origin, the tell of exceptional hatred.

“They come to learn about Hurston and Langston, about algorithms, mitosis, and Marx. They come to share what they know from books and life. They come to teach you the passion of questions and the flow of a good paragraph. They come to flirt with cute boys, eat French fries, go to a soccer game. Books and blood. Computers and computations. A test tube and a poem. An altar to the dead. #anotherschoolshooting”

– Kelly Norman-Ellis, teacher and poet.

What’s the point?

Mercer was “fragile,” was “isolated.”
Like Padgett was “quiet,” “devoted,”
like Kazmierczak was “normal” “a quiet man,” “anything but a monster”
Like Lanza was just another “normal, little weird kid.”

_How did we become what we are and not something else?_

A few weeks left in July, and my father tells me a woman he’d dated at Towson, a woman who visited the Frog Farm the first summer of its inception, sent him a package. In it was every letter they’d exchanged, numbered in descending order from the first night he’d stepped out of the Volkswagen onto overgrown, untilled, Horseshoe Bend Rd. Signed Michael,
P.S. you have to come to see the sky.

And come she did. Included are the only photographs I have ever seen of my father from the period of his life after graduating high school and before my brother Cotton was a boy. For the first time I could hold the imprint of Michael’s body, framed in muted color, in my hands. Here he is lashed in skin-tight bell bottoms at the end of a dorm room hall. Here he is shirtless, lifting a bundle of Billy Duncan’s hay over his head. Here he is, feet dangling off the back of an old farm hand’s truck his arm around his first wife, Joy’s, waist, holding the woman from Towson’s hand, his long blonde hair curling under her ears and overalls, holding and inflecting finger prints of sun.
“It takes you a second to twig who they are, for these disembodied heads have been shorn, electric-razored down to Marine Corps prickles. You can picture the clippers, gliding up the back of each skull—all that glistening hair water falling to the floor.”

—Mary Karr, Cherry

In Dave Cullen’s best seller, Columbine, he describes Eric Harris’ childhood as familiar, suburban. Like many young boys, Eric’s imaginary play centered on the re-enactment of war. Eric guarded the Earth against Alien invasions, tossed pretend grenades into the ether beyond the border of backyard and covered his ears from absorbing the shock of inevitable impact.

“Eric was always the protagonist when he reminisced about those days in high school. Always the good guy, too.”

A year and a half before Harris and Klebold opened fire on their high school, killing thirteen, a psychologist assessed Harris’ mental state and determined “there were no signs of mental illness. No signs of anything to predict murder. Eric’s Web site was obscenely angry, but anger and young men were practically synonymous.”

--Columbine

“The result is a mutation: the boys suddenly appear overtly criminal—characters from the grainy wanted posters tacked in the post office. If one of them were hitchhiking on the beach road, even in daylight, you’d lock the car doors.”

--Mary Karr, Cherry

Klebold asked Todd to give him one reason why he should not kill him, Todd said

“I don’t want trouble” To which Klebold replied, a gun to Todd’s face,

"You used to call me a fag. Who's a fag now?!"

In a campaign against John Quincy Adams for the presidency, Andrew Jackson posited himself as one “who can fight” against one “who can write.” The Plowman and the professor. The man and the less-than.

According to conquistador scholar Pagden, “Cortes was certainly not a letrado. His attitude towards learning was no doubt typical of the Spanish gentry of the fifteenth century, who were notorious for their suspicion and dislike of the pursuit of letters.”

“In the early 1960s ... I was a middle-class, first-year student at an all-male Ivy League college, a training ground for the sons of the elite. Among my classmates’ fathers were prominent figures in business, government, and the professions, who fully expected their sons to follow in their footsteps. In late fall, dorm residents who’d been accepted to fraternities prepared for “sink night,” a time to celebrate their newfound “brotherhood” by getting very drunk. Before they went off, they warned freshman not to lock our doors when we went to bed because they intended to pay us a visit later on and didn’t expect to be stopped by a locked door. We didn’t know what was coming, but there was no mistaking the dense familiar weight of men’s potential for violence. When they returned that night, screaming drunk, they went from door to door rousing us from our beds and herding us into the hall. They lined us up, and
ordered us to drop our pants. Then one held a metal ruler and another a *Playboy* magazine opened to centerfold picture, and the two went up and down the line, thrusting the picture in our faces, screaming

‘Get it up!’

—Allan Johnson, *The Gender Knot*

Over the next several days, a narrative emerges. Roles are cast, bodies redeemed, examined, exhumed. Mercer was, as CNN regales, a military reject. One of his victims, Mintz, army veteran, former football star, whose “thoughts were not of himself” but for “protecting others” charged at Mercer in an attempt to block the shooter’s rampage, surviving, in the process, seven gunshot wounds, and two broken legs. His sacrifice. During his tours as infantryman, Mintz was awarded the National Defense Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal and Army Service Ribbon.

“What an example of what it means to be an American hero.”

“… None of us protested, and of course none of us ‘measured up.’ … That, after all, was the point: to submit to the humiliation, to mirror (like women) men’s power to control and terrorize in what we later learned was a rite of passage known as ‘the peter meter.’”

—Johnson, *The Gender Knot*

“Here was the ‘the nursling of the wilds,’ a ‘pupil of the wilderness’ … The hero of the War of 1812 and the Creek War 1813-1814, Jackson saw his military exploits as an effort to overcome his own ‘indolence’ and achieve republican purification through violence.”

—Kimmel, *Manhood in America*
“The one thing [Daniel Boone] was truly good at was pushing farther into the woods to kill for flesh and fur. Boone spent almost all of his borrowed time doing this, hunting peregrine. It kept his family decent while simultaneously keeping him away from them for months at a time. There was something salvific in it: the separation, the descent into a more primitive state, the regeneration through violence. He was still hunting and trapping well into his seventies.”

—I Am Sorry To Think I Have Raised A Timid Son

“... As outrageous as the peter meter was it touched a core of ... truth about men, power, and violence that, as men, we found repellant and yet ultimately acceptable. The truth is, we, too, got a piece of real-man standing that night, for by deadening and controlling ourselves in the face of an assault, we showed that we had the right stuff.”

—Johnson, The Gender Knot

At thirteen Andrew Jackson was inducted into an Early American militia bent on procuring revolution. By fourteen, he had dug the graves of his mother and brother, casualties in the arm of European conquest extended through biological warfare: small pox.

A nursling of the wild.

Jackson’s military career has been punctuated by many historians with the infamous murder of over 800 Creek warriors following the War of 1812. The exploit many of his biographies fail to list is the sanction that followed: Jackson ordered every Creek woman and child systematically purged from the landscape in the event of a Militia victory in order to “complete the extermination.”
My dad was eleven when he left home for an elite Military Boarding school in Baltimore.

“The intersection of who I was and what is military needed was the null set, as a math nerd might say. The school required precision and conformity, adherence to routine, obedience, efficiency, and organization. Tardiness was one of my most consistent sins, failure to have the right equipment at the right time was a bigger one, whether it was a pencil during study hall or the blank cartridge that I was supposed to use when it was my turn to fire the miniature cannon from beneath the quadrangle flagpole at 6 a.m. to signal the sleeping campus it was time to rise and shine. I tried to improvise. I pulled the cord, and as the hammer hit the empty chamber I saluted the flag, and yelled BOOM at the top of my voice.

No one but me thought it was funny.

Actually, my ineptitude at military school had all the elements of a pretty good sitcom except for one thing. No one there ever thought it was funny.”

When I looked at those photographs, for the first time I could see Michael outside of all the legacies and intersecting meanings his body and his brain signify to me, about a father to his daughter, could conceive of him as the occupant of a timeline beyond its relation to my own. Picturing his young adulthood is difficult not because he experimented recklessly, or loved women other than my mother but because most of the stories he’s told me about his life are threaded into the man he had already decided to become when, at forty five, he squeezed my mama’s hand during the longest and most strenuous labor of her three daughters, and I came into a dawn that had already illuminated him. Michael the blue-eyed boy, the boy who never lived in one place for very long and was yet miraculously adept at navigating his way home. This fits, this I find reflected in my own memories of him, once honing in on a tiny bed and breakfast
in the Northern Yukon after night fell too fast and quiet to orient our rental car within the map, my mom’s wide eyes narrowed to discern elk and black bears from the unmarked highway, her feet smudging the dash.

