New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 19
Issue 2 *Special Issue: WAR, Volume 2*

Article 16

12-21-2005

The Pulse of War: Writing a Response

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The Pulse of War: Writing a Response

Kevin Bowen

One year into the war in Iraq, the ugliness of the undertaking has become more and more inescapable. If anything, the experience has reaffirmed a few simple facts that deserve reiteration. There is no such thing as an easily winnable war. There is no such thing as a humane war. In every war, long after the fighting ends, peace will remain elusive, and memories of suffering will endure through generations.

Of course we knew all this before. Writers have been trying to tell us such things for centuries. The writings that follow illustrate ways contemporary writers confront these truths. From Tony Aiello's memories of the First Gulf War, a war that Colin Powell told us was "conducted more humanely than any war in history" through Almira El-Zein's incredible evocation of mortality in "Is this Desolation for Me Alone"; through Carolyn Forché's testimony to the role of writers; Chris Agee's meditation on conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda to present-day Iraq; Fred Marchant's essay on war poetry and Fanny Howe's beautiful understated testament we are reminded of the ways good writers take the complicated pulse of war and why now, more than ever, we need their voices.

Tony Aiello *served in the 1991 Gulf War with rocket artillery (MLRS) unit in the 18th Airborne Corps. He is an editor at Oxford University Press.*

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Almira El-Zein*, poet and translator, has published two collections of poetry in Arabic:* The Book of Palm Trees, *and* Bedouins of Hell. Kingdom of Dust *is forthcoming in English. She is director of the Arabic program at Tufts University.*

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Carolyn Forché's *first collection of poetry,* Gathering of the Tribes *won the Yale Younger Poets Prize,* The Angel of History, *the Los Angeles Times Book prize, and her latest,* The Blue Hour *was a finalist for the National Book Critics Prize. She is the editor of* Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness.

Fanny Howe's *poetry books include* One Crossed Out, The End, The Vinyard, *and* Selected Poems. *A book of essays,* The Wedding Dress, *was published in November 2003.*

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Quit Paradise

— Tony Aiello

We commenced fire at five
a.m. to kill time till eight, then ceased
fire all day & forever.
The day the war died, I pulled
guard with Tebbe in a shellhole
on the highway to Basra
strung out on no sleep
strung along a road littered
with dead men & burning Soviet BMP's
Frog missile carriers T-62's
troop trucks. And along came
a car with a pickup behind.

2

I wondered where coming
or going while advancing the days before
with walking wounded & surrenders
on all sides shuffling along the way,
miles from there, hours till where
we drove arrived, the wanderers behind.

3

Tebbe turned toward me
when the car halted,
pickup behind, opposite us
on the road, the sky
bright in February
the day the war
died. I knelt in sand
& Tebbe turned to them.

4

Because after the day before,
after we broke with the Guard
& small arms gave way
to rockets, our firing commenced
near a farmshack, our massed launchers,
our many hundreds of rocket trails
& red glare & smoke
round a ragged fence & black-clad

woman shielding two children among
us, & in the distance at the front,
our submunitions like thunder
among men not home.

5

And a man & a woman
& a boy & a girl, & Tebbe turned again
to me to see what to do
with the pickup behind,
smoking vehicles on both sides
of the road. Everyone starting to move:
Tebbe toward them, waving & raising
his M-16; the man the woman the children;
me covering, rifle to shoulder,
sights at center mass on man woman children,
the hour still early, the war hours over.
Family, pickup, Tebbe, me: in the sun
in February.

— *for Austin, born today*

Setting Out

— Tony Aiello

Attention to detail is the discipline that grows from the tender and meticulous commitment to equipment — especially weapons — every GI learns from his first days in the army. In basic training, Drill Sergeant told us to love our M-16s like a woman. I didn't agree that an M-16 was anything like any woman I'd ever known, but I nonetheless lingered over its details — its shape and feel, its temper and kick, its sound and fury — the way I'd learned to linger over a woman's face, legs, arms, back, belly, breasts, and the rest. These lessons served me well when later, in advanced individual training, I learned not a single weapon but a weapon system that consists of two major components: ammunition supply and rocket fire. As our instructors told us, learning both together allows you to load your cake and shoot it too.

The HEMTT, pronounced HE-mit, is the heavy, expanded-mobility tactical truck: a thirty-three foot long, fixed-bed, forward-cab truck with a rear-mounted, folding crane and eight five feet tall tractor tires. The HEMTT was a monster truck of the most amazing kind. You could edge the huge bastards through the thickest Carolina pine woods, simply running over the smaller trees while threading your way slowly

between the larger ones, though you sometimes ran those over too. They could drive through six feet of water, or haul ass at seventy mph down the twisting hill roads at Fort Bragg, where I was stationed. In the desert, the trucks were almost impossible to get stuck, though we did plenty of that early on. The HEMTT's crane was used to sling Launch Pod Containers, which we called six packs. Each held six rockets in individual tubes mounted in an aluminum frame close to thirteen feet long, four wide, two and a half high. We could sling six packs as fast as the cranes allowed, spinning the tons by touch into place and aligning them rank by rank, when building an ammo dump, dress right, DRESS and all that. Day or night, when resupplying launchers, our two-man crews could drop two pods here and two others over there, in five minutes or less, spaced just right so two launchers could load at the same time. The HEMTT is one half of MLRS, the other half is the Self-Propelled Launcher-Loader, the SPLL: a tracked, light-armored vehicle twenty-three feet long, eight and a half high, and ten feet wide. Like the ammo guys, launcher crews knew their SPLLs as well as any of us knew our M-16s, which, of course, we all could strip, break down, clean, and reassemble in our sleep in under a minute. At a party, Drill Sergeant told us, the HEMTTs supplied the six packs and the SPLLs brought the pain.

