

# Missing and Presumed Dead

John Van Kirk

---

The crew may leave a ship, their stories never leave.

—B. Traven, *The Death Ship*

---

**S**ailors, like baseball players, fishermen, and actors, are a superstitious lot. They believe in streaks and jinxes, good luck charms, curses, and hauntings. By late October 1983, six months into the *USS Thomas Jefferson's* final deployment, a so-called Friendship Cruise that was supposed to take the aircraft carrier around the world, the crew had begun to believe theirs was a jinxed and haunted ship. On her pre-deployment work-ups off the Virginia coast, she had lost a hook runner and a plane captain when one of the arresting cables parted, cutting the men in half as it whipped across the flight deck. On dark nights, after the conclusion of flight ops, when the ship went to low visibility, some members of the deck crew claimed to have seen those two men, their shirts and helmets gray under the red lights, crouching under the folded wing of a parked jet, ready for the next plane to land. Since crossing the Atlantic, the ship had been plagued with accidents, losing two F-14s, one in the Mediterranean, the pilot and navigator ejecting successfully, though the pilot had had to be flown to a hospital in Germany and was now in Bethesda, and one going down in the Red Sea with no survivors. Two helicopters from Lieutenant Henry Bowman's squadron, the Jaegers, were now at the bottom of the sea, one having lost an engine over the tiny deck of a destroyer, the other experiencing a sudden tail-rotor failure in mid-flight. Lieutenant Commander Torres had executed a textbook autorotation and perfectly cushioned water landing, at which point the top heavy helicopter promptly rolled over and sank like a cement truck. The wreckage of a third helicopter was parked in the hangar bay

after Ensign Jasper, on an alert launch, engaged the main rotor while it was still folded. No Jaegers had been hurt in any of the accidents, but Jasper had turned in his wings shortly after the incident.

Now the *T.J.* was headed back to the east Med, long-awaited liberty in Perth, Australia cut short by the news that the Marine Corps Barracks in Beirut had been bombed, killing 241 American servicemen. No one wanted to go to war, but the men understood this. They could resign themselves to it. Then, less than two weeks out of Perth, in the Arabian Sea south of Oman, a lateen-rigged dhow sailed out of the Middle Ages and into the path of the *Jefferson* as it was refueling, and despite an emergency breakaway from the oiler—great black hoses decoupled, guy lines hacked away with axes—the slow-to-turn aircraft carrier plowed the fishing boat beneath the sea. The Jaegers pulled half a dozen men from the water, but more were lost, and the guttural speech of the turbaned survivors shown on the ship's TV led some of the crew to imagine that their ship had now been cursed as well as jinxed, and that whatever illustrious career the *T.J.* had had up to now, this was a doomed cruise, that she was destined not for the shipyard but for the bottom.

—The boilers are rotten, one sailor whispered to another. —They could blow if the ship really has to put on steam.

—The rudders are hanging by a thread, and if they go, no steering, and no steering doesn't just mean you can't navigate, it means you can't turn her into the wind, can't launch the planes—or if they are already in the air, you can't get them back aboard.

These whisperings were not true, but they circulated among the crew nonetheless. Most of the more experienced sailors didn't believe them—Bowman, a strict rationalist, certainly did not—but a few of the old-timers were the worst offenders, crotchety men who had too many

hashmarks on their sleeves for the number of chevrons they wore on their shoulders, the sort who all their careers had watched other men move up the ranks faster than they had, and who came to regard longevity as its own sort of rank, embittered men who had convinced themselves the world was against them. They already felt that they were pawns in someone else's game:

—There's people in the Pentagon who are dying to go toe to toe with the Russians, and if you don't think they'd be willing to let this rust bucket go down with all hands to justify a great naval battle, then you haven't seen what I've seen. You watch, they'll fix it so the airwing gets off, so it happens when we're in company with another carrier or near a secret base in Saudi or someplace.

It was the kind of rumor that, if it gains traction, seems supported by anything, like the news that a battleship—a World War II behemoth—would be among the company of ships being assembled off the coast of Lebanon.

—What did I tell you? A naval battle with the Russians. That thing's not for taking out land targets, it was built for slugging it out with other ships. Something big is going down, and you know they're not going to sacrifice one of the nuclear flattops. Plan your escape routes, boys. Keep your lifejackets handy.

