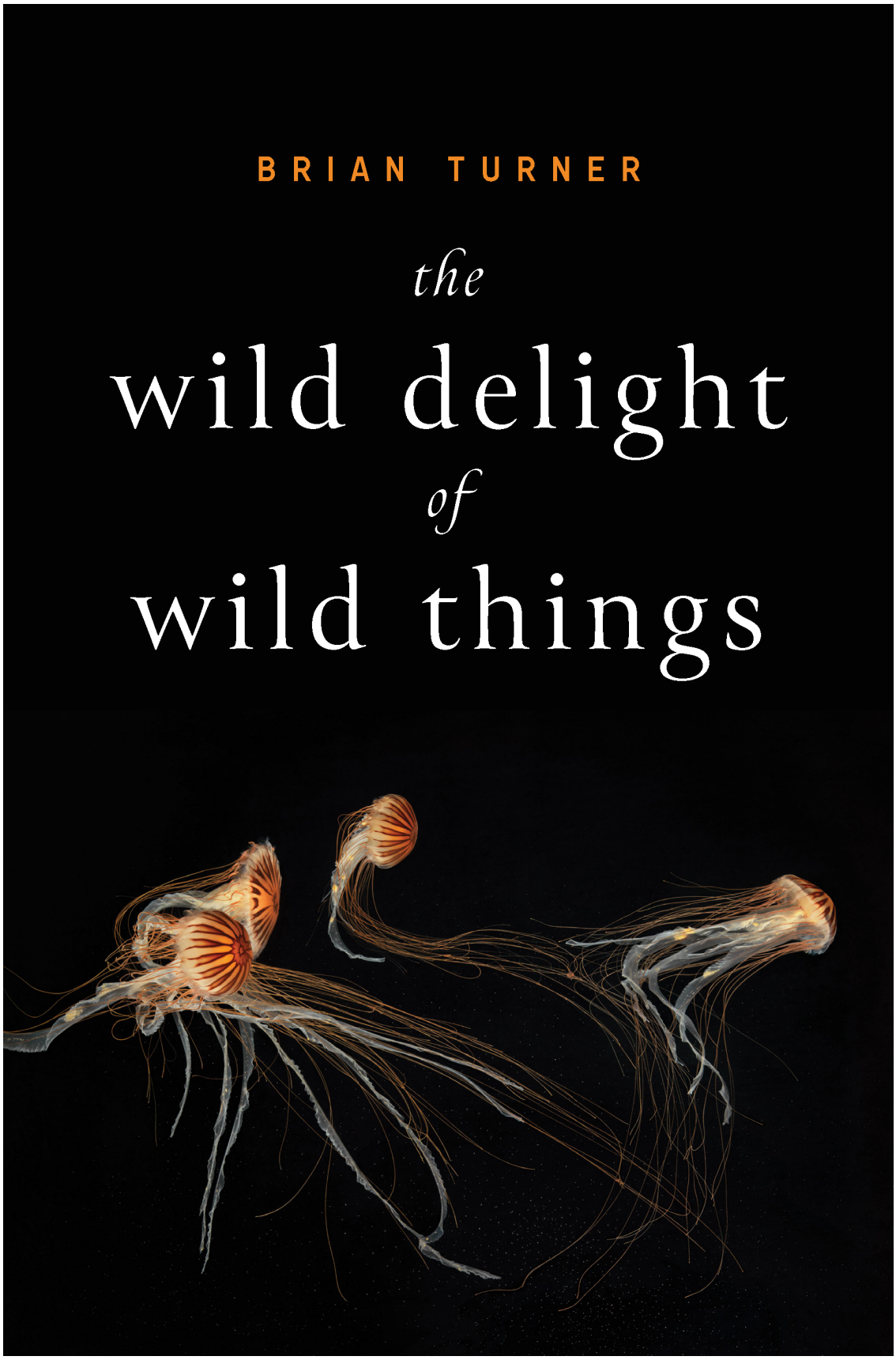
# Wild Delights: Patrick Hicks Interviews Brian Turner




Patrick Hicks: Brian Turner earned an MFA from the University of Oregon and taught English in South Korea for a year before he joined the United States Army. He served in Bosnia-Herzegovina with the 10th Mountain Division and, when he was

deployed to Iraq, he became an infantry team leader with the 3rd Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division. His first collection of poetry, *Here, Bullet*, won the Beatrice Hawley Award, the Pen Center USA "Best in the West Award", and it was a *New York Times* Editor's Choice Selection. His second collection, *Phantom Noise*, received equally strong attention and it was shortlisted for the coveted T.S. Eliot Prize in England. His memoir, *My Life as a Foreign Country*, has been praised for both its clear-eyed perception of what it means to go to war, as well as it's narrative structure, which is fragmented vignettes that examine the many wars that America has been involved in. Turner nudges us to think about the long after-burn of war and how one generation influences the next.

