

"So Damn Liberating"
An Interview
with
Jesse Goolsby

by
Barrett Bowlin

Way back in issue 9.1, Jesse Goolsby won the John Gardner Memorial Prize in Fiction for his short story, "Derrin of the North." Based on the outstanding writing alone, no one could have guessed that this was the first story Goolsby had ever published. Numerous fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction publications later, Goolsby's debut novel, *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them*, came out this past June from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and he's been busy on a bi-coastal book tour since then.

An Air Force officer and a PhD candidate at Florida State University, Jesse Goolsby has appeared in such excellent journals as *Narrative Magazine*, *Epoch*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Redivider*, *The Greensboro Review*, and, of course, *Harpur Palate*. He is also the recipient of the Richard Bausch Fiction Prize and the Holland & Knight Distinguished Fellowship from the Hambidge Center for Creative Arts & Sciences. He's been featured in *The Best American Mystery Stories*, and his prose has also been listed several times as a notable entry in *The Best American Short Stories* and *The Best American Essays* anthologies. In addition, he serves as a genre editor with both *The Southeast Review* and *War, Literature, and the Arts*. Running into him again at AWP 2015 was a true pleasure, and we were grateful for the chance to talk with him about his book and his career.

Barrett Bowlin: Which of the chapters did you build *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* around? What was the genesis, and what did that chapter look like before it became intertwined with the rest of the book?

Jesse Goolsby: The genesis: one day, six years ago, I was sitting in a conference room at the US Air Force Academy discussing literature and the emotional toll of war with some of my English department colleagues. We brought up the names of fellow service members, the complexities of battle, the simultaneous devastation and thrill, the borderlands of euphoria and fear. Someone invoked Tim O'Brien, another Joseph Heller and Dexter Filkins, and then one of my friends said, "You know, some folks come home and they don't know how to touch their kids. It's just too much after what they've seen." And that just floored me. I was a new father at the time, and besides the personal and believable horror that comment stirred, it also humbled me as a writer: how does someone, a character, get to a place where he or she is not sure how to touch his or her own children? What does that say about war, about that individual, about family, and the wide-ranging consequences of conflict?

The creative result of my initial investigation of those questions was a story called "Touch," now a chapter in my novel. While the story was edited to form the chapter, I hope it retains my wonder and curiosity of this possible result of war—the confusion of touch—for one of the protagonists, Armando Torres.

While that's the emotional genesis story, at the time, six years ago, I had no idea that I'd write a book. I was thrilled to have "Touch" published and to simply move on. However, when I realized that I wanted to write a novel, one of the things I was most interested in accomplishing was tracing a long arc of three soldiers' lives—and portions of the lives of the protagonists' families and friends—before, during, and after their service in Afghanistan. This long view was very important to me. "Touch," then, fell into place as a post-war chapter fairly seamlessly, but that specific chapter maintained an emotional heft that influenced my writing from the beginning to the end of *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them*.

BB: Similarly, several of the chapters in the novel started off as short stories in various journals, e.g., "Neutral Drops" in *Northwind*, "Pollice Verso" in *The Literary Review*, "No Doorbell" in *Nashville Review*, etc. What was the thread that linked them together? What made them part of this larger scope you wanted to focus on in the book?

JG: The foundation for all of the chapters in the novel is the deep human yearning for connection. Regardless of character or specific setting, my focus was mining each and every character's desire for companionship and understanding. As such, I found that it didn't matter if a particular chapter or scene dealt with one of the main protagonists or a character occupying a more tangential role, I wanted always to tap into his or her specific longing.

And that leads to your great question about publishing some of the chapters as stories first, then reworking them into a slightly more traditional role as a chapter. One of my preferences I discovered while writing *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* was that, at least for this project, I wasn't all that interested in chapter-to-chapter transitions, that I relished the white space between episodes of tension. Because of this preference, I decided to try to place many of the chapters as stand alone stories first, not as an excerpt of a work in progress, but straight up stories. I found this forced me to really buckle down and fine-tune my world building and the establishment of stakes each and every time I entered a new chapter-story. Because I was aware of my desire for these stories to eventually morph into chapters I certainly kept some of the plot logistics and timelines in mind, but there were also many advantages of thinking of them, individually, as stories; most notably, the beautiful short fiction demands of immediate stakes.

Additionally, I fully admit that I was in need of some positive reinforcement as I started this book. At the beginning, I had no agent, editor, or contract. Like the vast majority of writers, it was just me, a blank Word document, and a healthy dose of consternation when the perfect words didn't come pouring out on time. Just on a personal level, I needed and greatly appreciated the validation and feedback that came with an acceptance from a literary journal, so much so—and my wife will attest to this—that I cried

with nearly every acceptance.