We were an area weapon; our maximum range was thirty kilometers, our minimum eight, meaning we had to be further than five miles from our targets, which could be no further than nineteen miles from us. In an ideal war, nobody expected to see much of each other or the enemy. An army pamphlet from 1985 tells us that the Multiple Launch Rocket System "is a highly mobile, rapid-fire, free-flight rocket system that complements cannon artillery in the counterfire and air defense suppression roles. It also supplements other fire support systems by engaging high-density mechanized targets during surge periods and provides interdiction fires against follow-on forces. Targets include troops, light equipment, target acquisition systems, logistic complexes, and command, control, and communications systems." It turned out they were wrong about targets. One launcher could kill most anything in a square kilometer with its twelve rockets, each rocket aimed separately by the computerized fire control system. In the shit, we wasted everything that came at us and much that was running away, and plenty of Iraqis who just sat there with no idea we'd sent up rockets. While talking to a bunch of tankers from the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division, who we fought with in Iraq, they told me, Birdie, and Jeff Tebbe that every time their tanks were sent into a new area they called in fire missions, and every time they got there, everything was dead, so all they needed to do was finalize the details. They thanked us for making the war easy.

Drill Sergeant was right about bringing the pain. We killed light equipment: trucks and jeeps and cars didn't stand a chance. We destroyed most bunkers and the few buildings we fired on. We also killed medium armor like BMP personnel carriers. And we killed tanks, even T-72s. We weren't supposed to kill tanks, especially not 72s, the best Soviet tank Iraq could buy. In tests our rockets didn't kill tanks. But we didn't test massed battery fire, all nine launchers firing twelve-rocket salvos as fast as they could shoot their loads. "MLRS operations are characterized by rapid emplacement, engagement, and displacement (shoot-and-scoot tactics) of widely dispersed launchers." Expecting to fight the Soviets — who greatly outnumbered us, had excellent equipment and training, whose counterbattery fire and suppression resources were as good as ours — in the forests of Germany, we trained to fight a lonely war. "An MLRS battalion is assigned to each corps, and a separate MLRS

battery is organic to each armored and mechanized infantry division as part of the 203MM(a great big-ass cannon)/MLRS battalion. An MLRS battery is organic to the high-technology, light infantry division. The battery is in light artillery and rocket battalion. All MLRS firing batteries are organized identically and can operate independently for short periods." In practice, each launcher operated solo, supplied by two HEMTTs, whose crews left six-packs at resupply points the SPLLs would visit when needed. The Iraqis were not the Russians. Our launchers fired as close to each other as safety allowed, and as much, and as fast as they could, with dozens of rockets pouring thousands of submunitions into target zones much smaller than a square klik. This wasn't the rainstorm of grenade-sized bomblets a single launcher produced. This was the Deluge without hope of rescue.

* * *

Not even in childhood action-hero fantasies did I imagine I would one day become a rainmaker. The day I joined, my mother looked at me and said, you son of a bitch. Every adult I knew growing up had experienced life in war, and she couldn't believe I'd volunteered for the pain forced on her generation and her parents' too. Mom was born in Puerto Rico but grew up in Chicago, where I was born. She came of age during the Vietnam War and was active in protests and marches against the war and for civil rights, during which she became acquainted with some Chicago Panthers who ran with Freddy Hampton before the FBI and Chicago police assassinated him. She married my father at fifteen, divorced him at eighteen, me two years old. My father, then twenty-one and addicted to heroin, had deserted from the navy three years before in 1970 when orders came down for his ship to deploy to Vietnam. Mom hired a hippie lawyer named Jerry Brody, who worked pro bono for dodgers and deserters, and my father came away from his court martial with a general discharge that eventually, some years later, became an honorable. Imagine that. Their good friend, Lad, my godfather, was an Honest John missile crewman in Germany after being drafted. In the neighborhood, no one believed it: his brother Norby was already in Vietnam and they thought the army couldn't draft all a mother's sons. We all know how the vets came back with little or no welcome. My Uncle Lad left for boot camp with no farewells. His friends couldn't believe he was gone.

Norby flew in helicopters over the deep green death in Vietnam, a Huey door gunner. Three times Norby's helo went down, shot to shit dropping troops. The last time, Norby and his badly injured crew chief were the only survivors of the crash. Norby carried his comrade through the jungle, but the chief was dead by the time they reached safety. Several years gone by, Norby died his third try, by rope in the garage, after somehow surviving the multiple stabbings to his chest and slashed wrists of the second attempt, having failed to kill himself with pills the first time. Uncle Lad found his brother's body still warm and brought him down. Then Lad went down, checked himself into a hospital for a while, came out a Jehovah's Witness named Jerome.

Mom's best friend, Laurie, married an ex-Marine named Pat, who liked to sit with the news on television, volume turned low, Beatles records playing loud (the *White Album* more often than not). Every day he sat there and read the *Chicago Tribune*, then the *Sun Times* while he smoked his way through a series of packed bowls. In Vietnam, Pat had earned a Silver Star, and picked up a morphine habit after being wounded while earning that star. When he asked the Corps for help kicking the drug, he was told there are no addicted Marines and was asked to leave.

Mom was remarried by the time I was three. Two of my stepfather's four brothers went to Nam. One worked supply and came back with tens of thousands in stereo equipment and art. The other was a grunt who cradled his best friend as he bled out and died during a firefight; Stan never spoke a word I ever heard about Vietnam and drank hard, a Budweiser man. He married a woman who left him, so he moved back with his parents until the age forty-five. His parents, my brother's and sister's grandparents, were first generation Poles who lived through the Depression and met during World War II, which grandfather fought in Europe. Mom's father, stepfather really, was also a Pole. A merchant marine in the Pacific during the war, he got rich trading ivory and gems on the black market. My mother still talks about the small velvet bags all over her house while growing up, the bags stuffed with uncut rubies, sapphires, and emeralds, her home decorated with nineteenth century carved ivory from China and India. Mom's mom divorced him long before I was born when his angry, drunken stories of a wife and kids in Japan turned out to be true.

