

New Fiction from Thomas Mixon: “Strong Feelings of Sympathy and Horror”



A little stoned, on the screen porch facing the invisible grunts of New Hampshire spring peepers. Something night, something woods, something long sleeve. Lou looks down into mostly darkness. They can barely see the plaid pattern. One of Alex's, figures. You can swear off a person, but still wake in the middle of the night wearing her damn shirt you swear you didn't go to bed in. You can be a person, listening to thawed frogs, little creatures literally frozen the month before, and only hear her voice, though it's been two months since she's been gone, only taking half her clothes.

The two of them made it through the pandemic, the election, Lou's own thaw, cracked egg, the fucking whirlwind of body and mind and for once in their fucking life not having to deal

with it alone, coming out stronger on the other side, all those cliches. Alex going back to school, Lou moving north for her, buying a house neither could afford separately, making fun of the debt, together, making fun of work, leaving work, making fun of the Olympics, fuck you Intel, fuck you AI, fuck you 2032, working off a little laptop in the forest, tall trees on all sides swaying in the wind like they're bound to fall, but they don't, or, OK they do sometimes, but not on the house, far away. The turbulence of the 2020s transitioning to perpetual hurricunt of the new decade, tyfool, all puns but no groan, Alex gone.

Gone over such a stupid thing, compared to everything before. Lou gives the finger to complacency, somewhere in the nearby vernal pools, with one hand, undoes the buttons on Alex's flannel with the other. They open the door and throw the shirt into the yard. Half-dressed and shivering, they root around in the dark for the rest of their ex's wardrobe, tossing pants and hats out the windows. Living up here, can't even have a proper blowup scene, end of a dirt road, no chance of anyone driving by and wondering why the mess. Had they broken up in Mass, they could have given the suburbs the expected show. But no, they were fucking bulletproof, made it through everything, only to lose it after all the hard things. Now it's all soft things, mud, rain, hurt by flannel, hurt by others' smiles, smiling back, pretending to everyone at their new job that they are this quirky and fun kid who happens to be in their mid-thirties. It's cool. Yeah, I love New Hampshire. No, not born here. Why'd I come? You all have the best maple syrup. Change the subject. Hey, look at my new piercing!

#

The unicopters paused over the New Hampshire State House, longer than planned. There were just under 200 in the sky, hovering quietly above the gathered, applauding, crowd. They had left from Hanover that morning; another crowd, a set of speeches, the procession of the chosen students, standing

before the doors of each aircraft as they opened automatically. June, the semester had just ended, the passengers mostly undergrads heading home. These models could make it safely to Michigan, to the west, the Carolinas, down south; all autonomous, all single occupancy, electric, and irritatingly plastered with Live Free or Die, on the sides.

That they had to pass over the State House first, before scattering to their destinations, was ridiculous, political, unnecessary. The design had come from two Dartmouth grads; for years they had tried to get the state to invest, no luck. New Hampshire only kicked in a little bit, at the end, once it was clear these things were special, were getting buzz. The state stamped their motto at the last minute, so the football field still reeked of paint, as everyone waved the unicopters off.

Downtown Concord was a mess of closed streets and temporary grandstands, so Lou drove in from the east, parked in a strip mall lot across the Merrimack River, and walked along the Route 9 bridge toward the ceremonies. They wished they had a hat, even one of Alex's, lost to the forest; it was hot and stupidly muggy. They wished their camera worked; their phone was cracked and stupidly old. Mostly they wished they could have thought of a good reason not to attend. They were not, and had no desire to be, a real journalist. But, they had forty pages of magazine to fill by end of summer, and this little show was sadly the biggest thing in New Hampshire.

At least since the legislature passed the latest round of abortion restrictions, at the end of their spring session. A month ago, GOP clowns barely containing their glee, emboldened by the new governor, leaning in to the fucking circus mentality of the campaign, egging on the protestors, begging for a pie in the face, wearing chunks of banana cream on their foreheads for days, defiance kink, ringmaster high. The opposition did their best, showed up, filed lawsuits. But it wasn't looking good.

Lou passed a small band of them, protestors holding signs, snakes in the shapes of uteri, Margaret Atwood-inspired bonnets, homemade everything. The demonstration was being kept far back from the festivities; even most of them stopped chanting, when they saw the first of the copters take its place downtown, waiting with the clouds, for the others.

