
JOSHUA WHEELER

The Troubling of Hummingbirds (A Letter to Billy the Kid)

March 17, Roundabouts 9:00 PM, 1879

Dear Mister W. H. Bonney,

I know you will die hungry, Billy boy. You will die with a wet dick but an empty belly. You'll want a steak after a romp with your lover and you'll be in your skivvies and the butcher knife in your hand is only for the side of beef because you aren't expecting a fight. But the sheriff will have found you. So there you'll die, like in a sad way: in your skivvies, saying "Quién es?" near the bed of your lover's brother, you squinting in the dark and belly growling and dick drying and shriveling as Sheriff Pat Garrett's gun lights up the room. I don't mean to be crass. I know she is your lover, like you really do love Paulita and that's why you'll never run from New Mexico, even when there's a price on your head. I'm just trying to point out how undignified the circumstances of your death were. I mean, will be—if you don't heed this letter.

But if you don't die like that—like in a sad way—but die somehow more dignified before this mess gets messier like it's about to, you will not become a legend. So then here is your predicament: dignity or fanfare. You're in a very American situation, Billy boy. Maybe it is hard to fathom because you are just nineteen years young and adrift in a desert territory of the recently reconciled budding empire but within your grasp is infamy and maybe the best thing for your country is to let it pass—though passing on infamy will forever seem the least American course of action.

I'm writing this letter, of course, from the future, but I have dated it for the evening on which I expect to deliver it, which is the Monday evening you're living in 1879. I'm writing from the Lincoln County courthouse where there is a 134-year-old bloodstain on the floorboards beneath my feet. This is the blood of Deputy James Bell whose chest will explode in two years when you loose a Colt into his heart

as part of your final jailbreak while Sheriff Garrett is off hunting wood for your gallows because the governor has finally signed your death warrant. The restaurant where Deputy Bob Olinger will eat as you kill his partner Bell is still just across the road at the Wortley Hotel. The Wortley Hotel is where I sleep alone on a bed that feels as old as the bloodstain. In this world is a woman I love but she will not leave the Big City to sleep with me in a ghost town in a bed that feels as old as the bloodstain. You will kill Deputy Bob too. His blood will spill in the mud but I cannot see it now because mud does not get stained. She will not leave the Big City for me, Billy boy. And I will not leave this desert because the desert will not leave me. I guess you know how that last part feels. When I am done writing this letter I will walk from the courthouse, down the road that leads to Roswell, right through the middle of Lincoln, past the Tunstall store that is now a post office and the Dolan House that is now yet another sad tourists' B&B. Now there is nothing but sagebrush at the foot of the mountain where Squire Wilson's house once stood but 136 years ago you are in that house with a .44 Colt Lightning in your right hand and an 1873 Winchester rifle in your left hand and across the table is the new governor of this territory, Lew Wallace, ready to talk about once and for all and finally ending for good this last of the Wild West spats called the Lincoln County War. Lew wants to arrest you, for show. But he will soon betray you and sign your death warrant—if you don't heed this letter. At the door is Squire Wilson who will bolt it behind me as I leave after delivering the letter, as I have walked through Lincoln and melted to 1879—not traveled or slipped or fell but melted through to 1879, melted like the acid blood of an alien monster melts through its steel cell where it is over being poked and prodded by humans, which is to say I bleed to be here, I am freed by bleeding, I have so much blood in me still, I am done being poked and prodded—as I have just dropped this letter on the table between you and Lew who I hope will shake hands and make nice and disappear and erase your wakes.

Hello, Billy boy.

Do you know about aliens? Extraterrestrials? Martians? Here in 1879 those words are just beginning to percolate on the tongues of the proletariat and drip from the pens of the literati, the stories of unidentified flying objects just starting to rise up out of Texas and hover and cover the dime novels and they will colonize Roswell soon but you don't need all the specifics to understand the idea. Aliens are a myth sprung out of loneliness, which is why most of these UFOs appear to us in the desert.

Because the desert gets dark in a way that helps us to see.

Because the desert is a lonesome place.

The Gov said *come alone*. He wrote *come alone* five different ways in the seven sentence letter asking you to meet him here.¹ Have you worried over that, Billy boy? Before he was the Gov, Lew Wallace was a Union general in the Civil War and they say his incompetence was part of the 26,000 casualty shitshow at Shiloh and so he's got a lot of anger or guilt or the deadly duo of both riding his nerves. Look at his index finger. See how it twitches. See the dark stain on its trigger side. Don't sweat. It's only ink. His finger twitches because he's deep in the midst of obsessively penning an epic, in purple ink no less, because he is just that pompous, and right now he doesn't give two shits about you and never will except for maybe noticing how you seem to take after something he's already put to paper in his pompous purple ink.

