New Poetry from Jacqlyn Cope: “Mission 376: Patient X,” “Prolonged Exposure Therapy,” “Doxies and Rum”

THERE’S EARTH INSIDE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

MISSION 376: PATIENT X

There’s dirt in his mouth now

you

know that for sure.

There’s Earth inside his bloated belly

you

know that for sure.

The worms might have eaten away his ragged skin by now

but the metal is still there.

Splayed on the satin or cotton lining

like sad coins of a wishing well.

His casket might be oak, or cherry wood

you hope it was something sleek

and aesthetically pleasing

you hope the flag was soft enough

for hands and cheeks that needed touching.

PROLONGED EXPOSURE THERAPY

Ten minutes staring at
a fountain pen stabbing,
scribbling paper.

A rocket hit a concrete wall
I told her.

Water spots on bifocal glasses
blurring iris’s, flickering like
burnt out pixels on a screen.

A desk placard bolded
with professional credentials
hooraying the study of mental illness.

A rocket hit a concrete wall and

Tic-tacs shaking in my red purse
snapping the container at its neck
revealing the candied-mint nonsense
delaying my esophagus to stretch
in the direction of answer.

A rocket hit a C-130 fuel tank spraying
shrapnel

Her voice dives
down into the depths
of her vocal cords
pulling out
forced tonal sympathy
an octave of care.

If
you'd like, I can prescribe you Zoloft today.

The rocket hit a concrete wall
the metal
a rocket
hit
the fuel tank
a concrete
w
a
l
l

DOXIES AND RUM

My Dachshund

watches me pour

my

third

rum and
Coke.

His
bowed legs sit

firmly
under

his robust

chocolate colored
chest.

Eyes
beaming

not
in judgment

but acceptance.

Captain
Morgan’s

leg
swung firmly

resting on
a barrel

he winks, opens his mouth

and
howls a whistling screech

a
rocket’s screech.

A
hand over his mouth

I quiet
him.

Pouring
the rest in the empty glass

the
ice breaks up

dissolving
into

themselves.

Spice,
sugar, caramel,

washes away the
dryness in my throat

and
salt from the sinuses stuck there.

Salt that I refuse

to expel

any
natural way.

My Doxie jumps on
my lap

smelling
distinctly of corn chips

for
no reason at all.

He rests his head
in the crevice

of my arm

sighing deeper

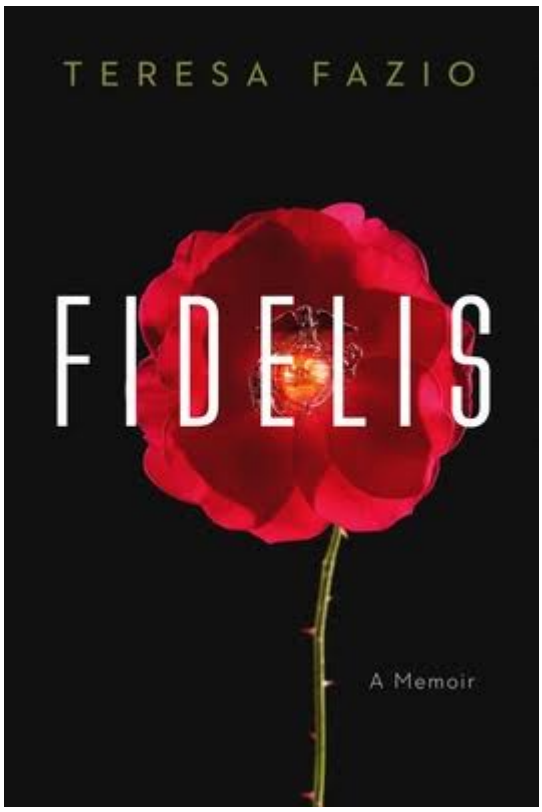
than
I thought he could.

Loyal to the Corps: A Review of Teresa Fazio's 'Fidelis'

The motto of the U.S. Marine Corps, or USMC, is "Semper Fidelis." Commonly translated to "always faithful," the motto—adopted in 1883 upon the urging of Colonel Charles McCawley, 8th commandant of the Marine Corps—replaced earlier mottos, including "with courage" and "by sea, by land."

The definition of the motto and what it "means" to be a Marine is different for different people, and almost never exactly what one probably thinks from the outside looking in. Now commonly shortened to "Semper Fi" by Marines, the motto and its history bear testament to the essentially arbitrary way in which rules are enforced not only in and by the USMC, but by and in American society, as well. After all, "Semper Fi" means

“always fi,” in Latin—fi means nothing, it’s a nonsensical term. Taken at face value, the reduction of a motto to shorthand underlines the motto’s essential mutability. Faithful… to what? Each other, the constitution, the president? Always… since 1883?



Meaning, as every adult understands, is highly contextual. This essential truth underlines most modernist and all post-modernist art and literature. When one takes the changeable truth of life and runs it through a harsh and dogmatic set of ideals, the resulting psychical energy is sufficiently powerful to drive some people to superhuman acts of discipline, in the name of honor and self-respect, and this is very useful when fighting a dedicated enemy. It drives almost everyone else mad, according to the extent to which they failed to live up to those ideals. Some rationalize their misbehavior, building up elaborate personal philosophies to justify their actions. Others descend into pessimism and become jaded.

Teresa Fazio is a proud former Marine, and her war

memoir—*Fidelis*—grapples with that mutability at the heart of everyday life, and her own efforts to live up to ideals. It is a top rate book about war, and how serving in the Marines requires great reservoirs of emotional energy under normal circumstances, but especially on deployment to Iraq. It will resonate with anyone who has served in the military. *Fidelis* may even give military leaders something to think about when it comes to setting and enforcing rules.

The story begins with Fazio's difficult family background—a household broken by infidelity, and an abusive stepfather, the type of situation that breaks many people down and ruins their potential before they have a chance to properly begin their lives. The setting did not break Fazio. Instead, she discovered great reservoirs of personal forbearance that complemented an aptitude for science. She put herself through MIT on a Marine Corps ROTC scholarship. She also learned early to rely on herself to succeed and overcome obstacles in an effort to achieve independence in two worlds dominated by men, first, that of science, then, that of the military.

One of the threads that Fazio follows from her childhood through the military and then afterwards is her complicated relationship with femininity. Growing up, she seems to see in her mother's adultery a kind of moral hazard specific to women, and this feeling is reinforced by the masculine circles in which she moves. It takes time and great effort for Fazio to overcome this inherent bias against her own identity as a woman, both in her own estimation and from others. The parts of her memoir that deal with this question are unsparingly honest.

Once in the military, Fazio proves herself a competent leader whose attention to detail makes her ideally suited to ensuring that communications for a Battalion-sized fort ran smoothly. The war intrudes in the form of dead bodies from outside the wire, and also mortar attacks, one of which nearly ends her life. Nevertheless, Fazio's greatest challenge arrives in the

form of a man—a much older, and (not incidentally) married man, who seduces her in Iraq, and with whom she sleeps after the deployment. Far more troubling to Fazio than the embarrassment of having fallen for a manipulative adulterer is her violation of two codes: her personal code, which depended on a lifelong repudiation of using femininity to gain any advantage (in this case, the attention of a man), and her violation of her expectations of herself as an officer and a Marine.

Above all, *Fidelis* is a memoir of endurance; a story about how a person can bear up under the weight of external and internal expectations. The prose is spare and straightforward, assembled carefully, attentively, and in a way that drives the reader forward sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter all the way to the end. Capable of being experienced in a weekend, or even over the course of a single day, at 215 pages, *Fidelis* is, like Fazio's deployment, intense.

The story is also filled with moments of understated wit, such as when she describes the midnight runs necessitated by a shift schedule that required her to stay awake at night:

Before midnight, I ran on the rough gravel roads, carrying a flashlight so trucks could spot me. Even with its bouncing beam, I could hardly see five feet ahead, and I tripped over concrete chunks, bruising my knees through OCS-issued sweats. I got up and kept running. Head- lights higher than my head screamed toward me, and I scrambled off-road to avoid them. Trucks roared past, carrying water or sewage to or away from this place; I couldn't tell. I turned around and jogged back for a freezing shower.

Of a rebound relationship, "if I squinted, it looked like love." Of the internet and cell phones, technology made it easier to talk, but not to connect."

According to Fazio, and the strict rules of the Corps, in helping a married man cheat, Fazio failed to live up to its standards of behavior. But she was surrounded by people who were skirting the system—drinking on deployment, cutting corners, focused on their own happiness and well-being first, before that of the corps. Not, in other words, being *Semper Fidelis.*

This is one of Fazio's greatest accomplishments: she remains essentially optimistic, loyal to the Corps and to her memory of the military. In spite of the failure of various Marines to live up to the ideals of the Corps, in spite of her own inability to reach perfection, Fazio carries out her assigned duties faithfully. Making an error, even one that consumes a substantial portion of one's energy and attention, does not define an individual, and although Fazio's error was apparent to her at the time and since, this aspect of her life does not capture her essence any more than it captures the essence of any human. The experience could easily have ruined her as an officer and a human, embittering her and turning her toward cynicism – but she must have been a competent and caring officer, and earning a PhD at Columbia after leaving the military establishes her bona fides as an intelligent and steadfast worker.

In writing *Fidelis*, Fazio more than makes up for her in retrospect understandable transgressions, by offering aspiring young men and women a realistic and expertly-written account of what it's like to go to war. Her unprepossessing prose, dry humor, and faithful rendition of the trials and temptations faced by deploying women should be read by anyone curious about what it was like to be a woman in the Marine Corps.

New Fiction from Henry Kronk: “We Found Out”

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Could be an ambush.”

“Could be.”

“But here? The corps is miles back.”

“Looks like it broke down.”

It was true. Steam trailed through the windows in the engine. Driggs could see the shimmer of heat from the stack all this way o without the binos. The tracks went through a wooded stretch, but the high desert loomed o in the distance and vegetation grew sparse. They could see intermittent open stretches along a length of the train. And in those stretches, no cigarettes burned, no bayonets glinted, no enemy moved. Not that Driggs could see.

“Let’s take a look.”

“Let’s report back to Captain first.”

Driggs looked from Cote’s left eye across her freckled nose to her right and back to her left. Cote gazed, unblinking, back. She broke the silence.

“You know about Captain’s and Donwalla’s beef. You were at muster this morning. You were standing right next to me when he leaned in with his pink cheeks and spat in my face. Shouldn’t be wearing my SSI for the 3rd Rangers? Are you shitting me? After what happened? Driggs, the man doesn’t trust us. He doesn’t like us. He has no faith in us. Until we

do something about that, we’re on our own.”

Cote had been blessed with the gifts of persuasion. Driggs had been wary of this fact since soldier onlining in Tacoma. Despite the war, one night she had gotten her hands on a bottle of whiskey. When half of it was gone, she then had talked Driggs into climbing one of the base’s mobile towers. From the top, they could see Mt. Rainier in the moonlight and, to the north, the remnants of Seattle still smoldering.

“The Janks could be back any minute,” Cote broke in again. “If we take this back to Captain, he’ll chew us out for not taking a closer look. And then he’ll round up a half dozen more experienced rangers and investigate. And if—if—this freighter is still around when they come back in a couple hours, they’re going to keep all the scotch and cigars they find for themselves.”

Driggs twitched. Cote chewed a twig and stared o at the train. It didn’t resemble any commuters or freights he’d seen. It was black and dilapidated. It looked like the trains from the pictures he’d seen in his history textbook.

Finally, he spat. “Ok, we take a closer look. And then we report back.”

Driggs scrambled down the blu face after Cote. He jumped the last ten feet and skidded through the scree. The two rangers made their way forward, hugging the red pines and stopping every 100 yards to listen and scan. Only hawk calls broke the silence, along with their own footsteps, which were impossible to stifle on the tinder-dry pine needles.