In later years he came by each Thanksgiving. He always brought small gifts he'd purchased on Maxwell Street in Chicago — a warren of stalls and tables covering several square blocks, offering the wares of vendors and thieves alike — anything you can imagine, but mostly garage-sale and trailer-park trash, rusted tools, and stolen stereos and TVs. One year he brought us these weird small radios (mine was blue) the size and shape of a halved grapefruit. The flat side was a mirror, the top of the dome was holed for the speaker. Sunday mornings I used to listen to Kasey Kasem's "Top Forty Countdown" on that radio. The same year he gave my mother several boxes of Ramen noodles, the kind you buy five for a dollar and most people eat only when they are in college. Another year, several huge blocks of government cheese he'd bought from somebody on welfare, selling it for drinking money. He wore a patch over one eye and would sit and tell World War II stories for hours: sailing all through the Pacific, delivering troops and supplies in the Philippines in 1941, India in '42, Australia in '43, then as part of Halsey's main naval supply line system throughout the rest of the war. He spoke about dogfights, submarine patrols, depth charges, and torpedoed ships, oil slicks, floating bodies and debris, of kamikazes, burning ship decks, roasted and torn shipmates. He talked about traveling in and around Japan in the 50s, Indochina and Southeast Asia in the 60s and 70s (family legend has it that he worked as a mercenary after the war), of returning to Chicago to retire to a neighborhood unlike the one he'd left: no more Pollacks, full of spics and niggers. Not that he didn't stay. When he died in the 1990s, he still owned several properties in some of Chicago's roughest neighborhoods; kept several pistols around the house along with several hundred thousand dollars in cash. He and my mother were close in their ways, and while alive his property and bank accounts had all been in her name; but he left everything to his Filipino mail order bride forty years younger, who he married a few years before he died, and who emptied his bank accounts and safe deposit boxes immediately after his death, before my mother thought to ask about them.

I never planned to join the military, hated the military actually. Mom had raised me to hate the military. In third grade I attended my first parade, a small suburban affair. I paid little attention to the marching bands or floats, though I liked the majorettes and dove for the Tootsie Rolls and hard candy thrown by the waving float-riders. It wasn't until a group of World War II veterans marched by with their color guard and VFW banner, and after them a float holding some sort of large missile with radiation warning signs prominently displayed on its carrier, and my teacher

made all the students stand with hand-over-heart as they passed, and I looked around to see lots of other people standing the same way while here and there a veteran in the crowd was saluting, that I realized not everyone hated the military. (Similarly, at the age of seven, while I knew not all people were Christian, I was amazed to discover not every Christian was Catholic.) In 1987 my best friend, Ed, whom I'd known since third grade and who was a year older than me, told me one day that he'd joined the navy. Don't do it, I said. Let's call your recruiter right now and get you out of it. What're you thinking? I said. Several months later, the summer before my senior year of high school, I got arrested tripping on acid with a group of friends on the roof of the North Riverside cinema where we all worked. Before closing, I taped down the spring lock on a fire exit in the rear auditorium so we could get back in to get to the roof and watch a meteor shower. Milky Way visible, trailing comets streaked across the speckled sky, bright like rockets. The LSD and the beauty of the burning lights actually caused me to gasp in pleasure, and for an hour or more I lay on the roof watching the show, talking to no one, and trying to catch my breath. One of the others got jittery and loud and had to be talked down. A janitor heard the voices from above and apparently figured out we weren't God and a choir of angels because he called the cops, who called the fire department, who brought a ladder truck to bring us off the roof so the cops could cuff us and stuff us into squad cars. In the car, arms twisted behind me and soaked from lying in a deep puddle from the air conditioning unit on the roof while waiting my turn to go down the ladder, Bowie's "Major Tom" was playing on the radio. Damn cop must have known we were flying cause he turned the volume up, and I kept getting swept along with the music as I unsuccessfully fought the effects of the LSD. At the station, locked up and waiting for my parents to get me out, I remembered the army recruiter who'd called me a few days before, who I told there was no chance I'd even consider joining. Two weeks later, I shook his hand when he came to pick me up to go get my physical at the recruitment center. I signed on for two years as a multiple launch rocket system crewman the next day. After all we fought for, Mom said the day I came home, told her that I'd tricked her into signing a form allowing me to join this man's army three months after turning seventeen. It was 1988, the final years of the Cold War.

Is this Devastation for Me Alone?

— Almira El-Zein

Your grave is my blossom.
My childhood rained
when you died.
I cried:
"Were you dazed at the moment of death?"

How did you see your body
leaving you?
How did you bend over it?

How did you pat it
and bid it farewell?

You listened to people
whispering.
You heard their voices
in a tunnel.
You rose to the ceiling
and looked at your body:
"Is this devastation for me alone?"

You said:
"It's the murmuring of ants
at my fingertips.
Ants are patiently pulling me to them."

O beloved,
when did mushrooms
blaze in
your head?
When did the whirlwind of tufted cotton
enfold you,
as you heard them
taking your body into the cold?

Moons were dripping blood.
Mosques arose
then were buried
three times.
And the priest of the temple came no more.

Beloved,
tell me:
What were you when you left?
Were you my androgynous tree
bending down to the ground?
Were you my perfect palm tree
blessing the maddened sun?
Did you work your way back
further
and further
to watch our forefathers
paint gazelles on cave-walls?

Tell me:
Where did your death come from?
From the saliva of your mouth?
From the sweat of your body?
From the ends of your hair?
Where,
O beloved?
How did those ants free your atoms?
How did they tell them:
"Turn around in all directions,
and let the water of the body
flow across every grave,
and salute death!"

How did your limbs
dwindle
to feathers,
Oh white feathers!
How did you cry out
when the iron melted, and you knew
it was death?

Tell me, how did you move from red to orange,
and Oh, to white?
How were you dazed
at the time of death
and how did you
utter: "IT IS DEATH"?

