New Fiction from Patrick Hicks: Into the Tunnel

Editor's Note: "Into the Tunnel" is the first chapter of Patrick Hicks's new novel, ECLIPSE.

"The rocket will free man from his remaining chains, the chains of gravity which still tie him to this planet. It will open to him the gates of heaven."

—Wernher von Braun

He was tired and cold when they arrived from Auschwitz. The moon hung above him, battered and beaten, as he trudged down a long concrete road with thousands of other men. The train that had carried him across Germany huffed in the night. A whistle pierced the frosty air—it was a single note, strangled into silence. The huffing engine took on water and he licked his dry lips. He tried to swallow. Searchlights paced the dark as dogs strained against their leashes, their front paws wheeling the air. Guards stood along the road and yelled at the prisoners to move faster, faster. Behind him, bodies were tossed out of the railcars. They hit the pebbly ground in sickening thuds. Stones skittered away.

Eli Hessel glanced at the moon. It looked like it had been pistol whipped, wounded.

"Move it, you pieces of shit!"

Another voice chimed in. "March in unison! Your left . . . left . . . left."

He had no idea where he was or where he was going. The shadowy bulk of a hill was on his right and, in the moonlight, he could see that a haze of pine trees lined its ridge. To his left were strange metal cylinders with nozzles on them. They

were stacked on flatbed rail cars.

The men kept moving, trudging, schlepping. Their wooden clogs clacked against the concrete road. Dogs continued to snap and bark. There was the smell of wet fur. And there was something else too, a smell he couldn't quite place at first. It was a mixture of oil and creosote. There was also—he breathed deeply—there was also the smell of decaying bodies. It was the stink of rotting meat and grapefruit. That's what a corpse smelled like. During the past few months he had plenty of time to familiarize himself with it.

But where was he?

The journey from Auschwitz had been hard. They'd been stuffed into wooden cattle cars and, as they rocked and clattered over hundreds of miles of tracks, these men, who had been crammed in cheek by jowl, had to relieve themselves where they stood. The weakest slipped to the floor. Many of them never got up again.

Eli stumbled. He was woozy. His lips were chapped and his tongue was leathery. It hurt to swallow. He couldn't make spit. On his lower back, at that place where the spine meets the pelvic girdle, he had a perfect bruise. A hobnail boot had kicked him into the cattle car a few days ago when he left Auschwitz, and although he couldn't see it, he knew it must look like a horseshoe with studded dots. Whenever he twisted his waist, a sharp firework of pain sizzled up his spine. He worried that his vertebra was shattered but there was nothing he could do about it. He had to walk faster. He hobbled. He tried to stay at the front of the line because prisoners were being beaten with metal rods behind him. The road beneath his clogs was splashed with oil. Or maybe it was blood? It was hard to tell at night.

"In unison, you pieces of shit! Left . . . left . . . left."

He ignored the nipping pain in his stomach and watched his

feet move on their own. The blue and white stripes of his trouser legs swung in and out of view beneath him. He wondered if they were being taken to a gas chamber. He'd seen it happen at Auschwitz many times before. He'd seen whole families walk down a gravel path to a gas chamber and he'd seen the black tar of their bodies rumble up from a crematorium at night. Flames shot out from the chimney and the whole sky above Auschwitz was stained a dull orange. The heat from thousands of bodies made the moon shimmer.

He focused on his swinging legs and didn't think about his mother or father, his younger brother, or his grandparents. They were gone. They'd been turned into ash long ago. And yet, against all odds, he was somehow still alive.

"Faster, you sons of bitches!" a guard yelled. "We don't have all night."

Maybe he could run away? Maybe he could slip into the night?

Barbed wire was on either side of him—he could see that—and there was the shadow of a wooden guard tower illuminated beneath a searchlight up ahead. No doubt the fence was electrified. To run would mean—what, exactly? All of Germany was a concentration camp.

"Move it you useless eaters, you pieces of *SHIT*!"

The guard was from Berlin. Eli could tell from his accent. How could he be so angry, so full of venom? And while he was thinking about this, something surprising and alarming appeared up ahead.

The rail tracks curved into a mountain. There was a tunnel. A huge one. Two massive sodium lights sparkled overhead like twin stars and they cast long shadows on the ground. A cloud of moths jittered in the lights and, for a long moment, he wondered what they might taste like. Dusty, he thought.

When it became obvious they were going into the tunnel, Eli looked around in wild terror for a chimney or a vent. Were gas chambers in there? Underground? His muscles tensed and he almost stopped walking. He had to force his legs to keep on moving even though he was shakingly afraid of what he would find up ahead.

Calm down, he told himself. It didn't make sense to ship them halfway across Germany only to kill them. The Nazis could have done that at Auschwitz.

"It's okay," he whispered to himself. "Yes, all is well."

But the claws of fear continued to scratch at the inside of his skull. His asshole tightened and his eyes darted to the left and right. If this *was* a work camp, where were the other prisoners?

The moon was swallowed by a cloud and this made the dark beyond the searchlights absolute. The moon had been snuffed out, choked. Two enormous iron gates on either side of the tunnel were wide open, and camouflage netting was strung above the entrance like an awning. A white wooden sign was suspended from the ceiling and someone had taken the time to get the calligraphy just right.

Alles für den Krieg
Alles für den Sieg

Eli looked around. It was understood by everyone that German was the only language that mattered in the Reich. If a prisoner was confused or didn't understand something that was shouted at him, well then, he would learn soon enough.

When they entered the tunnel, a sudden dampness fell over his skin. It felt like a heavy wet cloak had been placed over his shoulders. He began to shiver. And somewhere up ahead, metal banged against metal—it was deep and rhythmic—double-syllabled—*bah-wung—bah-wung—bah-wung*. There was also the low

hum of a generator to his right. Floodlights cast grotesque shadows on the wall. He looked around and realized that everything he could see must have been hewn out of the rock by hand. The floor. The walls. The curved ceiling. How many prisoners had died making this place, this cave?

Modern-day view of the tunnels where the V-2s were made. Photo by Patrick Hicks.

They passed a cluster of SS guards who stood around laughing at some joke. They smoked and paid no attention to the column of prisoners that shuffled past them. Bright balls of orange glowed at the ends of their cigarettes. They pushed each other playfully and talked about roasting a wild boar. For a moment, Eli allowed himself to imagine what it might taste like. The fibrous meat, the juices, the sucking of the marrow from bone.

“Keep moving!” someone shouted from the rear. Surprisingly, it

was a French accent.

Steel pipes were bolted to the walls and he wondered what they were for. When he looked up at the high rounded ceiling he felt claustrophobia run though his chest like spiders. For several long moments he had to fight a wild urge to run. What if the ceiling collapsed? How many thousands of tons of rock were above him? Eli looked for support beams but couldn't see any. The air around him was thick and oppressive and cold. It crowded his lungs. His nose was chilly.

He focused on his wooden clogs. They were badly stained from the mud of Auschwitz and he counted his steps as a way to control his fear.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .

All is well, he told himself. Yes, all is well.

When he looked up, he saw a winch and two dangling chains. The rhythmic banging got louder. *Bah-WUNG*. *Bah-WUNG*. *Bah-WUNG*. There were hundreds of prisoners working in the tunnel up ahead. They were dressed in blue and white striped uniforms like him. The light was weak and this made the underground world feel sunken and submerged. What were they doing? Mining for gold?

As he got closer, he realized they were hunched over tables and assembling something that looked like gearboxes. Others worked on metal tanks. Down a side tunnel, a group of prisoners carried a huge nozzle. It was the size of a church bell.

"Drop it and you get twenty lashes!" a voice roared.

It was a kapo. This man was given extra food if he agreed to do the dirty work of the Nazis. In exchange for beating his fellow prisoners, he was given a good night of sleep and a full belly. The nozzle suddenly teetered sideways, the metal

cone slipped against the wall, and when it bounced onto the ground—sending out a low ringing sound—the kapo immediately began hammering a prisoner with a stick. The blows rained down. Bloody stains formed on the man's back.

"Be gentle with that!" the kapo shouted. "Gentle! Gentle! Gentle!"

An SS officer watched all of this with bored curiosity. Cigarette smoke vented from his nose. Eli studied this man's clean face, his manicured hands, and he couldn't help but notice the high polish of the man's jackboots. They twinkled in a perfection of night. Eli turned away when the guard looked at the parade of arriving prisoners. He knew better than to look the SS in the eye. Surely the rules of Auschwitz must apply in this place too.

"Fresh rags," the SS guard yelled out. He took a long drag on his cigarette. "Welcome!"

As they marched deeper into the tunnel, Eli saw that many of the prisoners didn't have shoes. Their feet were bloody and caked with grime. He also became aware of the overpowering smells around him: diesel, the sulfurous burn of arc welding, and there was something else too. He recognized it from that factory at Auschwitz. His teeth tasted of iron. There were pools of water on the floor and he wondered if he could bend down and cup some into his hands. A kapo, however, was marching next to him. The man twirled a metal rod.

All around him were the scrapping of spades against wet rubble. The floodlights of the tunnel gave way to carbide lamps. Soon everything flickered and it was hard to see. He stumbled over a thick cable and nearly fell. Others were having trouble too.

When they rounded a corner, he decided to chance it. Eli bent down for a handful of water. It was beautiful and wet and primal against his skin, but when it passed over the dry seal

of his lips he spit it out. It tasted of urine.

