

from Ecotone

NONFICTION

Never Forge **T**

Matthew
Vollmer

No one now living knows much about the massacre at Draper's Meadow. No witness ever penned an account, and most—if not all—renderings of the events can be traced to a couple of reports written by descendants of the victims. We don't know the exact location of the massacre, though it's safe to say that it occurred on land that is now a part of the campus of Virginia Tech, most likely in the vicinity of the Duck Pond, a place Blacksburg residents visit to seek solace: to fish for mud bass, to feed mallards and Muscovy and Canadian geese, to stroll paths creased with frost heaves, to stare at rippling water. Nor do we know what motivated the band of Shawnee Indians to attack this place, once home to a group of enterprising trans-Alleghany pioneers. The explanation given by John Ingles, a descendant of one of the survivors, who claimed that the Shawnee were simply quenching "their heathen thirst for bloodshed and plunder," smacks of the prevailing attitudes that justified the denigration—and thus persecution—of an entire country's worth of indigenous people. And while the Shawnee might have had any number of reasons for attacking this particular settlement—after all, the whites here had begun farming land that, by some accounts, had once been sacred hunting grounds—it's also possible that the Indians had targeted Draper's Meadow because the French, as part of their new alliance against the British at the outset of the French and Indian Wars, had promised compensation for the scalps of Englishmen. This premise is especially alluring when one

considers that the victims of the attack included Colonel James Patton, a formidable—if somewhat arrogant and opportunistic—Irish sea captain and frontiersman, who, in his dealings with Indians and whites alike, had made a good many enemies, and who, it is presumed, had broken away from a supply train to pause at Draper's Meadow, possibly for recuperative purposes.

We don't know which settler spotted the Indians first. We're told that Bettie Draper, who sounded the initial alarm, ran into her cabin to retrieve her baby, only to be shot in the arm as she fled. She subsequently dropped her infant child, whom the Shawnee scooped up and whose head they dashed against the ends of cabin logs. Should we believe that Colonel Patton, described by others as "robust" and "Herculean," was sitting at a writing desk in one of the primitive dwellings when he heard Mrs. Draper's warning cry? That he grabbed his broadsword and strode out the cabin's front door, where, before being shot dead, he struck down two of his attackers? We don't know how the Indians slew their remaining victims, or whether they scalped them. We know only that some died, while others—perhaps those who appeared to be in better shape, and could therefore help replenish the recently diminished Shawnee population—were taken captive, one of whom was Bettie Draper's sister-in-law, Mary Draper Ingles, whose story of escaping the tribe once they reached Ohio and returning to Virginia on foot, alongside an old Dutch woman who may or may not have tried to eat her, *twice*, is a tale

one can hear in these mountains. We know the Indians set fire to the buildings, but we're unclear about how they did so, whether they arrived bearing torches or used fireplace logs already burning. We're told that the Indians' last act, subsequent to setting the settlement ablaze, was to decapitate a man named Philip Barger, and to deliver a sack containing his head to Mrs. Philip Lybrook, who lived in a cabin with her husband at the mouth of Sinking Creek. Did the Shawnee speak English, and did they, as legend has it, instruct Mrs. Lybrook to look inside the bag, in order to "find someone she knew"? How much time passed before William Ingles and John Draper—husbands of Mary and Bettie, respectively—looked up from their work in the nearby wheat fields, work that had saved them from capture or death, and saw smoke rising above the trees? No one can say. We don't know if any of the victims were still alive once these men reached the settlement—if these farmers braved flumes of heat to drag their friends and loved ones away from the fire, or if instead they had to wait until the bodies were long dead and aswarm with green iridescent flies before they could retrieve them.

One of the few things we do know for sure is that no trace of these settlers' cabins remains. When I say "we," it's not even clear what I mean. The massacre, which I've rarely, if ever, heard anyone talk about, has been largely forgotten. The majority of Blacksburg's current residents seem unaware of the event. It's true that a number of historical markers commemorate it but these markers are

hard to find. There's a tarnished metal plate, upon which has been engraved a dedication to those who lost their lives on that day, bolted to a rock embedded in the ground on a hillock not far from the university's President's House. A stone ledge, buried in the earth on the northeast side of the Duck Pond, bears the following words: DRAPER'S MEADOW MASSACRE, JULY 8, 1755. It's easy to imagine visitors reading this inscription and having no idea what to make of it, of bypassing the phrase *Draper's Meadow* and the date, and zeroing in on the word *Massacre*, and that particular series of letters delivering them to an altogether different time and place.