His work has been published in *The New York Times*, *National Geographic, Poetry Daily*, *The Georgia Review, Virginia Quarterly Review* and many others. He received an NEA Literature Fellowship, the Amy Lowell Traveling Fellowship, a US-Japan Friendship Commission Fellowship, the Poets' Prize, and a Fellowship from the Lannan Foundation. Turner gives readings all over the world and he has made appearances on NPR, the BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, PBS, and RTÉ in Ireland. When not writing or touring, he is a faculty member in the MFA Program at the University of Nevada Reno at Lake Tahoe. Although soft spoken and humble, his readings at book festivals and universities are deeply thoughtful and moving explorations about literature, global politics, and our responsibilities to each other.

Turner has three new collections coming out with Alice James Books, and we sat down to talk about the first in the series: *The Wild Delight of Wild Things.*

Patrick Hicks: Let's start with the title, which comes from a line of poetry that your wife, Ilyse Kusnetz, wrote. In fact, the very first poem in The Wild Delight of Wild Things isn't your work, it's hers. It's as if we have to read through her work in order to get at your own. And perhaps not

surprisingly, she infuses the entire collection. She passed away of cancer in 2016 and, as I read this new collection, it felt like a restoring of her presence or an act of determined memory to be in conversation with her. Could you talk about Ilyse's place in this collection and how she continues to influence you?

Brian Turner: Our home in Orlando, Florida, has a small entryway that leads to the living room. I've never told anyone this, but whenever I'm about to leave the house and whenever I return home, there's a very brief ritual I do that reminds me of Ilyse. It's one of the many ways I try to be alive with her in my life. To be present. To be in the presence of. To be in conversation with. And I think this practice mirrors, in some ways, the construction of this book—as her voice both begins and ends the meditation.

It's also a chance for me to share her voice with others, which is a way of saying it's a chance for more people to fall in love with her. And on that note—I dare anyone to read that first poem of hers and not fall at least a little bit in love with her.

PH: One of the first poems in *The Wild Delight of Wild Things* is "The Immortals." It's about jellyfish that seem to resurrect themselves from the dead and become young again. It's a denial of death, and it's rooted in nature. You write, "They have learned to reinvent themselves in defiance/ of the body's undoing. They rise from their own deaths./ They rise from the bottom of the sea." For a poet who has been lauded, rightfully so, for your work about the Iraq War, there are many references about nature woven throughout Wild Delight. Was it liberating to focus on things other than the Iraq War? In many ways, this collection feels like it comes from Brian, and not from Sergeant Turner.

BT: You know, this is something I've thought about quite a bit—not only for myself, but it's a dynamic that I recognize

in many writers and artists. When I lead writing workshops for veterans, for example, I often mention that my intention isn't to simply give them writing tools and meditative approaches that might help them to explore and navigate their experiences while in uniform. I tell them that my larger hope is to offer tools that might help them to write their way into the rest of their lives.

And here I am, doing that very thing. You know? Becoming Brian, more and more with each passing day.

PH: "The Salton Sea" starts off with a rumination of the crew of Enola Gay practicing bombing runs as they drop huge barrels of concrete onto a target that would eventually become Hiroshima. And then the poem switches to the Cold War. You mention how twenty-four million gallons of jet fuel spilled "into the water that Albuquerque rests on." Ilyse grew up in Albuquerque and died of cancer. It's entirely possible, as you write, that she is "one of many unrecorded deaths on the home front." In the poem, you talk about a reluctance for some people to think that she could have been a victim of the Cold War. Could you talk about what prompted this poem?

BT: This poem is watermarked with so many conversations Ilyse and I had after her diagnosis. And the anger welling up near the end—that's her anger, blended with my own. There's research involved in this poem, too, sure, but the basic argument and the emotional structure of the poem were drafted by her one conversation at a time with me as its first audience.