BB: Where much of the current fiction on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq centers on the conflict abroad, most of your novel telescopes instead into the lives of the characters shortly before and years after their deployment. Do you consider your novel, then, to be "war fiction?" How do you see your work in terms of genre overall?

JG: I'm an equal opportunity genre lover. The most important distinction for me, and a mark of all of my favorite books, is a deep investigation of the "Who am I?" question. In my novel, it's not that my characters are soldiers or fathers or mothers or lovers or amputees or whole or Broncos fans or Metallica fans or city boys or country girls; it's that each character is some of these things and much, much more. Each life is a perfectly subjective, individual experience. And regardless of genre, the finest books investigate specific characters, their personal complexities and preferences, their dreams and failures. If grappling at that "Who am I?" question occurs in literature set on Jupiter, the battlefields of Afghanistan, in Toronto, 1600s Brazil, 2400s China, or anywhere else, I'm interested.

To that end, one of the things I've tried to accomplish with my novel is to cut through the expectations of a "war book," by which I mean that I wanted the book to encompass events far beyond physical, wartime danger. While I appreciate a well-rendered, intense combat scene as much as the next reader, I'm equally, if not more, interested in the specific, individual battle going on inside the man or woman firing that gun. Not only that, I'm interested in his or her spouse, kids, hometown, musical taste, reason for serving; namely, all the things that make up a life, because that gun firing in his or her hands is only one manifestation of who that person is, who he or she was, and what he or she will become.

This is to say that, concerning genre, I welcome any and all labels. But, to me, the creative lineage of my work belongs first and always, to that of identity and longing.

BB: *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* is very much a novel

about place, as well, enough so that the settings feel as much as characters as the people do. What are your connections to the cities and towns featured in the book: Colorado Springs; Chester, California; Knoxville; Rutherford, New Jersey?

JG: Chester, California, is my hometown, a place of about two thousand people nestled into the far northeast reaches of the state. It's a community based on the logging industry and, in the summer months, tourism centered around Lake Almanor and nearby Lassen Volcanic National Park. It's a place that's very dear to me. To have such a diverse natural landscape right out our front door was something I've always appreciated. This section of California is also a place that's been almost entirely neglected by literature of any kind. I admit I feel a rush of pride in bringing Chester to the page. I also confess a special delight in being an alumnus of a high school with the best mascot in the history of mascots: the Chester Volcanoes.

Concerning many of the other locations in the novel, as an active-duty Air Force officer, I move about every two to three years or so to a new assignment. It's equal parts exciting and frustrating, but one positive thing about moving that often is it allows my family and me to experience many different cities and local communities. That also makes it great for writing as I consider places I may know well to base scenes. Colorado Springs and Knoxville are both places I've lived and loved, and it made sense to err on the side of writing places I knew firsthand. In this regard, Rutherford, New Jersey, is the odd inclusion for a setting in the novel. I have passed through Rutherford, but I had no local knowledge of the place.

In selecting major settings for the novel, I did want a feeling of inclusiveness, or put another way, a span across America that felt organic to the story, but also holistic geographically. I had a lot of fun thinking about and incorporating places, not only the settings you mention, but also in locations like Chicago; Elko, Nevada; Andalusia, Alabama; Green River, Wyoming; Key West, Florida; Farmington, New Mexico. One of the key reasons for this is that I'm very interested in not only the proximity of violence in combat, but also the proximity of violence in our communities and the side streets of America. The variety of these locations really opened the doors to

the full spectrum of conflict both overseas and throughout our country.

BB: Tell us about some of the research you invested into the book. What was the most challenging component? Also, what was the most surprising thing you found in your research?

JG: My favorite part of the research dealt with how well—or poorly—I remembered the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, especially cultural references. I purposely didn't Google every fact because I thought I had this stuff down: music, movies, and other cultural phenomena from my teenage years to my early twenties, but wow, memory is a fickle thing. And I confess that after I turned in a first draft of my book, the copy editor gave me some extensive notes including these gems: "I'll Make Love to You" by Boyz II Men released a year later," "Do you really think Drew Barrymore would be in this theater in 1995?" and "*Xena: Warrior Princess* runs from '95-'01." Reevaluating what I remembered about popular culture from my youth and what really happened, and when, was humbling and a little confusing. For example, I distinctly recall a spectacularly failed attempt at a kiss with a teenage crush in my dad's Toyota truck; I was sure as hell that went down to Boyz II Men's "On Bended Knee," and over the years if I've heard that song, it has transported me back to that horrible moment. I've lived with that memory for two decades, but alas, the song had yet to be recorded. Does that mean I've imagined that rejection all these years? Please tell me yes.

