

Pandemic Hours

A Conversation with Jesse Goolsby

Brandon Lingle

Beginning in March, the pandemic cleared our calendars with the efficiency and gracefulness of a wood chipper. With few social events, work trips, sports or vacations surviving, the pandemic gifted us a lack of distractions and maybe more time to read. Without much to look forward to in this fractured year, Goolsby's new book, *Acceleration Hours*, offered a welcome escape. This gut-punching collection hit the market in May, but hasn't garnered the attention it deserves in these strange COVID days.

In 2014, I read a draft of Goolsby's first book, *I'd Walk With My Friends if I could Find Them*, while deployed in Afghanistan. The novel distracted me from the dust, death and bullshit of a war that was supposedly ending. Goolsby's words also reminded me that our unending wars will carry consequences that our children's children will have to reckon with. The book took the long view and imagined how its characters' lives would play out after the war.

Six years later, during a global pandemic, I read his new book, *Acceleration Hours*, as the war in Afghanistan still sputtered along 8,000 miles away. Politicians mumbled about ending the U.S. presence, and most Americans didn't care either way, especially in the midst of a protracted battle against an invisible virus.

Like his first book, Goolsby's *Acceleration Hours* looks forward and imagines the invisible costs of decisions made years before. Reading a book grappling with the long-term consequences of conflict and violence, as the nation's longest war quietly hummed in the background, left me with a sense of irony and dread. Of course, I'm writing this as the West

burns and doomsday images of Golden State Mars-scapes fill my social media feeds. While *Acceleration Hours* centers in the American West—Northern California, Eastern Nevada, Washington, Oregon, Southern Colorado, Utah, New Mexico—the collection also jets us to Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, D.C., Florida and Hawaii. The way this book slides from place to place echoes the gypsy life of military people and their families who often have a hard time answering the question of: “Where are you from?” Just as the collection spans many miles, so too does the breadth of its characters’ lives and experiences. These people—fathers, husbands, wives, mothers, children, an AWOL soldier, a documentarian, vets, pilots, a missileer, wildland firefighters, grad students, a piano player—and their perspectives create a mosaic of experience held together by memory, fear, yearning, trauma and honesty.

Like a mixed martial artist, this compact collection hits hard, smart and fast. Relentless quick jabs veil the big swings and front kicks until you’re already hit. There’s moments where the words take you down, wrap you up and bring you to the edge of tapping out. With sparks of pop culture, sports, music and a hazy late ‘90’s sensitivity, a vast audience should find something to connect to. University of Nevada Press billed *Acceleration Hours* as a collection of stories. What’s left unsaid is the fact that this collection isn’t only fiction. Interwoven throughout the book are essays that create a blurring of fact and fiction and further complicate the notion of truth. The essays are not identified, and the book left me considering the truths we tell each other about our society and ourselves.

There’s a powerful photo that people often use in journalism or writing classes that shows a scrum of media people all looking and aiming their cameras, in one direction. In the corner, a lone photographer points his camera the opposite way and instead captures all those looking away. I thought of that photo as I read *Acceleration Hours*. Goolsby targets all of us

looking the wrong direction in this chaotic era. Goolsby's world of *Acceleration Hours* isn't infected with the Corona Virus, but it is plagued with long-term consequences and echoes of violence and war. That disease is also deadly, highly infectious and creates problems that our society will deal with for generations.

Brandon Lingle (BL): These stories look at the military's lasting impacts on individuals, families and communities. Why is it important to look at the long-term consequences of conflict and our society's relationship with violence?

Jessie Goolsby (JG): The foremost reason is to acknowledge the harrowing consequences that affect society all the way down to the individual level. Art and narrative provide vital spaces to better contemplate our world and the individual. So much of what we are fed concerning military and veteran issues—if we hear about them at all—is generalized to the point of abstraction. When we slow down and live with a character for a while, and have access to a specific consciousness that feels and yearns, some of the abstraction may sharpen into personality, which is a very powerful pathway to empathy. There is inherent goodness in empathy regardless of the subject matter, but the bizarre and disappointing silence about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the service members and families who fought them, deserves special attention.

It's no secret the US continues to fail horribly in addressing the vast consequences of our forever wars. This has been going on for nearly two decades. Somehow, the wars have simply disappeared from view and public debate. From atrocious veteran medical care to lacking

support programs for military families to basic acknowledgement and ownership of disastrous foreign policy plans and decisions across multiple administrations, just to name a few, where is the outrage? Where is the unrelenting public pressure for change? When was the last time the on-going war in Afghanistan made news?

My book will in no way alter this status quo, but it may provide an access point to those who read it to consider the sanctity and uniqueness of the individual and familial experiences that otherwise live under the generalized banner of "veteran."