A moment later, they came to a halt.

The sound of hundreds of clogs coming to a stop filled up the tunnel. It was like horses clattering to a standstill.

At first, Eli couldn't tell what was before him. He squinted and waited for his eyes to adjust. A skirt of light fanned onto—he wasn't sure what, exactly. There, in a long line, were giant metal tubes that looked something like torpedoes. Maybe they were for a secret submarine? Maybe they were for a massive U-Boat and they'd be sent across the Atlantic to attack New York or Boston?

A high-pitched voice came from the edge of the light.

"*Mützen…ab*!"

Eli and the others immediately took off their caps and slapped them against the seam of their trousers. They stood at stiff attention.

There was a long pause and, during this silence, Eli felt a sneeze coming on. He wriggled his nose in the hopes he could fight it off. In Auschwitz, he once saw a prisoner get hit in the face with a crowbar for sneezing. It killed the man. He fell to the ground like a sack of wheat. The tingling continued deep in his nasal cavity, so he held his breath.

A man in a business suit stood before them. He wore a white smock and, even from this distance, Eli could see the sparkle of a Nazi pin on his lapel. Lurking in the distance were SS officers. They stood back, smoking.

"You're in the heart of it now," a kapo yelled. He extended both arms as if he were a magician. "Welcome to *Takt Strasse*."

Eli had grown up in Berlin and he knew that a *takt* was a baton used by an orchestra conductor.

The kapo, who had the green triangle of a criminal stitched onto his striped uniform, pulled out a wooden club from behind a metal cabinet. He paced back and forth before adding, "On *Takt Strasse*, I keep time on your heads if you don't move quickly enough. Do you understand, my assholes?"

He brought the club down onto an imaginary head.

"In this place we build *rockets*." There was a deliberate pause. A knowing smile. "Yes, my assholes, we create machines the Americans and the British cannot even imagine. Our technology is going to win this war. You're standing in the future."

Eli looked at the torpedoes and nodded. Ah, he understood now. They weren't designed to fly through the water. They were designed to fly through air and come crashing down onto cities. His eyes opened in the horrible realization of what was around him. Each one of these rockets could kill…how many?

"You are enemies of the Reich and in this kingdom beneath the mountain you will work to destroy your own countries. Do you understand me?" There was another wide smile. "In this place you will build wonder weapons the likes of which the world has never seen."

He held the club and moved it like a scythe. "This is your last home, my assholes. The only way out of this camp is through the chimney." He opened is arms. His voice was suddenly bright and friendly. "Welcome to Dora!"

Eli didn't know what any of this meant, but he had a good idea. In Auschwitz, after his family had been sent into the sky, he had come to understand such speeches. In this place called Dora, death was a way of life. There would be death in the morning. Death in the afternoon. Death in the evening. Death would be everywhere, like oxygen. Death. Death. Death.

"Listen up," came another voice. It was deeper and darker.

“Approach the table in groups of five. We need to process you.”

And so it was that hundreds of starving men entered the most secret concentration camp in the Nazi empire. When it was Eli’s turn, he held his cap in both hands. He decided this made him look like a beggar, so he stood at attention. He stiffened his back.

“Age?”

“20.”

“Do you speak German?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Occupation?”

He needed to make himself useful because the Nazis believed one simple and ironclad rule: only valuable workers stayed among the living. Everyone else was wheeled into the darkness.

“I’m…an electrician,” he lied.

The prisoner behind the desk stamped a green work order and handed it to Eli without looking up. There was a number with an inky swastika punched over it. *41199*.

Eli Hessel, a Jew from Berlin who hoped that many decades of life still lay ahead of him, turned from thoughts of the dead and let his mind focus on clear, clean water. Yes, he thought, he’d love a tall glass. There would be ice cubes, big ones, big enough to sting your upper lip when you took in the cool wetness. It would flow down his throat, wet and pure.

And with this image hovering on his tongue, he stepped into a sub-tunnel.

He went to work.

* *

The official name of the camp was KZ Dora-Mittelbau. The KZ stood for *Konzentrationslager* and work began on the tunnels on August 28, 1943 when a hundred prisoners from nearby Buchenwald were ordered to dig into the hardened rock of an abandoned gypsum mine. By the end of 1943, some 11,000 prisoners were hammering and blasting their way through a stubby mountain called the Kohnstein.

“Mountain” is too grand of a term, though. It was a ridge that lifted up from lush farmland, jack pines sprouted up from its hump, and it was home to a rich variety of wildlife. Beneath the soil was a tough rock called anhydrite. It was so hard, in fact, that tunnels didn’t need supporting beams, which is precisely why the Nazis decided to create a factory deep inside its heart. Huge internal spaces could be chiseled into the center of this mountain and, as a result, no American plane would ever spy the assembly line of V-2 rockets hidden inside. The Nazis knew the enemy would fly on, seeing nothing, suspecting nothing, and even if they found out what was happening in the cool depths of the earth, no bomb could ever punch its way down to the factory floor. It was a natural fortress. It was bomb proof. The war could never touch it.

In the early days of the camp’s existence, the growing cavity of rock was a place of constant noise and dust. Emaciated prisoners blasted holes into anhydrite around the clock. They hunched against walls before each deafening explosion—they pinched their eyes shut and held their breath—and as they crouched there with their hearts racing they must have wondered if the ceiling would collapse. Would the tonnage of rock suspended above continue to hold?

While they imagined a waterfall of rocks tumbling down onto their bodies, that’s when the cracking detonation of TNT happened up ahead. A huge cloud of rolling white covered them, it submerged them. Dust particles filled up their lungs.

Whenever they spit, their saliva became like paste.

Once the dust settled they were ordered to clear away the largest chunks of rock. The prisoners were ghosts that tossed huge jagged pieces into rail cars called *grubenhunten* and then, by sheer force of will, these men muscled the carts down a track and out into the sunlight. There, they tipped out their load, turned around, and went back into the tunnel for more.

These withered men with burst eardrums slept inside the mountain. And because there was no plumbing, this meant sanitary conditions were beyond disgusting. Men relieved themselves into barrels of diarrhea, they walked across streams of excrement, and they were given hardly any drinking water. As a result, disease spread at a fearsome rate and prisoners fell to the ground in unrelenting numbers. Still, the work continued. It went on day and night.

For the Nazis, they didn't care who lived and who died. It was slave labor. The bodies of these men were the property of the Reich. Even now, we're not entirely sure how many prisoners perished from all the blasting and hauling but the numbers are thought to be in the thousands. We do know that the dead were hauled away to Buchenwald where they were burnt in a crematorium. The SS at Dora-Mittelbau felt this was too inefficient—all those trucks traveling back and forth, wasting gasoline—so they requested their own oven for burning the dead. This wish was granted.

By early 1944, Tunnel A and Tunnel B were finished, along with rail tracks that led out from their gaping mouths. Some 35 million cubic feet of space was now available for rocket assembly. If we think of Tunnel A and Tunnel B running parallel to each other—with a slight S curve to both—there were forty-six smaller tunnels that connected them. In this way, seven and a half miles of space had been chiseled into the Kohnstein. The world's largest underground factory was

finally ready for use and, if everything went according to plan, the Nazis would soon rain warheads down onto cities in a way the world had never seen before.

One thing was certain: the idea of a rocket was about to move from the realm of science fiction into the realm of science fact. What would soon rise up from blueprints would not only change the course of the twentieth-century, it would rumble down through the years to come. It influences us still. It threatens us still.

* *

Eli knew none of this when he arrived because the prisoners who built the tunnels were all dead by the summer of 1944. However, even if he *did* know how Dora-Mittelbau had been created, would it really matter? Not to Eli. He only cared about the narrow road to survival. This was part of the literal and figurative tunnel vision that existed in the underground camp. All living prisoners felt this way. The present and the future were all that mattered. The past? The past didn't matter. It was a place of pain and loss. The past held images of happier times and of family members who had all been murdered. And so, Eli didn't think of the past. It ceased to exist. It was a weight that threatened to drag him down.

He was housed in Barrack 118 along with 400 other men. It was a clapboard shack with thin windows and a dirt floor. It was one of many barracks that had been set up outside the tunnels and the whole outdoor complex was surrounded by electrified wire. Searchlights roamed the night. In the distance, dogs barked and he could hear classical music drifting out from the SS camp. Occasionally, laughter sliced the night air and, once or twice, he heard the sound of gunfire. The SS at Dora consisted almost entirely of men who had long careers at other concentration camps. They knew what they were doing. They were stone faced professionals.

Triple layered bunks had been shoved into Barrack 118 and it was here that shivering men nuzzled into each other for warmth. As the curfew siren wailed out, Eli searched for sleep. After sixteen hours of work—during which time he'd seen five men collapse from hunger and another beaten to death—getting a good night of sleep took on existential importance. A night of sleep might repair the damage that had been done to his joints and ligaments, it might help clot wounds, and it might allow his back to heal.

His uniform was infested with lice and, whenever he tried to slip into the syrupy void of rest, he could feel little mouths walking across the landscape of his body, nibbling here, nibbling there. If he thought about it too much it seemed like his skin was on fire, like he had already been shoved into the crematorium.

