

Nothing Left to Lose

Allan Johnson

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This beautifully written novel turns war's fantasies of glorious heroism into an elegy for all who sail the "Sea of Faith" that Matthew Arnold describes in "Dover Beach." William Carson is a World War II veteran who believes he understands the "darkling plain" of war, and he tirelessly drills military history and automatic obedience into his students, just as he taught his sons, Joshua and Andrew. By night, recurring nightmares drive him from his bed, only to be brought back silently by his wife, Anne. By day, however, the war exists as a silent barrier between them, a forbidden topic around which she has tiptoed for more than twenty years.

When Anne and William learn that Joshua is missing in action in Vietnam, the small cracks in their carefully controlled universe soon become gaping holes. Anne can no longer bear the enforced silence surrounding William's torment—today's post-traumatic stress syndrome—and begins to challenge her obligation to sacrifice Andrew on the altar of war as she has her husband and firstborn son. Anne's demand that Andrew, an ROTC senior, reconsider his military commitment stems from her grief at Joshua's unknown fate, but it also pits the "femininity" of love and life against a militarized definition of masculinity.

Andrew's conflict worsens when his Colonel asks him to enroll in "Topics in Southeast Asia," a course taught by a new professor whom he believes to be "Anti-war. Pro-VC." The Colonel describes his request as a "recon mission" intended to root out those who would use "colleges as platforms for indoctrinating young people and turning them against their own country." Andrew complies, but Josh's last letter gnaws at his convictions: "I shot a kid the other day ... how small he was, bare feet, probably eight or nine ... So you watch your ass little brother ... Don't show this to Dad, okay?"

As Anne and Andrew struggle through a morass of monolithic ideology, William becomes increasingly unable to separate his waking life from his long-repressed secret. He loses focus in class as his dreams force themselves into waking memory, blending his academic knowledge of Civil War battle horrors with his own from France in 1945. As wars past and present meld, and William becomes less able to deny his need for confession, he, Anne, and Andrew must understand that when "ignorant armies clash by night," only love and the desire to be true to one another can help prevent past disasters from becoming those of the present and future.

ELIZABETH BREAU (October 10, 2011)

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