—That's enough of that murmuration, Bowman heard Master Chief Malone say. —Keep your troubles to yourself. The Lieutenant don't want to hear that kind of talk, and I don't either.

Bowman, just back from a grindingly boring but mercifully uneventful flight, was filling out his paperwork at the maintenance window.

—Did Petty Officer Zapruder find you, Lieutenant? He's been looking for you since a while.

—I haven't seen him, Master Chief. You know what he wants?

—He said he wanted to show you something, seemed pretty intense on it.

—He knows where to find me, Bowman said. —Right now I gotta get some sleep. Got another flight in... he checked his watch... five and a half hours till brief.

On a long sea voyage, down-time is precious, sleep is more than rest, it is escape, and there comes a time when dreams grow more vivid, their colors bright and real, in contrast to the long gray days and nights of repetitive duty. Conversely, the dark hours of long night flights can seem even more surreal than dreams. Sometimes Bowman's conversations over the intercom with his copilot and crew would come back to him uncertainly, and he had to ask himself if they had taken place on actual missions or in the dreamtime between missions, when he would dive into his rack knowing that the next brief was only a few hours away, and dream that he was still in the cockpit, the sea black below him, the sky black above, nothing to see but the red glow of the helicopter's instruments.

As he stretched out on his thin mattress in the 8-man junior officer's bunkroom, he wondered just what it was that Zap, as Petty Officer Zapruder was known, wanted. And in his dream, Zap was the first person he saw.

—Wait till you see this, Zap said.

He led Bowman to a dark corner of the Hangar Bay, to a wall of 50-gallon drums lashed and netted together and piled nearly to the overhead. Together, they climbed up the netting and clambered over the drums to see in the dim light the hulk of an old time sailing ship, ghostly and skeletal, the remnants of its sails hanging in shreds from its masts and spars, planks falling away from its sides, draped in seaweed and encrusted with barnacles, her hull stove in....

They explored the vessel, a whaler, Bowman noted to himself, with blackened try-pots, broken whaleboats, and even an augur hole on the poop deck where an obsessed captain with an ivory leg might station himself. He realized then that he must be dreaming, and resolved to discover whether there was a gold doubloon nailed to the mast before he would let himself wake up, but the Petty Officer of the Watch was already leaning into his bunk, summoning him to his briefing for the next flight.

The real Zapruder caught him in the Ready Room.

—I've got something you're going to want to see, L.T.

—And what might that be? Bowman said.

—All I can say is, you're not going to believe it.

—Try me, Zap. You might be surprised at what I'll believe at this point.

—With all due respect, sir, you're going to have to see this for yourself. But I will say this, it might make you believe in ghosts.

—I've got a four-hour flight, and then debrief. Will you be around then?

—Come down to the avionics shop when you get back, Zapruder said.

Halfway through the flight, routine plane-guard with nothing much to do—turning JP-5 into noise, as the pilots called this mission—Bowman clicked on his intercom.

—Pilot to crew, you guys heard anything about ghosts on board mother?

Chief Wentworth answered up first: —You mean the ghost in the ship's library?

—I don't think so, Bowman said. Before he could go on and ask if anyone knew about Zap's mysterious something, the second crewman, a relatively new member of the squadron, cut in to ask about the library ghost, and the chief got into that story, filling him in on the ship's history, some of which Bowman already knew, some of which was new to him, and in the eerie

night at sea, the lights of the ship coming in and out of view as the helicopter flew its pattern, a lazy misshapen oval at 90 knots on the starboard side of the ship, three-hundred feet above the black water, Bowman and his crew listened in the dark to the chief's voice.

Rumors that the *T.J.* was haunted had evidently made the rounds among the shipyard workers even before she was commissioned. Craftsmen who had worked on the restoration of Monticello had been brought in to fit out Admiral's Country, the Captain's Quarters, and the Ship's Library to resemble as far as possible Jefferson's Virginia estate. The work was plagued with setbacks. Carpenters would arrive in the morning to find the previous day's work altered or undone. Wood and iron could not abide one another. Door jambs would swell and warp; shelves would shrink and fall from the bookcases; the parquet floors cracked and lifted from the deck. In the end most of the problems were solved, and the Monticello-inspired spaces became a justly celebrated feature of the ship, but the library remained a place of mysterious occurrences. Books would not stay where they were put. The two Campeachy chairs wandered. The rotating bookstand would be found slowly spinning, though no one had been in the room. Mysterious scribbling appeared on the twin sheets of paper in the replica of the pantograph Jefferson used to make copies of his letters. And the brass plaque summarizing the second president's accomplishments, though it was polished daily, became tarnished and unreadable overnight, the bloom of verdigris always seeming to begin at the sentence that claimed Jefferson was the father of only two children who survived to adulthood, Martha and Mary, the stain spreading outward from there until it threatened to obscure even his authorship of The Declaration of Independence.