On the morning of April 16, 2007, more than a quarter of a millennium later, the weather is lousy. I am out in it: jogging through a blizzard of stinging flakes to a bus stop, on my way to the Virginia Tech campus, where I teach creative writing and composition. The snow churns in gusts, seems never to land, fails to accumulate. Once aboard the bus, I hook my arm around a silver post, and we lurch forward, a packed crew of mostly sleepy undergraduates, whose shampoo and cologne smell perfumes the air. A sullen, chubby girl eats Cheerios from a plastic bag. Another, slowly chewing gum, types on her phone with her thumbs. I stare at the patchy beard of a droopy-lidded guy who suddenly yawns so intensely it appears he might be in danger of dislocating his jaw.

What I don't know, what nobody else on this bus knows: two people have

been shot in a dormitory on the west side of campus. These people are now dying; perhaps they are already dead. Had someone announced this news to the bus, riders would've surely murmured or winced or lifted their eyebrows. Some would've cursed, drawn the words out in slow exhalations, holy this or holy that, flipped open a phone to check the news. But the bus would've kept going. It wouldn't have turned around. Nobody would've gotten off at the next stop, because nobody ever gets off at the next stop—somebody always gets on. Those students who were headed to the building where, in less than half an hour, hundreds of bullets will be fired into the bodies of forty-seven people, would not have recharted their courses. They would have continued onward. Even had they known, they would have hoped that the people who'd been shot were okay and that the police would apprehend the shooter. They would have remembered the schizophrenic homeless man from the beginning of the year, the one who'd shot an officer on the Huckleberry Trail, the ribbon of asphalt leading from downtown Blacksburg to the New River Valley Mall, in Christiansburg. They would have assumed—as I surely would have—that by the time we reached campus, someone, somewhere, would have things under control.

The bus stops at McBryde Hall, one building from Norris, the site where Sueng-Hui Cho will fire 170 rounds into the bodies of forty-seven students and faculty. I walk a hundred

yards east, enter Shanks Hall, and climb four flights of stairs to my office, where I pour coffee from a thermos into a thermos cap and check my e-mail and then work on a story I've been writing about a dentist whose wife dies on his honeymoon, following an allergic reaction to a manta ray sting. I break from the story and I'm listening to a band called Deerhunter on the computer as I read the last chapters of *American Pastoral*, a novel by Phillip Roth that concerns a guy named Swede, a former high school basketball star who takes over his father's glove factory and marries Miss New Jersey and produces a daughter who later becomes a domestic terrorist.

Wife who dies. Hunter. Domestic terrorist. I fail to note the thematic connection between these words, and thus the synchronicity fails to make itself known. A beep sounds; I click a postage stamp on my screen. The e-mail, from University Relations, explains that a "shooting incident" has occurred and that everyone at Tech should contact the VT police if they spot anything "suspicious." Word in the building is that it's a drug deal gone bad, and that the shooter's been identified as a student from nearby Radford University. *Whatever*, I think, and return—relatively unconcerned—to my reading. The book's amazing; I'm completely absorbed. Twenty-five minutes later, another e-mail: "A gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice." *Whoa*, I think. *Crazy*. I shut my book, close my office door, call my wife, Kelly, who tells me to be careful. I check the *Roanoke Times* Web

site and CNN and *Washington Post*. Nothing.

A megaphone system announces, "This is an emergency. Seek shelter immediately. Stay away from windows." I immediately disobey this command, wheeling my chair to my window, which looks out onto a dormitory and a slice of Turner Street, and the Burger King on the other side. A couple of ambulances speed past. I am not alarmed. I don't think, *Those are for the dead and dying*.

Three girls, wearing coats and pajama bottoms, emerge from the dorm next door. They light cigarettes. They yell something incomprehensible and defiant. They laugh.

They don't yet know.

Neither do I.

The first number I hear is one. Then three. Then twenty. *Twenty* students. *Killed*. Professors, grad students, and stunned undergraduates who obeyed the commands of the public-address system begin to emerge from offices, whispering huskily. Should we stay? Is it over? Finally somebody says, "I don't know about y'all but I'm getting the hell outta here."

