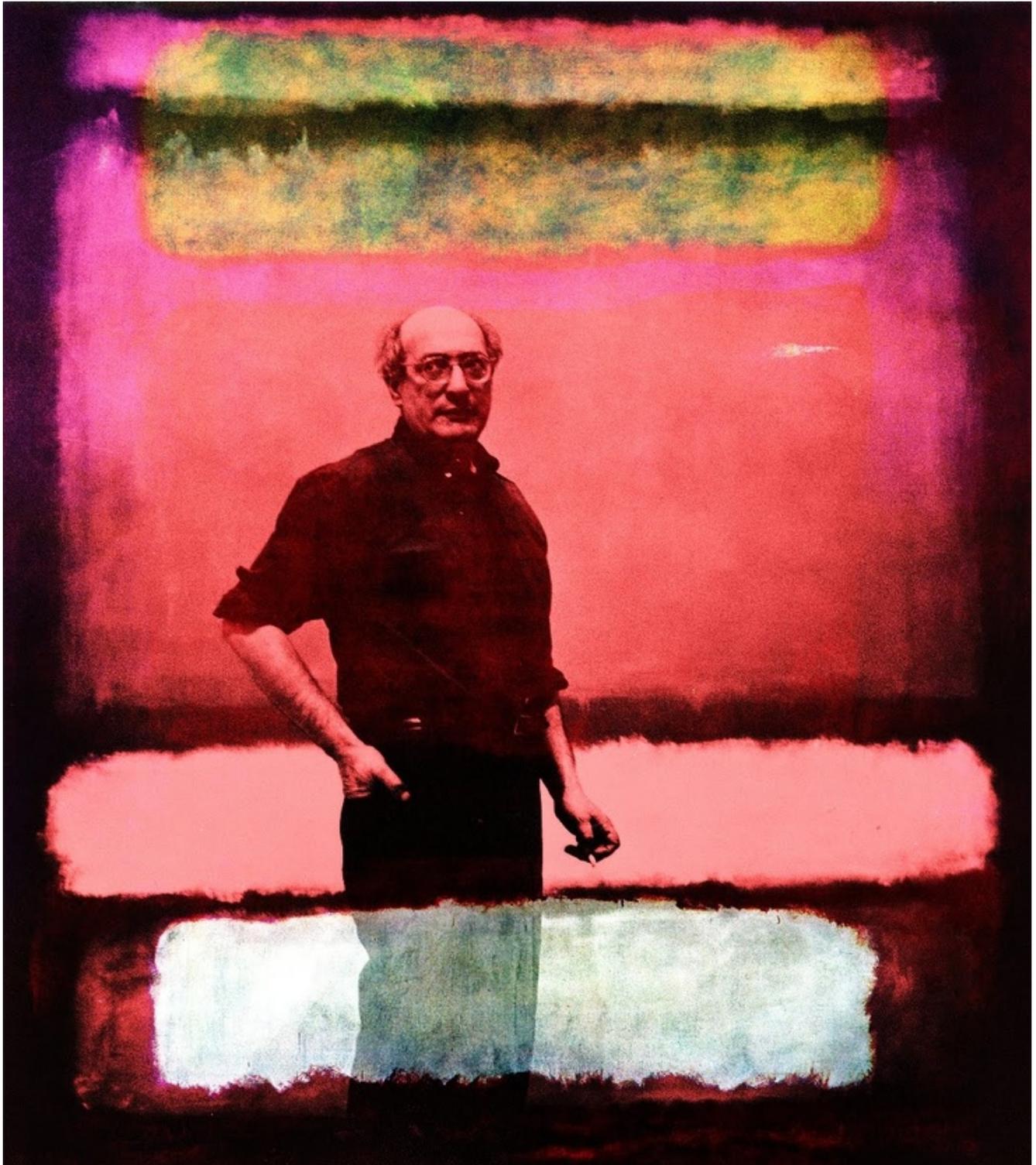


# New Fiction from Chris Daly: "The Rothko Report"



*"My father's work takes you to the edge of the abyss and invites you to look." -Son of Rothko*

Dateline South Florida, October, 1962: It was Monday 2:00pm EST when Sister Linus began to slap the living shit out of Louie V. The original offense was, along with Richard L., "jumping like a puppet into line behind the ring-leader", that would be one Brian B. Except to exist, Brian had done nothing in the new school year. Richard was unpretentious, almost unconscious at times, naturally refined, and not a person even the most obtuse teacher would strike. But Louie was scrawny-strong, head rising on his neck like a bird about to eat something amazingly large; him one could smack, especially when he would not stop laughing. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Today this would be so viral. The nuns were not always wrong; Louie later went to prison, Richard became a junkie, Brian escaped to the West Coast and a long underground life as a political satirist. The three members of the puppet gang were given notes directing their parents to a meeting on Wednesday.

*Up the coast in D.C. on that same date a bit after 8:00pm EST Secretary All Hail MacGeorge was shown U2 photos of possible missile launch sites on the cold war enemy-client island "ninety miles away", and at midnight he informed Secretary Mac the K, and they decided to let J Fucking K sleep, because he might be needing same.*

Parental or legal guardian conference would not be a big deal, another adolescent pain in the ass. Tuesday after school they were down at the back-to-back paddleball court off Dixie Highway, south end of town, in time for the surprise appearance over by the concrete wall of Louie's father. Not exactly homeless, he lived by the good grace of an east coast Italian American network that did not include the nearby well-kept house of Louie's aunt; from which he was likely on stay-

away remittance agreement that he was likely in violation of by showing up in the park. Worse for the gang: in his hand were their packs of cigs taken from their designated concrete cubby-holes, and he was doing a thing all kids hate; keeping them in the dark. Fairly soon they understood that Louie's father would be giving back the herbs, but of course he proceeded to fuck with them. Too bad they couldn't bring him to the schoolhouse meeting, but here's the way that worked: Louie's aunt ran a prosperous mid-size I/A grocery store, and Richard's father was a necktie manager with a wife who kept plastic covers on the living room furniture. From both of those families to the church the money flowed, actual appearance not required; for the Brian family, reverse that.

*In the western-style democratic nation-state capital that morning J F-ing K had been informed of the photos, and later at the meeting with the Macs, the Brother (RFK), the "Birds" and others, options were discussed. Do nothing, as the threat of thermo-n annihilation was already completely and firmly in place, and new spots on the island, though psychologically and politically spooky, were window dressing. Another option: apply boiler-plate diplomatic pressure. Or: back-door a choice to the Bearded Man of Island Truth: split with your angel or we bring T fucking R back to life for San Juan Hill II. Maybe we can without further adieu just do that. Or at least an air-strike on the sites. (This last plea from General LeMay-I, hawk of hawks, always ready to bomb the East Wing and ask questions later – in fact all the joint big birds were doing that thing with their wings.) Finally, there was the Harvard Yard son of a whiskey runner way: set up a blockade, call it a quarantine. Peaceful co-existence as we know it on hold.*

The female parent of Brian got home from her Nurse's Aid night shift Wednesday morning and they went to school. (Da was out pushing a hack.) Brian was fairly quiet, appropriate for a celebrity in reverse, owing to a somewhat screwball-ish exit from parochial school into the public system, out of that into

juvie home, then back into the arms of holy mother, all in one family-on-the-skids year; after that a year off for all concerned, and now a lecture was being delivered hard upon the kid's denial, he was about to turn thirteen, how much is he supposed to be able to explain, but they all knew that something was up and so they treated him like Al Capone. Brian later in life learned that both parents had folded in a fair amount of boozing to make it through more or less undetected. Of the three friends, his was the only in-person meeting.

*The flyboys were getting better and ID'd another site on the island that same day. The transgressor-sponsor nation was like the Brian family, with barely three hundred "Little Boys", while the Big Dog had three thousand that they were admitting to, so it was the player with the smaller arsenal who had to issue forth the official denial that any missile sites existed on the proxy island. In J Big Dog K's top desk drawer was a recon photo of something in a clump of palm trees.*

At age twelve members of the criminal syndicate weren't ready for the girls they had begun to notice, except for Richard. He was not loud or dangerous or great looking or especially witty, though like his friends he faked some version of all those things. He'd learned to carry himself in a way that was beyond his age, and had a natural sweet spot for girls that they responded to, including Susan S., queen of the grade level, who had a good personality and was developing nicely. Richard, Susan and Brian hung out briefly, significantly, Thursday after school till Susan was picked up, and Richard and Brian headed home in the other direction. Louie was not present because the aunt clan had him on close watch working at the store while gypsy dad was around. Richard and Brian decided that on Saturday morning they had to get the hell out of town.

**DOOMSDAY UPDATE: OPERATION DOMINIC, JOHNSTON ISLAND, CENTRAL PACIFIC, WAS THE SITE EARLIER IN THE DAY OF AIRDROP TEST CHAMA, (PHOTO OF WHICH IS A ROTHKO); RESULTS WERE "THOROUGHLY**

**SUCCESSFUL" WHILE THE YIELD WAS REPORTED TO BE BELOW THE PREDICTED VALUE.**

The friends did a version of the Three Musketeers sword thing on the playground on Friday afternoon and headed off separately, Louie to the well-stocked Italian American store which had great food that was beyond the Brian family budget. Richard was picked up by his creepy stuck-up mother in their creepy Buick. Richard had learned to communicate succinctly, with a word or slight turn of head. Brian hit the sidewalk feeling that the week had been a seasonal hump and getting over it was an accomplishment. The school, Little Flower, on U.S 1, was too damn small, it got inside you. In the compact perfectly square back half of a duplex mini-compound of the Brian clan he had a place by the bedroom window, fan blowing in his face, to read every forgettable book in the Little Weed mini-library. Maybe he loved Friday more than the weekend it promised. On this particular one he looked out through the fading light and had a thought: I'm having a thought.

