

## She Wears the Britches

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How do you solve a problem like Ash Thompson? The heroine of “Neverhome,” Laird Hunt’s enthralling new novel set during the Civil War, is at once sentimental and aloof, a savior and a killer, a folk hero who shuns her own legend, a fierce and wounded woman who finds strength in her troubled past. Above all she is a liar, but one whose every word has the sheen of truth. “I was strong and he was not,” she begins her tale, “so it was me went to war to defend the Republic.” Yet it becomes clear that Ash is hardly motivated by patriotism, and that an equally devastating war awaits her return home.

In a previous incarnation, Ash Thompson was Constance Thompson, a housewife and farmer from Indiana who, in 1862, decides to disguise herself as a man to enlist in the Union Army. Her meek and devoted husband, Bartholomew (“made out of wool,” Ash explains, “and I was made out of wire”), encourages her mission, watching as she dons pants and marches through their field, practicing her new identity. Passing as a man comes easily to Ash, who excels at arm-wrestling, cursing, fighting and especially shooting; in a letter, Bartholomew advises occasionally missing her target so as not to arouse the suspicions of her company. At first Ash’s sex is recognized only by women she meets in passing, including one to whom she gives her jacket — a gesture that inspires a nickname and a song, “The Ballad of Gallant Ash.”

To her annoyance, the song follows Ash throughout her travels, its lyrics conjuring memories from both her distant and recent history. She has visions of her mother’s tragic, mysterious death and hears her long-ago advice: “We do not ever turn our cheek.” She dreams, too, of life with Bartholomew, from the sweet early days of their courtship to the death of their newborn son. Her past clings and calls to her even as she fights through her present: bloody battles, a shocking betrayal, the slow but persistent erosion of her sanity. Letters from her husband reveal his hopes for her return and fears that she never will, an “Odyssey” in reverse, with Bartholomew the Penelope to her Odysseus. Out of necessity she occasionally resumes the guise of a woman, losing something each time she makes the switch. “I do not know myself,” she apologetically tells one acquaintance. “I do not know myself at all.”

The enchantment cast by a first-person narrator is contingent on so many factors, many of them subjective: the degree of intimacy or detachment elicited, how convincing or fascinating or grating we find the character, whether we ultimately feel manipulated or seduced. Rarely, a voice so compels it's as if we're furtively eavesdropping on a whispered confession, which is how I felt reading "Neverhome": I was marching alongside Ash, eager for more of her well-guarded secrets.

In an author's note, Hunt says he was inspired by the real-life tale of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, who disguised herself as "Lyons Wakeman" and enlisted with the Union Army. Ash, however, is entirely Hunt's own creation. His ability to evoke her demeanor and circumstances in a gorgeously written sentence or two is one of the book's many pleasures: A soldier boy has "a curlicue elegance to his scream"; her colonel wonders if she's been "set adrift by the moon." Of the physical machinations of Ash's disguise, we're told little; we don't know if she has noticeably small feet or hands, if she menstruates or where she hides when she binds her breasts. But Hunt has such masterly command of his character's singular, incantatory voice that this reticence seems to be Ash's decision alone.

As Ash starts to come undone, and her tales grow taller and more fanciful (she once dances naked with a group of Confederates, without any of them commenting on her body), even she struggles to separate her desires from her reality, to know what is real. Her visions and dreams, dropped like a careful trail of crumbs, lead her back to her Indiana farm, where Bartholomew and her past are waiting. "You can't ever know when the dead world will come to you," she muses, "only that it will" — and as the strong one, it is up to her to face it.

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