

What I love about these essays is how they capture a very particular but strangely ineffable way of being in the world. They tell stories of smart people doing battle with the stupidities that surround them, of adulthood thwarted and childhood cheated and the heartbreaking ways that our dreams both sustain us and bury us. Throughout it all Joe Oestreich is wise, good humored, and deeply literary. I read *Partisans* in fits of recognition and admiration. It's a formidable collection by a genuine talent.

—**Meghan Daum**

Joe Oestreich is the begotten son of Mitchell, Didion, and McPhee—but also an absolute original. These essays cover so much ground and break new ground at every step. Playful, rebellious, searching, Oestreich takes us through disparate landscapes while making of each one a place and people we come to know intimately. And what we discover is not our differences but our glaring commonalities. *Partisans* is the best essay collection I've read in years, from a writer working at the highest level of the craft.

—**Brad Land**

In these punchy, often very funny personal essays, we get snapshots from a well-considered life both home and abroad, at childhood and beneath the shadow of middle age, in the barber's chair and onstage at your local rock club. Joe Oestreich writes with such a warm voice and an easy closeness, I spent most of these pages feeling as if he were across a bar table from me and we were making a rowdy evening out of his gifts for storytelling.

—**Elena Passarello**

# PARTISANS

Essays

Joe Oestreich



Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*For my mom and dad.*

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# I. HOME & AWAY

# The Mercy Kill

1985. I was fifteen and staring hard down the long barrel of summer. My dad had just left my mom for another woman, and this hit me like a bag of bricks. It was proof positive that I didn't know, couldn't know, anyone. Not really. Not on the inside, past whatever veneer they'd doctored up and spit-shined. Easier to stick to the few things I could count on. The ball, the bounce, the basket. Every night after dinner I'd shoot free throws in the driveway. Toeing the mark on the blacktop that served as the foul line, I'd flip the ball to the ground three times and take aim at the hoop my dad had once paid some guy to attach to the garage roof.

My mom would come out the front door trailing Rex—a dog we'd owned for at least ten years, since the days when my parents' marriage was solid, and who, despite the name, was female. "Joe, doll," she'd say, "please remember to open the garage when you play ball." She'd thumb toward a cracked window on the garage door, one of several I'd broken shooting baskets that summer. "I'll have to ask John Parsons to fix that." John Parsons lived five doors down, and my mom walked with him and his dogs religiously, every night as soon as the dishes were done. She had since March, when my dad moved out.

Dribbling the ball, I'd watch her follow Rex down our elm-lined street. We lived in Worthington, Ohio, home of the middle-class dream exemplar. She'd walk past houses that were all variations on an aluminum-sided theme. She'd pass lawn sprinklers firing tracers

across grass so green it looked straight off the sod farm. She'd pass the open maws of two-car garages: American sedan for him, foreign hatchback for her, hand-me-down beater curbed out front for the kid. My mom was an adjunct at Columbus Technical Institute, and on the side she taught English to Vietnamese refugees, so she was too busy grading papers and running my sister Jill to soccer practice to maintain our home at the Worthington standard. Our aluminum siding was moldy. Our lawn was pocked with brown patches and turd piles. Our garage door was blackened with basketball dimples, and every time I opened it like my mom asked, I'd see a Pennzoil stain where my dad's '77 Grand Prix should have been.

My dad was never much of a honey-doer, so our place had always looked sort of neglected. Now it was worse. Recently, though, John Parsons had offered to help my mom around the house. "Anything you need, Mary Anne," he'd told her. "Yard work. A broken dishwasher. Car trouble. You call me." And when the battery in her VW Rabbit died, she called him. When the garage door went off the rails, she called him.