*Up the road the photo-op boys were getting their meeting legs. Affairs of mutually assured destruction are best settled in the heat of the moment, within a few days the first best option was declared to be the thirty-knot ocean-going blockade, though if the other guy was rushed to get in and complete set-up operations, one might later have to deal with hot targets, thank you, Brother LeMay-I.*

Richard's already gone brothers were twelve and fifteen years older, one of the curiosities of that mausoleum house was an untouchable double stack of Playboys on a corner hallway table, which entitled Richard to be unassuming. Brian was more familiar with the world of sidewalks than need be admitted. They were Saturday kids trying to not look like kids on tour down around 1<sup>st</sup> Street in Miami before 9:30 am, having bused from Young Circle in Hollywood; they hit a few elevators, people were starting to look at them, self-appointed cop-

types, they escaped across the street to Bayfront Park, where a certain amount of laughter ensued, the natives, the Cubans, the queers, everyone was funny; across the water was Arthur Godfrey Beach on the spit of land known as the Gold Coast. At certain ages one can complete an adventure by 1:30 in the afternoon. They trudged back to their respective homesteads. Richard's house of sophisticated moral relativism had powerful A/C. At his de facto duplex Brian laid down on the terrazzo floor next to his bed where it was cooler. Richard was probably on the phone with Susan S.

**DOOMSDAY RECORD CONTINUED** *In the world of insanely significant meetings beware of what may follow a day when "nothing happens" except the discovery of other sites. Earlier on this particular date ninety vertical miles from a particular faraway atoll there was* **A SECOND SUCCESSFUL OPERATION FISHBOWL EVENT, ESSENTIALLY ABOVE THE ATMOSPHERE, SO NO LUMINOUS FIREBALL WAS FORMED; AT THE MOMENT OF DETONATION OBSERVERS IMAGINED A GREEN AND BLUE CIRCULAR REGION SURROUNDED BY A BLOOD RED RING GONE IN LESS THAN A MINUTE, AND BLUE-GREEN STREAMERS AND PINK STRIATIONS THAT LASTED HALF AN HOUR. Who knew about THE DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIMENT, SAME DAY, IN THE IMMEDIATE ATMOSPHERE OF DISTANT SEMIPALATINSK, ABOVE THE FAR STEPPE IN NORTHEAST KAZAKHSTAN?**

Sunday was traditionally the most dangerous day in Brian's life, and more than twice he had been hauled in on the afternoon of the day of too much rest for normal types, and too much exposure for the new generation of under-financed freaks. After casing the church parking lot for cigs, he spent some time over in a half demolished, half interrupted construction area of a certain block where it felt "bombed out" and was interesting to be in. Get out of there, yelled a passing parishioner; Brian interpreted this as a warning from the small gods he'd learned to respect.

*On that holy day up on the porch the Big Dog determined to continue the discussion of the future of the existence of the*

*human race on the high seas where at least there was literary precedence for wit and wile.*

Louie was installed Monday at the front of the line, the rightful place of Brian who was in the middle, and Richard was at the very end; in a barely covert manner they were all laughing because being famous is funny. Louie had a certain extra-nutty look in his over the shoulder eye and on the playground later with the dynamic diction that would later win third place (crowd favorite) in the speech contest, confessed immortal inspiration for a caper; his neighbor across the street was gone for two weeks and Louie had a key to water the plants and turn on the hose in the yard; in this domain was much cool shit, and likely in an old world hiding spot, cash; on Thursday night the whole street would be gone to a big Knights of Columbus event, and yes he would be the obvious suspect, which was the perfect alibi! Louie had missed out on the weekend adventure, and anyway they had a rep to live up to.

*On this date in the evening J Fucking K made a Big Dog dinner time TV speech revealing that their boats were steaming this way and our boats would be cutting them off because evil hardware will not be tolerated so near the Gold Coast even if it meant putting everything on the line. The TV store crowd chewed on that and it tasted like an opinion the populations of all nations are used to concealing.*

**Same date doomsday check-in: AT 6:10 IN THE PARTICULAR TIME ZONE, TOP OF A VERTICAL ARCHIPELAGO JUST NORTH OF MOST OF THE MODERATE PART OF THE SOVIET, ABOVE CAPE DRY NOSE, ON AN ISLAND OF RED AND BLACK SHALE WITH STEEP CLIFFS FAMOUS AMONG LOONS, A THERMO-NUCLEAR POP QUIZ.**

On Tuesday after school Louie had a fight with Patrick K, a stocky individual normally of no interest to the three immortals. At first it was even but at a certain point Louie's strikes ceased to have effect so he picked up a piece of thin

piping and delivered a whack across the shoulders and back, mainly an indication of true craziness. But Patrick was stocky of mind and body and barely blinked, and after that things wound down, and they even shook hands, not that any invitations to join any elite groups would be forthcoming.

*Cargo was in the water and the whole world was chattering. N fucking K the Red Dog sent an unpleasant telegram. The secretaries and the Bootleg Heir continued discussion of the options as the cabinet-level brother played pocket-pool and LeMay-I danced up the wall and along the ceiling. There were further reconnaissance revelations and "states" lined up. Adlai the Intellectual Dog (and bald icon of loss at Brian's) was working the U.N.*

Louie didn't make it to school on Wednesday and Sister Slappy made the mistake of advising stone-faced Richard and Brian to distance themselves from their friend with the crazy disposition. You'll never learn, she said, and that's when she predicted they would all wind up in the big house, which so nearly came true. Later Brian would not remember any practice ducking under the desk that week. Did the parochial world not get the memo from a fellow-travelling power-earthling who was the first Catholic in that high office? That day Richard and Brian were allowed to hang a bit, and it was noted that it might be OK if the following night's somewhat screwy b&e caper were called off.

*Out on the briny the boats came near the other boats and a holding pattern ensued. It was poop time in the meeting rooms; invade the former gambling and good music mecca and Arthur Godfrey was probably fucked. One more thing, said Mac the data genius of the automotive business who'd been installed in the cabinet to lend horn-rimmed credibility, the incoming vessels with the barely camouflaged decks are shadowed by a sub. Che Fucking G, Island Beard #2, said bring it on; said the yankee didn't know or didn't want to know that they would lose.*

The foolish three, imagining that Thursday was a new day at school, gravitated along the lines of attraction, and so were taken to their assigned punishment places, Louie by the ear, Brian by the sleeve, and Richard, whose clothes, a version of the blue and white, one did not touch, by the little finger, whatever that was supposed to mean. In semi-covert caper-conference at recess it was decided that they would look at stuff but only take that which was irresistible. At an early hour of the night the three holy bums were spotted on the approach by a neighbor and had to veer off from the target house. They screwed around in the paddleball park for a while, waiting for the coast to clear, and then re-scheduled for Saturday daytime when walking around was not as conspicuous.

*At the U.N Adlai the Man of Loss, an intellectual vivand who kept a social apartment on the premises, had big pictures and a pointing device, and the other guy, per a flyer in the original charter, refused to respond to direct or indirect questions. About that time a ship slipped red rover and made a run for the island. All right, they were warned, we know that's not a serious tub, but don't let it happen again or else. We and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which we and you have tied the knot, wrote one world leader to another. N Fucking K who had pounded the international table with his shoe, might be cracking but on-site construction continued, and the Bearded One demanded the big pushback if they were invaded, for which eventuality he correctly guessed the BD was in preparation. Someone came into one of the smallest meeting rooms with word that a U2, whose existence the BD denied, had been shot down out of the other motherland's airspace, pilot probably dead. Life at the top can be embarrassing.*

After school that Friday Brian reported to the back of the nun station wagon to be delivered for an hour and a half of weed-pulling originally scheduled for Saturday. He had toyed with the idea of trying to make it on the coming weekend day from

the convent straight to the break-in, but nah. Louie was attuned to craziness, Richard was untouchable, but Brian was the slightly and essentially seasoned criminal. When Brian got home he received for his birthday a small money tree to which was attached eight one-dollar bills and one fiver on top. He thought of bringing his wad on the caper and pretending to find it. He didn't exactly know why, the whole thing did not bear a lot of thinking, but he was feeling lucky.