It was nearly midnight when Bowman, back from his flight, paperwork behind him, but still in his sweaty flight suit, made it down to the Avionics Shop. Zap was there waiting.

—You are gonna love this, L.T. We were moving a sonar transducer on the testing stand during that storm the other night, and the ship took a heavy roll. The stand got away from us and crashed into a wall. The corner punched right through. We thought we might have done some damage—wiring, pipes, who knows. We shined a flashlight through the hole, but we couldn't see anything, I mean anything. Like we'd opened a passage into a cave. Dietemeyer got an electric screwdriver, and we removed the panel, and it turned out there was a whole room there, walled off, with no doors.

—I heard a story like that once, Bowman said. —Might have been on another ship. Some guys found a whole sealed-off machine shop from when it was being built.

—Yeah, well wait till you see what's in here.

Zap handed Bowman a flashlight, and Bowman climbed through the opening, unsure of the wisdom of his action, but too curious to resist. Besides, he trusted Zapruder. This discovery was the kind of thing that could easily be kept from the ship's officers for any number of reasons, and Bowman knew he was privileged to be let in on it.

Entering the dark compartment, he was overcome first by the sharp smell of mold, and then by a wave of images, some from his *Moby-Dick*-inspired dream of the night before, some from his own memories of childhood, of forts made of stacked chairs, clubhouses in unused coal bins, under basement stairs, or constructed in the woods out of old pallets and lumber filched from factory lots and construction sites. And then there were the smoking rooms of the 60s, modern-day opium dens with sunken couches and low tables covered with drug paraphernalia, black light posters taped to the walls: Hendrix, The Grateful Dead, an entwined naked couple with a peace sign in the background, or a glowing green ghost ship with tattered sails. Or would this prove to be more like something from a horror movie, skeletons in chains, messages from

dead men scratched into the wall?

What he saw as he shone the flashlight around the compartment were elements of all these things. On one gray-green wall a huge black-power fist had been painted, on another he recognized the famous poster of Che Guevara. A dingy, sagging couch sat off to his right, above it another poster, this one of Huey Newton in a large wicker chair, holding a spear in one hand and a shotgun in the other. An artistic hand had painted angry slogans in red and black; as his eyes adjusted to the bad light, Bowman was able to make out *End Navy Slavery*, and *Servicemen, not Servants*.

—Check this out, L.T.

Zap had come in behind him with another flashlight. He shone it on an old mimeograph machine bolted to a bench in the corner. The last print job looked like a kind of newsletter with a hand drawn banner: *The Black Gang*. A handful of these single-sheet broadsides were strewn about the compartment; Bowman folded one into his pocket.

Back out in the clear light of the avionics shop, Zapruder was beaming. —So what do you think, L.T., a kind of black power clubhouse?

—Looks like, Bowman said.

—How long you think it's been closed up?

—Ten, fifteen years, based on those posters, Bowman said. —Wait a minute.

He took the broadside out of his pocket and looked at it again. It was dated 24 Dec. 1972. —Eleven years.

He could see the artwork now, a miniature black power fist in the upper left hand corner, to the right silhouettes of black men shoveling coal into a furnace. Under that a headline:

*Vietnam Is Not Our War.*

—Who else knows about this?

—Just the guys in the shop. Chief doesn't want us to tell the ship. He's afraid they'll take it over, and we could use the space ourselves.

—He's probably right about that. Does the chief know you told me?

—Yeah. He wasn't happy.

—Okay. Keep it under your hats. And tell the chief I'd like to talk with him before he decides anything.

—Okay, L.T. It's pretty cool, though, isn't it?

—Yeah, but... I've got to think about it.