But then there are gaps. My father, as a young man, once shoved a stranger out of a party and into the falling snow. The unknown enemy and he were both drunk, both leaden stepped, making pillars of steam from mouths to fists. A pause. Then the enemy reared back and swung while the party-goers constructed the periphery to egg on or ogle at the developing spectacle. Michael’s senses were numbed by cold by beer, he became estranged from his own face, but he could dimly perceive the weight of the other boy beneath him. My dad locked hips, and spent his strength maintaining the dominant position. Desperate, defeat already set into motion, the other boy pawed at Michael’s face until my dad could successfully pin his arms, and was—finally—pulled off by an onlooker or a friend who had determined enough was enough. Only later, after the adrenaline and frost bite and victory began the thaw, my dad caught the hint of his own reflection. The other boy’s fist and desperation successfully concealed a razor blade, white knuckled. Michael’s face was streaked with blood.

Cherokee called Jackson “Sharp Knife.”

“When [Natachee] was three or four years old she played in the woods where, three generations before, her great grandmother’s people had passed on the Trail of Tears.”

—The Names,
Cherokees of the Appalachian ridge were “migrated” at gunpoint from the fault line called New Madrid, a rift their ancestors’ ribs and teeth fossilized for centuries, bridged. The Historians refer to the 1830s Appalachian Gold Rush as the “great intrusion.”

“Some of my mother’s memories have become my own. This is the real burden of the blood; this is immortality. I remember…”

—The Names

Jackson.

Here was a man in danger of authoring the nation’s divide. Jackson ascended to power on the gold ticket, on the ticket of rugged, original American individualism. During his presidency, he cultivated a reputation of ambivalence in response to state ordained and distributed funds, to taxation, and capitalized on a promise to the multitudes he and he alone could secure the pursuit of prosperity. En masse, at his beckon, the hopefuls and speculators, the frontiersmen, the poor whites, “intruded” to pillage the seams and veins of Cherokee heartland. And in so doing justified the fortification of the boundary.

Sutured the body of the state.

“The Jefferson Davis Monument at Fairview was dedicated in 1929, one hundred and twenty-one years after Davis’ birth. It is an impressive structure, a concrete obelisk which rises 351 feet above a twenty acre park. It is a principle thing in the landscape. The construction was long and erratic. Natachee and this monument grew up together. In 1929 my mother was a Southern belle; she was about to embark upon an extraordinary life. It was about this time she began to see herself as an Indian.”

—The Names
If you read history the way it is taught: through a column, the Trail of Tears seems sanctioned by the “Sharp Knife” administration as a solution to a conflict of regions. The Mississippi bank and river are reared up and marched east to divide the Cherokee from incurring casualties, from the insatiable, inalienable, and inscrutable questing of white miners. Gold, after all, is born where it is born and may only be taken from where it is taken. And men? Their drive for prosperity is walking-dream, is derived from a violent, ancient hunger; they’ll hollow the mountain with fingernail or flint.

Jackson didn’t author the promise harnessing the hunger at the heart of the gold rush; this is the promise echoed in the very scaffolding of the American Dream. This promise is sometimes called New World, is sometimes called the West.

“For West is where we all plan to go some day. It is where you go when the land gives out and the old-field pines encroach.

It is where you go when you get the letter saying: Flee, all is discovered.

It is where you go when you look down at the blade in your hand and the blood on it.

It is where you go when you are told that you are a bubble on the tide of empire.

It is where you go when you hear that thar’s gold in them-thar hills.

It is where you go to grow up with the country.

It is where you go to spend your old age.

Or it is just where you go.”

— *All The King’s Men*
Henry Nash Smith was lauded, in 1950, for a book titled *Virgin Land*: “One of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward through the passes of the Alleghenies, across the Mississippi, over the high plains and mountains of the Far West to the Pacific Coast.”

Vacant. Virginal. “The garden of the world.” The obvious interpretation of Smith’s metaphor resides in reading virgin as a qualifier for the land itself, somehow “unpolluted” by civilization, unpopulated, and therefore more fertile than the valleys of Europe, its seed more authentic. But the New World in both resurrection and reverence preceded its material reality.

Philip Frenau wrote in 1782 that the “North American empire of the future … would bring agriculture to the summit of perfection and make the nations brothers by disseminating the riches of the New World throughout the earth. The world’s great age would begin anew, ‘those days of felicity … which are so beautifully described by the prophetic sages of ancient times.’”

The American West, in the conception of the New World, wasn’t inherently more value laden, more abundant than other country— the West’s desirability stemmed from its opportunity as metaphor: Promised land. A promise to land. The chance to begin again. To return to an innocence, a silence, a profound emptiness eroded by the Metropolis and moral/environmental detritus of London. To a blue sky that could swallow you whole.

Frenau: “Through stately forests and rich meadows roam vast herds of animals which own no master, nor expect their sustenance from the hands of man. A thousand rivers flow into the mighty Mississippi, ‘who from a source unknown collecting his remotest waters, rolls forward through the frozen regions of the North, and stretching his extended arms to the east
and west, embraces those savage groves, as yet uninvestigated by the traveler, unsung by the poet, or unmeasured by the chain of geometrician ... leaving the shores of many fertile countries in his passage inhabited by savage nations as yet almost unknown, and without a name.”

But the West wasn’t vacant.

The White settler’s proposed domination of indigenous Americans became folded into the virginizing narrative: just as violence had always been integral to conquistador absolution, disinfection, rebirth.

Elliot Rodger, the day before opening fire onto UC, Isla Vista, culminated his manifesto with the following: “Yes. After I’ve annihilated every single girl in the sorority house, I’ll take to the streets of Isla Vista ... all those popular kids who’ve lived lives of hedonistic pleasure, while I’ve had to rot in loneliness ... you’ve treated me like a mouse. Well now, I will be a God compared to you. You will all be animals. You are animals. And I will slaughter you like animals ... Humanity is a disgusting, wretched, depraved species. If I had it in my power, I’d stop at nothing to reduce every single one of you to mountains of skulls and rivers of blood and rightfully so.”

YHWH saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And YHWH was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart:

“Behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall die.”
But within that call to genocide, massacre, injury, arterially linked to the application of violence, is also the invocation of poetry.

“What traveler should penetrate the groves and solitudes, what explorer name the nameless savage tribes? What poet sing the westward-flowing rivers?”

—Virgin Land
"The names repeat themselves; the names are the same always. They are the volunteers; they are the cricketeers; they are the officers of the Natural History Society. They are always forming into fours and marching into troops with badges on their caps; they salute simultaneously passing the figure of their general. How majestic is their order, how beautiful is their obedience! If I could follow, if I could be with them I would sacrifice all I know. But they also leave butterflies trembling with their wings pinched off; they throw dirty pocket-handkerchiefs clotted with blood screwed up into corners. They make little boys sob in dark passages."

--The Waves, Virginia Woolf
I pretend I am walking on the moon.

...

I touch the sky.
I worry that I will have a fire in my house.
I cry when I hear or see a dog die.

...

I dream that I am the only person on earth.
I try to be as nice as I can.

—Eric Harris, *I Am Poem*, 10/30/95

“Every infraction, every shortcoming were not only grounds for being yelled at, they were ongoing opportunities for the privileged rich kids who inhabited the school to engage in relentless humiliation and express their unrestrained contempt. At McDonough, I learned very quickly, that there are in fact worse things than being invisible. There was no free pass. Ever. And bullies. Every one of those ass holes was a bully and I couldn’t fight any of them. They were, quite literally, my superiors.”

—Michael Gramling

“For them, perhaps, it was a passage to a fraternal bond forged in their shared power over the “others.” For us, it was a grant of immunity from having to submit again, at least in this place, to these men, in this way.”
—Johnson, *The Gender Knot*

Days pass, hours. The media’s ensuing and perfunctory investigation into Mercer—his motives, his methods, his mental state—uncover a suspicious thread on the internet forum 4chan which appears to predict the massacre. “An anonymous poster with an image of Pepe the Frog holding a gun reportedly posted, ‘Some of you guys are alright. Don’t go to school tomorrow if you are in the northwest. happening thread will be posted tomorrow morning. so long space robots.’

The first reply:

“Is beta uprising finally going down?”

Another:

I suggest you enter a classroom and tell people that you will take them as hostages. Make everyone get in one corner and then open fire.

The (alleged) shooter replies to this post to say

“Thanks man. Please pray for me.”