A small square past Storrs Street. Eagle something? Atrium? Umbrellas, brick, a good enough view of the sky without Lou needing to push further on, close enough to the action.

Of course, in retrospect, it was still too close. The swarm of machines dipped in unison. Just a little bit; the cheering turned to one collective gasp. Then faint clapping again, as they all ascended back to their original altitude. Hmm, didn't think that was part of the program. Lou tried to check their phone; stupid thing, too slow. Then the things dipped again, but seemingly at random. The little vessels jerked groundward, then back up. Something wasn't right. No one was clapping anymore.

The Republican Speaker of the House found a microphone, started asking people to remain calm and – wasn't able to finish his sentence. The unicopters started plummeting, on the crowd, on the State House, on the street. There were explosions, fragments of bone and tar, screams. Lou was knocked down some steps as the crowd ran. They dragged themselves as far as they could to the side, under the lone umbrella that hadn't yet been overturned. They covered their head and heard the parade of impacts, all down North Main, panicked footfalls of those separated in the confusion, survivors moaning and circling tragedy in real time. They stayed down until someone (a medic? not in uniform) shook their arm. Lou swatted the hand away, limped past people running in all directions, until they reached the highway, crossed the median in a daze, stupidly, and sat with their back against the guardrail, facing away from the disaster, toward the river.

#

By the time their leg feels good enough to cross the bridge back, they've forgotten which lot they've parked in. To Lou, it seems at least an hour must have passed since the mayhem, yet firetrucks are still streaming in, the echoes from shouts and glass breaking still bouncing off, one can see even from the river, an unrecognizable downtown.

It may as well be a different country, the other side of the Merrimack, though. Plenty of cars in all the lots, people walking into stores. Lou's got the vague sense they should call someone, but no names pop into their head, let alone a string of digits. They follow a family into Books A Million, hypnotized by the group's normal gait, the unfazed parents, the unpretentious children.

When they see a photo of the newest iPhone on one of the magazines, amongst the periodicals, they get the bright idea to look at their own phone. Still unsure who to dial, Lou tries someone named Mary it looks like they tried to call fourteen times this morning. Line disconnected, odd. They then pick a name at random from their contacts, Lionel. No luck either, but wow the guy's timbre is soothing, on his voicemail. Lou's lucky it's one of those long ones, where the person must be wonderfully eminent, conscientious, and leaves a ton of info, who else to reach out to in case of something urgent. Considerate, beautiful. They are murmuring into the device, mindless appreciations, without hearing the beep, not realizing they are leaving a message.

They see someone wearing a "Tamra" name badge, in a Books a Million polo, watching them with concern over the racks.

"Excuse me, where is Lionel."

"Lionel? Are you lost?"

"It's just, he's got a, very sonorous."

"There's no Lionel working here."

"Tamra though, that's a pretty name..."

And then they pass out.

#

Smell of burnt coffee, Bates Motel cushioning. Must be in the cafe section.

Lou shifts from slumped to sitting, unnecessarily dusts themselves off. Tamra is holding a phone.

"There's no need, I'm fine."

"Er, you fainted."

"I haven't eaten." Lou blinks, scans the cafe menu without taking in the words.

"I wouldn't," Tamra warns. "But, water."

She's back in second, somehow, with a glass of mostly cubes, and a little piece of paper.

"What's that?" Lou asks, chewing the ice.

"From the community board." Tamra hands them a card. "If you need it."

Lou reads aloud. "Crisis Center of Central New Hampshire."

"You can use my phone if you're in trouble."

"I was, it was." They look around for a TV. It's a cafe, not a sports bar, so. "Are we, under attack?"

"OK I'm definitely calling the police."

Lou scoffs. "I think they're busy."

Tamra hesitates, puts the phone away, looks out the front

window. "It's awful."

"Yeah, I slept bad before, so, this will be fun."

"Wait, you were there?"

"Barely, I was lucky."

"Um you look like shit."

"Um yeah it was a fucking horror show."

"Sorry, I mean, sorry. You just, I wasn't sure."

"If I looked like shit?"

"No, you do."