Tell me,
How did you pursue
your body,
then it evaded you,
then you caught it,
then it fled?

Love flowed from your failing form.
Your molecules laughed
and said:
"This is freedom!
All forms are mine,
and all beginnings!"

Did you hear the wailing
of my insects seeking you,
tribe after tribe?
And you said:
"It's like a lover's cup
shattering over the miles."

You said:
"It is death attending me.
It is birds that rave
at my fingertips
and beat at their cages."

You saw the birds
wail with their wings.
And you said:
"The time has come to leave."

Cough-wracked,
you saw the blazing bedouins of hell.
You saw thick ropes
dangling from their bellies
chanting:
"With us is Refuge."
You saw the eyes of hell
fall from their fingers.

Pain from the Arab hell attended you.

You heard ringing in your ears
from Bedouin whistling,
as they parted spheres of water
then swallowed them.

Then you turned,
and saw them grasping
your coat-tails,
admonishing you:
“Chant,
chant,
chant!”
You fell down, then shook yourself,
then fell again,
when they pulled you toward the cold.

Did you see those in agony
spreading salt on their bodies?
Did you hear the mad bones
break the bridge of the neck?

What burns the eyes
and bleeds the body
came to me from you.
A swelling of your waters came to you
mixed with the salt of ants.

Why did you sleep, O beloved,
when they came to you?
Why did you surrender to death?

Threads of sobs veil you from me.
Are they threads?
Or a memory of plants,
or their voices?

You listened to the birds
echoing Amen. You heard the trusty dolphin
mourn you in deep waters.

You heard the bleating of your veins
melting,
you listened to the raven of your
throat croak
in agony.

Who sent waves of death to me?
Whom did you meet there?
Did grandma welcome you
in her white veil?
Did my little brother rush to you?

You said: "The lotus flower now ripens
in my soul."
You said: "My body falls
into the well of space,
and I must part."

How many a time you fainted,
then you awoke,
then fainted.
Someone whispered:
"Come quick!"
Who clapped his hands
and said: "Bring him!"
Who presided over the table,
and called the sufferers in
for the first supper after death?

O beloved,
you who sleep no more,
who does not wake,
who know neither hunger
nor thirst,
tell me,
how do you swim now
without a body?
Why do I see you everywhere, leaping?

Do you see me as a newborn
sees the instant of birth?
Do you see me dead,
and yourself alive?
Do you shine?

Now I turn off my light
and enter my tunnel.
Now I rise to the ceiling
and look at my body:
"Is this devastation for me alone?"

(Translated by Karin C. Ryding)

Saying What Is

An Interview with Carolyn Forché

Kevin Bowen: In 1993, with *Against Forgetting* you edited an anthology of a kind never previously put together. Coming at the end of the century, it offers a sweeping chronicle of the immense turmoil, displacement, and cruelty of the twentieth century; and at the same time it offers a testimony of the power of writing, of the individual voice, to stand up against lies, tyranny, and oppression. Ten years later, now, in the age of hypertext, cyberspace, and continued war, do you see the role and situation of writers changing?

Carolyn Forché: Addressing the role of the writer, and assuming by this we mean the literary writer in the United States, and by "role" the writer's relation to the public world, I would say that during the past decade and a half, there has been a change in American literary culture. I would argue that it began with the *fatwa* issued by the former Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie on February14, 1989, for his book, *Satanic Verses*. This *fatwa* called the literary world to attention over the plight of an author condemned to death *for his writing*, and demanded a response from writers all over the world. In the earliest hours of that crisis in the United States, we were asked to sign letters and petitions, appear on national news broadcasts, and make public our support of Rushdie and our condemnation of the *fatwa* form of literary censorship, or what V.S. Naipul called "an extreme form of literary criticism." The rallying cry then was "we are all Salman Rushdie." But not everyone was willing to *be* Salman Rushdie, to pin that button to his or her lapel. In such times, one learns that not all those who champion freedom of speech and the autonomy of art are willing to put themselves even at slight risk in their defense.

Later that same year, the proDemocracy movement was crushed at Tiananmen Square, and the poet Bei Dao, in Berlin at the time, was accused of inciting events, as his poetry had appeared on banners held aloft by the demonstrators. In Czechoslovakia, the playwright Vaclav Havel, thrice imprisoned critic of totalitarianism, became president of his country in December, and so the momentous year ended with sleigh bells and candlelight in Wenceslaw Square. The literary community in the United States beheld the spectacle of a writer forced into hiding, a poet exiled in absentia, and a playwright borne on the shoulders of his countrymen as they chanted *Havel na hrad!* Havel to the castle! Bei Dao began teaching, first in Sweden, then in Denmark, Germany, and the United States. Salman Rushdie was offered the protection of Scotland Yard. Vaclav Havel was invited to address a joint session of the United States Congress on February 21, 1990.

Havel appeared officially as a foreign head of state, but spoke in the authentic voice of the literary writer, a voice not heard before in those chambers, where speeches are the labor not of individual conscience but of speech-writing committees. What he had to say partly concerned the question of the role of the writer and intellectual:

> We are still destroying the planet that was entrusted to us, and its environment. We still close our eyes to the growing social, ethnic, and cultural conflicts in the world. From time to time we say that the anonymous mega-machinery we have created for ourselves no longer serves us but rather has enslaved us, yet we still fail to do anything about it . . . we still don't know how to put morality ahead of politics, science, and economics. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions if they are to be moral is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success. Responsibility to the order of Being, where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be properly judged. . . . This is why I ultimately decided after resisting for a long time, to accept the burden of political responsibility. I'm not the first nor will I be the last intellectual to do this. On the contrary, my feeling is that there will be more and more of them all the time. If the hope of the world lies in human consciousness, then it is obvious that intellectuals cannot go on forever avoiding their share of responsibility for the world, and hiding their distastes for politics under an alleged need to be independent.

