

**Practicum**  
**A.J. Howells**

He was in fifth grade,  
the only true native to this land  
and more of a man than I can still wish to be.

I pulled him off a student  
who had stolen his basketball during recess.  
As I dragged him away,  
he screamed at me,  
calling me a “fuckin’ cowboy faggot.”

I wasn’t there to be a white savior.  
I wasn’t there to be a missionary.  
I wasn’t there to a social justice warrior.

The deal went like this:  
when you select your student teaching placement,  
a menu drops down listing multiple doors to possible futures.  
You could stay where you were,  
go to this city,  
go to that city,  
or choose the longer option,  
rusting at the bottom of the list,  
in smaller print than the others:

Enjoy snowy Pierre, South Dakota in the height of winter  
when the negative eighteen-degree weather  
will force you into thermals, work clothes, and a dirty Carhart  
and you’ll still feel the ice plunge into you deeply enough to hit marrow,  
even though you’ve only walked to work,  
which is less than a hundred feet from your trailer door.

In still smaller print:

Witness a third-world country,  
within a first world country,  
where whites still slam their windows shut  
when you walk past their houses  
with a trail of red-skinned children behind you,  
out for a morning stroll,  
in seemingly improved weather.

And even smaller:  
Be greeted with cries of “FUCK YOU”  
from five-year-olds,  
and show an eighth-grade boy  
(one who once watched his mother stab his father to death)  
how to diagram sentences.

And, miraculously, even smaller still:  
Upon completion of the course,  
you’ll have drunk enough fire water  
you’ll believe you can walk across the Missouri River.  
You’ll have drowned your white guilt  
while lying in a snowbank,  
listening to wind roaring across the plains,  
mixed with coyote cries,  
and a people clawing their way out of red, white, and blue jumpers,  
hoping something to find something remotely resembling freedom.

This is the option you select.  
It’s the only one you want,  
and you didn’t know why then,  
and you still don’t know why now.  
But you do know that every ounce of your patriotism died on the plains,  
somewhere between the horizon  
and a sky spewing snow and bolts of lightning.

A.J. Howells is the publisher and general editor of *Makeshift Press* (MakeshiftPress.org), publisher of Fredric Brown’s *The Office: 60th Anniversary Edition*. A.J.’s prose has appeared in *South Journal*, *The First Line*, and two volumes of *Workers Write*. RhetAskew Publishing will soon release his horror-comedy novella *Alley Bats*, and his poetry has been featured in *Eunoia Review* and *The Offbeat*. He lives with his wife, two children, and two cats in the woods of northern Virginia where he spends far too much time reading comic books and listening to Sun Ra. He also teaches full-time.