I follow a professor—a tall, thin man with hunched shoulders and horn-rimmed glasses who has agreed to give me a ride home. Nobody told us we

were free to leave, nobody knows if we need permission, nobody knows if it—whatever "it" is—is over. On the way to the parking lot, I feel exposed, perme-

able. I brace myself for the sting of a sniper's bullet, the pop of gunfire. I eye every stranger we pass, and every distant figure, with suspicion. I tell myself to act normal—whatever that means. It's like one of those dreams I have where I find myself in a public place without clothes, or I've forgotten to wear pants, but I've convinced myself that I can survive the situation by acting like nothing is wrong. By the

time we reach the parking lot, my pulse has quickened. Inside the professor's car, I have to fight the urge to slump to the floor, or at least below the window. I glance into the rearview mirror, where the professor's eyes are wide, bulging as he slides his key into the ignition. His face is pale and expressionless. He says, "This is huge. This is big-time. Everybody's going to know somebody."

In my head I fill in the words he omitted: *who has died*.

At home, Kelly and I lock our doors and windows. We still don't know whether what's happened is over, and as absurd as it would seem for the shooter to end up inside our house, we aren't taking any chances. The problem is, our family's incomplete: Elijah, our

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three-year-old son, is still in preschool. We debate whether we should walk past the cul-de-sac at the end of the street and then through a stand of pine trees and then across another street to the Church of the Brethren, and retrieve him. We've heard that all schools in the county are on lockdown. We also know that, during the day, the doors of the church remain unlocked, and that—under normal circumstances—anybody can stroll right in. We tell ourselves that Elijah will be safe there, in rooms stacked to the ceiling with board games and Tupperware containers of toys, a place where the white-bearded Mr. Bungard and the white-haired Ms. Noni, with their extraordinary powers of persuasion, are able to convince a dozen three-year-olds to quietly eat their snacks, while sitting upon a single blanket, all facing the same direction. We assume our fear is unwarranted, but still, we would like to bring him home, to lock and dead-bolt the doors and hold him, to know for sure that he's safe—despite the fact that he is not the kind of child who really wants to be held, mainly because he refuses to sit still. In the end, we defer to the judgment of Ms. Noni, who tells us over the phone that there's no reason to interrupt him, that he's playing happily with his friends. We postpone our retrieval and pray we're doing the right thing.

We watch TV with our laptops open, refreshing CNN and Fox and the *New York Times*. Our inboxes have been flooded with e-mail. We field calls, try to return messages, but it's difficult; we keep losing signals. The wind's

insane—too strong, we learn, for helicopters to airlift wounded. Lights blink. Clocks flash wrong times. The TV goes black, then bursts suddenly to life. Each time, the clamor startles us.

We flip channels, seeking eyewitness accounts. We want a justification, however absurd. We want to know how and why this happened, and who was responsible. But we also want names. We need to know if anyone we know was among those who were injured or slain.

I picture the faces of my students, and am overcome by an unexpected and desperate fondness for each one, regardless of how much grief they've given me: Jessica, the blond Republican who campaigned the previous semester for a state senator; John, the meek speed-metal guitarist; Matt, the droopy-lidded stoner; Brendan, a kid who unironically loves Carnival Cruises; the girl with the last name Butt; the guy with the last name Christ.

Some respond to my e-mails. Most say they're okay; others aren't sure. Some know people who were shot, others are waiting to hear back. All are shocked and horrified, but thankful someone's asked how they are. I imagine entering the classroom, but can't get past that. I can't imagine asking them to narrow research questions, choose a genre, construct a thesis statement.

The final count is thirty-two—thirty-three, if you're feeling generous enough to count the shooter. Many aren't. And don't.

The victims include: a former coffeehouse singer, a master's student researching the sustainability of water

quantity during drought, a triple major who played the baritone in the band, an effervescent French teacher, a skilled horsewoman, an accomplished swimmer, a triathlete who also happened to be a top researcher in biomechanics, a master's student researching storm-water management, a residence-hall adviser who cared for her residents as if she were their mother, a teaching assistant who'd been credited for discovering the first West Nile virus-infected mosquito in Centre County, an accomplished classical pianist with dreams of studying nanotechnology, an award-winning engineering student, a member of the cadet jazz band, a PhD student in civil engineering, a world-renowned hydrologist, and a holocaust survivor.