"Thanks."

"You kept saying something about Lionel."

Nice voice, Massachusetts, Cultural Council. Ah, all coming back now. "Someone I used to work with."

"Yeah. I thought like, abusive boyfriend, and..." Tamra trails off.

"Not quite, or, never."

"You're not in trouble?"

"I think I just strained, pulled something."

"Or, you know, PTSD."

"Time will tell, Tamra. I'm Lou."

"I already know. I'm crazy."

"Crazy like clairvoyant crazy?"

"Almost. I remembered your septum piercing."

Lou lifts their hand to their nose. Barbell still there, no tearing.

"Where?"

"Aren't you, working at *NOM* now?"

"Interesting, it's, not that big a publication..."

"I flip through every page of every magazine we get."

"Is that your department or something?"

"Nope, just control freak type thing."

Lou tries standing. Nope. "Do you still have a copy?"

"Blah, it was last month, so no," Tamra says, sitting down. Finally.

This is nice. "That's OK," Lou says, instead.

"You don't have one?"

"I do, plenty. I was just going to tear my photo out."

"What! You looked cute."

"It's insane, that they'd do a profile on me."

"I think sweet, you looked cute."

"I was just *supposed* to be the tech grunt, website content."

"K, you already get a promotion then?"

"Sort of. The Editor, she just, up and left."

"For real, forever?"

"Absconded to Massachusetts."

"Smart lady."

"Mary, yeah, that's who Mary is."

"You're doing that mumbling thing, again."

"You said I was cute, two times."

"You were, are."

"Sorry. I'm mad with power." Lou stands, stable enough.

"I like it."

"I don't. I think I'm the new Editor."

When Lou leaves, they're still holding the Crisis Center card, Tamra's number penned on the back.

#

The details on the malfunction are released within days. It may not be a malfunction. A young postdoc fellow at Dartmouth, Cindy, is being held in federal custody. Suspicious syntax in her code, an unusual amount of commented sections. She says it's poetry. But officials are wary. They have avoided releasing anything thus far, but today a few sections were leaked to the press.

*nh failure / experiment that only ends / with everyone
pretending / autonomy means just for men*

*sycophants pull down / their pants to check who's hardest /
whose dick swells most for hurting girls / who's the best bad
bill / filer the granite state / has yet to spawn*

*i wish the adamantine beasts / below the flying blades / meet
some sunny day / and crushed concrete / is indistinguishable /
from their meat*

Oof. That last one. Sounds damning, but, what does Lou know about verse?

They are looking up the word “adamantine,” when the first submission comes in. It arrives from the contact us link on NOM’s website. Lou still doesn’t have access to all Mary’s folders, inboxes, and has been dreading getting a complaint via the generic comment box, or a question they have no idea how to or if to respond to.

The submission’s not a complaint. It’s, more poetry. From someone “South of Manchester but with a White Mountains ethos.”

They say calamities insist

The weakest parts of us

Fall from our souls

And leave remaining

Only our best

To wrest the metal

Back in place.

This time, we rest

Only when our roads

Sparkle with a diamond

Shine, and we remember

Them, the blessed,

Who gave their lives

Without knowing why,

So we could attest

To undivided spirit,

Present, stressed,

Yes, but unbroken.

Lou is thinking, that was, sincere? Then they get another submission. And another. Some with real names attached, others anonymous. Lou wants to write each back, make sure they know they're writing to a quarterly mostly food magazine. But, they make a new folder on the desktop, arrange them by time received, start playing with the layout, for a few, just in case.

By the end of the week, they have more than enough to go cover to cover. It would be a departure, but Mary's run a few pages of poems before, when no new restaurants were opening, when the magazine couldn't feasibly do another feature on the same corn maze or apple orchard it had already covered extensively, multiple times during previous seasons.

The question still remains, is sincerity enough? There are some obvious bad ones, but the majority seem, just fine, maybe a little trite, but how original can you be about a bloodbath that's captured the entire country's attention? Lou could get away with this, devoting an entire issue to these remembrances, these little poignancies, in honor of everyone injured or dead. Lou needs to get away with this, they've got literally nothing else. Accounts locked, Mary missing; shit, this is really how it is.

