

# Praying at America's Altar: A Review of Phil Klay's *MISSIONARIES*, by Adrian Bonenberger

One of the first books I read was given to me by my father, who got it from his father—a children's version of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Opening the tome in the garret that was our home, I'd be transported to the vastness of Homer's Aegean. A giant tome that has fit awkwardly on my bookshelf since, the book's pages demanded effort and dexterity from my young arms, each revealing some new story or chapter in the war between Greece and Troy, and, later, Odysseus' long and tortured return to Ithaca.

Beautifully illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen, the book has a distinctive look that was clearly intended to evoke black-figure and red-figure paintings found on pottery from Greece's Classical period and earlier. Illustrations often take up more than one page, with action swirling from left to right, and back again, a chorus between the characters, achieving an effect on the viewer not unlike that produced when walking around the urns and amphorae that unfurl stories of Achilles, Hector, and clever Odysseus in museums today.



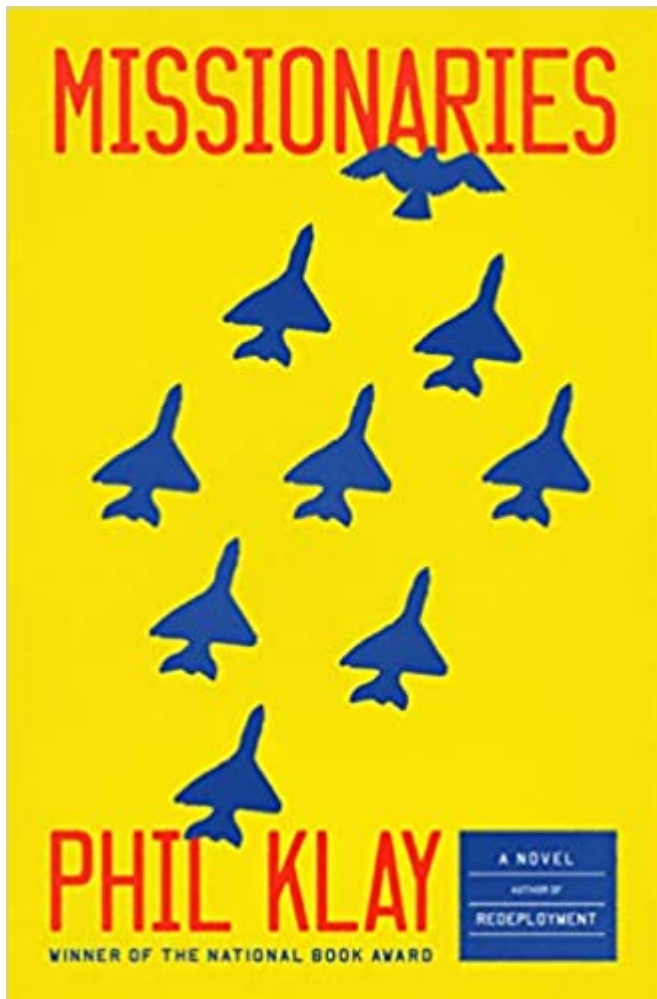


A two-page spread early on in the book introduces the characters together, more or less in context. The pro-Greek gods are arrayed on the left, above the Greek ships, while Greek heroes form a single-file line walking rightward across the page and onto the next, where they encounter the Trojan heroes and other significant Trojan characters in a stylized building. Above that building float the gods who support Troy.

It is a childish device, to introduce all of the characters immediately, and in their context, but this is a children's book. On those two pages, which almost serve as a glossary, I spent much time—either flipping back to cross-reference my understanding of a particular event, or simply to understand who fit in where with which story. With all of the love and care that went into building this book *for children*, it is not surprising that a war or wars that occurred nearly three thousand years ago remain entrenched within cultural memory. Indeed, they have come to form a great part of the literary basis of western civilization, and helped shape my own development.

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Phil Klay's [\*Missionaries\*](#) does not introduce its characters all at once, in part because Mr. Klay assumes that his readers are not children who lack object permanence and are capable of holding thoughts in their heads for longer than a minute. Instead, *Missionaries* offers a sophisticated narrative template, the shape of which organizes further chapters, and accomplishes the goal of stitching disparate storylines and characters together. The point of this device is to bind the journey of its characters together thematically—to create a plot driven by ethical choices rather than linear, temporal accident.



In this sense, *Missionaries* occupies a place in western literature most sensible to readers 100 years ago. It is a modernist book: things happen for reasons, and rewards are organized around a central ethical framework. It is a moral book: the bad come to bad ends or are thwarted from achieving their plans, and the good are afforded some measure of satisfaction through their choices.

The first character readers meet is a Colombian child growing up in the rural south. He's devastated by war, a kind of avatar of victimization, losing his parents and home before being rescued from the streets by a Christian missionary. The story moves back and forth between this child's evolution into a criminal during the 1980s and 1990s and the life of a female conflict journalist covering Afghanistan in 2015.

Klay focuses on these two characters' arcs in the book's first section. Later, the story expands to include others—most

significantly a special operations soldier who goes into the intelligence sphere, a former U.S. soldier who becomes a mercenary, a paramilitary leader turned drug lord, and a well-bred Colombian officer from a military family and his wife and daughter.

The final section of *Missionaries*, its denouement, is satisfying in a way that many modernist books are not. Klay avoids the impulse to “get cute” with the story—each of the characters is treated with dignity and respect, even the characters who make bad and selfish choices with their lives, and each one of their endings feels earned. When the journalist is presented with an opportunity to sleep with the mercenary—the two had been in some sort of romantic relationship in the past—what happens between them is both natural and surprising. The Colombian child turned criminal discovers an opportunity to atone for his choices, and how he takes advantage of it is perfectly in keeping with his trajectory.

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*Missionaries* carefully avoids endorsing a particular perspective or world-view, which is refreshing given the contemporary moment—characters are rarely driven by politics, nationalism, or philosophy. Perhaps it can be said that *Missionaries* is not anti-religion. The moments when many characters are at their most empathetic—moments that cannot be discarded later when characters behave selfishly or with cruelty toward others—often involve grace. The hidden hand of God is often seen deflecting or guiding bullets, presenting paths toward redemption, and, ultimately, offering mercy. Not every character takes the redemptive path, not every character accepts the mercy that’s offered. That is part of life, and Klay has represented that sad, tender part of the human experience well. Any adult, looking back over the scope of their lives, will easily find some regretted words or choices, a chance at grace missed. Klay’s characters, too, are beholden

to but not quite fully owned by previous choices to a greater or lesser degree that's magnified as successive generations within a family make choices that accumulate as the years pass.

This is most conspicuously true of the Colombian officer's family. The officer, an ambitious, cultured lieutenant colonel, has himself been affected by the political and military choices of his father, a disgraced general accused of war crimes carried out by soldiers under his command. This is explained as part of the country's fight against the FARC, a far-left communist insurgency group aligned with and inspired partly by Che Guevara. The effects of this longtime war are already known to readers, having been described in the book's first chapter, when the Colombian boy loses his family and village to fighting between the left and right, and the confusing criminal violence that arises in between. By the time the Colombian officer has a daughter of his own, Che has become a popular figure in the capital, a counter-cultural icon, a symbol of South American independence. His daughter has become enamored of a worldview in which the Colombian military is at best a handmaiden of American imperialism, and the FARC a kind of quixotic rebellion against that foreign (to Colombia) influence.

The hard work of the lieutenant colonel's father to do what seems right at the time—to battle the FARC—has become politically embarrassing, a liability during a time when political leaders are attempting to negotiate peace. The lieutenant colonel's own work training special operations to American standards in the war on drugs similarly comes to no spiritually uplifting end. But it is impossible to see what either man could have done differently in their lives.

Klay weaves his characters' arcs together slowly and imperceptibly, or reveals that they have been interwoven all along until all that is left are imperatives to act one way or another, selected out of expediency or faith. Those selected

out of the former tend to elevate characters professionally, while further ensnaring them in some greater, obscure plan—one operated or funded by the United States. Those selected out of the latter receive some sort of completion or absolution, and depart from the story.

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Here is the essence of Klay's project. Using fiction, he has sketched out an investigative piece no less important than the Pulitzer-Prize winning "Panama Papers." The contours of the book outline a series of behaviors and practices that, collectively, both define and circumscribe human action—what might, in previous centuries, have been understood as "fate." The characters inhabit those patterns, unconsciously, living out their lives and loves as best they can. Religion factors into this equation, as does class, ethnicity, sex, nationality, and gender. But the patterns run deeper, and are not accessible to the characters. Envisioned, felt, like some transcendent explanation to which none have access, the truth is exposed only to readers, like a divine boon. The name of that truth is "The United States of America."

Eventually, everything in *Missionaries* returns to the U.S. In mysterious ways, everyone gets drawn into America's orbit of wars and machinations—the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, the various named and unnamed contingency operations sprawling from sea to shining sea. A story that begins in Colombia ends, improbably enough, in an air-conditioned tactical operations center in Yemen. The role of some is to cover the wars, to write about them. Others create the wars, participating in their function as soldiers or officers on one side or another. Others yet fund them, or support them from afar. In this sense every American is a "missionary," and everyone who ends up taking a side, participating in the great global competition for influence, whether by birth or by choice, is a convert. America is its own God, its own religion, at least when it comes to the everyday, the mundane. America is the context in



which violence occurs, America is the bad end of the deal that gets offered to you at gunpoint in some destitute village; America is a romantic liaison in a hotel room with a trusted confidante; America is the family waiting patiently in Pennsylvania or Washington, D.C. America can get you into trouble, but it will get you out of trouble, too, if you suit America's obscure purposes. America is not grace—America is the novel itself, the entire complicated project. This is not political, it's not “anti-American” as some might say; it is, as Klay has presented it, a simple and unarguable fact at the center of everything happening in the world today as we know it.

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My grandfather was a diffident socialist. Largely apolitical, anti-war, having served in WWII, his socialism was the quiet, humanistic sort that started with certain fundamental assumptions and extrapolated from them ways of behaving toward and around others. The only time I recall him being worked up about a particular issue in a political way was to oppose my applying to West Point, threatening to disown me if I attended (who's to say I would have gotten in? I didn't apply).

Reading *Missionaries*, I realized that attending Yale was no different from attending West Point, on a certain level—or Dartmouth, where Klay went, or USC, from which my grandfather graduated thanks to the GI Bill. These places are, essentially, the same, in the way that Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Yemen, Venezuela, China, and America are the same, aspects of a megalithic overarching schema. Socialist, capitalist, communist, religious, atheist, opportunist, everyone inhabits some niche that feeds back into the center. You make choices—attending Yale or West Point or neither—and you live by them. You end up in a war zone, writing about it or fighting in it. Or you pay taxes, run numbers, open a small business, and your tax dollars are spent chasing the traumatized products of war from farmhouse to untenanted

farmhouse. *Missionaries* is about the wars, yes, but because the wars have come to define so much of what is and what we are, whether we like to talk about that or not, *Missionaries* is *us*, it's a 21<sup>st</sup> century Middlemarch, a 21<sup>st</sup> century *Iliad*.

Having spoken with my grandfather at great length while I was in university, and talked with him about his military experiences once I joined the Army, I feel confident that he would have loved this book, and seen in it as much value as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that he gave to my father. I enthusiastically recommend this to my grandfather, although he passed away thirteen years ago—his aesthetics led him to prefer nonfiction, but he would occasionally make exceptions—and I enthusiastically recommend it to anyone who has seen value in culture and civilization, who wants to better understand the world we live in today, and who values human life regardless of the choices that human makes. For although the structure of our world is not pleasant to many, and most of its poorest inhabitants, if there is any hope, it is that people from different backgrounds and cultural contexts can be kind to one another—that the logic of cynicism is not, after all, the only determinative mode of behavior possible on America's earth.

Klay, Phil. *Missionaries* (Penguin, 2020).

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## **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 he 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, dehumanization, 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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Hicks, Patrick. [\*In the Shadow of Dora: A Novel of the Holocaust and the Apollo Program\*](#), (Steven F. Austin State University Press, 2020).

Amery, Jean. *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a*

*Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Indiana University Press, 1966).

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## **Novel Excerpt: Elliot Ackerman's 'Red Dress in Black and White'**

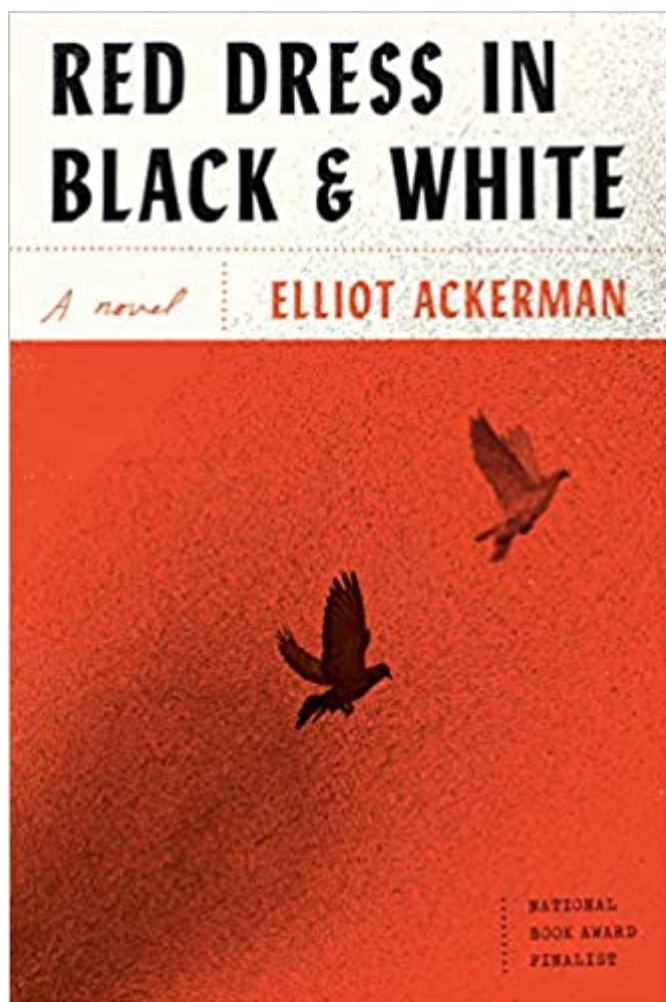
*That evening, at half past nine*

To William, the question of his mother is clear. The question of his father is more complicated, because there is Peter.

The night that they meet, William is about seven years old and his mother has brought him to one of Peter's exhibits. She hasn't said much to her son, just that she has an American friend, that he takes pictures and that the two of them are going to see that friend's art, which is very special. That's what she always calls it, *his art*.

His mother doesn't drive, at least not in this city, and in the taxi on the way there she keeps looking at her wristwatch. It isn't that they are late, but that she's anxious to arrive at the right time, which is not to say right on time. The apartment she's trying to find is off İstiklal Caddesi, which is a sort of Ottoman Grand Rue running through the heart of Istanbul, the place of William's birth but a home-in-exile to his mother, who, like her friend Peter, is American. As their cab crawls along Cevdet Paşa Caddesi, the seaside road which handrails the Bosphorus Strait, she stares out the window, her eyes brushed with a bluish cosmetic, blinking slowly, while she absently answers the boy's questions about where they are going and whom they'll meet there. William holds a game called

Simon on his lap. It is a palm-size disk divided into four colored panels—blue, red, green, yellow—that flashes increasingly complicated patterns, which reflect off the cab's night-darkened windows. The aim is to repeat those patterns. It was a gift from his father and his father has the high score, which he has instructed William to try to beat.



An allée of birch canopies their route and they skirt the high limestone walls of Dolmabahçe Palace. Their cab jostles in and out of first gear in the suffocating traffic until they break from the seaside road and switchback into altitudes of linden-, oak- and elm-forested hills. When the sun dips behind the hills, the lights come on in the city. Below them the waters of the Bosphorus, cold and pulling, turn from green-blue to just black. The boat lights, the bridge lights, the black-white contrast of the skyline reflecting off the water would come to remind the boy of Peter and, as his mother termed it,

his art.

After paying the fare, his mother takes him by the hand, dragging him along as they shoulder through the evening foot traffic trying to find their way. Despite the darkness eternal day lingers along the İstiklal, flightless pigeons hobble along the neon-lit boulevard, chestnuts smolder from the red-painted pushcarts on the street corners, the doughy smell of baked açma and simit hangs in the air. The İstiklal is cobblestone, she has worn heels for the occasion, and when she catches one in the grouting and stumbles into the crowd, she knocks a shopping bag out of another woman's hand. Standing from her knees, William's mother repeatedly apologizes and a few men reach under her arms to help her up, but her son quickly waves them away and helps his mother up himself. After that the two of them walk more slowly and she still holds his arm, but now she isn't dragging her son, and when the boy feels her lose balance once more, he grabs her tightly at the elbow and with the help of his steady grip she manages to keep on her feet.

They turn down a quiet side street, which aside from a few shuttered kiosks has little to recommend it. The apartment building they come to isn't much wider than its door. After they press the buzzer, a window opens several floors above. A man ducks his head into the bracing night and calls down to them in a high-pitched yet forceful voice, like air through a steel pinhole. He then blows them an invisible kiss, launching it off an open palm. William's mother raises her face to that kiss and then blows one back. The street smells bitterly of scents the boy doesn't yet recognize and it is filled with the halos of fluorescent lamps and suspect patches of wetness on the curbs and even the cinder-block walls. The buzzer goes off and William's mother shoulders open the door. Inside someone has hammered a plank across the elevator entry. It has been there long enough for the nail heads to rust. They climb up several floors where the brown paint scales from the brick.



The empty apartment building meets them with an uproar of scattering rats and the stairwell smells as bitter as the street.

A shuttle of unclasping locks receives his mother's knock at the apartment door and then the same man who had appeared in the window presses his face to the jamb. His gaze is level with the fastened chain and his eyes are pretty and spacious, as if hidden, well-apportioned rooms existed within them. The honey-colored light from inside the apartment shines on his skin. His eyebrows are like two black smudges. William notices the plucked bridge between them, and also his rectangular smile with its brilliantly white teeth. The man is uncommonly handsome, and William feels drawn to him, as if he can't quite resolve himself to look away.

The chain unlatches and then half a dozen or so men and broad-shouldered women spill across the apartment's threshold, pressing against William's mother, kissing her on the cheek, welcoming her. When they kiss William on the cheek, the harsh, glancing trace of the men's stubble scrapes against his fresh skin. The women begin a refrain of *Wonderful to see you, Cat*, and while they escort her inside they keep saying *wonderful* over and over in their guttural voices as if that superlative is the last word of a spell that will transform them into the people they wish to be.

A blue haze of cigarette smoke hugs the ceiling. Tacked to the sitting room wall, next to a white hard hat displayed like a trophy, is a poster advertising this exhibit. It is a portrait Peter shot of one of the women. She was photographed shirtless from the shoulders up, her mascara runs down her cheeks, her lip is split, a small gash zigzags across her forehead, and her wig—a tight bob symmetrical as a rocketeer's helmet—is missing a few tufts of hair. That summer, protests had shaken the city, shutting it down for weeks. Hundreds of thousands had squared off with the authorities. William's dominant memories of those events aren't the television images of riot

police clubbing the environmental activists who opposed a new shopping mall at Taksim Square's Gezi Park—seventy-four acres of neglected lawns with a crosshatch of dusty concrete walkways shaded by dying trees—or even the way so many everyday people surprised themselves by joining the protesters' ranks, but instead William remembers his father pacing their apartment on his cellphone, unable to drive into the office because of the many blocked streets as he negotiated a construction deal on a different shopping mall across town.

By the time the protests had finished, the city's long-persecuted queer community had assumed its vanguard. This caused one columnist, a friend of Peter's, to observe, "Among those who struggled for their rights at the police barricades at Gezi Park, the toughest 'men' were the transgender women." And so, Peter had a name for his exhibit. In the poster, battered though she is, his subject's eyes hold a certain, scalding defiance, as if she can read the words beneath her: *The Men of Gezi, An Exhibit*. As William's mother wanders into the apartment she becomes indistinguishable from the others, blending perfectly into this crowd.

. . .