If we take a bird's-eye-view of this… I've long been fascinated by the boundaries drawn between what some call the home-front and what we might think of as a conflict zone. There's a kind of psychic disconnect there, I think. While it's a very practical and seemingly logical thing to associate conflict zones with places where pain and trauma and death and violence occur, it does a disservice to the complexity of

experience when we untether the home-front from the battlefield.

It’s similar to the experience of looking at an oak tree—how easy it is sometimes to forget that the root structure below can grow as much as three times larger than the canopy above.

PH: Maybe we could stay on this line of thinking for a moment. In the poem immediately following “The Salton Sea” you write about Cuvier’s Beaked Whales beaching themselves—and dying—due to the “acoustic blasts of active sonar” in submarines. Just as the military inadvertently poisoned the water of Albuquerque, the Navy is doing collateral damage to whales. In both poems, you question the long-term hidden effects of war. Do you notice such things, perhaps, due to your experiences as a soldier? You have spoken at book festivals about the grave and lasting harm that has been caused to children caught in war.

BT: It’s impossible for me to know whether I might have written this poem if I’d never worn the uniform. But I’m moved and troubled by these losses when I hear of them. Collateral damage. I recently visited the battlefield in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and walked some of the Union lines. As I considered the landscape, I searched for stands of red cedar and live oaks. I was looking for survivors—for ancient trees with stories to tell. Eastern red cedar, for example, can live up to 900 years. And I wondered if some still held minie balls or grapeshot within them, or if trees sometimes weep bullets the way the human body can sometimes weep shards of glass or metal fragments long after an initial injury.

PH: In “The Jurassic Coast” you have a lengthy stanza that lists off the animals that will likely go extinct before the century is out. I have to admit, I hadn’t heard of many of them, which is precisely the point I think you’re trying to make. What are we inadvertently killing? Why don’t we care? You end the poem with a powerful stanza about the last

passenger pigeon, named Martha, who died at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. Just as you celebrate the wild delight of wild things in this collection, there is also an undercurrent of lament and despair.

BT: I wonder sometimes if the vast scale of it all is simply too overwhelming for the mind to grasp. I know that's true for me. While this book holds an intimate conversation with Ilyse at its center, that conversation is mirrored, in some ways, with a meditation on climate change and what it means to live in the Anthropocene. Elegy is at the heart of this, I'm sure. A way of praising and lamenting and grieving and offering comfort all at once. My hope is that it's clear-eyed in its compassion.

PH: Very much so. And even though I just mentioned an undercurrent of despair running through this collection a few seconds ago, it is equally true there is profound awe and fascination for the world around you. Some of these poems span lengths of geological time that our minds simply cannot fathom. It's clear that a great deal of research went into these poems. Can you talk about your research process and how you threaded that information into these poems?

BT: Long before this book truly discovered its form, I began an earlier version as a kind of challenge: I would write 100 brief lyric essays on nature, and in each piece, I would learn something about the world and I'd also in some way be in conversation with Ilyse and our relationship. It didn't work as a book, though—and that was a hard thing to accept at first. I had to sit with that fact for some time before rolling up my sleeves and weighing what was necessary and what had not earned its place on the page.

One of the beautiful things I learned in this entire process is that scientists and researchers are incredibly kind and helpful and clear and generous. Only once or twice did I not receive a response to a query. The opposite was true of the

vast majority of folks I reached out to for their expertise. I have a standing invitation now, for example, to visit cave sites in India and to see first-hand the cupules I've written about in "The Auditorium Cave." And I can't wait to go!

PH: One of the most powerful poems in this collection is "Ashes, Ashes." You start by saying "California is on fire" and then mention how trees and plants have been turned into particulate that rides the air as ash. You also bring our attention to the longest burning fire anywhere on Earth—an underground coal seam in Australia that has been raging for some 6,000 years. The third part of this poem focuses on your father's body being broken down by the intense flames of a crematoria oven, and you write about it in great detail. Lastly, there is the haunting image of you cradling Ilyse's ashes the night you brought her urn home. Could you talk about the writing process for this poem? How long did it take to write "Ashes, Ashes"? It's one of your longest poems in the collection, and I sense that it took a while to piece together.