Back in the 8-man Bunkroom, Bowman read over the flyer:

**Why should the black man help the white man kill the yellow man? No Vietnamese great grandfather ever whipped my great grandfather or put him in chains. If a black man has to be in this war at all, he should be fighting on the side of the yellow man. But I know that's probably too much to ask. We love our country. I don't think there's many of us who want to take up arms against our own country, even after all it's done to us. What's left is that we just refuse. We sit this one out. We say to the white man, you're on your own this time. We're not going to help you out. See how he likes that. Course you know he hasn't done a single thing without our help since this country was founded.**

Below that, in large bold type, was printed a call to action:

**Sit Down Strike: Noon on Christmas Day.**

**Just Sit Down. For one hour.**

**Let them know that they can't do this without us.**

He turned the page over in his hand. Someone had used the blank side for notepaper, writing in pencil in an unsteady hand. He couldn't make all of it out, but toward the bottom he was able to read the following: *If they find me, my life is over. It may be over already. If I can stay in here until we get to Subic, and get off the ship without being seen, where do I go then? Is there a life there for a black man with no ID and almost no money?*

Bowman put the paper in his desk and headed back to the hidden compartment behind the Avionics Shop. Feeling like an archeologist in a newly discovered catacomb, he found six more pages with writing on the back; they weren't numbered or dated, but he was able to piece together a story.

—Have you seen that compartment they found, Lavski asked Bowman.

—They showed it to you, too?

—Yeah, they showed it to me. It's my shop. You know what it means?

Lieutenant Anton Stanislavski was the Avionics Division Officer.

—What it means? I know there's a story behind it, a Jeffersonian story.

—What do you think that story is?

—I think something happened on this ship back in the early 70s, while she was off the

coast of Vietnam.

—Something?

—Yeah, something. I don't know what it was, a protest, a riot, an uprising, maybe even a mutiny, but whatever it was, some of it happened on Christmas Day, 1972, and they hushed it up. What do you think?

—There was a fire on the *T.J.* on Christmas Day, 1972, Lavski said. —It was second only to the Forrestal fire, only it started on the hangar deck, not the flight deck. Men died. I'm not sure how many.

—Not as many as they thought, Bowman said.

—What are you talking about?

—Somebody survived and hid out in that compartment. How come I never heard of that fire?

—I don't know. Between the Christmas bombing and the Paris Peace Talks, it never got the publicity. What do you mean a Jeffersonian story?

—That compartment was a kind of clubhouse for black sailors. At least some of the guys who hung out there were into the black power thing. It became a hideout for at least one guy. He left a record. From the day of the fire until the ship moored in the Philippines for repairs.

—How'd you figure that out?

—I read what he wrote.

—Leave me out of this, Selkirk said. —I don't want any part of it.

Lieutenant Alexander Selkirk was one of the few black officers on the *T.J.* and the only one in Bowman's squadron.

—If we found a secret clubhouse for Polish guys from Jersey, Lavski said, I'd want to know everything about it.

—That's just one of the differences between you and me, Selkirk said. —You find it useful to represent yourself as a Polack from Jersey. You make that work for you. You think I ought to represent myself as a black dude from Detroit? You invite people to underestimate you, and then you surprise them. I can't risk that.

—You could, Lavski said, if you wanted to. Shit, Cornell Engineering.

—No. In my position you try not to get noticed, but if you are noticed, you make sure it's for the right things: good fitness reports, team player. I got a career to think about. You think a black guy who goes public with a story uncovering race problems the navy buried is going to be selected for admiral's aide or White House liaison? My name gets connected with this, there's no way it comes out good for me.

—You don't see it as a piece of African-American history? Bowman said.

—Absolutely. But that's not my area.

—Okay, forget it, Bowman said. —I'm sorry I brought it up. I thought you, of all people....

—Yeah, me... of all people, Selkirk said. —That's exactly what you thought. Because I'm black. You've already got me associated with this thing...this secret history. Imagine if I were to be involved with the release of the story of a mutiny on a navy ship, by African American sailors. And, if what you just told me is true, possible murder, covered up and buried. A fire. Bodies thrown overboard. And a lone member of the alleged leaders of the mutiny presumed to have gone over the side and drowned, actually hiding out in a secret compartment behind the Avionics shop. I might as well start looking for a civilian job right now.

—But it's history, Bowman said. —It's part of this ship's story. Part of the navy's story, the

country's story.