Catherine and William have arrived at Peter's exhibit right on time, which is to say that they have arrived early. The apartment belongs to Deniz, the one who had appeared in the window to let them in. His date, who takes their coats, is a university-age girl with a pageboy haircut. She is as beautiful as Deniz is handsome. Her mouth is lipsticked savagely, and with it she offers Catherine and William a thin smile before retreating to the sofa, where she stares absorbedly into her phone. Soon others arrive and Deniz comes and goes from a small galley kitchen off the sitting room, where his guests pick at the food he's elegantly laid out on the thinnest of budgets. Not much wine, but carefully selected bottles from his favorite bodegas, a few plates of fresh

sliced vegetables on ice bought end-of-day for a bargain at last Sunday's market, small boxes of expensive chocolates to ornament each table. William can't keep track of who is who, as there are several Hayals, as well as many Öyküs and Nurs. Their self-assigned names affirm their identity, but in this political climate also serve the double purpose of noms de guerre. Who knows if one Öykü was born an Arslan and one Hayal was born an Egemen. Why so many of them had chosen the same names, he couldn't say. What seemed most important was that they had chosen.

His mother makes him a small plate and sits him in a chair by the window. While William picks at his dinner, the scented and beautiful crowd swarms around her, saying *Cat that* and *Cat this*. To take her son here, without his father's permission, so that she can be called Cat instead of Catherine, which is what everyone else calls her, endears her to the Men of Gezi. She has made a choice, just as they have. Having lost sight of his mother, William removes the game Simon from his pocket. He sits by the window and he plays.

Soon everyone has arrived and the apartment becomes too warm. Deniz walks to where William sits and heaves open the window. William glances up from his game. His eyes are drawn to Deniz's muscled arms, his rounded shoulders, how strong he is. A hint of breeze passes through. Deniz cracks a door catty-corner to the window and whispers inside, "Our guests are here." Nobody replies and he says it again. Then a man's voice answers, "Yeah, okay," and Deniz shuts the door and returns to mingle in the crowd, where William has lost his mother.

Whatever this night is about exists just beyond that door, so William stands from his chair by the window. Carefully, he turns the knob. The hinges open smoothly, without a trace of noise. Inside there is light: white walls, white floor and ceiling. The room is transformed into a gleaming cube. The scent of fresh paint hangs heavily around Peter, who stands in the room's center, his back to the door, surrounded by his

portraits. William steps behind him and watches.

Peter has almost hung the exhibit. A pair of photos lean one against each of his legs. They are printed in the same dimensions as the other portraits, twelve by eighteen, and the finishes are a monochromatic black-and-white matte. In front of him a single empty nail protrudes from the wall. He combs his fingers through his longish brown curls, which he often teases into a globe of frizz while concentrating. He cranes his neck forward, as if trying to stoop to a normal person's height, which bends him into the shape of a question mark. He has pulled his glasses onto the bridge of his nose and his alternating gaze dips into their lenses and then shifts above them. None of this seems to help Peter resolve the decision with which he's wrestling. William watches him for a while, until Peter feels the boy's eyes on his back despite the many sets of photographed eyes that encircle him.

Peter turns around. His scrutiny is slow and accurate. "Who are you?" he asks. As an afterthought, he adds, "And shut the door."

William does as requested but remains silent.

"Wait, are you Cat's boy?" Peter combs his fingers back through his hair and he puckers his nose toward his eyes as if the remark had left a spoiled, indigestible taste on his lips. "She brought you," he says, like an accusation, or statement, or even a compliment. William can't figure out which, so, finally, he says, "Yes."

"Come here," says Peter. "I need your help with something." He has transformed the cramped bedroom into a pristine gallery, and William steps carefully through the space Peter has created. "I can't decide on the last photo." Then Peter crouches and tilts out the two frames balanced against his legs. William crouches alongside him. One of the two photographs is similar to all of the others: a man with long,

stringy hair wearing makeup looks back, a bruise darkens his cheek, a cut dimples his chin, he wears a hard hat like the one hanging on the other room's wall by the poster. Though he stares directly at the camera, his eyes are not set on parallel axes—one wanders menacingly out of the frame.

The subject of the other photograph is beautiful.

Peter has shot this young woman in the same dimensions and lighting as the rest of his portraits. A sheet of dark hair falls straight to her shoulders. There is a bruise around her eye. Up from her chin and along her jaw she also has a cut. She wears a bright dress, whose shade in black and white is exactly the same shade as the cut. A tote bag hangs from her shoulder. Her eyes fix on William clearly, in a way that feels familiar to him, the reflection in her pupil serving as a kind of a mirror.

"This one's a bit different," Peter says. "She was born a woman."

Being a boy, William doesn't understand the exhibit, the nature of Peter's subjects or why he would mix in a single photograph of this one particular woman. But William knows the effect the second photograph has on him. He tells Peter that he likes it best. "You sure?" asks Peter.

He says that he is.

Peter hoists the last photograph onto the wall. As he takes a step back, he crosses his arms and examines it a final time. Then he crouches next to William. Peter has pushed his glasses all the way up his nose and his hands are planted firmly on his knees. "We'd better go find your mother," he says.

. . .

Twenty photographs hang inside of the gallery. About the same number of people mingle in the kitchen and sitting room.

William recognizes many of the faces he has seen in the portraits. Peter's eyes shift among them, as if counting the tops of their heads. When it appears that he has found all of the portrait's subjects, he takes off his glasses and tucks them into the breast pocket of his corduroy sports coat.

A knife clinks against a wineglass. The noise comes from a woman who stands alone in a corner of the apartment. The party faces her. Around her neck on a lanyard dangles a blue badge with an embossed seal—a bald eagle clutching arrows and an olive branch between two furious talons. This places her in the U.S. diplomatic corps. In her photo on the badge she wears the same navy blue suit jacket with a boxy cut and powder blue shirt as on this night, giving the impression that she has only the one outfit, or maybe multiple sets of the same outfit. Her face is lean. Like that of Deniz's date, her black hair is cut into an easy-to-maintain, yet severe, pageboy. Her complexion is such that she could readily be mistaken for a native of this city. A slim and no-nonsense digital triathlete's watch cuffs her wrist. The crowd turns its attention to her. She glances down at her chest, as if she can feel the many sets of eyes settling on her badge.

Awkwardly, she lifts the badge from around her neck, having forgotten to remove it when she left her desk at the consulate. She then raises her glass. "Thank you all for being here," she says. Her eyes land with sincerity on Deniz, who's telling his date to put away her phone. When he looks up he seems startled, as if confused at receiving thanks for being present in his own home. "And thank you to my old friend Deniz, for lending us his apartment. He was one of the first people I met when I came here nine years ago—"

"The first and last reception you ever threw at the Çırağan Palace," interrupts Deniz with a good-natured smile.

Kristin gives him a look and he shrugs, settling back into his seat. Her gaze then turns to Peter and she speaks to him

directly. "I want to congratulate you on this remarkable exhibit and say how proud the Cultural Affairs Section is to have helped, in our small way, to host tonight's event."

Everyone toasts.

"That's very kind of you, Kristin," says Peter, but his words stall in the forest of raised glasses, and before he can say anything more, Kristin continues her remarks, speaking over him, saying that she hopes Peter's photos will bring awareness not only to the events in Gezi Park but also to "this community's long struggle for equal rights and dignity." The room listens, politely, but by the time she finishes most of the crowd, including William and his mother, has migrated into the gallery.

Each person falls silent as they find their image on the blistering white walls. On one side are the portraits of the battered "men" of Gezi and on the other side are the women with their meticulously layered makeup and hair arranged as best as they can manage or covered with a wig for an evening out. Viewed from the doorway, a duplicate of Peter's exhibit begins to form among the guests. Then the finished product appears: a set piece, the exhibit itself as subject, portraits in and out of the frame. William can't put words to it, but he feels the effect Peter has created.

"What did you help him with?" his mother asks.

Of the twenty portraits, the only one that nobody stands in front of is the girl in the dress chosen by William. He points toward it and his mother says nothing but leaves him and wanders to its spot on the wall. Now every portrait is mirrored by its subject, or, in the case of his mother, a nearly identical subject. William turns back toward the door, where Peter leans with his camera hung around his neck. He snatches it up and takes a picture of his exhibit. Then he departs into the sitting room.

Deniz and his guests circulate among the portraits, theorizing about themselves in Peter's work, honing in on different details within the photos. William can hear them teasing one another, saying that they look like hell, or some variation on the same. The quiet that had descended so quickly lifts. The party that began in the sitting room and kitchen now resumes in the gallery. William's mother has drifted away from the photograph of the girl in the dress, even avoiding it, instead finding protection with Deniz and the others, who keep her at the center of their conversation with their *Cat that* and *Cat this*. William has no one to stand beside, so he follows Peter.

Kristin has forgone the gallery and stands by the window. With her thumbs she punches out a text message. Peter sidles over to her and she glances up from her phone. "I have to go," she says.

"You liked the exhibit that much?" Peter says self-deprecatingly. "What's the matter? Problem at home?"

"No, nothing like that. I've got to get back to work." "It's almost midnight."

"Not in Washington it isn't, but the exhibit's beautiful. Congratulations." Kristin tucks her phone back into her overstuffed handbag, from which she removes a small bottle of Purell. She squeezes a dab into her palms, which she vigorously kneads together. Heading to the door, she nearly bumps into William, who is slowly angling across the room toward Peter. "It's almost midnight," Kristin says to the boy in a tender almost motherly tone, as if the fact that he is up at this hour is more remarkable than the fact that he is at Deniz's apartment in the first place.

"That's Catherine's boy," says Peter.

Kristin glances behind her, offering Peter a slight rebuke. Of course she knows that this is Catherine's boy. "Don't let your mother stay out too late," she says to him, then touches his



cheek.

“He won’t,” says Peter, answering before William can. Kristin leaves and Peter and William install themselves at the window, staring toward the streetlamps with their halos.

“Take a look here,” says Peter, lifting the camera from his chest. William tentatively leans closer.

“The portrait you picked was perfect.” Peter guides the boy next to him by the shoulder. With his head angled toward Peter’s chest, William stares into the viewfinder. The picture Peter took inside of the gallery is a symmetrical panorama, five portraits hung on each of four separate walls, with every person a reflection of their own battered image.

“Your mom filled the last spot.”

William vacantly nods.

“One of the first rules of being a photographer,” says Peter, “is that you have to take hundreds of bad photos to get a single good one.” He points back into the viewfinder. “This is the one shot that I wanted, understand?” He is inviting William to be in on something with him, even though William doesn’t completely understand what it is.

The boy offers a timid smile.

“Photography is about contrasts, black and white, light and dark, different colors. For instance, if you put blue next to black, the blue looks darker. If you put that same blue next to white, it looks lighter.” Peter flips through a few more images on the viewfinder, pointing out pictures that demonstrate this effect. Each time that William nods, it seems to please Peter, so William continues to nod. “But the blue never makes the white look lighter and it never makes the black look darker. Certain absolutes exist. They can’t be altered.”

Catherine wanders over. She takes Peter's hand in hers, quickly laces together their fingers, and then lets go. "The exhibit is fantastic," she says.

William reaches for his mother's hand and grips it tightly.

Peter shrugs.

"You don't think so?" she asks.

He dips his gaze into the viewfinder, scrolling back through the images.

"I'm sorry more people didn't show up," she continues. "I'd hoped a couple of critics might come to write reviews. I know Kristin tried to get the word out through the consulate, but you know most of the papers are afraid to print anything on this subject."

"Meaning photography?" says Peter.

"Meaning them. Don't be cute."

He tilts the viewfinder toward Catherine. She tugs the camera closer so that its strap cinches against his neck as she takes a deeper look. On reflex, her two fingers come to her mouth. "This whole thing was a setup for that photo?"

He takes his camera back and nods.

She glances into the exhibit, to where Deniz's guests revel at being the center of attention, for once. "Don't show them," she says.

"Catherine, I need to talk to you about something." Peter rests a hand on William's shoulder. "Give us a minute, buddy."

Catherine and Peter cross the room. They speak quietly by the front door while the party continues in the gallery. William reaches into his pocket and removes the Simon game. He plays for a few minutes, trying to match the elaborate patterns set

before him, but he comes nowhere close to his father's high score. While he presses at the flashing panels, he begins to think about what Peter had told him, about contrast, about how one color might change another. He glances up from his game. As he watches Peter standing next to his mother, the two of them speaking close together, she is like the blue. William can see the effect Peter has on her. While Peter looks the same, unchanged by her, like the black or the white.

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## **New Fiction from Matt Gallagher: Excerpt, 'Empire City'**

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Mia Tucker woke before the alarm. She usually did on weekdays. She was a person of routine and that's what routine did. Sleep whispered like a lullaby through the black morning but she pushed it away, sitting up in bed to put her mind in order. If she'd been dreaming, she'd already forgotten what about.

Monday, she thought. Cardio.

A storm had rolled through the city late in the night, leaving

the brittle musk of rain. A coldness nipped at the top of Mia's shoulder. How do they keep getting in here? she wondered, rubbing at the mosquito bite. I shut the screen last night.

Jesse hadn't come home. He'd sent a few texts, first saying he wasn't sure when he'd be leaving work, then saying he wouldn't be. All-nighters during Bureau emergencies weren't unprecedented. Mia knew the deal. All part of marrying a special agent. Even if waking up by herself in darkness brought on a loneliness she didn't trust.

Mia ate a yogurt, then changed into light workout gear and fitted her running leg and sneakers. Downstairs, the summer air smelled of metal and moss. Dim streetlights lined the corners like sentries and the sidewalks had almost dried. A garbage truck on an adjacent block groaned through the still while monitor drones pulsed red in the sky. She stretched her left leg and then her core in front of her building, looking up to watch the flag whip around atop the Global Trade. Sixty stars and thirteen stripes, pale against the dark. It didn't strike her as cluttered, anymore, all those rings and stars in the blue canton.

Mia finished stretching and tapped at her right knee. Her running prosthetic was hard and coiled, like a spring. She appreciated the city most during these early morning runs, because it was empty enough to seem welcoming, even hopeful. It reminded her of the city from her childhood. It reminded her of the America she'd grown up in.

Daybreak always ended the spell.

Cut the crap, Mia thought. These ten miles aren't going to run themselves. Then she took a deep breath, set the digital green of her wristwatch to 00:00, hit start, and began, the joints of her leg cracking with the motion while the socket of her prosthetic did the same. She headed west, toward the harbor.

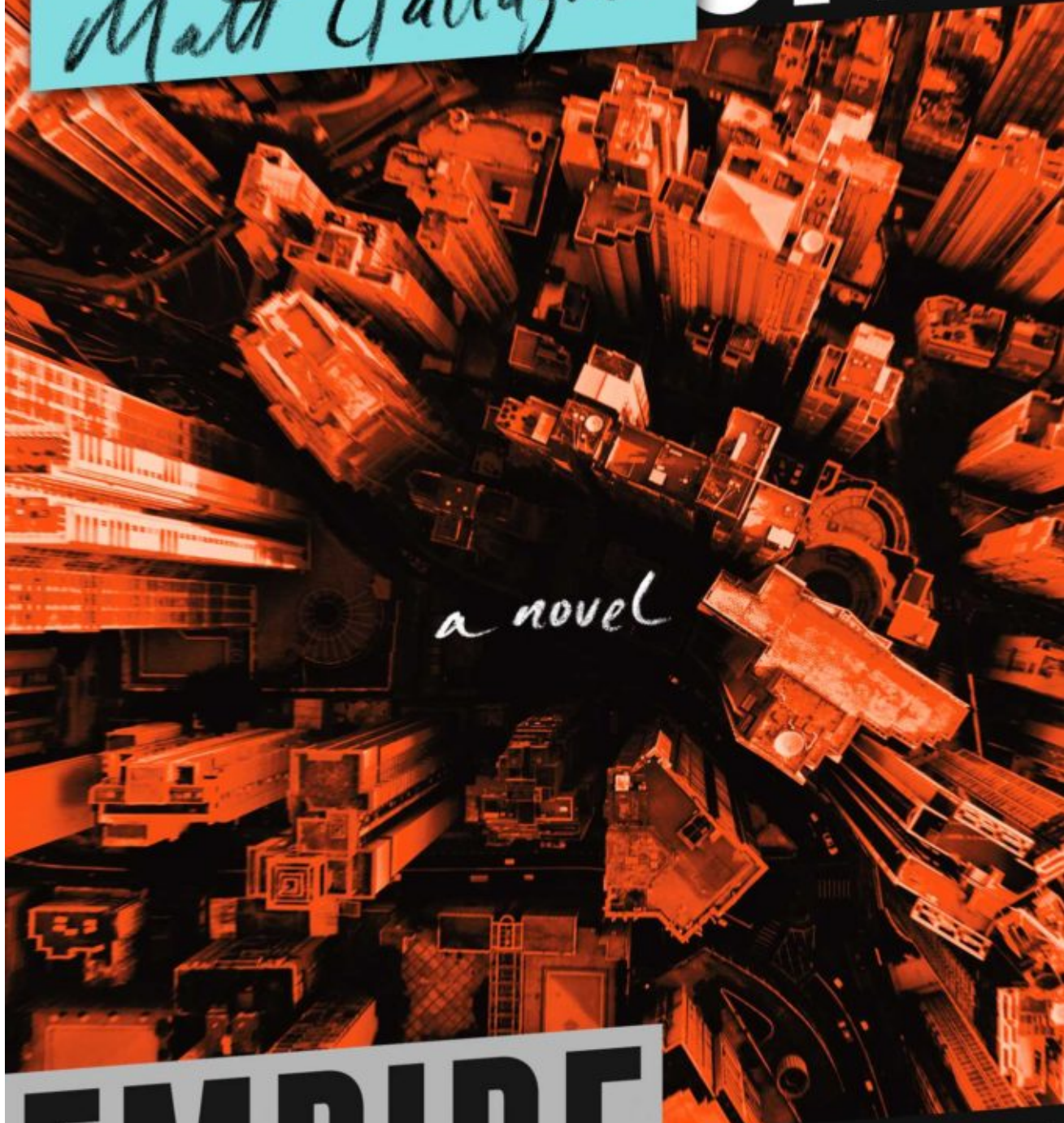
Mia had run most of her life, discovering as a girl that she was good at it and being good meant respect, and trophies, and approval. It made an object of her body, but it was a functional object, something that mattered to her even before she'd figured out why. She'd pushed herself to be very good at points in her life, competing in college for two seasons before it interfered with ROTC, and later running the city marathon her first year with the prosthetic to prove that she could. But she'd never crossed into greatness, and for that she'd come to be thankful. Mia lacked the masochism of true runners, the renegade fanatical gene to ignore and ignore all the warning blinkers thousands of years of evolution had instilled in the human brain. Bloody calluses and angry muscles were one thing. Tendons ripping from bone were another.

The baby, or not-baby, entered Mia's mind. She focused on her breathing. Then came General Collins's job offer. She focused on her breathing.

The first scratches of sun were tracing the water. Lady Liberty rose in the distance, droopy torch in her right hand. The whole statue needed repair, though how, and when, had become a political hot potato. Decades' worth of money allotted for national monuments had gone to the Council of Victors, toward honoring the triumph of Vietnam. No one wanted to be the congressperson who redirected funds from that.

# EMPIRE CITY

*Matt Gallagher*



*a novel*

# EMPIRE CITY

*by Matt Gallagher*

A lot of citizens had come to loathe the statue, considering it an eyesore. Mia's father thought it a sentimental leftover. She sort of liked it, the way a person enjoys a musty childhood blanket found in storage. She remembered climbing to the torch on a field trip as a girl, through a staircase of graffiti and rickety metal, seeing the city from an entirely new angle. A snapshot of old American might, sealed in memory.

They'd closed the torch after the Palm Sunday attacks, then the entire island. Students like her adolescent cousins wouldn't ever see Empire City as she had. No one could now. The sad, corroding statue was their normal. It was all they knew. In the meantime, Lady Liberty sank slowly into the island it rested on. Turned out it'd been set on sodden ground.

Mia adjusted her sports bra and glanced at her watch. A mile in, which meant her warm-up was over. She lengthened out her strides.

She turned north along a waterfront path, moving into the bike lane to dodge fallen tree branches and loose rocks. Other than the occasional taxi striking through the predawn and a man in rags watching the city from a bench, she was alone. The wharf across the river jutted out like a broken jawbone, suggesting a past when its docks did more than shuttle around office workers and tourists.