Havel then praised the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution of the United States as documents of enduring inspiration to the world, and quoted Thomas Jefferson's famous dictum "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the Consent of the Governed." He acknowledged Jefferson himself for "backing up his words with his life." In closing, Havel had this to say: "History has accelerated. I believe that once again, it will be the human spirit that will notice this acceleration, give it a name, and transform those words into deeds."

During the ensuing decade, writers in the United States viewed political turmoil most often through the disfiguring lens of corporate media, and a few, among them Susan Sontag and Russell Banks, journeyed to countries suffering dissolution, genocide, and war. Post–Cold War events made visible to us through media include, in 1991, the first Gulf War; in 1992–94, war and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the break-up of former Yugoslavia; in 1994, genocide in Rwanda without intervention, and in 2000, the second Intifada or "shaking off" in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

During that same decade, the economic infrastructure envisioned at Bretton Woods in 1947 was quietly put into place, consisting of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the World Trade Organization agreements, the last effectively establishing corporate sovereignty over civil societies in matters bearing upon "free trade," that is, having to do with labor rights, environmental protection, water rights, biodiversity, genetic modification of food crops, and globalization's effects on the world's poor.

It may not seem at first that these developments bear upon the "role and situation" of the writer. What have Havel's invocations of the founding documents of our Republic to do with the role of the writer today? What have the aforementioned foreign wars and genocides to do with the writer's situation? And finally, what could a nine-hundred page, largely unread trade agreement have to do with the question of the writer's responsibility?

It cannot be argued that writers and intellectuals in the United States have always been shielded from the depredations of the state. They were harassed, black-listed and held in contempt during the McCarthy hearings, jailed for participating in the Civil Rights movement, imprisoned for conscientious objection to both World Wars and the American war in Southeast Asia. They have stood, in their writings and in their persons, against unjust wars and social injustice, and in so doing, have

variously been condemned, dismissed, censured or silenced by their peers.

However, for most of the twentieth century, disdain for "politics" was a commonplace in literary culture, especially among poets, who followed those agrarian conservatives who had artfully set the strictures of "New Criticism" against Edwardian sentimentalists, but also against socialists, populists, and all those who would align themselves with the aspirations of common people. Throughout the Cold War, literary culture in the United States vociferously championed dissident writers abroad and quietly condemned them at home. This "anti-public" stance, which according to philosopher Hannah Arendt, was seen as an "almost automatic rejection of everything public . . . was very widespread in the Europe of the twenties with its 'lost generations' — as they called themselves." Arendt writes that "Testimony to this anti-public climate of the times can be found in poetry, in art, and in philosophy; it was the decade when Heidegger discovered *das man,* the 'They' as opposed to the 'authentic being a self,' and when Bergson in France found it necessary 'to recover the fundamental self' from the 'requirements of social life in general and language in particular.'" She quotes Auden's poem, "We Too Had Known Golden Hours," as illustrative of this tendency: *All Words like Peace and Love,/ All sane affirmative speech,/ Had been soiled, profaned, debased/ To a horrid mechanical screech.* If poets wish to avoid anything in their work, it would be that horrid screech.

It seems apparent to me now that this aversion to the *polis* was class-bound in the Cold War period, a reaction against the democratization of literary culture inadvertently accomplished through the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill of Rights), and later, the National Defense Student Loan Program (which extended the availability of higher education to the American public). Poetry, once an elitist art (in English), whether of the establishment or avant-garde, and most often supported by private incomes of the endowed leisure class, had become the province of those surly, untutored, immigrant-and slave-descended Americans, whom Whitman anticipated and precursed. Something had to be done, and so we had a proliferation of writings from those who would champion *l'art pour l'art,* aestheticism, "pure poetry," classicism, "neo-formalism," — all manner of defendants of the dignity of the genre, whether in the traditional or experimental modes.

Things changed politically when the Supreme Court ruling of December 13, 2000, in the matter of *Bush v. Gore,* resulted in the appointment of George W. Bush as President of the United States. This is the date of the "turn" in the matter of the writer's "role and situation" in the United States. From this date commences the history of the dissolution of the civil liberties and civil rights at home, and disregard of the Geneva Conventions and provisions of international law abroad. Under the Bush regime, and in the aftermath of 9/11, House Resolution 3162 was passed quickly and almost unanimously: "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001." This occasion does not permit close scrutiny of the provisions of this act, but in summary, it provides a foundation for the dismantlement of the protections of the Constitution and Bill of Rights against unlawful search and seizure, surveillance, and wiretapping. It effectively suspends the writ of habeas corpus. American citizens and foreign nationals can now be held, without charges and in secret detention at home and abroad. As the Polish poet and Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz wrote in his famous early memoir, *A Captive Mind,* "If a thing exists in one place, it will exist everywhere."

"Patriot II," The Domestic Security Enhancement Act of 2003, proposes to extend these powers to include more than a hundred new provisions, including the revocation of American citizenship for those suspected of aiding and abetting "terrorism," the deportation of permanent residents, the building of a DNA data base on American citizens, secret arrests of suspected "terrorists," immunity for law enforcement officers carrying out search and seizures "under orders," an expansion of the death penalty to cover fifteen new offenses, and the rescinding "sunset provisions" on aspects of Patriot I, firming the ideological infrastructure of the Bush regime, which renders the Republic, as set forth in the founding documents, unrecognizable.