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Whenever the sirens used to blow and they sheltered in their basement, Driggs’ father would always tell him by the light of their LED lantern about how he took up smoking on the day of November 3rd, 2062.

“It was then that me and just about everyone else in Port Angeles knew for sure that the house was divided against itself,” he used to say. “You had President-Elect Morrison parading across screens and broadcasts, celebrating his 92% landslide victory over the so-called ‘Supreme Commander.’ We thought he was such a plushed-up load of wash—the ‘General’ or whatever else he was calling himself. He really showed us. Suddenly, everyone realizes we’re not hearing a chirp from regions all across the country. The Southwest, the Rockies, the Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic, Alaska, Florida, Maine—they all went dark. Nothing. 404 Error Page Not Found. Then we heard rumors about the transport and information sector sabotage, the round ups, the murders.

I walked to the corner store and asked for a pack and a lighter. Red Robert who owned the place knew all too well I was 14. He didn’t say a thing to me. Didn’t even look at me. He just kept staring at his screen.

I walked home, sat on the front porch, and I’ll always remember this: The Church of Latter Day Saints across the street, they’d put up a new sign a few days before. It said,

‘Free trip to Heaven! Details inside.’ I hated it and I loved it. I wanted to believe it. I wanted somewhere to escape to. I wanted faith. But all I had was a pack of smokes. I flicked my butts at that sign all afternoon.”

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There in the high desert, twelve years after his father had passed, Driggs remembered the last cigarette he had smoked with painful clarity. When the word got out that tobacco rations had been cut altogether three weeks back, he started measuring his supplies. He took out his three remaining packs from the waterproof pocket in the top of his rucksack. He lined the blank government issued labels side by side. Two were full, and four remained in the third. He took out two darts, lit them at the same time, and resigned himself to two a day for the next three weeks. Maybe by that time, things would change.

Six days and twelve cigarettes in, the Third Rangers made it over the Cascades and down onto the plains. Screening the movement of the main corps, his unit skirted the edge of the forest. Then they were ordered to scout ahead. Intelligence believed a Jank division sat camped some miles o and were backed up by guerrilla mountain people, no less.

At dusk, the corps was 10 miles back, and dark clouds began to pour over the foothills to the West like slow-flowing lava. Captain Donwalla ordered the rangers to camp. They posted sentries, ate a cold supper, and staked out their bivouacs for the night. Cote had wandered o to piss. When she came back, she told Driggs about a cave she’d found and how there was room for two. And then the rain started coming down by the gallon. Driggs gathered up his roll and followed her through the storm. It was some ways out and it took Cote ten minutes wandering around before she found it again. But a cave it was, and it was dry. The two laid out their rolls and soon were sound asleep.

They woke at first light, collected their things, and headed down the gentle slope. Mist hung just above the treetops. Their fellow rangers' shelters lay among the pines glistening from the rain.

"How about that," Cote said. "First ones up. Guess that proves Donwalla does sleep after all."

But as Driggs stepped beyond the next tree, his captain's eyes met him with a stare. He wheeled about in horror. Donwalla's high-and-tight head was pinned to the tree with a rebar stake. His body was nowhere to be seen.

Driggs ran over to the nearest bivvy and kicked it. No response. Same with the next. And the next. Looking closer, he saw knife cuts through the denier nylon.

"We need to get out of here," Driggs said to Cote, who was slumped down below Donwalla's head with her rifle raised.

"Cote!"

Cote held up her hand, and Driggs clammed up. He caught some movement at his 2:00. And then Cote's rifle went o and a body fell in the distance.

"Go," she whispered.

Shots responded. The instinct for survival lifted Driggs' feet with the momentum of generations, tipping him onward.

After they reported back to the Colonel, Driggs smoked every cigarette he had left. Their unit, the Third Rangers, which now numbered two, was dissolved and absorbed by the Fourth.

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They could see the train through the trees now and they began to smell the faint smell of death.

"Are those dogs barking?"

Driggs stopped walking and listened.

“Not dogs … vultures.”

They followed the sound and sure enough came upon the bodies of three horses beside the first car. After pausing for a few, the rangers approached.

They hadn’t been dead long. Their coats still gleamed and the few carrion birds that had arrived were only just beginning to battle over the choice spots. Driggs could see no apparent cause of death.

“If these horses just died, where’s the smell coming from?”

Cote shook her head. A trail of blood ran o toward the train. They followed it across the coupling and around the other side.

A Jank lay slumped against a wheel. He wore a moustache not unlike the one Driggs’ father used to grow. His bewildered eyes gazed up into the muzzles of Driggs’ and Cote’s rifles. With his left hand, he clutched his right arm. It had been severed o cleanly—surgically—below the elbow. His sand-colored uniform was stained crimson down one side.

“What happened?” Cote whispered.

The dying man raised his eyes.

“Do you have a cigarette?”

“No.” They said in unison.

His mouth went slack. And he lowered his gaze to the horizon.

“What happened?” Driggs said and nudged the dying man’s stump with his muzzle.

He gasped and, in racking breaths: “We—we—we—we …”

“We what?”

“We found … out.”

He used his last breath to say his last word. His left arm dropped and his head swung forward.

“Found out what?”

“Fuck knows. Check him and them.” Cote gestured to a distance away from the train where a half dozen dead Janks lay lined up in a neat row. “I’m going inside.”

Like the horses, none of these Janks bore any visible wounds. Driggs searched their khaki pockets. He found a locket holding the picture of a woman that could be a mother or a wife to the late wearer, a stained embroidered handkerchief, some worn polaroid porn, two journals, a deck of cards, fishing line and three lures, along with the six Jank regulation cantines, carbines, clasp knives, fire pods, watches, bivouacs, and extra rounds. The unit leader, one Captain Harrison, also carried a pair of binos, a compass, a spot device, and one melted ‘government’ issued Jank chocolate bar. Driggs tore open the package and shoved the melted bar in his mouth. He tightly closed his front teeth and slowly pulled the plastic out, trapping the chocolate within.

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When Driggs was 17, Jank guerrillas blew up the Port Angeles supply stockpile. He and most of the others started walking south towards Olympia. The rumors were that the Mounties at the Canadian border had orders to shoot migrants on sight. Still, some scraped supplies together and set off in boats hoping to land somewhere on Vancouver Island or to venture further north and seek shelter with the Haida.

With his father dead and his mother off running a field hospital somewhere around Fort Vancouver, he loaded up a

backpack and headed south alone. He walked from sunrise to sundown and on a little further, lighting the way with his headlamp. The road was full of others like himself.

When the sun rose the next morning, he carried on. Toward noon around Briedablick, Driggs found himself in open farm land, with the Olympic range framing the horizon. The road ran beside a river bordered by blackberry bushes and poplars. Two quads motored up towards him, traveling in the opposite direction. It was two shirtless boys with shapeless torsos, younger than Driggs. As they neared, they slowed, and then stopped ten feet away. One showed him his shotgun.

“You can stop right there.”

Driggs stopped.

“Put your pack on the ground and empty your pockets.”

“I don’t have any money or much of value. I’m heading to—“

“PUT your pack on the ground. And empty your pockets.”

One of the boys’ quads had a trailer fixed to it. Driggs saw other packs, suitcases, and miscellaneous gear in the back.

Then all three heard a ping followed by the sprinkling of glass. The left rearview mirror of the quad ridden by the boy with the shotgun had been shot off. A sandy-haired young woman wearing tan waders with a fishing net on her belt walked slowly up from the river bank with a rifle under her cheek.

“The next one is going through your ear if you don’t throw that shotgun down.”

The unarmed boy towing the load looked to his friend.

“Do it, Jackson.”

Jackson tossed his shotgun on to the pavement.

“Good job. Why don’t you go pick that up?” Driggs knew she was talking to him. He walked forward and grabbed the gun. The woman now hurried forward to face the boys.

“If it were olden days, I’d say you boys are going to hell, robbing refugees in times like this. But we’re past that now. I guess I’ll say you better think about how you treat your fellow humans, otherwise you’re bound to wind up dead. Get out of here.”

The boys fired up their quads without a word and rode them past. At last, the woman lowered her rifle.

“My name’s Cote.”

“Driggs.”

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“Driggs!”

He turned to see Cote’s head poking out the doorway of the engine.

“Come on and check this out.”

He sneezed as he entered the cloud of dust in the engine car. Cote had her undershirt up over her nose. It was hot; fuel still burned in the engine. A fine layer of dust covered the controls, the sills, every surface. It blew like smoke out into the car behind. The only marks in the dust were their own.

“Cote—what the…?”

“What?”

“What’s with the dust?”

“It was windy last night.”

“The windows are closed.”

“The door’s open.”

“This isn’t sand.”

“Whatever. Look at this.” Cote held a piece of a single piece of paper with a dull red seal at the bottom corner. “Can you read it?”

Driggs brought it into the light, but it was so heavily mildewed that the words had been all but completely obscured. He saw marks that looked like ‘□□□□.’

“Not a chance.”

They jumped out and headed to the next car. Driggs struggled to pull the iron latch down, and it creaked along the way. They needed to push together just to crack the door ajar. But the second they had it open, they were hit with a wave of aroma and moisture. Cote and Driggs climbed in to another world.

All was dark and dank; heavy and hard to breathe. Driggs had to sit down. An aisle ran down the center of the car and, on either side, there were dense rows of lush plants. Their green stretched out, down, and up toward the glass-paned ceiling.

Orange-purple flowers sprang from the gaps in the husky trunks and yellow fruit hung in bunches.

“What on earth …”

Driggs wandered closer. He’d never seen flowers like these. And now that he was close, he could smell the ripeness of the fruit. He picked o□ a bunch and brought them to his mouth, bit, chewed, and swallowed.

“Cote!”

“What the hell, Driggs?”

“Try this fruit!”

Cote grabbed her own bunch. A second passed.

“Jesus on a jet plane! That’s good!”

“Hehehe, pretty tasty, aren’t they?”

The laugh sounded a guttural baritone and echoed throughout the car. Driggs and Cote froze. In the corner, a dark figure rose from a sitting position in the shadows.

“FREEZE JANK.” Juice ran in a stream from Cote’s chin down on to the stock of her raised rifle.

The shadow raised its hands and spoke. “*Hinene*. There is no need, for I am unarmed.”

“Where is this train headed?”

The figure walked forward. He was tall and wore a black coat with tails. A black, brimmed hat hid his downturned face from view.

“The o□cial documents say Seattle, but its true destination is Vancouver, and on from there.”

“Seattle? But our forces are all the way south to Bend.”

“The present conflict between your state and your opponent’s state does not concern me.”

“Well then how’d you get all this fruit past the Jank inspectors?”

“They’re called chupas, and I have a few cards up my sleeve.”

“Are those cards Verified Greenbacks?”

“Hehehe oh no.”

“Why’d you break down?”

“I didn’t. I received word your forces have pulled up the tracks a few miles north. I just stopped.” He drew these final words out.

“Who are those Janks outside?”

“Part of a platoon from the Army of the Supreme Comander.”

“Why are they dead?”

“Why? Were you family?”

“No, but—“

“Why’s the engine so dusty?” Driggs’ voice cracked.

The figure paused, slowly turning his head. “I like it that way.”

“So, what is this? What—“ Cote paused. Her rifle dipped. “—what are you bringing north? Why are there a half a dozen dead bodies outside? It’s time to start making some sense here pal.”

“Why don’t you see for yourself?”

Driggs’ mouth opened wider. Cote stomped her foot.

“Whatever man. First, I want you to step forward. Driggs, go pat him down.”

When Driggs slapped the figure’s breast pocket, a hollow thud sounded. Out of it emerged an unopened pack of Marlboro Reds.

“Want a smoke?”

The figure raised his head to reveal a pale grin.

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Outside, his skin looked even paler. Nicotine washed over Driggs in gentle waves. Despite the heat and the black dress,

the man did not sweat.

“What’s your name?”

Cote had already finished her cigarette, after dragging furiously with it clenched between her teeth. She still held her rifle raised with both hands. The man o□ered her one more.