He scratched his eyebrow and felt a white speck moving beneath his fingernail. The man next to him twitched in sleep. His breath stank and, gauging from the smell of shit that was on the man, he obviously had dysentery and hadn't made it to the barrel in time. While the man snored, Eli studied his skeletal face, how the eyes darted back and forth beneath papery lids. Maybe this man, this stranger with a homosexual's pink triangle on his uniform, would magic into a corpse in the next few hours? Such things happened. Just yesterday the kapos woke up Barrack 118 for morning roll call and seven men had died during the night. One of them had hanged himself.

Eli glanced out the window. The moon was pock-marked and brilliant. He saw that it was bleached white, just like the walls of the tunnels of Dora. In the drowsy chambers of his imagination, he wondered if the moon and the tunnels were made from the same rock. He saw himself quarrying into the moon, digging down, down, down, deep into its belly where he could sleep in peaceful glowing warmth. Sleep, he thought. To drift away…

A gust of wind rattled the window.

He adjusted his wooden clogs beneath his head. They hurt the base of his skull but that was far better than waking up to find that someone had stolen them during the night. Imagine walking into the tunnels with bare feet, he thought. He could almost feel the cold against his toes.

When he was kid, he loved feeling grass beneath his feet. July sunshine trickled down through oak leaves and the warmth was delicious. He imagined stopping at a café for a slice of chocolate gateaux. Maybe he'd sink a finely polished fork into frosting and lift the crumbling goodness to his lips where—

He opened his eyes and felt a hundred mouths on his body. Stop, he counseled himself. Go to sleep. Go to sleep so that you may live.

And with that, he drifted into the abyss.

The lice, meanwhile, continued to feed.

* *

Unlike other camps in the Nazi system, Dora didn't have a grand gatehouse that prisoners marched through on their way to forced labor. In places like Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, and Dachau, the phrase *Arbeit Macht Frei* was emblazoned over a main gate. By contrast, the gate at Dora was simple, artless, and had no such phrase. There was, however, an unofficial slogan in the camp that everyone knew. It hung silently in the air. Sometimes the SS even said this phrase during roll call. "*Vernichtung durch arbeit*." Extermination through work.

This was the essential element of Dora and we should note that between the years 1943 and 1945, one in three prisoners died there. Work camps like Dora realized they didn't need a gas chamber: they simply had to work prisoners to death and, by doing so, they could extract as much useful labor as possible.

In his first week there, Eli came to know Dora well. There were the tunnels, of course, where he and thousands of others were forced to work. This underground area of camp was called Mittelbau, and this is where the world's first rocket was built. In the years to come, the designer of the V-2, Wernher von Braun, would shed his Nazi past and go on to create the thunderous Saturn V for NASA, which lifted American astronauts to the moon. The bargain for the United States was simple: ignore von Braun's past and in return he would deliver the most powerful rocket the world had ever seen. Whenever questions about Dora-Mittelbau *did* come up in later life, von Braun would simply smile and talk about Apollo, and Tranquility Base, and the bright pull of the future.

To the west of the tunnel entrance was the SS camp. This was off limits to the prisoners and yet, whenever they marched past, they could see fine homes, a fancy pub, dog kennels, and vegetable gardens. Just to the south of the SS camp was the rail yard where the V-2s were loaded onto trains and sent to launching pads across Germany. Further to the west was the gatehouse of the prison camp. Aside from a horrible stench lifting into the air—a stench that stung the eyes—the first thing a visitor might notice would be the guard towers, the searchlights, and the barbed-wire. The prisoners were woken at four in the morning by kapos. They entered the barracks with rubber truncheons and flayed away until everyone was assembled for roll call. Thousands of striped uniforms had to stand at attention while the SS strolled among them, roaring out commands. Dogs strained at leashes. Men in guard towers yawned and smoked cigarettes. They lifted their machine guns and took aim while a swastika on a flagpole snapped and rippled in the shadowy blue of sunrise.

Roll call lasted for hours. The prisoners stood at attention with their caps off while a kapo read off their numbers in German. Eli listened for his new name as a soft breeze moved through his uniform. He was no longer Eli Hessel. He was

41199.

The numbers were always shouted out.

“VIER EINS EINS NEUN NEUN!”

“*Jawohl*!”

He raised his hand and was counted among the living.

As the count went on, crows circled overhead. They wheeled around and landed on barrack rooftops. They cawed and hopped. Sometimes, if the wind was right, Eli could hear church bells bonging in the valley below. Wisps of smoke lifted up from unseen chimneys. He wondered what they were eating for breakfast. Eggs? He liked to imagine eggs. Boiled. Poached. Fried. Scrambled. Thick with butter.

When they were dismissed, everyone rushed for rutabaga soup, a slice of moldy bread, and coffee that tasted of acorns. When Eli drank the soup for the first time, he noticed that it tasted of petroleum. Blobs of oil floated on top. The soup arrived in fifty gallon drums—they probably held fuel once—but he didn’t care about this. He poured the soup into his mouth and tore at the green bread. The coffee too disappeared. When it was all over, he looked at his dirty hands and ached for more. Many of the prisoners went over to the empty metal drums and began to lick them clean with their tongues. One of the cooks, a burly man with thick forearms, hit them with a ladle.

“Stand back. That’s all for today!”

Some prisoners ate lice off their shirt. Others ate snails off fence posts. Others tried to eat leaves or tufts of grass. Eli watched all of this and wondered if he, too, might do the same thing in a few weeks. Yes, concluded. Yes.

An announcement crackled out from the camp loudspeaker. “Attention . . .” There was a shriek of feedback. “Return to the roll call square. Return to the roll call square

immediately.”

They moved back and lined up. A brass band started to play and, in this way, thousands of men marched out of Dora for the tunnels of Mittelbau. The work day had begun.

As they moved for the tunnels, and the rockets, and all that the future might bring, Eli glanced at the guard towers. The wind picked up and the trees began to rustle. Birds soared overhead, riding the currents into quieter valleys. Behind the prisoners, the crematorium rumbled softly. The tall chimney looked like an inverted rocket. It belched up tarry exhaust, staining the bright blue sky with the fuel of flesh and bone.

His arms were heavy and he shuffled carefully to keep his clogs from falling off.

They turned for the tunnel. It was a gigantic black opening, a wide mouth. Soon, the long column of starving men were swallowed by the mountain. Eaten.

Eli focused on what lay ahead. No matter what happened, he told himself, he must not give up. He must fight to the death to live.

Our Personal Community by Curtis J. Graham

It was in the news. On a bright summer day in Helmand Province, Lance Corporal Wickie did his duty and killed an insurgent. A suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with explosives into the berm of Outpost Shir Ghazay. Wickie returned fire, then applied a tourniquet to someone's wounded leg. He earned a Combat Action Ribbon, a Commendation Medal, and a Valor Device. He was promoted to Corporal, then Sergeant, and he reenlisted.

Before we deployed, Wickie told me he was getting out as soon as possible, that his contract couldn't expire fast enough. He would eat the apple, and fuck the Corps.

I first met Wickie at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. I was a Private First Class with a single chevron on my shoulder. I had orders to report to an office inside a warehouse, and the Corporals told Wickie to show me around. Wickie was small, with a round head and big brown eyes, like someone's kid brother. He brought me to a wall locker covered in dents and

bootprints. He opened the door and pulled out a plastic cowboy hat. “Check out this bad boy,” he said. He dusted it off affectionately and rapped it with his knuckles. “OSHA approved.”

Outside, Wickie led me to the far corner of the lot, where rusty forklifts were parked in a row. He began to tell me about his dad. “Yeah, he was Secret Service for a while, before he got contracted for Blackwater. You know, spec ops. Assassin shit.” He pulled out a camouflage wallet and opened it with a rip. He handed me a black business card with a longhorn skull in the center. It said, *Robert P. Wickie, Blackwater Operative*, with a phone and fax number.

“There’s no address,” I said. “And why is there a fax number?” The card felt like printer paper.

“Obviously, ain’t no address,” he said, and took the card from me. He stuffed it into his wallet. “Works where he wants, when he wants, my old man.”

“How much does he make, doing that?” I said.

He took a while to answer, like he was making something up. Then he told me twenty thousand a week. “Bull crap,” I said.

Wickie sucked his finger and felt the wind. The sun was setting. “’Bout that time,” he said. We walked to the formation for dismissal, and Wickie realized he’d left his blouse out back. He was wearing a green t-shirt with a toothpaste stain shaped like a lollipop. The Corporals made him stand in his own formation for a while, facing a brick wall.

I’d been in Afghanistan three months, on an outpost called Shukvani. The base was situated in a depression surrounded by hilltops. The day Wickie arrived, he threw rocks at the

windshield of the forklift I was driving and shattered it in three places. The Sergeant Major sent him away, to Outpost Shir Ghazay.

In the early months, I photographed things. I had a mattress in a metal bunk frame, a luxury, and I took a picture of it. The previous occupants had left us a mini fridge, a black loveseat filled with knife punctures, and a small TV. I took a picture of the sun setting behind an abutment, helicopters landing at night. A frozen steak grilling on wire mesh over burnt wood scraps. I uploaded the images to my Facebook profile.

One night, a short burst of gunfire woke me up. The noise echoed around the base, then stopped. Everything was quiet. I climbed out of bed and pulled on my flak jacket and helmet. The radio crackled with chatter. “Everyone to the berm, now,” said the voice of the Sergeant Major.