They send an email to the lawyer representing Cindy, why the hell not. Maybe she'll elaborate on her leaked lines. Certainly not expecting an exclusive, her freshest criminal justice metaphors, not to *NOM*, at least. But, Lou's thinking of a front cover. If they could get permission to use something from the villain (plaintiff...) herself, that would definitely get some attention, sell some ad space for the fall.

They make a call. Tamra answers.

"I was wondering how long you'd take."

"Tell me everything you know about poetry."

#

Turns out, not much. But, Tamra suggests an outing. Flyer she's seen tacked to the Books a Million community board, picture of a peace sign, open mic night in Warner, thirty minutes north or so, at a cafe called Warless, local poets promised.

Warner, interesting. Lou may not be a reporter, but some easy searches show that's where Cindy grew up, graduated high school from, a decade ago. If she wasn't being held in federal prison, who knows, maybe the kind of place she'd hang out, congregate with rural creatives, farm type beatniks.

While Lou's driving up there, Lionel calls.

"Please tell me you are not still in New Hampshire."

"I am still in New Hampshire."

"Come back to civilization, Lou!"

"Don't you know I'm very important now."

"How bad was it?"

"Twisted ankle. Lots of smoke. Things I can never unsee."

"Jesus, Lou. I really thought, when Alex left."

"I'd rather not say, the mortgage, a lot."

"Mass real estate is insane."

"Yeah I'm stuck here. Got a date, though."

"Hot damn! Go get em, tiger."

"Tyger, tyger, burning bright..."

"Impressive. All the readings I invited you to."

"I know. I'm late to the game."

"Poetry is very serious, Lou, not a game."

"I'm headed to an open mic night, right now."

"For your date?"

"Yeah, work maybe, too."

"Good luck, have fun."

"If I need some like, line break, advice..."

"You call me. You call me if you need to escape south, also."

"I did call you, your voicemail saved me, I think."

"I'm not kidding. Your state is devolving."

"They just copy Texas, Alabama, we'll get a heads-up."

"Do you think that kid fucked with the code?"

"Fuck if I know, Lionel. I wouldn't blame her, though. Is that OK?"

"Suffering aside, in a vacuum, lots of people would agree."

"New Hampshire's worse than devolving."

"Seriously I know some well-off jerks, love to have you, however long Lou."

"New Hampshire's a fucking hole, a black hole, it for real sucks in all the loonies nearby, your state, the Berkshires aren't all Tanglewood and roses."

"I know, there's a new gun shop, down the road from the Norman

Rockwell museum.”

“Idiots in Vermont, idiots in western Maine, pent up rage from worse people in better states than mine, who come here, to fulfill their worseness.”

“I pray for women, every day.”

“Gonna take more than prayers, Lionel.”

“Amen. Have a fun time tonight.”

#

Warless Cafe is attached to the back of the town’s Unitarian Universalist church. Lou meets Tamra outside, little hug, both squeeze onto a bench near the order counter. Inside, the place is packed, mostly because it’s small, probably thirty people or so. Lou’s steadying their coffee as the barista keeps walking past, delivering drinks. Tamra’s balancing a BLT on a plate, on her lap, it falls, she lets out a big sigh and eye roll.

They talk briefly between poets reading elegies very similar to the ones Lou’s received since the tragedy. Maybe it’s the setting, this unsubtle conscientious objector vibe in here, lots of protest photos on the wall, that makes each recitation feel tired. Like, how terrible how terrible the wounds, but also how strong how strong we must be, we must not meet violence with violence, we must acknowledge the pain, but seek counsel with our better angels.

You know. No details of the shards of glass and human flesh bouncing past the bystanders’ faces. Where’s the poem like that? For sure, it would kill the mood in here, but Tamra already seems bored. Maybe Lou’s paying too much attention to the acts? They try to ask Tamra about the bookstore, or her life, or anything. Is she still mad about the BLT? Wasn’t this her idea, what else did she expect from a small town? Lionel

wouldn't be caught dead in here. It's nothing great, but again, it never promised to be, the cafe name is a bad pun, should be a warning, right off.