John was my friend Steve's stepdad. Steve's mom, friendly in a neighborly way, didn't mind lending her husband out for the odd house repair and seemed happy enough that he had a dog-walking companion. An ex-high school chemistry teacher, John had left the classroom to go out on his own as a handyman. A few times already that summer, Steve and I had squeezed into John's cigarette-smelling El Camino, and he'd taken us along to a job site. Paid us a few bucks to help him paint a room or trim a row of bushes. As we drove home to prim-and-proper Worthington, with John's tools rattling in their buckets and wall primer streaking my mall-bought Levi's, I was both proud and embarrassed. Proud, as a kid who now lived with his mom and sister, to be led by John into the hands-on, get-'er-done world of men. And embarrassed to be seen with a man so unlike my dad—PhD, licensed professional counselor, director

of a rehabilitation facility for the disabled—a white-collar guy who paid grunts like John to do jobs like hang basketball hoops.

As my mom and Rex walked up John's driveway, he and his two fat beagle-mixes would be waiting on the porch. From there they'd head down to the ball fields at the elementary. Standing in the grass, watching the dogs run, John would mostly talk and my mom would mostly listen. He was stocky and bolt-strong, smart and well read. Knew something about everything. She was not quite five feet tall, an Adult Education PhD who loved opera and Agatha Christie. Maybe my mom liked John precisely because he was so different from my dad. Maybe she just liked the company. Or the ritual: Walk after dinner, because that was the routine, like Mass every Sunday morning and *Masterpiece Theater* every Sunday night. These were the things she could count on.

When she'd come home an hour or more later, I'd still be shooting baskets, though it was too dark to see the rim. "Oh, boy," she'd say, smiling as she let Rex loose in the front yard. "Didn't we have fun?"

I'd drop the ball in the corner of the garage by the rake and the shovel, neither of which had been used in a long, long time. I'd shut the garage door, which, thanks to John, now went up and down ten times smoother than my jump shot. And I'd follow my mom and Rex inside, a little bit happy because she seemed so happy, and a little bit grateful because John had reached out to her, to us.

What I didn't know, couldn't know, was that my mom and John Parsons would walk the dogs together nearly every night for three years. And they'd keep doing it even after John was charged with murder.

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Playing ball in the driveway that summer, looking up and down the street at the aerated perfection of the other lawns, at the white-washed siding on the other houses, I wondered if the families living

in those homes were as flawless and faultless as was their landscaping. I worried that we were the resident freaks on the block, not just because our house was below par but because we were guarding a secret history, one that I knew to keep hidden from the neighbors.

The secret was that my mom had been a nun and my dad had been a priest. They met in the late sixties in Madison, Wisconsin, where my dad was pastoring a parish and they both were attending grad school. After leaving their orders and quitting their dioceses, they were married in a city hall ceremony across the Illinois state line. Their families were shocked, my dad's especially, embarrassed by the stories in the Madison newspaper that reported he was stepping down from his post with the church. His parents wouldn't talk to him, his sisters wouldn't visit, and my mom and dad spent their first Thanksgiving and Christmas together, alone. By the time my sister and I were teenagers, the scandal within the family was long over, but still we understood that we weren't to discuss our parents' pasts outside the house. Not because they were ashamed, my mom told us, but because they'd never be able to meet other peoples' expectations for how a nun and priest should live. Impossible, she said. Best to keep it quiet. So we did. And as far as my sister and I knew, nobody knew. Except for maybe John Parsons. It was the kind of thing he and my mom would have talked about on their walks.

One night that summer, John's wife knocked on our front door. From up in my room, I could hear that she was crying. Something about John getting so mad he'd ripped the staircase banister right off the wall. My mom slipped into nun-counselor mode, calmly consoling John's wife, then making a bed for her on the couch. As I went back to sleep, I took a strange comfort in the Parsons family's troubles, because it made my family seem a little less screwed up.

The next evening, my mom and John walked the dogs like always, and I never once thought that she probably shouldn't be spending so much time with a guy who could send his wife crying

to the neighbors in the middle of the night. I was glad my mom had a man in her life, even if that man was married, even if he could get pissed-off enough to yank down a staircase railing. I wasn't even a little worried that John might hurt my mom. He'd never so much as raised his voice to her. He was polite and deferential as a deacon.