*Brother R Fucking K met secretly with one of the opposition's Brothers Fucking K straight out of Dostoevsky, who put the parallel missiles of Turkey on the table with the one's on the Island. The highly competitive presidential sibling left the room to make a phone call.*

**Doomsday Progress Report EARLIER, JUST AS THE DAY HAD ARRIVED, AT AN ALTITUDE OF 31 MILES, 19 MILES S-S/W OF JOHNSTON ISLAND A SLIGHTLY DISTORTED BRIGHT MOON-LIKE SPHERE WAS SEEN, YELLOW AT FIRST, THEN GRADUALLY SHOWING GREEN, PINK AND VIOLET HUES. BLUE-PURPLE STREAMERS WERE FORMED AND TWO OBSERVERS WITHOUT GOGGLES IN PLACE SUFFERED RETINAL DAMAGE.**

The first thing the juveniles did was get tired of watching the fresh white mouse cower in the corner of the cage of Louie's pet snake. They took a circuitous route to the paddleball court that offered the broadest operational perspective. Damn if that same neighbor wasn't about, but in a more oblivious mode. At the right moment they crossed over and entered the back part of the back yard. The grass was of a type too nice to walk on. Tom Sawyer and the two Huck Finns traversed the immaculate lawn in preparation of entry through a window left open and through which one could be boosted and then open the door from the inside. Why just use a key when one could ruin the end of a good story? In fact, at the last minute there was the sound of crunching gravel on the street, which was the residents returning a week early from vacation just because the world might blow up. Louie covered the retreat by turning the hose on the fantastic lawn. Brian spent

some of his roll on fresh packs of cigarettes and soda and by the time they got back to Louie's Mr. Mouse was barely a lump in the long throat of Mr. Snake.

*It was Black Saturday, LeMay-I and his ilk of the various persuasions were bouncing off the walls and N Fucking K officially blinked, the hardware would be off the island and J Fucking K secretly blinked, the Turkey items would be removed without announcement, most boats turned back. A sub shadowing the flotilla in question was out of communication and came close to launching the first final torpedo. Apparently three guys down there argued it out correctly.*

**From the Journal of Doom    WITHIN THE DURATION OF THIS PARTICULAR ROTATION OF THE EARTH, NEAR THE USUAL ATOLL THE CALAMITY DOMINIC MUSHROOM CLOUD REACHED THE HINDU HEIGHT OF SIXTY-THREE THOUSAND FEET.**

Brian determined to save his bread for a non-white shirt for the upcoming social season, a new concept, and so had a Sunday afternoon to fill somewhere besides the pinball arcade, without his friends. After eighth grade graduation the three went to separate schools and thereafter saw each other around town now and then. Louie developed a knack for hanging with an older crowd, making himself useful, and followed them into the county jail, where one time he dropped acid. Brian would rather die ten thousand deaths. Then Louie topped himself; after getting out on bail he went back on visiting day with a bag of weed down his pants to smuggle in, and on that particular Lord's Day he disappeared into the correctional system. Same thing almost happened to Brian for a bogus pot bust, the judge fucked with him and then let him go to California, where one night at Barney's Beanery he sat in a booth with visiting Richard, who was out on bail, and there is nothing like waiting for a court date. Richard had gravitated upwards, which is possible when money and a little finesse are involved, to a small group of rich kids who became practiced hedonists chasing after excellent junk in two-seater sports

cars. Brian arrived at the little local deconstruction site thinking spot to find that a passing idiot had taken a dump in one of the half-finished rooms. He took a step back towards the street, and spotted just in time the front end of a patrol vehicle emerging to the left; his reflexes were sharp but he was still living too close to the line. The arcade was safe, and he could just watch.

*N Fucking K was never the same, there was the old familiar low buzz in the politburo. J Fucking K had one year to live, but this Sunday was a good day; K Brother met with Brother K to finalized the deal and have some Chinese. Someone came up with the idea of exchanging phone numbers; the Man of the Moment had an exit line out of advertising: if one invades when the same result could have come through negotiation, then you don't have a very good war.*

**Doomsday Nightly Sign-off AT THE END OF THE KAZAKHSTAN STEPPE HARD BY THE SPOT CALLED SEMIPALATINSK ON THIS PARTICULAR DATE IN A BUSY YEAR, ONE COULD HAVE HARDLY HELPED BEING AWARE OF YET ANOTHER BEATIFICATION OF DUST.**

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## **New Nonfiction: “Underground” by Mark Hummel**



Hands at the Cuevas de las Manos upon Río Pinturas, near the town of Perito Moreno in Santa Cruz Province, Argentina. Picture taken by Marianocecowski (2005).

In my childhood, television was a great unifier, for there existed a limited choice of three television networks, discounting PBS. But even if we were watching the same programming, television had begun to shape and change all of our lives—and our democracy—for the Vietnam War was broadcast into our homes every night as was the coverage of Nixon's downfall and resignation. Politics reached beyond the nightly news and entered drama and comedy. Programming like *All in the Family* provided a shrill echo of conservative politicians in its portrayal of bigoted Archie Bunker as he faced an America that looked, in his eyes, nothing like the one he had known before. *M\*A\*S\*H*, a laughter-heavy depiction of an army surgical unit set on the frontlines of the Korean War began airing in 1972 and offered a not-so-subtle editorial about the

folly, politics, and dehumanizing effects of the real war still raging in Vietnam.

*Hogan's Heroes*, an altogether different slapstick television-vision of war with no pretense of condemnation, ended the year before *M\*A\*S\*H* began. That it is a regular presence on Nick-at-Nite and in YouTube videos offers a sure sign I'm getting old. The comedy held a vision of a time when enemies were still identifiable, choosing as its setting a prisoner-of-war camp in Nazi Germany. Written and released within an America that emerged as the savior of Europe, it broadcast clear allegiances. My own childhood fascination with *Hogan's Heroes* had little to do with bumbling Colonel Klink and "I see NOTHING" Sergeant Schultz and the other Nazis made to look like incompetent fools. My interest was with the hidden tunnels and the secret underground chambers dug by Allied prisoners. I was fixated on Colonel Robert E. Hogan, the obvious star, in his leather bomber jacket and perfect hair (and on all those busty blond turncoat spies he seduced). The show started in 1965 and lasted two years longer than US involvement in the actual war it spoofed.

The era of its airing goes back. Back before we knew Bob Crane, who portrayed Hogan, was a sexual misfit, back long before someone murdered him, way back before they made a movie about him. You know about all that, right? Those underground stories, that Bob Crane was obsessed with pornography, watching it and making it, recording his sexual conquests over women for posterity, even laying soundtracks over his videos? Crane was murdered, bludgeoned with his own tripod in his Arizona condo in 1978. After his death, the details of his surreptitious life began trickling out, as did the videos in which he documented his sexual conquests dating to the days of *Hogan's Heroes*. Many of his secrets only became widely public in 2002 with news stories accompanied the release of a biopic titled *Auto Focus*.

Today we might shrug at a television star proving to be a

misogynist and sexual deviant, but such behind-the-scenes information was kept strictly behind-the-scenes in those days. No hot-mics or soundbites. No cable channels or 24-hour news cycles. News, like entertainment, entered our lives on a decidedly different trajectory in those days. There was no such thing as streaming services or binge-watching. You showed up at your television at 7 PM on Sunday because that's when *The Wonderful World of Disney* aired. As a child I could never have imagined a Disney streaming platform or that they would own sports and television networks, no more than I could imagine funny, handsome, smiling Bob Crane was a sexual deviant. There were no television or internet radio venues for future presidents to discuss their wealth, ex-wives, or sexual interests. That sort of talk was kept strictly in the underground. And discussions of global pandemics weren't yet the plotlines of movies, the metaphors of Zombie apocalypses on our television screens, and certainly not our lived reality. We hadn't yet fractured into political divisions you identified by where you received your news. We didn't air our beliefs or our dirty laundry to a network over social media. In those days, if you wanted to avoid the lives of those beyond your neighborhood or ignore world events, you didn't need to construct an underground bunker, for the network gatekeepers already provided cover. I suppose entrance to the right Manhattan cocktail parties, Senate offices, or newsrooms would have gotten you every manner of uncensored stories, but public spectacle on a grand scale seldom appeared under the bright lights.

I've been thinking about going "underground" for years now. Maybe it's a sign of aging and reveals a nostalgic longing for a childhood where I dug a lot of underground forts and passed exorbitant hours playing in my parent's crawlspace. Or perhaps it's a reaction to the daily surrealism of life during a global pandemic, when the desire to "stick one's head in the

sand” becomes something approaching literal and has resulted in a lot of Netflix. Or maybe my underground thoughts have been brought on, much to my bewilderment, because America has survived a president who was so locked inside his own nostalgic yearning for the era of his youth that he built a political agenda out of it.

My own nostalgic longings are, like most things, complicated. I turned twelve in 1974. At twelve I reached an age when playing with model tanks in a dirt crawlspace was beginning to seem uncool. Which is also to say that I had reached an age where I had begun to care what might pass for “cool,” if there is such a thing in junior high. I was also awakening to a wider, above-ground world, which largely entered my consciousness through television. I read a lot, but I wasn’t the sort of twelve-year-old who perused *The New York Times*, and I stuck to headlines in the paper I delivered, *The Cheyenne Tribune*.

