

New Fiction by Benjamin Inks: Contract

On Monday I wore a cowboy hat to work—just to see if I could.

Employees at Brick Albert seldom break the unspoken dress code of a Costco button-down paired with either khaki, black, or navy-blue slacks. Once you get pegged as dressing a certain way, any deviation only invites conversation, and I don't like talking about myself.

New Fiction by Dion Wright: “Your Land”



“Drone up,” said Lieutenant Levi.

Heads turned and eyes followed the drone’s swift ascent to the sequoia canopy 350 feet above. It briefly hovered there before slipping out of sight, free of the enclosing redwoods and the damp shadowed ground.

“Eyeballs on the treeline,” ordered Captain Sophie Bencker. She stood next to the prisoner in the midst of the small circle of Rangers in the clearing. Good soldiers, special forces and Marines. But they’d been out here three weeks. *Too long*, she thought, and searched for Cat. It was a game to see if she could spot its nano-camouflage. *There!* Some thirty yards away by the northeast treeline, just beyond the unit’s defensive EM bubble. Still and sphinx-like, Cat was peering into the trees, perpetually ready. A hybrid predator of nano/biotech and huge male cougar, its luminescent red eyes

gave troopers the shits.

Snowbird-North Fork CS Zone was an immense glory of primeval forest. In the early 2040s the UN had renamed all world forests, temperate and tropical, as Carbon-Scrubber Zones. An attempt to save our planetary lungs from incessant pillaging, it also made for good PR. Yet Snowbird had rare earth mines—and hydrothermals—which added up to very big bucks. Particularly for the Consortia, unholy alliances between defence, mining and tech-media, which sponsored most public ventures.

In the clearing, Janssen, Fernandez and Kelly were fastening their HOTS, Hostile Terrain Suits.

“I’m sick of pissing in my suit. Three weeks out, it stinks,” said Fernandez.

“Yeah, you stink like a bear,” said Kelly, activating her own suit. “But gotta recycle those meds.”

They urinated on the march to recycle their precious mix of bio-protection and performance-enhancing drugs, triple-A approved, and a vital advantage in the Games.

Once Taiwan was off the table, the superpowers had seen the futility of endless confrontation. They could still dominate the show and make gestures to eco-stewardship while keeping a tight rein on their own populace. The business of war had become too risky for those in power and far less rewarding. Also in trouble were the bloated dope-ridden Olympics, tame sports for fractional achievements. Already losing their appeal for fragile societies ridden with eco-guilt, suicide bombers at the 2036 Mumbai Games put the nail in their coffin. Sensing an unprecedented opportunity, the Consortia and their shadowy financiers had created the New Reality Games.

Its players were veterans and loner-chancers of all nationalities; its stars were ex-special forces. For these

near-redundant military, the Games meant good money, playing with new if untested tech, and rules of engagement that were... flexible. Survival odds were equally variable, and players needed any edge they could get. The HOTSuit was nano-metamaterial and piezoelectrical-responsive, sealed head-to-toe, and designed by Hugo Boss, to boot.

“Hey Kelly, your tits really that shape or is it just the suit?” asked Fernandez.

“You’re never gonna find out,” Kelly countered with a smile.

“These suits really protect us?” asked Koch, the newbie on his first deep patrol.

“They’ll take a hit from light fire, shield your body heat against infra-red detection, and bend light to give basic camouflage” said Janssen who really got off on this stuff. “Temporary protection against biochems, and limited EM defence”

“Can’t wait to see if that’s true,” muttered Kelly. Looking at Fernandez she added: “If the Enclavers or Smugglers get hold of you, they’ll strip it off. And dump what’s in it.”

“You’re kidding, right?” asked Fernandez. Kelly just turned away.

The New Reality Games offered a spectacle of lethal conflict at human scale in a choice of environments “protected” by a bankrupt UN. Governments bought in. The Global South ravaged by floodwaters, firestorms, and epidemics saw lands emptied by violence and migration become newly lucrative. In the First World, rulers eschewed the thankless business of governance in favour of full-on entertaining of their consumer-citizens, those purposeless slaves to the social media mainstream as they curated their stories and imbibed podcasts. Gamers&Gamblers Anonymous briefly became the flagship 12-step recovery programme until outlawed.