With the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing political response, writers and poets in the United States find themselves, for the first time since the Second World War, and before that, since the American Civil War, in a "zone of conflict," wherein they are called upon to act, to declare principles and defend them, whether by writings or stands taken in civil society. History will judge them, and they sense this, and so are responding variously — by deciding that a White House celebration of American poetry would include anti-war poems, resulting in the cancellation of the event by First Lady Laura Bush; by organizing via the internet to oppose the impending war against Iraq; by disseminating information about violence against Palestinians and Iraqis; by holding readings and vigils, signing petitions, and contributing poems to such anthologies as Sam Hamill's *Poets Against The War.* A group of notable poets convened in Key West, Florida, and declared themselves against the pending invasion. They included Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott and then-Poet Laureate of the United States, Billy Collins. American novelist Russell Banks cofounded the International Parliament of Writers and its descendent organization, "Cities of Asylum," and sent news about the Bush regime and its war plans via his internet news-clipping service, scanning alternative media for announcements important to American writers and public intellectuals, such as there are. Email lists were developed, and the web provided distribution of debate in the lively but highly spied-upon cyberspace. So I am returning to the language of your original question. When students asked Hannah Arendt during the American War in Vietnam if they should cooperate with labor unions opposed to the war, she advised them to do so, so that they could "use the unions' mimeograph machines." Cyberspace is the present-day equivalent of those machines.

The "role" of the writer, that is, the writer's relation to the public realm, is a matter to be privately determined at all times, and no less so in times of urgency, but to confine that relation to the responsibilities of citizenship, incumbent upon all and no more demanding of the writer than of anyone else, seems to me disingenuous. While the writer is free, in his or her work, of all constraints and obligations external to the work, and in life free to live in isolation and solitude, the published writer is one who has been made "public," and so has entered the social realm, where ideas are discussed and language attended. In urgent times, when much is at stake, what we do and say matters, as does our silence and our failure to act. If we do not stand apart, and stand against the wrongs committed in our name, we become one of those who went along, quietly "in service to those who make history," rather than, as Camus famously wrote, "in service to those who suffer it."

I believe we are today witnessing an unprecedented attack on our democratic principles and institutions, and so I am relieved that writers and poets who denounce these wrongs need suffer as much opprobrium or censure as was the case in the not distant past.

KB: Much of your own work deals with conflicts in Europe, Latin America, and other places. In what senses do you consider yourself to be an American poet? Is there a more international sensibility at work among poets today than in the past?

CF: My upbringing was, in significant respects, European. My paternal grandmother was from the former Czechoslovakia and lived with us from time to time during my childhood. Through the planting of orchards and gardens and the keeping of house, she re-created the world of her youth for us: the music, the language, the baking, the harvest. Her stories made present to me a distant, nineteenth-century village, but they were also riddled with the debris of twentieth-century warfare and the imposition of Communist rule. When I was young, my relationship to this European-ness was ambivalent; I wanted, at times desperately, to be free of this foreignness, especially in the matter of bringing my friends home after school. Eastern Europeans were not so accepted in the America of my childhood as they are perhaps today. I am much less ambivalent now, and I cherish those qualities of my early life that might be called "European." My interest in languages inspired me to work in translation, which made possible my first travels abroad, and the experience of these travels led to work in human rights in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Seventeen years ago, when my son was a toddler, we returned to America, where we have lived since, except for a few summers and visits. The decade of intense travel and residence abroad was formative, so that I am hesitant to assume that I am whatever one means by "American" in world-view and sensibility. My work arises out of my deepest obsessions, and I have never experienced the writing of poetry as preceded by conscious decisions regarding content. As with most artists, I do what I must. I don't know what it would mean to be "an American poet," as they are so various, and I would rather not distinguish myself by nationality, as I am not a nationalist, but rather am committed to a world community, and yes, there is an international community of poets, and "American" poetry has been very much influenced by poets from other countries. During the past two decades, some of the world's most honored poets lived in the United States: Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, Czeslaw Milosz, Joseph Brodsky. And beyond these Nobel Laureates, others, too, came here to live, whether by force of political exile or personal choice: Bei Dao, Denis Brutus, Adam Zagajewski and others.

Translation of contemporary poetry began in earnest during the sixties, with the work of Robert Bly, W.S. Merwin, Ben Bellitt, James Wright, and Mark Strand. At first it was thought that an "international voice," was developing, to the detriment of the translated poets, but more so, to American poetry. It was thought that young poets were emulating the language of works-in-translation. But as Hans Magnus Enzensberger reminds us, "*kann nicht Ubersetzung von Poesie sein*," what is not poetry, cannot be a translation of poetry. What I think these critics of the "international voice" might have feared was the influence of foreign sensibilities, concerned as they often are with public and political questions.

KB: You've acted as a translator for poets as diverse as Claribel Alegria, Mahmoud Darwish, Robert Desnos, and Xuan Quynh. Do you think of translation as an obligation as a writer?

CF: It is not an obligation, but an act of love, requiring patience, the assimilation of another poet's labor, and a willingness to immerse oneself in the sensibility and language of an other. There are many ways to serve literature, and the principle

means is through writing, but yes, there are other opportunities, and translation is among them.

KB: The NEA has recently introduced a project, "Operation Homecoming," that would send writers to military bases to set up writing workshops for returning soldiers for the purpose of some "therapeutic" activity and for collecting work for an anthology of writing on the Iraq War. Do you think of writing coming out of traumatic events such as war as being "therapeutic"? Given that the cooperating agencies are the Defense Department and Boeing, do you see a danger inherent in this kind of collaboration?

CF: I have known survivors of warfare and other horrors to have felt compelled to write of their experience, as if this were a sacred obligation, and some have said that the act of writing was personally salvific in some way. I'm not sure of the relationship between writing and therapy; there are others qualified to address this, especially regarding therapeutic utility. What helps the returning soldier? Everything. Nothing.