Lou's about to suggest maybe they go out for drinks, real drinks, somewhere else, instead. But then the barista passes them again, delivering nothing but himself to the microphone stand. He's about to speak, puts a finger up, behind the counter briefly, dims the lights, giddily reappears. A ham, yeah, so Lou's expecting something very melodramatic. But the guy starts performing a, poem? Something, from memory, or he's making it up on the spot. It sounds, a lot like Cindy. Bits about the hopelessness of men, how they're the dregs, some strange metaphors involving sediment, gathering up useless matter, setting it ablaze. It doesn't make a ton of sense, it contradicts itself. It has hushed the crowd. Even the what-seems-to-be regular knitting club clique near the back, stop their work, listen.

The barista excoriates the state. Begs for annexation from Canada, Mass, New York, anyone. He speaks of his hometown and the shame, the shame of still being here, and strangely the people here, in this very hometown, are nodding their heads. At the end, he references Cindy's last name, in a long list of names, of those working towards disMENbering the status quo, misquotes her leaked code:

anyone defending / autonomy for men / is good as dead / already

When he's done, the lights go back up, it's intermission, Joan Baez on the speakers. He thanks the other barista, is about to make someone a latte, does a double take. He walks right up to Lou, bends down, peers close at their face, rummages through the book rack near the entrance, comes back to the bench holding the previous month's pages of *NOM*.

"Please don't do a feature on us."

"Jesus, if I knew a nose ring would, do this."

"I beg you. The food is terrible."

"Wouldn't know, you knocked my date's sandwich over."

He appears to notice Tamra for the first time. Gives her the once over.

"I may have saved you from diarrhea, for real."

"Refund, apology?"

Tamra is standing up, is adjusting her bag as she gives a weird wave.

"Soooo I should be heading back."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'll call."

"Um OK."

She leaves. The barista sits down next to Lou, who is still processing the goodbye.

"That's some shitty customer service."

"I'm not kidding, the bread's stale."

"I kind of do now, wanna write something."

"This is me, imploring you."

"We're technically a lifestyle publication..."

"The owner, he's delusional, cheap."

"...with merely a heavy focus on food."

"So *NOM*, like Not Only Meals?"

"North of Manchester."

"That's classist as fuck."

"You're rude as fuck."

"I'm Zeke, I'm sorry, where's your friend?"

"My date, probably blocking my number."

"Could be worse, in federal prison."

"You know Cindy?"

"Know her? We were practically the same person."

"So you should be locked up, too?"

"Maybe, if anyone would publish me."

"That why you never left home?"

"Low blow. I did move out, last year."

"You stayed here, though, in town."

"Yeah. Cindy was always way smarter."

"She's on trial for conspiracy."

"Wait here."

Lou shouldn't. Zeke seems like a tool, Tamra's stormed off, they already have enough material for the fall issue, last thing they need are angry musings from a semi-eloquent hick.

What Zeke brings back to the bench, though, aren't poems. They're pictures. The first ones he pulls out he says aren't the best; it's Cindy being presented with medals, trophies, in various auditoriums, in her teen years.

"She was, is, a genius. Math bowl, debate, spelling bees."

He shows Lou more. The good ones. Photos of Cindy writing in the hallway of some school building, head down, in a notebook. Apart from the awards photos, and a few with her laughing next to an awkward looking younger Zeke, she is alone. She is jotting down something furiously, or gazing off into a distant space. She is walking her dog in the dark, lost in thought. She is in her car, arms straight out, but chin thrust to the roof, exasperated. She is someone New Hampshire was bound to lose, one way or another. She is presented first place ribbons, pinned to her by quote reasonable men, who denounce very obvious evils, like the Confederate flag, but who then, since they are so quote reasonable, take their self-assessed moderate cred, and come up with quote sensible voting restrictions, laws for female bodies, lower taxes to make the schools quote earn their place in the community. They were going to lose Cindy. They have her in custody, but they've lost her.

#

The state loses Lou, too, shortly after Zeke gives them the albums.

They accepted the photos, the good ones, decided to scrap the poem content, publish a whole issue with portraits of Cindy inside. They left Warless, Warner, tried to call Tamra, had no luck, emailed Cindy's lawyer again. Zeke swore he had permission, owned the copyright, everything was taken with his camera, but Lou wanted to make sure.