“Just stay on mission, stay alive, and bank the friggin paycheck,” said Kelly wearily.

Protected forests needed protectors, and Bencker’s Rangers were among the best. They were owned by PC—the Pacific Consortium of Afrikaan Mines, AppleMeta, LevantSolar, Nike, Russian SiberNex, Vatican Zurich Holdings, and X-Disney. The PC yellow-flash-on-blue logo adorned their uniforms, along with its slogan *We fight For Trees*, which was unwise to dispute.

This particular, early Spring mission of Bencker’s Rangers was a deep sweep into Snowbird to check on the principal mining operations and tolerated human activities, read tree monitors, gather intel on strange reports filtering in from deep country, deal with any bad guys, and generally strut their stuff.

“The HOTS will keep you safe, Fernandez,” Janssen put in helpfully, exchanging a look with Kelly.

The Games were invisible to those on the ground. Airtime was not live—financially and politically way too risky—but edited and sold for online VR/AR products showcased at Moondance, the annual games fest where the world came to shop for some dynamic oblivion.

All of which made the Captiva, their new prisoner, very valuable. They’d stumbled upon her just before dawn. Strange. She was one of the forest dwellers, rarely seen. In Snowbird a deep patrol could come up against armed groups either from the fortified Enclaves of wealthy religious wackos or from Vancouver smugglers using stealthcraft to run in food, Sinopioids, weapons—oh the bosses *loved* a brush with those guys. There were also survivalist Treeboys looking for redemption or whatever, and these Captivas, who just goddam lived here. Then there were the weird rumours, stuff that bounced around a campfire at night. *Keep the lid on that shit*

thought Bencker.

The Captiva. She was compact and muscular, Asian-looking with black pony tail and a crest of grey like a warning, and eyes that missed and betrayed nothing. She sat on the ground, her hands bound behind her. Lieutenant Levi's SCAR 7.62 mm had the safety off and its barrel was in her face, and she held his gaze. Captain Bencker entered the small circle of troopers.

"Lower your weapon," she ordered in even tone.

A spasm played across Levi's well-shaven jaw; troopers watching the treeline glanced over.

"Sir, the Rules say prisoners are without rights," countered Levi. "She's probably been raped, anyway." Trooper Fernandez, down on one knee and eyes on a small navscreen, shook his head.

"Not by us," said Bencker quietly. "The weapon, Lieutenant."

Bencker never pulled rank and the quietness of her voice spoke of something coiled. Those within earshot tensed. This had been brewing awhile: a shaven-headed female commander with a reputation even outside the Rangers, and a marine hunk with a gilded tech-and-sports education and son of a Consortium bigwheel. And now this prisoner, *who likely doesn't know shit about the Games. Levi wants to waste her, WTF?*

Cat had locked its red eyes on Levi. Neurolinked to the commander, Cat received Bencker's biofeed and instructions and sent back images and recon sense-data. Levi didn't have to look at Cat, just felt the eyes. Slowly he turned from the prisoner and cradling his weapon, sauntered to the perimeter with a fuck-you roll in the shoulders. The Captiva's eyes followed him, then went to Bencker who spoke for everybody to hear.

"The Captiva might have intel, and knows how to survive here."

Play with what you've got. Her own weapon was slung across her back, her preferred Heckler & Koch MP5 upgrade.

"Hope daddy Levi don't spot that little scene," Kossowski said quietly to Janssen, who nodded.

* *

Something had now opened inside the unit. An opening could be as sharp and haphazard as an incoming shell or as drawn-out as nursing a cold beer while stoned under a hot shower after a patrol in bad bush. It was all SAR, Situational Awareness and Readiness, what nerves fed on in the field to make each moment full and keep you alive. Regardless of all the think-positive shit or meticulous PPTs in a pre-op briefing, out here in deep Snowbird the mind was veined with uncertainty. *How does this Captiva survive?* wondered Bencker, moving away to sit against a small rock.