The city changed like a photo album, slowly and slowly and then all in a rush. Repair shops became delis. Parking garages became art studios. In the water a flotilla of coast guard barges that'd been restored as restaurants and pubs drifted to and fro. Steel and glass high-rises gave way to the architecture of the last century, rowhouses and squatty brick apartments. The streets narrowed, a few dotted by tidy cobblestone. The waterfront path leveled off, though Mia kept her strides long. She knew an incline awaited. She wanted to meet it in force.

Sunrise arrived somewhere between miles three and four, stained-glass clouds chipping the sky. Mia passed a vomiting young man in a sport jacket too large for him. Probably an intern for one of the banks, she thought, before turning around to make sure it wasn't one of hers.

"Call in sick!" she shouted. He raised his fist and managed a weak "Defy!" before purging again. The motto of the old radicals' caucus in Congress. Funny, Mia thought.

Another mile on, Mia ran into a short concrete tunnel. The tunnel lay underneath an abandoned railway line. Sunlight filled it with a fierce yellow shine. Around ten feet long, the sides and top of it had been covered in graffiti, dozens and dozens of circles of different colors and sizes. Just about every inch of available concrete had been tagged, leaving a sort of rainbow mosaic. Each of the circles contained three arrows pointing down and to the left. The job was fresh—Mia could tell by the tint to the spray paint. She came to a stop in the center of the tunnel, her breaths sharp but controlled. She rubbed a hand against a small purple circle. It smeared across her palm.

I know what this is, Mia thought, looking at her palm, then at the purple circle, sifting through her mind to place where. It took a few seconds, but she remembered a course in modern European history, and this shape and question from the final exam. The antifascist sign, she thought. From Nazi Germany.

A gust swept through the tunnel, and Mia smelled storm from the night before. She fought off the urge to shiver. It was going to be a cold summer day.

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Most mornings Mia turned around and headed home on the same pathway, but the tunnel had spooked her. She pushed east and then south instead, running the sidewalks. The light and the city rose slow, together. A medley of urban noise was



beginning to tune and it sounded mostly like construction din. There was order within the mayhem; one just needed to know the refrains. Mia did. She made it back to her apartment building on time, stopping only to remove her running leg before showering and dressing for work. She was back out her front door sixteen minutes later.

The air had turned and smelled of humid dew. Mia decided to walk through Vietnam Victory Square. Under the gaze of the Four Legionnaires sculpture, a couple of kids had waded into the fountain, laughing while splashing water at each other. Across from them, a tour group stood in front of the grand white marble wall with the simple words: "Praise to the Victors/In Honor of the Brave Men who went forth to Vietnam/1955-1981." The guide was explaining why the inscription stopped there, despite the insurgency continuing after in parts of the north. He was stumbling through the history and Mia wanted to intervene. Because wars have to end, she thought. Just tell them that.

Coffee-charged angst and white-collar id crackled along the streets, bankers and lawyers and digital communications associates hustling to be at their desks before the workday siren sounded. As she turned onto Wall Street, Mia passed the brownstone Trinity Church she attended every month or so. She'd considered herself an atheist since her tour to Albania, but she still appreciated the ceremony of church and the sense of renewal it allowed for. Her family had fled to America in 1620 for that ceremony and sense of renewal. She wouldn't give up that heritage for something as banal as not believing.

Then there was Jesse. "Jesus's heroin needle," he liked calling Trinity's Gothic steeple. The church's adjacent cemetery, where a slew of American founding fathers and Union generals from the Civil War rested? "A yard of goy bones."

And he's all mine, Mia thought. Trinity was an option for their wedding, though her family wanted it held in

Connecticut. One more decision that she needed to make, and soon.

Mia's bank was located in the Westmoreland Plaza, a mass of skyscrapers bundled together at the end of the island. As she neared it, a vast, bright fire engine came into view, its lights twirling and flashing like a hallucination. A row of police barricades separated the vehicle from the street, uniformed officers turning away confused citizens trying to get to work. Mia joined the crowd.

"No one's allowed in the plaza today," a cop was saying, not for the first time. "And yes, that includes you." His eyes lingered on Mia's blouse, and she stared at him flatly until he looked away. Her grandmother had taught her how to do that on her fourteenth birthday. It worked in Empire City boardrooms just as well as it had in aircraft hangars along the far edges of the world.

"Ms. Tucker." A man shaped like a square wearing a ruffled dress shirt and overlong tie called to her from a corner of the barricades, close to a large bronze globe. It was the security director of her bank. He looked wired to Mia, even eager. "Ms. Tucker," he repeated. "The office is closed today. Your father sent out a message to everyone—work from home, as you can."

"Hadn't checked my email yet." This didn't make any sense. The office, as far as Mia knew, had never closed. Finance didn't "work from home." That was for other people, other jobs. "What's going on?"

"I shouldn't say," he said, in a tone that suggested he very much wanted to.

"Mum's the word," Mia promised. "I'll be finding out, anyhow."

"A threat," the security director said, his voice low and hushed. "Whole plaza. Homeland marshals got it last night."

“Oh.” There’d been a few lockdowns in Empire City over the years, for both real and false alarms, but Mia couldn’t recall any of them shutting down a main cog of the Finance District. “Must be some kind of threat.”

The security director looked out the corner of his eye to make sure no one else was listening, then pulled out his cell phone and read.

WITH FIRMNESS IN THE RIGHT AS GOD GIVES US TO SEE THE RIGHT,  
LET US STRIVE ON TO FINISH THE WORK WE ARE IN, TO BIND UP THE  
NATION’S WOUNDS, TO CARE FOR HIM WHO SHALL HAVE BORNE THE  
BATTLE.

MAYDAY, MAYDAY. FROM THE ASHES, HOLY REDEMPTION.

“Mean anything to you?”

Mia shook her head.

“The first part’s from a speech Abraham Lincoln gave. Used to be the motto of the old Veterans Administration. The second part . . . I don’t know. The distress signal or something.”

Mia contemplated that. “There’s a Council of Victors office down here. Some crazy’s angry about the colonies again?” She tried not to laugh but couldn’t help it. “It all needs to be taken seriously, of course. But shut down the plaza?”

The security director shrugged. “Federals think it means something. The Mayday thing, especially.”

“I see,” Mia said, wondering if this was the Bureau’s emergency, and if so, why Jesse hadn’t said anything to her. He worked intel analysis, not counterterrorism. Though he hadn’t always been behind a desk.

*Gallagher, Matt. [Empire City](#) (Atria Books, 2020).*

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# New Fiction from Amy Waldman: 'A Door in the Earth'

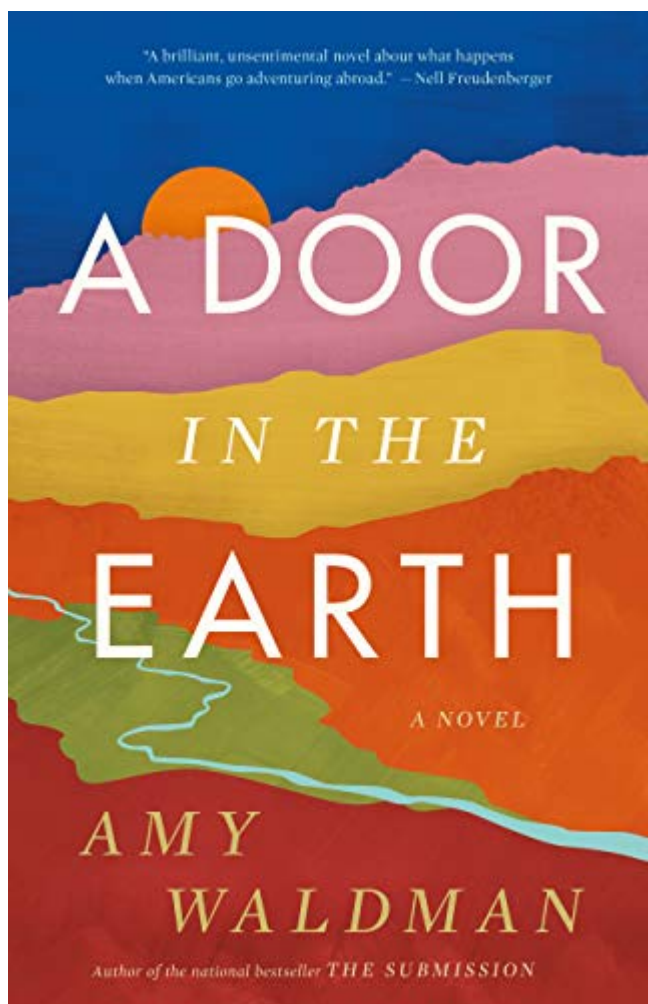
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## **From Chapter Four: The Distant Fire**

On her third night, Parveen stayed in the main room with Waheed and Jamshid after dinner while the women and girls went to clean up. The radio was on, tuned to the BBC Persian service, as it was each evening, radio being the sole medium by which news of the outside world regularly came to the village. An Air France flight with two hundred and twenty-eight people aboard had vanished; a South African woman claiming to be one hundred and thirty-four, and thus the world's oldest person, had died; General Motors had filed for bankruptcy—the family solemnly took it all in . . .

Most of the news they received, however, was about Afghanistan, its politics and its war, reports of which drifted in through the radio like ash from a distant fire. In every other way the war felt remote, as if it were happening in another country. This was a relief to Parveen, for in Kabul it had seemed uncomfortably close, like metal woven through the fabric of the city—a hard, cold presence you kept butting up against in the course of normal life. Her relatives, as they took her to museums and palaces, a Mughal garden, the British cemetery, and the zoo, not to mention internet cafés, kebab joints, and the homes of many distant relatives, often had to pull over for the military convoys that bulled their way through the streets. They pointed out the blast craters

left by insurgents' bombs, and navigated around the barricades and walls meant to guard against them. Western embassies and Afghan government offices had all clawed out so much territory for their own self-protection that to Parveen, the city read like an aggregation of security fiefdoms. A reprieve her cousins had planned—a picnic in Istalif, a famously beautiful spot north of Kabul—was canceled after a suicide bomber attacked a NATO convoy on the road they would have taken. Such disruptions were not routine, for they could not be predicted, but neither were they surprising. To Kabul's residents, the war was like a giant pothole that you kept swerving around until you fell into it.



Each night she and her relatives gathered in the living room to watch television, where a more disturbing face of the war was playing out. A few weeks before Parveen arrived in Afghanistan, an air strike in the western province of Farah,

some five hundred and fifty miles away from Kabul, had killed more civilians, it was said, than any similar incident since 2001. It made the news in America, but Parveen, preoccupied by preparing for graduation and her journey, had barely noted it at the time. Now she couldn't escape it. It was believed that a hundred or more people had been killed, and most of them were children, mainly girls. Their bodies had been so badly shredded that not all of the pieces could be recovered, leaving Parveen with a new and chilling understanding of the word *remains*. Then there were the wounded children in their hospital beds, including three sisters she couldn't forget. They had singed hair and charred skin that had been smeared with yellow ointment. The youngest, just five, clutched a glass of milk.

"Why is your new president escalating the war?" her aunt asked. "We hoped he would find a way to end it."

The politeness of her voice hid her emotions. Pessimism? Resignation? Suppressed rage? As the sole American in her relatives' house, Parveen felt culpable. She remembered her Berkeley friends savaging the military. How could she argue with them now? She'd expected to find clarity about the war by coming to Afghanistan. Instead, the blur had worsened.

Now, on the radio that Waheed had taken off the shelf and set, like a small pet, to his right, came a discussion of the Farah air strike, in which the U.S. government had at last conceded significant errors. Unable to help herself, Parveen began to speak about it, to describe, as best she could in Dari, the images she had seen on television in Kabul. The girls in the hospital. The men pawing through rubble looking for family members. A mass grave.

The females had rejoined the men and Parveen saw the twins, Adeila and Aakila, staring at her in shock and clutching each other's hands. She could have been describing them, she realized with horror, when she talked about the sisters. She'd

given the twins, perhaps the whole family, a new sense of their fragility, their vulnerability, and she wished she could undo that. Although, unlike the radio reporters, she'd witnessed nothing other than what she'd seen on television and the internet, the family reacted as if she were the one offering a firsthand account of the air strike, maybe because this was a place with no screens, to where images didn't travel. Or maybe the family was rapt because of the guilt she confessed to—an admission that embarrassed her. It seemed so American, to act as if everything was about her own emotions and be so shocked by the barbarism of war in a country whose past three decades had been consumed by it. And yet she wanted to insist, but didn't for fear of sounding condescending, that it wasn't silly to expect that your government would act decently and to be crushed when it didn't.

The family looked to Waheed, the patriarch, to say something. He turned down the radio and began to speak, occasionally stroking his beard as a much older man might. The village had a great commander, he said, who'd fought with the mujahideen against the Soviets. This man, Amanullah, had gone into the mountains for years, eluding the Russians who were hunting him, surviving on roots, nuts, mulberries. He'd lost a hand in battle and he'd gained great fame. Because of his valor, Waheed added, almost as an aside, the village forgave him his sins.

Parveen knew about the commander, for he'd figured prominently in Crane's book. She also knew his sins. In the late 1990s, he'd lent his courage to the Taliban, becoming a commander for them and terrifying the region for a time. Amanullah had whipped women, beheaded men, and run a private dungeon. And he'd kidnapped Crane during his stay in the village.

Waheed didn't speak of any of this. How painful it must have been for the villagers when their hero joined the Taliban, Parveen thought; too painful to be spoken of. No, Waheed talked only of Commander Amanullah's exploits against the

Russians until he reached his point, which was that if Amanullah decided the Americans were an enemy, he'd take up arms to fight them, and many villagers would follow him. Not that anyone wanted that, he added. They wanted to stay here and farm. For the villagers, too, this war felt like another country. No one here had even gone to fight for the government, although that was mostly because they couldn't meet the literacy requirement for soldiers.

"But the Americans should be aware," Waheed said, "that this soil has never been hospitable to foreigners."

It was all Parveen could do not to roll her eyes. This was the one cliché about Afghanistan that every American seemed to know.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon Waheed came back from the fields and announced, without explanation, that they were going to the clinic that Gideon Crane had built in the village, and where Parveen was planning to volunteer. Parveen wondered if she'd passed some test. From a hook near the door, he lifted a ring with a pair of heavy, ornate keys. Nearby hung a row of emerald-green chadris, what Americans called burqas: the head-to-toe coverings, with netting over the eyes, that the women wore when they left the house. Parveen did not take one—her Kabul relatives had told her that, not being from the village, she should feel no obligation to wear one—yet their mere presence shadowed her into the yard. She chafed at the cloister she'd been living in. The women and girls watched her go.

When she stepped out of the compound she felt free. This was her first clear view of her surroundings, unobscured by walls. The village lay in a long, verdant valley that spilled out from between the feet of the mountains. The valley floor, flat and rich in river silt, had been given over to fields shaped



into neat squares or sweeping crescents. Wheat and corn, rye and barley, rice—each claimed its own shade of green. The land had been terraced, and on higher levels there were orchards: almond, apricot, mulberry, peach, many trees enveloped in clouds of pale pink blossoms. The houses, built from tawny mud bricks, stepped up a low stony ridge, their intricate patterning guarding the privacy of each family. And ringing it all, the mountains.

As Parveen was getting her first view of the valley, the villagers were getting their first view of her. When she was just steps from the compound, a passel of boys and a few men gathered around, as if they'd been waiting these past days for her to emerge. Her hair was covered but not her face, and it was her face they stared at, their gazes pinning her in place. Her seconds of freedom vanished.

“Have you never seen a woman's face?” Waheed shouted. “Don't you have mothers?”

His assertiveness on her behalf surprised her, although she sensed that some of his irritation was directed at her for putting him in this situation. The boys didn't move until Waheed took a step toward them and clinked the large keys. Then they scattered, continuing to spy on Parveen from behind walls and around corners. Once she and Waheed reached the bazaar, the boys didn't bother to hide. They stood a few feet away and gawked.

The bazaar was a simple place: two rows of facing stalls, about fifteen all told, propped up by stripped tree limbs, with corrugated tin roofs overhead. The main path was mucky from the buckets of water merchants tossed on it to keep down the dust. Waheed gave one-word self-evident descriptions for each stall they passed: butcher (a skinned sheep hung on a hook, its bare pink flesh flecked with black flies), baker (loaves were stacked for those too poor to buy ovens), and tinsmith, a maker of pots and pans. There was a shop with a

desultory hodgepodge of stale biscuits, cigarettes, expired medicines, and pirated DVDs (although no one in the village had a DVD player) of *2 Fast 2 Furious* and Bollywood films, merchandise that had probably been bought and sold a hundred times between Kabul and here, where it had washed up, as an ocean deposits plastic far from its source, to gather dust.

“Some of those things have been here since I was a child,” Waheed joked.

The shopkeeper laughed a little too hard. People greeted Waheed deferentially, as if he were someone important, and Parveen wondered if this was because she was with him. He bantered with them but did not introduce her.

The blacksmith worked outdoors, next to his forge, which was made from mud. The coals within it glowed orange, and a large kettle sat atop it. The blacksmith was an inquisitive graybeard with sweat trickling down his face, but it was the man next to him who caught Parveen’s attention. He was as big in the belly as he was in the shoulders and had a hennaed beard, a gray turban wrapped expertly around his head, and in place of one hand a metal hook. With his intact hand he was popping pistachios into his mouth, then loudly biting them with a sound like knuckles being cracked. The shells he ejected with a buffoonish *pfft*. This was Commander Amanullah.

She looked in vain for signs of the terror he had inflicted on so many or of his famed courage. What she saw was a grizzled aging man, hardly in fighting shape. Waheed’s suggestion that he could lead an army against the Americans seemed comical, a pantomime of threat. But when someone changes slowly before your eyes, Parveen thought, the change can be hard to see.

“You are the American doctor,” the commander said after Waheed had introduced Parveen.

She was not a doctor, she clarified.

"Then who are you? We need a doctor here."

"The clinic doesn't have one?"

"The lady doctor comes once a week. We've instructed our wives to get sick or give birth only on Wednesday, but they don't always listen."

The small crowd of men who had gathered laughed; Parveen didn't find it funny. She was about to tell the commander so but Waheed had disappeared, so she held her tongue and instead asked, "Didn't Gideon Crane hire a full-time doctor?"

"I don't know what Dr. Gideon has done." Like Issa, the villagers called Crane Dr. Gideon, she noticed.

Parveen said that she would report the situation with the doctor to Crane's foundation.

"You work for Dr. Gideon?"

"I've come to be helpful to him," she said, uncomfortable with this elision but uncertain what to say instead.

The commander asked if Parveen spoke English. The question struck her as hilarious until she remembered that of course they had no way to know what language, other than Dari, she spoke. Yes, she said and smiled.

"Let's hear some," the commander said in Dari.

She stuttered, "H-hello, how are you?" and was surprised to hear how strange English sounded to her.

"Yes, she speaks English," he confirmed in Dari to his minions, who laughed because the commander himself didn't speak the language and had no idea what Parveen had said. He asked her if she'd learned Dari in school.

No, she told him. Her family was from Afghanistan, from Kabul, where she'd been born. Her parents had left in 1988.

“So they left with the Russians. Were they Communists, your parents?”

“No! That’s just when their visa came through. They were trying to escape the Soviets. No one knew they would withdraw—”

“The little bird has quite a sharp beak,” he said, amused by Parveen’s outrage.

They’d left everything behind, she went on. They’d started over in America with nothing. Her father, for several years, had driven an ice-cream truck. That this was humiliating for Ashraf didn’t register on the villagers’ faces. An ice-cream truck was as mythical here as a unicorn. Truck drivers earned good money.

“The suffering of those who left can’t compare with that of those who stayed,” Amanullah said, and Parveen fell silent. “I’ve lost two sons to war. And this.” He waved his hook.

“I’m sorry about your sons,” she said, unsure whether to offer condolences for his hand.

“It’s a blessing to lose sons fighting for God,” he said.

“Of course.” She rebuked herself. She should have known that was how he would see it.

There was an awkward silence. The blacksmith picked up his hammer and began to bang on his anvil. Commander Amanullah looked away, as if to say he was done with Parveen.