Outside, dust blew in the breeze. The ground was pale blue with moonlight. We sprinted across the packed gravel of the helicopter pads. I imagined I might shoot and kill someone tonight, then I stopped imagining. I racked my bolt while I ran, chambering a round. I reached the berm and lay against the baked earth. I caught my breath. Nearby, I heard a radio. Someone spoke.

They told us that a small convoy operated by the Afghan National Army, our allies, had parked just outside the base. They were on their way to another part of the desert and needed to pass through. They had no radios, so they fired their AK-47s into the air to get our attention. We were not in danger.

I walked alone across the crushed stone, back to the tent. I lay awake on my mattress, and felt nauseated from unspent adrenaline. I listened to mice as they ran around the tent, invisible, chewing holes in things and attacking one another

over food scraps. Their tiny screams. I awoke when the sun shone through a rip in the canvas by my eye. The next day, I went to the computer tent and logged into Facebook. I checked my album titled *Afghan 2013* for likes. People had commented on my pictures of our small television, the mattress, the single steak. Someone wrote, “Wow, really roughing it over there.” I deleted each of the pictures, then the album entirely.

A month passed before the big explosion happened. It felt nearby and sudden. It was like a punch of breeze, a gentle concussion. Across the desert, at this moment, Wickie was becoming a hero.

When the deployment came to an end, we kicked the sand from our boots and flew home in cargo planes. They searched every other bag for rocks and vials of moon dust. “Leave the country how you found it,” they told us.

Back at Camp Lejeune, I found Wickie sitting in a pickup truck outside the warehouse. He’d used his deployment cash to buy a black Chevy with four rear tires. We got talking about Shir Ghazay. “No one believes me, man.” He reached up and slammed the truck door.

I’d read the official report on the Division website, and I’d heard from others who were there. Private Cody talked about how Wickie just shucked a bunch of rounds from his magazine so that later, it would look like he’d returned fire. Rucker said he saw Wickie crouching beneath a truck, covering his ears during the firefight. Wickie stood in front of me and twisted his toe in the dirt. He told me that, last week, he’d been eating a sandwich at Chick-Fil-A when someone dropped a tray of dishes. He ducked beneath the table and barricaded himself with chairs. People laughed at him, he said.

I’d been out of the Marines for six months. I grew my hair long and wore flannel shirts. I was in college studying literature, and I’d recently signed up for a course in war poetry. On my way to classes, I walked past the campus veteran’s lounge. It was an oversized closet with a computer desk and a silver mini-fridge with Capri Suns for the veterans to drink. The students inside laughed often. I never went inside. I didn’t feel like one of them. Most of them wore combat boots with blue jeans, t-shirts from the infantry units they’d been in. Their hoodies were smattered with graphics of skulls smoking cigarettes. Aces of spades, fanged dogs. They probably had good stories, and I couldn’t think of any of my own.

In the poetry classroom, students took turns reading stanzas from Brian Turner’s “At Lowe’s Home Improvement Center.” The poem was about a veteran walking through aisles and seeing weaponry in household items. The students sat in a circle, reading aloud. They were careful to pause when appropriate, to read with continuity from one line to the next. In the poem, a box tips over, and nails trickle out like shell casings from a

machine gun. Paint spills and expands like a puddle of blood.

A student with a combover read a stanza about dead soldiers lying on the conveyor belt at the cash register. I listened to the description of the body. A year ago, I had been standing in a medical tent watching an Afghan civilian dying. He had fainted from blood loss. He was naked, with a catheter inserted. His toes were all crossed over themselves, and he had gashes that peeled and showed the muscle beneath. I watched the Navy Corpsmen bustle around, wearing tied-on paper scrubs over their cammies. At the far end of the tent, a little girl lay on a plywood table. She would soon have her legs removed. She would live. On the wall were x-rays of her femurs and pelvis. I saw the faint gray silhouette of her flesh on the outside, cracked white bone on the inside. She had stepped on a doormat bomb the day before. The man in the bed would die after amputation. The next day, I would drive a forklift and carry a cardboard box containing his legs, and those of the little girl, to the pit where they would be burned. I'd drop them off, and I'd smell them burning as I drove away.

In the poem, none of the shoppers see what the narrator sees. I set my photocopied page on the table because my hand was shaking. I looked around the room and was conscious of my heart beating in my ears. The students kept reading and reading. I grabbed my bag and left the classroom before it was my turn.

I walked down the hallway, touching the wall at intervals. It was cool beneath my fingertips. Billboard flyers fluttered as I walked past them, promoting frisbee tournaments and drag concerts. In the bathroom, I dry heaved. I flushed the toilet with my foot and waited in the hallway for the hour to end.

My next class was American Education. I arrived early. There were two veterans in this class, and they always came in together. The guy was bald and in his late thirties. He wore

cargo pants and brown shoes. The girl wore a pink sweater that looked like shag. They didn't fit in with anyone but each other. They seemed to like it that way.

Today, we were giving presentations about our Personal Community. The guy went first, and he talked about the Army. He had a deep, loud voice. He shook a little, being at the front of the classroom. He spoke in short bursts, like a Sergeant addressing a group of young soldiers. He had to project confidence, because of his rank. He clicked through a slideshow of himself in various states of undress, posing with weaponry outside plywood buildings. The class clapped for him when he finished talking about the camaraderie he knew in Iraq.

The class was mostly queer and transgender students studying music education. The next person to speak was Skye with the green and black hair, the pierced lower lip. She spoke about her friend who leapt to his death from a parking garage. Another friend had opened the passenger door of Skye's car and rolled onto the freeway while she was driving. The people who understand Skye's post-traumatic stress, she said, are her Personal Community. Someone turned on the lights, and the classroom erupted with applause.

I stood next. I kept mine generic—my family, my friends. There was no camouflage in my slideshow pictures. I clicked through the photos as I talked. A camping trip. My uncle's '78 Nova. I imagined it wouldn't take much to make them think I was someone, a person of valor. I'd just have to show the right pictures, ones with sand and smoke in them. I could tell them the story of how Wickie became a hero. I could talk about the sound and the blood, and the way it felt afterwards. I could be anybody. I could be Wickie. It wouldn't have mattered what I told them, really. They would still applaud for me. They might even call me a hero.

I walked down the hall after class and passed the lounge.

Someone had just told a joke, and there was an explosion of laughter. I thought about leaning in and knocking on the door. I thought about stepping over the threshold, pulling up a chair. Maybe they'd tell the joke again. Maybe I could hear it, too.

Shining Light on the Darkness: An Interview with Patrick Hicks

Andria Williams: Patrick, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. I've just finished reading "Into the Tunnel," the first chapter of your new novel, *Eclipse*. I was struck as always by what an immersive, detailed world you create, the tension you achieve, and the beauty and specificity of your language.

As the novel opens, we're accompanying Eli Hessel as he arrives from Auschwitz – where his whole family was lost – to a vast, mysterious Nazi project deep in a mountain. The change does not bring relief. As he's led into the dark, underground tunnel, observing the familiar cruelty of SS officers and the smells and tastes of punishment and broken bodies and death, he tries to piece together exactly what this horrible and mysterious project is and what it will require him to do.

We are learning along with Eli just what the deal is with this place, and that approach creates not only tension in the story, but an empathetic dread as we cringe along with each new shade of understanding. Did you always know that you wanted to open the novel this way, with the reader learning Eli's situation along with him, almost in real-time?

Author Patrick Hicks

Patrick Hicks: The beginning came to me very quickly, thankfully. I could see it all in my head: the arrival at night, the huffing train in the background, the gaping mouth of the tunnel, the guard towers. I think there's something deep inside us as a species that recoils at the thought of going underground, and I wanted to tap into that. Many of our legends and myths revolve around a fear of caves, and the underworld, and buried rivers. That natural dread of

journeying beneath the soil must have been amplified a thousand fold for the prisoners of Dora-Mittelbau. Being underground? During the Holocaust? Can you imagine?

AW: No, I cannot imagine.

PH: It must have been a unique horror to be in that concentration camp. Imagine entering that warren of tunnels as slave labor and seeing the high technology of these new things called "rockets", and now imagine knowing that you could shot or beaten or hanged at any moment. I wanted the reader to feel that sense of horrified amazement.

It also seemed like a good way to get at what I call "the moment of crisis". That's what drives all stories—a moment of crisis. It's that moment in a character's life when everything could change, the stakes are high, and the outcome is anything but certain. If a writer can find that moment, the tension will naturally follow. I wanted the opening chapter to unfold in real time, as you say, to make everything feel immediate and dangerous. It also makes the reader feel closer to Eli. He's a likable man. We want him to live.

AW: Yes, from the very first line of *Eclipse*, the stakes feel incredibly high. My investment in Eli's safety only grows as I read on.

Partway through the chapter, however—without at all diminishing the momentum—the reader's granted a small measure of relief from in-the-moment dread when Eli's narration is briefly replaced by a more authoritative narrator, who explains some of the history of the project inside Dora-Mittelbau. (That relief is short-lived as the nature of the project becomes known.)

"One thing was certain: the idea of a rocket was about to move from the realm of science fiction into the realm of science fact. What would soon rise up from blueprints would not only change the course of the twentieth-century, it would rumble

down through the years to come. It influences us still. It threatens us still.”

Can you explain the project at Dora-Mittelbau, and the influence it still has? I’d be interested to hear more.