* *

Janssen finished cleaning his Glock automatic, an uncle's hand-me-down; he loved the heft of it. He looked over at Cooper sitting on the ground with his plants. "Cooper, what you got for us today?"

A trained botanist and mycologist, Cooper could spot a mushroom at 30 yards. "The usual, some buttons, ink caps, oysters, chanterelles. And a shroom," holding it up. "*Psilocybe semilanceata*. This little beauty will open your mind and mess with your brain. If you have one."

"Fuck you," said Janssen, and Kelly smiled, then noticed the Captiva looking at them.

"What's your problem?" asked Kelly. "Hungry? You want some?" as if teasing a child.

"Shut it, Kelly," said Cooper, squatting in front of the prisoner and holding out the mushroom with a questioning look.

He waited; they all waited.

"If she won't speak, maybe Levi had the right idea," said Kelly.

"Maybe she's scared of you," said Janssen.

"Not this one," replied Kelly. "But she might hate us. And she doesn't like us picking her mushrooms."

"Sacred."

The word fell from the Captiva and drew eyes to her, and nobody spoke. Again Cooper held out the mushroom: "Sacred, how?" he asked quietly.

Bencker had put down her book and was looking at the group.

"We talk to the dead," and her eyes travelled over them, "to our ancestors." Cooper nodded, his brows knitted together, and backed away.

"Now *that* is intel," he said, mostly to himself.

Kelly breathed out audibly. "Friggin ancestors done shit for me. I don't even know my parents."

"Hey, straight up, Cooper," said Janssen, whose social skills were what you'd expect from someone on the spectrum. "What you reckon's out there?"

"No friggin clue," said Cooper. "And hope it stays that way. Anything could stay hidden in this."

"C'mon, what aren't they telling us?" insisted Janssen.

"It's probably the mines," answered Cooper slowly. "Rare earths and heavy metals discharged into ponds and streams, then leaking into the aquifers. And the mines are just the stuff we know about." Silence.

Bush fever. Bencker couldn't let that get into her unit.

"Trooper Nurri, activate Exemption," she ordered loudly. Nurri stopped scoping the treeline through his gunsight and touched his suitPad. He was the only one Bencker could bounce ideas off of—the price of being a woman in the ancient profession of arms commanding men, some of them smart... some, well, less than smart. Nurri was self-contained and ruthless, with a devilish sense of humour and piercings in strange places.

"Snowboard CSZ is unoccupied, Captain," commented Nurri, and Bencker gave him a pointed look.

Exemption protects us but also reveals our position, I know.

"Exemption activated," quickly confirmed Nurri, knowing better than to give her attitude.

Regardless of popular misconceptions and Consortium hype, big data-assisted AI had only amplified the uncertainty of warfare for those on the ground. Sure, troopers humped hi-tech weaponry and sweated in HOTSuits, but they were up against odds they could never fathom. Game rules forbade calling in fire-support or medical evacuation. You went in and you came out. Or you didn't. Shareholders and spectators of the Games would always be the winners, so finish the mission and stay alive. Troopers functioned more or less strung out in their private meds-enhanced SAR-cloud; some of these Rangers were also stoned a lot of the time, thanks to Cooper.

"Another morning in paradise," said Kossowski, sitting on the ground and spooning rations into her mouth. "Friggin mist, it's always shifting, things appear and disappear, can't tell what I'm seeing." She licked the spoon carefully and began packing her gear.

"And drip drip drip all friggin night," added Koch, bloodying a Tiger mosquito on his arm; dengue was rife here but the meds should handle that.

Fernandez took a last look at the photo of a lady, his, and their child, slid it inside his suit and stood.

* *

Bencker took meds; she also had Cat to bounce off. But her refuge was a tattered copy of the *Odyssey*. Where it spoke of creatures that lure ships onto rocks she'd noted: "the Sirens speak to each sailor only about himself. Like algorithms." *Damn this Captiva.*

Bencker went to the prisoner, knelt and held out the black carbon neck-bracelet. "Put it on."

The woman stared at it, expressionless, stared at her and down at the large dagger in Bencker's belt. The *Captiva* took the bracelet and slowly put it around her neck, clicking it to lock. She now belonged to their SecurNet—in fact, to Cat. She could try and run but... bad idea.