BT: "Ashes, Ashes" took several years to write, though the bulk of the writing was done in three phases. The first half of the poem was written after my father's death, in 2015, and Ilyse was still alive. We didn't talk about Marshall's death. It was something I pushed down inside of myself emotionally. And yet, I wrote this meditation during the autumn after his death. Ilyse read everything I wrote and this meditation was no exception—as she was its first editor. And so, in a sense, we talked about this grief through the page as she suggested edits and choices in language, but the conversation stayed there and I didn't talk about his loss outside of that.

What I couldn't see then—or had blocked from my own imagination—was that this meditation would later include the second half that you mention. A version was published in *The Georgia Review* (Fall 2017), and that was later scaled down into the much more streamlined version that's here in the

book.

I’m continually reminded that there are things I want to write, and there are things I need to write. It’s a rare thing for a poem to contain both of these things at once.

PH: A difficult question, and I want to ask it delicately. In “The End of the World” you write, “I wanted the ruin. I’d be lying if I said otherwise./ I wanted the hurricane to destroy what was left of my life./ […] if that hurricane simply crushed me to death/ and then splintered the home around me into an unspeakable/ puzzle of what was once our favorite place on Earth—so be it.” Ilyse passed way in 2016 and you have also lost your best friend, Brian Voight, as well as your step-father, Marshall. Grief has been your companion for a long time now. How have music and words sustained you?

BT: Now that some time has passed—it’s been almost seven years—I can see a bit more clearly. I can see that writing helped me to find my way forward. I had a lot of anger for quite some time, and it’s been difficult for the body to metabolize that and then slough it away. Part of what helped was the research I did into the natural world. In some ways that attention to the details of this amazing planet helped me to fall in love with it once more. And yes, I had fallen out of love with it. When I realized that art offered some ways back into memory, and into conversations with the dead I love—that began a series of creative meditations both on the page and with sound that have sustained me to this day. Ilyse and Brian both died far too young. Both were artists that had so much to give to this world, to all of us. Part of my work now, as an artist, and as a human being, is to find ways to collaborate with them so that others might have a chance to meet those I love.

I’ve found that the sorrow that lives within the body remains, at least for now, with a kind of ebb and flow to it. It’s something I’m learning to live with. We each grieve in our own

way, and the signature of love and loss is unique to the heart that carries it.

A friend in Colorado has shared with me some of the trees up in the mountains that are a part of his life. Lightning trees, as he calls them. You can trace the smooth skin of the trunk where lighting has discharged through the tree with such intensity that the bark has been blown off. They are mapped with scars from the ground to the sky. They are survivors. They radiate a quiet wisdom. And I can't explain what it is or how it happens, but when I place my palms on the trunks of those trees, a sense of calm washes through me, something timeless and transcendent, and I open my eyes, and I breathe, and then I walk back into the days of my life.

PH: There is a definite, and yet subtle, soundscape to this collection. Waves appear in many of the poems. So do birds, clouds, fire, and the fall of rain. You've done something unique for this collection because you have literally created a soundscape that can be accessed by a QR code. Once a reader finishes *The Wild Delight of Wild Things* you invite them to listen to a thirty-minute song called "Clouds," which in many ways is an auditory meditation on the entire collection as a whole. I can hear the sounds that hold these poems together and there is also film of clouds taken at 30,000 feet. I'm not aware of seeing—or hearing—anything quite like this before. Could you talk about how the idea, and the song, came together?

BT: I didn't realize I was creating this when I began it. In Chennai, I sat under a sacred tree and recorded the birds above. I then had the honor of speaking with over 100 students of traditional dance and song in a nearby classroom—and so I asked if they might follow my lead and sing a wave-like meditative pattern with me, which I recorded on a hand-held recorder that I often carry with me. Likewise, while living in Ireland as the inaugural John Montague International Poetry Fellow for the city of Cork, in 2018, I was lucky enough to

have a full choir bussed in from an outlying town to record in a gorgeous chapel. The waves themselves were recorded late one night on Anna Marie Island as Ilyse and I sat on the beach to watch the Perseids rain down.

And so, this meditation in sound arose organically as I began to learn how to live in the word after. Now that it's done, I hope that "Clouds" might help the reader to process their own thoughts and feelings and experiences once they're finished with the book. But in a larger sense, I hope this meditation stands on its own—and that it might prove meaningful and helpful for others in ways that I can only imagine.

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*The Wild Delight of Wild Things* will be published by Alice James Books in August 2023. To hear a sample from "Clouds," click here.

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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.