“You can call me Jo.”

“Where are you from?”

“Down south.”

Driggs finished his cigarette and took one more. They all smoked in silence down to the filter.

“Ok, let’s see the rest of the train.”

“Yes Private Cote. I have another car of the chupas here.” He gestured inside the following dank container. “Their root can be used to mix a psychedelic tea. Many find it heals a□ictions of the nerves and the mind. It can also serve as an undetectable poison in highly concentrated doses.”

Jo cracked the latch on the car and thrust it e□ortlessly open. Cote and Driggs followed him inside to the close air.

“Chupas have an amazing ability to regenerate if injured.”

He reached out and snapped o□ a green outgrowth.

“And their shoots make for an excellent salad addition.”

He popped it in his mouth.

“Look.”

Driggs and Cote bent close. In the place where the shoot had grown, already another young outgrowth had emerged to replace it.

“I love these organisms for their structure. Human society for centuries now has prized and supported the lone individual, The Napoleons, the Michael Jordans, The Supreme Comandante who overthrew the hold of the technologists that bound him.”

“That’s not us, pal.”

“But he’s still in charge, isn’t he?”

“Down there he is.”

“It makes no di□erence. The purpose of life is to live, to love, and to spread life and love. And with luck, new creations will do the same. Over the years, organisms typically do one thing well. They either love well and spread love, or they live well and spread life. Too often, they destroy life to spread love or destroy love to spread life. They see things as a competition. But these chupas strike a balance. Like the poplar, or the hive, or the rhizome, they have no conception of the individual. They may appear to be single organisms, even being potted here individually for more convenient transportation. But in the wild, they exist as a network. Each grove represents a hub of chupa life. If one falls ill or su□ers damage, others will divert resources to help it rebuild. In potting them like this, I have done them a great injury. I hope they will forgive me.”

“So this is what all those Janks got jacked up for?”

“I doubt those men had seen a chupa in their lives.”

“Look, Jo,” Cote scratched her narrow hip. “These plants are great and all, but we need to get this tour moving so we can make our report to our superior. And I’m also gonna need another of those Reds.”

“As you wish, Private Cote.”

The next car was refreshingly cool, refrigerated well below the heat outside. The walls were lined with illuminated glass

cases filled with glass cylinders. The cylinders were filled with liquid, and through the liquid floated particulate matter.

“What’s in those?”

“Other creatures. Well, their DNA at least.”

Driggs coughed. He remembered his mother’s lab where she collected dead specimens in jars. Always in the evening, after her office hours had ended, his father sent him down there to call her for dinner. She left her work with gravity. Driggs’ older brother and sister had died of the measles. His own cheeks and forehead still bore the scars from when he had it. His mother would talk about how humans once knew how to cure and vaccinate against it. But since the Breach, doctors in the Resistance had lost much knowledge.

“What creatures?” Cote still held her rifle pointed between Jo’s shoulder blades, though she had lowered it to her hip.

“Some of my favorites. The cuttlefish, the bonobo, the venus fly trap. The three-toed sloth—they’re cute. I very nearly made room for the Welsh Corgi too …”

“Why aren’t the chupas in one of those?”

“Well, they can’t bear fruit if they’re just DNA in a test tube, can they?”

In other cars, Jo showed Driggs and Cote an assortment of bins filled with precious gems and earth metals, jagged materials that glinted with sunlight. Another held rows of filing cabinets. In another, they found dusty shelves full of old holy books, all written in honor and glory to the creator.

They walked back outside just before the caboose. Jo turned and said, “I want to tell you about a people I once knew.

When once, they were lonesome, I took them in. They had nowhere to go, no values to live by. I gave them purpose. When

once, the yoke wore and wore till it fit too snug, I handed them the axe. I gave them the grinder, the haft, and the bronze point to crown it.

I bade them to rise up against their enslavers in Mizraim, and brought them to the land which I promised unto their fathers; and I said, ‘I will never break my covenant.’ I parted the waters.

When once, and many times more, fires of rival tribes burned too close, I raised the spirit in them and sent rider after rider galloping down the mountainside. I cared for them like children, and in return, they called me father.

They were very much like you—taking up arms, offering their lives to further their cause, even under a commander who thinks you should have perished alongside your comrades and his rival whom he hated. I know they would recognize you both as a brother and a sister in arms in the fight to preserve life and love.”

Driggs felt his vision go warm and hazy. A low buzzing became audible. He realized that he was slowly nodding. Cote fixed him with a quizzical expression, and he quickly regained his focus. Jo was still talking.

“With them and with those that came before, I built a beautiful society of plants, mammals, fungi, cetaceans, bacteria, Noah, Abraham, Lot, and countless other houses, domains, and families.

But these great men and women have passed. Like rain upon the mountain, they have all passed. As the years went on, fewer and fewer loved me. Some claimed they had killed me. And now, I fear the conflict between your warring factions will destroy all I—all we—have built. I ask that you grant me safe passage. I carry with me only life and love. All I ask is you help me spread it. Go unto your commanders and rally your brothers and sisters with my message. Re-lay the tracks south of Bend and

allow me safe passage north.”

The sound of Jo’s voice died away slowly in the dry desert air. Driggs looked from Jo to Cote. He was about to speak. And then—

“What’s in that car?” Cote asked, sucking on another red, pointing with her thumb over her shoulder to the caboose of the train.

“That—that car holds more chupas.”

“Uh-huh.”

The buzzing subsided. Driggs stood up straight and raised his voice. “Why aren’t those chupas with the others at the front of the train?”

“I wasn’t sure if I’d have room.”

Cote looked from her fellow ranger to Jo.

“Go open it, Driggs.”

“It might interest you to know a unit of the Commander’s cavalry will arrive within minutes. I can only delay them for so long. I beg you, make your report.”

“I don’t hear anything except those vultures.”

Cote pointed her rifle at Jo again.

“Open it, Driggs.”

Driggs started walking toward the caboose. Jo looked to Driggs and back to Cote, who kept her rifle raised.

Impossibly fast, Jo crouched to the ground and threw sand in Cote’s face.

“Driggs!”

He wheeled around to see Jo flying across the sand. His knees collided with Driggs chest and knocked him to the ground.

“I thought I could convince you—I thought I could inspire you,” Jo spat, his face growing taunt and drawn beneath his black brim. “But it appears you’re like the others. And like the Amakelites, you shan’t be spared. It is written.”

At that moment a bullet passed through Jo’s head from jaw hinge to jaw hinge. He was knocked sideways o Driggs. Cote sprung forward, running toward the caboose door. Jo rose unscathed.

“NO,” he shouted. Driggs felt his bones vibrate. Cote made it to the door and popped the hinge down with the butt of her rifle. A sound like a shell blast emitted from the car. The door exploded open and Cote and Driggs were lifted from the ground and thrown through the air. Cote struck a tree and landed unconscious among the dry needles.

Driggs landed hard a few dozen feet away and scrambled over to his fellow ranger. But before he could rouse her, he raised his head to watch the train. A kind of smoke or cloud was issuing from the caboose. Behind it, he saw what looked like masses of limbs and pulsing organs. They were hit with a wave of stench. It smelled like thousands of nameless carcasses left to rot under the sun. Soundless bolts of lightning flashed, followed by a howling gale. Jo stood beside the train, but had inexplicably grown in size. He grew larger still, towering over the train, seeking to contain the cloud with his hat. His enormous bare head revealed tattoos of ancient characters and deep, purple scars.

Fire, ice, toil, and sickness flew from the open caboose, igniting the forest floor beside the tracks. The wind from the train spurred the fire on, toward where Driggs and Cote lay. Driggs hoisted Cote over his shoulder and ran north along the track. Past the train, he crossed the ties and made his way

into the forest. He knelt and laid Cote on the ground. After gently lowering her head, his hand came away bloody, and he uncorked his canteen to splash water on his friend’s face.

Through the storm issuing from the train, he shouted her name. Her eyes flickered.

“Cote, we have to go!”

Her eyes snapped open, her jaw clenched, and her hand thrust up to catch Driggs’ shoulder.

“Help me up.”

The rangers ran back toward the blu and scrambled up it. At the top, they collapsed with heaving chests and looked back. The fire had spread impossibly fast. It had crossed the tracks, and approached in their direction.

“Look.”

A section of the horizon shimmered.

“What is that?”

“Hell is murky.”

Driggs raised his binos. Three Jank columns marched forward. Refocusing, he saw cavalry units peppering the sparse forest. Driggs looked back to the train. The now-massive Jo still battled amongst the storm that issued from the caboose. A noise sounded at their nine and the two looked up to see incoming Resistance birds.

“Wonder what good they’ll do.”

“Maybe a little more damage than my rifle.”

The two watched as the aircraft rained down missiles onto the Jank cavalry and into the cloud in which Jo was now obscured. Upon contact, the train erupted and flung ash and smoke miles

overhead. Below, the fire drew nearer and nearer.

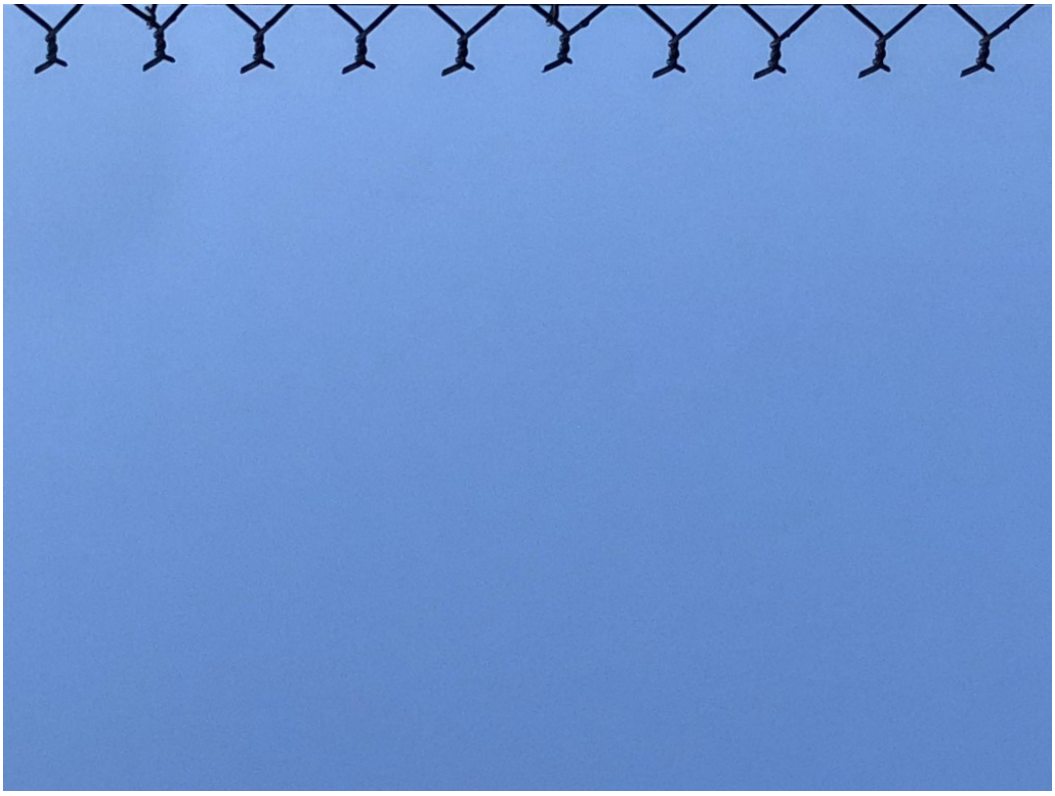
“Cote.”

She looked at her ranger in arms. Driggs held out the half empty pack of Reds, with one protruding in her direction.

“They were knocked loose when that thing had me down.”

“Driggs,” Cote said, lighting up, “you’re one hell of a ranger.”