Bencker moved back to the rock and the *Odyssey*. Her father had also been a reader and his old copy of the *Iliad* was on her desk back at base, his photo tucked inside. It had ridden in her pack until she'd discovered the *Odyssey*, the first tale of a lost wanderer

Her father the Colonel had been a decorated warrior of the conflicts that had seen the rise of the consortia. He'd died in an infamous op at MB7, a mining-base in northeast Africa, when everything had gone fatally wrong for the unit... and unexpectedly well for its sponsors.

Twenty years later, situations were even more "fluid," even for the Games. Slick Powerpoint assumptions broke as soon as a boot touched the drop zone—even *because* it touched the ground, in this quantum fuck-up of a world. Bencker had become an elite soldier because her loneliness and rage could only be soothed in battle and its liminal moments, where knowing and caring were fused in pure awareness of death, of its

imminence. Her personnel file was a mix of medical reports and censorial black ink, and troopers either avoided her in the mess or vied for a place on her team.

Resting on the ground against the rock, Bencker read her *Odyssey*. Kelly and Janssen, sitting nearby, exchanged looks.

"Any answers in there, Captain?" ventured Janssen carefully.

"No," said Bencker. *No answers; acceptance, maybe.* She resumed: "Three thousand years ago wars were short and small-scale, close-to and savage, sometimes honourable," said Bencker, echoing her father. She turned her head, suddenly aware that the Captiva was looking at her and the book.

"Men fought like animals, some saw themselves as half-gods," she added.

"No shit," said Janssen, nodding. "No shit."

"Uh, and the space thing that the Colonel—" began Janssen.

"The Space, his notion of leadership, Trooper," Bencker said with finality, putting away the book.

"And the women?" asked Kelly.

"They washed bodies and mourned, or waited for their men," replied Bencker. "If on the losing side they were sold, or..." she stopped, remembering the Captiva and Levi and what he'd said. Kelly and Janssen looked at the Captiva then away and began scoping the trees through their gunsights.

"Move out in ten," said Bencker. "Lifting the Bubble."

Gloved fingers checked safety locks, flipped off screens, patted pouches, stoppered canteens, felt to ensure a knife was to hand, adjusted straps, all before catching the eye of another trooper for a long second.

For Captain Sophie Bencker, the Space was her Rangers and this

forest, was achieving the mission and bringing everybody home. The troopers' HOTS were now sending in their KVIs (key vital indicators) which flitted across Bencker's visor, confirming their biochems were stable: *the Space rebalances itself*.

Suddenly she was aware how quiet it had grown. Cat?

"Check for Sweepers," she ordered. These autonomous weaponised droids were the delight of west coast EcoPuritans and ZenBuddies, each with a self-righteous agenda and no time for human messiness. Sweepers protected the forest and had the legal right to kill interlopers who didn't signal an Exemption.

"Movement, one click northeast," said Kossowski, and troopers turned and looked at her. Kossowski was on point, a comms role that demanded one's visor-SAR to be always active and attention at 100%. Point was a prime target for snipers. On the edge of Bencker's mind a wind blew down the neurolink as chunks of data fed in from Cat already speeding towards the unidentified threat.

"Moving erratically... in our direction," said Kossowski.

"Could be a Sweeper, Captain," said Nurri, frowning, and with reason.

Their Exemption was active so there should be no problem. But the briefing had said the area was empty of Sweepers and likely hostiles.

"The drone?" asked Bencker, looking around for Levi. She had just touched her sleeve panel to raise the collective EM defence bubble again when suddenly she gasped as if hit in the gut, feeling her feet begin to slide. Koch had raised his rifle toward the northeast but was already crumpling to his knees. In the same instant Bencker's own suit-bubble was activated—Cat's doing—as she pivoted to throw herself on top of the Captiva and everything went dark.

* *

Seated in PC Command outside Eureka, northern California, Operations Controller Ellis squinted at the big wallscreen. "Bencker's unit?" He'd never gotten used to the Consortium's obligatory "team."

"Offline, Sir. And we're trying to confirm a sonic pulse."