. . . looking up, he saw a face he never forgot . . . shaded by locks of yellowish bright chestnut hair; a face lighted by dark-blue eyes, at the time so soft, so appealing, so full of love and holy purpose, that they had all the power of command and will.

—*Ben-Hur*, Book II, Chapter VII

I think you look rupestrine like I look rupestrine but your lover Paulita will always say you were beautiful even when you are long dead and the only surviving tintype of your ugly mug suggests you look exactly rupestrine. But other pals will hail your beauty too. Well, all right. Everybody says me and you have real pretty eyelashes and dainty wrists like our mamas. Hummingbird says she loves my little wrists. Did Paulita say the same to you? Something about the way they made those guns dance, her hips roll, her body sing? Hummingbird is what I always called the woman I loved when I was trying to be sweet because she hated when I called her darlin' because she'd heard me call other women darlin' and because she has a way of doing so much without seeming to move at all because she is small and has a sharp nose and shines iridescent and is always after something sweet. Hummingbird is now the only thing I call the woman I loved because I'm afraid to use her name because I choose the desert over her and it makes her mad, because even just the whisper of her name fills my room at the Wortley Hotel with her absence and makes the creaks of the bloodstain-old bed echo more and so now I say only Hummingbird because maybe the haunting will flit away just like that. Rupestrine means living or growing among rocks, which doesn't seem to connote anything sweet but maybe it does. Maybe I only think of rocks in landscapes where nothing grows. Maybe that

is why Hummingbird will not leave the Big City for me. Even in my imagination the place I belong is one where nothing grows.

Lew's purple-inked epic is *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* and he began writing it in 1873, the exact year you migrated from the Big City to New Mexico and started making trouble as a kid in Silver City. Lew has been here as the Gov for only seven months and has spent most of his time ignoring the ghosts of Shiloh and ignoring the ghosts of this desert's past, trying to conjure the scene of the Crucifixion of Jesus that will be the climax of his epic.ⁱⁱ So the soft-faced, blue-eyed boy he writes about in purple ink is Jesus. But Lew must now see that you look like that, too, pretty for a boy, meaning maybe you are less of an outlaw than he thought. Or Jesus is more of an outlaw than he thought. In two weeks Lew will write to a friend: *A precious specimen named 'The Kid,' whom the sheriff is holding here in the Plaza, as it is called, is an object of tender regard. I heard singing and music the other night; going to the door, I found the minstrels of the village actually serenading the fellow in his prison.*ⁱⁱⁱ In two weeks Lew will still be deep into conjuring the Crucifixion climax of his epic and I don't see any way the two stories don't kind of melt together inside of him: you and his Jesus yarn.

Stories do this, you know? There is never only one and when they are poked and prodded they bleed through the cells where we've trapped them.

At year's end Lew will write in a letter to his wife from Santa Fe:

I am busy putting in every spare minute copying my book for publication. It is curious this jumping from the serious things of life to the purely romantic. It is like nothing so much as living two lives in one. To pass from a meeting of the Wise Men in the Desert, to effecting a reconciliation in a legislature and breaking a deadlock, are certainly wide enough apart . . . How long will it last?

I guess when Lew sat down to write *Ben-Hur* he wanted to write the Greatest Story Ever Told but most Americans felt that story was already in the Bible. So Lew made up a story on the fringes of greatness. I know you would read Lew's book if you could because you are more literate than people give you credit for—otherwise I would not waste my time with this highly literate letter—but the book is not yet finished. Some of the Crucifixion is still there in the ink on Lew's finger. See how it twitches, how he rubs the thumb on the trigger finger and pulls at his moustache and squints his eyes to hide the ghosts of Shiloh that live there, how impatiently he waits for you to finish my letter. Take your time. There is no ink on my fingers because in the future we have computers. In the future computers are how we do

so much without seeming to move at all. In the future we have a dozen different versions of *Ben-Hur* as books and plays and films but here's the gist of Lew's original tale on the fringes of greatness: a Jew named Ben-Hur gets sold into slavery after accidentally killing a Roman soldier. But slavery will not keep him down and he is buoyed by the thought of revenge against his Roman friend who lied and testified that the accident was actually assassination. And Ben-Hur is buoyed also by the thought of taking down the whole of the bullshit Roman Empire by raising an army to rebel alongside a messianic fellow named Jesus who seems to be everywhere doing miracles and stirring up Roman ire. *Ben-Hur* is the story of a man consumed by rage and hate except at the very end where, only after accomplishing his revenge by murderously cheating in a chariot race and getting very rich, he finally accepts the teachings of love and compassion preached by the crucified Jesus and buys himself a nice church to help spread the Good Word that now gives him solace amid all that Roman wealth earned from a life of hateful vengeance.