Poetry from Dennis Etzel: “The War in Coming Out,” “The War in Men,” “The War in their Duties”



SELF-ASSURANCES FENCED IN / *image by Amalie Flynn*

The
War in Coming Out

Today we honor those soldiers who fought for our country against oppressing forces. It was a matter of showing up. Like Leonard said, *They gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.* Howard told me how it was a point-blank question in the draft line for Vietnam: *Are you a homosexual?* Howard didn't lie. The man started screaming, *We have another f-g here. We have a queer one here.* It was a matter of showing up.

The
War in Men

When they enter, the guards strip them down and beat them. The guards shout, demanding compliance. They are shown their quarters. The guards continue, tell themselves, it's either us or the prisoners. They don't care why they are here. The guards didn't choose to be here. They say, *The prisoners must have done something, or they wouldn't be here.* As small as serving time to be sent back to the front or as big

as
waiting to face prison in the US. Little self-assurances fenced in and in solitary confinement.

The War in Their Duties

My father joined the National Guard to avoid being drafted. When the draft came, the National Guard was sent over. Same old song and dance. Cliff said he saw the action through the helicopters. He saw the bullet holes and repairs needed, as his duty was to fix them. Cranked up I Can't Get No Satisfaction. Gordon told me he served in Vietnam, too. He played French horn. He played Reveille. He played Taps.

New Nonfiction from Teresa Fazio: "Light My Fire"

The following excerpt is from Teresa Fazio's ***Fidelis: A Memoir****, reprinted with permission from Potomac Books.*

A week before leaving Iraq, I shuffled through my post-deployment health assessment, a quiz to divine if we were crazy or sick or prone to shooting our loved ones. I gave the pasty Navy doc the answers he wanted: *Yeah, I'm fine. No, I haven't seen anyone killed—lifting that transport case doesn't count. Yes, of course I was exposed to sand. No, no nightmares, not lately. Shit blows up, whatever. No anxiety, just stress. I'm an officer; I can handle it. Let me go.*

I was impatient with anyone who hadn't also been in Iraq for seven months, laying cable like my wire platoon. Our replacements' questions—where did this cable lead, when was

chow, was there really a shot-up mural of Saddam Hussein—disrupted my precious workaholic routine, the one for which Marla, another female lieutenant, had nicknamed me Rain Man. With the new troops swelling our numbers, we spent the next several weeks laying as much cable as possible. The Marines bore down, digging what trenches they could with a motorized Ditch Witch, then pickaxing the more sensitive areas bordered by concertina wire. They laid cables straight into sandy trenches, zip-tying them every few feet and burying them under fine grains. Their knees shone white, and they washed grit from their hands and necks before meals. It sucked, but it was celebratory for the Marines leaving country: a last hurrah, the old guys willing to do anything to get out of there, the new guys excited to do anything at all. Even if it meant pulling cable hand over hand, fingers pruning with sweat in canvas gloves. As they tipped blue strands of Ethernet, bits of plastic tumbled to the ground, until everything was wired in. I watched Marla help dig, her slim figure bent at the waist, forearms dirty, red bun over delicate features. Though half the company comprised new troops, I didn't overhear anyone hit on her.

Fortunately, a squared-away comm-school classmate named Torres took over my wire platoon. Major Davis tossed me the keys to our battalion's SUV, so Torres and I could inspect the cable line. Airfield to the left, headquarters to the right, the rest of Camp Taqaddum a desert plateau. The Euphrates winked below us if we craned our necks just right. Though I hadn't driven in seven months, the potholed roads felt familiar. Torres' clean uniform stood out against dusty upholstery.

I pulled over within sight of some junked Soviet planes, where I'd once gone on a long run with Jack and one of his sergeants.

Torres asked if mortars hit around TQ a lot. I told him that in the past month, most of the danger had stayed outside the wire. Except down that road—I pointed toward the gate where

insurgents had crashed a vehicle full of explosives. And, I continued, when the mortars got close to regiment, peppered that empty tent—that was bad. Cut our fiber optics. Fucked up like a football bat. I climbed out of the car and kicked a toe in the sand, unearthing zombie cable. Torres didn't ask any more questions.

A few afternoons later, hopped up on caffeine with nothing to do, I called Jack from the Systems Control hut. He couldn't hang out; he had an angel coming in, he said, a mortar victim from Fallujah. All of the other times I'd been in his room, he'd shooed me away when the calls had come. This time, I asked to watch him work. I wanted to finally witness the cause of his sleepless nights.

"Major Davis would crucify me if I let you see this without him knowing," Jack said. But when I asked the major if I could watch Jack work, he just braced a hand on the two-by-four door frame and said, "Yup."

In his bunker, Jack pressed play on James Taylor's Greatest Hits. It calmed him, he said. Two Marines lay a stretcher on sawhorses and unzipped a body bag: an ashen Navy Seabee with a fresh haircut. Blood sluiced to the sawdusted floor. One Marine held the clipboard; several more circled the body. They marked the locations of wounds and tattoos, crossing the Seabee's stiff arms over his chest for balance. Jack donned nitrile gloves and pulled a brand-new pack of Camels from the Seabee's pocket. A fist-sized hole bled where a heart had once beaten. *Fire and Rain* kept time.

I shifted from foot to foot as Jack counted dog tags, ID card, wallet, and photographs into a manila envelope. He motioned me back with an outstretched arm and a frown.

The whole process took only fifteen minutes. Soon the chaplain thumbed a cross on the Seabee's brow. The Marines put him in a fresh body bag, strapped it into a flag-draped transport case,

and tied it tight with twine.

After, Jack wadded his nitrile gloves into the trash and led me to his room. We shut the door, no matter his Marines cleaning up in the outer bay. He pulled me in, kneading my back; I pressed my nose into his T-shirt and inhaled. Together, we breathed.

▪ • •

The next night, there were no casualties. I stayed long enough after midnight to hear Jack say my name and “I love it when you touch me” and his son’s name and “I love you.” He saw the dead when he slept. He thought of them constantly, he said, except when he was with me. We dozed an hour. Then I pressed my lips to his forehead, found my glasses, and slipped away. Six more days left in Iraq.

The next morning, on my walk to stand watch, I ran into Sanchez exiting the chow hall. I teased him about the samurai pads snapped to his flak vest: floppy hip guards, shoulder pads, a flat, triangular groin protector. Each piece sported a different pattern: digital desert, analog woodlands, Desert Storm chocolate chips. He was a Marine Corps fashion nightmare.

When I got to work, I found out the reason for all that gear. A vehicle-borne IED had hit a convoy northwest of Fallujah, killing seven Marines and wounding six. A “mass casualty” event. Jack, Sanchez, and others rode out on a convoy to recover the bodies.

I couldn’t sit still, so I walked into the TechCon van. Maybe the sergeants could offer distraction, whether with work, or with *Nip/Tuck*, their latest binge-watching addiction featuring plastic surgeons in compromising relationships. We watched for three hours, until we hit an episode where the plot revolved around infidelity.

I remembered that Jack was on the convoy.

This “other woman” had terminal cancer. Her adulterous lover helped her commit suicide before the cancer took her. The woman penned letters and sipped milk to coat her stomach while swallowing handfuls of pills. As she watched a lakeside sunset and the soundtrack played Elton John’s Rocketman, I felt a wash of fear.

Jack was still on a convoy.

While watching the show, I wondered, Will that be my punishment, too? I’d become increasingly anxious about our imminent return to the States. Even more than getting caught, I feared losing what I thought was my only chance at love. Jack’s wife in California loomed far larger than any bomb threat. A thick sludge of guilt coated my powdered-egg breakfast. I controlled my breathing.

He was still on a convoy.

After the episode ended, I stumbled out of TechCon into sunlight, blinking back lethargy from hours of TV. I had to do something good, something officer-like: inspect the cable. Check on my troops. I controlled my breathing and swallowed the lump in my throat.

At the far end of the flight line, my Marines were deepening a trench in a spot plagued by heavy truck traffic. I walked the fiber optic lines along the airfield's edge, checking them for bald spots, kinks, and cuts. The air reeked of diesel. Helicopter rotor blades blended into a buttery hum. Sparrows flitted along eight-foot-tall Hesco barriers. After fifty yards or so, I stopped and peered down the flight line. Maybe a hundred yards left. Hot, boring work. I figured I could get to my Marines more quickly on the other side of the barriers, where there was a concrete path. I ducked behind them at the next opportunity.

▪ • •

WHUMP. Seconds later, a mortar landed on the airfield. I felt the blast wave in my chest and teeth. I took a few steps forward, thinking of my troops digging near the flight line entrance.

WHUMP. Another mortar round, a little farther away. A small rock kicked up by the blast flew over my head, or was it shrapnel? I had the urge to reach for it, to catch it, but I did not. Instead I turned around to head back to our company's headquarters. As my Marines fast-walked past me, carrying ammo cans full of tools, I thought only of counting their heads.

In the following months and years, I would wish I had been on the exposed airfield side of the Hesco barriers when the mortars hit, that I had sprinted full-tilt toward my Marines digging that trench, instead of taking a few steps forward before retreating. I would even wish I'd been hit by shrapnel, like a vigilant lieutenant. Was that the most fitting

consequence of what I'd been doing with Jack? If he returned from his convoy to find me lifeless, would caring for my body have made him love me, made him stay?

In any case, he returned. Late that night, I lingered outside Comm Company's compound under a hard pearl moon. A hundred yards away, Jack's Marines unloaded one, two, three, four, five, six, seven body bags from their refrigerated truck. Then they hefted still more.

Under the floodlights, I made out Hoss's lanky silhouette, spotted Mullins's round shoulders and rolling gait, almost heard his Southern drawl. Two more darted around the truck, its tailgate the height of their heads, shepherding paperwork. Sanchez stood straight and musclebound, lifting tirelessly. Sergeant Jonas barked orders.

Soon they all moved inside; they must have been grabbing clipboards and unzipping body bags. I stared at the bunker doors, wishing I could enter. If I had tried, Jack would have shouted me away, and Mullins and Jonas would have shaken their heads. I would like to say decorum held me back from going over there. Really, it was shame. The most honorable thing I could do was stay away. Wait to go home.

Fazio, Teresa. ***Fidelis: A Memoir*** *(Potomac Books, September 2020).*

Uncrossable Borders: A Review

of Patrick Hicks's New Novel, 'In the Shadow of Dora'

As Patrick Hicks's novel *In the Shadow of Dora* opens, it is July 1969 in bright-and-sunny Cape Canaveral, Florida. In just a few days the United States will send astronauts to the moon for the first time, hopefully with success, and, because of this, Dr. Wernher Von Braun is all over American television. Dr. Von Braun has been a familiar face, to some extent, for years – on a popular Walt Disney space series, for example, in which he held up model rockets and enthusiastically explained them to children between lively cartoon segments; and, now, on an evening talk show, filling in the fawning host on the big upcoming event. Von Braun is all winning smile, salt-and-pepper hair, double-breasted suit. He has become a celebrity, the "Columbus of Space": explorer, educator, friendly tour guide to the majestic world of the stars.

At least one viewer, however, is not buying it. Watching from his couch after a day of work is NASA engineer Eli Hessel, nursing a beer and a sore back and considering the man on the screen. He has known this man, or known of him, for decades, longer than have most Americans. Von Braun was not always an American science celebrity. In Germany he had been chief developer of the V-2 rockets – precursors of the ones powering Apollo 11 – built secretly underground, using concentration-camp labor, at the site called Dora-Mittelbau.