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As summer unwound, I played Wiffle Ball and badminton in John's backyard. Slapped together bologna sandwiches in his kitchen. Spent a few nights sleeping over with Steve. John would stay up late with us, watching *Scarface* or *The Terminator*, shoot-'em-up movies I wasn't allowed to watch at home. To get us through the boring parts, he'd thrill us with stories of real-life blood and gore, tales from his tours in Vietnam. One night he told the story of how he'd assassinated a Viet Cong general. From five-hundred yards. A single shot.

"Holy crap," I said.

"It was no big deal," he said. "They had me doing that kind of stuff all the time."

What a badass, I thought. Pacino and Schwarzenegger had nothing on John Parsons. I asked if he'd won a bunch of medals. I asked if I could see them.

He brushed that idea away with a wave of his calloused hand, saying that the missions he'd carried out were so covert, the government had expunged his service record in the name of national security. "Medals are for rank and file," he said. "Special Forces don't need no stinkin' medals." Then he smiled. "You want to see something really cool?"

I was fifteen. Of course I did.

"Then hang on. I'll be right back." Leaving Steve and me on the couch with Cokes sweating on the coffee table and Fritos bags bunched between our legs, he headed out to the garage. When he

came back, he was carrying a gun that looked like the one from *Rambo*. “This is my baby,” he said. “The UZI.”

The gun was sinister as a rattlesnake. “Can I touch it?” I said, not quite sure I wanted to.

“You can do better than that,” he said, and he extended the UZI toward me. “You can hold it. You can aim it.”

I’d never before held a gun, not even a BB. My parents were pacifists. They’d taken me to Vietnam War protests when I was still in the stroller. Back when my dad was a priest, he’d led the Dane County chapter of Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, riding around town with a peace-sign sticker on his motorcycle helmet. Not only had I not been allowed to own toy guns, my mom had a conniption every time she caught me extending my thumb and pointer finger, taking aim at my sister. If she knew John was letting me near a real machine gun, she would have strung him up and field-dressed him, pacifist or not.

“Don’t worry,” John said. “It’s not loaded.” He pushed the UZI into my chest. “Here. Take it.”

I was expecting cold steel. I was expecting the gun to have a weight equal to the damage it could bring. But it was lighter than I would have guessed. Warmer. I squinted down the sight and aimed the gun at the TV, wondering if I should trust John, if I really could pull the trigger and not riddle the living room drywall. I didn’t have the guts to find out. Keeping all four fingers locked on the handle, I said, “Rat-a-tat” and passed the gun to Steve. He was unimpressed. He’d played with the UZI before.

“Wanna see more?” John said.

I didn’t. But I nodded anyway.

He gave an exaggerated bow and gestured toward the garage. “Then I shall dip back into the cache.”

For the next hour or so, until Steve and I finally retreated to our sleeping bags, John told one ’Nam assassination story after another.

As he talked, I laser-sighted empty pistols and pulled the pins on disarmed grenades. I was shit-scared handling these weapons, but I was worried that if I let it show, then John would think I was a pansy-assed peacenik who was afraid to get dirt under his nails. A guy like my dad.

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John's UZI was the first thing that came to mind three years later, on a winter morning in my Ohio State dorm room, when a call from my mom woke me up. Her voice was shaky, phlegmy. She said that squad cars were lined along our street. From our front porch, she'd watched police lead John Parsons away in handcuffs.

Prosecutors alleged that John had set off a firebomb under the mobile home where a man named Michael Gustin was living. When Gustin fled the burning trailer, John, they said, was waiting outside with a 12 gauge Winchester. He allegedly shot Gustin twice. The state called for the death penalty. It was a revenge killing, the prosecution claimed, payback for an incident a few months earlier, when Gustin had accused John of breaking into the apartment Gustin was renting at the time. John insisted that he didn't break into the place, that it was a simple misunderstanding: He'd been hired by Gustin's landlord to do some maintenance work. He and Gustin argued, then fought, and in the scuffle John broke the man's ribs. Gustin apparently told friends he was afraid John would come back to kill him, so he moved out of the apartment and into the mobile home, where he'd be harder to find. He also threatened to file assault charges against John for the broken ribs. But John allegedly smoked him out and shot him down before Gustin had the chance.