She could see the clinic from the bazaar. She couldn’t *not* see it, since it was two stories high and painted a white so bright that it looked primed for sunburn. It was completely out of scale and character to the rest of the village. If she hadn’t known better, Parveen would have figured the building for a wedding hall planted by some entrepreneurial provincial. It looked like the photo in Crane’s TED Talk, but it was much

grander than the photo in the book, which she had recently perused.

She mentioned this to Waheed, who laughed; the clinic looked smaller in the book because it *had* been smaller. Originally the structure had been just one story with a few rooms, he said. But after the book was published and donations poured in, that clinic was torn down and a new one built at three or four times the original size.

From what Issa had told him, there were three warehouses in Dubai full of unused equipment, Waheed said. "The donations kept coming; the clinic had to keep growing." He sounded almost sad, but his eyes were creased with amusement, as if he understood his own illogic. Supplies were brought in, sometimes by helicopters, he continued. A high wall, also white, surrounded the clinic. Both wall and clinic were repainted at least twice a year, because of the dust, Waheed said, then added: "It can never be defeated."

"Dr. Gideon wants the clinic to look sanitary," Parveen said, feeling obliged to explain for him.

With one of the large keys Waheed unlocked the metal door that led into the clinic's courtyard. Among the children who had tailed Parveen and him, only Waheed's were permitted inside. The rest were harried off. The courtyard was large and dusty, unadorned except for a single shade tree that stood slightly off-center. In the late-afternoon light, its shadow stretched diagonally across the empty space.

"So the doctor comes once a week? Isn't the clinic open any other time?"

Waheed was using the other large key to unlock the building door. "If there's no doctor, it stays locked," he said. "The equipment here is more valuable than all the fields in this village. And what good's a clinic without a doctor?"

His question struck Parveen as unintentionally profound, more profound than anything in Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*, which they'd read in Professor Banerjee's class. Parveen had been taken with the idea of the "medical gaze," which was how Foucault described the way doctors, even as they were elevated to sages, reduced patients to bodies alone. She'd been curious to see how that would play out here, in the developing world. That there might not be a doctor to bestow a medical gaze had never occurred to her.

The clinic facility itself was good, staggeringly so, Parveen thought. The interior walls were a soothing white and there was a reception desk and several rows of sturdy metal chairs screwed to the floor in a waiting area. The chemical smells—ammonia, bleach, paint—were acute, almost painful. She hadn't smelled chemicals anywhere else in the village except for the diesel that fed Waheed's generator. There were skylights and—this seemed almost miraculous—a light switch, which Parveen flipped. Nothing happened.

The fuel was saved for when the doctor came, Waheed explained. They couldn't run the generator all the time. After sparking a lantern, he walked Parveen from room to room, beginning upstairs with the ten-bed maternity ward and the adjacent nursery, which held three empty incubators. Downstairs he slung the beam of the lantern into windowless rooms labeled, in both English and Dari, examination, labor, delivery, surgery, and recovery. The equipment looked state-of-the-art. That this pristinely kept temple to health—to modernity—should be in this village, of all places, moved Parveen. If, approaching the clinic, she'd questioned the abandon with which Crane flouted the village context, now she celebrated his refusal to let the village's history or isolation limit its possibilities. The clinic's seeming excess proclaimed these humble villagers to be worthy of the same medical care that Americans were, a message almost as meaningful as the treatment itself.

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# Fighting for All of Time: Katey Schultz's Novel, 'Still Come Home'

*Still Come Home*, the first novel from *Flashes of War* author Katey Schultz, opens in the tiny town of Imar, Afghanistan, where a young woman stands by the window, wanting an apricot. The weather is hot and the woman is hungry and thirsty, and she thinks to herself that she would like very much to walk to the market and purchase an apricot. "It would taste like candied moisture," she thinks, "like sunlight in the mouth."

This seems a simple and easily attainable desire. But in Taliban-occupied Afghanistan, without a male relation to accompany her, it's next to impossible. Seventeen-year-old Aaseya is a young woman nearly alone in a village that "insists on the wrongness of her life." Her family was killed by the Taliban, under the mistaken belief that they were American collaborators. In truth, they were only a moderately liberal family with a dangerous belief in freedom and education, including—most suspect of all—the education of girls. Now she is married to Rahim, a man twenty years her senior, whose work—which she believes is bricklaying, though he has actually, and reluctantly, taken a recent job with the Taliban—keeps him away from home all day while she is taunted by neighbors, including her own cruel, myopic sister-in-law, and unable to fulfill even the most basic longing for a piece of fruit. The metaphor has many layers. Aaseya's sharp mind longs for the pollination of reading and books but can't get them. Her marriage has not yet produced children; all speculation as to this lack is directed at her, not at her much older husband.

Aaseya mourns the loss of the local school where she was educated and its English-speaking teacher, Mrs. Darrow, who was forced to flee three years before. She doesn't know that her husband Rahim may be at this very school building right now—it has become “quietly minted Taliban headquarters”—getting his instructions for the day's distasteful work. (“Afghans have been fighting for all of time,” he reasons. “Even not fighting ends up being a kind of fight.”) His employer is the gaunt, black-robed Obaidhullah who drifts through the schoolhouse overseeing a cadre of drugged, cackling foot soldiers. Rahim is an inherently nonviolent man who finds comfort in verses from the Sufi poet Hafiz (“the past is a grave, the future a rose. Think of the rose”), but his past could serve as a grave for even the strongest of people: he was taken at a young age to be a *batcha bazi*—“dancing boy”—for a corrupt general. He reflects, movingly, that “his body was like his country; it would survive and it would always be used.”





Rahim is paid to dig up AKs, hidden along roadsides in advance, and use them to deter aid vehicles, along with his friend Badria, who's in with the Taliban deeper than Rahim knows. Rahim aims for the dirt, or the tires, or the rearview mirrors, and hasn't yet killed anyone. But he cannot tell Aaseya, whose family raised her with an idealistic affection for Americans and for democracy, of this arrangement. When she sees him carrying American cash, she's thrilled, but it hasn't come directly from Uncle Sam—it's come from Taliban leaders accepting payment to let certain convoys through, for a cut. Now Taliban fighters swagger through the market place showing off stacks of American dollars loaded enough with meaning to be nearly munitional in themselves.

So Aaseya spends her days alone. She will, not, in the end, be able to buy the apricot. (It's amazing how much traction a simple desire can get in a work of fiction—the reader simply

knowing their protagonist wants to buy a piece of fruit.) But this day will end up bringing a much greater gift in the form of a small, mute orphan boy named Ghazel, who'll change the structure of her family forever, even though she's just now spotted him from her open window.

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Meanwhile, not far away on FOB Copperhead, National Guardsman Nathan Miller—a well-meaning, slightly uptight, former high school Valedictorian with a wife and young daughter at home, plus, sadly, the specter of the child they lost—is preparing his team for one final, humanitarian, mission. They will be delivering water to Imar, where Rahim and Aaseya and Ghazel live, a town watched over by its one, defunct water pump installed years before by hopeful Americans and now silently gauging the town's decline, like the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg in *Gatsby*. The dry pump and a distant well have put pressure on marooned Imar—Rahim has returned home more than once to find there's not enough water left after cooking to drink—and Lt. Miller is almost looking forward to the mission and the chance to do good. His four deployments have strained his marriage to a point he fears irreparable, and he struggles daily with the lack of clarity that descends on a life of perpetual war-fighting in a tribal environment of unknowable loyalties, connections, and deceptions. There is the constant threat of death for Miller and his men; death provides its own awful clarity, but he never knows when it's coming ("it could be now. Or now. Or now"). Working for change is even harder. One step forward, two steps back. As Aaseya does, he uses the word "impossible": "Like grabbing fistfuls of sand—that's what this war is. Like trying to hold onto the impossible." When Miller finally does get his humanitarian mission, it's a dream come true, the water bottles sparkling in the sunlight as thirsty children drink. "It feels so good," he thinks, "to do something right." By "right," he means something charitable, something unselfish, but also finally—clearly—that they have

done something *correctly*. They have not, yet, screwed up.

One can't help but think of Kerouac here, warning, "that last thing is what you can't get." But Miller gets so close.

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Readers of Katey Schultz's critically lauded 2013 collection *Flashes of War* will recognize Aaseya, Rahim, and Lt. Miller and his wife Tenley from those pages. As with Brian Van Reet's character Sled, whose genesis occurred in *Fire and Forget* and then grew to be a major character in *Spoils*, it's a pleasure to meet these characters for another round. It's satisfying to see them grow into not just themselves but into the preoccupations and concerns the author has provided for them. Forgiveness, shared humanity, the frustration of unfair restrictions (upon women, upon soldiers, upon children like the orphaned Ghazel and like young, exploited Rahim) come to the fore again and again in Schultz's work. For *Still Come Home* she has chosen an epigram from Yeats's poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul": "A living man is blind and drinks his drop," it begins. True enough. We're all blind. But its close urges gentleness, with oneself and others: "I am content to live it all again...measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!"

I don't know if these characters would want to live everything all over again. It might be cruel to ask them to. I do know that I gained understanding and compassion at being walked in their shoes. These are characters who ask questions and, by Schultz, are asked. (A notable number of sentences in *Still Come Home* end with a question mark, often questions the characters are posing to themselves. There are so many questions that I thought of Rahim's beloved poet Hafiz, chided gently by the Magian sage: "It's your distracted, lovelorn heart that asks these questions constantly.")

Rahim might say, echoing Hafiz: "There are always a few men like me in this world/ who are house-sitting for God."

Schultz's characters find ways to care for one another in a world that tries to claim there's no time or energy left for that, that this is the first thing we must cut out. In the end they will, despite the hard tasks they have been given, find themselves emboldened by and for love. There is the shared sense among them that all this pain will be worth it if at least something endures.

Schultz's authorial balance is realistic, tough, painstakingly researched, steeped in the knowledge that the world is unfair. Her writing style is supremely attentive, and it's this attention that may be the great gift of writing and novels: not a trick-like verisimilitude or trompe l'oeil but a careful asking of questions. What would happen now; how would this person feel now? What would they say now? I find myself wanting to ask her, as Hafiz does his friend:

“When was this cup  
That shows the world's reality

Handed to you?”

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*An excerpt of Still Come Home appeared in the August 2017 issue of Wrath-Bearing Tree. You can read it [here](#) and purchase the book [here](#) or [here](#). Wrath-Bearing Tree contributor Randy Brown has a [recent review](#) of Still Come Home—with valuable insights—on his blog, Red Bull Rising.*

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**New      Fiction      from      Mike**

# Freedman: KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI



The only thing to fear is missing out. Sources indicate all opportunities to pre-order a first-edition of *King of the Mississippi* will be lost forever by July 9, 2019. Click the image to avoid missing out.

## The shine and swagger of a new day.

Great Recession? Not Houston. And yet, and yet there had been a speed bump in September 2008, sure, but that had been assessed and corrected; and now the city of Brock Wharton seceded further from the rest of the flatlined country in the first week of

September 2014. As Wharton was considering whether to rearrange his weekend schedule to pencil in sex with his wife, one of the strangest men he had ever laid eyes on breached the space of his open doorway. Of average height, the boyish, sun-cooked man appeared taller than he was as his askew brown hair lashed out in every direction. His rangy build (accentuated by the too-small, off-the-rack, navy double-breasted suit he wore as if he were a redneck admiral at a regatta that Wharton would never enter) seemed pulled at the sinews' seams. It was the sort of flawed build that none of the South Texas ranching families would ever breed. If not for the intensity of the blue eyes—divided by a comic eagle nose that dived toward raggedly chapped lips—so nakedly sizing him up in return, Wharton would have dismissed the figure as an apparition too absurd to be real.

Unnerved by the fixed eyes that looked through him to some burning skyscraper or falling zeppelin outside the window, Wharton twisted around anticipating to be hit by a tornado. But the downtown skyline was undisturbed. Annoyed by this intrusion and humiliated that he had been tricked into a search beyond his window, Wharton spun around in his chair to regain the initiative. "Who—"

"You're the man to beat?" A smile the size of the intruder's face tore through the puffy lips and exposed a series of

swollen red gums  
congregated around two monstrous white tusks for front teeth,  
which, if not  
fake, the hospital-white fangs had avoided the yellow staining  
of the other  
teeth and clearly swam in their own current in the man's  
mouth. A muddy five  
o'clock shadow surrounded the giant mouth, which surely, upon  
closer inspection  
of this dark facial sandpaper, would be attributed to not  
shaving than some  
celebrated regeneration of stubble.

His piney, log-cutting aftershave sprayed Wharton's  
office with his scent. A hand slithered in the air above his  
desk toward  
Wharton. He stood and asked in a harsh tone that betrayed the  
mask of imperturbability  
he wished to project, "Who are you and what is the nature of  
your business in  
my office?"

"I'm Mike Fink," the man said in a mysterious  
dialect, a dialect hailing from a region that Wharton could  
only place as from  
the land of the lower class while his limp hand was grabbed by  
Fink. His flagrant  
confidence-man grin expressed an expectation that Wharton knew  
the name, if not  
the reputation. "I'm here for the leadership position."

I, Wharton declared to himself, will personally see  
to it that that never happens. This was a case that needed no  
analysis. Wharton  
pulled his hand from Fink's clasp and came around from his  
desk. "Be that as it  
may, I have never heard of you. I am sure we can resolve this  
misunderstanding

in no time if you would please . . .” But Wharton trailed off, watching in horror as Fink plopped down unmasked in the chair across from Wharton’s desk and wriggled his lanky body to find an incorrect posture. This creature’s cheekiness apparently knew no bounds. Wharton found himself slightly behind Fink and facing his back; Fink tapped his right foot, waiting on the start of an interview. Wharton was not about to give such an entitled lout. *Leadership* position? Papers rustled behind where Wharton stood, but he could not take his eyes off the hunched back of Fink.

“I see that you used your Special Forces navigational skills to find Brock’s office, Mike,” a squeaky voice said behind Wharton.

“Too easy, Carissa. Didn’t even have to *consult* the compass.”

“Consult,” Carissa repeated in a higher pitch that no doubt carried a waving of a finger at clever schoolboy Fink for his introduction of an unimaginative punning attempt to their colloquial exchange.

“A good consultant never consults a compass.”



Click on the image to order the “Catch-22 for the millennial generation.”

“Miss Barnett, what is going on?” Wharton asked, as he swung around to see the top-heavy recruiter giggling and swaying her head to



the savage's tapping beat. Was she blushing? Her lips certainly now bore the mark of lipstick, adorned in a Valentine's Day red to match a pair of six-inch stiletto heels that had magically sprouted up from her earlier flats like weeds in a trailer park. She was without her jacket, and it appeared that—was it possible, even amid the other illusions?—she had lost three or four buttons, too, judging by the excessively gratuitous amount of breast on exhibit. All at once, Wharton felt the butt of a joke, a weary traveler who had stumbled into some rustic country inn for shelter only to be mocked by the randy bar maiden and the regular patrons.

“Oh, Brock, I'm so sorry. I guess you hadn't been notified that Mike would be interviewing this afternoon. He was traveling from New Orleans and wasn't able to make it for the morning block of interviews.” She ruffled through the stack of papers in her hand and pulled a badly mauled page out and passed it to Wharton. “Here's a copy of his résumé. Like I told Mike, you are the only one left to interview him before the meeting in the conference room in half an hour to decide on who the new hires are.”

Wharton waved her on before she disclosed any more details of the hiring process. Oblivious to the intent of his wave, she leaned over to Wharton with the bright eyes of a much younger child, a mercurial

silver sparkle that screamed antidepressants, and whispered audibly for Fink to hear, "He's a Green Beret."



"I don't care if he's the pope, Carissa, as I have only a half hour to give an intensive interview," Wharton said truthfully, for despite his conservative Christian upbringing, he now cared little for religious figures. Indeed, besides possibly salvation, little reward stemmed from religious fervor beyond the required Christian affiliation among his strategic-friends crowd. Wharton thought even less of people in the military, despite the nauseating resurgence of post-9/11 glorification of a segment who'd been the frequent subject of derision prior to that day. In Wharton's youth, the military was the last stop for the talentless who could not do anything else in life. It usually wasn't even much of a choice: *You can go to prison, or be all you can be in the Army.* Now everyone was expected to shake their hands, pick up their checks in restaurants, turn over their first-class seats on airplanes, and worst yet, stand up and clap for them at sporting events while nodding that the only reason the sport is even being played is because of heroes like them fighting in some country with cities no one can pronounce. An inane rah-rah yellow-ribbon patriotism, a shared ritual offering peace

between the jingoes,  
Middle America, and pinkos where everyone emerged feeling good  
about their  
participation. Doubtless this explained how this Fink  
character was granted a  
CCG interview.

“Well,” Wharton said to Fink, shutting the door on  
Carissa, “it appears I am to interview you. I’m going to take  
a minute to scan  
through your résumé.”

“Take your time,” the applicant advised the  
interviewer. “There’s a lot there.”

There, Wharton quickly realized, was not a lot  
there: current employment listed as *none*, no work experience  
(unless  
ten years in the military counted), a 2.9 GPA, and a bachelor  
of arts in  
English literature (was that not the easy major?) from Tulane  
University (a  
bottom first-tier university that CCG did not even review  
applications from)  
the same year Wharton graduated. Lo and behold, Fink’s résumé  
was actually a  
mirror out of a fable, in that if you held it up, your exact  
opposite looked  
back at you.

“An English literature major?” Wharton murmured,  
bringing the CV closer to his eyes.

“With a minor in theater. I read  
somewhere that English majors make the best consultants.  
Stands to reason.”

Had recruiting seriously thought the special forces  
bullet in bold letters at the top alone merited an interview?

Special Forces

could not be that special if Fink lacked the cognition to apprehend that he did

not belong at CCG. That his presence, an interloper squandering his time, was

offensive to a Brock Wharton, who had conducted a life cultivating a résumé.

Fink was a great example of a candidate not having researched CCG; how had he

passed the first-round interview? In fact, Wharton assessed it to be the most

heinous résumé ever submitted for his review: not even the oversized font or

alignment from section to section was consistent in what amounted to only a

stretched half page of largely questionable achievements (high school senior

class president?). Wharton looked up at Fink in time to see him fondling his

Texans football!

“Put that down!” Wharton pointed at the ball holder

on the wall next to Fink, who on his orders positioned the ball upside down on

its seam.

“I apologize. I had forgotten that you were drafted

in the last round after playing for UT.”

Wharton searched the blue eyes sunk back in the

triangular face for an intended slight in the usage of “last” to describe the

still-prestigious seventh round. What it seemed Fink hadn't forgotten was the

chatter of sports columnists, recruiters, superfans, and boosters who had once

ranked Wharton the top high school quarterback in the South and proclaimed him

the next UT football savior. He in turn ranked this same mindless mob number one in cowardice after four years of enduring their catcalls every time he was injured and being denounced by them for betrayal when their impossible expectations for their fair-haired boy were not met on the field. "Were you drafted as well after graduating college?"

"Drafted by our country," Fink said, startling Wharton with a belly laugh loud enough to be heard down the hall.

Wharton avoided Fink's face to conceal the anger he was sure must be reddening his own cheeks. He found refuge in Fink's résumé. A review of it demonstrated that the undereducated Fink knew absolutely nothing beyond the art of exploiting some tax credit for businesses that interviewed veterans. Another bending of the laws, no less egregious than allowing veterans a pass in public with their PTSD service dogs while their pit bulls created anxiety for everyone else. Wharton pushed aside the flash of resentment that made him want to physically kick Fink from his office. He settled on an approach he was convinced would inflict far more damage to this impertinent CCG impostor's candidacy: cede the stage to an unwitting Fink and allow the veteran to shoot himself, hailing as he did from a demographic statistically known for its high suicide rates.

"Thank you for your service. Now why don't you walk

me through your academic accomplishments?" Wharton began anew, chumming the waters of that pesky foe of Delusion: Fact. "I see here that you had a two-point-nine grade point average at Tulane."

"Two point nine four five to be exact, but if you round that up it is a two point nine five, and if you're really telling a tale, you could round that to a three point zero."