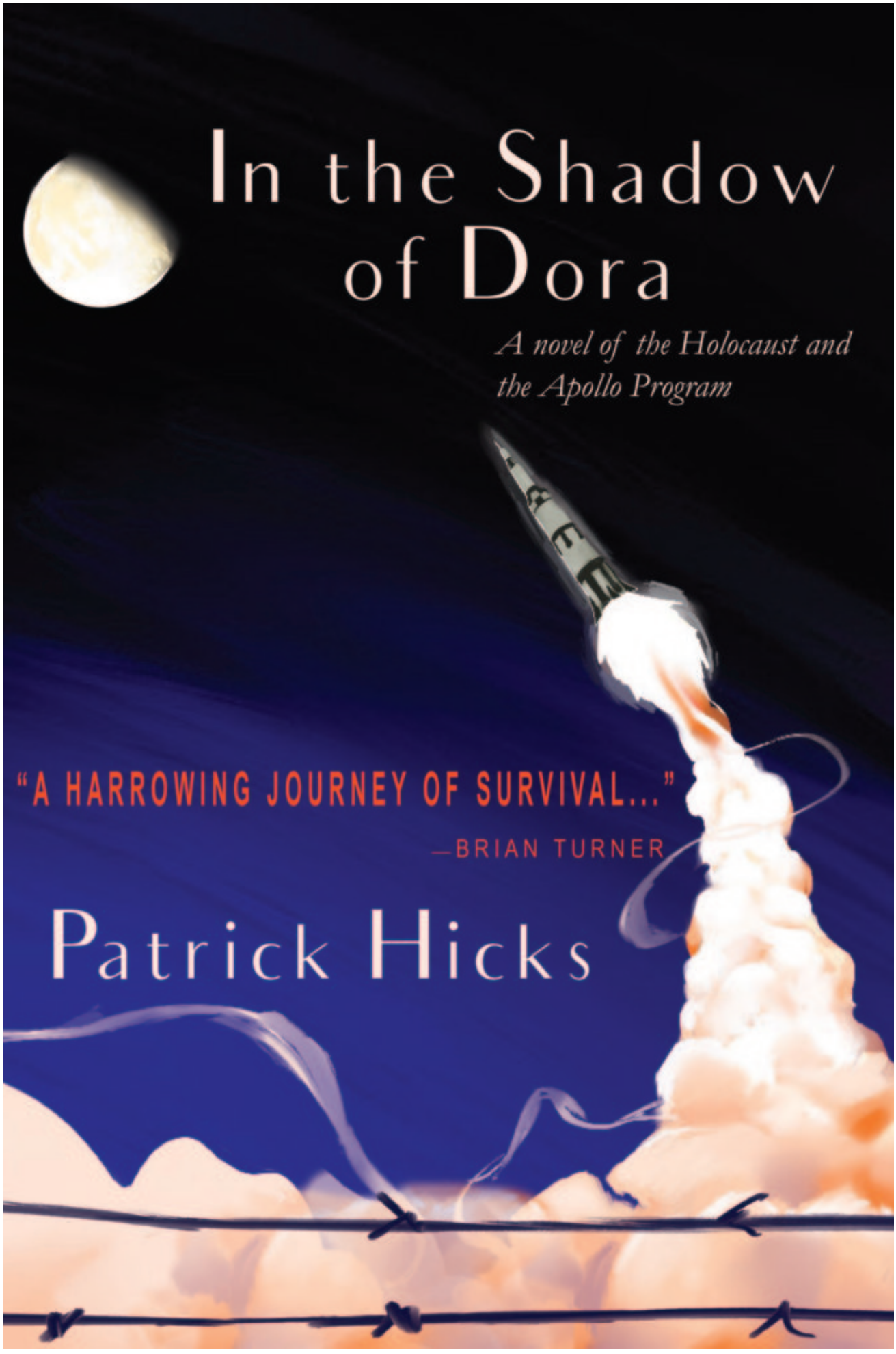
Von Braun's V-2 design was a last-ditch attempt at victory for an already slowing Third Reich, but its development injected the Nazis with new, if short-lived, energy. If it did turn out to be the game changer they hoped, V-2s might soon rain down on New York, Chicago, and more.

Eli knows all of this very well because, long before his NASA engineering career, he survived Auschwitz and later the

tunnels of Dora-Mittelbau, where he was forced to work on Von Braun's V-2 rockets. When he could, he sabotaged them. Most of the time he just tried to stay alive. And now here's Von Braun himself, all over the television; the next day he and some of his former cohort will show up at Eli's workplace where he will be forced to see them, like startling visions from the past, made Technicolor.

The very sight of them makes Eli's blood run cold. But, of course, they'd never remember Eli.

Why hasn't someone shot one of them? One of us survivors? he wonders, thinking of his own gun in the hallway closet, which he has purchased – when? Why? Perhaps be owns it out of some persistent inner fear. He is not a violent man, but suddenly he can hardly believe the simple fact that no one has tried it. Those criminals are out in the open, just walking around! If someone were to assassinate a big name like Von Braun, Americans would have to wonder *why*, and the media might investigate, and then maybe the truth about him would finally wash out from beneath this absurd scrubbed-clean façade. Some former prisoner like me, he thinks – why haven't they just *done* it already? It seems, suddenly, like a question that requires an answer.


In the Shadow of Dora
A novel of the Holocaust and the Apollo Program
"A HARROWING JOURNEY OF SURVIVAL..."
—BRIAN TURNER
Patrick Hicks

“Whoever was tortured, stays tortured,” writes Jean Améry in his superb essay collection, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*. Améry examines what happens when the human intellect is placed against such unthinkable entities as death camps, de-humanization, torture. “The intellect nullified itself,” he writes, of his time in Auschwitz, “when at every step it ran into uncrossable borders. The axes of its traditional frames of reference then shattered.” What do we do when our former frames of reference no longer work? How can we make sense of the fact that the Third Reich lasted twelve years, that millions of people were active participants or quiet bystanders in mass extermination?

And on a smaller scale, how can we transmit, or translate, unthinkable personal experiences to a listener, even a sympathetic one? An experience like Auschwitz, like torture, can be described, Améry says, but never clarified: “All the attempts at clarification, most of which stressed a single cause, failed ridiculously.” Eli has a similar thought when he recalls being asked by an American what “lessons” he might have learned from surviving Auschwitz and Dora. Lessons? he thinks, blankly. How could there have been lessons? How does one take a lesson from sadism?

For that’s what it was, according to Jean Améry: sadism. “National Socialism in its totality,” he writes, “was stamped less with the seal of a hardly definable ‘totalitarianism’ than with that of sadism…[which is, according to Georges Bataille] the radical negation of the other.” He goes on:

A world in which torture, destruction and death triumph obviously cannot exist. But the sadist does not care about the continued existence of the world. On the contrary: he wants to nullify this world, and by negating his fellow man, who also in an entirely specific sense is ‘hell’ for him, he wants to realize his own total sovereignty.

The act of being tortured, Améry says, is to have the human social contract breached in every way, so that the victim feels themselves negated by the other. Améry calls it an "astonishment" – "astonishment at the existence of the other, as he boundlessly asserts himself through torture…That one's fellow man was experienced as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as an accumulated horror…

Torture becomes the total inversion of the social world, in which we [normally] can live only if we grant our fellow man life, ease his suffering, bridle the desire of our ego to expand. But in the world of torture man exists only by ruining the other person who stands before him. A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other – along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and The World as Will and Representation – into a shrill piglet squealing at slaughter.

This "horrible and perverted togetherness" between torturer and tortured is what follows Eli in the decades after his "liberation," all the way to Kennedy Space Center when he sees his former tormentors strutting along metal walkways. Hicks takes the psychological links described in Améry and, in a smart novelistic twist, makes them physical.

"It is impossible for me to accept," Améry writes, "a parallelism that would have my path run beside that of the fellows who flogged me with a horsewhip." But, when Von Braun and his cohorts show up in Eli's very place of work, that is exactly what is happening to him.

Would we expect Eli not to think about his past? The people around him seem to either suggest that he ruminate on "lessons," or forget his torment entirely. In fact, he has done very well for himself, considering. He has a wife, a grown daughter at Berkeley, a job to be proud of. In the evenings he assembles jigsaw puzzles of classic paintings (he's on Vermeer now). All is well, he tells himself. All is

well. Still, when he looks in the mirror, he is startled by how quickly he's aged. "One ages badly in exile," Jean Améry notes.

Améry might say that Eli is suffering from resentment – suffering *in* resentment, perhaps, because he describes it as a state, one which he both apologizes for and defends. Resentment is "an unnatural but also a logically inconsistent condition. It nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone. Resentment blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future."

The burden of resentment seems, in this way, nearly as cruel as the original harm itself. Like torture, Eli did not choose it, but here it is. How could he *not* want "the event" to be undone? Eli Hessel endured the complete negation of his own humanity as the price of enlarging another's, and here those others are now, still, somehow, enlarging themselves. (Hicks painfully, but effectively, re-creates this complete negation, often through the SS guards' dialogue at Dora, where the novel opens. "You pieces of SHIT!" one guard screams – in fact, the prisoners are called "pieces of shit" at least three times in the opening pages – while another refers to them as "my assholes." An unnamed guard beats a prisoner with a pipe – possibly to death – for dropping one of the materials, all the while bellowing at him, "Be gentle with that! Gentle! Gentle! Gentle!" The bodies of the dead prisoners are referred to as "rags.")

The Second World War is all around Eli in commemorative magazines and TV shows – *Hogan's Heroes, The Great Escape* – but represented in a triumphant manner he can hardly recognize. After all, we won! The Third Reich lasted "just" twelve years (Eli would not have had Wikipedia, but that's what today's entry says). The cultural amnesia that both Améry and Hicks point out in modern society can feel staggeringly glib (for Hicks's writing definitely points fingers, subtly,

at disturbing current trends). Are we collectively glad that a despot was allowed to rise to power, slaughter millions, incite a world war, and continue to inspire copycats with perhaps rising influence even today, because Hitler was killed after "just" twelve years?

(When I look at my son, I think: twelve years has been his whole lifetime.)

In any case, Eli is the one with the conscience, not his tormentors. Their actions occurred out of the context of any morality, turning them into (Améry): "facts within a physical system, not deeds within a moral system." "The monster…who is not chained by conscience to his deed sees it from his viewpoint only as an objectification of his will, not as a moral event."

It is a deep unfairness that Eli's conscience, his role as victim in a massive cultural and personal crime, continues to mark him with guilt throughout his life. When CIA agents descend on Kennedy Space Center in a Communist witch-hunt (how the Soviets would love to sabotage Apollo!, they think), they single Eli out immediately. Was he with political prisoners at Auschwitz and Dora? Communists? Maybe they gave him ideas? What happened to him there, anyway? Maybe he's not trustworthy. He makes some other people uncomfortable. He is not "clear"; he is an insoluble dilemma. Eli is thrown into a surreal second tunnel where the victim has become the blamed. "He embodied something…dangerous," he realizes, with a new, dawning grief, "something that needed to be buried."

"*I* am burdened with collective guilt," Jean Améry writes. "The world, which forgives and forgets, has sentenced me, not those who murdered or allowed the murder to occur."

The question, for Hicks as a novelist, is now what Eli will do with his resentment.

It's true that much of Hicks's *In the Shadow of Dora* is a

literary account of crimes against body and memory, and that they are hard to read. They are things that happened. They are not the only things. Hicks is very careful to hold Eli apart from the sort of feel-good, "wow-this-guy-really-overcame!" narrative that lines bookshelves, probably because you can tell that he cares so much about the character he's created. The morality of Hicks's novel is a carefully considered one: realistic, fundamentally opposed to cruelty and to use of force, and dedicated to exposing these but not letting them block out all light.

As far as the book itself, it manages admirably to balance the dark and the light. His use of language is cinematic and rich. Hicks's description throughout – perhaps keeping in mind that when something is beyond the intellect, all we can do is describe – keeps the reading riveting: the SS guards hold their rifles "lazily at their sides, like baguettes." An air raid is "blossoms of fire" and "a steeple [sinking] sideways into the ground." Then there's this apocalyptic image: "An SS guard stood on top of a truck and fired a machine gun at the approaching bombs. Huge orange asterisks erupted from the end of his weapon."