"Sonic? Out there?"

"Trying to identify but interference is heavy." An understatement, given canopy density and high hydrothermal humidity.

"Find them," said Ellis as calmly as he could manage.

Sonics were not standard on Sweepers, so that should rule out a rogue droid, or so he hoped. He had maybe 30 minutes before this "situation" leaked to the Consortium's ears-and-eyes and his red desk telephone went berserk. Turning his head from side to side to ease his neck muscles, he walked oh so casually out of the Ops Room to his office. Closing the door he activated the bugscan: all clear. Carefully he punched a code into his private phone. After a lapse, another phone buzzed far away.

"Marvin." Ellis heard his codename with relief despite its nerdy ring. "What a pleasant surprise," said a rough, careful female voice.

"Aunty," he replied in what he hoped was a neutral tone: This cloak-and-dagger stuff was not his game. He paused, then: "The lady. She's disappeared on mission in Snowbird. Her unit is down, no movement." Silence. "We're waiting confirmation on a rogue sonic pulse."

"And Cat?" asked the woman after a beat.

"Active, was active for nearly an hour after the incident,

then nothing.”

Ellis heard the slight seeping of breath from ex-Lieutenant M’Gele, officially KIA. She’d served under Sophie Bencker’s father and her *Shibriya* dagger would reply to any who dared speak a word against the Colonel. After MB7 her missing body was just one of the strange things that had happened that day. She had survived, and only Sophie and Ellis knew this, which suited M’Gele just fine.

“If Cat is moving then the lady is too. If you have no indications of further attack then we can assume she decided to go dark.” Just like that day years ago at MB7 with her colonel in their last battle. The entire squad, an ambush—though by whom had not been clear.

“Keep me informed, please.” She hung up. Ranger Sophie Bencker, with the blue-eyes of her father and a ferocity all her own, was going to hunt. “Be without mercy and find your song, little leopard,” M’Gele said to the shadows. She touched the red garnet at her throat, remembering the promise she’d made to her Colonel as the light had left his eyes: I will protect your daughter.

Ellis sat, not moving. He too was back to that day at MB7, as the young Watcher in Rome EuroCommand following Colonel Bencker’s unit, seeing events unfold on screen, recalling the carnage found later at the mining base. Taking a deep breath he slowly let it out. Tonight would normally be an at-home with his wife Paula and their two little girls, for pizza and TV. But not this night.

* *

“Dad.” Captain Sophie Bencker flashed back in cinematic microseconds. “Dad dad dad.”

If only she could have known him as one soldier to another. Would he approve of her tatoos, and her shaven head, devoid of

the golden locks he'd so loved? He might balk at CAT and its neurolinks; he used to look at their dog Mifty and just grunt, and it had seemed to work between them.

Her father's image wobbled; the eyes changing to red and Cat looking down at her. Clarity flowed along their link. *But never make assumptions*: "Identify!" She said with difficulty, and felt its purring of approval. *Bagheera* entered her mind, the private name she'd given Cat, taken from a story dad used to read to her. Then down came *Breathe*, and Cat's own deep breathing began to pace and calm her own.

"I'm good." SAR was re-establishing itself.

"Nurri?" Nothing. "Levi? Kossowski? Cooper?... Janssen? Kelly, Fernandez?" *Cat, Sitrep!*

Down the neurolink came images of troopers scattered on the ground, none moving, and: Levi has gone. There was no signal from the drone. *What the hell happened?*

Swift activation of her HOTSuit had saved her and the Captiva. *Need to move*, she thought-sent. Cat replied with an image of the woman and a warning. Bencker flashed back: *she comes with us. Intel, survival.*

With a growl Bagheera bounded off, his sense-data flitting across her visor. Bencker nodded to the woman who sprung off fast, following Cat with ease. Bencker could see that this was her land. *Levi. WTF?*

* *

The team's drone had returned, its control now overridden by CSZ Command. It hovered over the clearing and the scattered troopers of Bencker's unit, then descended over each body. Away in the Ops Room, all eyes were riveted to the big wallscreen. As each face came into close-up the trooper's name appeared in a side column. They looked peaceful, thought

Ellis. A message came onscreen: two MIA, Captain Bencker and Lieutenant Levi.