Another:

“You might want to target a girls school which is safer because there are no beta males throwing themselves for their (the girls’) rescue. Do not use a shot gun. I would suggest a powerful assault rifle and a pistol or 2x pistols. Possibly the type of pistols who have 15+ ammo.”

Another posted a photo of Elliot Rodger, encaptioned,

“It takes a great man to do great things. Become legendary.”

Still:
“Make us proud”

And:

“Kill them all.”

The investigation yielded no substantial evidence that the original poster was, in fact, Mercer. Overwhelmingly white, male forums such as 4chan and Reddit are home to so many threats of violence, oaths of vengeance and idealizations of domestic terrorism—so few (in relation) amount to tangible blood-shed. The threats were often envisioned by “trolls” in the first place, or could not be backed up by action, resolve, vision, intent; the “real threat” like the real shooter, can never be parsed out, can never be placed, identified, or predicted due to the normalcy of his makeup, the recognizable/unrecognizability of his mugshot. The translucency of his mask. Caucasian male, buzz cut, crew cut, 25. 17. Mid twenties. Mid teens. Blonde.


White.

Male.

Anything but a monster

“Hi … Elliot Rodger here. Well, this is my last video. It all has to come to this. Tomorrow is the day of retribution … For the last eight years of my life, ever since I hit puberty, I’ve been forced to endure and exist in this state of loneliness and rejection and unfulfilled desire. All because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their sex and affection and love to other men, but never to me. I’m twenty two years old, and I’m still a virgin. I’ve never even kissed a girl … I will punish you all for it [chuckles]. On the day of retribution, I am going to enter
the hottest sorority house of UCSP. And I will slaughter every single spoiled, stuck up blonde slut I can see ... All those girls I’ve desired so much ... I will take great pleasure slaughtering all of you. You will finally see that I am the truth, the superior one, the true *alpha male* [chuckles].”

“Andy said: ‘My baseball team’s t-shirts had DBAP in capital letters. Our team made into an acronym. It meant Don’t Be A Pussy. I was raised like that... men don’t cry.’

Jim added: We used to have all my football buddies over at my house, like six or seven of us. And if my dad wanted us to do something all he had to say was one word,

“What are you guys, pussies?”

— Excerpts from Pommper’s study on the affects(s) media representations have masculine self-perception among, in the above case, white/caucasian youth.

Chris Mintz’ valorizations in the media are inextricably tied to photos pulled off his Facebook profile—grinning from under a flexed bicep in the mirror. Handsome. Muscular.

White. The soldier and the coward. The man and the less-than.

*Who’s the fag now?*

“And now here they were, The Cabal, The Coven, The Others, The Monsters, The Outsiders, The Faggots, The Dykes, dressed in all their human clothes. I am black, and have been plundered and have lost my body. But perhaps I too had the capacity for plunder, maybe I would take another human’s body to confirm myself in a community. Perhaps I already had. Hate gives identity. The nigger, the fag, the bitch illuminate the border, illuminate what we ostensibly are not, illuminate the Dream of being white, of being a Man.”

—*Between The World and Me*
Robert A Williams Jr. traces the first recorded “savage” of the Western tradition to The *Iliad*: Homer’s written mythology of the Trojan War. Beginning nine years into the war’s inception, Helen – the specter, the silhouette, the figurehead— had been shored firmly into the collective imaginary of the Grecian soldiers, who were not only entitled to the reclamation of her national body, but righteous in their pillage of a thousand breasts, hearts in order to return to King Meneleus of Sparta, the face.

“It is the ninth year of the Greek’s siege of Troy, and Achilles, king of the fiercely loyal Myrmidon warriors, is furious at Agamemnon for claiming his captive slave girl, Briseis. Achilles vows that he will no longer fight against the Trojans and threatens to take his Myrmidon warriors and go home.”

In order to prevent this pivotal loss of artillery, the Pylian king invokes the “names of the immortal heroes and demigods who fought by his side … in the great mythic battle called the Centaurmachy by the Greeks: ‘…Mightiest were these of men reared upon the earth … and with the mightiest they fought, the mountain dwelling centaurs, and they destroyed them terribly.’”

*The names repeat themselves; the names are the same always.*

*This is the real burden of the blood; this is immortality.*
"'All jocks stand up!' Harris demanded.

Nobody stood.

Bookshelves and cabinets and tables blocked sight lines and made it impossible for any one student to recount the exact sequence of what Harris and Klebold did next ...

Beneath one table, Craig Scott huddled with two schoolmates, Isaiah Shoels and Matt Kechter. The killers spotted Shoels, a football player and one of the few Black students at Columbine. "There's a nigger over here!" one killer shouted.

Under the table, Shoels tried to back up.

Boom.

A gun blast, then whoops of celebration.

‘Look at this Black kid's brain! Awesome, man!’"

He says he almost didn’t, almost didn’t do it...

Dylann Roof was welcomed to a Bible Study group in the belly of “Mother Emanuel,” at 8:00PM on a hot Wednesday in June. He says he almost didn’t, almost didn’t do it on account of the kindness extended him, a stranger, an Other, a new comer in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

But then he did.

“I have to do it.” Roof loaded his gun once, twice, again

and again.

“You rape our women and you’re taking over our country, and you have to go."
And for the fifth and last time, Roof emptied his round into the bodies, the backs, the breasts of Clementa, Cynthia, Tywanza, Myra, Sharonda, Ethel, Suzie, Daniel, and Depayne,

“Cortes began to extol our courage in the late wars and battles, saying that then we were fighting to save our lives, and that now we had to fight with all our strength both for life and honor, for they were coming, they were coming to capture us and drive us from our houses and rob us of our property.”

—Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Fall of The Aztecs*

“Nestor’s invocation of the ‘mightiest’ men ever ‘reared upon the earth’ refers to the immortal roster of Greek warrior-heroes invited to the wedding feast of Peirithous, one of the great Lapith warrior-kings, to the ... woman named Hippdamia, ‘Tamer of Horses.’”

As the Greeks remember it, “The centaurs ... proved to be most inhospitable guests, ... unable to control the libertine effects of wine on their bestial natures. When Hippodamia is presented as the king’s bride, the centaur Eurytion tries to rape her.”

“Then one and all we answered him that God was helping us, we would conquer or die over it.”

—Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Fall of The Aztecs*

A freshman girl, in August, accused a white senior boy at St. Paul’s elite prep school in New Hampshire of rape. Allegedly, Owen Labrie raped her to the hums filling the dark spaces between electric room and dorm roof. The two allegedly gazed over the boarding school campus landscape before —allegedly— kissing, once, then ducking out of view.
The prosecution exhibited an email Labrie composed to a portion of the male senior class, early in the school year. In it, the defendant proposed a continuation of a St. Paul tradition known as The Senior Salute, a game of sexual conquest in which the seniors compile a list of younger girls they find attractive: younger girls, because they are interpreted as being more naive, insecure, easier to convince. Success or failure within the competition is contingent upon how many girls’ names the older boys can ink over, can scratch out before graduation.

“Is life on earth heaven? Are there any gazelles left in this desolate savannah? Can sisters be slain in the same evening?” The email read.

“Had anyone protested, he wouldn’t have been seen as the more manly for his courage. More likely, he’d have been called a sissy, a pussy, a little mama’s boy who couldn’t take it.”

—Johnson, *The Gender Knot*

My father continued his story,

“You mean there are kids your age that are officers that tell you what to do and can punish you if you don’t obey?’ My Dad asked me. I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me. I was calling on the dorm pay phone to let my parents know that once again I would not be allowed to come home for the week-end. Such was the retribution exacted for not spit shining my shoes (I never did figure out how to do that one), or for not completing my homework because I had lost my pencil yet again, and no-one in study hall would lend me one, or even if they would, it was not worth the ridicule that would surely follow if I were to ask.

My dad was incredulous.
You may have noticed by now my Dad’s conspicuous absence from this narrative. That is because he was conspicuously absent. He made two other comments during the entire ordeal that I can recall. When my uniform showed up in the mail the summer before I shipped out for the very first time, I donned it immediately so that I might admire myself in the living room mirror. ‘It’s the uniform that always gets them,’ he remarked ruefully, to no one in particular.

“But fuck, man. Consider any guy who captured your attention, who gave you the (metaphoric) dick tingles. Likely, there was something in him that was unhinged to his advantage. Likely, he was in some way opposed to the kind of man we’re supposed to be now: the kind who understands himself, explains himself, acquits himself—the kind who, ultimately, never makes memorable gesture numero uno. Doesn’t that guy sound like a dildo? Aren’t legends forged (forged, not recorded) by the kind of man who lives in the world in such a manner that, unbeknownst to him—and he really couldn’t give a good goddamn either way—his days become his credentials.”