From John's basement, police seized ten guns, including the UZI, the Winchester, and two homemade semi-automatics. They found silencers and grenade components. They found seventy-four con-

tainers of chemicals, more than enough materiel for an ex-science teacher to enact his own personal scorched earth policy.

Still I thought John was innocent. By then I was an eighteen-year-old political science major, and my worldview had widened enough to accommodate a healthy skepticism toward guys like John, big talkers who bragged about their glory days. Shortly after my dad moved out, he told me he didn't care much for John; he thought the guy was a blowhard, a bully. Now I understood that my dad had been right. John's tales from Vietnam were surely exaggerations, and, more likely, out-and-out lies. I didn't believe for a second that he'd sniped a Viet Cong general, and I didn't believe he was guilty of killing Michael Gustin or anybody else either. In fact, firebombing a mobile home and hiding in the bushes, waiting with a Winchester for the kill shot, seemed *exactly* like the kind of thing John would have gloated to Steve and me about, which, to my thinking, made it the last thing he would have actually done.

The alternative—that John really was a killer—was much harder to believe, despite the evidence. No way could the guy who taught me how to edge crown molding be a killer. No way had a killer spent so much time working in my house, or had I spent so much time hanging around his. Besides, he just didn't look like a murderer, any more than our Worthington street looked like a place where a murderer might live. With his big plastic glasses and paint-flecked coveralls, he looked exactly like what he was: a chemistry teacher, a doer of odd jobs. Perhaps most importantly, my mom insisted that John was innocent, that he was home watching movies with Steve on the night of the murder, just like he'd told the police. She knew John much better than I did, better than almost anyone did. She believed him, and I believed her. And their nightly dog walks continued, even with John out on bail, awaiting the trial that could send him to the electric chair.

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The first installment of *The State of Ohio vs. John L. Parsons* ended in a hung jury. My mom was appalled that he wasn't simply found innocent and set free, but she was optimistic that the retrial would deliver the correct and just result. We all were. At the request of John's defense team, the second trial was conducted before a three-judge panel, rather than a traditional jury. This seemed a smart tactical move: put John's fate in the hands of professionals rather than schmucks off the street. But the three judges were unable to reach a unanimous agreement, so the deliberations were again declared hung. John would have to be tried a third time. "If two hung trials doesn't leave a *reasonable doubt*," my mom said, "I don't know what would."

At trial number three, the prosecutors finally got their man. The jury found John guilty of aggravated murder. My mom was sad but resigned, and she quickly girded up and set about enduring what she couldn't change. Instead of lamenting the verdict, she looked ahead to the penalty phase, wherein the jury would deliberate on whether John would be sentenced to life in prison or to death row and the chair.

John's lawyers called both my parents to testify as character witnesses. I wanted to go to the courthouse to watch my mom's testimony in person, but I had Poli Sci classes I couldn't cut, so I missed seeing her tell the jury about walking Rex with John and his dogs, about how he was always quick to help us fix things up. The next day, however, my dad was scheduled to appear, and with no classes, I took the bus downtown and found a seat in the courtroom gallery, nervous when they called him to the stand. I knew that he'd once testified in Washington before a congressional subcommittee, but that DC hearing had been about civil rights for the disabled, an issue I saw as mundane at the time. Here in Ohio the stakes were

literally life and death. My dad was fiercely anti-capital punishment, so I was worried that he'd lie under oath, tell everyone how much he liked and respected John. Even worse, he might tell the truth, that he thought John was a loud-mouthed bully. I figured if my dad blew it, John would fry.