The above-ground world mostly entered through snippets from my father’s ritual of watching the ten o’clock news, though like most kids at twelve, I’d have a hard time finding synthesis in the relationship between my experiences and what was broadcast into our family room. I grew up in Cheyenne, Wyoming, a place remote enough and small enough that it offered, and suffered, insularity. Reality, and the outside world, crept in mostly through our televisions and newspapers. With the benefit of hindsight, I can now see that in the isolation afforded by living in Wyoming—and in those pre-globalization, pre-internet days you could be quite isolated—the social tensions of pro-Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War arrived years later than elsewhere in the nation. What might take an hour to arrive from the coasts now might take a year or more then. Yet Cheyenne, apparently, was not isolated from realities like economic woes, and the 1973 – 1975 recession arrived right on schedule. In my narrow experience, local economics were manifested in the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of our school being condemned, so

the building could not accommodate the entire student body. As a result, my first year of junior high was defined by our school operating on a split schedule where half the school attended between 7:00 AM and 12:00 PM and the other half from 12:00 PM to 5:00 PM. I was on the afternoon shift, which meant athletic practices took place at the high school (also condemned) in the morning and riding the bus home from school in the dark on winter days to deliver newspapers by flashlight.

In 1974 a new school building opened. The atmosphere of fresh paint and new carpet and a functioning cafeteria were marred by locker searches that frequently turned up weapons and a near daily early dismissal due to bomb threats. Delayed incidents linked to war protests and backlash against national civil rights organizing were fueled by a community within an almost entirely homogenized state that found unexpected diversity in its schools through the presence of the children of airmen and airwomen with skin tones decidedly not white. Unfocused, misplaced anger and confusion had fueled the broader tensions also resulted in riotous skirmishes in our city's schools and something akin to perceived class wars sparked between the children of educated professionals and those of blue-collar workers. There were frequent fights, often at scale. Mostly there was more threatening than fighting, and typically I hightailed it for home, now in walking distance from the new school. I no longer had to wait for a bus, which is where most of the trouble happened, when insults were hurled and fights erupted.

The world that entered my twelve-year-old world through the television screen was every bit as contentious and bleak. 1974 was the year Richard Nixon resigned. A year later, Saigon would fall and the last American troops would retreat from an unethical war. My dad regularly took his turn waiting in around-the-block lines to put gas in the family Buick.

The 45<sup>th</sup> U.S. president turned twelve in 1958. I suspect that he may have never pumped gas in his lifetime. The year was marked domestically by escalating tensions from court mandated school integration and racist responses. The Supreme Court ruled in *Cooper v. Aaron* that fear of social unrest or violence, whether real or constructed by those wishing to oppose integration, did not excuse state governments from complying with *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Popular culture in 1958 mostly cast misogyny and racism as harmless and conformity as patriotic. The following year our future president would be sent away to boarding school. Based only on his self-confessed adult habits, my guess is that he watched a good deal of television as a child. What I am certain of is that, like every twelve-year old, he believed the world revolved around him. The difference? He never stopped behaving like he was twelve.

Forgetting the narcissism, the hyperbolic tweets, and the actions that led to his two impeachments, the closest thing to a coherent political vision the 45<sup>th</sup> president (or perhaps that of his advisors) articulated is a vestige from the middle of the last century, a simple-minded view of lapsed American greatness best conveyed in his "American Carnage" inauguration speech:

This vision of America is derived from a uniformed backwards glance that neglects a great deal of economic and technological transformation and that is inextricably intertwined with misogyny, racism, and convenient, actionless patriotism. With unidentified and unexamined nostalgia guiding political action, we entered a geopolitical fantasyland where down is up and anyone who disagrees is cast aside as un-American or lying. The promise that a nation could unilaterally disentangle the complexities of a global economy that American capitalists seeking cheap labor largely constructed is laughably naïve. It is a promise that emerges from a nostalgic view held by someone born into wealth,

specifically wealth originally derived from charging poor people rent. Who wouldn't like more American made products or better paying jobs that don't require an education or patriotism where you only have to wear a lapel pin, stand for the national anthem, and send someone else off to war? Easy right? Like reality TV easy. If instead we recognize the inherent complexity of living in an age where everything is global—marketplaces, resource allocation, human migration patterns, climate change, viral transfer—the intellectual demands are exhausting. Safer to listen to the guy at the end of the bar and nod along complacently. Safer to go looking for subterranean refuge.

I expend directionless energy wondering if our culture can be repaired. Is it possible to reeducate multiple generations with the critical thinking skills required to distinguish truth from lies? To distinguish nostalgia from history? Can we again learn what it means to participate in a civil society?

It would be so much easier to dig a big hole and hide.

I should likely go searching for non-political explanations for my current underground obsession. After all, I'm clearly guilty of my own nostalgia, whether my politics originate in it or not. Could my desire to withdraw be as simple as not sleeping well? It's true that I have been awakened by "upside-down" dreams prompted by Netflix addictive viewing of *Stranger Things* and *The Leftovers*. Or is there a through-line present here as well? Is a desire for a return to an older vision of America real or imagined?

I didn't watch a great deal of television as a child, growing up in a time and place where my friends and I had the freedom and safe environment to play without supervision and the space to explore. There were family television rituals that united me to other kids of the same era of course: *The Brady Bunch* on

Friday nights, *Emergency* on Saturdays, *The Wonderful World of Disney* and *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* with requisite popcorn on Sundays. Outside of that, there wasn't a lot of connective tissue to kids from elsewhere. Wyoming was a place so foreign and typecast by most that when my family traveled on summer vacations, kids I met in motel swimming pools would ask if we rode horses to school. Their vision of the West I lived in was more formed by *Gunsmoke* than textbooks or Yellowstone vacations. Of course, I knew no more of their homeplaces than they did of mine.

When winter forced my brother and idea inside from the prairie, much of it was passed in our crawlspace. Perhaps inspired by *Hogan's Heroes*, we spent a lot of time excavating under our house in the weak light of a sixty-watt bulb. My best friend and I used the tailings of our excavations as a play space for our painstakingly constructed, authentic reproduction plastic model World War II tanks. The Americans and Brits on one side of the crawlspace dug in with complex forts constructed under the dirt with scraps from dad's table saw, while the Germans positioned the big guns and long-range tanks on the ridge we'd piled against the foundation wall. That pretend World War II of our imaginations was a war we could manage, a clearly delineated war that bore little resemblance to the Cold War we lived daily and never understood or the Vietnam War played out on our TV screens and in our draft board chambers, a tidy war studied in our history books when the enemy wore distinguishing colors and marched under a swastika, not the nebulous, endless "war on terrorism" of our current age.

I was a cold war kid all the way. Not just by historical era but by virtue place. Cheyenne, Wyoming is the home of Warren Air Force Base and the headquarters for the Strategic Air Command, that wing of the US Air Force charged with control over the nation's nuclear warheads. Many of my classmates' fathers were officers who managed the bureaucracy of nuclear

missile movement and maintenance. Growing up, we were told that Cheyenne was Soviet target #2, just behind NORAD in Colorado Springs where an incoming nuclear onslaught would be tracked. NORAD inhabits a bunker scraped out of a mountain (eerily named Cheyenne Mountain) and refashioned from concrete and steel.

We lived among daily reminders of nuclear presence in the long, white semi-trailers passing on the interstate pulled by blue USAF semi-tractors. As a teenager I crossed beyond the posted "No Trespassing by Order of the United States Government" signs and chained gates to explore an abandoned Atlas missile base in the inky blackness of a Wyoming prairie night. We were made to understand that the nuclear missiles and their command had been placed in our midst precisely because we lived in the middle of nowhere—as if one could have a serious conversation about minimalization of causalities in a nuclear firestorm so vast it would literally alter planetary climate. Perhaps the mental instability of our leaders in that age simply took a less overt form than we have come to expect today.

How did one find victory or freedom in a nuclear holocaust or in a political war of competing ideologies? No wonder we needed the predictability of Colonel Hogan. When our teachers directed us in nuclear raid drills, wrangling us from classrooms to interior hallways where we were instructed to sit against walls with our heads resting on our knees, we longed for Hogan's tunnels and our crawlspace. We weren't foolish enough to think the earth offered sufficient protection from a nuclear blast but it seemed a far sight superior to our teachers asking us to assume the position.

With *Hogan's Heroes* I grew up on images of Lt. Louis LeBeau popping his head out of the ground beneath the guard dog's house or lifting an entire shrubbery beyond the prison camp fence. My brother and I had big plans for just such a tunnel. We figured we'd leave from an entrance hidden in the

crawlspace, tunnel under the front foundation, and come up in an immense Golden Elder. It was the only damn thing that seemed to grow in the dry, wind-ravaged arctic zone called Wyoming. The tunnel was going to be a thing of beauty. Deep, clean, and precise. We envisioned it clearly. We'd sneak out of the house at will—down through the basement, through the furnace room, through the small hatch door into the crawlspace (that too-small door dad cursed whenever he bent his 6'4" frame to retrieve a storage box each time mom wanted to change seasonal decorations). Through the crawlspace and through the bare stud wall to the other side where dad had piled all of the dirt from his excavations when he'd had the bright idea to dig out all of one side—a chamber twenty feet long by fifteen feet wide—digging it down three feet and leaving a dirt shelf along the entire perimeter where he could stack the boxes of ornaments and Easter baskets and out of fashion clothes. We'd slip between the bare studs, duck through to the other side, our own beloved dark chamber where we had to kneel or literally crawl over the excavated dirt, down into our secret fort through the tunnel, through the bush, and into freedom.