The accompanying photos showcase the obliviousness of innocence. Studying them, reading the biographies, I can't help but wonder if Norris Hall was an arbitrary choice on the part of the shooter, or if he'd done his research and targeted the building that held the highest percentage of the university's overachievers and said to himself, *Yes, this will be my final destination.*

At the entrances to our buildings, signs appear—not paper signs but plastic ones, maroon letters that read:

The media,
when it asks
how we're
doing, hopes
our answer is:
"Not well."
The media
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the cracks of a
tragedy.

MEDIA PLEASE RESPECT OUR MOURNING.

This is, for the media, an impossible request to honor. Mourning is a main staple of the media's diet, and therefore what it continuously hunts. The media, when it asks how we're doing, hopes our answer is: "Not well." The media snakes its tentacles into the cracks of a tragedy, feeling, probing, asking: *What can I find? Is it sharp enough? Dangerous enough? Sad enough?* If the answer is yes, then it slaps on its suckers, shows it to

anyone who will watch, moves to the next thing.

Let me be clear: I'm one of those watchers. In fact, I seem to be defined at this moment only by my insatiable need to consume news coverage. For hours I flip between channels, worried that I'm on the wrong one, that the one I'm not watching is the one broadcasting the information I need. I learn that Professor Libriscu barricaded the door with his body so students

could line up at the windows and leap out; that Kevin Granata tried to tackle the gunman; that a girl who'd been shot twice in the head had survived by playing dead, hiding her phone in her hair as she whispered to 911 dispatch; that the cell phones of dead students were ringing inside body bags as responders lugged them from the building. I am absorbing more information than I know what to do with. My head feels like

it's housing a snowstorm of static. My eyes burn. I flit between channels and browser windows. I don't know what I'm looking for. It's too early to accept the truth: that no amount of information will explain what has happened.

Meanwhile, the campus has become a prop, a setting, a backdrop for a particular kind of event: the media-glutted aftermath. "Here we are at Virginia Tech," the reporters say, "the scene of the largest mass murder in American history." The largest. The worst. The deadliest. The tragedy is, they insist, something that can—and must—be measured. They might as well be saying: *Here we are at the worst thing of all time.*

The *V* and *T* accompanying the headlines begin to look foreboding—like the blunt ends of instruments that might be used to bludgeon someone. Cable-news stations have created special logos for this story. The *Virginia Tech* in *Virginia Tech Massacre* appears to be the logo of a corporate sponsor, as though the massacre was an event subsidized by the school.

A reporter tells a student—one who appears on several different channels in the same gray Virginia Tech sweatshirt, a kid who helped engineer the barricading of a door the shooter blasted two holes through and tried but failed to enter—that some are calling him a hero. What does the student think of that? The student tries to speak, but can't. His face contracts; he's trying to stop himself from crying.

He quenches a couple of sobs, squeaks out: "I'm just glad to be here."

He's happy to still be alive. It's the only thing he knows for sure.

The anchorman of Headline News says, "Mm." He jerks once in his chair, the way a dead body might were it to receive a sudden surge of electricity. "Raw emotion," he says, as if naming something foreign, a phenomenon he's read about, and can therefore only imagine.

The day after the shootings, Kelly and I attend a convocation, which is held in Cassel Coliseum, the university's basketball arena. By the time we arrive, the coliseum's full. Along with the rest of the overflow crowd, we're directed to neighboring Lane Stadium, where we sit under a blazing sun, a sky now blue. Every fall, fans congregate here to eat monolithic turkey legs and cheer the Hokie defense as it incapacitates opponents. Now the face of the president of the United States appears on the screen of the Jumbotron. It is the head of a man who, four years earlier, supported the preemptive invasion of a country that posed a theoretical threat to our national security. Depending on which statistical records you believe, this invasion may have killed and wounded well over a hundred thousand innocent people. The head, which attempts to look serious, says that it is filled with sorrow, and that someday, whether we can picture it now or not, things will return to normal.

Members of the Virginia Tech administration take turns saying things they think we want to hear, or perhaps things they want to hear themselves say. A poet, our most famous, stands to

she speak. She wears a black suit, a white shirt, a loose black tie. She begins with an assessment—"We are sad today"—and ends with a prophecy: "We will prevail." *Wait*, I think. Why are we already thinking about prevailing? Didn't the shootings happen only yesterday? Weren't they still happening, in some sense? Weren't we reliving them in our waking and sleeping dreams?