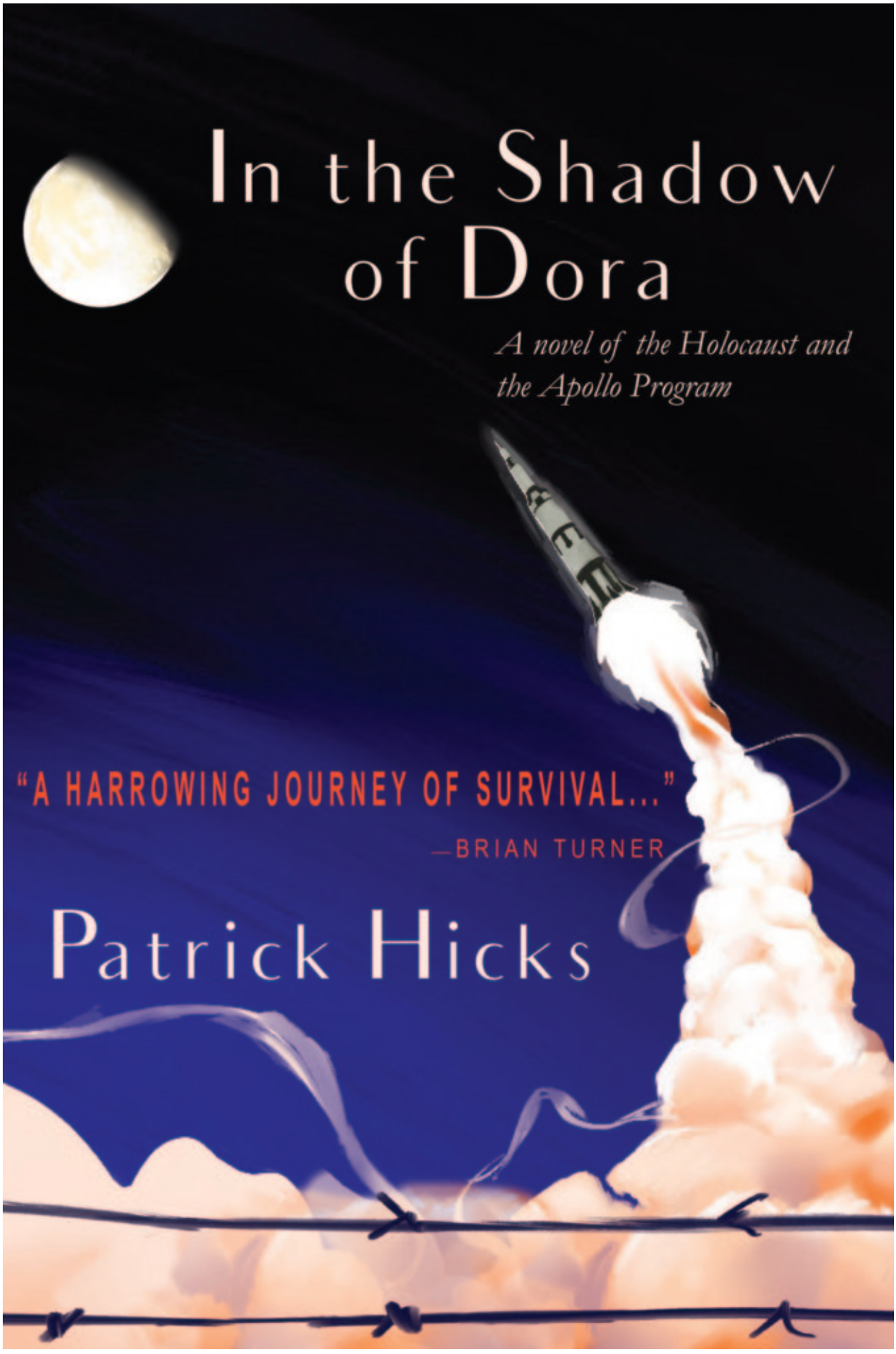
Von Braun’s V-2 design was a last-ditch attempt at victory for an already slowing Third Reich, but its development injected the Nazis with new, if short-lived, energy. If it did turn out to be the game changer they hoped, V-2s might soon rain down on New York, Chicago, and more.

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# New Fiction from Patrick Hicks: Into the Tunnel

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

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

—Wernher von Braun

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

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

"Move it, you pieces of shit!"

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

left . . . left.”

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

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

But where was he?