"CCG, almost as a rule, requires its applicants to have a GPA of three point six or above from a top-ranked college. You are applying for the position of consultant with an undergraduate GPA of two point nine against a field of applicants that all have MBAs, and, in some cases, two advanced graduate degrees. Have you done any graduate-level course work at all?"

"The Special Forces Qualification Course."

Fink was making this easy for Wharton. "I don't think I follow," Wharton said, baiting him to continue his charm offensive and rambling lack of reflection, which conformed ideally to Wharton's plan of wrestling back control of the interview. "Can you elaborate specifically on how this course qualifies as graduate school and how it relates to a career in consulting?"

Fink straightened up in his chair. His arrowhead chip of a face leaned in over the desk. Was he applying for a job or auditioning

for a small part in a play?

*"De Oppresso Liber,"* Fink said, enunciating each Latin word for Wharton's appreciation.

Wharton stared dramatically at the now confirmed lunatic and awaited a further terse three-or-four-word inadequate explanation that was not forthcoming. It was not as if Wharton lacked experience playing a part; he knew full well what was expected of him in life's starring role. Finally, Wharton asked, "Excuse me?"

"Motto of the Green Berets." Fink thumped his chest with his fist (in the spot where the handkerchief, which could have been the only item to make his costume more ridiculous to Wharton, was missing). "It means 'To Liberate the Oppressed.' "

"What does this have to do with consulting?"

"For a decade I trained not only on how to operationally liberate the oppressed, but also how to free my mind from the oppression of conventional thinking. A consultant referencing unconventional thinking in a plush CCG office and actually being unconventional when the stakes are high are as different as a yellowbelly catfish is from a bullhead catfish," Fink exclaimed. He had also managed to concurrently use his hands to grotesquely elucidate the contrasting courage of each subspecies by forming what Wharton interpreted as human female and male genitalia. "Like consulting,

it's about being adaptable. Who is the most adaptable? Ain't that America? Now, I'm not a big war story guy, but you asked me to describe a situation where I had to lead a group of people and convince them that an unconventional solution was the right way and to that I say: how about every day in Iraq! If that—"

*"Two alphas battle to be top dog at a global consultancy in this amusing satire on business, ambition, and entitlement... A solid entertainment from a writer of considerable talent and promise."*

*– Kirkus, Starred Review*

"I didn't ask you anything of the sort. You are barking up the wrong tree."

"I once stared the bark off a tree I was so riled up," Fink offered as further qualification. He laughed and winked at Wharton.

"Too much time overseas in the sandbox dodging death this past decade will do that to you. The relevance of my graduate work in the Special Forces Qualification Course is that I have unique professional training and a record of success in solving and analyzing complex problems. As I explained to the senior partners, and this perhaps fails to come across in a limited reading of a CV, there is a value in being able to establish networks of influence—"

"Influence," Wharton repeated. "You are claiming to have acquired this from the military?" Here was a hick who



could not influence the next banjo number at a hoedown—could Wharton get a witness among the kinfolk (because they're all related) messing around on the hay bales?—and yet Fink thought himself up to CCG snuff. The true tragedy of these small-town military applicants not being that bright was that they were unaware of it. Seeing how everyone else was afraid of the possibility of veterans returning to the office and shooting up the place, Wharton saw it as his duty not to coddle military candidates, but rather to use the interview as a teaching moment to direct them to their intellectual rung below dieticians. He did not doubt that they probably thought his posture that of a cheese dick. But comporting yourself as such was part of the game, be it assimilation of the fittest douches. In Wharton's CCG class, there had been an ex-Naval Academy nuclear submariner who had lasted a year out of the Houston office with his conventional mind-set, his pervasive logical staleness onsite incapable of turning the client ship around. He'd even had a gut.

“May I please just be allowed an opportunity—” But a knock at the door cut Fink off before Wharton could cut him off again.

Nathan Ellison, a senior partner in his midforties with the body and energy of a younger man able to both network around town at all the right social gatherings and find time to teach Sunday

school, stepped  
inside. "Didn't realize you were still doing an interview." He  
apologized to  
Wharton, then noticing Fink, asked, "Is Brock giving you a  
real pressure  
cooker?"

"Can't complain, no one's shooting at me," Fink  
said, bounding up from the chair to straighten his corkscrew  
backbone into an  
erect figure of authority for a handshake, with a nod to  
Wharton. "Yet." Their  
hands met and held, arm wrestling blue veins popping out in  
the kind of  
kingmaker handshake set aside for finalizing backroom palace  
coup plots. They  
smiled at each other and continued to ignore Wharton as if he  
were a naked man  
changing in *their* locker room row. "Only jesting. He's great,  
Nate."

Wharton brooded over the liberty taken with Nathan's name,  
paraded as it was by  
Fink, who no longer sniffed the air but deeply inhaled the  
noxious fumes that  
he had introduced to the office.

It dismayed Wharton that the late-afternoon autumn  
light from his window slightly softened the crags of Fink's  
bird-of-prey  
profile, the challenging mannerisms and hillbilly hostility of  
the hawk-nosed  
dive bomber jettisoned for the litheness of the assassin, high  
on hash and his  
mission, who moves limberly along the corridor wall in wait on  
the balls of his  
feet. "Unlike our intellectual discussion, Brock and I were  
sparring about the

value in establishing networks of influence onsite with clients. I suppose we represent differing schools of thought”—Fink motioned with his hands to group him and Nathan on one side against Wharton on the other—“regarding the best method of how to mine pertinent data to achieve effective results. Just waiting on him to give me the case, but if you two are in a rush to get to your meeting, I am happy to skip over the bio part.”

“Can’t talk about it,” Nathan said, and turning to Wharton added, “or he’d have to kill us.” Was the newly christened infantile persona Nate, once a sober CCG senior partner by the honest Christian name of Nathan, as high as Fink?

“Influence.” Fink flicked his wrist in the air to snap an imaginary towel at Nathan, who laughed and closed the door. Fink’s reciprocal laughter, forced to begin with, stopped the moment the door shut.

Wharton hypothesized that Fink’s true intellectual capacity could be brought to the surface quite easily with the right application. Deployed not to the Middle East but to the far more unsympathetic region of high finance, how would Fink operate in the world of big money?

“Let’s play with some numbers. We have to know that you are comfortable with numbers and speak the language of the business world while coming up with unconventional solutions to complex problems, as I recall

you endeavoring to frame it earlier. The best way for us to discern whether you have the skill set required for the intellectually rigorous environment of consulting is by walking you through a case and seeing how . . . you . . . compete.”

*“Mike Freedman writes with a distinct sensibility. His new novel King of the Mississippi throbs with humor and American exuberance.”*

*—Ha Jin, National Book Award winning author of Waiting and The Banished Immortal*

“I like to win . . . in . . . life.”

Win? Was Fink attempting to commandeer *winning*, the very ethos Wharton lived by? Wharton handed him four clean sheets of paper and a clipboard with a pen attached. “How many in-flight meals were prepared on an average day last year for flights from George Bush Intercontinental Airport?”

“Forty thousand.”

“Come again?”

“Forty thousand.”

Wharton could not have been felled harder had Fink launched his entire gangly frame at his knees. *In point of fact*, Wharton would have normally explained if Fink had not rendered him speechless, the correct answer to the market-sizing question was forty-three thousand after factoring in the four thousand meals for the international flights.

Wharton attempted to salvage some dignity from this unfathomable opening checkmate that had always stumped even the smartest business school students by an incorrect margin of at least ten thousand. "Would you care to illustrate how you arrived at that number?"

"For the reason that around forty thousand is the right answer," Fink charitably clarified.

"I am interested not in Hail Mary guesstimates but your thought process. That you were on the runway for ten minutes and watched two other planes touch down that you then multiplied by six to calculate how many per hour. You then extrapolated out that there were three runways total and each plane on average carried one hundred forty-five passengers. Which you multiplied by twenty instead of twenty-four, as the time from midnight to four in the morning is essentially a dead zone for departures. And that, of those domestic flights, only twenty-five percent of them provided a meal service."

"Which is how I arrived at around forty thousand meals. Just do the math like you just did. I solved it like I had one shot, one kill. Some of us applicants have been vetted—and I don't mean at an investment banking desk job playing with myself and numbers."

Fink released a cackle of a laugh aimed to pierce what patience Wharton had left. The Prohibition gangster-suited Brer Rabbit

across from him had duped Wharton into illustrating a method aloud that backed Fink's wild-ass guess, now claiming ownership of Wharton's mathematical reasoning. What next: squatter's rights to Wharton's office? After Fink's barrage of assaults on football, his manhood, and the nonvetted like himself who had played with themselves while investment banking, Wharton suspected that his colleague Piazza was behind all of this. The explicit attack on investment banking by Fink was an overplaying of the inside information he had been fed, revealing the puppet strings. It was time to cut them, as Fink was still an applicant applying for a job at Wharton's firm. Why hadn't he stuck with the Dr Pepper case, a straightforward branding case? Fink could not even articulate his own identity. "You will need to write down your calculations and structure an outline for the remaining part of the interview. And I will be collecting your notes when we finish for confidentiality purposes."

"I understand. You're talking to a holder of a Top Secret security clearance."

It occurred to Wharton that such a fact, if true, did not bode well for national security. Wharton got up and walked to the window. "For the sake of simplicity, let us use the number forty thousand meals a day." He faced Fink and began the mad minute of firing. "Our client, a company called Swanberry Foods, is responsible

for fifteen percent of the daily in-flight meals at George Bush Intercontinental Airport with a profit margin of one dollar per meal—but the meals only stay edible for eight hours. Recently, management at Swanberry Foods has been considering an overhaul, moving to frozen meals that stay edible up to twenty-four hours, enabling our client to increase its profit margin twenty-five percent per meal. The technology and new equipment to switch to the frozen meals costs fifteen million dollars over five years.” Fink’s pen lay untouched atop the paper.

“What would you advise our client to do under the circumstances? You may take a minute to structure your—”

“I’d pull the trigger and double down on this new technology if our client’s only objective is to maximize profit over the long run. You’ve got to roll the dice to make money.”



Clicking on the image above jumps to the Amazon page for KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

“Please demonstrate beyond the usage of military and gambling metaphors how our client should strategically approach this decision. This time, be so kind as to walk me through your calculations that support your hypothesis after taking a moment.”

Fink held up his index finger to Wharton and began to scribble manically. The same index finger reappeared two more times separated by three-minute intervals between

flashes. It took all the reserve in Wharton not to snatch the finger on its third appearance and break it.

"What do your numbers say?"

Wharton asked, putting an end to the longest ten-minute silence of his life.

"Profits of almost six million dollars a year if Swanberry switches to the proposed plan. That's before I shave their fixed costs to trim them down."

"I think you mean variable costs," Wharton said, allowing a laugh to escape at such amateur histrionics.

He leaned over to try and read the chicken scratch on the top piece of paper.

He was enjoying this and shook his head slowly at the illegible writing, indubitably representative of the mind that had dictated it.

"God only knows

where, but I'm afraid you have an extra zero or two in there somewhere. I don't

know where to begin helping you because I can't make out a single number on

your paper. This is why a *successful* applicant will use this as a dialogue

and voice aloud each major step in his or her explanation; that way we can help

guide you a little should you stumble in one of your calculations. Had you done

the math correctly, you would see that at their projected rate of sales

Swanberry would lose almost a quarter of a million dollars a year over the next

five years, and that it would take almost six years just to



break even after  
the investment if they could withstand the initial losses.”

“I was shooting for long term,  
the big picture.”

Like the trajectory of a clay pigeon, Wharton had anticipated this  
rationalization before he fired. “If you were thinking ‘long  
term’ and the ‘big  
picture,’ you would have noted they needed to increase their  
market share by  
marketing to airlines that their newly designed meals would  
last longer and  
save the airlines money compared to the other products being  
offered by  
competitors. Even acquire a competitor and streamline costs.  
And that’s only  
after analyzing whether the industry is growing. You would  
have recommended  
that they diversify with other products or at least expand  
their current market  
into supermarkets, hospitals, retirement  
centers, prisons, and even your military base chow halls. And  
that is exactly  
what we did, because I worked on this for eleven months—though  
the real company  
was not called Swanberry.”

“Not bad, though, for ten minutes versus what took  
you a year, right?”

Wharton did not bite on this tease designed to  
distract him from closing in for the scalp. “Where’s your  
outline or structured  
strategy? I need to collect your scratch paper as well.”

Fink first handed Wharton a sheet from the bottom,

the outline. "There might be a gem or two buried in there y'all could use," he thought he heard Fink say as Wharton gazed transfixed on the only two things written on the paper:  $\text{profits} = \text{revenue} - \text{costs}$ , and circled below it, always look at the revenue.

" 'Always look at the revenue.' I don't even know what this means," Wharton muttered in shock, letting the outline float down to his desk. "This is your foundation?"

"Winning," Fink instructed, standing up and tapping with the familiar index finger on the written equation at the top of the outline. "Or in the more narrow terms of this particular world, maximizing profits. In a wilddcatting oil town like Houston, a thin line—"

"I must conclude this interview, for I have to attend our office meeting," Wharton said, rising from his chair and sparing himself from Fink's clichéd interpretation of the essence of Wharton's hometown.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

Fink held up his hands as if about to make a confession. "I've got nothing for you."

Wharton thought it was the first valid point Fink had made.

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# New Fiction from Jennifer Orth-Veillon: Marche-en- Famenne

*The following is an excerpt from Jennifer Orth-Veillon's work-in-progress, The Storage Room. Here, she intersperses real letters from her grandfather (italicized), an American soldier who fought at the Battle of the Bulge, with her own imagined accounts of the stories behind the letters.*

*The Battle of the Bulge, which ended 74 years ago on January 25, 1945, was the largest and deadliest battle fought by Americans in WWII and the second-deadliest battle in American history.*

*All photos provided by the author. – WBT Editors*



Three American soldiers in Europe, WWII, taken by the author's grandfather. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

*January 12, 1945*

*Somewhere in Belgium*

*My Darling,*

*You are probably sore at me as you read this. I'm sorry. I write as often as I can, and even then, Uncle Sam doesn't handle the mail service over here like he does at home. I admit I laughed at the way you gave me hell in one of your letters. In fact, I read the letter to the boys.*

*To bring you up to date: we are fighting with the 7th Corps in the north who are using the pincer maneuver. "Pincer" is just like it sounds—a military tactic that actually "pinches," meaning we flank the enemy on both sides and press in. We*

*pinch them. It works beautifully. We are planning to trap some Jerries in the drive.*

*I hate missing holidays with you. Did I ever tell you about our Thanksgiving Day in Geronsweiler, Germany? It was Roosevelt's best T-day yet. Jerry had an artillery observer in the town, and we hit him hard. Still, we took a pounding for the several days we were there. We were stationed in a central building that the Jerries bombed so regularly we timed our trips to the john according to their schedule.*

*Often, I daydream about you. Sometimes it's so real that I can almost feel you in my arms. Dreaming of you is one of two things I do other than work. The other is dreaming about good food. Incidentally, the Christmas cookies and peanuts arrived in good shape.*

The November wave of muddy battles around the Siegfried Line that carried Brillhart and the Railsplitters, the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry, east in December 1944 turned to ice at the Belgian border. They had to blink to keep their eyeballs from freezing, but the cold muted the smell of rotting. A few Christmas lights hung in some little town squares, softening the browns and greys tracks from tanks that stained the new-fallen snow. Frozen mud and dirty snow, brown and brown-grey stains dominated the colors of the Bulge landscape, blurring the contours of quaint villages with pointy church spirals and red clay roofs so they almost looked intact after the intense bombing.

Unfrozen mud could swallow bodies and fill holes, but against the backdrop of snow that spanned the flat fields and streaked the Ardennes, nobody could completely disappear. The cold preserved the dead in seconds, the look of horror or peace seemed almost chiseled on their faces by the precise hands of ice. The bodies reminded Brillhart of sculptures he saw in the Paris Tuileries Gardens and he caught himself studying corpses as the snow dusted their bloodied clothes. Wounds frozen in

time. The snow would never stop falling, blanketing the bodies, until spring turned the statues into fertilizer, humus for revitalizing the battle-ravaged soil.

Brillhart and his men shuffle-kicked and stomped their way through the Ardennes forest moonlit snow towards a Belgian farmhouse in the distance. Translucent smoke poured from its great stone chimney. The more the soldiers pounded the ground, the less likely that Brillhart, the battalion surgeon, would have to cut frostbite away from their feet, with amputation the eventual outcome. The thermometer registered thirteen below Celsius. They had to find a warm place for the night or freeze to death by morning.

*I am sorry you cried at Christmas. I felt a little low myself. I can imagine the menu and it must have been wonderful. You should see me – I look like a coal miner, judging from the slack in my pants. But don't worry. It won't take long to get my figure back once I start eating your cooking.*

*Snow! When I was a kid, I always loved the snow. It's nearly a foot thick in the fields here. There's less in the forests, which are beautiful but show battle scars. Belgium is a beautiful country. The Belgian people are simple and homegrown. They live quiet lives and never seem to be in a hurry. All along the way they gave us delicious apples. You want to fight to help these people. Already, they have been invaded twice by the Boches – we are here to prevent a third.*

Over their thick wool uniforms and insulated helmets, Brillhart and the other Railsplitters were still wearing the long white winter underwear to camouflage themselves in the snow. During the past few days of the Bulge, wearing long underwear on the outside of their clothes became protocol. The disguise had helped them win the last yards of the town of Marche-en-Famenne, a three-day fight. The story told through

the ranks was that, a few nights prior, the Railsplitters, wearing the outer layer of long, ghostly underwear, spotted two Germans cowering behind leafless trees in the winter forest lit by the full moon. Hunching over in the dark, the GIs first thought they were frightened bears. "Hände hoch!" one of the battalion sergeants had called, apparently mangling the German order with his strong Texan accent. The Krauts must have heard them coming but made no effort to run or fire. They raised their hands without protest as the Railsplitters surrounded them. Both Germans—now prisoners— had officer status. What were they doing alone in the woods in enemy territory? Rumors surmised that Krauts were tired and wanted to get caught by any ally before they had to confront the Russians again— American POW camps were said to be more humane. The two captured Germans had led the entire ghostly American battalion unnoticed away from five enemy squadrons and into the heart of a strategic Belgian village.

The rest of the Krauts didn't see the GIs coming at them from all sides and were forced to capitulate. Brillhart tried to get the American generals who implemented the rule to honor the insignificant private from his company who came up with the idea, but his superiors refused to admit that a boy who hadn't been to military school or even college was that smart.

White soldiers on white snow. A small town, big victory. A thousand men lost. The Bulge was far from over.

*My birthday, Jan. 6, was spent in a town that I can't name – but I had French-fried potatoes (with salt!) and fried chicken (with salt!). I also heard a Kay Kiser radio program. What a treat! Kelly – the guy I told you about before – is still a Lieutenant. I found out why he wasn't promoted to Major: apparently, he hasn't got the guts, brains, foresight or desire. Personally, I have no respect for Kelly, but I play along to get what I want. Then there's the translator, Urban – we call him "Burpin Urban"—who asks to be evacuated every time he has some damned minor ailment. The whole regiment will*

*rejoice if he gets really injured and leaves.*

*We get decent food from time to time, but what we really want is a bath, clean clothes, and a shave. I am glad to hear you are working on a scrapbook of our relationship. I wish I could send you something for it.*

Brillhart and his men reached the farmhouse with the chimney. As he prepared to knock at the door, he realized that the orange light of the hearth would illuminate the blood and dirt stains on the white underwear covering their uniforms. They would look like murdered ghosts rather than American saviors. Brillhart instructed the men to shed the outer layer, then knocked. A toothless man with a hollow, dark-stained mouth answered. He uttered something Urban couldn't understand and slammed the door shut. Brillhart's stomach squeezed with hunger at the brief blast of heat and glimpse of the stove. He ordered the men to put their frozen C rations on the ground in front of them as a peace offering.

A string of obscenities rose from the men. *Goddamn frog. Goddamn Belge.*

*Goddammit, there was booze in there.* Brillhart kicked at the door with his boot. Urban was a wiry nineteen-year-old with chronic indigestion and a Canadian mother. He tried to talk to the Belgian man when he re-opened the door, but the man shouted, waved his hands in the air, and slammed the door again. Brillhart kicked harder, shoving Urban in front of him. The Belgian opened again and gestured wildly. He held up all ten fingers, made fists, held up two more, and pointed to his crotch. Brillhart looked at Urban, his eyebrows raised. "What in the hell is he saying?"