BL: Tell us about the importance of place in this collection?

JG: The American West was a crucial and foundational element to this book. I'm constantly pulled to the myth, hopefulness, foolishness, violence, repose, and solitude the west portends. I was raised in the far northern reaches of California, along the edges of the Great Basin, and have lived a healthy portion of my adult life in Colorado. Surely, living for so long among the geography impacts my sense of belonging and wonderment. The stories and essays in this collection were written over a period of nine years, and I found during this time that my most intense memories and fruitful imaginative spaces circled this western landscape. I think part of the reason for this is because the narrative of the west continues to amaze and confuse me.

BL: How have you changed as a writer in the time between writing your novel, *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them*, and this collection?

JG: It's a great question, and one I have no idea how to answer. Certainly, I have benefited from the reading I've done in the past several years, but that settles and affects my art in ways I find

difficult to diagnose. I'd like to think I'm more patient with my work and willing to take narrative risks I once might have shunned, but I'm not sure that's true. It depends on the day. There are many times now when I marvel at my energy and focus of a decade ago, and others when I am deeply embarrassed at the unchecked fervor with which I produced and sent out unpolished work. Perhaps the only certainty I live with in the span of time from *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* to *Acceleration Hours* is that I am as vulnerable now as I was then to whim. That makes me happy.

BL: *The Things They Carried* was published 15 years after the fall of Saigon, and we're approaching 19 years in the Global War on Terror. You wrote this collection as our nation continues its perpetual wars. How do you think art about our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has changed over time? Where is it headed?

JG: History—including the literature of the Vietnam War—shows us the wide time span of creative fermentation required for great work. Immediacy is one of the least meritorious signs of artful competence, but it doesn't preclude it. We're lucky to already have wondrous books exploring the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I have no idea where war literature concerning the Global War on Terror is headed, but I hope it includes increasingly diverse voices and narrative angles. In the near term, I'm especially excited for Teresa Fazio's *Fidelis*, M.C. Armstrong's *The Mysteries of Haditha*, and Phil Klay's *Missionaries*.

I'm also constantly thrilled by individual pieces in magazines, journals, and newspapers. I think we often privilege book-length work a bit too much. Brilliant work appears all around us, constantly. A couple examples: Kate Schifani's "The Kill List" (*Southeast Review*); Jen Hinst-

White's "Fifteen Eggs" (*Consequence Magazine*), and Jerri Bell's recent story, "Bringing Home Baby" (*War, Literature & the Arts – Folio 2020*).

One of the very positive things I've noticed over the past several years as I've attended conferences or met with active-duty and veteran artists is the growing awareness from emerging writers that their stories matter. For a while there seemed to be a prevailing attitude—from where, I'm not sure—that the contemporary war story/essay had been covered. Of course, nothing could be farther from the truth. The uniqueness and energy of every perspective—be it lived or imagined, conflict-based or not—should embolden any writer to put words to page.

BL: Has anything changed in the way you view these stories and essays, most of which were first published individually, and now appear together in a book? Which of these stories are you most proud of?

JG: It has been interesting to watch these individual pieces come together as kind of a chorus of voices. When I worked with the University of Nevada Press on which stories to include, I was very surprised at the breadth of tone and topic the press decided was essential to incorporate. This is one of the wonderful capacities of collections: there can, maybe even should, be considerable range and variance in the pieces. Some of my favorite collections shift significantly from story to story: *Fortune Smiles* by Adam Johnson, *How to Leave Hialeah* by Jennine Capó Crucet, *Lost in the City* by Edward P. Jones, and *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* by Robert Olen Butler, to name a few.

While each of these stories mean a great deal to me, "Anchor & Knife" has a special place in my heart. My first few stories had been on the long side, 7,500 words or so each, and

"Anchor & Knife" materialized via this unique economy of words that, at the time, was entirely and refreshingly new to me. The imagined narrator just captivated me. He still does.

BL: What are you reading now?

JG: I'm currently reading *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward, *Orfeo* by Richard Powers, *Far from the Tree* by Andrew Solomon, and *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson. All of them brilliant.

Jesse Goolsby is the author of the novel *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* and the collection *Acceleration Hours*. His work has appeared widely, including *Narrative*, *Epoch*, *The Literary Review*, *Salon*, *TriQuarterly*, and the *Best American series*. He currently resides in Abu Dhabi, UAE where he is the Associate Dean and Senior Military Professor at the United Arab Emirates National Defense College.

As a writer and journalist, **Brandon Lingle's** work has appeared in *The American Scholar*, *The New York Times (At War)*, *Guernica*, *The North American Review*, *The Normal School*, and more. He served in Iraq and Afghanistan and recently retired from the Air Force. He currently writes for the *San Antonio Express-News*.