It is an undeniably American story being penned by Lew—and now poked and prodded by me—in this famous desert of the Old West about all those deserts of the biblical Middle East.

All hail the ancient desert wormhole.

In the future, wormholes are what we call it when the cells of the universe bleed. *Ben-Hur* is really the first great success of us Americans insinuating ourselves into the Christian myth, making it bloodsexy in our own image as we inch toward becoming an empire with a chip on our shoulder. But Lew cannot just turn Jesus into an American badass even though his wife will keep goading him to do exactly that.^{iv} So Lew tells the whole story of Jesus, from the Wise Men and the star of Bethlehem over the manger all the way to the hilltop hanging from nails, tells the story via a proxy named Ben-Hur, a proxy that gets to do all the awesome shit we Americans are eager to do as we ride the rich wave of the Industrial Age toward the new century, energized and hungry for more glamorous sins—revenge gold plated with celebrity and wealth—in which we want to indulge but without sully-ing the divine story of Jesus so that in the end we can still be saved by his hilltop hanging from nails.^v

The second great success of us Americans insinuating ourselves into the Christian myth is you. Or, will be you, if you don't heed this letter.

Growing up I always heard my preacher preach and carry on and pray about the Second Coming. He always said, *When Jesus returns to Earth and brings the*

Kingdom of Heaven, that is the Day of Judgment and Apocalypse and ruin . . . but salvation if you are pure of spirit. He said it often and would repeat it a bunch of times in succession the way some people keep jabbing the elevator button after it's already lit. Elevators are vertical coffins that in the future will come to plague the Big City, coffins that strangers ride to higher and lower floors of their lives with each other, a sign we are already running out of dimensions in which to fit ourselves. I know you know about the Apocalypse because your mama always read you the Bible. And then I guess you always read the Bible to Paulita because that was one surefire way you knew to express love. I wonder if you and Paulita stayed up nights in bed in your skivvies making plans for how you might ride your horses through the smoldering ruins of the End Times.

Hummingbird is a cartoonist who dreams only of apocalypse. I don't mean she hastens it but that her sleeping hours are consumed by visions, not the Second Coming of Christ but just the part where everything is ruins. We stayed up nights in bed in our skivvies making plans for traipsing through the smoldering ruins of the End Times. Hummingbird is not exactly a cartoonist, might prefer to be called an illustrator or artist. Cartoonist sounds condescending but it is not. Cartoonists just take for granted that everything is askance. Hummingbird draws the apocalypse from her dreams but draws the ruins in a cartoonish way that makes the devastation less scary and that's only one reason I've loved her. She would get up in the night so many times to piss and then spend so much time telling me about the ruins she'd dreamed before getting up to piss that I wonder how she ever did any dreaming at all. In the future, our bathrooms are right in our houses and there is a system of pipes underground that carries everyone's piss to the same place where it gets all mixed up together. Hummingbird never had to walk too far for the bathroom. Maybe she never woke up at all.

Billy boy, have you ever been stuck in a rut? Have you ever felt that it has all been sleepwalking for years? Have you been alive long enough to get that sensation or have you been all whiskey and gunpowder for as long as you can recall? I am old enough now to be old enough to know the feeling of feeling I've been sleepwalking for years but it is so tough to trust my feelings when feeling I'm dreaming and so I walk on and on and on and now I find myself melted to you.

So there is Lew still sitting across the table with that purple-inked epic trigger finger and tugging at his moustache and squinting his haunted eyes and now also craning his neck awkwardly trying to get a peek at this all-important letter as you hold it farther and farther from your body, growing increasingly concerned that

I've lost the thread. I was saying you're on your way to becoming an American Jesus, Billy boy. If we look at this rendezvous between you and Lew just a little bit askance we might realize Lew is wasting his time conjuring the Crucifixion because he's already seated at the Second Coming, which is you.

How's Jesus look to you now, Bob?
 (Bang.)