Urban, useless, shook his head. "I can't understand this accent, Doc. I get one word out of ten."

The Belgian man held his hands to his chest in the shape of a woman's breasts. Still speaking quickly, he pointed to his



crotch again and thrust towards the door as if he was taking a woman from behind. Then ten fingers, fists, and two more. More thrusting.

*Oh! And I'm glad you like the perfume I bought you at Guerlain. Tell Aunt Bessie she'd better stay away from it, that cow!*

*The further along you get with the pregnancy, the more I wonder about whether you are taking care of yourself and if you are being careful. I wish I could have seen you at Christmas. We would have had so much fun together—shopping, packing, mailing presents.*

*Belgium at the present is wrecked with war. I don't know what kind of Christmas they had, but the people don't seem to mind. They realize that there must be some destruction in liberation.*

“What's he saying, Doc, that he's a woman?” shouted Lt. Kelly, the short redhead Irishman from Chicago. “He wants to fuck us? What the hell? Tell him, sure! We'll make sweet love to him in exchange for a bed and some booze.”

Brillhart turned around and drew his finger across his throat, looking at Kelly and the others. He shoved Urban forward to the door again. “Ask him to speak slowly. And ask it slowly.”

*“Nous comprenons rien, Monsieur. S'il vous plaît, nous comprenons rien. S'il vous plait, parlez plus lentement. We don't understand you, Sir. Don't speak so fast, please.”* Urban held up a can of C rations and a pack of cigarettes. He knocked the can against the house's stone wall to show that it was frozen. The man held up his palm and said slowly *“Attendez. Stop.”* He pulled the door partly closed but left it open a crack. Brillhart moved closer to the sliver of heat coming from the house.

“Wait, he says wait,” Urban said.

The Belgian man appeared at the door again, offering Brillhart a framed photograph. Twelve somber-eyed children dressed in white stood between a younger version of the man and a plump woman in black. Her lips were pressed so tightly that Brillhart wondered if they could soften into a kiss.

"He has twelve children sir," Urban said, "*Douze enfants, c'est ca, Monsieur? Pas de place, c'est ca?*" The man nodded vigorously and smiled, revealing several brown teeth lingering at the back of his mouth.

"Doc, we can't stay here. He's got twelve kids. No room. No food."

"Thank him and let's move out," Brillhart said. All twelve were probably sick and undernourished. He had dealt with enough depressing scenes over the last days and couldn't fathom caring for anyone else without a few hours of sleep.

Brillhart felt his men's disappointment and reminded them to keep rubbing their hands together to keep blood flowing.

"Son of a bitch."

"*Merci, merci Monsieur. Au revoir. Bonne nuit,*" Brillhart said, mangling the few French words he learned.

"*Et merci. Merci à vous, nos sauveurs. Que Dieu soit avec vous jusqu'à la fin,*" said the man, bowing his head and then saluting.

The door closed. The emptiness of moonlight in the snow silenced them. Their hunger deepened, but they left the C-rations for the family in front of the house. *When you talk about buying diapers for Junior, I wonder about the name we should choose for him when he's born. I'm at a loss. I have considered every single name in and out of the family, and even some girl names just in case. Belgian names like Colette, Therèse, Jeanne, but I still can't hit it. I think about*

*cigarettes, too. I've got more than a carton left, but I give so many to civilians. They need them more than I do.*

Still stomping and kicking at the snow, Brillhart felt the heat at the bottom of his veins dwindling. His blood was slowing. Little knives of cold dug in. He was minutes from frostbite. Nothing could stop the necrology of frozen tissue.

When the Railsplitters first arrived in the region, he found the rolling mountains of the Ardennes comforting. They brought back pleasant memories of snow-covered hills in Kentucky after football practice when he would walk home to the wood stove and hot food. As the star of the team, he ran miles, back and forth on the practice field, crushing himself against other players and smelling dirt as he hit the ground. After practice, he stayed in the hot shower longer than the others, feeling the gentle pull of his muscles recover. He knew that he wanted to spend his whole life studying the body's power. Back then, all he knew of war were the medals his grandfather won in 1917 from the Meuse-Argonne. His grandfather was strong and quiet although he cried at odd times.

While poor, he was a nobleman in the coal mining town. Everyone respected him. Before the Bulge, it had never crossed Brillhart's mind that his grandfather saw things like uncoiling intestines.

But within days of the Battle, the Ardennes appeared squat and bulbous under a gray sky that faded or darkened according to the amount of smoke rising from arms fire and shelling. Only at night could Brillhart see a few stars. Now, in leading his freezing men in search of another house, Brillhart decided he wanted to live in an isolated, beautiful place like pre-war Belgium, alone with June and Jr., away from everyone, away from the cities and people. He would build a beautiful Belgian stone house from the rubble.

*Since you always ask, I'll tell you about the old farmhouse in*

*Belgium we stayed in. It was typical of Belgian farmhouses in that the barn and house were located together, but the Belgians are very clean people. It was clear that Jerry had used the house as an aid station a few short hours before we arrived. Fresh piles of dirt indicated that a few dead Jerries were buried outside.*

The men almost passed by the next farmhouse. There were no lights, and no smoke rose from the chimney, but it was quiet. Brillhart switched on his flashlight and shone it across the stone walls. Bullet marks dotted the façade, but no other sign of significant structural destruction was visible. He knocked on the door, prepared to wait, but the it swung open. The men stepped inside and swept their flashlights across the rooms.



A Belgian farmhouse during WWII, perhaps the one mentioned in these letters, or another. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, they saw soiled

gauze, empty morphine ampoules, discarded scalpels, and shards of disinfectant tubes littering the floor. Sofas, chairs, and a piano with missing keys had been pushed towards the wall and the large kitchen table had been dragged into the center of the living room. The top of the table was slick with frozen blood and icy bits of flesh.

“All clear Doc,” called Kelly from the kitchen. “Not even any dead ones lying around. Think they’re all outside already, buried and frozen, so they won’t stink us out. God, I love German efficiency.”

Though it was a hygienic disaster, the house would do for the night. Brillhart and his men decided to light a fire in the stove, eat, sleep a little.

The soldiers found enough logs stacked in the small barn adjoining the house to make fires in the kitchen stove and in the living room fireplace. Slowly, their hands and C rations thawed. A few portraits hung on the wall, but the subdued eyes and high-buttoned collars inspired little empathy from the hungry men, who were more concerned about the unpleasant taste of canned rations. The flames revealed details of their physical condition— all the fat chiseled from their cheeks, chins peppered with dirt and stubble, eyes like dull moons. They looked to Brillhart like the coal miners limping into a diner in Loyall, Kentucky after days underground. Brillhart remembered thinking that no amount of sunlight could erase the miners’ ashen pallor as they drank coffee and ate toast with pork gravy. The color was stain, not dust.

Every meal for Brillhart and the medics had become a guessing game since the labelling disintegrated in the wet snow. Tonight, they opened three cans of meat and potato hash, two meat stew, four meat and beans, and five cellophane-wrapped fudge bars. They added two instant coffees and nine pressed sugar cubes. Except for the chocolate and sugar, all had the same soft, morbid taste of over-salted metal. They had eaten

the same range of things for almost two months. It calmed but never vanquished their hunger.

Kelly stubbed his cigarette out in the viscous film of meat hash left in one of the cans. "Well, that was disgusting, as usual. Anyone want to go with me to find the cellar? They've always got something stored away in those basements. Maybe even booze."

Urban followed him. Brillhart stayed upstairs and smoked one of his last cigarettes.

Kelly's trip to the basement reminded Brillhart of Christmas when he and some other Railsplitters had spent the holiday with a Belgian family in the town of Comblain La Tour. During the meal, Monsieur Colson, the father, recounted the town's proud history. It was famous for its picturesque houses along the quais of the river Ourthe, and for its steep granite cliffs, called Le Rocher de la Vierge. After dinner, when Brillhart thought he had eaten and drunk everything the family had to offer, Monsieur Colson stood up and announced he was going to the cellar for the rest. He disappeared and then re-emerged with one arm full of dried sausages. In the other, he carried a bucket sloshing over with a thick dark red liquid. "*C'est du boudin. C'est du sang. Pour le nouvel an.*" He set it in the middle of the kitchen, rolled up his sleeves, and pulled out strings of sausage links. "Blood sausage. For New Year's.

As he stared into the bucket of blood, Brillhart his eyes swirled. In the messy pail, he saw intestines spilling out of downed men. Blond curls belonging to a private he lost back at the battle at Geilenkirchen in December swirled together with the intestines. His vision blackened and he fainted, falling off of his chair to the floor. He came to as Kelly pinched his cheeks and announced to everyone that Brillhart had never been able to hold his liquor. He hoped that Kelly would come back from the basement in this deserted house with something more

appetizing than blood sausage.

*In the basement of the house, we found two girls— one around 18 and the other 8 – and a smaller brother who was blind and badly crippled. Jerry had locked them down there. They hadn't eaten for four days, it was very cold, and upstairs, the parents had been shot dead. The mother and father were still in bed under the covers. We brought the kids upstairs and gave them food and hot coffee and blankets.*

"Doc, you'd better get down here," Kelly called from the top of the basement stairwell, breathless. Urban panted behind him.

The soldiers' flashlights made a flickering kaleidoscope of yellow dots as they thundered down the stairs, then formed a bright circle around three children, two girls and a boy, propped against the far end of the basement wall. Pale and shivering, tears traced lines down their fear-pinched faces, but they didn't move. The younger girl whimpered as the men moved closer.

Brillhart pointed to the red cross on his sleeve and then to the sleeves of all the other medics as he approached. He motioned to Urban, who said, "We're doctors. We're here to help you. Don't worry" and then, "*Nous sommes médecins. Nous sommes là pour vous aider. Ne vous inquiétez pas.*" Despite their tears and dirty faces, he noticed the two girls were beautiful, with heart-shaped faces and thick wavy brown hair. They huddled around the boy. Brillhart elbowed Urban in the back when he fell silent. "Keep talking, Goddammit. They need to know they can trust us."

Urban jumped and repeated "We're Americans. We're allies," several times.

Finally, the girls unlocked themselves from around the boy and the young girl looked at the men with a faint smile. *Nous sommes Américains.*

The eldest girl began to get to her feet as if to move toward them, then fainted, her hand sliding down the wall as she hit the floor. The other two children bent over her, screaming, *Germaine, Germaine!*

"Sh, shhhh. It's ok." Kelly moved forward and gently slid his arms under Germaine, while Brillhart took her feet. Despite the fullness of her face and lips, her body was almost emaciated. She seemed to weigh almost nothing. Together, they made their way up the stairs. Urban stayed with her as she recovered in the kitchen while Brillhart and Kelly went to get the other sister and the boy, who could barely walk.

Brillhart put more C rations on the fire and melted clean snow for drinking water. The children brought the food and water to their mouths in swift, jerky movements, and it was gone in minutes. The men searched their bags for more cans. Brillhart saw a bit of color return to the childrens' faces and realized they were more beautiful than he thought. With a bit of regained strength, the girls looked tearfully around their devastated house.

Brillhart felt grateful when he learned the boy was blind. At least he couldn't see the blood and dirt covering his family home, or how the lace curtains had been torn from the windows, probably used for tourniquets.

The younger girl, Colette, sprang up from the table and ran toward the stairs leading to the second floor.

"Non!" Germaine cried. She lunged forward but teetered and gripped the table for balance. "Please, stop her. She's looking for my parents are up there. She can't see that."

Brillhart caught Colette and lifted her up as she kicked her legs in protest. He set her by Germaine, who enveloped her sister with her arms. Colette shuddered and buried her head in Germaine's shoulder.



*"Maman, Papa,"* she sobbed.

Germaine, who had begun to cry again, dug her lips into Colette's hair and muttered quick, soft French until she calmed. Brillhart dug in the rations and pulled out all of the pressed sugar cubes that the men used to make the terrible coffee somewhat drinkable.

"Look," he said, holding a cube up to Colette's face. "It's magic." He stuck out his tongue and placed one of the white squares. He pulled his tongue back in, scrunched his face for a few seconds, and stuck it back out. The square had transformed into a smaller, rounded lump. He stuck his tongue back in again and repeated the process two more times. Finally, the sugar cube disappeared and his clownishness had drawn a weak giggle from Colette. He offered the box to the girls, who mimicked him. He gave one to the blind brother, Jacques. He had steadied them enough for now. He would give them the chocolate at the next outburst if necessary.

While Jacques and Colette sucked and played with the pressed sugar cubes, the older girl, Germaine, who spoke excellent English, stood in a corner out of earshot of her siblings and quietly told Brillhart the story of the last few days. The Jerries had arrived in the middle of the night, kicking open the front door, waking the whole family, but it was too late for them to hide. The children ran to the room where the parents slept, and they hugged each other in fright as the soldiers climbed the stairs. The soldiers kicked the bedroom door open, ordered the children out, and shot the parents. They made the children take them to the cellar. The Jerries were tired of their own rations too. When they found nothing, they locked the children inside. That was four days ago.

According to Germaine, the cellar had done little to muffle the sounds of battle that raged around them and of the makeshift hospital the Germans had made in their home. Shelling shook the house for hours at a time and the children

were sure they would be buried alive when the walls caved in. The screams they heard came in waves, followed by silence. "Either they died, or the morphine kicked in," Brillhart explained. Germaine had heard someone calling for his mother.

*The scene was a tear jerker. Unfortunately, I've seen things like it several times.*

*What can you do? Curse Jerry and carry on. When we left, we notified civilian affairs and made sure the children had some food. And then we looked to our next job.*

Brillhart made a bed out of the Army blankets next to the dwindling fire in the stove for the children, who had barely slept while locked in the cellar. Germaine sung to Jacques and Colette until they closed their eyes.

"It's a miracle," Germaine said. "I can't believe they're sleeping. Thank you."

"You should sleep too. We're not going anywhere right now. It's safe." Brillhart handed her the blanket he was going to use for his own bed. She wrapped it around her shoulders. Colette whimpered in her sleep. Germaine placed her hand on her sisters head to soothe her and then closed her own eyes.

Once the children were all asleep, curled in their blankets next to the stove, Brillhart went upstairs, harboring the stupid hope that the mother and father had somehow suffered only surface wounds, and were still alive. When he found them, he understood why Kelly overlooked the scene. He was surprised to find the parents' room neat, untouched, except for minimal bloodstains on the floor and the pungent odor of decomposition that they had all gotten used to. Under a pristine white blanket two figures, a set of shadowy lumps dappled with moonlight appeared to sleep.

Once, when his father had rare a day off from the railroad and slept the whole night at home, Brillhart woke before sunrise

and tiptoed to watch his parents sleeping. They snored in soft, cacophonous bursts. His mother's snore was deep and throaty, while his father exhaled shrill, nasal blasts. He watched them hopefully, willing his father to get up and go outside to the pond with him to catch the early-biting fish.

That morning, his mother awoke to her young son standing in the doorway of her bedroom. Instead of shooing him away, she lifted the covers, and Brillhart crawled over her into the warm space between his parents. He pressed his back into his mother and let the snoring lull him back to sleep.

When he pulled back the blankets on the bed in the Belgian farmhouse in Marche- en-Famenne, Brillhart was relieved. The gunshot wounds on their heads were dried. The blood had drained from the backs of their heads into the pillows and mattress. The Germans had made a perfect, thorough shot. Madame and Monsieur Jacques Bourguignon. A mother, a father asleep with the knowledge, Brillhart hoped, that their children had been spared.

It had only taken a few months of combat for Brillhart to understand what he now called German logic. Unlike the French, the Germans were exacting, methodical. When he checked German medical bags left on the field, he found them to be impeccable, well- stocked, with clean instruments. The tanks, the weapons, the burp guns fired precisely. The Germans spared no one, not even animals got in the way of the mission or the order.

Few traces of life sprouted back after their destructive path. The rumor was, though, that they were also tired. Americans were fresh from two decades of peace. It was their main advantage.

Brillhart couldn't understand why the Jerries had let the children live. This bedroom looked like someone had tucked the parents in. If the parents were trying to protect the children

or vice versa, some kind of struggle must have ensued. Sheets on the floor, nightstands knocked over blood and brains everywhere. Someone had taken care to clean up, to recreate a peaceful diorama. Given his take on German behavior, the scene both dumbfounded him and made perfect sense. He placed the covers back over the couple's head, went downstairs, and ordered Kelly and Urban to take the bodies to the barn outside before the children woke up.

*I read your letters over and over to make them last longer. It is darned nice of you to write so often. Mother never writes, but I guess she is busy with her sister and can't find time. I should be in bed right now, but I wanted to write to the dearest person in my world.*

A few hours later, in the kitchen, they were awake, hovering over the stove to keep warm. Jacques plunked away on a piano with a few keys missing. Colette was the only one still sleeping. Brillhart and his men talked intermittently with Germaine.

In 1914, the girls' father had stopped trusting Germans after losing his entire family to the first World War. As soon as Hitler annexed Austria, the father dug a hole in the basement floor, barred it with a wooden plank, and covered it with dirt. Day after day, he filled it with his hunting rifles, ammunition resistance, yards of dried sausage, pork fat, dried potatoes, jars of apples, bottles of beer, and candles. He was determined to see his family survive the second coming of the Germans. That's why, at first, the children weren't worried when the Germans locked them in the cellar. But when they tried to get to the supplies, they found that the ground was hard and frozen. They didn't have the strength to dig all the way through.

"Why didn't you tell us when we were serving you that horrible army crap?" Kelly cried.

Germaine shrugged her shoulders and blushed. "It wasn't that bad."

In minutes, the GIs were chopping away with axes they found in the barn. Within two hours, pork fat and potatoes sizzled in a heavy pan. Apples bubbled beside them. The soldiers drank the thawed beer and gnawed on the sausages, giddy that they outsmarted the Germans with this treasure trove of food. Thanks to their father, these children would survive on the surplus through the rest of the war. Colette started to cry again and run to the stairs, but Brillhart brought her back and gave her chocolate, which she had never tasted. The novelty quieted her briefly.

For the second time, Brillhart entertained the idea that June, his wife, might give birth to a girl. If so, he would name her Germaine. Jacques felt his way to the piano and played a song resembling Yankee Doodle Dandee on the remaining keys. Blind and crippled, he seemed the least affected by the parents' death or perhaps he was just used to other people taking care of him so he trusted the soldiers. Brillhart, Kelly, and Urban laughed as the boy sputtered the words to the song. How did he know? they asked. "Papa taught it to him and told him to play it as soon as the Americans got here," Germaine explained.

"Well, shit," Ramsey, a medic from Georgia said, "Your Pops had his damn head too far up north. Shove over boy, let me play you the real song." Ramsey sat next to the boy and pounded out Dixie. Even with the missing keys, Ramsey managed to render an accurate version. After hearing it that one time, Jacques replayed it perfectly.

"He's a goddamn Mozart," Ramsey said.

His sisters smiled shyly "He can do it with almost any song," Germaine said.

The GIs all sang the southern hymn of Dixie together and then returned to the food.

After more apples, potatoes, sausage, beer, and coffee, Brillhart sat down and talked to Germaine again. Germaine told them how Monsieur Bourguignon had put away money for at least one of his children to go away and study something other than farming. Since his only boy was blind and crippled, he decided Germaine would be the best educated of his two girls. The schools nearby didn't have a spot for her, so instead, she spent six months in Amsterdam studying to become an English teacher, which explained why she hardly needed any translating from Urban. She had a second cousin in Amsterdam, who lodged her in exchange for housecleaning and goods from the farm in Marche-en-Famenne that Monsieur Bourguignon brought once a month.

The mention of the Netherlands made Brillhart remember the package nestled under his coat. He had been carrying a slightly-torn Dutch comic book that he found in another house weeks ago. He understood none of the words – he just knew it wasn't German – but the pictures of the animal characters made him smile. He ruffled Colette's hair and pulled it from his leather satchel, spreading the pages out on the newly-clean kitchen table. Colette seemed transfixed by the critters jumping over the pages and giggled when Brillhart snorted like one of the pig characters. When she pointed to a horse, he neighed and stuck his upper teeth out. She giggled again. Germaine leaned over the table, too, smiling at the comics and at her little sister.