The Jumbotron is malfunctioning, its words now indecipherable. Everything sounds like it's underwater, like it's been reverbed and delayed. The sun—a brutal light—bears down on us. We exit the stadium thirsty and sunburnt. On the way out, I pick up a *Collegiate Times* newspaper. On the back page, Lockheed Martin—the largest manufacturer of weaponry in the world, and a company who has offered significant philanthropic support to Virginia Tech's engineering program—has printed its condolences.

In other news, auditions for *Girls Gone Wild* have been canceled.

At our departmental meeting, the room is packed: TAs, professors, faculty I've never seen before. I wonder who had the shooter in class, who knew him, who feels responsible. I wonder who refuses to feel responsible, since what could he or she have really done when faced with a person who'd nurtured such monstrous desires?

Refreshments—seven-layer dip, Fritos, pound cake—have been arranged on a folding table. Representatives from Human Resources take turns at a podium: a tall guy with a radio voice, a

man who looks like he could play a doctor on TV, a woman who apologizes for being soft-spoken. We collect handouts that include the phrase *grief management*. A woman said to be an authority in these matters informs us that we should engage in something creative. We might find it comforting, she says, to do something with our hands. We might find solace in gardening. I clench my jaw and shake my head, not at the idea of finding solace, but at the idea that the institution would presume to tell us where it might be found.

After the meeting, Kelly and I decide to take a walk through campus. We exit Shanks—the building that houses our department—and for the first time the building's name on the signage outside suggests to me homemade weaponry. I do not mention this to Kelly. I don't say anything and neither does she.

We pass Norris, the building where the shootings took place. Police tape thrashes in the wind outside. What does it look like in there? Are there people scrubbing bloodstains? Reporters wander the Drillfield, interviewing students, who themselves are wandering. Classes have been canceled. The building: it was full of classrooms where students doodled and snoozed, jotted notes or drew graffiti. The question was now: when people have been shot and killed there—people you knew, or knew of, or didn't know—where should you go? Everywhere seems like the wrong place to be. The students flock to Kentucky Fried Chicken. They nap on the floor of

the local Blockbuster. They place stuffed animals wearing little T-shirts with VT logos upon makeshift shrines. They stand blinking and cold before great waxen candle blobs that rarely flicker with light because the wind keeps blowing them out. They hold signs that say FREE HUGS AND HERSHEY KISSES. They enter great blue-and-white striped tents tethered to the Drillfield to view dozens of long white wooden boards bearing thousands of messages:

NeVer ForgeT.

I never knew any of you. I will miss you all.

There are 32 angels in heaven today explaining what a HOKIE is.

32 gone. Because 1 was lost.

Dear Cho, Sleep in peace and let the all the things that hurt you a lot go.

I'm sorry I couldn't do more.

I too feel compelled to write something, to put my name upon one of these gigantic sympathy cards that will later be archived in the university library's Special Collections. The problem is that I have no idea what to write. I'm crippled by self-consciousness and the knowledge that anything I could possibly write would be laughably inadequate. It is futile to address the dead. Brash to make pronouncements. Presumptuous to make public my own private and conflicted sentiments. And why, of all things, would my *sentiments* matter? All that matters is that the sons and daughters of mothers and fathers, those who were once the age of my own son, are now gone forever. No amount of never forgetting will bring them back.

Our wandering brings us to the Inn at Virginia Tech, where skirted banquet tables offer faux-silver platters of granola bars and snack cakes, bowls of apples and oranges and bananas—nourishment for the grieving, for those who are investigating the source of the grief, and for those reporting it. A wall-sized screen in a conference room plays news footage, which, when we pass it, features a still photo of the shooter. His head, which fills the screen, is at least a half a story tall. It has spoken more since it perished than it did during the past twenty-two years.

There are no answers to our questions—only facts. The shooter wrote stories and plays and poems about sexual abuse and violence. He had an imaginary girlfriend named “Jelly.” He refused to speak. He said that he didn't have a choice: he had to kill. He said someone could've stopped him. He wanted to be referred to as a question mark.

In another conference room, two hundred people are being debriefed. Earlier, a psychologist explained how to stop yourself from crying during television interviews: move your fingers and toes. This physical activity, she said, would trick your brain, and stop your tears. Now, someone's reading names from the list of the injured, none of which I recognize. Are the people in this room family members of the victims? If so, I feel bad that we've intruded. And yet I don't know what else to do. I feel terrible if I take my mind off the shooter and victims. I feel terrible if I keep my mind on the shooter and the victims.