PH: We forget about it now, but the Third Reich had very sophisticated technology. The Allies had good reason to worry that they were quite literally being outgunned. The Nazis were developing an atomic bomb, they built the first jet plane, they had stockpiles of chemical weapons the likes of which the world had never seen before, and they also created the world’s first mass produced rocket—the V-2. Wernher von Braun, who would later move to America and build the Saturn V that got us to the moon, was the mastermind behind the V-2. He tested his prototypes at a military base called Peenemünde. The Allies bombed this site in 1943—we totally destroyed it—and this led von Braun and others to realize that a secret underground concentration camp was needed, it would be an underground factory that would churn out V-2s at a dependable rate. Hitler hoped it would change the course of the war.

Tunnels where the V-2s were made. Photo by Patrick Hicks.

And so, deep in the Harz Mountains, prisoners had to blast tunnels into the earth to create this factory. Thousands of lives were lost and, today, no one really knows about Dora-Mittelbau because what was built there—the rockets—were top secret when America discovered the camp. It was hidden from the press. We didn't want the world to know much about the V-2s, so the horrors of this camp weren't put in the public eye the way that Dachau, Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen were. Even today, the name "Dora-Mittlebau" means very little to most people.

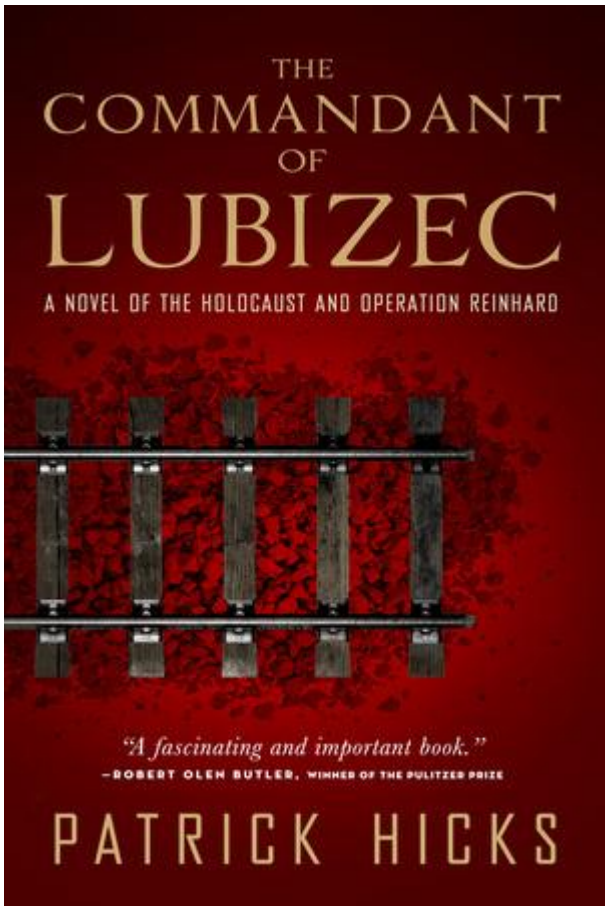
> *I wanted to change that. I wanted to show that this place created the blueprint of the latter half of the twentieth-century.*

Those rockets became the ICBMs that exist today. They were

built by German scientists who would go on to work for NASA—they'd get Apollo 11 to the moon—and in return we cast a blind eye on their crimes against humanity. That's why the novel is called *Eclipse*. It's about darkness and light. The horror of the Holocaust is directly tied to the wonderment of the Apollo program, and my main character, Eli Hessel, is involved in both events. While everyone is cheering for a successful moon landing in 1969, Eli Hessel is thinking about what happened in Dora. What would it be like to see your tormentors holding positions of high rank at NASA?

One reason some people think the Holocaust and the moon landings are hoaxes comes down to one irrefutable emotion: they both seem impossible. And yet, they both happened. We as a species did both of these things. There is ash at Auschwitz and there are bootprints on the moon. For me, they represent what we are capable of doing to each other, and they also represent what we are capable of doing *with* each other. Eli wrestles with all of this, and I've rooted everything in strong historical research.

AW: I'd love to hear about your approach to research. Both in this novel and *The Commandant of Lubizec*, I've been amazed by the absolute grounding in place and time you achieve, the attention to specific terms and images (carbide lamps, sodium lights, gypsum, kapo, Tranquility Base). What sort of reading and travel does your research involve?



PH: I really appreciate this question and I'm so pleased you felt that sense of grounding. As you know yourself with *The Longest Night*, all fiction is rooted in a particular time period, and it was important for me to make the reader feel they were in Nazi Germany. I wanted them to feel this in their bones, but I can only achieve this if I do a lot of research. So, in the case of *Eclipse*, I went to Dora-Mittelbau on two separate occasions and I spent many hours wandering around the camp, talking with curators, and getting into the ruined tunnels with a guide. I read eyewitness accounts of being at Dora, I did research on von Braun, the V-2s, and the Apollo program. This meant visiting the Kennedy Space Center, the Johnson Space Center in Houston, and the Marshall Space Flight Center in Alabama where von Braun developed the Saturn V. Did you know they have a V-2 on display at Marshall but there isn't a plaque or really *anything* that explains the crimes committed at Dora? Those who were murdered have essentially been erased from the story. Seeing that—or really *not* seeing that—made me want to write about this all the more.

I did the same type of thing for my first novel, *The Commandant of Lubizec*, which is about a fictitious Nazi death camp in Poland. I did three separate research trips to the real life camps of Treblinka, Sobibór, and Bełżec. I spent over 30 hours in Auschwitz. I interviewed survivors. I have strong feelings that if I'm going to write about the Holocaust, I have to get the history correct. I mean, I just *have* to. It would be an insult to the survivors and the dead if I didn't get it right.

AW: What, then, do you think is the relationship between politics and art?

PH: They're braided together very tightly. Art isn't created in a vacuum and artists have opinions which invariably come out. If you're going to write or paint or make music, it's because you have something to say, and that "something" will be a statement on the world around you. We may not see the politics embedded in Shakespeare today, but they're there. He was a man of his era and he wrote about the world he saw.

One of my jobs as a literary artist is to shine light into the darkness. If I can illuminate new ideas and nudge readers to consider new things, then I've done something that goes beyond just entertainment. Good writing provokes us to think differently. It challenges us to care and it forces us to see the world through the eyeballs of another human being. The act of doing that is immediately political because you have to take in the world from someone else's perspective, and biases, and joys, and fears. I love how literature forces me to consider the world anew.

AW: Alexander Chee has said that "writing fiction is an exercise in giving a shit—an exercise in finding out what you really care about." With several books under your belt, have you figured out, or distilled, what you really care about?

PH: Oh, wow, what a great question. A complicated one, too.

Writers tend to orbit around the same issues and approach them from different angles in different books. I'm deeply interested in how the forces of hatred and racism can turn into violence, and I feel a responsibility to help readers understand the Holocaust better. How we remember the past matters to me and I'm drawn to the idea that previous generations aren't that much different from us. I care about cheating time and hauling the past into the present so that we might understand a particular era better, and maybe placing it into dialogue with our own concerns and values. That idea of "giving a shit"…if the writer cares, the reader will probably care too. We tell beginning writers to "find their voice" and while that's important, it's equally necessary to find out what you care about. Intellectual passion matters in writing. It's the energy that propels narrative.

AW: One of the most moving passages in your previous novel, *The Commandant of Lubizec*, comes right before a group of prisoners decide to attempt escape.

> *"…As much as the guards wanted these prisoners to be faceless and anonymous, the very opposite was true. The prisoners were all individuals. Some had freckles. Others had crooked teeth…Many of the prisoners had ghostly pink indents on their fingers where a wedding ring once sat. Such a thing proved that they were beloved, once…At some point in time, the hot words of love had been whispered into their ears, and once, long ago, in what seemed like another life, they had all been the center of someone else's universe. They were the sun. They were the stars and light. They were the molecules of God himself."*

In much of your work, fictional characters are given all the careful specificity and individuality of real people, until we feel that we know them. Why do you undertake this painstaking work, and why do you think it's important?

PH: In order to write about a death camp, I knew that hundreds of minor characters would vanish into the gas chamber and never be seen again. But of course, they weren't minor characters in their own lives. These were people just like you and me. During these scenes of mass murder, I wanted the reader to feel wounded that they were being taken from us. I wanted the reader to gasp at the monumental injustice of it all and see these people as fully realized lives. That's the thing about genocide: it's often viewed just as statistics, and I didn't want that for *The Commandant of Lubizec*. I think that's one reason why it's made such a connection with readers. They see people dying in my novel—not numbers—people.

There's a chapter called "Numbers" in *The Commandant* where all of these innocent souls are being forced to run towards the gas chamber and, in each case, I wrote pages of notes on who was in that crowd. My feeling was that if I didn't care about these characters, than how would the reader care about them? In nearly every case, I had more information on these individuals than I put into the novel. I needed to see each of them, and I refused to make them faceless. That's what the Nazis did. I wanted to see people—mothers, wives, fathers, uncles, piano players, poets, plumbers, book store owners, rabbis, children. They all had lives. And those lives were stolen from them.

Present-day site of the crematorium at Dora-Mittelbau, where over 20,000 souls were lost. Photo by Patrick Hicks.