Brillhart announced that he would return in a few minutes. Germaine nodded and waved. He heard Jacques still puttering away at Dixie on the piano. He couldn't see the children's faces when he said goodbye. Perhaps the first overwhelming stirrings of fatherhood. Germaine, Colette, and the boy almost felt like his children, as if he owned them, as if they owned him. If he could wrap them up and send them to June, he would. They would love America. He envisioned a bustling household full of the adopted French-speaking children and his own.

Germaine could be the nanny and go to school. He pictured the crippled boy sitting in the sun by the pool he hoped to build one day. Water exercises would be good for atrophied legs. If he stayed with them any longer, he might stay forever. Brillhart kept walking.

When he reached the main road, he saw the line of surrendered German soldiers, many carrying litters of wounded. They filed past Brillhart as he went to the battalion station in the center of town. Kelly would have yelled obscenities at the prisoners, but Brillhart kept his head down.

That afternoon, the Railsplitters moved on to another town, another battle. A few days later, they came back through Marche-en-Famenne. Brillhart had let civil affairs know about Germaine, the two younger children, and the dead parents. Brillhart walked into the center of Marche-en-Famenne taking photos for June, though few of the buildings rising out of the icy rubble remained intact. The Town Hall with its Romanesque and Gothic facades, the Mosan church and belfry, made of red brick with ornate white trimmings, and the classical columns of what had been a bank, represented Old Europe. This was what June would want to see. This was where she dreamed that Brillhart ate and slept each night. He tried to aim the camera so that it didn't capture the hungry townspeople or piles of broken homes. Sometimes, without taking pictures, he let the camera linger in front of his face to hide his eyes that searched everywhere for Germaine and the children.

He paused in front of a modest, partially-caved-in church and observed a small cemetery with a group of civilians gathered by tombstones that had been knocked sideways by shelling. A priest crossed his hands over the bodies of the dead before closing their makeshift caskets. Brillhart recognized, among them, Germaine's mother and father. Next to them was a hole that Brillhart knew had taken hours to dig in the hard ground. He looked into the crowd for the children but still didn't see them. He hoped they were drinking Red Cross hot chocolate and

eating doughnuts under warm blankets.

*Today, I saw townspeople burying bodies in a churchyard. Amid the rubble and ruin, a small group surrounded a priest who was quietly conducting the ceremony. Some of our boys helped to dig the graves. The parents from the farmhouse were among the bodies.*

*There is so much ruin. It's hard to imagine the Belgian people regaining the quiet lives they once had. And at the same time, it's easy to see how this destruction feeds all our hatred of the Germans. It makes us want to kill more, and take fewer prisoners, to grind every German deep into the soil. Sometimes I am afraid of how you will react when I return. I hope and pray that you'll still know me, but that the memory of this ruin will stay vivid enough that we will never let the German or any belligerent nation get a foothold again.*

*We thoroughly enjoyed the cookies and the Readers Digests you sent, as well as the tuna fish, knackers, sardines, and saltines. Thank you. My darling, I must stop now. I have a big day ahead of me. I will try to write more often, but regardless of how busy I am, I'm never too busy to remember you and the things we've done together, to think about our plans for the future. I love you more every day. Brillhart.*





Brillhart's wife upon the birth of their first child, a girl, in April of 1945. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

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## **New Fiction from Patrick Hicks: Into the Tunnel**

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

*"The rocket will free man from his remaining chains, the*

*chains of gravity which still tie him to this planet. It will open to him the gates of heaven."*

–Wernher von Braun

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

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

"Move it, you pieces of shit!"

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

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

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

smelled like. During the past few months he had plenty of time to familiarize himself with it.

But where was he?

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

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

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

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

of bodies made the moon shimmer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

done that at Auschwitz.

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

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

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

*Alles für den Krieg*

*Alles für den Sieg*

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

When they entered the tunnel, a sudden dampness fell over his skin. It felt like a heavy wet cloak had been placed over his shoulders. He began to shiver. And somewhere up ahead, metal banged against metal—it was deep and rhythmic—double-syllabled—*bah-wung—bah-wung—bah-wung*. There was also the low hum of a generator to his right. Floodlights cast grotesque shadows on the wall. He looked around and realized that everything he could see must have been hewn out of the rock by hand. The floor. The walls. The curved ceiling. How many prisoners had died making this place, this cave?



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

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

“Keep moving!” someone shouted from the rear. Surprisingly, it was a French accent.

Steel pipes were bolted to the walls and he wondered what they were for. When he looked up at the high rounded ceiling he felt claustrophobia run through his chest like spiders. For several long moments he had to fight a wild urge to run. What if the ceiling collapsed? How many thousands of tons of rock

were above him? Eli looked for support beams but couldn't see any. The air around him was thick and oppressive and cold. It crowded his lungs. His nose was chilly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a kapo. This man was given extra food if he agreed to do the dirty work of the Nazis. In exchange for beating his fellow prisoners, he was given a good night of sleep and a full belly. The nozzle suddenly teetered sideways, the metal cone slipped against the wall, and when it bounced onto the ground—sending out a low ringing sound—the kapo immediately began hammering a prisoner with a stick. The blows rained down. Bloody stains formed on the man's back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A moment later, they came to a halt.

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

At first, Eli couldn't tell what was before him. He squinted



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

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

*"Mützen...ab!"*

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

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

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

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

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

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

He brought the club down onto an imaginary head.

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

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

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

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

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

“Listen up,” came another voice. It was deeper and darker. “Approach the table in groups of five. We need to process you.”

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

"Age?"

"20."

"Do you speak German?"

"Yes, of course."

"Occupation?"

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

"I'm...an electrician," he lied.

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

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

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

He went to work.

\*     \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By early 1944, Tunnel A and Tunnel B were finished, along with rail tracks that led out from their gaping mouths. Some 35 million cubic feet of space was now available for rocket assembly. If we think of Tunnel A and Tunnel B running parallel to each other—with a slight S curve to both—there were forty-six smaller tunnels that connected them. In this way, seven and a half miles of space had been chiseled into the Kohnstein. The world's largest underground factory was finally ready for use and, if everything went according to plan, the Nazis would soon rain warheads down onto cities in a way the world had never seen before.

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

\* \*

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

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

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

His uniform was infested with lice and, whenever he tried to

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

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

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

A gust of wind rattled the window.

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

When he was kid, he loved feeling grass beneath his feet. July sunshine trickled down through oak leaves and the warmth was delicious. He imagined stopping at a café for a slice of

chocolate gateaux. Maybe he'd sink a finely polished fork into frosting and lift the crumbling goodness to his lips where—

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

And with that, he drifted into the abyss.

The lice, meanwhile, continued to feed.

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

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

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



questions about Dora-Mittelbau *did* come up in later life, von Braun would simply smile and talk about Apollo, and Tranquility Base, and the bright pull of the future.

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

Roll call lasted for hours. The prisoners stood at attention with their caps off while a kapo read off their numbers in German. Eli listened for his new name as a soft breeze moved through his uniform. He was no longer Eli Hessel. He was 41199.

The numbers were always shouted out.

“VIER EINS EINS NEUN NEUN!”

“*Jawohl!*”

He raised his hand and was counted among the living.

As the count went on, crows circled overhead. They wheeled around and landed on barrack rooftops. They cawed and hopped.

Sometimes, if the wind was right, Eli could hear church bells bonging in the valley below. Wisps of smoke lifted up from unseen chimneys. He wondered what they were eating for breakfast. Eggs? He liked to imagine eggs. Boiled. Poached. Fried. Scrambled. Thick with butter.

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

“Stand back. That's all for today!”

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

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

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

As they moved for the tunnels, and the rockets, and all that the future might bring, Eli glanced at the guard towers. The wind picked up and the trees began to rustle. Birds soared overhead, riding the currents into quieter valleys. Behind the prisoners, the crematorium rumbled softly. The tall chimney

looked like an inverted rocket. It belched up tarry exhaust, staining the bright blue sky with the fuel of flesh and bone.

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

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

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

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## **Blood Money: C.E. Morgan's 'The Sport of Kings'**

On May 17, 1875, under blue skies and wearing the flapping green-and-orange silks of his legendary employer J.P. McGrath, a diminutive, tough, whip-thin African-American jockey named Oliver Lewis, weighing little more than a hundred pounds, careened to the first Kentucky Derby victory on a chestnut Thoroughbred with a white blaze and two white socks named Aristides. Thirteen of the fifteen jockeys surrounding him as they thundered down the home stretch were also African-American. In fact, black jockeys would dominate the sport in the south for another thirty years, winning 15 of the first 28 Derbies.

Aristides' trainer, Ansel Williamson, had been born a slave in rural Virginia. Purchased by a wealthy horse breeder, he

learned the art and science of groomsmanship, and was eventually hired by J.P. McGrath, of the famed green-and-orange silks, who'd been born dirt-poor but, after winning \$105,000 in a single night in a New York gambling house, started a Thoroughbred farm that went on to become one of the most famous of its time.



1887. Eadweard Muybridge. Wellcome Gallery, London.

That a former-slave-turned-Hall-of-Famer trained Aristides—whose statue now stands at Churchill Downs—and an African-American jockey the size of a young girl rode the pounding horse to victory, hints at the intrigue, breathtaking chance, and monumental toil involved in the sport of horse racing. It also, for novelist C.E. Morgan—with her sharp comprehension of history and a penchant for literary gambles of her own—sparked the genesis of a brilliant, winding epic novel of a racially and economically fraught America: *The Sport of Kings*.

Spanning over 200 years as it moves back and forth through time, *The Sport of Kings* opens in the mid-1950s. Henry Forge, a restless, ambitious teenager schooled from birth in the racial politics of the south, sets in motion a shocking crime against his father's black groom, Filip. The event is one of several sharp seismic blips in the bedrock inequity of Forge Run Farm, initially founded by Henry's great-great-great-great-grandfather, Samuel Forge, who came on foot from Virginia to Paris, Kentucky in 1783, accompanied by one slave. On such an act of claim and hubris the farm was built; and, as author Morgan levels her steady eye at the parallels of human history, a nation.



Young Henry Forge turns the family's tobacco farm into a Thoroughbred empire where the green grass is "the color of money." His frustrated cosmopolitan wife, Judith, leaves him before too long and, in a deeply un-maternal move, also leaves their sole child, Henrietta, for him to raise. (One can't help

but wonder if Henry and his daughter, or at least their naming scheme, are a nod to legendary horse trainer Leo O'Brien and his daughter, Leona; or if, given Morgan's divinity school background and this father-daughter pair's ruthless streak, it's more of a Herod/Herodias sort of thing.) Henrietta is bright, offbeat, and enthusiastic in youth, qualities that become warped into a strange, intellectual coldness by her father's intense, even immoral, over-involvement in her life. When Henrietta blurts a racial slur at school and is penalized, her father, irate, decides to homeschool her on a strange curriculum of evolutionary biology, manifest destiny, and horsemanship.



Henry Forge is, to put it mildly, obsessed with genetics. He's especially intrigued by the strategy of linebreeding: the idea that doubling down on a certain lineage can perfect and purify it, yielding—if the circumstances are just right—the ideal specimen. (Even today, the odd, invisible world of dominance, alleles, and zygotes is a hallmark preoccupation of the sport, so much so that even the casual gambler can combine mares and stallions on fantasy web sites such as [TrueNicks.com](https://www.truenicks.com) to produce virtual “nicks,” foals with an edge on wins. The site's slogan could have come from Henry Forge himself: “Do

more than just hope for the best.”)

The cloistered universe of Forge Run Farm is rendered in such careful and specific detail by Morgan that its sheer particularity could become claustrophobic—even her other characters realize how deeply weird the Forges are and try to get away from them, like the salt-of-the-earth veterinarian, Lou, who skitters to her truck to escape “these crazy people”—if it’s not for the sea change the author delivers halfway through the book, when Allmon Shaughnessy arrives on the farm.

Allmon is a 24-year-old fresh off a seven-year prison sentence, schooled in the Groom Program at Blackburn, and an undeniable talent with horses. He’s the only child of a wandering, handsome, alcoholic father, Mike Shaughnessy (“known in high school as that Irish fucking fuck”) and a caring but overburdened African-American mother, Marie. At fifteen, Allmon is noticed for his athletic promise and brought into a pre-NFL program, the Academy for Physical Education, where the coaches’ focus on phenotype is not so different from the horse breeders’ whom Allmon will encounter later (““How big was your dad?” “Six-two.” “Good....I want you big, fast, and I want you mean”).

But Marie’s chronic health problems, revealed to be lupus, are sinking the household. As with Erica Garner—the daughter of Eric Garner who was killed by police violence in 2014 for selling cigarettes without tax stamps, herself dead at 27 from a heart attack after childbirth—a legacy of racism and poverty live in Marie’s body, the “gendered necropolitics” of anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence, the [sequelae](#). “Make me an animal,” Marie begs, in a heartbreaking prayer, “so I won’t know anything. Make me a man, so I won’t give a damn about anyone.”

Her son Allmon does give a damn, but he is orphaned too young to know what to do with his anger and his aching heart. He is



led into crime by older boys on the street; tried as an adult for possession of narcotics, an illegal firearm and a stolen car, he is sentenced to seven years, some of which is described in horrifying detail as he learns to defend himself.



The introduction of Allmon to the farm—their first ever black groom, hired by Henrietta without the blessing or even knowledge of her father—will change the course of the Forge family forever. Most likely not in the way you, avid reader, are thinking, because Morgan will not give the reader what he or she expects. But—and there’s that wink at history again—change is coming, and change is, as Lyell and Darwin would agree, nature—and therefore man’s—most unstoppable force.

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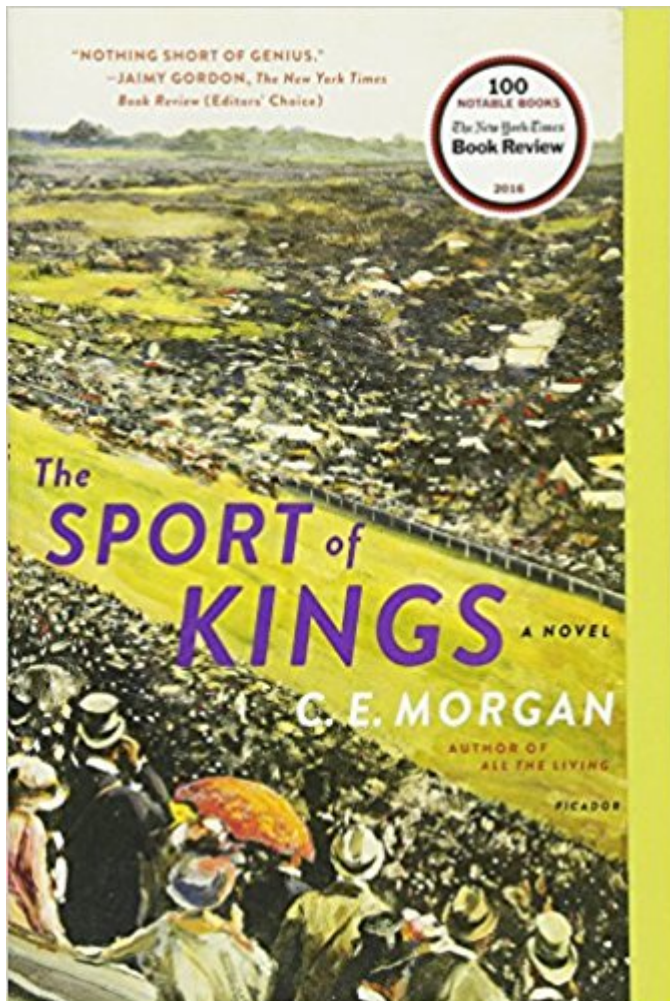
C.E. Morgan was born and raised in rural Kentucky. She

attended Berea College, a tuition-free institution founded as an abolitionist school in 1855, and later, Harvard Divinity School. And like Allmon's mother, Marie, she is no stranger to chronic pain, as indicated by this interview with *Commonweal Magazine*:

*Anyone who lives with poor health or chronic pain, or who has endured poverty—real poverty—knows what it is to live with lack and a resulting fear so incessant that it becomes thoroughly normalized, invisible in its ubiquity. If you're lucky enough to have that fear begin to ease, which it has for me only in the past year, it's an odd experience. A stranglehold eases off your entire body.*

An essay Morgan wrote for the Oxford American, "[My Friend, Nothing is in Vain](#)," suggests that her own brand of chronic pain may, like Marie's, be auto-immune in nature, like lupus.

But it's important to keep in mind that a novelist need not have experienced firsthand that which they write into their work, and Morgan's first preoccupation is with the way she renders her subjects. "Evil's breeding ground is a lack of empathy," she explains. "Evil acts reduce the other to an object, a being to its component parts, and obliterate subjectivity...So I locate moral beauty in an other-regarding ethic."



She's also concerned with the notion of "attunement": "Humans struggle to remain attuned to one another—they want to turn away because of fear, or ambition, or boredom, or some lure of the ego. It's difficult. It requires radical vulnerability, radical risk."

Writing so boldly outside one's historical period, race, and gender also puts the novelist in a position of "radical vulnerability," and the whole thing can only work if it is a radical risk: the author wholly invested, putting her emotions and reputation on the line, tapping into voices that are not her own. It's a gamble with a nearly paralyzing moral and ethical obligation, and that's before you even get to the whole issue of "craft." But if the stakes were not so high, how else could Morgan have propelled herself to create a character as stunning in thought, action, and voice as "The Reverend," Allmon's restless, glittering-eyed, charismatic

preacher of a grandfather? (Morgan is excellent at writing convincing, multi-dimensional characters of faith, and their sermons; her first novel, *All the Living*, a quietly gorgeous, small-scope book taking place over only three months and focusing on just three characters, features pastor Bell Johnson, whose words read much like Morgan's prescription for novel writing itself, her "other-regarding ethic": "My heart was like a shirt wore wrong side out, brothers and sisters, that's how it was when God turned me, so that my innermost heart was all exposed.") But The Reverend is a different kind of preacher. An urgent, assertive, slightly wild and dogmatic man with an Old Testament streak, he has chosen a life of urban poverty and service. He harshly judges his own daughter, Marie, for her decisions, and is easier on his flock than his own family, much like John Ames's grandfather in *Gilead*. He also speaks many of my favorite lines in the book:

*"Y'all act like Jesus is dead! Well, let me ask you this: Is Jesus dead in the ground? 'Cause I heard a rumor Jesus done rose up from the grave!"*

*A woman cried out, "He rose!"*

*"And how come he rose up out of that dark and nasty grave?"*

*"Tell me!"*

*"How come he said, 'Eat my body and remember me?'...Because my Jesus, my Jesus is the original Negro, and he said, only I can pay the bill..."*

*...Now the Reverend stopped suddenly, plucked a pink handkerchief out of his suit pocket, and mopped his streaming face, and when he spoke again his voice was conversational: "Now eventually somebody's gonna tell you Jesus ain't had no brown skin. And you know what you're gonna say when they tell you that? You're gonna say: If Jesus wasn't born no Negro, he died a Negro. What part the cross you don't understand?"*

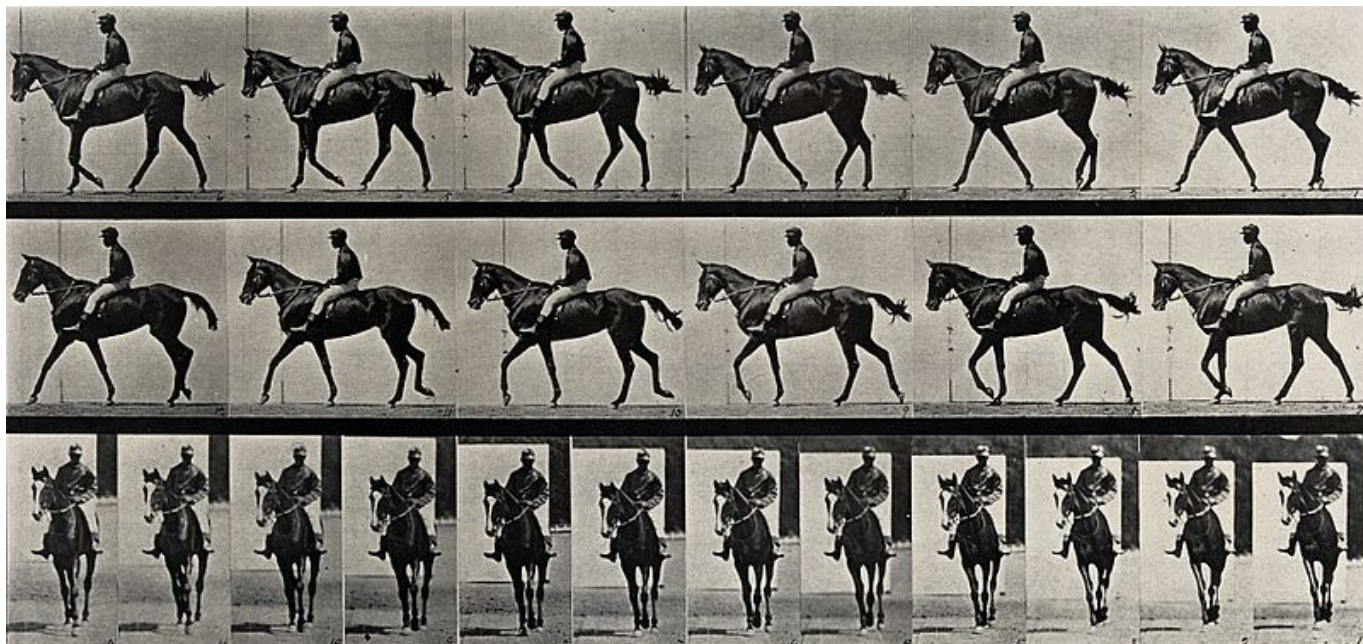
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*The Sport of Kings* is by no means a “perfect” book: its arc treads a little too close to Philipp Meyer’s *The Son* to feel wholly new, and at one key section, delving back into the early days of slavery on Forge Run Farm, the novel takes a sudden dive so immoderately Faulknerian—all dark and lushly incestuous and overwrought—that it threatens, like kudzu, to choke up the whole book.