—I Am Sorry To Think I Have Raised A Timid Son

But fuck, man. The idea is tantalizing. And not for no reason. They say Cortez, the sickly son of a Medellin soldier, grew up listening to the romances of Don Quixote run parallel with the stories of his father at war with the notorious, land-stealing Moors, the Jewish heathens, until the twin streams of chivalry and nationalism, virtue and violence, spiraled out of his boyhood dreams into a unified narrative, A bedtime story that ultimately carried him over the sea, through a foreign jungle of “savage” limbs, and to the foot of Tenochtitlan. City of gold.
“These great towns and cues and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an unchanged vision from the tale of Amadis. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream.”

--Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*

“My Dad’s last words on the subject of military school would not be uttered for two more years, the night before I was scheduled to report for another year of prison camp, when he informed me he had finally over-ruled my mother (My interpretation, not his words), and that I was not in fact returning to McDonough after all. ‘You’re just not cut out for military life,’ he told me.

‘You’re a dreamer, Michael. Not a soldier.’”
In 1942, my grandfather saw the draft notice on the door for the war following the war to end all wars and enlisted with the intention of proving to the US government that his intellect, his skills in electrical engineering elevated his mind as distinct from the body they deemed disposable. I have little doubt that my grandfather believed his son’s heart fundamentally incompatible to military life. But what I don’t know is to what degree the state’s promises ushering the aftermath of my granddad’s survival, “heroism”, duty served, the GI bill and all it promised of solidifying a lasting peace, didn’t bleed through his consciousness, into the ways in which he reared and regarded his four sons. You’d hold onto hope, wouldn’t you, that your pledge of fealty to your president, your king, extended to shield your children: that they wouldn’t stand to be as vulnerable in the ongoing democratic project of US land speculation, that they wouldn’t be subject to the draft? But my father, the dreamer, came home to the draft notice on the door, just like his father. And John, knowing what he knew, surviving what he had survived, encouraged my father to enlist out of high school.

“At eighteen, I considered it. I still subscribed to the GI JOE version of American diplomacy. I guess I wanted to defeat the bad guys. I thought I’d be a hero, thought I wouldn’t be killed, you know? I was seduced, like so many, by magical thinking. So, what happened? My student deferment went through. Two years passed, and because I had that time, I got the chance to grow up. But then the US government stopped allowing student deferments, because, as it turns out, kids who’d gone to college didn’t make good soldiers.”
I bought *I Am Sorry to Think I Have Raised a Timid Son* for its title. Daniel Boone supposedly spoke those word to his only living son after the boy was not among the first to volunteer for the Battle of Blue Licks. Another arm of the war for territory against the “savages:” this one, the timid son would not survive, a battlefield beneath which he would be folded into the husks of hundreds, thousands of other sons, others’ sons.

How many bodies does an instance of sand or red clay swallow before it becomes a mass grave?

Once, my parents detoured on our way back home to Bowling Green, Kentucky from Willston, North Dakota, to a fenced in mound, a grave site whose name was barely visible from the highway. Wounded Knee. I was ten years old.

When my dad’s childhood neighbor, Michael Stokes, of Hialeah Florida was drafted into the leagues of casualties buffering the Vietnam War, the remains of his adolescent body would have been collected, recovered, boxed, and shipped home. His mother would have buried Michael in a graveyard reflective of his name, names, his origin, the Stokes’ lineage. His father would have been buried there. Grandfather.

The Wounded Knee Monument in South Dakota memorializes the unmarked grave of 300 Lakota men, women and children massacred by the 7th Calvary on December 29th, 1890. The prescript of state sanctioned violence—evangelized and hystericalized in preparation for the extermination of a displaced people, of refugees—was the US government’s fear and distrust of the Lakota Ghost Dance religion. “A Paiute prophet named Wovoka had a vision that
the Christian Messiah, Jesus Christ, had returned to Earth in the form of a Native American. According to Wovoka, the Messiah would raise all the Native American believers above the earth ... the white man would disappear from Native lands, the ancestors would lead them to good hunting grounds, the buffalo herds and all the other animals would return in abundance, and the ghosts of their ancestors would return to Earth ... All this would be brought about by performance of the ... Ghost Dance performed as a shuffle in silence to a slow, single drumbeat.”
Kicking Bear said the ‘Ghost Dance’ shirts had the power to repel bullets.
The memorial sight itself is built onto the crest of a miniature version of the South Dakota Black Hills. Adorned with prayers and artifacts of unlived life, remembrances braided in and out of chain link containment.

After the 7th Calvary opened fire, a blizzard blew for three days. Lakota bodies preserved, blood congealed, were wrapped in scraps of canvas, sheets, and gathered by their murderers. According to Dick Fools Bull, a witness:

“There were dead people all over, mostly women and children in a ravine near a stream called Wounded Knee Creek. The people were frozen, lying there in all kinds of postures, their motion frozen … The soldiers, who were stacking up bodies like firewood, did not like us passing by. They told us to leave there, double-quick or else.

Old Unc said:

‘We’d better do what they say right now, or we’ll lie there too.’

So we went on toward Pine Ridge, but I had seen.

I had seen a dead mother with a dead baby sucking at her breast. The little baby had on a tiny beaded cap with the design of an American flag.”
When I pressed my fingers into the grooves of stone spelling out the surnames of the bodies, lives spilling into one another, the stone wrought a decade after their burial, stenciled, etched, I must have imagined the names were collected by survivors. But the monument is actually a gesture extended by the US government, one aspect of a larger push to absorb Wounded Knee creek and the surrounding area into Federal territory, convert the land the grave hollows into a state Park.

Some survivors interpret the memorial as a re-traumatization, a reminder of brutality and an inflection of power: name after shared name printed in perfect, cold typography. The will of an architect of both massacre and grave.

The Lakota group protesting the invasion call themselves Re-Member.

The British Museum in London displays an alternating bounty of over 5000 objects acquired from thousands of cities, homes, tombs and mantles, the only evidence in London indicating centuries of imperial rule, expansion. Click a link to Babylonia on the British Museum website and you can gaze upon a virtual image of a once sacred document: the omen of the baru. Peruse the exhibition on Ancient Egypt, and you can be separated by no more than a few inches of industrial strength glass from the sarcophagus of a pharaoh. His organs individually encased across multiple rooms, shelves.

I remember visiting my brothers when they worked as servers and busboys along the ramshackle digs of Baltimore harbor. The two Smithsonian museums I begged my parents to take me to most often were the Museum of American History, and the Museum of Natural History. American history, according to national consensus, begins in 1776. With exhibitions
such as “The First Ladies” and “The Price of Freedom: Americans at War.” You can see Dorothy’s Ruby slippers, or a recreation of a WWII fighter jet. American museums do not display mementos from the countries it colonizes: not even this one.

The Museum of Natural History, on the other hand, covers a less coherent extent of time. And its geography is amorphous and winding. A wing for dinosaur bones, for moonrocks. Here, you can find America’s first people waxed and pressed among the museum’s wings mapped to contain myriad extinctions.

“We were to escape that night and get to the bridges ... When I least expected it, we saw so many squadrons of warriors bearing down on us, and the lake so crowded with canoes, we could not defend ourselves ... The passage was soon filled up with dead horses, Indian men and women, servants, baggage in boxes ... Of the followers of Navarez, the greater number were lost at the bridges weighed down with gold.”

—Bernal Diaz del Castillo, The Fall of The Aztecs

“Led by brave Odysseus, the Greek soldiers inside the horse escape at night while the city is asleep and open the gates for their comrades in arms, now stealthily reassembled outside the city walls. The Trojans are quickly routed and the famed city is sacked, pillaged, and burned to the ground by Agamemnon’s marauding army. The rest is history, as they say in the West.”

—Savage Anxieties

In The Revenant, Hugh Glass, charges his horse off a cliff in an effort to escape Indian threat. The fall should kill him —Glass’ horse is killed— but, miraculously, the European pioneer converted white “savage” lives. But the blizzard is coming, and the early sun is sinking. And
shelter is vital for survival through the night. Glass carves womb from horse carcass, still warm from the fear of the drop and the heat of the run. He strips himself bare, cocoons manhood into tender belly, sleeps. By morning the wind has stilled. Glass splits the creature, now sickled, down the middle, and, once more, emerges into the cutting, Alaskan White.