“Can we get a fix on them?” asked Ellis. “And what about the Cat?”

“Negative, for the moment. Damage, or environmental interference,” said a young operator.

Ellis glanced at the red phone. “Levi,” he said quietly. An inevitable shitstorm was heading his way once Levi Sr in corporate HQ came looking for an explanation of a lost team that included his son—and for just a few seconds of footage. Heads would roll. He recalled a saying of Colonel Bencker’s: “When playing poker, remember it’s always serious, even when they say it isn’t.” As a rookie Watcher listening to the Colonel over a beer and totally overawed, Ellis had thought this unbelievably cool. Now he was beginning to see what it could mean, and didn’t like it.

“Keep looking, see what Narciss comes up with,” Ellis ordered. Narciss, their mighty AI sitting on photonic quantum hardware, was there to facilitate decision-making. But in the particularly fluid “fog of war” they had to confront nowadays it was of little use. “Beware of geeks bearing gifts,” he said under his breath, adding: “Keep safe, Captain Sophie Bencker.”

“We have one alive!” All eyes in the Ops room flew to the wallscreen. There was an arm slowly rising. Ellis felt sick.

“Trooper Nurri, sir,” said the operator.

Ellis nodded. Nurri, tough bastard. And the Games don’t do immediate evac so I have to leave him, at least until Editorial decide how they can use him. He just has to survive the next few hours.

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The two women had stopped by a pool. The one with the black

ponytail approached the small waterfall, and slipped behind the curtain of water. Bencker followed into the cave.

"We are undetectable here, the water and the rock," said the Captiva, then: "Take this off," touching the neck bracelet. *Those eyes. Without you I'll probably die here.* Bencker removed the bracelet. The woman gently rubbed her throat; "I will prepare some food," she said.

* *

They were sitting by a small fire. "It's good," said Bencker, carefully spooning the hot plant stew from a bowl in her lap.

"You will piss out the meds. Your body needs to rebalance to survive here." Bencker paused in eating. "And you will take off the suit."

My HOTS? "No friggin way!" Bencker's eyes flashed. "I need to be in contact for my unit. They--"

"They are probably dead." Then, matter-of-factly: "You would have heard something by now." She waited, watching Bencker. "You must cut all comms to your base. And you cannot jog for long in the suit," she said with finality. Rummaging in a wooden box, she handed Bencker a shirt, trousers, and top like her own, in a rough grey-green fabric. "Keep your link to the..." nodding towards the mouth of the cave, "but cut its comms to your base."

Outside a shadow moved and a growl came down the link. *Cat, cool it! This woman knows her shit.*

"Also you smell wrong. Swim, wash." *She is used to giving orders,* Sophie saw, but still didn't move. The woman looked at her: "You stopped the soldier killing me. You covered me in the attack. Now I protect you." She had brought out thick blankets, "At night it gets cold."

* *

Later, the fire down to embers. Under blankets they were close for warmth, semi-naked.

“What is your name?” Bencker asked. The woman didn’t answer, but stretched her hand to touch the leather-bound *Odyssey* lying between Bencker’s breasts.

“I do not know you yet,” said the woman, looking frankly at Bencker’s body. “What is this book?”

I asked dad the same question. “Stories of ancient warriors.” Remembering his words, she added, “They were mighty as trees.” The woman nodded, and for the first time, smiled.

“My father said those times were violent, men were violent, a few were godlike. They fought knowing that any moment could bring the terror of gods in blinding light, and all a warrior could do was pray, ‘may the gods be on my side.’”

“Your stories are of people and the desire to be like gods. They could have chosen to be like trees, to be great without making the gods jealous.”

“Trees are dying, they get cut down,” replied Bencker too quickly.

The woman looked her full in the face. “We talk to our dead.”

Uh huh, mushrooms. Bencker was beginning to feel lost.

They stared into the fire. “I think your father is proud of you,” offered the woman. Bencker turned away from the fire, her gaze dropping to the dagger, her fingers resting on the scabbard.

“He gave me this *Shibriya*, a Christmas present. A week later came the funeral-drone carrying his ashes.”