But *The Sport of Kings* possesses a certain perfection of spirit, a reckless authorial gamble. Something special happens when a novelist combines that gamble with a terrific intellect and a heart for human suffering. We end up with a book that’s one in a million, a *Secretariat*, a *Hellmouth*, pounding for the finish.

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And what of those African-American jockeys who dominated the sport of horse racing in its early decades? The athletes like Isaac Burns Murphy, whose 44% win rate has never been surpassed, and whose earnings would have made him a millionaire if he lived today; or Jimmy Winkfield, who won 220 races in 1901 alone, every one of them a threat to life and limb?



Sadly, Jim Crow racism, and sometimes direct sabotage, thinned their ranks. The Irish jockeys of the northern states were not, on the whole, kind. Isaac Burns Murphy was once discovered, apparently drunk, on the back of a horse prior to a race; it was later proven he'd been drugged by an opponent. Winkfield escaped segregation in the United States with a successful second career in Russia, winning the Russian Oaks five times and the Russian Derby four; but when he was invited back to the States for a *Sports Illustrated* gala in 1961, he was told he could not enter through the front door.

No African-American jockey has won the Kentucky Derby since 1902, though Winkfield placed second the following year.

The sport is now dominated by riders from Latin American countries, immigrants from Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, rural gauchos of small stature and true grit. (Leona O'Brien, that daughter of famous horse trainer Leo O'Brien, whom I mentioned earlier? She went on to marry her father's jockey, the Puerto Rican-born John Velazquez, now the highest-paid in his sport; they have two children). Morgan gives these newer jockeys a brief nod in *The Sport of Kings*, and a reader can't help but think that fifty years from now, there will be a novel in their story, too.

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# An Interview with Taylor Brown, Author of Gods of Howl Mountain



**The Wrath-Bearing Tree** (Andria Williams): Taylor Brown is the author of a collection of short stories, [In the Season of Blood and Gold](#), and three novels: [Fallen Land](#), hailed by Booklist as “a masterpiece;” [The River of Kings](#), and [Gods of Howl Mountain](#), out next month (March 2018), of which a starred Booklist review said:

*It's the characters, so wonderfully vibrant and alive in their all-too-human variety—scared, tightly wound, angry, damaged, yet resourceful and resilient, some honorable, some not—that demonstrate Brown's prodigious talent. Brown has quickly established himself in the top echelon of Southern writers.*

An [excerpt](#) from *Gods of Howl Mountain* appears in this month's issue of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

Thank you so much for answering our questions, Taylor.

Let's start with some background on *Gods of Howl Mountain*. The novel is set in rural North Carolina in the 1950s. Rory Docherty, a young man freshly home from the Korean War, has returned to the mountain where he grew up. He lives with his grandmother, a folk healer; his father is dead and his mother, mute since witnessing a terrible crime, has lived most of her life in a mental hospital nearby. Rory finds work running bootleg whiskey for a powerful local family. But when he falls for the daughter of a preacher, he gets himself into a new brand of trouble that may open up secrets about his mother and his past.

Begging my own Yankee ignorance here: Is there a Howl Mountain, North Carolina? How did you develop a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains and its long legacy of family feuds, bootlegging, folk medicine, snake-handling, and more?

**Taylor Brown:** There is no Howl Mountain, North Carolina – the place and history are products of my own imagination. That said, I was inspired by the history and folklore of Blowing Rock, a town in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. The town itself is named after "The Blowing Rock," a rock formation that stands three thousand feet above the Johns River Gorge and is storied for a powerful wind that blows upward out of the gorge. Legend has it, a heartbroken Native American brave leapt from the cliff, only to be blown back into the arms of his lover. That idea of mysterious winds inspired the cyclonic updrafts at the top of Howl Mountain, which I do envision as being in roughly the same area as Blowing Rock. However, I wanted to be free to create a geography and history of my own.

Though I grew up on the Georgia coast, I've long had a



fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as the world of bootlegging, folk medicine, stock car racing, and more. As a child, I remember hearing my father play the song "Copperhead Road" by Steve Earle, still one of my favorite songs. The narrator is a Vietnam vet whose family has been involved in bootlegging for years, and who returns from Vietnam to begin growing the new cash crop of the region – marijuana. I can remember sitting in front of the stereo in my dad's study as a kid, playing that song over and over again.

Like most of my novels, *Gods of Howl Mountain* started with a short story. This time it was "Kingdom Come," the second story in my collection, *The Season of Blood and Gold*. With that story, I decided I wanted to write a novel set in this time and place. In fact, it was a large part of my motivation to move to western North Carolina in 2009, where I lived for two years—first in Asheville, then in Black Mountain, NC.

It's strange how organic these books become over the years. In 2013, I met Jason Frye, a writer who has become a great friend and editor of mine. Jason is from Logan, West Virginia, and his grandfather used to catch rattlesnakes to sell to the serpent-handling churches in the area. Jason has a black-and-white photograph of this one-armed snake-handling preacher on his office wall, and he directed me toward Dennis Covington's incredible book *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Later, I ended up seeing someone who was in herb school in Asheville, and she was an incredible help for the specifics of Granny May's folks medicine.

So, as you can see, this story has traveled quite a long road with me.

**WBT:** I can't help but notice that many of your novels and stories feature characters whose lives have bumped up against the vast movements of history and, in particular, war. There's Callum and Ava in *Fallen Land*, for example, caught up in

General Sherman's "March to the Sea" in the final year of the American Civil War; or Lawton in *The River of Kings*, who's still grappling with the legacy of his recent service in ways that sometimes baffle or worry his college-student brother. In *Gods of Howl Mountain*, Rory is a Korean war vet and amputee, and you've mentioned that your newest work-in-progress features a female Army vet as well. Where do you think your attentiveness to veterans comes from—and your—what I would call—remarkably mature, long-range, compassionate interest in the ways war shapes whole generations, whole nations?

**TB:** That's a very good question, Andria. I've begun writing a little about my father, who was killed in a motorcycle accident last fall.

**WBT:** Yes, I remember that, and I am so sorry.

**TB:** He was of the Vietnam generation, and I grew up with stories of his time in the Army. For instance, he sent his 21st birthday on guard duty at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, marching through a hailstorm. Later, he graduated from the University of Georgia Law School and Army OCS at Fort Benning in the same year.

Fortunately, he was never sent to Vietnam, but the threat of war hovered over his entire early manhood, as it did over his entire generation's. He had so many friends who were impacted. One of his good friends, Sully, was a Green Beret in Vietnam, and I know my father was very moved by how the war has impacted his friend—the emotional and physical trauma. I think, as a burgeoning writer, you're maybe especially attuned to such stories or emotions.

What's more, 9/11 took place during a very formative time for me: when the towers fell, I was a freshman in college—nineteen years old—and I knew my generation was going to war. The military was never an option for me, as I was born with bilateral club feet, which have necessitated a multitude of

reconstructive surgeries. but so many of my friends had to consider their involvement (or lack thereof).

Of course, 9/11 kicked off the GWoT, so our nation has been at war for most of my adult life. I think it's easy for the average civilian to forget that; after all, so little of the general population has "skin in the game" these days. But, as a writer, I think your job is not to be incognizant or unaware of such things, you know? I think your job, in some part, is to try and empathize with the experiences and traumas of others, to put yourself in their shoes (or boots).

**WBT:** Yes!

In a "Writer's Bone" essay interview with Daniel Ford, you mentioned that you've written several stories based on old ballads, and that *Fallen Land* was inspired by an American ballad of Irish descent, "When First Unto This Country, A Stranger I Came" (Library of Congress Archives of American Folk Song #65A2). What is it about these ballads that speaks to you so strongly? Was there any particular music that inspired, or worked its way into, *Gods of Howl Mountain*?

And, as a fellow writer, I'm curious: Are you careful about the music you listen to when working intensely on a novel, the way some authors are careful about what they read? Do you have "sets" of music that have sort of accompanied each of your novels?

**TB:** Yes, as I mentioned before, I think Steve Earle's "Copperhead Road" certainly influenced this book—it's just a song that's been big in my imagination since I was a kid. It's a modern ballad, really, and I love how it juxtaposes outlaws from two different generations. Steve Earle's "Johnny Come Lately" does much the same thing, exploring the vastly different homecomings of soldiers returning from WWII versus Vietnam.

**WBT:** I know that song! We had it on an old Farm Aid CD when I

worked in rural political organizing. Steve Earle is a good guy – a big supporter of Farm Aid! And wow, that video really has the same feel as the opening of *Gods of Howl Mountain*. I can see how the tone of it worked its way into the novel.

**TB:** As for the old ballads like the one that inspired *Fallen Land*, I think there's something so timeless and visceral about them. These were songs of the people, sung again and again and again, the verses evolving over the decades. I think of those ballads as survivors, really. It's like natural selection—only the strongest songs survive century after century, migrating from old countries to new ones, from mountains to prairies to coasts. There must be a nugget of truth or beauty or power in these old songs that just won't die, that continue to move our hearts and blood.

I'm fairly careful about what I listen to when I'm actually sitting there writing. Often, it's music that doesn't have lyrics, or else I can't understand the lyrics well—I don't want to have other words in my head. Rather, it's the mood or atmosphere of certain songs that seems to help. Also, there's music that helps with certain projects, but not while I'm actually writing. For instance, I've been working on something that relates to motorcycles, and I've been playing various renditions of my favorite song of all time—"Vincent Black Lightning 1952"—on repeat.

Not surprisingly, it's another modern ballad.

**WBT:** You are thirty-five, and *Gods of Howl Mountain* is your fourth book. This just might make you the Leonardo DiCaprio of fiction writing! What is it like to have published "early and often?" In Virginia Woolf's "Letter to a Young Poet," she famously writes, "For heaven's sake, publish nothing before you are thirty." How would you respond to Ms. Woolf?

**TB:** Ha, sometimes I feel a lot older on the inside than I look on the outside! To be honest, though, I only had a few short stories published before I was thirty. It may seem like an “overnight success,” but I spent the large part of a decade working in near isolation, writing and throwing away two novels before *Fallen Land*, as well as tons and tons of short stories. I really didn’t know another serious writer until I was around thirty years old.

I’ve heard that Virginia Woolf quote before, and, I don’t know—I think that sometimes writers use it as an excuse. Looking back at my early stories, there are some cringe-worthy moments, sure—and plenty of things I would do differently now—but I don’t regret them. We only have so much time to express ourselves in this life, and early work shows us where we were then and how we’ve arrived where we are now. It’s all part of the journey, I think.

**WBT:** I love that—“we only have so much time to express ourselves in this life.”

This seems like a good time to ask if you have any advice for the even-younger poets (or fiction writers) out there, those who hope to make writing their life’s work?

**TB:** I think Harry Crews said it best: “Get in the chair.” There’s really no secret but that. Desire, discipline, and force of will. And what did Calvin Coolidge say? “Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.” I think that’s as true of writing as it is for anything. It isn’t going to be easy. You’re going to get knocked down again and again and again. You’re going to have to write through shitty jobs and shattering heartbreaks and rejections. But that makes you tough—not just with writing, but in life.

I hear young writers whine sometimes because they got rejected from the hippest new lit journal. Fuck that. In my book, rejections are badges of honor. Paper your walls with them.

Each is proof that you kept writing despite all the forces trying to keep you from making your art, and every rejection is one step closer to the glorious moment of publication. Every rejection makes that moment sweeter. So keep your chin up and keep swinging, and remember your heroes went through these same battles. If they didn't, you might want to find new ones.

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## Why Don't Afghans Love Us: Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*

There aren't many "literary" fiction books out about Afghanistan, and almost none authored by veterans. Brian Castner, a veteran of Iraq, [published an essay in \*Los Angeles Review of Books\*](#) that examines the phenomenon in more depth. Roy Scranton, another veteran of Iraq and a philosopher, [claims in a different \*LARB\* essay](#) that there are plenty of war stories by American veterans already available, and that Western audiences should be looking for stories by or about the host nation. This claim has been made by writers like Joydeep-Roy Battacharya and Helen Benedict, as well.

Enter *Green on Blue*, a savagely honest, realistic novel about Afghanistan by Elliot Ackerman. Imminently readable and deeply subversive, *Green on Blue* draws on its author's extensive experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan to paint a stunning and accurate description of why the West is losing and will lose in Afghanistan. The problem and solution both exist within the



book's title.

“Green on Blue” is a military term that derives from the color of units on NATO battle maps – blue colored units are friendlies (America, Great Britain, *West Germany*), green are allies (France), and red are enemy (Soviet-aligned countries). Green on blue describes what happens when allies deliberately or accidentally attack friendly soldiers / units. The incidents, therefore, are incredibly troubling – they represent the failure of alliance, the prospect of new enemies arising from botched friendships. They hint at betrayal, in the context of existential struggle.

In *Green on Blue*, Americans are “blue” and Afghans are “Green,” the allies. Crucially to the plot, there are no “red” – there are enemies, but this term, in the context of Afghanistan, is fungible. The plot revolves around an Afghan militiaman named Aziz, who navigates generations of human relationships between Afghans, while attempting not to be crushed by the war. At its heart, the war is described as a competition between groups for social standing – respect from young men, and money from the Americans.

According to the capitalist west, money is supposed to buy respect and loyalty. This forms the basis of an important miscommunication between Americans and Afghans in the novel – a strategic cultural miscalculation of extraordinary significance. Money, in the context of the story, represents a sort of catastrophic idealism, which merely compels individuals to compete in a zero-sum game for resources.

Ultimately, American dependence on the coercive power of tangible resources predicts the type of incident hinted at in the book's title.

On a local level, in Afghanistan, the most important thing is respect – the honor of a group (“*nan*g”), which is under constant threat of insult. Once “*nan*g” has been challenged, the group is required to respond to the insulter with revenge – “*badal*,” which consists of appropriately violent action. The protagonist learns this essential lesson as a child: “*Once, in Sperkai, an older child had split my lip in a fight. When my father saw this, he took me to the boy's home. Standing at their front gate, he demanded that the father take a lash to his son. The man refused and my father didn't ask twice. He struck the man in the face, splitting his lip just as his son had split mine...*” On this plane, *Green on Blue* operates as a sort of slowly-unfolding national tragedy, wherein the Afghans become their own heroes and villains, and the Americans – representative of “The West” – are simply agents of catastrophe and destruction, casually and unthinkingly paying money to keep the feuds going, hoping to find “High Value Targets” in the war on terror.

Aziz is both nuanced and archetypal – a quintessentially Afghan product of the West's involvement in Afghanistan. At the story's beginning, his father (a fighter for hire), dies at some point between the Civil War period after Soviet rule and NATO's intervention in 2001: *First there was the dust of people running. Behind the dust was a large flatbed truck and many smaller ones. They pushed the villagers as a broom cleans the streets... Amid the dust and the heat, I saw men with guns. The men looked like my father but they began to shoot the villagers who ran.* The gunmen are never identified – they destroy Aziz's village and move on, leaving Aziz and his older brother orphaned. After a difficult childhood where he and his brother struggle against the odds to improve their tenuous life at society's margins, another, similar tragedy involving



a Taliban suicide bomber leads Aziz to join the "Special Lashkar," a CIA-funded militia on the border of Pakistan.

In the "Special Lashkar," Aziz learns to fight and kill. The group's leader is an Afghan named Commander Sabir, paid by the CIA to fight against the Taliban. Readers quickly learn that Sabir is enmeshed in his own struggle over "badal" and "nang" – Sabir is hunted by the brother of a Taliban fighter that Sabir killed, a Taliban named Gazan, in revenge for that now-dead brother having killed Sabir's brother, the former leader of the Special Lashkar. If that seems complicated, it should – alliances and enmities proliferate in the book, ensnaring all and forcing everyone to take sides in the conflict. Nothing is sacred, not love, not honor, not brotherhood – nothing. And behind it all stands the enigmatic, fascinating character of "Mr. Jack," the CIA officer who runs the Special Lashkar, and who seeks targets for America's war on terror.

Mr. Jack is my favorite character in post-9/11 fiction. There isn't much of him in the book, but his influence is seen everywhere – he resonates through the book's pages, exceptionally powerful, moving in and out of autochthonic settings like he belongs, while making obscene and absurd mistakes that lead only to more preventable strife. Mr. Jack is so unaware of the consequences of his actions, that he becomes an incidental antagonist. His hunt for professional success turns Mr. Jack into a caricature of a man, a careerist who seeks professional success without any understanding of its human cost.

There are no heroes in this book, which could make it a World War II story similar to *Catch-22* or *Slaughterhouse Five* – save that there are no antiheroes, either. There are believable human characters that find themselves at war in spite of themselves, forced to fight for meanings that shift and collapse until the only thing left is friendship, then friendship collapses as well. This resembles the standard Vietnam narrative, like *Matterhorn* or *The Things They Carried*,

but the characters in Ackerman's book are not motivated by ambition or by ideology – rather they seek simply to survive, not to be killed. The characters in *Green on Blue* do not have space for the type of indulgent self-reflection imagined by the typical Vietnam-era author, such as Tim O'Brien or Tobias Wolff – this is a book where there is little room or space for interiors. Perhaps we are on the verge of a new type of fiction – a story that balances deliberately earnest *almost modernist* narrative plotlines, while acknowledging the infinitely expansive potentials of post-modern perspective and awareness of self- and other-ness, only to reject that literary and intellectual dead-end as (paradoxically) reductive. Or, as Aziz says in the opening sentence: “*Many would call me a dishonest man, but I've always kept faith with myself. There's an honesty in that, I think.*” Rather than opening a meditation on postmodernity, Aziz goes on to show us precisely, meticulously, how that opening statement could possibly be true, in the context of Afghanistan.

*Green on Blue* makes a series of bold philosophical, political, and literary claims, which are plausibly balanced and supported throughout. It is a powerfully realistic and exciting adventure; it is also a eulogy for the failed post-colonial ambitions of a capitalist society that believes it can demand service for money, as though the developing world is a whore or a dependent. It is among the best, most accessible and accurate descriptions of Afghanistan available – and the single greatest critique of the West's policy yet written.

Incidentally, the most successful militia commander in Paktika Province for the last ten years – a wealthy man who has successfully played the role of insurgent, bandit, contractor, and militiaman on both sides of the fence? That would be Commander Aziz.