That's a line of dialogue (and a sound effect) from Sam Peckinpah's 1973 film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. The line will be delivered by Kris Kristofferson playing you right before you kill Deputy Bob whose spilled blood will not stain the mud. In the future, a film is what we call a play whose blood has melted through the cell of the stage. This is the best film that'll ever be made about you and this is the part where they're making fun of how you, all rupestrine and criminal, have morphed into an American Jesus. They'll start making these jokes as early as 1958 in Arthur Penn's film *The Left Handed Gun* starring Paul Newman as you. The joke is not about you so much as it is on us. First of all, you are not left handed; that's our misconception on account of how tintypes reverse images, make it look, in the one photograph we have of you, like you carry your Colt on your left hip but you do not, like you are rupestrine but you are not. Beginning in 1881 there will be a flood of dime novels about Billy the Kid and Billy the Kid will hit Broadway in 1906 and Billy the Kid will first grace the silver screen in 1911. There will be over one hundred films about you and some say you will be, at times, the second most recognizable name in the world—second only to Jesus. In 1926 *The Saga of Billy the Kid* will be published and it will amalgamate all the dime novel myths about you into one slick biography and you'll come out looking exactly like an American badass, like the Jesus I'm telling you Lew cannot bring himself to write even though his wife keeps telling him to. You were, all these stories say, a young man adrift in the desert, fighting the authorities while hiding among the peasants, a Robin Hood with the seemingly miraculous ability to never die, a beacon for the disenfranchised, a final embodiment of the one true light and the way that is the American God of the Individualistic Spirit.

A halo has been clapped upon his scapegrace brow . . . a figure of eternal youth riding forever through a purple glamour of romance . . . he escaped by apparent miracles; he was saved as if by necromancy . . . he set his foot upon the sunlit road.

—*The Saga of Billy the Kid*

You will be a killer and a saint in one body, no need in your story to bifurcate the murderous and the messianic like Lew's so painstakingly doing in his Bible epic—here in our American desert it's a two-sides-same-coin situation. Back to the old, vengeful God but in a new way. So then this is what I mean when I say you're the Second Coming seated across from Lew. In those films in 1958 and 1973, when Garrett catches you, you will not hold your hands up like any old outlaw but hold them outstretched like you're nailed to a cross, like you're exactly the American Jesus you'll become.

Have you seen that?
What does it say?
Outlaw youth dead.
Keep it as a souvenir.
I ain't dead no more. I come Awake!

That's you and your lover in *The Left Handed Gun* talking about rumors of your death that will not be rumors for long. But the lover is not Paulita. Paulita will be, more often than not, written out of your story and mostly at her own behest. Even though she will always say you were pretty, she will never admit to being your lover. I mention this not to hurt to you, Billy boy, but to let you know how it will be if you do not heed this letter. She will not spurn you but neither will she claim you. Maybe you should write Paulita a love letter. Your letters will survive in the future but they will all be missives to Lew begging for leniency when this clandestine rendezvous fails to get you off the hook for good. There should be a letter that makes clear who you've loved, or that you've loved at all.

Seventy years from now *The Left Handed Gun* will hit theaters to little acclaim. Just a few months later a film called *Ben-Hur* will rake in all the box office cash. Here in Squire Wilson's kitchen in 1879 you are facing off with Lew for the first time. The second time will be at American cinemas in 1959 where *Ben-Hur* is projected twenty yards from *The Left Handed Gun*. This staring contest between you and Lew will evolve into a box office face-off where Charlton Heston drives a chariot while Paul Newman dances and cries and dies.^{vi} Both films will be written, in part, by a man named Gore Vidal, who will work on the scripts simultaneously. And I don't see any way the two stories don't kind of melt together inside of him—each about a boy betrayed in the desert and a subsequent life of vengeance leading to fame or fortune. Both films will be rewritten many times by different writers and in both cases the notable thing that will only sort of make it from Gore's drafts to the final

cut is the love affair he conjures between the protagonist and the antagonist. In the Gore version, Ben-Hur's hatred for his Roman friend and accuser, along with that friend's betrayal, are born of an unspoken sexual tryst between the boys in their youth. In the Gore version, Pat Garrett will hunt you down because you sabotage his wedding because he wants you to leave this desert for your own good, to run to Mexico like all good outlaws, because he loves you like a son but you can't stand to be loved with so much vengeance in your blood. Gore will understand stories need both love and hate and all the better if he can get them mixed together, which in your case he maybe has the liberty to do because you never declared your love for Paulita. You never wrote that letter. But don't you know that one must always include a love story, one way or another, even if it ends rough? Love is the only way for a story to really feel human. Those films will only be as good as the love Gore sneaks into the vengeance.