Never mind that there was a door to the back yard next to the furnace room, unattended, unlit, a direct path to the world beyond. Never mind that we had no idea where we'd go if we did sneak out. Never mind that, had we succeeded, we would have, inevitably, passed the time asking, "What do you want to do?" and responding, "I don't know; what do you want to do?" that mantra a rerun of pre-adolescent summer afternoons. I'm talking about that in-between age, those years when we were too "cool" to play guns ("You're dead." "No, I'm not, you missed me.") or cops and robbers on our bicycles. The age before we found beer and Mad Dog 20/20 and weed and girls. Never mind that our parents were entirely trusting and we lived in a safe place where we could venture into the prairie for whole days of play, stay out until after dark all summer playing kick-the-can or flashlight tag with every kid in the neighborhood. Never mind the back door. The tunnel would have

been so much cooler.

We got as far as digging the "secret" fort that we proudly showed our father from the distance of "his side" of the crawlspace, shining our flashlights into its depths. Unfortunately, these excavations were permanently interrupted by my brother discovering girls.

Left to my own devices, the tunnel idea was more forgotten than abandoned and, for a time at least, the new mound of dirt created by our previous industry grew of greater interest to avid model tank builders than the rather grave hole, particularly once my next-door neighbor and I discovered the simulated bombing realism accomplished by rock throwing, the effects of matches on plastic models, and the excitement generated by tin foil basins buried beneath the dirt filled with lighter fluid. Eventually the hole gave way to more construction on an American tank compound and filled to a point where it marked the "no man's land" between Allies and Germans, a soil fought over for years but oddly never crossed by either army, likely in part due to the fact that the G.I.s eventually discovered nurses (more evidence of Allied superiority over Germans, who never once threw a party). Colonel Hogan would have admired our imaginative industriousness.

Like the fort and the tunnel, the tanks, dozens of them, all carefully hand-painted and laden with tank tread, gas cans, shovels, sandbags, additional armor plating, and long aerial antennas melted from the thin plastic strips that held the model parts, were abandoned. How we had labored over these weapons of war, ironic given that we were circled by weapons with firepower beyond imagination and our fathers attended service club luncheons alongside the warriors of Strategic Air Command. We built tanks, we could have reasoned, not missiles, as if one means of killing had moral superiority over another, or as if we were oblivious to the ways the world had transformed in the years between the war we carried out under

our house and the one our fathers watched on the nightly news. I should have had the consciousness to understand the dangers of such a blasé vision of war as acted out in our play, for my father had landed on Normandy and fought through Central Europe. That is the risk of looking backward as entertainment rather than a living history. We'd constructed models with precise engineering, forgoing their function, a mistake common to engineers the world over.

Having gathered dust for two or three years—and the crawlspace offered nothing but gritty dust that embedded into the plastic in a manner superior to what any airbrush artist could accomplish—we had created artifacts rather than toys or weapons. I remember the day my next-door neighbor, now sixteen, rang the doorbell where he waited with a big cardboard box. “Hey, man,” he said. “I thought I should probably get my tanks.” On the way out he asked, “Want to party tonight?” We'd stopped our underground play. My brother had submitted his draft card. There now existed a thing called HBO, and it ran dirty movies.

There are any number of euphemisms for the word “underground.” It often refers to things that are “clandestine” or even “subversive,” the usage bringing to mind spies or secretive groups. We use the term loosely to reference those who go into hiding, referring not just to the actions of fugitives on the lam but also to psychological remove from the broader society such as we encounter in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and the narrator's descent into ennui. Often the word underground is included in the monikers of those committing the act of “speaking truth to power” as in an underground press. And frequently we apply the word to “things nearly present in plain sight but not acknowledged.” The early punk band The Velvet Underground took their name from a documentary-style book of the same title by Michael Leigh that depicted wife-swapping and kinky sex beyond the white-picket

fences of suburbia.

I cannot speak of euphemisms for “underground” when writing about a World War II television comedy without speaking to its starkest inverse, for of course the French Resistance movement to German occupation was dubbed “the French Underground.” Courageous but otherwise ordinary French citizens combatted the Nazis with intricate intelligence networks, underground newspapers, guerrilla warfare tactics, and escape routes that aided Allied soldiers and airmen trapped behind enemy lines. Americans cut from a similar cloth included members of the Underground Railroad, that network of abolitionists operating in secrecy to secure the freedom of the enslaved.

The lesson both groups taught us: When fascists rise to power, as when capitalists enslave humans to generate labor, those driven underground become the clandestine activists tasked with restoring social justice.

The men and women of the French Underground took actions to try and save lives, to preserve freedom for a future generation. My father was among the Americans who landed in France to ensure their actions and sacrifices were not empty. He, like the men he served alongside, guaranteed I could spend a childhood with the liberty to waste my time watching *Hogan's Heroes* and digging in the dirt.

What freedom we had! The prairie was our second home. One summer my brother risked ruining our father's lawnmower when he embarked on an enterprise of prairie development. The baseball diamond came first. Next, he mowed a football field, clambering through gopher holes and spitting rocks like a machine gun. (Note: the prairie, despite all clichés and claims stating otherwise, is decidedly not flat.) His most ambitious effort: a nine-hole golf course. The greens (rougher than the roughest rough on the municipal course) featured

hand-sewn flags and buried tin cans. Like in the crawlspace, we dotted the prairie with underground forts. We played on and under the prairie while boys a few years older than us—Strats, we called them, we civilian kids in an Air Force town—passed long shifts just miles away under that same network of grass roots babysitting lethal nuclear payloads. We played while young men died in Vietnam. Some of them died infiltrating the vast network of underground tunnels the Viet Cong used to launch deadly attacks and to ferry lethal supplies.

Exercising our freedom, we spent a summer jumping bikes out of the abandoned basement excavation of someone's dream home. They'd never gotten beyond digging the huge square hole. Soon it was crisscrossed with hardened bicycle trails at every possible angle. We'd charge down one side, dropping steeply off the edge, pedal hard up the opposite side and on up where they had moved the tailings from the excavations, the fill mounded to make the steep sides of the once-wanted basement taller, more dangerous. There we would shoot off the tops of these manufactured jumps and take to the air.

I won't say that hole abandoned by some over-extended builder was our inspiration, for maybe it was *Hogan Heroes* that gave us the idea, but digging forts was as regular a part of our summers as spear grass wars. It was mostly my brother and his friends who built the forts, and mostly, the younger kid-brothers were stuck on the outside wanting in. They started small, one room chambers with a single entrance, small enough that a single sheet of plywood was sufficient for a roof. Get the plywood in good and deep, pile it with soil, and within a year the prairie would reclaim the gap. Soon they learned they could dig deep enough to leave the prairie above intact, reinforcing the span overhead every few feet with scavenged 2 x 4s rather like the preserved gold mines every Western kid visited during weekend trips to the surrounding mountains.

Our older brothers were the real engineers. The best forts became ours by inheritance. Our own creations were puny and

unimaginative. It was our brothers who had built the fort we were awed by, a fort we only gained rare entrance to by special invitation. Our imaginations made it grander in our minds, just as the activities we imagined they carried off in our absence grew roots in our reverent daydreams. We assumed they held secret rituals, maybe were members of secret societies. Certainly, they must have taken girls down there, and girls were still a mystery to me darker than a fort under the prairie with candles extinguished.

But one fort surely must have lived up to our mental excavations. They'd dug three rooms, linked by curving narrow tunnels. It had a distant, protected entrance and a secret escape hatch. (We'd all spent enough time catching gophers and snakes to understand why, at minimum, you had to have a second, secret entrance.) The entrance was covered by a plywood scrap, the kind of weathered board you were required to check under anytime you were in the prairie as a likely source of snakes. It opened onto a long, sloping tunnel that forced those entering to crawl on their elbows. The largest room could accommodate four adolescent boys, and they'd dug a long bench into one wall, rather like dad's dirt storage shelf in the crawlspace. The walls had carved niches to hold candle stubs. Illuminated in the flickering shadows, prairie grasses and sage dropped roots penetrating the ceiling in fibrous tangles. The air was heavy with the rich scent of clay, and the walls were cool to the touch and revealed the smooth spade marks of construction. The excavation tailings were piled to obscure the entrance and emergency exit and were soon overtaken by the weedy growth of a hungry prairie. To stand at the neighborhood fringes and look into the distance you could never know what lay beneath the grass. Surely, some adults must have wondered where those heads of kids disappeared. Or did they? This felt like a different time when kids were free to roam outside the company of adults, a time when I might worry every day that a Soviet nuclear missile was likely to conk me on the head but I never once worried about being

abducted.

Within a year of being old enough to have succeeded minimally with my own fort digging, my brother and his friends shifted interests and passed boredom torturing snakes. Their engineering abilities turned to manufacturing execution devices—snake guillotines and battery-powered snake electric chairs, snake death by fireworks ingestion, that sort of thing. We dug in their absence, quickly learning that the real fun, rather like our model-building, was in the construction. Once completed, no matter how ingeniously engineered, a fort quickly became little more than a hole in the ground.

At some point that summer something else shifted too. I don't know if my brother and his friends were all assigned *The Outsiders* for English class or if the crowding and tensions that had yielded protests and marches and incidents of Molotov cocktails at their high school sparked them, but the neighborhood suddenly divided, and those boys living south of Harvard Avenue formed one kind of gang and those north another. They spent half a summer in two packs, one group of rabid mongrels pursuing the other in random courses across the prairie, over the abandoned golf course and up Boot Jack Hill and down across the rooftops of forts both groups had apparently forgotten. There were frequent fights. Maybe it was some other kind of turf war to which I was naïve and they represented a preamble to the tribalism that infiltrated my junior high and that continues in politics today.