“"The Indians thought that the horse and its rider were all one animal.""

—Fall of the Aztecs

“We understood them to be asking us if we came from the sky”

—Columbus, The Four Voyages

“How can you buy or sell the sky? ... The idea is strange to us ... The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The Great Chief also sends us words of friendship and goodwill. This is kind of him, since we know he has little need of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer. For we know that if we do not sell, the white man may come with guns and take our land.”

—Chief Seattle’s speech of 1854 as translated by Ted Perry, 1972.

“The white chief says that Big Chief at Washington sends us greetings of friendship and goodwill. This is kind of him for we know he has little need of our friendship in return. His people are many. They are like the grass that covers vast prairies. My people are few. They resemble the scattering trees of a storm-swept plain. The great, and I presume -- good, White Chief sends us word that he wishes to buy our land but is willing to allow us enough to live
comfortably. This indeed appears just, even generous, for the Red Man no longer has rights that he need respect.”

—Chief Seattle’s speech of 1854 as translated by Henry A. Smith, 1887

“When the last red man has vanished from this earth, and his memory is only the shade of a cloud moving across the prairie, these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people. For they love this earth as the newborn loves its mother’s heartbeat. If we sell you our land, love it as we’ve loved it. Care for it as we’ve cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you take it … One thing we know. Our God is the same God. This earth is precious to Him. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see.”

—Chief Seattle’s speech of 1854 as translated by Ted Perry, 1972.

“God makes your people wax stronger every day. Soon they will fill all the land. Our people are ebbing away like a rapidly receding tide that will never return … How then can we be brothers? How can your God become our God and renew our prosperity and awaken in us dreams of returning greatness? If we have a common Heavenly Father He must be partial, for He came to His paleface children. We never saw Him. He gave you laws but had no word for His red children whose teeming multitudes once filled this vast continent as stars fill the firmament. No; we are two distinct races with separate origins and separate destinies. There is little in common between us.”

—Chief Seattle’s speech of 1854 as translated by Henry A. Smith, 1887

Henry Smith actually witnessed Seattle’s speech, supposedly could speak Seattle’s native tongue, and reportedly took notes on its content, of which, by his own omission he only
captured a fragment, an impression. “In 1891, Frederick James Grant's History of Seattle, Washington reprinted Smith's version. In 1929, Clarence B. Bagley's History of King County, Washington reprinted Grant's version with some additions ...” And on and on. And then, of course, there are those who question whether Seattle’s speech isn’t a fabrication at its root. Chief Seattle is, himself, a symbol, a statue, the man behind the poetry knew himself as Chief Si’ahl.

Columbus barely slept.

From August 3rd to October 11th at sea, charted West, the admiral paced the unnavigable dark, bleary eyed, hallucinating islands, countries, bodies of land and their dimensions conjured from scripture or half-remembered romancias. Columbus wrote letters to King Ferdinand that he bottled and cast from the side of the Pinta to the unfathomable the Atlantic. What happens to your sense of self, your sense of a somebody, if you are the man whose dreams of providence materialize? Do you paint your armor in immortality? Do you spoon your heart through your eyelids? How do you read the world? How do you translate a person or a people who are aberrations on a landscape you dreamt into becoming?

“So a dozen persons – men, women, and children – were taken in a peaceful way, without noise or trouble. When the time came to sail away with them, the husband of one of the women captives, and father of her two children who had been taken aboard with her, came to the ship in a canoe and begged by signs that he should be taken to Castile also, so as not to be separated from his wife and children. The admiral was highly delighted by this man’s action...”

—The Life of The Admiral by His Son, 1492-93
Bartolemé de las Casas, *History of the Indies*, wrote “I have no doubt that if the Admiral [Columbus] had believed that such dreadful results would follow and had known as much about the primary and secondary effects of natural and divine law as he knew about cosmography and other human learning, he would never have introduced or initiated a practice which was to lead to such terrible harm. For no one can deny that he was a good and Christian man.”

Anything but a monster.

...The names repeat themselves...

This is the real burden of the blood; this is immortality

...The names repeat themselves...

Anything but a monster

“The problem of translation haunts every aspect of the telling. [Tamir] Rice was generally described by neighborhood witnesses as a kid or a ‘little boy.’ The responding officers, on the other hand, described a man of advanced years and exceeding size such that, when Rice arrived in the emergency room, the medical team was unable to intubate him: Based on ‘prehospital information’ (or police descriptions), ‘tube selection was for an adult male’ and was too large to bypass his vocal cords. ‘Rather than delay for a second attempt, the decision was made to transfer to OR’—where Rice hemorrhaged to death by early the next morning.’”
When Hugh Glass finally confronts his son’s murderer, he and Fitzgerald exchange words. Glass struggles to grapple with what has compelled him through his perilous journey: the red blood beating his heart the battle drum of revenge. Glass hesitates.

“You killed my boy,”

Fitzgerald replies, “Or maybe you shoulda raised a man... instead of some girly little bitch.”

In a rage that echoes centuries of taking, Glass’ howl cuts the wind.

John the savage is mined from the West’s wide consciousness, as much a bounty of this promise to land as coal, gold, and ginseng. There exists no archive of evidence to indicate Hugh Glass, the man, loved a Pawnee woman or birthed by her a timid son, ever valiantly rescued an Arikara woman from brutal rape by the ungodernable, uncivilized appetites of the French fur trappers. Glass had his own fur to trap, generations of breath and stories to siphon from living bodies, a lifetime of slowly converting his own body into an incubator of culture, legend, legacy: securing the terms of his sacrifice. The attributes he assimilated, the mountain he renamed—the conditions of his geography, are today a landscape he cultivated, invented—the White skinned savage. El Nuevo Mundo. Immaculate conception. Glass keeps splitting the stallion down the middle, Glass keeps emerging into the blinding white of the brave New World.

“In 1784 Thomas Hutchins ... published ... a prophecy concerning the future development of the new nation that left little to be added by the philosophers of manifest destiny ... he finds in the natural resources of the North American continent promise of a power greater than any in the past ... and announces ‘If we want it, I warrant it will soon be ours.’

—Virgin Land
The prosecution revealed that in a private message to Labrie his friend and fellow classmates asked how the boy converted a no into a yes. Labrie replied, simply:

“Just pulled every trick in the book.”

She contended that Labrie bit her nipple, spread her open, spat inside.

The defense questioned the accuser/victim about shaving her vagina, asked if she twirled her hair when she lied.

Labrie maintained that he and the girl never had “real sex.” His friends were touted one by one in front of the prosecution in order to testify that Labrie intimated, in confidence, the opposite. But, each, in turn, concedes, it’s possible he was exaggerating;

*Don’t boys lie about that kind of thing all the time?*

He put a condom on, Labrie said, but stopped just short of penetration. A moment, by his own omission, of “divine intervention.”

Her credibility eroded decisively when cordial emails she sent to Labrie after the alleged rape surfaced in court. “You’re quite an angel yourself.”

“He’s not a saint,” Mr. Carney said in his closing argument on Thursday. “He’s a teenager. And I submit he told the truth.”

DNA evidence can *prove* only that she and he engaged in sexual acts: the question of consent was, in the eyes of the jury, a question of testament. Witnessing.

“Man is situated in the garden and told to cultivate it but is prohibited from eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Observing the inappropriateness of man’s solitary state, Yahweh ... creates animals, parading each in front of man so he can name them. The power to name holds special significance. Naming delineates, categorizes, defines, and imposes meaning
and order. But it also establishes hierarchy: the one being named is subordinate to the one doing the naming. Hence, man has authority over the animals, but his authority has been granted to him by God ... by naming and classifying animals, the man emulates the divine action of using speech to designate ... the elements of creation.”

But what about the power not to name, to redact a name, to insist on the substitution of monument, monolith, place holder instead of human creature, instead of a somebody? The girl Labrie was acquitted of raping remains unidentifiable. In the eyes of the law, she is a child whose name must be protected even though her body is rendered available for mass violation, speculation, ownership, projection. The defense questioned the accuser/victim whore/virgin child/adulterer about shaving her vagina.

*Does she twirl her hair when she lies?*

And God said to woman,

"What is this you have done?"

“The inhabitants of the potent empire ... of the New World so far from being in the least danger for attacks of any other quarter of the globe, will have it in their power to ... reign, not only lords of America, but to possess, in the utmost security, the dominion of the sea throughout the world, which their ancestors enjoyed before them.