Sitting in the witness chair, my dad looked very much at ease. He answered the defense's questions in a voice clear and authoritative, turning his head to address the jurors directly. He told the court that John had taught me important lessons: the value of working with my hands, that treating a dog well demonstrated a respect for life. I sat there proud as hell, listening to my dad explain that John was an asset to the community, to the neighborhood, to our family, and it hit me that my dad was talking about the man who had, to some degree, replaced him. And he was saving that man's life.

The jury didn't buy it. They came back with a death recommendation. The judge, however, was swayed by the testimonials of my parents and others, and he made the controversial decision to go against the jurors and spare John by assigning the life sentence, no chance of parole for 39 years, when John would be 80. "John Parsons is unique," the judge was quoted in the paper as saying. "This man was an educator in our community, a good educator and an outstanding handyman. If a person has lived 41 years helping the old and young, that has to go for something."

The prosecution disagreed, of course. "John Parsons knew a lot of good people," the assistant prosecutor said. "But those people didn't know John Parsons. There was another side of John Parsons... John Parsons the destroyer."

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John has spent the last twenty years transferring from one of Ohio's medium-security prisons to another. He's now assigned to the Marion Correctional Institution, having just moved up from

Chillicothe, where he spent the last several years locked up less than five miles from the house where my dad lives with my stepmom. John and my mom exchange letters every few months, and in those letters he seems better than stoic, almost happy. Lately he's been writing to tell her how proud he is of a prison program he started, teaching English to the Spanish-speaking inmates. He calls the students his Chihuahuas. They call him *El Perro Gordo*. The fat dog.

I'm now the same age John was on the day he was sentenced, and I still don't know for sure if he's guilty or innocent. Maybe guilt versus innocence is too simple a binary. I feel sad for the Gustin family, but I remember John fondly—murderer or not, braggart or not—and I doubt anything I could learn about him would change that. These days when I think of John, I don't picture him wearing an orange jumpsuit, sitting in a prison library, reading to Latino inmates. I don't even imagine him behind the wheel of the El Camino, ashing a Camel out the car window. Instead I remember a story my mom once told me about a particular night when I was in college and John was out on bail, waiting for his first trial.

On that night, my mom was awakened by hideous moans coming from outside her bedroom door. Worried that my sister might be sick, she shot out of bed and hurried down the hall to Jill's room. But now it was obvious that the wails weren't coming from my sister. These were animal noises, deep and desperate. She found Rex curled at the bottom of the stairs, panting, feverish, in agony. The dog couldn't walk. Her eyes were dull. My mom tried to stand Rex up, but the dog fell splay-legged to the floor. She felt Rex's belly and wondered if one of the fatty tumors had finally burst. As a nun, she'd often sat bedside. She knew when a body's time was up.

My mom wasn't strong enough to lift Rex, let alone carry the dog to the car. She sat on the stairs, head in hand, unsure of her next move. As the dog panted frantically, my mom rubbed her behind the ears, thinking back to the day when my dad carried Rex-the-

stray-puppy home. Things were good then. Why wasn't he here to help now, when it might matter? Goddamn him for leaving her alone in this house to tend to cracked garage windows and dying dogs all by herself. Then she remembered something one of her Vietnamese ESL students had told her years before. The Vietnamese woman had been reading my mom's palm, when she curled her fingers closed, patted my mom on the back of the hand, and said, "You will always be taken care of."

So even though it was smack in the middle of the night, my mom called John. She told him Rex was dying. He got out of bed and, like always, came right over. He said he'd handle it. And he did. He put one arm under Rex's jaw and the other in the crook of her hind legs. He muscled her up to his chest and carried her out to the backyard. He loaded a pistol, one he'd apparently hidden from the police. He attached the silencer. He aimed the gun at the dog's head.

A single shot. Quiet as a cork pop. And as my mom cried in bed, as Worthington slept, John Parsons walked into my garage, pulled out the shovel, and started digging.