The division that happened in my small neighborhood broke roughly along the same economic lines that we experienced in the larger outbreaks of violence that happened at school, or to be more accurate, the perceived differences in economics. The world was chaotic and school mimicked the chaos. I wonder what gaps in our education remain because school was so often dismissed because someone had called in an anonymous bomb threat or a disgruntled classmate pulled the fire alarm. The bomb threats, like the rumors that reached the teacher's

lounge, resulted in frequent locker searches. Those consistently produced knives and homemade weapons. We knew something serious had shifted when, near the end of the 1974 school year, a locker search produced gun.

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On the days I'm not reaching for a shovel, I find myself thinking about Mr. White, the neighbor every child feared during my Rutgers Road upbringing. Mr. White—and no, I am not making that name up—lived at the end of our block where a dirt road intersected our paved street. Everyone in the neighborhood referred to road as “the alley” when really it was the demarcation line between our odd little neighborhood—six blocks named after universities bordering the interstate—and the Wyoming prairie. The alley led directly to the new junior high and offered a quick escape route home. School represented real danger, featuring a population harboring a communal misplaced anger that shadowed that of its parents. The only dangers the alley posed was an open trench being dug for a sewer line, a mean dog that broke its chain with regularity, and unsolicited rebukes from Mr. White.

Mr. White was the neighborhood misanthrope. He made it his business to enforce his strict code of how the world was supposed to behave. The warnings he issued through his front screen door to “Stay off my grass!” were shouted with the venom of taunts at a 21<sup>st</sup> Century political rally. The signs he posted announcing the unwelcoming terrain of his lawn were written with an incendiary tone, like Twitter tweets lobbed from the safety of cyberspace. The wire he strung taut between green metal fence posts where his front yard met the alley was a visible reminder, a message more than utilitarian barrier.

In sixteen years as his neighbor, I never recall seeing a visiting car fill his driveway. I only knew there was a Mrs. White because she, on rare occasion, answered the doorbell when I collected monthly payments for my newspaper route, a

required action that inspired foreboding. From the porch, I glimpsed their living room, which felt like observing a diorama—furniture attired in plastic slipcovers and a console television dating to a previous decade. When Mr. White answered the doorbell in a tank-style t-shirt, he grumbled complaints, remarking when the newspaper had been late or that the fat Sunday edition arrived with too much noise, despite his being one of two houses on my route where, rather than throw the paper to the door—with a precision of which I was proud—I laid the paper on his porch.

Clearly, I either place too much blame on or give too much credit to Mr. White when I recall his yellow house and his uninterrupted lawn and then try to make sense of our bifurcated democracy. My elderly mother assures me that Mr. White—Herb, she reminds me—was a perfectly nice man, one who hosted milk-can suppers and did body work on neighbor's cars, although she does add, "But I can see why children would have thought he was mean." I'm sure she is right and there were other sides to him. But then I must also recall that all of my friends were decidedly afraid of my mother, and not without reason. As with Mr. White, had they come to know her in her fuller complexity, they may have had a more nuanced opinion.

Perhaps, like too many of my fellow Americans, I've become guilty of seeing all events through a warped lens. Who might Mr. White have proven to be had I shown the maturity and courage to shake his hand and engage him in a conversation? Mr. White is long dead. I can't go back in time and try to find the man beyond the transactional exchanges we had when I was a boy.

The neighborhood boys, whether north or south of Harvard Avenue, were united against Mr. White. Perhaps if we could have focused on a common enemy, we could have avoided the tribal divisions that emerged. Or perhaps not. It's entirely

possible that the divisions that occurred in our neighborhood, like those that brought such turmoil to our school, was rooted mostly in boredom. In the endless downtime between the neighborhood campaigns, the northern boys would sprawl, listless, across our front yard or spar with one another like dueling dogs. If I hung around them for any time at all, some scrawny high school acquaintance of my brother would test me by picking a fight, which was a mistake because I fought ferociously and without logic, having spent a lifetime fending off the abuses of an older brother. I secretly looked forward to such fights because my brother seemed to like me better after I put one of his friends on his back. But I never joined in their prairie campaigns. My best friend and I had our own battles awaiting us in the crawlspace, a domain that had become totally our own.

As soon as driver's licenses settled into our brother's back pockets, the gang wars, at least on the home front, ceased, though the trouble seemed to worsen for the boys living south of Harvard and several became real criminals and then convicts. Our brothers' interests shifted. The prairie forts were ours if we wanted them. We entered them on a kind of unspoken dare, like crawling through the drainage tunnel that connected our neighborhood and a borrow ditch near the elementary school on the other side of the interstate. The forts seemed more dangerous, more primitive now that lack of use had fostered thicker spider webs spanning the tunnel entrance and little cave-ins where there were finger holes of penetrating light.

I remember going to the big fort when I was fourteen. It was night and the only light we carried was a cigarette lighter. My tank-building best friend and I had found a nearly full pack of Marlboros on the street. Sucking on someone else's cigarette, sitting, cramped, in the dark of an underground fort dug into the prairie, the talk of girls and parties and high school, I remember thinking I had passed into

something. It seemed only a matter of days later when Mr. Johnston bulldozed the fort. The bulldozing felt like a violation, but we'd never liked Mr. Johnston in the first place, didn't trust his son even if he was part of my brother's group, and didn't have any interest in rebuilding. An era had passed. I felt late to the party. In fact, the party had ended. Growing up into the above-ground world felt exciting and scary at the same time, yet even in the midst of change, I was aware that I would not be allowed to go back in time or return to ignorance.

Of course, the fields we played in as children are now lost too, the prairie soil no longer violated by kid's forts but dotted everywhere by the penetrations of actual basements. The prairie has succumbed, like every other part of America it seems, to suburbia, and this little part of Wyoming now-paved over, strip-malled, homogenized-looks exactly like ten thousand neighborhoods in California or Florida. Except for a lack of trees, which stubbornly refuse to grow, the curved streets that make up the place now are lost in place and time. Along the way someone purchased the slowly refilling foundation hole where we jumped our bikes and built their home, though I couldn't identify which house used to harbor this playground, just as selecting the house that stands atop what was once a fort would be little more than an educated guess.

In the years since we have watched the end of the Cold War be replaced with terrorist attacks and nuclear power plant disasters. We have seen the weapons hidden in the Wyoming prairie grow in payload if decrease in number. We still don't know what to do with the waste of the missiles we have decommissioned. We have seen Bob Crane murdered, and now we have watched as celebrities do the killing. Increasingly we elect celebrities and billionaires rather than statesmen and stateswomen, mistaking television figures for leaders and

reducing democracy to a popularity contest.

The crawlspace in my parents' home is still there, of course (sans tunnel), for so long as the house exists, the crawlspace exists. My parents lived in the house until they were eighty-seven and eighty-six before moving to an apartment where they had help available. It was only in the final couple of years living in their home that dad finally stopped managing to contort his tall frame sufficiently to retrieve the artificial Christmas tree and its boxes of ornaments.

I have owned two homes of my own with dirt crawlspaces, and while I used them for storage, my primary ventures into them were for mechanical repair or to retrieve the recycling bin every two weeks, for I had built a chute from the kitchen for that purpose. My children showed no interest in the crawlspaces, finding them dirty and scary.

The home where we raised our children had no crawlspace. It featured a finished walk-out basement. We bought the home, in large part, for the natural light that warmed the basement nearly as well as the main floor. Yet I regularly fantasized about building a secret chamber. I imagined breaching a foundation wall through the garage and under the deck. I wasted good time thinking how I'd dispose of the dirt. I thought about the engineering required to make such a chamber stable. I imagined disguising it, hiding it behind a sliding panel, a secretive entrance to a chamber dug deep into the earth, awaiting my return.

Perhaps that longing arrived out of fear, a desire to escape adult responsibilities rather than a wanted return to the play places of my childhood. Looking backwards is nearly always self-delusional and messy. Memories typically appear purer than the actual times recalled, as if we must filter out the less-pleasant parts of our past, the sadness and embarrassment, in order to move forward into the future. I suppose it is human nature to be nostalgic for the past. We

all want to believe times were simpler "then." Yet I would argue that humans have a unique capacity for viewing the past through forgiving lenses or, at the very least, with the full benefits of hindsight that allows us to create documentary style versions of times gone by, events now neatly in context, relationships one to another entirely clear rather than suffering the murkiness of real time. We are all capable of self-deceit. Perhaps that is how we survive, as individuals and as a species. Perhaps it is a biological imperative, something akin to how women's bodies are able to mitigate the memory of childbirth pain. The alternative, to see only the hard times or the ugliness of the past, is a journey into despair.

But the real dilemma is, as with all things, how do we find balance? In this instance, how do we benefit from a more forgiving recall of the past without failing to learn from it? Can we carry fondness for the past without sanitizing it? We must heed George Santayana's famous warning, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." What is that space between definition of nostalgia—sentimental longing—and its origin—acute homesickness? Balance requires distinction as well, that between sentimental longing held by the individual and denial of history carried by a collective. When entire segments of a population accept "alternative facts," whether about an individual's past or a shared history, the road for corruption is already paved. The distance between self-deceit and narcissism is not long.