—Yeah, it is, Selkirk said, but it's not a story anybody wants to hear. Let it go, Hank. Let some shipyard worker discover it. It will keep for a few more months. Then, when all of us...he made a sweeping gesture with his head and hand...and I mean all five-thousand something of us, when we've all moved on to the next ship, the next duty-station, or back to civilian life, then someone can rewrite the history of the *USS Thomas Jefferson*.

—I don't know, Alex.

—I do. You're thinking like it's a good story, and you love stories. You're thinking like a journalist. Try thinking like a naval officer, which you still are! With a top secret clearance. Some things are still restricted, need to know. Ask yourself who needs to know this? Race relations in the navy may be better than they've ever been before, but this brings up old wounds. Make this guy—your lone survivor who's maybe living a quiet life somewhere—make him a villain and you create resentment, make him a hero, and I don't know what you create. Neither one does any good for race relations on this ship, or in the navy as a whole. This guy's presumed dead, let him stay that way. He's a ghost. Let him be.

—Has anybody told the skipper about this, yet? Master Chief Malone asked.

—Not as far as I know, Bowman said. —The guys in the shop have been told to keep it to themselves. Lieutenant Stanislavski knows, and Lieutenant Selkirk. Lavski's not going to involve anybody else unless he has to, and Lieutenant Selkirk doesn't even want to know about it.

—Lieutenant Selkirk's a smart boy, the master chief said. —Plus, if we tell the ship, they'll commandeered the space. We could just take down the wall, clear out the compartment, and have a bigger avionics shop. Nobody the wiser.

Bowman was on the brink of agreeing, but something about the way the master chief said *boy* when he referred to Selkirk had rubbed him the wrong way, and he decided to press the man: —You were on board the *T.J.* back in those days, weren't you? Didn't I hear you talk about the fire one time? What else do you know about this?

—In here, Lieutenant, Malone said, leading Bowman into a small office where the aircraft maintenance files were kept. He closed the door. —This don't go no further, he said. There was a rumor that the some black sailors lit themselves on fire like that crazy monk in Saigon back in the 60s. But I don't think anybody really believed it. It didn't make sense. Things were bad between us and the coloreds back then; there were places on the ship people were afraid to go, galleys, laundry, black sections of the berthing compartments....

—You mean there was segregated berthing?

—Not exactly, but the blacks kept to themselves then. They were bad times, and I wouldn't want to do anything that would bring those days back. And there's a lot more blacks on board now, too.

—Damn, Master Chief. You know how that sounds?

—I know how it sounds. I been through the training. And I know I'm not racist. I look at the boys that work for me and the only color I see is the color of their shirts. But I wouldn't want to inspire the kind of trouble we had back then. I say we clear that space out, paint it over, and end up with more room for Avionics. Nobody has to know.

—I'll know, Bowman said, and I don't like the idea of erasing history.

—What history? Better people forget. Besides, if nobody knows, how can it be history? They're just going to break up the ship; it will be lost anyway.

—Maybe, maybe not. Anyway, I don't think they will break her up. We're not going

around the world anymore. Friendship Cruise is over. When this shit in Beirut is over, we're taking her back to Virginia. That's Jefferson's country. Maybe they'll make a museum out of her, like the *Intrepid* in New York. And someday they'll be going over the floorplan, or following an electrical cable or a leaky water line and they'll find that space again. So there's still a chance it will become a part of history. Only not now, I get that. Not yet. I know you don't like it, but I don't think we have a right to just erase it. But I agree nobody wants to hear it right now, out here. Think about where we're going.

It took a lot of convincing, but eventually Bowman got the master chief to agree to seal the compartment back up. They took the damaged access panel over to the airframes shop, where Dietemeyer riveted a sheetmetal patch over the hole, and they closed up the compartment and repainted the wall, leaving in darkness the old posters, the painted slogans, the beat-up furniture, and the mimeograph machine. Bowman sealed the old newsletters and the unnamed sailor's journal into a manila envelope and duct-taped it to the bulkhead where he hoped it would be found someday, whether by dockyard workers who dismantled the ship, or museum workers who restored it.

Every ship has its secrets, as does every man aboard. Locked in the drawer of Bowman's desk in the 8-man bunkroom was another manila envelope with copies of every page he'd collected from the compartment. He thought a lot about the sailor who wrote that journal and about the events revealed in its disordered pages. The *T.J.* was haunted all right, and not by some library ghost that moved books around and tarnished brass plaques. The man who kept that journal would haunt Bowman throughout the rest of the voyage, indeed throughout the rest of his life.