North America ... as surely as the land is now in being, will hereafter be trod by the first people the world ever knew.”

—Thomas Hutchinson
“The first word gives origin to the second, the first and second to the third, the first, second, and third to the fourth, and so on. You cannot begin with the second word and tell the story, for the telling of the story is a cumulative process, a chain of becoming, at last of being.”

—The Names
Cotton was the second baby born to the Frog Farm.

“Paula had the first, Joshua, in the hospital, and the staff were not very friendly to what we take for granted now. Like, the daddy even being allowed in the room. Everything she got, she had to fight for, and she didn’t get much of what she wanted. Paula also received a congratulations from her congressman in the mail, which really disturbed me. I was like Jefferson Starship,

‘What are we gonna do when Uncle Samuel comes around
Askin’ for the young one’s name
And lookin’ for the print of his hand for the files in their numbers game
I don’t want his chances for freedom to ever be that slim
Let’s not tell ’em about him.’

So, when Joy found out she was pregnant, we decided, whatever we were gonna do we weren’t going to go to a Scottsville obstetrician. We visited The Farm in Tennessee, another commune which set up shop just that year. I still believed in the fantasy that my generation was all going to drop out of consumer America and take care of one another. Stephen Gaskin was the Farm’s mighty leader, and he literally thought he was God’s appointed representative on this planet. Up there with the saints and Jesus. But we knew they had midwifery so we checked it out. Once we were actually down there, we knew they were weird. They could tell that we weren’t there because we worshipped Stephen Gaskin, which made them fairly hostile to us. So, we decided if they could do it we could do it. Paula had expertise as she’d had a baby. And I had expertise as I’d read about having a baby.

Joy was still shoveling hay and stuff right up until Cotton was born. She went into labor on the fourth of July. Which on the Frog Farm was a big holiday, because all the townies came out, and we played a double header softball game and went through two kegs of beer. And
usually around that time Billy Duncan, our neighbor, always had hay that needed to come in. So, that was our deal with Billy. He took care of our farm, but whenever he needed us, we just came. So, I remember I got out of hauling hay that day. But it didn’t stop me from having a beer or two.

As people showed up for the party, they’d sit for a while with Joy and me and then they’d go have another beer. On and on like this. Night fell. There was a full moon, and a huge thunderstorm brewing above Billy Duncan’s field to the west. And the cabin was packed with hippies: a random collection of people if ever there was one. And Paula was coaxing Joy and helping her, and telling her to push. Joy didn’t have stirrups, but she needed to brace her foot, so I got on one side of her, and she pushed against me, and Rocky got on the other side of her, and she pushed against him. So all three of us were her support as she pushed that baby out.

When Cotton was born, everyone clapped and cheered. We cut the umbilical cord. And all the stuff I read had said to put him in cold water to make sure he cries—first thing, so you’ll know he’ll be alright, so you know that he’s alive.”

From the beginning, Achilles’ mother, Thetis, could read the symmetry in the stars, and sensing her son’s vulnerability, imagined she could coat Achilles’ pink, breakable body in the rinse that would wash him, hardened. In one version of the story, she lowers Achilles into the river Styx, (the border between the underworld and our own) but her grip tightens around the baby’s ankle to secure his body to hers—the current already coaxing Achilles along the seam of a premature conclusion, the someday soldier remains partially unbathed.

“I remember I kept worrying that he wasn’t going to cry, but finally we made him cry. That was his first experience. His second experience was being passed around, person by
person. And everyone held the baby. God. I think Paula still has the bible somewhere, the one we all signed. The collection of signatures of random people that happened to be there when Cotton was born.”

“A real bible?”

“Yeah an actual bible, we didn’t know where else to record it. You know, I refused to get him a birth certificate.”

I think before 2001, what I pieced together from the disparate bits of background newsfeed or the black and white representation of my grandad gleaming in metal wings on the mantel, was that war was something that happened to other peoples. In America, war was an artifact, a reenactment on National Geographic, a bygone era.

My boyfriend, Lee, told me once he was at space camp running simulated missions, how to breathe on the moon, how to lift off from earth and keep his heart hiccupping the cavern of his chest, when news spread US troops would be assembled to invade Iraq.

“I was crying in my bunk, and a counselor came into check on me. He asked what was wrong, and I told him my brother had just turned eighteen. I was terrified. I knew about the draft. He told me not to worry, he told me no one in the United States had deployed the draft in a long, long time. I asked him,

‘but can you promise me?’

“No more speeches.
Before Patroclus met his day of destiny, true,
it warmed my heart a bit to spare some Trojans ...
But now not a single Trojan flees his death ....
Come, friend, you too must die. Why moan about it so?
Even Patroclus died, a far, far better man than you.
And look, you see how handsome and powerful I am?
The son of a great man, the mother who gave me life
a deathless goddess. But even for me, I tell you,
death and the strong force of fate are waiting.
There will come a dawn or sunset or high noon
when a man will take my life in battle too—
flinging a spear perhaps
or whipping a deadly arrow off his bow."

—Achilles, *The Iliad*

Michael and Joy were set to get married in Baltimore, May of 1970. A week before their wedding date, the Ohio National Guard opened fire on student protestors at Kent State, killing four, an instance of violence which catalyzed unprecedented movement in this country’s youth. Michael called my granddad up, and told him—he was sorry—but the wedding would have to be postponed.

“They had already sent invitations to friends. My mom had bought a dress, but I told him it wasn’t where I belonged.” My father felt compelled to join the ranks of outraged students, the anti-war demonstrators flooding the nation’s capital. Even though the Kent State march on Washington was organized spontaneously, people from across the country turned out. En masse. A hundred thousand people in total. My dad and Joy let the throng of hippies propel them through the heart of the protest, the Marxist chants, and the Dylan sung like a hymn, on and on, and then, like a vision: there he was. John Gramling emerged from the crowd to grasp hands with his son. The two Gramling men marched to the periphery of the White house, shoulders allied with the wind.
A couple days ago, I re-posted John Filo’s iconic photo of Mary Anne Vechhio kneeling over the body of Jeffrey Miller. Someone had captioned her grief with a quote by Donald Trump: "I love the old days — you know what they used to do (to protesters) like that when they got out of line? They’d be carried out on a stretcher, folks."

My dad responded to the photo almost immediately: “They were courageous students who opposed the complicity of their University in recruiting college kids for the war machine. These days children are recruited in high schools and we accept that. That’s our normal.”

Over the ten years that Navy Seal commanders have been deployed to Afghanistan, “defeat” or “victory” as soldiers have interpreted those realities from the material truth, the indisputable data transmitted from the ground, have gradually altered shape. At first, like any battlefield, success measured itself in bodies counted, racked up. A tally of enemy fire prevented, disrupted, destroyed. In a decade, leadership shifted, “terror” tripled and mobilized, moved north, and set in on devouring a body from the inside out. Seal Commander Price began measuring success or failure in terms of losses incurred rather than inflicted. He barely slept. Two hours a night according to his logs, and never un-clothed in uniform. In December of 2012, his team was setting up to pull out of Afghanistan, surrender command, go home, but their plans were disrupted by a blast so wide it shook the Afghan valley. A lone body was recovered from the rubble. A little girl. Neither Afghan nor US troops could definitely locate the detonation’s source. No one could determine from whom the explosion came. Whose nation should be held to account.
“On the morning of the 22nd, a colleague could not find Commander Price for a meeting with an Afghan general, so he knocked on the door to his room twice, found it unlocked and went in. It was not until he fully entered the room that he noticed all the blood. He could not detect a pulse in Commander Price’s left wrist, and found his skin cold.

His daughter’s photo was on his desk, and the folded report on the death of the Afghan girl was still in the pocket of his utility trousers, slung across a nearby couch.”

We saw his fingers begging.
We saw him measuring the sky with chains.
Lands that change their people,
Stars that spread like pebbles.
He sang:
Our generation passed and died
The killers bred in us the victims grew in us
Blood like water.
Mothers who married enemies.
We called out, ‘wheat!’
The echo came back ‘war’
We called out, ‘home!’
The echo came back ‘war’
We called out, ‘Jaffa!’
The echo came back ‘war’
From that day on we measured skies with chains.