Ruminating on *Hogan's Heroes*, it is evident that nostalgia is certainly present in television writers' rooms. It seems we have been caught inside a full-throated nostalgic return to the 1970s and '80s as material for artistic rendering for some time. There would seem equal measure of writers of my generation looking back to our shared formative years and the generation of our children examining times they did not live

within, likely in an attempt to understand us. The former suggests writers of my generation are as guilty of referencing our past as those political leaders I have accused of longing for an idyllic vision from a previous era. But the latter suggests wisdom in a younger generation to act with intentionality about trying to understand something of how we have, collectively, come to arrive in our current age.

Among the better-known media projects set in the years formative to my generation's worldview are: *Stranger Things*, where a group of adolescents encounter secret government projects and supernatural forces, set with an opening in 1983, and *The Americans*, where two Russian spies brought to infiltrate the US as a married couple try to steal enough American secrets to sustain a failing Soviet system, the series opening in the early years of the Regan Administration.

Of course, looking into the rearview mirror is also a phenomenon derived from familiarity—the desire to turn away from contemporary events. Or at least a step sideways, like the long run of zombie television fare, which offers a rather obvious mask for the evil we feel present around us and what seems to many as a continuous creep towards end times. For we are living in an age with new sources of fear and new enemies. One cannot predict the nature or the placement of terrorist attacks. Moving, clandestine, ideological warriors are nearly impossible to identify and defeat. In the years since 2001, Americans inhabit a nearly invisible yet omnipresent fear of jihadist attack that has been a regular feature of life elsewhere in the world for decades. And in the United States, we seem to breed our own brand of terrorists with as much regularity as any jihad. We now reference horrific events by shorthand: Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland. To scan interactive maps identifying mass casualty event escalation from one year to the next is like watching a medical contagion take hold in a population. In the span of twenty-two years, we witnessed the obliteration of the Murrah Federal building in

Oklahoma City and savage machine gun fire into a concert crowd in Las Vegas. Those two attacks alone account for 226 innocent deaths. No wonder we are forever fearful when death arrives for our neighbors at church, in nightclubs, at work, and in school. If we associate the cold war with those most paranoid among us constructing underground bomb shelters, would we seem so insane as to wish underground retreat today?

For of course those fears that had some of our fathers and grandfathers stockpiling canned goods and batteries within concrete bunkers remain. The presence of nuclear weapons has only grown more tenuous. We have every reason to fear unstable governments. Just as we have every reason to fear a degrading nuclear arsenal in a place like modern Russia, let alone those lethal devices lost in the dissolution of the former Soviet Union that face internal corruption and jihadist assault. Our headlines are filled with the fear stoked by the emergence of nuclear capabilities in North Korea and Iran. Shouldn't such a world prompt all of us to want to dig a little deeper? After all, the only country to have ever unleashed nuclear weapons on a civilian population were, in television terms, the "good guys." Is it sensible to believe there won't be other entities present on the planet willing to follow our example whether we label them enemies or allies?

Our current political climate would once again suggest that nostalgia does not breed intelligent insight to learn from our past. When we routinely elect those who spurn education and intellectualism, when we promote those who shun books, reject science, and disregard history (recalling that we now have elected those who openly embrace Q-anon to Congress), we fail to heed Santana's warning. And when we choose to follow those who employ bullying as a method of wielding power, we abandon our values and withdraw from a vaunted history of social justice. The stakes could not be higher.

In my Wyoming circa 1974, the warring factions varied. Often it was the self-identified "cowboys" vs. the self-identified

stoners. Sometimes, if we were capable of time travel, we might leap forward and find the divisions at a schoolyard fight would parallel the left and right so regularly at one another's throats today. And sometimes, the divisions were remarkably clear between those of us willing to defend Black and Brown friends with our fists and those who attacked them because their "otherness" apparently incited fear.

The near future is being fashioned by divided politics forming two camps incapable of agreeing on rules for a game of Capture the Flag. One camp is rooted in a vision of a 1950s America that afforded unregulated pursuit of material gain without consequence and that envisioned a culture that was entirely patriarchal and homogenous. Its vision as emblazoned on red campaign hats suggests America is no longer great and that there was some past, perfect moment when it was. This simplistic vision of America never really existed beyond television fabrications. We do not live upon a *Happy Days* set any more than we ever have inhabited the world of *Leave It to Beaver*.

While the 1950s may have given birth to Disneyland, NASA, and the Interstate highway system, it is also the period in which America enabled Joseph McCarthy, joined the Korean War, and authorized a CIA-orchestrated coup to return the Shah of Iran to power. It was a decade notable for, and in desperate need of, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the school desegregation of Little Rock. As suburbs grew and post-war home-ownership rates were sustained, one cannot reasonably believe that rates of spousal abuse, alcoholism, adultery, and other cancers that preyed on families were less common, rather they were more sequestered behind closed curtains and silence. I'm not arguing many social features haven't changed, even changed rapidly and radically in the decades since the 1950s, but I do steadfastly believe that we cannot truly long for something that never existed any more than we can watch reruns of *Hogan's Heroes* and accept it as an

accurate, or even an alternative portrayal of World War II. Rather than longing for an uninformed nostalgic view of the past, why not work for the ideals represented in the Declaration of Independence?

Even if we can no longer identify facts when we depend upon social networks for our windows on the actual world, we can still possess enough critical thinking ability to discern what is reality. Or can we? Perhaps it is a worthy reminder that we elected someone to the presidency who entered American consciousness as a reality television "star." Would we ever have acknowledged him at all were this not the case?

Perhaps more to the point, are we at risk of no longer distinguishing between the fiction of dramatic television, no matter its historical setting, and "scripted-reality" television? It is not only the young who long for the idyllic lives and flawless bodies of social media "influencers." When I become so feeble-minded that I can no longer distinguish Colonel Hogan from Bob Crane, I will not just be someone to dismiss as sad and irrelevant, I am likely either a danger or in danger.

Yet in the last years of the 1960s, the time of Vietnam and street battles for civil rights, when tie-die challenged IBM blue suits and red ties, is there a wonder we wanted the comfort and predictability of *Hogan's Heroes*? It was understandable, if dangerous, to fabricate a vision where those who had enacted the Holocaust were reduced to buffoons. Would we rather have a sitcom that shows the butchering regime Hitler created as dupes and simpletons playing out recycled plots or the reality of discovering Bob Crane's body after he was bludgeoned to death in his Scottsdale apartment among his sex tapes?

Maybe I have an unfiltered view of the past as well, yet I have faith that most television viewers in the 1960s could differentiate comedy from real history. I no longer hold such

faith. We now inhabit a media space where we are “fed” news. Those news feeds are no longer objectively journalistic, rather they provide a specific viewpoint determined to fit our preconceptions as analyzed by algorithms so complex that only a tiny minority of the populace understand them.

Will you blame me if I long for the predictability of my childhood crawlspace?

Of course, going underground, as the characters of *Stranger Things* can tell us, is inherently topsy-turvy and possesses its own dangers. When the show takes its characters literally within the earth, they enter the “Upside Down,” a bizarre, glowing, creepy, vine-filled underworld that harbors a literal monster that preys upon humans for its meals. As the audience for the show, viewers are challenged with the question: which is scarier, the upside-down world monster or the government that hides knowledge of its existence? Or, like any well-plotted drama might ask, perhaps the real questions are: has the government, in its secrets, *created* the monster? and has it had a hand in creating the superhuman adolescent girl who might save us from it (the monster and the government)?

The entire plotline of *The Americans* creates a different kind of topsy-turvy, upside-down response in which we are likely to find ourselves rooting for Soviet spies and sometimes even aligning with their cause. It’s a rather odd response to television depicting our old Cold War enemies infiltrating our culture and battling our government, stranger still in a time when we acknowledge that their real-world motherland has repeatedly subverted our democratic process.

There are reminders and warnings for us in both shows. When we live inside of history and technology that moves so fast that we cannot keep pace, when we participate—or don’t—in politics that feel at once insidious and inept, when we encounter

global events that require such sophisticated knowledge that we are made to feel overwhelmed and anxious, is it any wonder we may wish to go looking for holes to hide within? In an age when we have all been united by a virus's unwillingness to differentiate between us by gender or race, nationality or ethnicity, political affiliation or wealth status, why shouldn't we long to have identifiable monsters for our enemies and superheroes as our defenders? It gets quite confusing when we begin to cheer for murderers on television while encountering them more frequently in real life and when we wear masks as barriers to infection rather than to hide our identity.

Of course, my own nostalgia for a simpler time, a "wistful affection" dug into the cool womb of the earth, is folly, like all escapist thinking. I cannot pretend to be immune from recalling fondly a childhood where I was left to play with friends or within my own imagination from the time I left the house in the morning until my mom pulled the rawhide cord on the bell attached to the back of our house at sundown. Nor am I not guilty of self-deceit or for wanting a return to a time when politics seemed simpler, communication less fraught with risk, facts were more readily identifiable and more frequently trafficked. The forts I construct today are the indoor variety, which are built alongside my grandchildren using an ingenious framework kit that allows construction of nearly any shape or size, but many of the blankets that cover the frame are handmade by those who passed before me, and the wonder and joy I see in my grandsons' eyes as they hold a flashlight to their faces when inside their creations is familiar and comforting.