Yes, there is a danger in the proposed program. It isn't necessary to gainsay the intentions of the National Endowment for the Arts, which might well be honorable, particularly in the matter of providing opportunities for the returning soldier. And as both the Department of Defense and the Boeing Company have deep pockets, such a program wouldn't suffer a paucity of resources; on the contrary, it may have been those very resources that gilded this idea when it was conceived. And we shouldn't discount the efficacy that such a program would have for the arts agency when it next seeks appropriations on Capitol Hill. Setting these factors aside, however, one must question several aspects of this plan. First, these "workshops" are to be held on military bases, with returning soldiers still in uniform. This is an environment of discipline and control, and it is hard to imagine how any writer or poet, no matter how gifted a workshop facilitator, could create an environment in which such soldier writers would have the sense of freedom so necessary to literary art, nor would time have passed, time so necessary to the gestation of work marked by the experience of extremity. Second, I notice that there is no provision for such workshops to be held for veterans of the Iraq War, once they are out of uniform, and after such time has passed. Third, there is the matter of the absence of veterans of the Vietnam War on the list of workshop leaders. Is this because many of these accomplished veteran poets and writers have not portrayed their war experience in terms acceptable to the Department of Defense? Who vetted these workshop leaders, and what were their criteria? Would the writers and poets involved wish to know? Finally, what does cooperation and work with the Department of Defense mean, at this juncture? As Milosz has suggested, "what we were and what we did — these should provide us with a questionnaire, drawn from our own life; we shall then ask history to fill it out." It seems advisable, in times such as ours, to subject our decisions to the greatest possible moral scrutiny, and exercise caution in the matter of our allegiances and those projects to which we choose to append our names.

Heartlands

— a collection of poems by Chris Agee

Observatory, Empire State Building

Night shimmerings. Sahara of million-fold
mirage. Or cooling lava in full flow,
its salamander glows. Down below, shadowy
geometries, a bird fluttering above the stone

evolution of humanity, dazzling capital
of capitalism. Surely it will outlast us,
the miracle of its dinosaur-flight
against our Antaean powers, all idiolect

of microcosm. As, say, Grand Central
at flowering Park, where blossoms drift
in time and space, its verdigris
dome like a Greek mirror

inscribed with mythologies; or Uptown
at Yankee Stadium, the rusting El
and rotted, ramshackle cistern, Hopperesque,
still shadowing the platform, sad and tired

now, like the heart, where Mantle
was once eternal
as boyhood; or Downtown, tonight, whose rising
half-light fogs of street light, windows

banked as ocean liners', the obsidian
polish of the Two Rivers, bespeak, surely, the true
apocalyptic note that sea-girts the tongue's
universal grammar for the human moment.

The Mall

Vietnam's wound. Polished black
Bangalore granite, its oblique angles
a hanger's incision, tapering obsidian
blades of a Shaker rocker — the globe's biggest

tombstone. No symbols, no statements: just
the silence of death, word without
etymology or gloss, word most truly
itself. Via the nearby book of the dead

I locate the place (arranged in the order
"they were taken from us") of the name
Robert Ransom, whose death's single
rippling heartbreak brushed my boyhood

in May of '68. Forever, his
will stare towards the land
of the living, meeting our clouded eyes.
Then the Lincoln Memorial,

its ghosts from death-soaked Gettysburg,
the kitsch of Korea's, a World War Two
work-in-progress, sad forgotten rhododendrons
round the domed doughboy monument,
plus legions more
on the rolling greens of Arlington,
a continent of griefs — vanished
and living — beyond the Potomac's

Indian syllables: nothing less
than Washington's federal necropolis
consecrating the collective
landscape of its blood-hemmed nation-state.

Amish Quilt, Kalona

Breughel in Iowa . . . I am told the Amish don
their best blues and whites and blacks, to skate
on the small ponds of vanished prairielands
checkerboarded with fields themselves etched

with fallow swathes of watercourses. Is their faith,
stylized, the mystery of self-limitation, America turned
inside out, something sealed against the World's *imperium*
they've unburdened, I inhabit — like those New

World monasteries, the Shaker villages? After a walk
in encroaching prairie woods, spring leaves revealing
themselves, a sprinkle of violets, Canada geese,
cornfields of shorn stubble, off a dirt road

in a landscape of silver silos and weather-beaten,
windswept white barns, storm-darkened skies,
the Nineteenth Century looked out of a bonneted face
pausing over the handle-bar of a manual lawnmower:
Old Europe's folk sense of time-in-place, the same
I felt at *Yoder's Antiques*, when antique Kalona quilts
were unfolded, with names like "Sunshine & Shadow"
and "Cactus Bowl". I bought one with two names and later

when I unfurled its denims and ochres (Jasper Johns *avant
la letter*) on the stairwell of the International Writers Program,
(seeing an icon for my prairie time), to be hung somewhere central,
"Stair-Steps", as I opted, got the staff's spontaneous applause.

Limantour Beach, Point Reyes

We reached its Pacific breakers. At last I
dove into the globe's icy eyeball. Behind us
the Marin Hills were California heaven,
the *Qi* of eucalyptus and blue: turkey vultures,

poppies and lupine, Steller's jay, oaks, redwood, bay,
Mexican pine, quail, a red-tailed hawk. Out of Rwanda
Jean-Marie, trousers rolled up, touched the sea-foam
for the first time. On its blank sands, the fresh world's

tabula rasa, a Rosetta Stone for silence, transponder-
and-float stood in for Friday's footprint halting
my single track of marks. Three brown pelicans
skimmed the given of the spindrift. Dunes and *estero*,

the scrubland and the Hills, in ocean's foundations
land's *imperium* ended: a mesa of dreams. Even I could glimpse unlanguaged
in cognate breakers some vision of Milosz or Jeffers
— unwilled, undone — by the cold sea-wash at continent's end.

Boston Common

A Shaw Memorial for the Iraqi dead? *One overhears the art*
of the single voice. In Baghdad a gold Akkadian harp
is looted and vanishes; in a refrigerated truck, a small boy
stiffens on a pile of corpses. *It was the protest of the individual soul*

which is never wasted. Not a stone's throw from where
divines hung an Irish "witch" — their first — Miriam leapfrogged
below the kidney-shaped Frog Pond the last summer before
her death. *Whether one makes things happen, one can, at least,*

say what happened, what was: and that is something
towards the what-becomes-what-is. So let us call it that —
a spade a spade — let us make it personal, *let us now praise*
infamous men, their famous victory, saying what was was this:

A servant's war. Rumsfeld's war. A servile war.