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

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

being beaten with metal rods behind him. The road beneath his clogs was splashed with oil. Or maybe it was blood? It was hard to tell at night.

“In unison, you pieces of shit! Left . . . left . . . left.”

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

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

“Faster, you sons of bitches!” a guard yelled. “We don’t have all night.”

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

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

“Move it you useless eaters, you pieces of *SHIT*!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Alles für den Krieg*
*Alles für den Sieg*

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

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

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

They passed a cluster of SS guards who stood around laughing at some joke. They smoked and paid no attention to the column of prisoners that shuffled past them. Bright balls of orange glowed at the ends of their cigarettes. They pushed each other

playfully and talked about roasting a wild boar. For a moment, Eli allowed himself to imagine what it might taste like. The fibrous meat, the juices, the sucking of the marrow from bone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

having trouble too.

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

A moment later, they came to a halt.

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

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

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

"*Mützen…ab*!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

He brought the club down onto an imaginary head.

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

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

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

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

Eli didn’t know what any of this meant, but he had a good idea. In Auschwitz, after his family had been sent into the

sky, he had come to understand such speeches. In this place called Dora, death was a way of life. There would be death in the morning. Death in the afternoon. Death in the evening. Death would be everywhere, like oxygen. Death. Death. Death.

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

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

“Age?”

“20.”

“Do you speak German?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Occupation?”

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

“I’m…an electrician,” he lied.

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

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

wetness. It would flow down his throat, wet and pure.

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

He went to work.

*  *

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

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

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

rock suspended above continue to hold?

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

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

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

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

By early 1944, Tunnel A and Tunnel B were finished, along with rail tracks that led out from their gaping mouths. Some 35

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

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

*  *

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

He was housed in Barrack 118 along with 400 other men. It was a clapboard shack with thin windows and a dirt floor. It was one of many barracks that had been set up outside the tunnels and the whole outdoor complex was surrounded by electrified wire. Searchlights roamed the night. In the distance, dogs barked and he could hear classical music drifting out from the

SS camp. Occasionally, laughter sliced the night air and, once or twice, he heard the sound of gunfire. The SS at Dora consisted almost entirely of men who had long careers at other concentration camps. They knew what they were doing. They were stone faced professionals.

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

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

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

Eli glanced out the window. The moon was pock-marked and brilliant. He saw that it was bleached white, just like the walls of the tunnels of Dora. In the drowsy chambers of his

imagination, he wondered if the moon and the tunnels were made from the same rock. He saw himself quarrying into the moon, digging down, down, down, deep into its belly where he could sleep in peaceful glowing warmth. Sleep, he thought. To drift away…

A gust of wind rattled the window.

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

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

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

And with that, he drifted into the abyss.

The lice, meanwhile, continued to feed.

*  *

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

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

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

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

shadowy blue of sunrise.

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

The numbers were always shouted out.

“VIER EINS EINS NEUN NEUN!”

“*Jawohl*!”

He raised his hand and was counted among the living.

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

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

“Stand back. That’s all for today!”

Some prisoners ate lice off their shirt. Others ate snails off fence posts. Others tried to eat leaves or tufts of grass. Eli

watched all of this and wondered if he, too, might do the same thing in a few weeks. Yes, concluded. Yes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Shining Light on the Darkness: An Interview with Patrick Hicks