*If they find me I'm a dead man*, the sailor had written. *They know we didn't light that fire, but*

*they'll never admit it. And there's guys on this ship would kill me if they got the chance. No one out there wants to hear what I got to say.*

Selkirk had been right about one thing, Bowman did like stories. He had always been fascinated by stories of people who started over from scratch. Men who went out for a pack of cigarettes and never came back, cutting all ties with past mistakes, debts, connections, friends, loved ones.... This was such a story, but it was real:

*I don't know why I'm writing this. I just want the record set straight someday. We didn't start that fire. And when it got out of control, we fought it with everyone else. Some of us died in that fire right alongside the white guys, probably more of us than them. One whole hose team got blown up by a bomb. I saw guys go over the side on fire. I saw pieces of guys go over the side on fire. Nobody knows how many for sure. I knew they'd be coming for me after it was over, so I disappeared. You'll find my name on the list of the missing, but you won't know which one I am.*

None of the pages were dated, and it was difficult to put them in order, but in a kind of refrain, one thing came up on almost every sheet: *We didn't start that fire.* And on one page there was the part of the story that Bowman kept to himself, never telling Selkirk or Lavski, never telling Zap or Master Chief Malone—who, he thought, might have already known—the part of the story that was the most dangerous, and the most important, the part that he desperately hoped would be revealed someday but couldn't bring himself to reveal as his ship, and his shipmates, steamed into who knew what:

*Somewhere on this ship there's another compartment like this one where the white power boys meet, where they made the Molotov cocktails they threw at us when we were just sitting there. Or maybe that one isn't even a secret, just a secret from us. But sure as my name is*

*on the list of the missing, it's on their list of the men they would kill if they got the chance. I'm not giving them that chance; I'm dead already as far as anyone knows, and I plan to stay that way. So whoever finds this, don't come looking for me. I wish to hell I never see another ship, and when I get off this one I start over as somebody else. Don't come looking for me. I'll be in another country. I'll have a new name. My people will think I'm dead and I'm sorry for that, but if the crazy white guys find me, I'm dead for sure, and if the regular ones find me I'll be court-martialed for mutiny and end up in the brig with crazy white guys there too. And all because I stood up about the way they treat a black man on this ship. Now I'll be a ghost for the rest of my life...*

Bowman was not ignorant of or indifferent to racial strife. As a boy he'd seen what life was like in Newark's tenements when he'd gone with his father on plumbing jobs in the ghetto. The Catholic high school he'd attended sat a block away from the courthouse and two blocks from the projects, and the bus he rode passed through the burnt-over wasteland where whole neighborhoods had burned to the ground in the aftermath of the riots of 1967. He thought of himself as an enlightened white man in matters of race, and he believed his country had come a long way since the turbulent 60s. On the other hand, he knew that the navy had been the slowest of the services to integrate and that the navy's officer corps, of which he was a part, was still the whitest cohort to wear a U.S. Military uniform. Clearly there was still work to be done. He honestly did not know whether his decision to keep the *Jefferson's* shameful secret would help or hinder that work. This just wasn't the right time, he told himself, which, he knew, was what people always said, and why progress was so slow.

Meanwhile, the *USS Thomas Jefferson* sailed on, back through the straits at Bab el Mandeb, and back into the Red Sea, north bound for the Suez Canal and the coast of Lebanon,

ready for one last foreign war before being decommissioned, on its way to ignominy or renown, thousands of men below decks keeping the machinery of the giant ship running, the flight deck crowded with warplanes, redshirts standing by with enough ordnance to fight WWII over again, purpleshirts with their fuel hoses, greenshirts with their wrenches, and pilots sweltering in their cockpits in the hot sun on five minute alert, Bowman in his helicopter, the jet-jocks in their fighters and bombers, helmets balanced on their knees, briefed and ready to launch on missions of reconnaissance, rescue, or destruction.

**John Van Kirk** is the author of the novel *Song for Chance*. His short fiction has won the O. Henry Award and the *Iowa Review* Fiction Prize. A former navy helicopter pilot, he is Emeritus Professor of English at Marshall University.