—Mahmoud Darwish, “Sirhan Drinks His Coffee In The Cafeteria” Translated from Arabic to English
“Joy and I had been living in the cabin on the hill, furthest away from the farm house. We had our own privacy, but you could see daylight through the logs, and wind howled right through us. No running water; we heated with kerosene lamps, candles, a woodburning stove. And I looked at that, that summer, and I thought,

‘I can’t keep a baby up here.’

‘Cotton’s fine while it’s July, but what are we going to do come winter?’

If I had posed that question to everybody, they probably would have said something sensible, like, one of us will go live in your cabin, and you should live here in the house. Or they could have said, we will dedicate some of the collective tobacco cutting money to fixing your cabin up. But I didn’t ask anybody. I just announced:

I said, ‘I’m going to move,’

I said, ‘I need enough money to cut the wind.’

“So, they lost me.”

Whatever force compelled her, Thetis’ baptism forged a son born on the cusp of battle, flesh infused with (nearly) impenetrable armor. A tour de force. A super power. Achilles body could be sacrificed a thousand times for every mortal soldier’s.

“For six weeks, I cut tobacco on a farm along Kentucky’s Southern border, and every penny I made, I saved for dry wall and lumber.”

After the 2015 attacks in Paris, the Washington Post published the following opinion, “The true Achilles’ heel of American foreign policy: Significant blocs of humanity ignore or repudiate [America’s] faith in the power of shared prosperity … Less ambiguous is radical Islam,
whether the Islamic State or other variations. We don’t speak the same language or, at any level, share the same goals. Radical Islamists deny the legitimacy of the secular state and seem willing to do almost anything to weaken or destroy it. Their moral code is completely disconnected from ours. They are creatures of rigid religious dogma, fervor and fanaticism.”

*We are not dealing with peaceful men.*

After the prime minister of Germany pledged to settle over a million Syrian refugees, Donald Trump suggested the exodus of refugees is a cover by which ISIS smuggles itself over borders.

“‘I've been watching this migration,’ he said on CBS, ’and I see the people. I mean, they're men. They're mostly men, and they're strong men. These are physically young strong men. They look like prime time soldiers.”

In September, the body of a Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi, was swept to a Turkish shore after his family’s attempt to escape across Europe, across the Atlantic, and ultimately to Canada, capsized in the sea. Pictures of Aylan’s body, motion frozen in soft waves, or cradled in the arms of a Turkish coast guard, went internationally viral in hours.

By January, French satire magazine, Charlie Hebdo, published a series of cartoons concerning the migrant crisis, one of which asked,

“‘What would little Aylan have grown up to be?’

‘A groper of women in Germany.’”

“Where are the women?” Trump asks. “You see some women, you see some children. But for the most part I'm looking at these strong men.’

'Why aren't they fighting for their country?’”
Had anyone protested, he wouldn’t have been seen as the more manly for his courage. More likely, he’d have been called a sissy, a pussy, a little mama’s boy who couldn’t take it

maybe you shoulda raised a man... instead of some girly little bitch.

Early February, before the blizzard that had been slowly collecting momentum in the South crossed the Ohio River, the first stirrings that there was an incident at the State House in Columbus, trickled through my feed. Someone was shot. Someone had died. The next day, authorities released his identity and the terms upon which the man’s body was recovered: Marshawn Mccarel, 23, committed suicide.

“Black Lives Matter activist fatally shoots himself in front of Ohio Statehouse; tough work for causes took toll.”

Marshawn spent Christmas Eve jailed for protesting the police murder of unarmed year old Black man, John Crawford III, 22: killed for walking down a Walmart pet aisle on the phone with the mother of his two small suns, swinging, an unloaded air soft gun at his hip.
Marshawn laid on his back— one man among a hundred activists performing a die-in while reciting, in unison, a mantra of the names of those taken.

The Daily News goes on: Marshawn “founded youth mentorship program Pursuing Our Dreams,” for which he was recognized by the NAACP the previous weekend.”

“Larry Morrison ... was scheduled to retire with honor on March 17 of this year. The Army said he deserved to retire on medical grounds because he has chronic PTSD. But around 3 p.m. that very day, Morrison's commander gave him a document that said instead of retiring him, the Army's going to kick him out and take away his benefits. Why? Because Morrison pleaded guilty to a DUI and reckless driving two years ago and because the Army alleges that Morrison joined a criminal motorcycle gang that's been linked to shootings and drugs. Morrison and other soldiers told us,

‘Criminal gang? That's one of the most popular bike clubs for Black troops.’

Meanwhile, he gets recurring nightmares about one of his soldiers who got killed in Afghanistan. A doctor prescribed pills to suppress the dreams....”

But there are nights, Larry says, he chooses not to take them.

“You know you can't go see them. You can't call him, and you can't go talk to them. So sometimes you want the nightmares to help you spend time with the guys that are actually gone.”
“And overpowered by memory
Both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely
For man - killing Hector, throbbing, crouching
Before Achilles' feet as Achilles wept himself,
Now for his father, now for Patroclus once again
And their sobbing rose and fell throughout the house.”
— *The Iliad*

Abdullah Kurdi, tried and failed to hold on to his wife and two sons after their boat to the Greek island of Kos capsized. He has reportedly now said his only wish is to return their bodies to their home town of Kobani and then ‘be buried alongside them.’”

“Achilles didn't ask to be strong.
He wasn't born with a yearning for blood.
War is just all you taught him.
You were his heel.”

--Marshawn Mccarel, (February 3rd, 2016)

“With me the world has taken great liberties, and yet I have been but a common man.”

— Daniel Boone
“In October I returned to the Frog Farm with a case of beer as my peace offering, and went to work, and by the time winter came around, that fire would keep Cotton warm. But I had set the precedent for keeping your own money.”

“The deal we made with everybody was that the farm belonged to whoever lived there. You could live there a couple of weeks, it didn’t matter. You ate at our table, you worked with us in the field. The deal was, if you left the Frog Farm, you didn’t get anything, we didn’t buy you out. We said, ‘have fun in your new life.'”

Peace.
“The winter of 75-76 was really cold. Was really hard.”

I listened to my dad say those words this summer on the orange couch against the back wall of my mother’s art studio in Kentucky over the sound of Teresa squeezing out paint brushes in the sink, but I have heard him say them many times.

“That winter, only a few of us didn’t return to Baltimore, got jobs, instead, in Bowling Green, because there was no field work in winter to pay the mortgage. I was desperately unhappy. It was bad enough that half of us had gone for the hardest months and therefore half our resources were gone, but then not everybody that did stick around was contributing equally to the collective fund. Dan had brought his girlfriend from town to live in the dome. And I don’t know if because of that, or because of the example I had set... Jack and Janet started keeping their own money. Which left me and Joy. I was suddenly, five years in, in a position of acting as the commune’s landlord. And I just... I just I couldn’t become that.

Dad describes the splintering off of the Frog Farm as an eleven-way divorce. Galvanized by a lack of real leadership or system of decision making or a shared ideology to rally around—all of which were intensified by the pangs of literal hunger.

It was such
A long winter
When the ice had thawed
There wasn't much that survived it
It takes more
Than a strong swimmer
To stay above water
With a body divided
—“Strong Swimmer”
“In December, I gathered the six of us, and I said

‘I didn’t come out here to ask any of you for your damn money. Fuck that. I’m done. I’ll see ya.’

I got Joy to leave with me, much reluctantly, and we moved in with your uncle—in Washington, DC. He took us into his apartment—me, Joy, and Cotton. We got jobs, and we saved money, so we could move back out to Kentucky and start again.”

The Frog Farm’s unspoken deal of residential ownership didn’t hold in the end, six months or so after my dad said “I’m done,” all the first folks, those whose names were on the original deed along with those that settled on during the years that followed, gathered in Kentucky to divide the communal property in equal pieces. What’s really amazing, my dad tells me, is “in all our hurt and anger, when it was time to break up, no one called a lawyer … We had all these albums and stuff strewn across the house; of course no one could remember who had bought what, and we just each went around and we picked something. I said, ‘Oh, okay, you take that album, and I’ll take this album.’ I can’t remember if I got the car and Alvin got the cow or if Alvin got the car and I got the cow.”

“That’s just how we did it,” is what I think my dad said next. But the last leg I recorded of Michael’s version of the Farm ends midsentence. Teresa, who he wouldn’t meet for another five years after the break up, Teresa, who was a freshman in high school when Michael sunk his moccasins in soft leather’s first brush with Kentucky soil, interrupted our last interview to bring me coffee. But this is a story I have chased as long as I can remember, and I know how it trails off and under, how it picks up then slows. I know that on the limb of the farm land allocated Michael, he built the cabin my brothers came of age of under, the cabin I would eventually walk
barefoot to across a long gravel road in hopes of conning Joy out of a bowl frosted flakes or, on
clear nights, lay flat against her trampoline, discerning Orion, the hunter, from a stretch of sky
so buried, it presses gaps in memory.