Feeling terrible, it seems, is my new vocation, one that—despite how easy it seems—I feel like I’m failing.

I feel disconnected and empty and ashamed for wanting to feel something other than what I do, part of which is: *I could’ve been there*. If I’d been there, if I’d borne witness, I’d have earned the right to wonder why I’d survived, why I—and not others—had been spared. Not to be dead and yet not to be a survivor, either—and not to know personally anyone who died—was not to know one’s place in the tragedy. You were there but you weren’t. You’d forever be associated with a disaster you hadn’t experienced, a storm whose epicenter remained hidden. You’d feel sad but not sad enough. You’d want to grieve but not be able to—and it’d feel false if you did.

On our way back from the inn, we’re stopped by an adolescent girl with dark curly hair. She introduces herself and her brother, a younger redhead with freckles, and asks if we know that God loves us, asks if we know that if we died today, we would go to heaven.

It doesn’t take long for me to realize what’s happened: our campus has been identified as a place touched by evil and in need of comfort. It has become a setting where opportunistic young evangelists can come to save souls. I re-

ceived an e-mail from a relative the day before, telling me how proud he was of his church’s response to the tragedy, which occasioned an e-mail of my own, to my unsuspecting mother, in which I

typed the following rant: *What kind of world is he living in where he feels the need to express “pride” for booklets presented as self-help devices but which are actually doctrine delivery devices?... People are grieving here. Truly grieving. If he thinks this is a chance to indoctrinate people, he is truly out of touch with reality.*

A hundred yards farther on from the curly-haired girl, we’re interrupted by another woman. She’s wearing a brown velour tracksuit.

She has bleached blonde hair. Pink lips. Tan skin. Diamond necklace. She also wants to know whether we know that if we died today we would go to heaven.

What we tell her: “No thanks.”

Some students claim that they tried to befriend Cho. To greet him. To include him. Maybe they did. Maybe they didn’t. Maybe they’re saying this in order to evade responsibility, to make themselves feel better. Hey, they think, I tried saying hi to him, I tried talking to him and he wouldn’t talk, he wouldn’t speak. I wonder, though, if anyone called him out. Where were the young evangelists when Cho needed a friend? Where was someone to say, “Hey, Cho,

Balloons bearing the school colors are released. A chaplain reads the full name of each victim, after which a bell is rung. This happens thirty-two times.

you know what, this act you're putting on—this farcical, existential, I'm-tormented-and-won't-speak act—is total bullshit.” What if someone had dedicated time to being Cho's friend? *You know that guy who never speaks? I'm pouring all my energy into him, I'm going to make him better, and I'm going to say to him, You aren't unlovable, people don't hate you, they just maybe think you don't speak English, or that you're shy, or that you're psycho. Are you psycho? Because it's okay to be psycho, as long as you don't hurt anybody or yourself. I'm going to love you if it kills me.*

At noon the next day, hundreds of students and faculty—all wearing orange and maroon—stream into the Drillfield for a memorial service. A makeshift memorial in front of Burrus Hall features thirty-two limestone slabs, each one piled with flowers and stuffed animals and candles and laminated photos: faces of the slain. Balloons bearing the school colors are released; they fly away until they are tiny dots in the sky, until my brain is tricking me into thinking I still see them when I can no longer be sure. A chaplain reads the full name of each victim, after which a bell is rung. This happens thirty-two times. I lose count, think it's never going to end. How long will the dead be remembered? Will people memorialize this tragedy 250 years from now?

For weeks, our school exists at the epicenter of a place in history, a supercharged moment in an absurd world, a world whose semi trucks are delivering shipments of teddy bears, handmade quilts, framed photographs, memorial ribbons, memory books, paper

chains and handwritten letters. Inside the Squires Student Center, the walls have been draped with plastic banners bearing the logos of other universities. They're like giant flexible cards marked with the names of well-wishers and people who are keeping Hokies in their thoughts and prayers. I pause to read some, wondering, “Do they mean me? Am I a Hokie?” Everybody from everywhere seems to be repeating the same chants: “We are keeping you in our thoughts and prayers” and “We are all Hokies today.” I wonder who made these banners, what kind of person organizes or even knows to organize something like this, and why a banner, and who has the energy and the unself-consciousness and generosity to do such a thing, to write, *We Will Prevail*, and then sign one's name.