It had been a clumsy, New Year’s Day media attempt to turn the Colonel into a posthumous legend as a prelude to the first

Consortium Games. But by raising her teenage middle finger to the drone's camera and the world, Sophie Bencker had become the angel of self-contained, traumatized anger, perfect for social media and its self-elected obsessiveness. Then she'd gone off-grid (keeping the details vague), eventually reappearing as a trained soldier hardened by pain. Now Consortium eyes and various nutters tracked the maverick Captain Bencker, Ranger. She was top dollar, with her tanned features and the sapphire eyes of her dad.

"I am sorry," said the woman, putting out her hand gently to touch a shoulder. Bencker turned back, their eyes found each other. On the cave wall the dying fire threw their shapes which moved as if borne on the soft evening wind.

* *

It was first light and cold outside and they dressed quickly, then sat to eat in silence. Cupping her hands around a steaming mug the woman said, "You will know my name when I am sure of you." Then added in a quieter voice: "I do not want the loss of you."

WTF? Bencker's gut churned. She knew about loss, her father, and now her squad.

"Do you know what happened to my troopers?" she asked.

"I was tracking you for a week."

Bencker stared at her. "A week! But when we captured you—"

"I let myself be captured." The words hung in the air. "We can talk later. Now we have to move. This is not a game, there are dangers."

All clear came over the neurolink. Cat was blended into the forest shades, hard to see. All was still.

"Where are we going?" *Gotta keep my head straight.*

“Into the deep woods.” Bencker opened her mouth to ask another question but was cut off: “Now.”

Captain Sophie Bencker realized that she was going to have to trust the woman with her life. She already did so with Cat. For a soldier such trust was normal; it bound comrades to each other and to each waking day and each long night; trust defined them in a way that was absolute. But this woman was not a comrade in arms. Nor was she a stranger anymore. Bencker had unveiled herself to this woman, and with an intimacy she never showed. They were also bound together by danger. From now, uncertainty and danger would vie in her life with her capacity to trust, and this tension would be her Space. One hand resting on the hilt of her *Shibriya*, she looked up at the canopy far above and smiled.

“Ready?” asked the woman. Bencker nodded.

The woman set off at a jog through the shadows and mist among the trees. Her strong fluid gait reminded Bencker of another, many years ago: Lieutenant M’Gele. *This land is their land.* Now for Ranger Captain Sophie Bencker, the song of her hunt had begun.

**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.

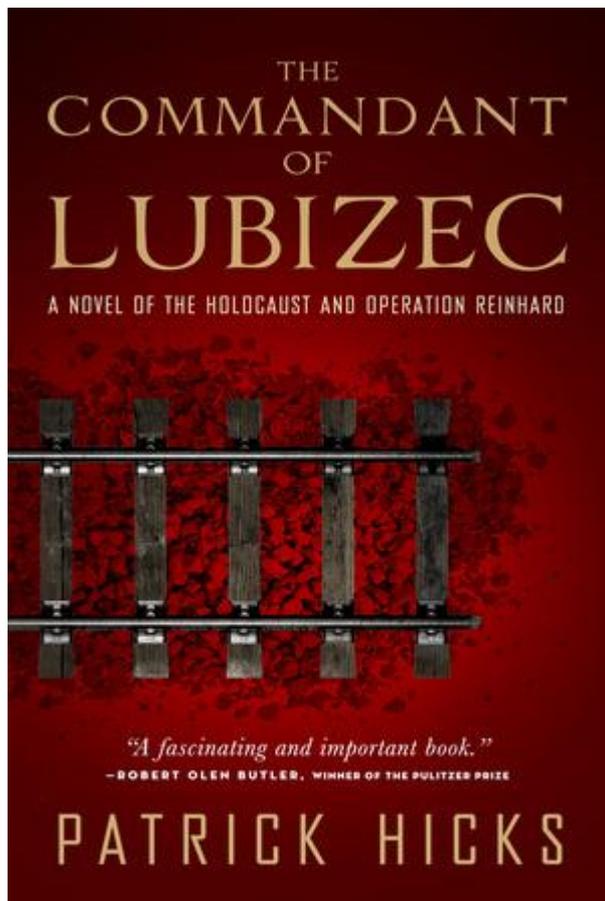
I wanted to change that. I wanted to show that this place created the blueprint of the latter half of the twentieth-century.

