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## **All That Is by James Salter (review)**

Nathan Washatka

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

*Nathan Washatka (bio)*

James Salter, *All That Is* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 304 pp.

In James Salter's new novel, *All That Is*, we begin at war. It is the spring of 1945. The Allied fleet has begun its assault on the Japanese island of Okinawa. It is to be one of the final battles of the campaign in the South Pacific. The novel's protagonist, Philip Bowman, is a young navy lieutenant bracing for his first action. Bowman has, at this time in his life, "no experience of love" and, in the opinion of a former high school teacher, "the makings of a fine Latinist." Meanwhile, desperate to halt the Allied advance, the Japanese counter by launching their greatest, heaviest, and most heavily armed battleship, the *Yamato*. It is a suicide mission; the *Yamato* sails with its ammunition lockers full and its fuel tanks half empty. Battles ensue. Bowman and his ship survive. The *Yamato* is sunk. So end the first twelve pages of Salter's book, and we are off.

The balance of *All That Is* traces the contours of Bowman's life: a degree in journalism from Harvard; a career in an up-and-coming publishing house; a fizzled marriage; his concern and care for a mother succumbing to a disease with Alzheimer's-like symptoms; a passel of doomed love affairs. In fact, Bowman so thoroughly corrects for his earlier romantic inexperience that it is almost endearing to recall that he once laid, alone in his bunk, forlorn and fearful, listening raptly to a shipmate read aloud racy correspondence from a lover in San Diego. Whether Bowman ever fulfills his promise as a Latinist, we never find out.

It has been more than thirty years since James Salter published a full-length novel. He has not been idle in the interlude. A luminous collection of short stories, *Dusk and Other Stories*, won the 1989 PEN/Faulkner Award; a pair of memoirs recounted, among other things, his experience as a fighter pilot in the Air Force; most recently, he co-wrote *Life is Meals: A Food Lover's Book of Days* with Kay Salter. Still, the absence of any new **[End Page 284]** novels since the late 1970s has no doubt tried the patience of his admirers. The scope of *All That Is*—encompassing much of one man's life, stealing glimpses into dozens of other lives, and ranging in setting from New York to the cultural capitals of Western Europe—not to

mention its title, suggests that Salter has done his best to deliver a novel worthy of the wait.

The result, at many points, is admirable. Salter has made his mark as a meticulous curator of pleasures. In *A Sport and a Pastime* (1967), a slender and meditative book, he seemed determined to catalog all the native charms of rural France, as well as the charms two lovers find in one another. The resulting list of impressions spills forth like an incantation. As in that novel, the greatest pleasure to be found in *All That Is* is sex. Philip Bowman partakes liberally, but Salter is keen to show that Bowman derives joy from a spectrum of pleasures: paintings, the opera, wine, a plate of *fruits de mer* from a back-alley restaurant in Paris. There is pleasure to be had from parties with friends, from the quiet calmness of life in the country, from nature. Salter is keenly aware that beauty is not something that can be consumed. Nor can it be properly appraised without patience, that rarest of virtues. Salter's prose often lingers, almost lounges, on moments that offer themselves to the observant:

It had been a long day. The summer had come early. Sun struck the trees of the countryside with dazzling power. In towns along the way, girls with tanned limbs strolled idly past stores that looked closed. Housewives drove with kerchiefs on their heads and their men in hard yellow hats stood near signs warning Construction Ahead. The landscape was beautiful but passive. The emptiness of things rose like the sound of a choir making the sky bluer and more vast.

Ah, the sky. Salter has never...

modulates beautifully from the conventions of airline-speak, to poetic reverie, to satire of our petty desires (“You should have had a third little flask of scotch”; “Real terror, let me tell you, / is no aphrodisiac”), to candid sobriety:

Let’s be frank. This flight is headed for  
your longest vacation. Tonight, the only gates  
we’ll taxi to are pearly: no connection  
to the party raging on down there without us.

The pilot finally exhorts everyone to selflessness: “Spend your last moments in big-hearted hope / we’re going to hurt nobody on the ground.” We’re all headed for the nothing that is, Salter’s poem insists, and it doesn’t get lonelier than that.

—Jay Rogoff

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