I know I laid under that same sky with my mother one night in September after a hoe
down: the sky fell around us in great trailing shards, and her fingers anchoring me to earth were
my only reminders of where I ended and orbit began.

I know my uncle and Dad built the house closest to Horse Shoe Bend Rd together, the
house my eldest sister would raise a son and a daughter in. I know on her wedding day, my dad
trailed Lauren’s white train over a bridge he built connecting the house my grandparents
retired to. Emma, when she learned to walk could shortcut barefoot through the woods and
back again.

The vast majority of Frog Farm babies weren’t born to cabins our fathers built. We were
born to hospitals with IVs and fitted sheets; inheritors not of shared land but overlapping, and
often unverified stories.

Daniel Boone’s grave lay unmarked until the mid-1830s.

Initially, Boone was buried with his wife where he had lived out the grief of his sons and
the end of his life: Missouri. But Boone became Kentucky’s untamable frontier embodied, and
for the preservation of our state hood, our name, the incubator of regional identity Boone had
become wasn’t at rest in death. “In 1845, the Boones’ remains were ... disinterred and reburied
in a new cemetery ... in Frankfort, Kentucky.” Supposedly, Missourians never recovered from
the injury, the theft and “over the years ... a legend arose that Boone’s remains never left.” The
legend dictates that Boone’s Missouri grave was mismarked from the start. Boone's relatives in
Missouri, kept quiet about the mistake, and they allowed the Kentuckians to exhume the wrong man. In 1983, a forensic anthropologist examined a crude plaster cast of Boone's skull made before the Kentucky reburial and announced it might be the skull of an African American.”

Both graveyards still lay claim to Boone’s body.

Two months ago, Lauren and her husband auctioned off their little house in the country, the plot of land maybe my father once kept the car or the cow on, and for the first time in four decades a complete stranger to the eleven Maryland kids will move onto Frog Farm land.

*Have you noticed?* How the rain falls soft as the fall of moccasins. *Have you noticed?* how the immense circles still, stubbornly, after a hundred years, mark the grass where the rich droppings from the roaring bulls fell to the earth as the herd stood day after day, moon after moon in their tribal circle outwaiting the packs of yellow-eyed wolves that are also *have you noticed?* gone now.

—“Ghosts,” Mary Oliver

Over winter, the field I watched the night sky fall around, the field the frog farmers used to raise tobacco in, the field to which Jim and Paula were married, was burned down. A neighbor careless with gasoline. An accident. For a month or so, the land looked as though it bore witness to a bomb, scorching the earth and singing the tree line. A war-scape. A wasteland.
But the Kentucky seedbed runs deep, and long before the auction, the wildflowers and Blue grass replenished a hundred fold like my father reminded me soil will do on an exhaustive repeating loop until it is eroded, hollowed, or salted through.

“Tobacco cutting work is almost exclusively conducted by migrant laborers these days, but for a stretch of my life, it was how I spent my time. For Joy too. We worked our asses off, and we were good at it. That was our best money. We got paid piece work. Joy always cut; I always spiked, we were like a machine. And when you’re all done, it’s all cut, all spiked, all laying slant in the field; you look at it, and it looks beautiful.”
Appendix:

For The Direction His Eyes Are Facing, a research component was never an extra layer added simply to deepen or complexify my creative work; research was built into the bedrock of this Geography at its conception. I spent the summer compiling the vast and diverse amalgamation of texts from which this project draws its content. One text led to another. Recurring metaphors I tracked in margin notes. My Notes and Bibliography sections are serving as both the evidence of my research, and also the performance of my methodology. Here, too, is parataxis: Wikipedia alongside high theory. The revisionist history I hope to perform is a people’s history. And in order to produce it, I drew from myriad, often disparate sources, ranging from the comments sections of blogs to Columbus’ ship logs.

By weaving an essayistic tapestry of literature, historical record, and contemporary masculinity theory I have intended to expose and explore the long shadow that the figure of the conquistador has cast on the country we take for granted—what is, in fact, an ideological mapping we call the United States. My undertaking was necessarily defined by process. Because of its heavy dependence on research not simply as an informative tool but as a creative ethic, my project straddles analytical and creative boundaries. I have intended to contextualize my primary sources in intentionally manipulative ways in order to undermine enduring canonical portrayals and embodiments of these conquistador masculinities, thereby ensuring that the project and the process which formed it are indisputably “creative.” Through excerpting these diverse literary artifacts, each bearing varying degrees of “legitimate” or “historical” status, and weaving them into a mutually interrogative and exploratory form, I have hoped to reveal the ethnocentric assumptions, biases, and systems of meaning inherent in what we, as creators and
inheritors of Euro-American imperial culture, conceive of as empirical data and fundamental truths.

Following in the tradition of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: an American lyric*, David Shields’ manifesto, *Reality Hunger*, and Paul Metcalf’s essay “...and nobody objected...” I have tried to craft a textual mosaic of the conquistador archetype as he persists across genre and time, from examples as unselfconscious as Guthrie’s Western *Big Sky* to explicitly theoretical considerations such as Williams’ *Savage Anxieties*. By removing such quotations from their original context and appropriating them for a new form, I have attempted to deconstruct the hegemonic narratives of masculinity they represent and, in most cases, seek to defend.

I have immersed myself in the pivotal process of reading, selecting, and collecting quotations from the critical and creative bodies of work that are my *Geography’s* foundational source material. Since my project functions as a mosaic of found text, the collection of quotations I selected, compiled, and edited originally served as a primary drafts for the experimental essay. I intentionally positioned each text within a timeline of sorts – a syllabus, perhaps – assigning each to myself in a progression that allowed and encouraged the analytical to always be in conversation with the creative, the historical always buffered by the theoretical. This methodology further reinforces the primacy of process in defining my project, and the ethical underpinnings implicit in “showing my work,” so to speak.

My notes section is tracking the sources cited in the bibliography in the order that they appear in the project. Numbers refer to pages.
Notes:

15. Didion
16. Gonzalez
17. Cohen
18. Russel
   T.S. Eliot as quoted by Morrisey
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20. Campbell
   Russel
   DeBlasio
21. Huxley
   Bush
22. Huxley
23. Bush
24. Obama
25. Voto
   Lugones
   Huxley
26. Huxley
   Voto
27. Momaday
   Saunt
   Momaday
   Wood
   Momaday
28. Stegner
   Voto
   Guthrie
29. Jackson (unverified)
   “Strong Swimmer”
30. The walking Dead
31. Trails West
   Humans of New York
   Michael Gramling, Interview
32. Terry Hermsen
   Michael Gramling
33. Trails West
34. Sullivan
   Trails West
   Alcaraz,
35. Norman-Ellis
36. Karr
37. “Columbine High School Massacre”
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39. Johnson
Kimmel
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40. Michael Gramling

41. Momada

42. Penn
Smith
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43. Frenau
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44. Genesis 6:5
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45. Woolf

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49. Pompper
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50. Williams
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51. “‘You rape our women and are taking over our country,’ Charleston church gunman told black victims”
Diaz del Castillo

52. Williams
Diaz del Castillo

53. Ex-classmates Testify That St. Paul’s Grad Owen Labrie Boasted about Encounter

54. Johnson
Michael Gramling letter

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56. Michael Gramling: Letter
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   “Savage Anxieties” Williams
   *The Revenant*
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   Columbus, as quoted by Hernando Colon
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   Chief Seattle’s Speech, translated by Henry A Smith
65. Chief Seattle’s Speech, translated by Ted Perry
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   St. Paul’s Sex Scandal: The Secret Emails
   Owen Labrie of St. Paul’s School Is Found Not Guilty of Main Rape Charge.
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   Genesis 3:13
70. Hutchinson as quoted by Smith
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80. The Iliad
   “Missed Treatment: Soldiers With Mental Health Issues Dismissed For ‘Misconduct.”

81. Boone, quoted by Russel
   Aylan Kurdi’s story: How a small Syrian child came to be washed up on a beach in Turkey

82. Strong Swimmer

83. Gramling interview

84. Wikipedia

85. Oliver

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