Much more serious and devastating in my research was learning about the severity and prevalence of sexual assault in our society, and specifically in the military. *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* takes this issue on and I wanted to be sure that I took the time to research and think deeply about the topic. As a service member myself, and someone passionate about sexual assault prevention and response, I thought I was aware of—and educated about—the issue at large. But after extensive research, I came to realize just how big the issue is, and how diverse the perpetrators and victims are, how the roadblocks in coming forward to report sexual assault are numerous, and how there is so much to be done, legally and

culturally, to prevent the crime and to help and support victims.

BB: Who are some of the writers and books that most influenced you as you wrote the novel? Who did you need to study in order to build the novel properly?

JG: My favorite book of the past ten years is Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and there is no doubt that the snap shot and alternating point of view structure that beautiful book employs influenced my decision to follow a similar framework with *I'd Walk with My Friends if I Could Find Them*. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Richard Ford's *Rock Springs* were also constant literary friends never far away from my writing space, largely because of their respective genius at showcasing human yearning.

I'm currently pursuing my PhD at Florida State University, and I feel privileged to study with many of my literary heroes, including the incredible Robert Olen Butler. Reading his book on writing fiction, *From Where You Dream*, and taking his class were creative game-changers for me. I say "game-changers" because I was searching for, and subsequently discovered, new pathways into the creative zone where I write my best.

I also owe much to the brilliant and recent work that also taps into questions of conflict, family, and identity. My favorites include Janet Burroway's *Losing Tim*, Michael Garriga's *The Book of Duels*, Jehanne Dubrow's *Stateside*, David Abrams's *Fobbit*, Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Katey Shultz's *Flashes of War*, Benjamin Busch's *Dust to Dust*, Siobhan Fallon's *You Know When the Men Are Gone*, Brian Turner's *Phantom Noise*, Donald Anderson's *Fire Road*, Lea Carpenter's *Eleven Days*, and the fantastic nonfiction work of essayist Brandon Lingle.

But what I needed most while writing this novel was my brilliant editor, Ben Hyman. It's funny now to think of all of the well-intentioned warnings I received from fellow authors about possible creative differences with editors. And I understand that many have had challenging issues when it comes to the author-editor relationship, but I say this with my heart on my sleeve: my novel exists only because of Ben's encouraging and smart guidance. May others be as fortunate.

BB: Lastly, looking back at "Derrin of the North," the first piece you published with *Harpur Palate*, how do you believe you've progressed as a writer since then? How have your obsessions changed?

JG: "Derrin of the North" was not only the first piece I published with *Harpur Palate*, but it was the first piece I published, ever. I received the acceptance call while I was visiting family in Salt Lake City, and after I hung up, I walked into the living room and wept in front of extended family I hadn't seen in years. It's been seven years since that phone call, and the two most important things in my development as a writer have been to remain an active reader and to believe in my voice; the former has been easy, the latter, much more difficult. Since that first *Harpur Palate* publication I've had years to read, and also, to listen carefully to feedback on my own work. I relish the moments when I'm reading and I'm just flat out jealous. Besides the appreciation of entering wonderful literature as a reader, thousands of writer-craft questions swirl: How is he or she pulling this off? What's new here? Why am I falling in love with this book? In my attempts to answer these questions, I'm really asking myself, "What kind of art do I want to create?" And although it isn't that articulate, I find myself most often answering, "The kick-ass kind."

My obsessions? Well, they continue to intensify because with each passing day, I seem more aware that I am mortal, and that my end will one day be a real event. I don't mean that in a depressing way at all. If anything, I'm more invigorated by this acceptance. I watch my healthy children play in the front yard and think, "My God, I have it good." So my personal obsessions for literature, music, sports, and Thai food deepen, and now is as good a time as ever to indulge. This type of urgency is great creatively. Sure, I have my periods of regret and laziness and doubt, but after giving myself a break, it's time to dive back in. This ties into the idea of believing in your voice. I find it invigorating that we each possess a unique creative perspective, and that no one else can write the story, essay, or poem that someone else will dream up. This knowledge is so damn liberating that even during those times when I'm staring at a blank document and nothing arrives at my fingertips, it's okay, because when something does, it will be my voice.