AW: How do you maintain perspective, and avoid slipping into despair – if that is possible – when writing about and studying the Holocaust?

(I keep thinking of the way Eli tells himself, "All is well. Yes, all is well," to cope with the constant threat and strain. Has such an intense working relationship with one of the darkest parts of human history ever felt like too much?)

PH: I've done research at ten camps now and…sometimes I feel too close to the Holocaust. When this happens, I back up and focus on the goodness around me. It's always there though, hanging darkly in my imagination. For example, whenever I see the Yankees play baseball on television, their striped uniforms remind me of the prisoners at Auschwitz. Or whenever I see freight trains clattering across the prairie, I think of

Poland. The same goes for smokestacks or crowds shuffling in the same direction. I teach at Augustana University, which is abbreviated on t-shirts as AU. That's what Auschwitz was abbreviated to. AU. *Konzentrationslager Auschwitz*. KZ AU. If you go to Auschwitz today, you can see that stamped onto certain items. I don't know…the Holocaust flits through my brain all the time. At least I'm removed from it by the safety of several decades. How on earth do survivors cope with what they saw? How?

AW: Oh, wow – I never thought that about the Yankees uniforms, and I don't know enough about the Holocaust to have picked up on the AU reference – but if I had studied it as much as you have, I can see how it might permeate all my perceptions. Like you, I have no idea how survivors are or were able to cope with what they have seen.

Which leads me to my next question, in the hope that we have learned from history: A common refrain, under the current presidential administration, is that many of its messages smack of fascism, or sound eerily authoritarian, or seem to endorse white supremacy. As a scholar of one of the worst eras of white supremacy and genocide human history has known, do these claims ring true for you?

PH: The Trump Administration is one of the most corrupt and reprehensible in our nation's history. He is certainly a damaged human being who is a racist, a misogynist, and his narcissism—not to mention his unmoored relationship to the truth—all make him an ideal candidate for dictatorial aspirations. This is a man who does not like criticism and demands absolute loyalty. I have no doubt he will go down in American history as a thug and villain to our democracy. After studying white supremacy and fascism for so long, Donald Trump's language has disturbing echoes with what happened in the Third Reich for sure. These comparisons can only be taken so far, though. Trump's political savvy and acumen is thankfully well below Hitler's own rise to power, and I take

comfort in the fact that, unlike Hitler, Trump does not have a private army like the SA or SS at his command.

While I'm concerned about the state of our republic, the majority of Americans reject Trump's toxic viewpoints. We also don't yet have widespread political violence in the streets with men chanting his name and beating up bystanders. If that happens—if something like Charlottesville happens regularly and routinely—that's when the claims of Trump being like Hitler take on a more ominous and deadly tone. Nazism was forged in the furnace of post-Great War Europe. Germany wanted a strong leader in the 1930s. Americans? Our nation was founded on rebellion. Sooner or later Trump will be tossed aside. Until that happens, it's good to study how one man came to power in Germany and what his dark charisma unleashed. One of my favorite quotes is from John Fowles's novel, *The Magus*. In it, he says that the tragedy of the Third Reich is "not that one man had the courage to be evil. But that millions had not the courage to be good."

It's necessary to keep such things in mind. Raise your voice. Get out there. Demonstrate. Vote. Our nation is greater than one man.

AW: Finally: I am a huge fan of your collection of poetry, *Adoptable*, about the building of your family: your wife and your sweet son Sean, adopted from South Korea. Each of these poems is so tender, so lovingly observant. You talk about your son's arrival, as a toddler, and his initial terror; his mastery of the English language; and you imagine very movingly the birth mother who surrendered him mere hours into his life.

You write:

"what catches my eye is the gap

between when he burrowed into this world,
and when he was given to an orphanage.

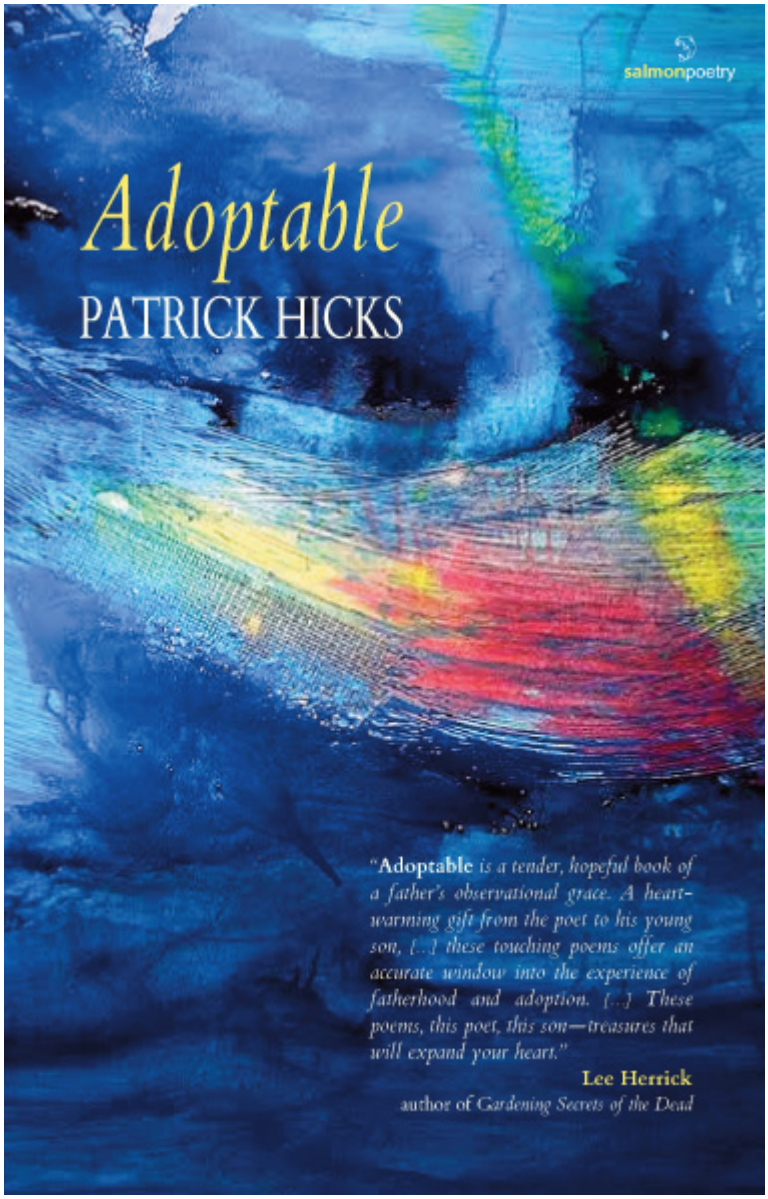
In these missing hours, I imagine his birth mother
cupping the grapefruit softness of his head.

She breathes in his scent,
kisses his nose, memorizes

the topography of his face.
And then, reluctantly,

she lets him go.”

You’re able to turn your remarkable empathy and gift of language to almost anyone you choose. Can you talk a little about your journey to fatherhood and how it has influenced your writing and your art?



PH: I'm so happy we're ending on this note, a note of love. I also want to thank you for these thoughtful questions, Andria. It's been a fun conversation.

I wrote *Adoptable* at the same time that I wrote *The Commandant of Lubizec*, and although I didn't realize it back then, I really needed to do this. I couldn't write about the Holocaust without occasionally turning away to focus on the good things in my life. Adoption is complicated and beautiful and messy and confusing. My son will have plenty of questions about his birth country and his birth family—I won't be able to answer these questions—but I'm looking forward to walking next to him as he searches. Aside from all the normal things a father worries about, I'm also thinking about racial issues, and belonging, and what it means to be an American. Since becoming a dad, I've realized all those clichés about being a parent are true. They exist for a reason. *The toughest job you'll ever love. Being a parent changes you forever. You don't know love until you have a kid.* They're all true, at least for me.

I sometime wonder what my son will make of my writing when he's older. One of the reasons I wrote *Adoptable* is because I wanted to capture the forgettable moments of his childhood—the day to day stuff. He already has huge missing pieces about background, so the least I could do was write about things he did as a toddler and try to explain how much we love him.

Being a parent has changed me as a writer for sure. I'm now totally aware that my need to write means that I'm *not* spending time with him. When you're single it's okay to be selfish and lock yourself in an office but, when you've got a child, that compulsion to get ideas onto the page takes on a new dimension. I'm a more focused writer now. I don't flaff around like I used to. My writing time is more intense and disciplined. And when I *do* write about the Holocaust, I now see all of my characters as someone else's child. I see the timeline of a single life more sharply. Maybe it helps me to remember how fleeting our time on this planet really is. And,

when I think about how temporary our bodies really are, it makes the crime of genocide all the more monstrous, all the more important to write about.

"All. art. is. political:" An interview with Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales

Our two featured poems for the month are selections from Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales's anthology, *Pulse/Pulso: In Remembrance of Orlando*. Here, WBT editor Andria Williams interviews the two editors about this unique, gorgeous, and necessary passion project. As Morales describes,

> *The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.*

ANDRIA WILLIAMS: Roy, one entry point into this discussion might be to start with your 2016 poem, "Restored Mural for Orlando." The poem is beautiful and gutting. You have a masterful way of building the emotional investment with each turn, opening with the shooting itself, and then moving into a fond, pragmatic, and even tenderly humorous portrait of your family on vacation in Orlando. On that trip, you reflect that Orlando is where kids go to "fantasize about the childhood [they] didn't have;" you're surprised by the sight of your mother on a rollercoaster ("because she's always been ashamed of her weight"), and note somewhat humorously that your

parents ended up “buying a timeshare by mistake/ not really by mistake….”