But I have dug no holes, constructed no bomb shelters. I live firmly above ground. Mostly now I am reminded my current residence has a crawlspace only by the regular flush of the sump pump that indicates the snow is melting out of the mountains as spring nears or when retrieving the storage bins

filled with toys for the grandchildren when they make an annual visit. Like their parents, when I invite my grandchildren to maneuver the wooden ladder and descend into the crawlspace with me to get their toys, they decline, the two-year-old declaring the space “scary.” That is, I suppose, a normal reaction to the underground.

When I see old pictures of Bob Crane today, in nearly every image taken for *Hogan's Heroes*, whether screen shots or stills used for marketing, he seems to possess a sly smile, one best described as a smirk. In a 2002 article about the release of *Auto Focus*, *The New York Times* astutely recognized that “decadence and self-destruction make for the best kind of celebrity” and provided Crane mythical longevity his career would never have allowed him. Maybe I'm thrown off by the jauntily placed hat or the trademark Colonel Hogan bomber jacket, but I still find myself looking at that smile and within those laughing eyes and wondering what other underground secrets they hide.

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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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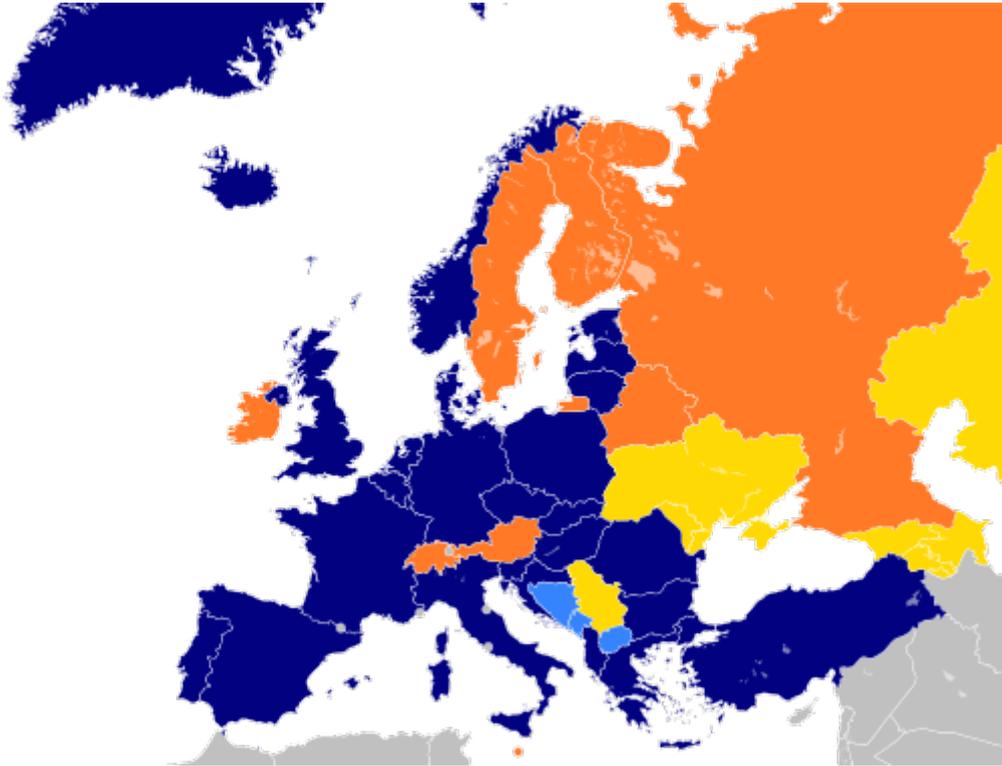
# Against NATO: The Other Side of the Argument

Since 1989-1991 when every country in the USSR or the Warsaw Pact (save Russia) jumped ship at the earliest opportunity, reasonable people have asked the question: why does the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) still exist? This essay represents an attempt to understand basic criticisms that exist across the Western and non-Western political spectrum—to take them at face value, and examine them in good faith. The author of this essay believes in the necessity of NATO—its goodness, in fact—so it is an attempt to see things from another perspective.

Speaking with people on the right and left who argue against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, one encounters two different critical methodologies that arrive at the same conclusion. This is how Americans who support former candidate for US President [Bernie Sanders](#) or current presidential candidate Dr. Jill Stein could find common ground with Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson, Republican candidate [Donald Trump](#) (and former Secretary of Defense, [Robert Gates](#)). It's also how Americans can find common ground with Russian nationalists, Chinese nationalists, and far-right groups across Europe.

Jumping into a comparison between the two groups' methodologies requires some minor simplification. I don't think this veers into oversimplification, but then, as I view both arguments against NATO as insufficient, that shouldn't be surprising. The motives of the left and the right are very different. As such, their criticisms have different moral weight, and require different types of justification to make sense. The left and right are not "the same" for reaching similar conclusions about why one should not support a European Cold War alliance, but their conclusions do happen to agree. That's important.

Conservative NATO skeptics tend to bring two types of criticism against the organization. The first draws on skepticism over globalization and alliance, and is not unlike the "States Rights" argument one often encounters among this type of thinker. These people view NATO membership as a concession of US sovereignty and agency. Taking part in a mutual defense pact means the US having to defend *other countries* in ways that run contrary to its own interests. The US loses more than it gains from a military alliance with Europe. The second describes the problem in financial terms: the US cannot afford to spend the money it does on NATO, that money would be better spent almost anywhere else. This second source of concern is similar to the first in that it assumes that the US is somehow being cheated by participating in the alliance—out of sovereignty, agency, or money.



NATO as of this article's writing, from Wikipedia (NATO countries in blue)

NATO skeptics on the American left are less concerned about advancing “US” interests, and more interested in expanding a world where people can live free from war. To this type of thinking, the US is itself a source of much or the dominant piece of aggression in the world, and as NATO is subservient to US influence, it should be diminished. The hypothesis here is that a smaller or non-existent NATO would inevitably lead to a more peaceful world. People tend to live harmoniously with one another, much moreso than nations, and reducing any nation-state agency is to the good. This type of thinking also leads people to advocate for the reduction or outright destruction of all nuclear weapons. From this point of view—the humanist or humanitarian—the stronger and larger NATO is, the more likely war becomes.

Leftist criticism of NATO spending resembles conservative criticisms, with both claiming that the money spent on defense could go elsewhere. Whereas conservatives tend to prefer that

money spent on alliance flow instead to grow US military capability, liberals or progressives would prefer that money to be invested in education, infrastructure, and science, both domestically and overseas. This leftist tends to believe that lack of education or transportation leads to misunderstanding and violence, and that were everyone to have the same basis of understanding and knowledge, wars could be prevented.

Another possible anti-NATO stance comes from countries hostile to Europe. Countries that would prosper from NATO's wane (China, Russia, etc.), which correctly assess that a militarily unified Europe checks their own territorial or economic ambitions, are natural enemies of NATO. These countries view any alliance of which they are not a part as something to be diminished or destroyed. In a few cases, like that of Serbia, whose territorial ambition NATO buried in the 1990s, hostility could also represent lingering resentment toward having suffered military defeat. It is worth pointing out that people who refer to Serbia as "Yugoslavia" are, as a rule, almost always anti-NATO along these lines.

The final perspective hostile to NATO comes from within the US military establishment. This criticism tends toward the conservative: defense industry spending is a zero-sum game. A country only accumulates so much capital, and conservatives believe that investing in alliance or partnership wastes that capital. While the motivation in this case is financial, the criticism manifests itself as political: these skeptics focus on the [possibility of fighting war at the tactical level](#), independent of strategic considerations, or the diplomatic minutia of whether Russia was somehow [tricked or deceived by NATO's expansion](#). In all cases, the argument by people like Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-48) ends up being reduced support for NATO. This amounts to tacit or explicit acceptance

of non-Western agendas.

Across the spectrum, people who have criticisms of NATO should not be viewed as necessarily hostile to American, European, or Western interests. While that is certainly the case in a few circumstances, for the most part, criticisms of NATO end up being reflections of the West's failure to translate its prosperity into a model that is sustainable in the rest of the world. As few places outside the US and Europe have experienced lasting prosperity under Western models, it's difficult for the West to dismiss criticisms out of hand.

In the US and in Europe, hostility toward NATO should be viewed as a failure on the part of NATO to communicate its purpose effectively. If NATO and the US were able to describe how and why, specifically, Europeans and North American participants benefit from the security arrangement, it seems unlikely that any morally and logically humanistic citizens of Western countries would see meaningful opposition to NATO, save on the absolute fringe. On the fringe left, people wish to weaken the US and Europe following the hypothesis that strengthening all non-European countries would lead to an increase in global justice. On the fringe right, people wish for there to be absolute US or European power, and see alliances between the two as contrary to the interests of each.

If you believe that peace and prosperity for all humans require a weaker Europe and USA, you see NATO as a problem. If, on the other hand, you believe the USA or Europe should be absolutely powerful, NATO appears wasteful at best, and a threat to your sovereignty at worst. I think you're wrong—but I understand your position.