A week went by, nothing from the lawyer, simplistic texts from Tamra, she saying no no all is good, just busy, maybe in a couple weeks? The New Hampshire Legislature, in a special session held in honor of their fallen colleagues, doubled down on the abortion law, no exemptions for incest, rape. Then, they passed a real Rumpelstiltskin of a state terrorism bill, everyone who read it said it couldn't pass federal muster, everyone who didn't read it chanted its talking points, loved

it, considered it law already.

The lawmakers must have directed the state troopers to their positions, as well, comprehensive strategy, scary version of safety. Lou hadn't been keeping up with the local news. They were stressed, they were picturing overturned cars as they showered, as they slept. They were out of weed.

Down to Massachusetts, since it *still* wasn't legal in New Hampshire. As they crossed from Nashua to Tyngsboro, they noticed the brown and yellow Dodge Charger, not hiding at all, parked right behind the *Bienvenue!* Lou assumed they were being paranoid, pulled into the gas station instead, but sure enough the state trooper pulled out, as soon as the first NH plate to leave the dispensary did, crossed over the border, lights on. Oh fuck that. They tried Methuen, same thing, even goddamn Salisbury, little beachbum Salisbury had a cop on the north side of Lafayette, ready to pounce.

They couldn't go more east, the ocean, didn't feel like going more south, so headed back towards Concord only to collect their things and call Lionel, to ask for his wealthy friends' numbers.

#

A little stoned, in the basement of a retired college president's harborfront villa, Boston, board member of the Humanities something. Lou gets an email from Cindy's lawyer. No, the defendant does not authorize any use of her writing or likeness, for any popular culture publication. Furthermore, the defendant has no idea who any person named Zeke is, strongly advises that any purportedly consensual images be immediately destroyed. Anything less than full cooperation will result in...

Lou zooms in on the photos, the ones with Zeke and Cindy together. Shit, of course those are photoshopped. Of course they almost went to press with the collected works of a

stalker as their total content. Of course they try Mary again, line still disconnected, decide to leave a rabid voicemail on a completely rando person's number.

They could reinsert all the mediocre poems, still make the printer's deadline, but they draft something for *NOM's* website, instead.

The resignation is not necessary, will not be read by many. Lou types up their account of the devastation. It lacks sentiment, dwells on the lone umbrella left to them to shield their body, their head, from debris. They work themselves into a sweat, remembering. They take off their shirt, it gets stuck on their septum piercing. They yank the cotton and accidentally rip the ring out. It bleeds, it hurts, Lou curses, Lou cries. Lou takes a picture of their own, uploads the wound underneath their homepage statement. They google "great disaster" and find this, from a 1912 *New York Times* op-ed:

"...the hundreds and hundreds of people who have sent us verses about the loss of the Titanic...may be moved to share our own wonderment at the audacity they showed in attempting to deal with such a subject. For very few of those hundreds and hundreds of people had any other excuse for trying to write, other than the fact that the great disaster had excited in them strong feelings of sympathy and horror. They all took it for granted that, being thus moved, their verses would give poetical expression to their emotions."

And then, below the picture of their inflamed nostrils, they list the names, actual and fake, of every person who sent the magazine some stanzas. Just the names, no comments about or excerpts from their work. They close their laptop, dial Alex.

"Why are you calling me." No pleasantries, icy. She left in winter and forever wrapped the season around her.

"We're both on the mortgage," Lou says, throwing up in their

mouth a little.

"We had an agreement."

So did we, Lou wants to say. "I left, I'm never setting foot in New Hampshire again."

"Good, don't blame you."

"You must know someone in real estate."

"I'll get on it, this weekend, Lou."

"Handle it, everything."

"That's fair, thanks."

"Just take care of it Alex." Also, I still love you, but better to be all business, aloud, and romantic on all the silent frequencies, where it doesn't count for shit.

"Fine, Lou, but I'm not splitting –"

"And don't ever call me again."