I go for a run. At the halfway mark I trip on a frost heave in the asphalt, fall, scrape the palms of my hands. The endorphins, the pain, the sight of blood—and the phrase *blood on my hands* actually appears in my mind. I'm afraid to wipe the blood on my sleeves, as I'm wearing my new Hokies shirt. I don't know what else to do but brush myself off and keep running. But when I try to move, I can't. I'm hyperventilating. I'm crying. It feels good. I'm sad when it passes. I would like to cry more, but whatever grief I feel is buried in a well that's too deep to tap.

Undergraduates gather in Shanks for treats: a plate of ham, finger sandwiches, Cokes, brownies. But nobody eats. A tall, angular professor hoists a

tray and totes it around the room, accepting refusals of food with a gracious nod. Our famous poet sits at a table, signing copies of the poem she read at the convocation, copies of which the department is distributing to English majors. The line to get the poem signed leads out the door and down the hall. I ask Hannah, a former student, how she's doing. She rolls her eyes. "This sucks," she says. I ask if she's going to get her poem signed. "Yeah," she says, "I'm gonna be like, Will you sign my depressing keepsake?" I laugh, but instantly catch myself.

I still don't know what to do with the phrase *We will prevail*—three words that have already been transformed into signage, emblazoned upon the back windows of Blazers and Explorers and Range Rovers like so many talismans. I worry about the "we." I worry it's not true. Will we *all* prevail? Maybe not. Certainly most will. Most need to know that someone they love and trust believes they have the power to move on. Most need to know this won't happen again, that our school is still safe and fun and awesome, that it can't be changed, that the phrase *Virginia Tech* won't be resurrected only with the word *massacre*.

But what about the rest? What about the some? Some lost their one and only, their favorites. Some lost the loves of their lives, their fathers and moth-

ers and brothers and sisters. Some will toil in darkness—for years—and never recover. Some can't, and won't, be inspired. The eyes of some won't get watery when ESPN plays lonely trumpet music over a montage of VT photos before sporting events, because they're not watching sporting events, especially not those that take place at Virginia

Tech. Some see *NeVer ForgeT* bumper stickers and avert their eyes, because "never forget"—for some—sounds like a curse.

Some see *NeVer ForgeT* bumper stickers and avert their eyes, because "never forget"—for some—sounds like a curse.

My son—three years old—is asleep. My son, I'd like to report, has a cherubic face. Then again, most children do, especially when

sleeping. Years earlier, the parents of the slain gazed upon their own sleeping toddlers and presumed those faces to be cherubic. These parents reflected already on the passage of time, acknowledged that their children would not always look like they looked now, secretly wished they wouldn't grow up, that they would always remain small enough to be held. They did not worry that these children would bleed to death on the floors of university classrooms. They did not imagine that their dying children would pretend to be dead in the hopes that they might stay alive.

Someday my son will ask about the shootings. Someday he will enter

Virginia and *Tech* into a search engine, and it will automatically add *Massacre*. He will read the dates, do the math, realize he was alive and kicking not two miles away. He will have no memory of any of it, will not remember the time when his parents were glued to the television for hours on end, will have forgotten that his father became impatient when he clambered over him, how his father, when the shooter appeared on TV with his guns pointed at the audience, shielded his son's eyes.

Two years after the shootings, a Chinese student will remove a knife from a backpack and decapitate another Chinese student, a woman, in a place called the Graduate Life Center. He will walk around Au Bon Pain holding up her head.

Later that same year, two students—a young man and a young woman—will be shot fatally at Caldwell Fields, a meadow skirted by a creek about twelve miles from campus. There will be no witnesses. There will be no suspects. The murderer will not be apprehended.

Four and a half years later, I will receive an e-mail from VT Alerts that says “Gun shots reported—Coliseum Parking lot. Stay inside. Secure doors. Emergency personnel responding. Call 911 for help.” Despite the tone of the message—and despite the fact that I was on campus during the shootings on April 16, 2007—I shrug it off. Six months earlier, students at a Virginia Tech summer camp claimed they saw a man carrying a gun across campus. Nothing came of it. Furthermore, I am

now accustomed to receiving e-mails from VT Alerts on a regular basis; they inform me of robberies and assaults—however few—that occur on Virginia Tech's campus.

So untroubled am I by reports of gunshots that I plan to go about my day, which involves driving to campus to meet a student in my office. But as I begin walking toward Shanks, having parked my car, I realize that nobody's out, anywhere. I slide out my phone and read an e-mail from VT Alerts informing me: “A police officer has been shot. A potential second victim is reported at the Cage lot. Stay indoors. Secure in place.”