The novel is exquisitely researched; Hicks has visited ten concentration camps including the tunnels at Dora, which he detailed in an earlier Wrath-Bearing Tree interview. Those who are fascinated by WWII and Cold War history will find much to learn. As for period details, Hicks could probably tell you the ratio of metals in the rocket pipe, and the brand of TV dinner Eli's eating in 1969. Television shows (and only three TV channels!), clothing, even smells (of course the work area smells like hairspray and pomade – all the ladies were wearing beehives!) add texture without showing off or overwhelming the heart of the book, which is its story: Eli's life.

Initially, when he arrives at Dora, any scrap of mental energy Eli may have left is devoted to food: imagining the look, the smell, the taste of lamb chops, green beans, bread. Later,

small snippets of his family show through. These are too hurtful to dwell on, but he can't keep them all away. They are wedded inexplicably to his sense of self, of potential. (He is only twenty-one years old: sometimes that is hard to remember.) In one brief, pleasant memory, Eli recalls doing calculus at his parents' table. "He thought about his hand unspooling an equation of stars. Yes. His little life did have meaning."

Somehow, amazingly, in 1949 his daughter is born. He will hold her, and later his granddaughter, so that they cover the blue tattoo on his forearm. "We are who we love," he whispers into his daughter's newborn ear. "Do you hear me, little one? We are who we love."

And, last, the moon. In "Secrets," one of the most unique chapters in Hicks' novel (or partial-chapters, more accurately), the author decides to tell the history of the moon. I have never in my life read a book that included a chapter on the history of the moon, and I found the notion delightful and the chapter itself charming. It opens in 1969, and Eli is out looking at the night sky, as he often does. The moon is perhaps the one thing that's been with him throughout all of his trials – in Dora, it often seemed to reflect his state of mind – and now here he is, part of the engineering team that's sending the first astronaut to walk it.

Five billion years ago, Eli muses, we didn't have a moon at all. Then, it was created when a planetoid the size of Mars hit Earth.

The cores of these two planets were wrenched apart and the molten debris twisted around each other, caught in an unbalanced dance of gravity. Over millions of years, the cooling matter created a larger and a smaller orb. We may not think of the moon as a companion planet, but it is one. It came from us, and we came from it.

The moon is our closest neighbor at 240,000 miles away, and reaching it, Eli believes, is “the biggest adventure mankind has ever undertaken.” He plays with words, thinking about honeymoon, lunacy, moonstruck. This brief, sweet flight of fancy is a fun inroad into Eli’s mind. He is a quiet, self-protective man out of necessity, but he still has his beautiful mind. And what could be more self-contained, more silent than the moon? Lonelier than the moon? “The experience of persecution,” Améry has written, “was, at the very bottom, that of an extreme loneliness.”

As a reader, it’s odd to think of the moon having a “history” – or maybe I’m just a typical human who simply can’t imagine history without or before us – but the moon has one, or at least it has a past, if there is a difference. And this past, still, in 1969, untouched by man, must be appealing to Eli, though the moon has obviously been a touched thing. It’s full of craters and dry pools, it’s been bombarded – but not by humans. It’s been touched only by blameless things. Perhaps there is no “lesson” in that, either, but there is also no lasting pain.

And in a few days, men will land there. Eli is in awe, but not exactly jealous. Surely, though, it’s not lost on him the immense effort that’s going toward getting these three men to his favorite satellite and back again in eight quick days. The whole world is watching. Over 25 billion dollars (about 152 billion, by today’s standards) were dedicated to ensure that, no matter what, these men – the bravest men in the entire world – come home safe.

In the camp, Eli often wondered if anyone was coming to save them. Six million dead. Would anyone come for them? Here is Améry:

In almost all situations in life where there is bodily injury there is also the expectation of help; the former is compensated by the latter. But with the first blow…against

which there can be no defense and which no helping hand will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived.

The men headed out on Apollo 11 can rest assured that mountains will be moved to get them back again. No obstacle is too physical, no amount of care is too much. Hell, America knows their *vital signs*. Should one man's heart rate drop, the highest-level experts in the world will scramble. These astronauts have an expectation of help unmatched in history.

Eli doesn't begrudge them. He wants, deeply, for the mission to be a success.

Later, in 1972, Eli's one regret will be that the American moon program ended so soon. Only six manned visits? How much can we know, from that? And this may be our clue into what memory is, for Eli, as well as love: they are knowledge. Eli is a man of the mind and his knowledge is his own. Perhaps the men who hurt him thought they knew him, or knew something of him, but they didn't know anything at all. No Nazi thug who put a boot in his back will ever get to see the curl of his newborn daughter's ear. They will never have his particular view of the moon. They cannot know what his father and mother said to him as they sat around that kitchen table, joking, and while he did his homework. Love is an incalculable knowledge. And so that is why he feels just a little indignant about the idea, in 1969, that one moon landing could tell us so much.

How much can we learn from such brief contact?, he wonders. We put our boots on it once, and we think we know a thing.

*

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Artist Profile: Musician Emily Yates

INTRODUCTION

Emily Yates joined the Army at 19, spent six years in, from 2002 until her "release," as she puts it, in 2008, finishing as an E-4, and served two deployments to Iraq in 2005-06 and 2007-08. She calls herself a former "public affairs minion, writing heartwarming news stories about the Iraq War to help build fellow soldiers' morale." **1** She worked under David Abrams (author of the novels *Fobbit* and *Brave Deeds*), and as "the only snarky female specialist in his unit," she sees some of herself in the character of Carnicle. She says that she wishes to "use my experience in the military to make my civilian life richer . . . [and] help those who are struggling." **2** As a self-proclaimed "eventual ukulele superstar" she often uses humor to express her concerns, and utilizes juxtapositions of joy and disillusionment, humor and aggression, and gentleness and vulgarity to communicate those concerns, whether they be about the VA, the precariousness of freedom, sexuality, the military, certain personality types, or how "not to be a dick."

Yates works in a variety of media, also doing photography and writing. Her photographs run from “Food” to “Faces” to “Nature” to “War.” The latter document scenes from her time in Iraq, like “On Patrol” and “Perimeter Secured,” as well as scenes with children, often with soldiers. 3

Like the diverse subject matter of her photographs Yates' writing touches on a variety of themes. In "A Veteran's Affair: How Dealing With the VA is Like Dating a Douchebag" (2016) **4**, she uses humor to highlight a serious issue. "Unfortunately, because only one percent (roughly) of Americans serve in the military at any given time, there's a massive cognitive disconnect between veterans and, as we lovingly call the rest of the population, civilians. But there is hope for us yet to bridge the communication divide." In the essay she points out the multiple ways that the VA falls short of expectations.

Two essays for *Truthout* also express her concerns. "American Propagander: Six Ways Paul Rieckhoff's 'American Sniper' Column Deeply Bothers This US Veteran" (2015) Yates presents a scathing critique of Rieckhoff's praise of Eastwood's film. She feels that in his discussion of the film Rieckhoff exploits veterans and ignores the complexity of the war. In her view, he ignores the real story of the war, such as PTSD and veteran suicides (although to be fair, Kyle's PTSD is depicted), and the complexity of American involvement. She ends her essay "All of these points illustrate the larger issue that when veterans' traumatic experiences are exploited as freely by veterans themselves as they are by the powerful few who send us to war, it's a sign that we ourselves have internalized the destructive system that our bodies were used to support."

In another essay, "Who Am I, Really?: The Identity Crisis of the Woman Veteran Returning Home" (2013), she describes the psychological split she and other women face trying to "recalibrate" their lives and "relearn" how to be a civilian. "I'm referring to the particularly awkward division between women veterans and women who have never been in the military – the division that leads to women like me getting out of the Army and finding it nearly impossible to relate to 99% of other American women." 5

One of her poems, “I Am the Savage,” reflects on her war experience. She writes about the “rubble beside the Tigris river” and troops’ entering Iraqi homes, instilling fear in the citizens. But the military power she observes, wielded against ordinary citizens, is the source of her dejection:

My job is to tell the story of victory—
victory!
Victory?
But I am defeated

Another poem, “Yellow Ribbon” (also a song and video), is critical of civilians who refuse to see the reality of war, believing that a yellow ribbon on their cars and the formulaic “thank you for your service” excuses them. She feels that civilians are willfully blind to what is being done in their name, and are content to follow the trappings of patriotism. She writes “But you can’t bring back the dead by throwing a parade.” The poem closes: “Don’t make me your hero, just lend me your ear/Oh, and wipe the tears I cry/While I apologize for that goddamn yellow ribbon on your car.” **6**

Yates is best known for her music. In 2012 she released *I’ve Got Your Folk Songs Right Here* and in 2014 *Folk in Your Face*. She also released a children’s album under the *nom de musique* Fancy von Pancerton. In *I’ve Got Your Folk Songs Right Here* there is a humorous dimension to “Plant Some Weed,” where growing marijuana is a better economic choice than working at McDonald’s or taking tickets at a movie theater. “In Your Mind” and “Shut Yer Face” criticize ego-centric males who believe that they are “the best and the brightest/Your teeth are the whitest/Except that it’s all in your mind.” “Foreign Policy Folk Song” is reminiscent of Phil Ochs and protest songs of the 60’s placed in a contemporary context:

Just bomb their country
Just bomb their fucking country
Kill all of their children and destroy their infrastructure

Just bomb their country, put holes in all their history
Then take all of their resources and bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb their country.

Folk in Your Face echoes many of the themes of the first album. There is the whimsical, upbeat "Porn!" ("Everyone likes porn!") and the more serious "Just a Little Cog," in which she declares that she will no longer be a cog in anyone else's wheel, whether it be in a relationship or the military: "I was just a little soldier in your war/I'm not fighting anymore/I'm no longer just a cog in your machine."

One of her strongest songs is "You're the Enemy," released on the 2018 *Women At War: Warrior Songs Vol. 2*, as a response to the prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and her own assault, which she did not report "because I knew the investigation, if one even happened, would be even more demoralizing than being assaulted by people I knew." She is especially demoralized that there is no escape from the situation. She sees her attacker daily and the supposed trust within a unit is meaningless:

I was trained to fight,
To kill and to die
But never thought that I'd be fighting
Someone on my side

Yates has made numerous music videos, some of performances and others more illustrative of the songs. "Yellow Ribbon" (noted above) is set in front of a recruiting station, with Yates playing a banjo. The more-active "Land of the Free" (released July 4, 2017) is in "honor of those for whom this is not the 'Land of the Free.'" It is an attack on corporate greed, consumerism, militarism, and any force that restricts personal freedom. As Yates skips through Boulder's streets draped in an American flag, she.sings "you'll be convicted for your convictions" and "you'll be tried for tryin' to speak the truth." The video ends with Yates bound with duct tape with a

strip of tape over her mouth. On the strip is written "patriot," suggesting that in the current political climate the real patriots, the truth-tellers, have to be silenced and held in check.

What Emily Yates says about her work could also be applied to artists Vince Gabriel and Jason Moon: "Through my art, I express my many opinions and observations, casually brushing aside social stigma in the interest of breaking down communication barriers and shining light on the many ties that bind humans together."

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INTERVIEW WITH EMILY YATES

Larry Abbott: To start, I was just wondering about your poems "I Am the Savage" and "The Yellow Ribbon." How did they come about?

Emily Yates: "I Am the Savage" was a long time ago now, but I was looking through photos that I had taken during my first deployment and thinking about how we had turned the city of Baghdad into complete rubble. Yet, we were calling the people there backwards, or savages, or just all kinds of derogatory names.

I was thinking how that was actually the opposite of what it was because only savages would go in and bomb a complete civilization, a city, a metropolitan area full of civilians. Then, mock or criticize those civilians for having to make the

best of it.

I started to think about how we as American soldiers, as U.S. soldiers, were not any better than these individuals whose homes we were occupying. In fact, we were invaders. So, I had a lot of guilt and shame around my participation there, seeing a place where civilization was formed, the cradle of civilization at the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, being reduced to complete rubble.