As a non-poet but a fiction writer, I was simply impressed by the way you allow the “character” of yourself to guide us through the poem, which somehow, almost counter-intuitively, increases the intensity.

Can you talk a little more about the myth of Orlando for you, as a child, and how this mythos worked its way into your thoughts about the tragedy?

ROY G. GUZMÁN: First of all, thank you for your generous reading of my poem and, as a fiction writer, for noticing these rich aspects about the poem. I think one of the most important things I had to negotiate during the writing this poem was my position in all of this. I kept returning to that image of the club, to the colors, to what the victims and survivors might have been wearing, to the sounds. Those sensory details invited me into that space, but I had to figure out what I’d be doing in the reimagining of that space. I had to turn the gaze on myself. That is when a lot of these autobiographical details suddenly became important to my approach to the poem. I had to honor the victims and I had to be as clear as possible about my relationship to Orlando. As someone who grew up in Florida, I was affected in so many ways.

Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Roy G. Guzmán.

The mythos of Orlando was important for me to talk about. I can’t remember how many times my friends and I would just drive up from Miami and stay in a hotel and do all kinds of stupid things. Most of us were teenagers. I probably went to Orlando a few times before I even set foot in Disney World. The timeshare event affected my family and me greatly. I’d just gotten my first job out of college and I wanted to treat my parents to something meaningful. I remember being in the info session for that timeshare and running all kinds of

figures in my head to possibly work out this possibility. Obviously, I was naive and the people running the info session took advantage of that with false promises. Till this day my mom tells my stepdad and me that she never wanted to sign that contract, that we pushed her to. And she's right.

2) AW:

In "Restored Mural for Orlando," you write:

"I am afraid of attending places
that celebrate our bodies because that's also where our bodies have been cancelled / when you're brown & gay you're always dying
twice"

What was the particular importance to you of publishing an anthology – specifically of Latinx and LGBTQ+ writers – about the shooting?

In their poem "straight partner of ten years and anyone else," Nicole Oquendo writes,

"do not erase my grief. there is a galaxy of this
spreading out inside my chest."

Did you feel that the stories, the grief, of members of your community were not being heard in the aftermath of the shooting?

RG: We were totally not being heard. We still aren't. It's appalling how that's always the case when tragedies affect marginalized communities. Again and again we see scholars and researchers build careers out of Black and brown pain, and whatever money they make hardly ever makes it back to our communities. This year, for instance, marked the second anniversary of the massacre. Instead of promoting queer and trans voices of color that responded with care and tact, most of the writing community decided to promote another cis white

writer and what they've written about others' pain or how they want to make the world a better place. I'm tired of this pattern. It's enough to make me feel cynical. But we're told to shut up and be grateful we're still alive. That's what the writers in this anthology are trying to resist.

MIGUEL M. MORALES: Pulse affected us all in ways we'll be discovering for years to come. QTPOC weren't being heard before the shooting, in the aftermath,or even today. But just because we aren't being heard doesn't mean our voices aren't out there.

QTPOC communities across the country immediately felt connected to the shooting because so many times we've been relegated to the occasional "Latin Night" and even then, those spaces are filled with others trying to excoticize or fetishize us. No matter how comfortable we try to make those spaces, we are still being policed, attacked, and victimized. But through it all, we always – *always* – have each other. Honestly, it hurt to see so many commemorations of Pulse exclude our voices but we did what we always do, we buried our dead and made our own space. That's what we wanted to convey with *Pulse/Pulso*, we have each other.

3) AW: Miguel, I know that you grew up in Texas and worked as a migrant farmworker beginning quite early in your childhood, that you lead writing workshops for farmworkers in Missouri and Kansas, and that you're also an accomplished poet and fiction writer. Can you talk about how you initially connected with Roy to work on the Pulse/Pulso anthology, and about your own passion for the project?)

Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Miguel M. Morales.

MM: I followed Roy on social media, but we didn't interact much. Not long after the Pulse shooting, my friend and poetry sister, Sarah A. Chavez, asked if I knew Roy because he had a piece about Pulse that was going viral on the internet. It was "Restored Mural for Orlando" and I didn't even finish reading it before I sent him a message thanking him for the piece. We began chatting and I shared with him how I wished someone would put together an anthology of brown queer voices responding to Pulse. That's when he said a press approached him about doing that very thing. He said he was wary because he wasn't sure how much he could commit to it because he was in school. But, like me, he wanted something to happen. I'm not sure who brought up the collaboration first but it was obvious that we were meant to work on this together.

Many of us endured sustained losses of loved ones during the AIDS crisis of the ’90s. Some of us have never come to terms with those losses. I didn’t want that to happen with Pulse. All I could think about in those first hours and days after the shooting were of the names of the victims. I wasn’t prepared for how similar they would look and sound to the names of people I loved. I had to do something even if it was simply to encourage/nag/beg action from more accomplished Latinx writers. As with most forms of activism and leadership, it didn’t come down to big names. It came down to us.

Everyone in this book stepped up when presented with the opportunity to honor the victims. Each of us relied on family, friends, and strangers for help. The enduring legacy of Pulse and of the lives lost is not of grief but of gratitude for the communities that sprung up across the country in the aftermath. The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.

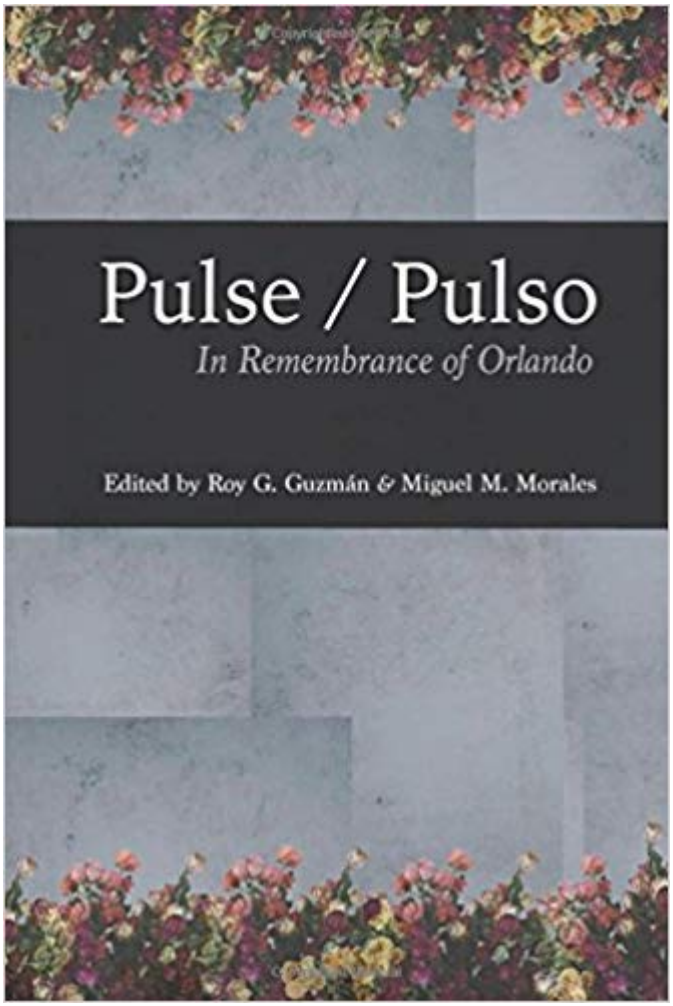
4) AW: I love the variety of the poems in Pulse/Pulso; some are quiet and sad; others, like Maya Chinchilla’s “Church at Night,” has moments that I would love to hear performed out loud (“Queerly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life….”) How did you decide how and where to place the pieces? Did an order reveal itself as you were editing, or was it more like fitting puzzle pieces together at the end?

RG: The organization of the anthology felt very natural in how it came together. As we accepted pieces, we’d add them to a file. I remember mixing a lot of these pieces and not thinking much about order. What was interesting is when Miguel and I came back to the document, months later, and found that somehow the order we’d put the work in worked. We came up with a lot of reasons for why Chinchilla’s “Church at Night” would

go where it ended up and, for instance, why Chen’s work appears where it does. I’d like to believe something greater than us helped us with that order.

MM:I don’t remember us officially having to plan out the order, much less have a disagreement on the pieces we selected. It’s easy for editing teams to agree on which pieces make it into a collection. What really tests the team is when they come to pieces on which they disagree. I was waiting for us to have that disagreement but it didn’t happen. I think that’s because we stayed focused on honoring Pulse and while there are some pieces I wish had made it into the collection, I’m extremely happy with what we curated.

From the beginning, Roy and I worked to have our submissions include new, emerging, and established QTPOC voices. We worked even harder to make sure those voices filled the anthology. Of course we had to examine those terms because someone like Joe Jimenez is seen as emerging but many of us in the community know Joe as an established voice. And since we put out the call in 2016, some of the people who submitted have since become important and emerging voices. We also included writers who have never submitted work anywhere. Including them was essential to the tone of what we wanted to reflect. I’m so proud of everyone who submitted work whether it made it into the anthology or not. They all helped shape *Pulse/Pulso* into what it is.