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

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

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

Author Patrick Hicks

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

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

**AW:** No, I cannot imagine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

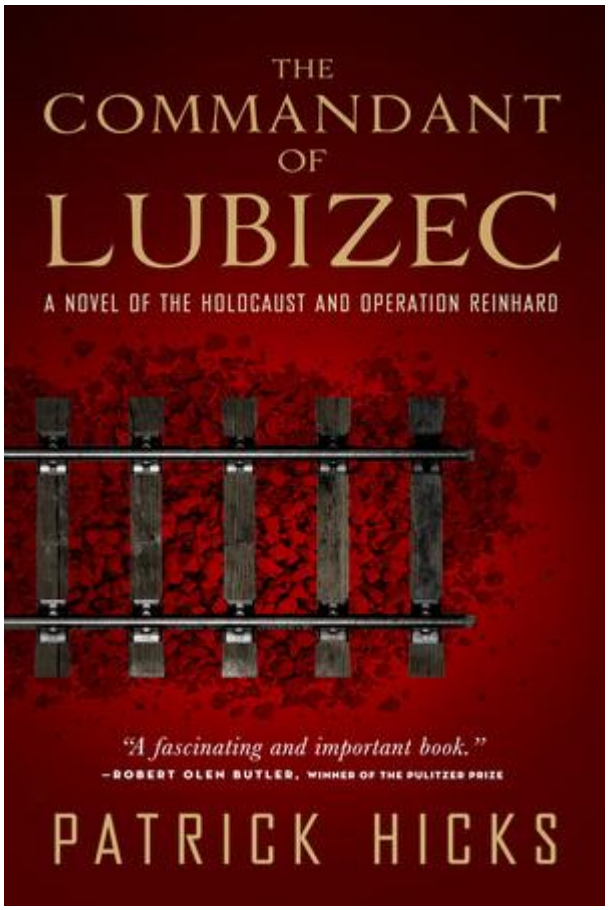
> *I wanted to change that. I wanted to show that this place created the blueprint of the latter half of the twentieth-century.*

Those rockets became the ICBMs that exist today. They were

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

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

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




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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You write:

"what catches my eye is the gap

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

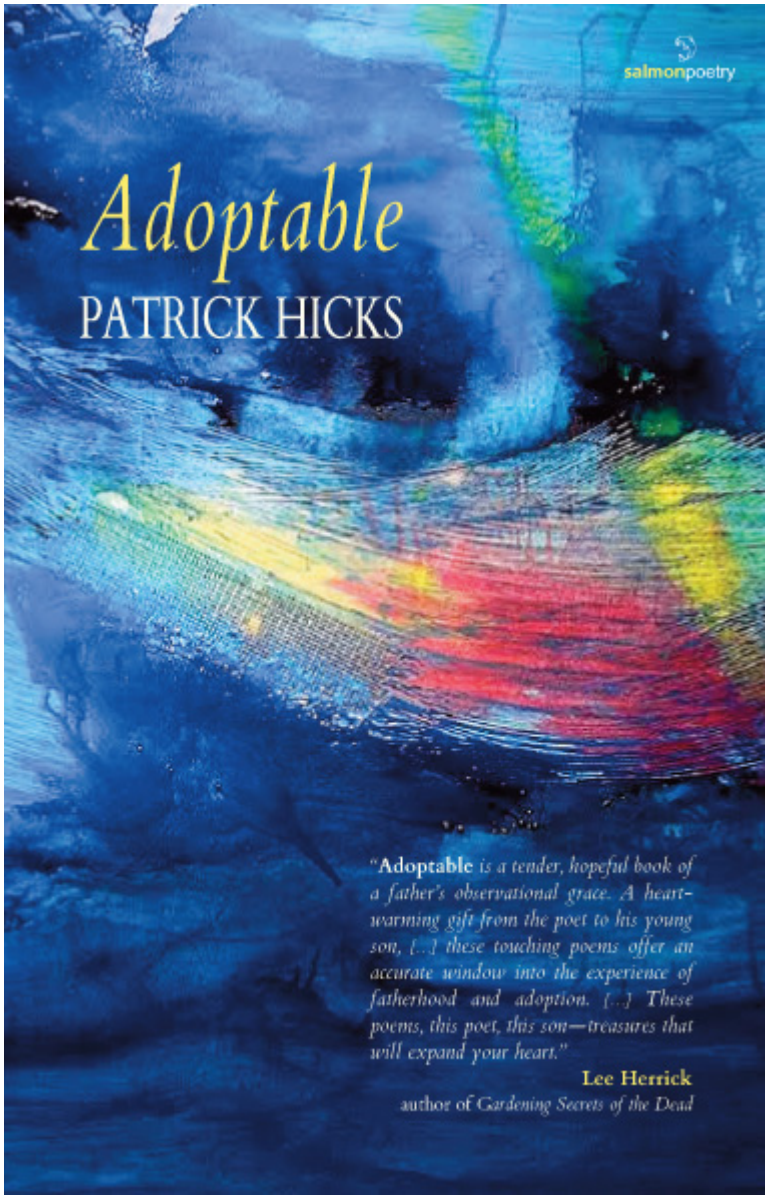
In these missing hours, I imagine his birth mother
cupping the grapefruit softness of his head.

She breathes in his scent,
kisses his nose, memorizes

the topography of his face.
And then, reluctantly,

she lets him go.”

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



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

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

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

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

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