I reach my building. It's locked. I take out my keys, open the door, but can't get the key back out. I twist and turn and tug. I panic a little. It's exactly like the movies when the main character is trying to get the car key into the ignition but can't, and there's no explanation for why this one simple thing that should work, doesn't. After maybe thirty seconds, I retrieve the keys, ascend the stairs to my floor. All doors closed. I feel safer in my office, where I load Twitter and CNN. *Déjà vu*, I think. I can't believe this is happening. Again. It's two hours before my department chair knocks on my door, tells me it's safe to leave. A day will pass before we learn that the assailant was a Radford University student, and that he'd shot the policeman and, minutes later, himself.

I tell myself I remain untroubled. I do not seek counseling. I am not plagued by fear or nightmares. But I

often imagine dying. I ride my bike on the Huckleberry Trail, see guys dressed vaguely like thugs or gangbangers, imagine them unzipping hoodies to reveal bandoliers, cocking their Glocks and blasting holes through my torso. I pass people on campus who look weird or unkempt or simply just mean, and I imagine them sliding firearms from their waistbands, spraying my brains against Hokie stone. For me, violence is a sick reconstructed fantasy that I replay over and over, if only to prepare myself for the moment when it happens for real, and I can say, with some detachment, *This is exactly how I imagined it.*

There's a computer in the corner of the second floor of Virginia Tech's Newman library reserved especially for those who wish to read official documents pertaining to the events of April 16, 2007. I've considered visiting the terminal on a number of occasions, but the sign above the monitor, which announces that the computer is to be used only for accessing the special database, has acted as much as a deterrent as advertisement, and for years, I've been too sheepish to visit. I can't explain why, really, except maybe to say I had no "good" reason to do so, and worried that anyone who saw me sitting there—in front of a screen that faces a corner, so as to guarantee privacy for its user—would attribute my browsing to some kind of morbid curiosity. Perhaps this designation has prevented others from visiting as well; I've never seen anyone else accessing the database—that is, until today, when I decide to visit the

library with the sole intent of accessing it myself. But the person—a bearded man with glasses—who's parked himself before the monitor is not performing research; he's an employee updating security software. When I return later to find the station vacant, I'm unable to access the database, in part because it requires a log in I don't have. I visit the information desk, summon a librarian. He leads me back to the terminal, rifles through a few handouts in a plastic holder, fails to find the instructions. I mention that I've never seen a soul using the computer. He's not surprised. He hasn't been asked by anybody for the login in two years.

Five years have passed since the shootings and I still think about them almost every time I visit campus. This commemoration isn't willful; it's automatic. The green expanse of the Drillfield; the Burruss tower; the statues above War Memorial Chapel; the wooden doors of Norris Hall, which once fluttered with police tape; the sight of a bus pulling up to a stop and opening its doors: any and all of these everyday images have the power, at any time, to transport me to the events of April 16. That's why the phrase *Never Forget*—a phrase one still finds on T-shirts and magnets and bumper stickers—strikes me as absurd. I couldn't forget if I wanted to.

Eventually, though, people *will* forget. Or, to put it more accurately, they will fail to remember. Future students and visitors to the university—those who were shielded from the news footage, those who were too young to process it, and those who were born after

the events of April 16—will stand before the memorial stones on the Drillfield and read the names of the victims and recall nothing in particular. However horrifying, however inconceivable, the memories of this violence will dissolve with the bodies that carry them.

For now, though, those who hear about the infrequent bursts of violence on campus remember the day they heard about the thirty-three who died, and feel compelled to offer us their condolences, express their disbelief. Some of them ask point blank if we're cursed. We, of all people, don't know. It's difficult to persuade others we aren't. We don't feel like we are. We live in a kind of paradise. In some ways, it is not so different

from the world the Ingleses and other English settlers inhabited in the mid-eighteenth century, when they lived in Draper's Meadow. We have blue mountains and green hills. We see foxes under our overpasses; deer graze upon our lawns. The world's second-oldest river flows through our county. We know our neighbors and have genuine affection for them. We often leave our doors unlocked. Our children run through their yards, unsupervised, unimpeded, wild. We stand outside at night, under the stars, and despite all that has happened, and because it is something we are committed to feeling, we tell ourselves that we are safe, and that now the worst of it must be over. ●