As far as "Yellow Ribbon," it was really almost a gut reaction. I had been involved in a lot of conversations with other veterans right around the time I wrote that song, and talking about the disconnect between people saying thank you for your service and displaying these yellow ribbons, but then not being interested in hearing about our actual experiences or opinions about the war, or asking us how we were doing, or really saying anything other than "thank you, now move along."

The yellow ribbon, to me, was sort of emblematic of that attitude, even though I know there are plenty of people who really mean it sincerely. I think many of those people are just as misled by our government as I was.

LA: You seem to be attacking the hypocrisy or phony patriotism of some civilians.

EY: Yes and no, because I understand the hypocrisy and the phony patriotism. To those people, it might not seem hypocritical or phony. They are products of a very effective national indoctrination system. They came by their perspectives honestly. I was pretty angry when I wrote that song and maybe didn't have as much empathy for those people as I do now. But it was more of just "pay attention." If you really want to be patriotic and say thank you, pay attention because none of this death and destruction needs to be happening, and it shouldn't be.

The military is a job. It’s not a service. It’s a job. We join because we need a job. We’re told that it’s some kind of noble job, but it’s not. That’s what they say so that we don’t feel bad about all the horrible things we’re being trained to do.

Some people do really have a willingness to serve, but they wouldn’t do that shit for free. I think of the work that I’m doing now, speaking out, as more of a service than anything I did in the military. That was a job I did to get money for school and life security, to get out of my hometown and have some new experiences.

But it’s a sacrifice of your own personal freedom, so I encourage people to acknowledge the sacrifice. But saying thank you, thank you for anything, it doesn’t make any sense to me. You don’t thank someone for working at McDonald’s. They’re actually feeding you. You don’t thank someone for working in a nonprofit. That’s service. You don’t thank someone for going and picking up trash on the side of the road.

Why are we thanking anyone for not having any better option than the military? Or for not thinking very clearly about what’s going on? Maybe I’m sorry for your pain. Or, how are you? Or, welcome home. Or, I’m sorry you were deceived. I’m sorry you were used.

The thanking makes me uncomfortable because the military hasn’t done anybody any favors. At all. Whether or not we’re paid for it at all. We’re not doing anything positive for freaking anyone. Other than Dick Cheney, maybe.

LA: You also do photography with a variety of different subjects. They seem to be a little disparate. You have some war photographs on one hand, and then nature on the other hand.

EY: Yeah. I try to think of myself as a multi-polar person. Maybe not bipolar. It’s got such a negative connotation. I

feel like too often, we humans are pressured to define ourselves as being one thing or another thing. I love butterflies, and I care about militarism.

I think that acknowledging the multiplicity of humans is something I try to do all the time. I try to give myself permission to be as many people as I need to be. I think the more we do that, the less we run the risk of erasing parts of people that we don't want to see.

LA: Your songs reflect that multiplicity. Some are cynical, some are critical, satirical, whimsical, political. Would this be accurate, that your songs have this multiplicity to them?

EY: I'm even veering into hopeful in the next album that I'm working on.

LA: How did you get into songwriting?

EY: I started writing songs just by accident, in a way. I was learning to play the ukulele and I had been listening to a lot of Kimya Dawson and Bob Dylan. I became aware of how songs can be anything.

The thing I loved about Kimya Dawson's songs is that they sound so sweet and cute, and they often say such powerful and provocative things. Her song, "Loose Lips," was one that I first heard when I was deployed.

It was absolutely adorable and she had the lyric, it was, "My warpaint is Sharpie ink and I'll show you how much my shit stinks." Let's see. "I'll tell you what I think because my thoughts and words are powerful. They think we're disposable, well both my thumbs opposable are spelled out on a double word and triple letter score."

She had the line, "Fuck Bush. And I'll say fuck Bush and fuck this war." She said it so cutely, and I was like, yeah. Let's just say things cute. I listened to that and I was like, yeah.

How do you be angry at that voice? How do you be angry at that song?

So, when I was learning to play the ukulele, I was practicing three different chords and thought, I bet I could put some words in here and that would make it easier to practice, and more fun. So, I did. I put in words that were an answer to the question people were always asking me at that time, as I had just gotten married.

Which was, “When are you gonna have a baby? Are you gonna have babies? Are you gonna have kids? When are you having babies?” I was just like, my answer was always, “I’ve got so much to do. How do you think I have time to have kids right now?” I would answer these questions over and over, and try to be polite.

So, when I was practicing my ukulele, I just started with, “I don’t want to have a baby,” and went from there, and wrote what I think is probably my most vulgar song that I’ve ever written.

LA: This is true.

EY: But it was cute enough to where people just kind of laughed, instead of hating me when I was done singing it. So, thank you Kimya Dawson for the influence, and thank you other people for asking me questions I don’t want to answer except in a song.

LA: You’ve mentioned that it’s better, maybe more powerful, to use humor in a song even though the topic is serious, rather than beating people over the head with a club about the topic.

EY: Yeah, I’ve always tried to use humor almost as a defense mechanism really because if you say things people don’t want to hear in an aggressive way, then they become aggressive back. But if you can make it a joke, then they laugh a little bit and maybe the proclivity toward aggression dissipates a

little bit. Maybe people are more open to hearing what you have to say if you can make them laugh while you say it.

LA: Were you a musical person growing up? What led you to the ukulele? You're a self-proclaimed "next ukulele superstar."

EY: I was not a musical person growing up, other than singing, which I did in choirs and such. My mom tried to teach me a couple of different instruments when I was a kid, but I didn't pick it up quickly. I didn't have very good hand/eye coordination. I didn't have any good rhythm, and my mom got very frustrated with me at a young age. I decided that I was just never going to be able to play an instrument, I guess.

Everyone else in my family played instruments. My brother is a fantastic musician. My mom plays cello and guitar. My dad plays hammered dulcimer and a bunch of other stuff. I never played any instruments.

Then, I started dating my now ex-husband, who was a musician, a multi-instrumentalist, and he happened to have a ukulele that he never played because he was always playing other things. But he had this ukulele and I was like, "This is so cute. I want to play it!" He was like, "Okay. Here's how you play a couple of chords." I was like, "Great."

But I didn't have rhythm until one of his bandmates decided that he wanted to go on this trip to Africa, to Ghana, and record an album. Even though I was kind of pissed that he scheduled it during the time my new husband and I had taken for our honeymoon and invited him, I was like, all right. That's kind of rude, but sure, let's go to Ghana. Fine. I don't play any instruments, but I had never been there. Why the fuck not? Sure. Let's do that. Then, we'll go to Italy. Okay. Great.

So we went to Ghana. His bandmate had set up these drumming and dancing workshops that we had to get up ridiculously early for every morning. He had set up different levels of drumming

workshops. The real musicians were in the advanced drumming. Then, the wives were in the beginning drumming class to keep us busy.

So, we did three or four days of drumming workshops, and it turns out muscle memory is a thing. I got rhythm, all of a sudden. I came back from Ghana, we went to Italy.

I picked up a ukulele at a music shop in Venice and I started strumming it. I was like, holy shit! I can strum! Neat. Then, when we got back, I picked up the ukulele again and started practicing, and wrote my first couple songs. No one's been able to shut me up ever since. Now, I also play the banjo, the bass. There you go.

LA: You called yourself a folk-punk singer. What do you mean by that?

EY: I've since learned that there's a term called anti-folk that a couple of other artists, like Ed Hamell or I think Ani DiFranco, probably relate to that is a better descriptor. I related to punk because I felt like punk rockers were also putting messages in with their songs that a lot of people didn't want to hear.

I related more to that because a lot of folk songs I knew were very sweet and earnest. I'm very earnest, and I think my sound is kind of sweet, but I'm not really, because I tend to veer more toward sarcasm than actual deep earnestness in a lot of my songs. I tend to put a lot more winking in than a lot of my favorite folk singers. I was like well, I'm not quite folk. I'm kind of folk, but I'm not quite folk.

I love punk. I listen to the Dead Kennedys and the Ramones, and whoever. I related more to that sort of aggressive style than to "the answer is blowing in the wind," for example.

Even though I love Bob Dylan, misogynist though he is. That's a whole other conversation. Although that did inspire me to

write some parodies of Bob Dylan's songs, called Boob Dylan.

LA: You said that you were influenced by Boob, I mean, Bob Dylan, but also Jonathan Richman and Eric Idle. What do you draw from those two?

EY: I feel like from Jonathan Richman, I draw a lot of openness and wonder, and a lot of I don't give a shit what you think about this style that I'm doing. I'm just gonna do it, and it might not be what you're expecting, but fine, with a lot of "wide-eyed here I am" type of vibe.

Eric Idle, I grew up with Monty Python. I grew up with the songs of Monty Python and the comedy of Eric Idle's songs. "The Galaxy Song," "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," stuff like that that were very pointed and profound, but hilarious. I really feel like I need a solid amount of profundity in my ridiculousness. So, that's what I draw from Eric Idle. Also, just his lack of give-a-shit about who you might be pissing off.

LA: You were in the military for six years. What led you to that decision?

EY: Well, it's funny you should ask because I just finished my book draft, which is inspired by a lot of questions like that, and details my journey. So as not to discourage you from reading it . . .it's essentially inspired by all the questions people usually ask me about being in the military. Why did you join? What did you do? What was it like being a woman in the military? What was it like being deployed? Did you see combat? Were you on the front lines? I feel like it's important to show people how there really are no front lines in the current occupations that the United States is involved in.

People usually ask this blanket question, what was that like? And I'm just like, well, buy me a drink and sit down. How much time do you have? Now, I was like, fuck it. I'm just going to put all of the answers in stories and show rather than tell. I

don’t want to beat people over the head with my opinions about my experience. I just want to explain what I went through and show what I went through. You can see for yourself how I came to the conclusions I did.

Last night I just finished editing my most final draft, as I’m calling it. I feel good about it and started to send it around to whatever agents, and try to work on getting it published.

It’s around 53,000 words, so digestible, ideally. I’m not trying to write frickin’ *War and Peace*. Maybe the condensed version.

Anyway, the military seemed like the best idea at the time, a way to get college money, the job training. I wanted to be a journalist. A recruiter offered me a job as an Army journalist, which is the alternate title for Army public affairs specialist, which, if I had actually been a journalist at that time, I would have been like, hey, those two jobs shouldn’t be the same thing, actually. I learned the technical skills of journalism, but not the critical skills.

LA: You’ve said that you use humor or satire to express the serious. You wrote an essay, “A veteran’s affair: how dealing with the VA is like dating a douche bag.” The essay certainly uses humor to make your point. How did that essay come about and what were you trying to?

EY: You know what’s so funny? I had totally forgotten about writing that until you mentioned it. I think I came back from a really fucking frustrating experience at the VA, and it felt like every bad relationship I’d ever had, because I couldn’t get away from it. I had to deal with this entity that could be so much of a better institution than it is.

I have a love/hate relationship with the VA. I’m glad that I have access to healthcare from doctors and nurses who are familiar with the military experience. But at the same time, we don’t have another option.

There’s a push right now towards privatizing the VA. They’re not coming right out and saying we’re privatizing the VA. They’re just contracting out and contracting out, and underfunding the VA, and understaffing the VA, and calling it things like the Veteran’s Choice Program.

Well, if you can’t get an appointment for months, you have this amazing option of going to one of our network providers. It’s framed as this option, but what needs to be happening is the VA needs to be fully staffed and fully funded because there’s absolutely no reason for it to take months to get an appointment. There’s absolutely no reason.

And the reason we need the VA is because we need health professionals who are intimately and specifically acquainted with the experiences that veterans have. Most civilian doctors aren’t, and you have to tell them all these things. You have to explain to them.

In the military, they pretty much train you to not take your own health seriously because any time you seek help, they act like you’re trying to get over and game the system, and to get out of something. So, soldiers specifically, because I don’t really have as much experience with the other branches, are put in these positions where even if there’s something legitimately, terribly wrong with us, we’re forced to downplay it.