"What? You called me –"

They hang up. Another edible. They ruin the retired college president's towels. They make good on their word; in the future, they don't so much as cross the Ipswich River. Cindy is found guilty. Zeke moves back in with his parents. Tamra takes off for Burlington. Lionel passes away, respected and loved. There's another attack, another draft. Warless in Warner goes up for sale, is turned into a tanning salon. Unicopters become ubiquitous, but are called something else, and look different. Amateurs write banal but mostly harmless rhyming couplets. A few idiots are prosecuted for incitement. Many idiots are not prosecuted for upholding the "law," denying human rights because a bunch of doofs wrote down their discrimination and got some other doofs to sign it. The UN is ignored. The Supreme Court's expanded, but it doesn't go well,

it gets worse. A lot is ricocheted, lobbed through the air without much force, returns stronger than anticipated. A lot of people don't like this, a lot do.

On the next major anniversary of the sinking of the ship, the *New York Times* reprints the op-ed Lou found. With every tragedy, more and more of us investigate our mood, as if that mattered. We pencil our enthusiasm, wonder how a thing could happen, wonder at the pieces put together, afterward, as if our words were stone, and supported anything, except their own created tension.

New Poetry from Randy Brown

victory conditions

My father taught me
to say *I love you*
every time
you stood in the door

left for school
went to work
flew off to war

it became a habit
a good one
like checking the tires
or clicking your seat belt

but now
every conversation feels
like a movement to contact

we took the same vows

we swore the same oaths
we wore the same uniform
we see the same news

I raise my kids
like he did his
and have the same hopes for them

How is it that we now live
in two countries?

three more tanka from Des Moines, Iowa

1.

The leafblower drone
buzzes into consciousness—
fast cicada hum.
I wave to the new police,
before I close the window.

2.

Yellow Little Bird
hovers near high-voltage lines
conducting repairs
outside my bedroom window,
but I am miles away.

3.

Thunder and popcorn;
a remembered joke about
the “sound of freedom.”
In rain, I stand listening
as rifles prepare for war.

a future space force marine writes haiku

1.

This drop won't kill you—
terminal velocity
varies by planet.

2.

We spiral dirt-ward,
samaras in early fall,
sowing destruction.

3.

Reconnaissance drones
orbit our squad's position:
Expanding beachhead.

4.

"Almost" only counts
in horseshoes and hand grenades.
Go toss them a nuke.

5.

If war is still hell,
at least my bounding mech suit
is air-conditioned.



"An American pineapple, of the kind the Axis finds hard to digest, is ready to leave the hand of an infantryman in training at Fort Belvoir, Va, 1944. American soldiers make good grenade throwers."

This is just to Say All Again After ...

after William Carlos Williams' "This is Just to Say"

I have expended
the "pineapples"
that were in
the ammo box

and which
you were probably
saving
for final protective fires

Forgive me
they were explosive
so frag
and so bold

**Most Likely /
Most Dangerous Enemy Courses of Action**

what most
threatens my children

social media /
unending war

the rat race /
the daily grind

half-baked policies /
global warming

a lack of hope /
a lack of justice

my constant distraction /
my constant distraction

the stand

if you can't stand injustice
take a knee

if you pray for others
take a knee

if you believe in freedom, not fabric
let others see

you practice
what you preach

Shining Light on the Darkness: An Interview with Patrick Hicks

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

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

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



Author Patrick Hicks

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

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

AW: No, I cannot imagine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

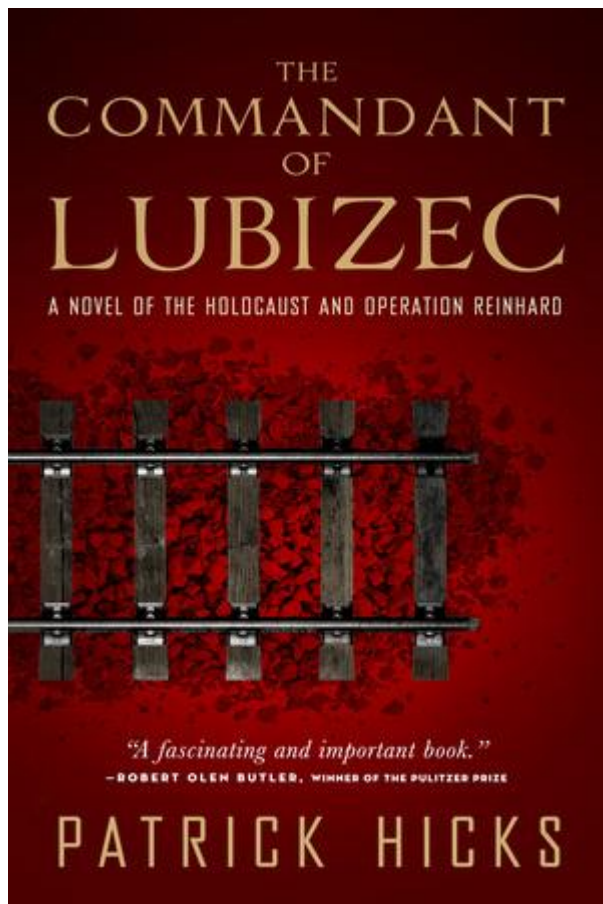
I wanted to change that. I wanted to show that this place created the blueprint of the latter half of the twentieth-century.