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, than how would the reader care about them? In nearly every case, I had more information on these individuals than I put into the novel. I needed to see each of them, and I refused to make them faceless. That's what the Nazis did. I wanted to see people—mothers, wives, fathers, uncles, piano players, poets, plumbers, book store owners, rabbis, children. They all had lives. And those lives were stolen from them.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You write:

"what catches my eye is the gap

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

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

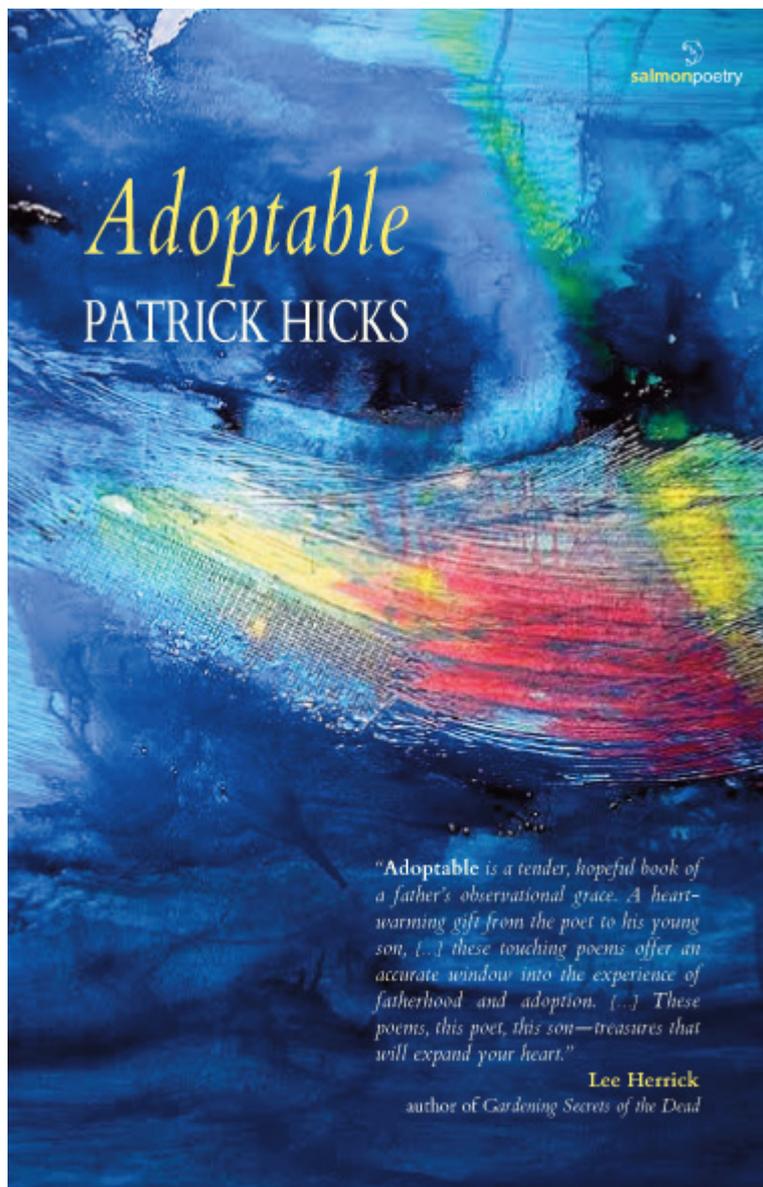
She breathes in his scent,
kisses his nose, memorizes

the topography of his face.

And then, reluctantly,

she lets him go.”

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



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

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

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

Being a parent has changed me as a writer for sure. I'm now totally aware that my need to write means that I'm *not* spending time with him. When you're single it's okay to be selfish and lock yourself in an office but, when you've got a child, that compulsion to get ideas onto the page takes on a new dimension. I'm a more focused writer now. I don't 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.