If we speak frankly about the seriousness of what we’re experiencing, if we are able to actually give ourselves permission to have something wrong with us, half the time we’re told that we’re making it up, or we’re exaggerating. Or, we’re forced to exaggerate because we won’t be taken seriously unless it’s seen as a huge, huge problem.

If you go into the VA and you’re like, “Hey, I’m having some trouble sleeping,” they’re like, “Well, what’s your pain level on the scale of 1 to 10?” You’re like, “Uh, I don’t know. It’s

1 or 2.” “Okay.” You immediately aren’t taken seriously. If you’re not in excruciating pain and you don’t look like you’re actually falling apart, they just stop caring or stop asking questions.

It’s like, well, maybe you’re not sleeping because you’re plagued by thoughts about your experiences. Maybe you’re not sleeping because you’re depressed. Maybe your depression is legitimate because you were part of a machine that de-humanized you. You are never able to get to the root of the problem because if you were, then every single problem would come down to how you’ve been treated like—one of my veteran friends said it best—a cog in a machine that hates you. Or a natural outcome of being in these situations that nobody should be put in in the first place.

I think that the past administration, Obama didn’t address the fact that literally every person who goes to a combat zone comes back with some kind of post-traumatic stress. It’s not a disorder, it’s a natural outcome. People are treated like they’re broken because they have post-traumatic stress because they’ve been in traumatic and stressful situations. That is an absolute dehumanization. It’s an absolute denial of the fact that these situations are inherently traumatizing.

Trump created a war crime, as did Obama. Obama bombed Yemen for his entire eight years in office. He didn’t end the Iraq war, he just privatized it. It’s absolutely horrifying to see the way these politicians talk about the situations that they put actual human beings in and expect them to come out of it okay.

Nobody is okay. None of us are okay. Some of us are better at functioning than others. Some of us are more resilient than others. But resilience isn’t a good thing. It’s just some of us have gotten better at dealing with the impact of trauma, or we’re not as traumatized, or we’re not traumatized in the same ways.

Pretty much the whole reason I do the work I do is because I am wracked with guilt if I don't. I feel like I was a mouthpiece of the Evil Empire, and the only way I can make myself feel okay about it is by trying to correct that narrative, and use my entire life to do so.

I don't feel like I can go work for any person who isn't okay with me being extremely vocal about exactly what I'm seeing. That has made it pretty much impossible for me to have any other job other than myself, or any other boss than myself.

LA: You've said that, "I want to use my experience in the military to make my civilian life richer and to help those who are struggling." So, you feel that your music can help in that process?

EY: I feel like if it's helping me, then it's hopefully helping other people. Because I see the fact that most humans are a lot more alike than we are different. Nobody's experience is completely unique.

Yes, there are differences in the specifics of what we've gone through. But if I feel comforted by a thing, then I generally conclude that someone else out there in the world can also be helped. I see the work I do to heal myself as instrumental and my ability to be a better person in the world.

If the songs I write make me feel better, then that will hopefully reflect on the way I'm able to communicate with others and understand them. I'm still an asshole a lot of the time, don't get me wrong. And I'm working on that.

I feel like if I can write these songs that help me make sense of things, and if they can help anybody else make sense of things, and feel like someone else in the world understands and is able to articulate the fuckery of this shit better in a way that helps them communicate it to others, then that's a thing that I can do.

I don’t really see any other purpose to life other than to live it, and to live it in the most authentic way possible. And to be as kind as possible, even though I do struggle deeply with kindness a lot. I feel like ideally, if I can write songs that help people, maybe that will make up for the times when I’m an asshole. I don’t know.

LA: Let me ask about your music videos. One that struck me was “Land of the Free” because at the end, you’re bound and gagged for your freedom of speech, or so-called freedom of speech. What were you trying to express in the song and the video?

EY: I was just trying to express what I’ve experienced. You get to maintain the illusion of freedom as long as you don’t actually use the freedoms that you’re told that you have. I happened to have a couple of new friends at the time who were a photographer and a videographer, and they believed in me.

I was like, “You know, Fourth of July is coming up. I’ve got this song I’ve been wanting to make a video of for a while. Why don’t we get all America-ed up and go prance around in downtown Boulder?”

LA: Your first album, 2012, *I’ve Got Your Folk Songs Right Here*, includes the “I Don’t Want to Have a Baby,” which is probably responsible for your parental advisory sticker. Two songs, “In Your Mind” and “Shut Your Face,” reflect anger against a certain personality type.

EY: Well, the parental advisory thing, it was really just like, I just put that on there to be silly because I don’t think of anything as being not for children.

I think if you can say it, say it. Truth shouldn’t be restricted to adults. Kids are more honest than everyone. I just thought it would be a funny thing to put it on there. Especially because “The Bad Word Song” is also on there, which was inspired by George Carlin’s bit about the seven words you can’t say on television. I think I put every little word in

this album that nobody wants me to be saying in front of their kids, so why not just do that?

But yeah, it was really a response… All those songs were just things that I had always wanted to say, and felt like I could just put them into a cute song and say them.

LA: "The Please Don't F with Me This Christmas" is along those lines.

EY: Yeah. I felt like I should write a holiday song. I got to get in on this holiday song market, but I don't feel like I want to say the same things everyone else does. Honestly, the holidays are a time of enormous conflict for a lot of people and I felt like that was something that I could bring to the table, and maybe other people would relate. I write the songs I write as a way of finding my people.

LA: In the "Happy Ever After" song, you seem reconciled to life's ambiguities, and to the ups and the downs of life.

EY: That one actually was the last song that I recorded with my now ex-husband, ironically before I realized we were going to be splitting up. I had started writing it a while back. Sometimes I just get lines in my head and start putting them down.

Then, a friend of mine, another musician, and his partner, who was also a musician, they were in a band together, had just split up. And another friend was going through some relationship issues.

The one friend was having a hard time, and I ran into him at a coffee shop. Before he left the coffee shop, he pulled out a piece of paper and said, "Here, write a song today." I was like, "All right. Well, here's an idea. You write down a line for me, I'll write down a line for you. We'll trade and we'll see what happens."

So, he wrote this line down and handed it to me, and I felt like I could use this to finish that song that I'd just written a fragment of. It all sort of fell into place. Then, I ended up recording it with his bandmate, who produced it. I sent it to him and said, "Here, maybe this will be comforting."

It was prophetic because I ended up going through a pretty horrible divorce after that, and actually released the song no longer on even speaking terms with my ex. So, it was interesting. It kind of forced me to come to a place of acceptance, honestly. Like oh, neat. I wrote my own divorce song. Great. Good job, Saul.

LA: You also did a kids' album in 2014, *Don't Kid Yourself*, using your alter ego, Fancy von Pancerton. Some of the songs are reassuring, like "Don't Be Scared" and "Happy Heart." "Go Out and Play" is about importance of imagination. "Just Because You Can" is a kids' version of an adult song, a couple of words changed. How did you come to do the children's album?

EY: The children's album was a therapy project. After I was brutally arrested at a demonstration in 2013, I was feeling really cynical and despondent. When I was on tour that summer, right before that arrest happened, one of my friends had told me he wanted to come to my show but he couldn't because he was just going through a pretty nasty divorce and his daughter was having a hard time with it. I was like, oh man, that's terrible. I feel like I want to write her a song.

So I wrote "Sometimes Life," the shortened title of "Sometimes Life Sucks." I wrote that and I was like, man. This is actually a kind of song that I wish I had heard when I was a kid. What other songs do I wish I had heard when I was a kid? So, I just started writing songs for my own inner child, my own past self.

Then, after that arrest, I got back to California and a friend of mine was like, “Man, I’m just so sorry you had to go through all that. Is there anything I could do to support you?” I said, “Well, you seem to have this really cool little home studio that you’ve created as a hobby. Would you be interested in helping me record some of these songs that I’ve written for kids?”

Of course, he said, “Yeah! Let’s do that!” I had only written four of them at the time. It was over the course of about a year, I’d go up to his place on Tuesdays and we would just track songs. My then-husband would come in and play all the different instruments. I had a couple other friends who played too.

It was really a labor of love and a therapy project. There are 13 songs. The last song in it, “Arise,” is one that I had written with my friend Bonnie. This song is so sweet. It’s just not like any of my other songs. I wouldn’t put it on any of my other albums, but I bet it would work on this one. So, I recorded it for the kids.

All in all, I didn’t want to release an album for kids under the name Emily Yates, and have them Google me and come up with all the songs about porn, and drugs, and militarism, and get traumatized. So, Fancy von Pancerton emerged. I also decided to make a coloring book. So, the drawings I did for the coloring book were also therapeutic.

Yeah, it was a therapy project for my inner child that I’ve been giving to all my friends’ kids. I made a little bit of money on it because I basically recorded it for free.

LA: On the opposite end of the spectrum is “You Are the Enemy,” on *Warrior Songs*. There is a lot of anger and bitterness in that one.

EY: Jason [Moon] asked me to write a song about military sexual trauma and I tentatively agreed. At first, I was

annoyed with him. I was like, how do you just ask someone to write a song about that? That's fucked up, it's terrible, it's traumatizing. Fuck!

As I started writing it, I realized that I couldn't put any humor into it. There's absolutely nothing funny about it. Absolutely nothing. Even just thinking about my own experience, I was just getting angrier and angrier. So, the song that came out was, I think, the only really purely angry song I've ever written that has no sense of humor and ends with a group primal scream because that was the only thing I felt like it could have. I specifically wanted other women musicians to play on that song with me. Michelle the drummer is absolutely fantastic, and Julie the bass player, they're fantastic musicians.

It was an intense song to record. I needed to smoke a lot of weed after that song, after I recorded it, and do a lot of long walks in the woods. But I was glad to do it.

LA: "Smoke Break" also recounts your military experience, where there is a split between having a cigarette and shooting the bull, and then a few minutes later, we go back to war.

EY: "Smoke Break" actually started as a poem that I wrote in a Warrior Writers workshop at an Iraq Veterans Against the War convention in Baltimore, I believe in 2012. We were just doing a workshop and the prompt was to take a small detail of your military experience and expand on it because there's so much power in the details.

I tend to write a lot about concepts, but I don't tend to focus in on details too much. The detail that immediately sprung to mind was sitting around having a smoke in a war zone.

It was like a tiny window of normalcy or mundanity in this absolutely surreal experience. The smoking area was right by the headquarters. We would just be sitting there and hear

mortars land, and talk about who had been killed, and about our shitty bosses, and how this fucking war was like Groundhog Day, where today is just one shitty day after another, the same shitty day every day.

The smoke breaks were the only breaks that you were able to take. In the Army, you can't just be like, I'm going on break. That doesn't exist. You go on break to smoke cigarettes so that you don't start screaming at people, and that's respected. Okay, you've got a nicotine addiction, go take care of that. Please.

I smoked when I was a teenager in high school. It was the thing that kids like me did. But I stopped during reform school. Then, when I was in the military, my first year in the Army, everyone smoked. It was the only way to get to take a break.

So I started taking smoke breaks. They were the one opportunity to regain a tiny sliver of sanity in the day. I don't smoke cigarettes anymore; I quit a couple of years after I got out. I smoke weed now.

I've actually started getting better at weaning myself off of that a little bit, as a dependency thing. I still love it, of course, but trying to not be as dependent on it as I have been.

LA: Just to finish up, what is the status of the "Try Not To Be a Dick" movement?

EY: Well, I still play the song every time in a show. I add new verses as appropriate to reflect current situations. The global "Try Not To Be a Dick" movement has a Facebook page, which I discovered is the way to start a global movement. You have to have a Facebook page and a hashtag, and you're good. I mostly use it to share pertinent relevant memes and articles that I think speak to the idea of trying not to be a dick, both the personal and the political, and the funny and furious

ends of the spectrum, and all over the place.

I could post that on my personal page, and I do a lot of the time, but I feel like having this page where I share all that stuff takes my face away from it and puts the idea in the forefront, which I like better.