Billy, it was never really rose petals and champagne for me and Hummingbird, which I guess you've figured out. There was mostly that old cycle of sulfurous passions. There was general meanness at times, saying unnecessarily true things to one another out of frustration. We could make love for hours whispering terrible lies out of pure lust but then later when the dinner gets burned or the boss fires off a lunatic missive or general existential dread settles over us both at once, then maybe one little mean truth slips out in frustration—and that truth is a dagger severing all the connections we'd made whispering filthy lies while trying to fuck our way into each other. Sometimes the love story is rough all the way through but that does not make it less of a love story.

When I say *love story* I mean between humans but I guess it could be an affair between other kinds of nouns—a person and a place, for instance. I am in a lifelong torrid affair with this desert at the bottom of America. Hummingbird long ago gave her heart to the Big City at the top of America where people ride coffins with strangers to stack themselves toward heaven or away from hell. She'd say *I want to live in my Big City*. And I'd say *I want to die in my desert*. So me and Hummingbird stayed up nights in bed in our skivvies fantasizing apocalypse and making plans for navigating the smoldering ruins because in the End Times locations are meaningless, are all flattened to the same rubble. Because maybe in the ruins we could finally love only each other.

When I read the words "The End" how beautiful they will look to me! What a long, long work it has been, a labor of love! How many hours and days and weeks it has

consumed! Frightful to think of; and yet I know no happier way of passing time, none which takes me so completely out of this world and affairs of the present, a perfect retreat from the annoyances of daily life as they are spun for me by enemies, and friends who might as well be enemies. . . . Every calculation based on experience elsewhere fails in New Mexico.

Lew will soon write this in a letter to his wife, a letter that rolls quickly from relief and exuberance about nearing the end of his epic to lamenting the ancient desert wormhole he's stuck trying to govern. Lew will publish *Ben-Hur* in November of 1880, two weeks after Pat Garrett is elected sheriff and two weeks before you are arrested for the final time. In April of '81, when Lew at long last signs your death warrant after you kill Deputies Olinger and Bell, his epic will not be selling well, less than 2800 copies in six months. But in July, when Garrett's bullet gets inside you, Lew's epic will begin to fly off the shelves and will eventually sell more copies than any previous American novel. The two situations, your assassination and his best seller, are maybe not related at all unless of course they are totally related—the way the last outcry of Jesus hanging from the nails just happened to immediately precede an earthquake.

And while they stood staring at each other, the ground commenced to shake; each man took hold of his neighbor to support himself; in a twinkling the darkness disappeared and the sun came out; and everybody, as with the same glance, beheld the crosses on the hill all reeling drunken-like in the earthquake.

—*Ben-Hur*, Book VII, Chapter X

And lo, the myths will make our culture reel drunken-like in the quake from the wind of your last breath and the wind of the pages of Lew's sword-and-sandal epic flying open across all our empire. The Big City papers will have on one page an obituary for you, the kid outlaw killer, and on another page a glowing review of Lew's Crucifixion climax. All the people on the streets will be flipping those pages back and forth as they sleepwalk to their callings. And a street vendor will take a nickel from a knee-high boy for *The True Life of Billy the Kid*. And from the White House even the president of the United States will champion *Ben-Hur*, until the president takes a bullet himself. And Pat Garret will write *The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid* to fix some blatant lies perpetuated by *The True Life of Billy the Kid*. But mostly Pat will write lies about himself. And *Ben-Hur* will hit the best seller list and stay there for thirty years, for thirty years on all the nightstands and coffee tables and prominent living room shelves next to all the heirloom Bibles. And on

the floor of the children's rooms the dime novels will get torn through again and again until they are nearly back to the pulp from which they came and there in all the trash bins lie the worn cartoon covers of *Buffalo Bill and Billy the Kid* and *Billy the Kid: King of the Old West!* and *Billy the Kid vs. The Monster of the Mountain*. Before it is all over you will fight so many aliens and vampires, Billy boy. I will grow up eating lunch out of a box on which you ride a dinosaur. By 1910 over twenty million people will see the *Ben-Hur* traveling stage show in which there are live action chariot races and Jesus is played by a 25,000 candlepower spotlight but that glow will be the closest an alien gets to dropping into Lew's epic because he will have a thing called copyright that extends beyond the page, will be the first ever author to control the dissemination and representation of his story so completely no matter where it pops up, a stage or an advertisement or the Los Angeles corner of Venice and La Cienega in 1925 where a whole coliseum will be built of plaster, beautiful but oh so temporary, and forty-two cameras will burn Lew's vengeful chariot race into our celluloid consciousness. And the chariot race will end up on lunch boxes, too, *Ben-Hur* the first ever story to morph into a multimedia, multiplatform, all-merchandise-branding phenomenon: All-American Mama will open her *Ben-Hur* freezer with *Ben-Hur* curlers in her hair and *Ben-Hur* perfume spritzed on her clavicle while All-American Pops sips his *Ben-Hur* whiskey and lights the *Ben-Hur* charcoal briquettes while the All-American Boys and Girls run around in their Billy the Kid SaFTNee jeans with knee patch pre sewn on the inside and fire their Billy the Kid eight-shot cap guns at one another until it is time to slather their dinner in *Ben-Hur* ketchup and finally wash up and brush with *Ben-Hur* tooth powder and fall asleep snuggled into their Billy the Kid sheets.