5) AW: Julia Leslie Guarch's poem, "Shh. Shh. Be Quiet" uses the last text messages of victim Eddie Jamoldroy Justice, sent to his mother as he hid from the shooter in a bathroom. ("Mommy I love you./ He's coming. Im going to die.") The effect is brutal. But such messages have also become familiar, as one public shooting after another rocks the US. How do you think Orlando fits into the larger discussion of gun violence in this country?

MM: It is clear that so many of us, especially QTPOC, are not safe living our lives, telling our stories, dancing in clubs, shopping, walking, driving, standing, sitting, praying, laughing, or breathing. Gun violence is the focus of so many these days due to the immediate and imminent threat of death that it poses, and it should be. We have to shut that shit down. Gun violence is violence.

The Pulse shooting is just another example, though a rare and

extreme one, of the violence queer people, especially queer/trans people of color, face daily. Violence against us is dismissed by the authorities and eventually even by ourselves. Trans women are being slaughtered. Our vulnerable queer youth and queer elderly face violence and threats by those who are supposed to take care of them. We are targeted for sexual violence and other forms of sexual assault that go unreported, unacknowledged, and unrecognized.

In some places queer people are not legally safe in our workplaces or walking down the street or using a public restroom or in our homes. And even in the places where we are legally protected, we're still not safe.

I am not attempting to dismiss the loss of the 49 lives and the injuries of the 53 others that happened on June 12, 2016. I'm saying that our survival is much larger than gun violence. If we only focus on bullets, we ignore the beatings, the bashings, the bullying, and hundreds of other ways the blood of LGBTQIA+ people is spilled every moment of everyday. Ignoring these forms of "everyday" violence gave permission to perpetrate the violence that happened at Pulse.

6) AW: Roy, in an interview in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, you have said, "[Intersections of identity] are something that unfortunately in the U.S. [do] not get to exist simultaneously. Either people want you to wave the immigrant flag and that's it, or wave the student flag, or wave the poet flag, and a lot of institutions prevent people from having all these different identities coexist. And for me it's like, because I exist, I exist already within all these different identities."

Can you speak a little more about this? Do you have any insights into how this problem might have developed, and whether any progress is on the horizon?

RG: Thank you for bringing me back to what I said in that

interview—for which I remain grateful. I just got back from a research trip in Honduras, so a lot of what I experienced there is going to speak to how I respond to these particular questions. I find that a system built on colonization, classification, surveillance, torture, and power is going to want to control and stratify identity. Although I noticed these problems in Honduras, in a place like the United States, where people care so much about individuality and wealth, you can't have layers of gray. Complexity isn't valued because American society wants the world to speak only American English. Privilege isn't recognized when people obfuscate different levels of hardship. Something that gives me lots of joy is seeing Black women, for instance, run their own successful businesses. But immigrants, at least those from Central America, are still treated like disposables. Our laws continue to see us as barbaric, social leeches, and unable to govern ourselves. The progress I want to see happen has truly yet to come.

7) AW: Miguel, you had a fantastic poem, "This is a Migrant Poem," a couple of years back in Vol. 29 of *The Green Mountains Review.*

"This poem is a gift of a strong back, of sturdy legs,
of silence, of patience.

And a never-ending work ethic
a never ending work ethic
a never ending work of ethics."

We are, as a nation, failing to deal ethically with people trying to enter this country, and now are being led by an administration that seems obsessed with and increasingly hostile to immigrants altogether. Can you talk a little about your understanding of the "zero-tolerance" policy, the effects you've seen? Has it been hard to keep writing and making art in a national climate that's this openly hostile, or do you

feel that the hostility has always been there and it's only the openness that has changed?

MM: I grew up in Texas but I live in Kansas. While the first is a border state, the second acts like it is. They are remarkably similar in their geography and in their approach to immigration and to those they regard as "others." Kansas is one of the states receiving migrant children forcibly separated from their parents at the southern U.S. border. Like any other community we are doing our best to keep eyes and ears on these children, hold each other up, and push back against those who advocate for this monstrous policy and shame the cowards who keep silent.

Because hate and hostility have always been there, and will always be there, the Latinx community has learned to pick and choose its battles. Though now we're facing what we thought was far behind us – emboldened, willful, vile ignorance and an increase in extreme anti-brown violence. As an artist, it's hard to find the moments to create in this environment. But I came of age in the AIDS activism of the 90s and that oppressive, destructive, and deadly time gave us some of the most powerful and creative moments in queer history. That's the challenge Latinx artists, and all artists, face in these exponential series of crises. We're also learning to embrace our anger and our rage. We're channeling it into something positive.

8) AW: Miguel, in a 2014 blog post, after the Ferguson riots in St. Louis, you wrote

"…. there is… beauty in pain. We … have a gift and sometimes that gift requires sitting in our pain, processing it, and putting it through the artist's lens.

It means taking what's inside our hearts, inside our heads and on our tongues and putting it in words, on canvas, or in clay – that's our ability, our gift. It's our super power. In doing

so, we can help others process their feelings. We can stand as examples to young people on creative ways to deal with these difficult emotions that make so many turn to, and live in, rage or to simply shut down.”

I’d like to close with [both of] your thoughts on what it means to write with a political consciousness. What does political art achieve when it is doing what it does best?

MM: All. art. is. political.

People who say otherwise speak from a place of invested privilege where their politics are so deeply inherent that their positions are seen as default and apolitical. Those individuals are deluding themselves and desperately want to conscript you into any and all efforts sanctioning that delusion.

For me, art has the most impact when it meets and merges with activism. As artists, we are tasked with holding a mirror up to society. We reflect its darkness as well as its beauty. Right now, in this moment, we have an abundance of both. Every artist strives for the apex of creativity. We are there. We are standing in a vulnerable sacred space that comes along once in a generation. We just have to be bold.

RG: I’ve been writing poetry consistently for about 6-7 years, though I’ve been reading it for much longer than that. Most of my first poems primarily came from restlessness and a need to heal. I’m not sure how much has changed for me since. I think the best art operates between imminence, urgency, and compassion, as the works in this anthology claim. However, I strongly believe that any kind of embodiment must begin away from the page. If you are not doing the work your words claim you do, then it’s hard for that work to connect with readers. It’s hard for you to even connect with what you’re talking about. I’m not implying that fiction writers engage in fiction

because they themselves can't do the work urged by their words; on the contrary, the best fiction does not come from the "best gaze" but from the best embodiment of those words. You can't claim community if you've never provided community for others. If we are saying that all art is political, what we are also saying is that our words carry all kinds of responsibilities and possibilities.

One time I met with author Jeanette Winterson and she said that anything she writes, regardless of the genre, is an extension of herself, a preoccupation she wants to unpack, the self wanting to grow and learn.

I think about that often. How do we want to grow? What are we consuming? When will you be ready to give back?

New Poetry from Nicole Oquendo and James A.H. White

The following poems are reprinted with permission from the anthology *Pulse/Pulso: In Remembrance of Orlando* (Damaged Goods Press 2018), edited by Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales.

to be born

by Nicole Oquendo

my spine is queer, curved enough
to hold me up while the news bends

and sways us. every day we die, and
one day it will be me, though statistically,
according to these headlines,
it’s more likely to happen soon.

but there’s new life to look forward to.
last year, my family taught me how
to press my chest and sculpt my own form.
i make love now by giving and taking in equal measure.
my brothers and sisters and those in between
see me standing next to them, signing all of my names.

Stained Glass

by James A.H. White

Fifty—the number of years my mother has lived. The number of paper clips currently interlocked in a small tin bucket on my work desk. According to motivational speaker Gail Blanke, the number of physical and emotional ties you should throw out of your life in order to find it again.

Some say many of them knew each other. It's often like that in our community. It's often like that in a nightclub. We recognize each other. There's no darkness dark enough to interrupt that.

The Orange County Medical Examiner's Office, with assistance from Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System, identified, notified, autopsied (if needed) and released all bodies to next of kin within 72 hours of the incident. That is, all but one victim, whose father wouldn't claim his gay son.

Phonesthesia is the term for sound symbolism, or, relating shapes to sounds. I see shame played like tetherball, see it shaped like the tennis ball as it flies, bound, around that metal pole, hear it on the slap of the child's open hand or deeper-chorused fist. I see shame falling on that victim's burial like the kind of rainstorm written into movie scripts—dark and heavy. I think of it registering unfairly on the faces of the closeted's families when they saw their loved one's body and recognized it for the first time.

An installation at Chicago’s Contemporary Art Museum featured a row of bodies lined
across a gallery and blanketed by white sheets that peaked at the noses and toes hidden
but assumed molded beneath. A girl nearby says it all makes her sleepy before she falls
to the floor and pretends to sleep—like the dead. On the morning of the shooting, I
think of my brothers and sisters inside, not lined but scattered, sleep I imagine made
clearer to the young as something much nearer, perhaps much whiter.

I break down hearing about the group that hid in the bathroom but were found then
fired on, a couple in a stall injured not only by bullets but shrapnel from the wall and
door. Suppose the bathroom stall like a closet. Do you remember huddling? How about
holding onto yourself beneath a traditional Jibarro straw hat or flower bonnet? How
long did you wait before the car horn outside announced it had come to take you out
dancing?