Those rockets became the ICBMs that exist today. They were

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You write:

"what catches my eye is the gap

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

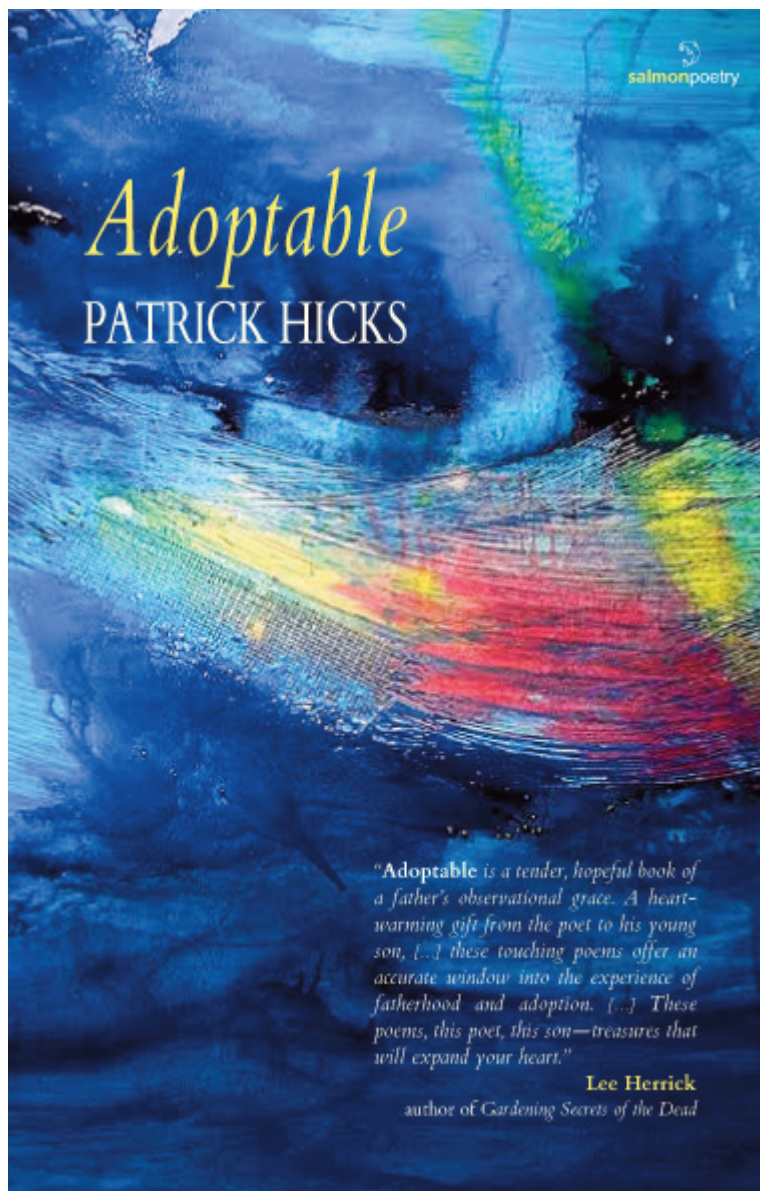
In these missing hours, I imagine his birth mother
cupping the grapefruit softness of his head.

She breathes in his scent,
kisses his nose, memorizes

the topography of his face.
And then, reluctantly,

she lets him go.”

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



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

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

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

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

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