Billy boy, I know all sorts of hummingbird facts now, a kind of Trivial Pursuit I've picked up to help take my mind off a ruined love affair without actually giving it up. Hummingbirds suck at hollyhocks and foxgloves and morning glories but also they eat the meat of flies. The male hummingbird performs wild dives when courting, big dramatic swoops up into the sky and then like a missile down past the female who just sits and watches the most acrobatic of all nature's courtships but then, when their eggs hatch, the male always abandons the nest. Hummingbirds undertake some of the world's longest migrations. They don't sleep. They do something deeper than sleep, every night, called *torpor*. Their heartbeats drop from 1000 beats per minute down to seventy and I bet they dream some goddamn powerful dreams. I bet their wings only flap so much because they are always trying to convince themselves they are awake. I bet everything in the universe is only happening

inside a hummingbird's dream. And that's why they're the only birds that can fly backward.

I don't need to tell you all about hummingbirds. I know you've studied them by the tens of thousands. Five years ago you were even more of a kid than you are now, fourteen years young and stealing laundry in Silver City like a real punk and getting locked up and learning to escape by disappearing through the chimney of the jail like a lick of smoke. But I know where you disappeared to, Billy boy. I know you snuck to Sapillo Creek for hiding out before heading to Arizona where you upped the ante of your thieving to horses before going all in on outlawry by putting a hole in the gut of a blacksmith who bullied you, maybe said you look rupestrine when you do not. I know you went to Sapillo Creek after your first jail break not because anybody told me you did but because I know that creek is a good place to hide, tucked into a rough box canyon, cool in the summer from the shade of cottonwoods and with plenty of water, the first place a boy named Geronimo learned to hide back in the 1830s. I've walked all the way up that creek to the Gila River and then ten miles more and to the cliff dwellings where the ancient Mogollon first did their hiding in the year of our Lord 1000. There are so many holes in the cliffs along Sapillo, so many places we bipedal fleshbags have cowered.

Every summer the great hummingbird migration bottlenecks at Sapillo just north of Silver City. They arrive as a ten thousand strong swarm, Magnificents and Calliopes and Lucifers, all the prettiest little hummingbirds descending on the desert, coming from the east, from the Big City maybe, heading down to Mexico for the winter. They stop at Sapillo because the desert is not, after all, a place where nothing grows. One just has to look harder, fly on and on and on before the oasis materializes. One just has to know, from way back in the less evolved part of the brain, the path the flock has always flown. I guess it is not unlike sleepwalking. A bunch of hummingbirds is not called a *flock* or a *swarm* but a *charm* or: a *troubling*. I bet you didn't know that, Billy boy. You cowered there on Sapillo Creek and here it was: a charm or a troubling. The troubling of hummingbirds. You sat there in 1874 with the troubling in your young eyes as Lew wrote the first lines of *Ben-Hur*, his Wise Men wandering through the desert and chasing a star and there you are staring at ten thousand blurs of wings—you remember the hymn about ten thousand angels?—colorful throats and crowns bobbing as they fly backward and forward, dipping their bills into sweetness, the collective hum of their flight still dim but almost industrial like finally hearing the wobble of the motor that's

all this time been at the core of the earth making it spin for what reason we still do not know. They will suck on hollyhocks for about a day and then head for Mexico. In the future, the troubling of hummingbirds is the same. The individual birds are different but in the future the migration of the troubling is the same.

The migration of the troubling is always the same.

The troubling always migrates through our desert.

The way to move freely through time is not melting, like I said before when I was being overly dramatic with all that talk of alien blood. Nor is it only through drunkenness which is something we've all thought at one time or another. But maybe it is this way, through a troubling, a collective migration like the hummingbirds, moving toward something better but doing it the exact same way year after year, a kind of sleepwalking built into genes, the dreams not of ruins but the opposite, following nothing conscious to somewhere better for now and full of sweetness to suck. Or maybe I am only describing nostalgia again. I just want some way to erase regret. I always thought one day I'd get Hummingbird to this desert in summer to see the troubling. Or she'd just migrate with them and show up and say, *There is a way for us. Join the troubling.* But she will not talk to me anymore. She does not spurn me but neither does she claim me. Well, maybe she spurns me. Maybe that's why I'm not writing this letter to her.

The pen shrinks from the picture she presented.

—*Ben-Hur*, Book VII, Chapter III

This is how Lew will describe Ben-Hur's sister stepping out of a tomb all scaled with leprosy right before Jesus heals her, right before he hangs from nails. Lew calls attention to himself as the narrator of his epic often. He addresses his reader often. He writes *O Reader* so many times and makes *Ben-Hur* feel like a dispatch from the Holy Land even though Lew's never yet been there. Any description of the Holy Land in his epic comes from a history book or looking out from his governor's palace at the dusty wormhole. But Lew wants his book to feel personal like a letter and maybe it does when he writes *O Reader* but here he writes *the pen shrinks* and that just makes him seem like a coward, not because he's admitting to being a hack whose talent has clear limits but because he has no problem describing miracles and magic and majesty of all kinds but when it comes to the messiness of humanity, the rotting flesh, he taps out. He refuses to do the dirty work. His pen shrinks. Well, this pen will not shrink. Pass this letter across the table to Lew, Billy boy.

Hello, Gov.

See Billy boy's face worked up into a consternation snaggle. Know the cause of that snaggle is the powerful document he's been poring over that is now in your hands. Wipe the ghosts of Shiloh from your eyes and see that your country needs you. O Reader, I'll sum up everything you've missed in my letter thus far: this clandestine rendezvous may be our last chance to keep the myth of salvific vengeance from soaking into every last cell of our impressionable nation's daily life and also I am lovesick but that last bit just sort of melted through—though, as always, lovesickness is what it must all be really about. One does not ever feel vengeful unless one has loved and lost. I know you're flipping back now, Lew, frantically through the early pages of this letter looking to ascertain particulars but I recommend you not do that because now you are back at the end where you started and have wasted so much time, have not even noticed Billy stand up and sidle to your hip where he now reads along with you, leaning over your shoulder as you sit there dumbfounded by my letter and now his Colt comes out of his belt and rises toward your temple but Lew, lucky Lew, you got the advantage of being a quicker reader than Billy boy and so you draw your own Colt and get it in his gut just like you got it now and you don't even have to think to pull the trigger because your finger is so tense from all the purple ink you've been dragging onto the pages of your great novel about the epic past but even as you the feel the kick from this one finger stroke more than you ever felt it from the pen, you know you're never gonna be quicker than the boy who will become the sharpshooter Prince of the West even if, with my help, you are just as quick as him and so, well, all right, there go his guts and there go your brains and for a second in that midair splatter, the clumps of your gray matter float still with the spark of neurons on the hunt for one last epiphany—in the future, *neurons* is a word we use when we pray thoughts make sense—but the sparking neurons are invisible to the naked eye like the way a hummingbird's wings disappear when it flies hardest, that whole slew of your brains in the air for a second like the troubling of hummingbirds descending on Sapillo Creek and for that second you're still conscious of these words, still feeling them like some kind of note long after the end of a letter^{vii} and you're conscious also of how now there will be no Ben-Hur, there will be no Billy boy, there will be no vengeance branded tooth powder and blue jeans and perfume, no reason for me to write this letter at all so long as Squire Wilson remembers to burn this missive, erasing all evidence of this future I'm sad and sleepwalking in.

ENDNOTES

i. This is the letter now crumpled in your pocket, Billy boy. I provide it here as proof that I'm from the future:

Lincoln, March 15, 1879

W. H. Bonney,

Come to the house of Squire Wilson (not the lawyer) at nine o'clock next Monday night alone. I don't mean his office, but his residence. Follow along the foot of the mountain south of the town, come in on that side, and knock on the east door. I have authority to exempt you from prosecution, if you will testify to what you say you know.

The object of the meeting at Squire Wilson's is to arrange the matter in a way to make your life safe. To do that the utmost secrecy is to be used. So come alone. Don't tell anybody—not a living soul—where you are coming or the object. If you could trust Jesse Evans, you can trust me.

—Lew Wallace

ii. Just read Lew's assessment of completing his epic, written years after the publication of *Ben-Hur*, written for a newspaper, an article that will be included in his autobiography, a book compiled and edited (and heavily revised, it seems) posthumously by his wife. It is worthwhile, Billy boy, because it reveals more of the warp and wobble of history than anything actually included in *Ben-Hur*. Lew writes:

Everybody has heard of the old palace in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A rambling, one-story adobe structure, with walls in places six feet thick, and hard as friable stone, it covers the whole of the north side of the plaza.

Authentic history connects it with the occupation of the Cibolan region by the Spaniards; while traditionally every room in it is the habitat of ghosts more or less numerous, of which some are said to mutter their tales of woe in the vernacular of the Pueblos, some in the liquid castillion of Isabella, some in what a lively French ambassadress, within to flatter me, once called American English.

. . . in that cavernous chamber I wrote the eighth and last book of *Ben-Hur*.

My custom when night came was to lock the doors and out the windows of the office proper, and with a student's lamp, bury myself in the four soundless walls of the forbidding annex. . . .

The ghosts, if they were ever about, did not disturb me; yet in the hush of that gloomy harborage I beheld the Crucifixion, and strove to write what I beheld.

iii. *Lew in a letter to Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz. March 31, 1879.*

iv. December 1879, letter from Lew to his wife in response to her revision note that Jesus be more of a badass during the Crucifixion climax at the end of *Ben-Hur*:

I have given thought to your point—that there is nothing in my last chapters to relieve the meekness with which Christ went to the cross. The point is correct as an observation, but not as a criticism, since that was exactly what I sought to give in the description. My idea is that at a certain time—viz, when Christ arose from the table to go to Gethsemane, his spirit had not yet been brought to the condition in which he could go meekly to death; a little later—viz, after the struggle in Gethsemane, his mind, to use a common expression, was made up, and after that he delivered himself to his captors, prepared for death. In the apostolic account there is not a word, nor an act, nor a gesture, indicative of any resentment, defiance, or impulse of resistance; on the contrary, when Peter cut off the servant's ear, he not only rebuked the disciple, but restored the ear whole. Go now and read the several accounts of the four apostles, descriptive of the capture, the trial, the march to Golgotha, and the dying upon the cross and every exemplification is that of absolute submission, which, with the prayer, 'Father forgive them,' etc., uttered the moment the tree dropped into the hole ready for it, marks the difference between the divine Christ and the common man. To me the conduct of the sufferer in the very particular of which you speak is the most conclusive proof of His divine nature, and—think of this!—it was not possible by words or acts to show more plainly His strength, derived from knowledge of what He was, than by the meekness with which He endured and died—no flashing of the eyes, no pointing towards heaven, no threat of what He could do if He was so disposed, no boast of His divinity could have served that purpose so well. He was the Lamb of God at no time in His career so completely and purely as in the agony of His last hours. So I mean to stand by the description exactly as you have it, so far as this point is concerned.

v. In *Ben-Hur*, Lew is engaged in a narrative technique I like to call the Forrest Gumping of history. Or just Gumping. Gumping is the creation of a fictional character to place in an actual supporting role in an actual historic event, a kind of retelling that honors the truth and just only melts it a little to make it fit the story at hand. Lew will, for instance, Gump his protagonist Ben-Hur into the Crucifixion by having him play the anonymous man quenching the thirst of the hanging Christ with a sponge full of vinegar. Your story will endure this kind of Gumping, too,

with all kinds of subsequent aspirants to badassery inserting themselves on your fringes as a ploy for credibility. This letter is me Gumping you.

vi. Not that it matters but the first actor asked to play Ben-Hur will be Paul Newman, who'll decline by saying his legs look no good in a skirt. But wouldn't that be something, Lew's epic and your myth projected simultaneously, side by side, the heroes indistinguishable from one another.

vii. I'm just caught up jumping from the serious things of life to the purely romantic, Lew. Will you hand the letter back to Billy boy? Hello, Billy. Despite this letter, all will unfold as it has already unfolded (you dead too young, Lew alive too old, and *Ben-Hur* a perpetual best seller) because you love and you will not give love up. You love Paulita and you love this desert and if just one of us in the whole wretched species can die on account of love then I guess it will be all right. I do not love enough. I do not have enough to sacrifice. So tonight I will head back to the Wortley Hotel and dream no more of the death of you and Lew but dream of Hummingbird dreaming of her cartoon apocalypse like I always do. Tomorrow I'm headed alone to Sapillo Creek where there will be hummingbirds because the passing of the troubling through the desert wormhole is one thing we can always count on. I know I won't, but I need to say it anyway: I hope to see you there.