Night Visions

Fred Marchant

What is so valuable about art, and poetry in particular? The author examines the techniques (extended metaphor; overlays, juxtapositions, collage; leaps and eruptions emanating from silences; and lines with multiple tones and broken cadences) used by poets to express their responses to war. He shows us how the poet is helped by these techniques to create a "night-vision" that enables us to see what we might otherwise turn from.

It is difficult/to get the news from poems," wrote William Carlos Williams over half a century ago, "yet men die miserably every day/ for lack/ of what is found there."[1] What is it that is so valuable about art in general and poetry in particular? What is actually found there? How is it a matter of life and death? These are the questions that I want to explore in this essay. I want to examine what I like to call the "night-vision" of poetry. Such vision is what I think Williams is talking about, and I want to study its workings in a selection of war poems written by various poets from different countries about their experience of war during the last century.

Let us begin with the contemporary American poet, Jonathan Holden, and a poem from the Vietnam War era "Why We Bombed Haiphong":

> When I bought bubble gum,
> to get new baseball cards,
> the B-52 was everywhere you looked.
> In my high school yearbook
> the B-52 was voted "Most Popular"
> and "Most Likely to Succeed."
>
> The B-52 would give you the finger
> from hot cars. It laid rubber,
> it spit, it went around in gangs,
> it got its finger wet and sneered
> about it. It beat the shit
> out of fairies.
>
> I remember it used to chase
> Derek Ramsen around at recess
> every day. Caught he'd scream
> like a girl. Then the rest
> of us pitched in and hit.[2]

Metaphor, specifically a personification, is the primary act of imagination in this poem. Given the poem's title, and Holden's intent to explain an affair of state, the poem renders the bombing of what was then North Vietnam as something similar to the viciousness of a schoolyard bully. Condemning the bombing of the strategic port of Haiphong, Holden's outrage is presumably the result of knowing there were many civilian casualties, not only in Haiphong, but throughout the North. Derek Ramsen, too, is an innocent "civilian," and Holden's root metaphor suggests the assault on Derek is a not-so-distant kin to what many think were American war crimes. In addition, the extended B-52 metaphor is the way in which the poem explores the connections between various American notions of "manhood." The spirit of the B-52 was everywhere the speaker looked: it was not only the fellow "most likely to succeed," but also the juvenile delinquent peeling out and giving people the finger. These, writes Holden elsewhere, were the available versions of manhood for American boys growing up during the Cold War.[3] Sex would mean sexual conquest and bragging; "fairies" would be an obvious threat. The metaphor that Holden extends thus enables him to sketch out the value system behind these ideas of manhood.

The extended B-52 metaphor proposes a continuum between public and private violence, between sexualized aggression and realpolitik. In the bashing of Derek Ramsen one also hears an echo of the broader question of the individual's responsibility in a democracy. Just as the poet remembers that he too "pitched in and hit" Derek Ramsen, it could also be said that we all were complicit in the bombing of the North Vietnamese civilian population. The poem thereby claims a wider, complicating redefinition of where and when and why the Vietnam War actually occurred. It makes us wonder who the bombers really were, and what they were like. The war was not only over there, says this poem, but it was back here too, and even if one actively opposed it, the spirit of the B-52 nevertheless afflicted and co-opted us all.

Witness and Response

What I have just outlined is not all the "news" that Holden's poem conveys. In fact, it is never easy to paraphrase a poem adequately, especially if what the poem means is exactly and precisely what it says. The poem we treasure most always seems to be saying more than we can say about it, and something always seems lost in translation into ordinary discourse. The American poet William Stafford, in his short prose piece, "What It Is Like," discusses the way poems tend to radiate meaning. Whether you are reading or writing a poem, says Stafford,

> poetry is the kind of thing you have to see from the corner of your eye. You can be too well prepared for poetry. A conscientious interest in it is worse than no interest at all, as I believe Frost used to say. It's like a very faint star. If you look straight at it you can't see it, but if you look a little to one side it is there.[4]

The factual basis for Stafford's figure of speech is a way of seeing called "night-vision." It is a technique, ironically enough, that is taught throughout the military, and is intended to be of use in nighttime combat operations. In looking "a little to one side," one literally dilates the pupil, opening it to more of the available, ambient light, and allowing one to see more despite the darkness. The dilation of the pupil is analogous to the way the intensified and cadenced language of poetry can, at times, alter what the heart and mind can apprehend. As Stafford goes on to say,

> if you let your thought play, turn things this way and that, be ready for liveliness, alternatives, new views, the possibility of another world — you are in the area of poetry . . . Anyone who breathes is in the rhythm business; anyone who is alive is caught up in the imminences, the doubts mixed with the triumphant certainty of poetry[5]

The "imminences" that Stafford mentions refer to the meanings and insights that are about to enter consciousness. Or perhaps it is just as accurate to say that they were already present in the mind, and are now about to surface to conscious awareness due to the influences of the poem.

In *The Witness of Poetry*, the Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz defines poetry as the "passionate pursuit of the Real."[6] What the "Real" is will surely vary from poet to poet, but Milosz and Stafford would agree that poetry discovers and presents those aspects of the "Real" that cannot be discerned or encountered in any other way. The art's medium is language, and the artist's effort is to intensify language to the utmost of its carrying capacity. In the process, the poem makes more of reality available to perception and understanding. It is the news of a difference in the way the world is ordinarily viewed. Seamus Heaney, also a Nobel laureate, writes in "The Government of the Tongue" that we need to remember "to credit poetry with an authority all of its own." The poet, he says, has "a power to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the nature of the reality we inhabit."[7] These communications between our human nature and the nature of reality are specific to poetry and what poetry does. The revelations obtained are the ways in which poetry bears witness to our experience.

Ordinarily one thinks first of a witness as someone who knows what happened, has seen the matter with his or her own eyes. The report that arises from this experience we might call a testimony, and there is a natural desire to credit eyewitness testimony with some significant truth-carrying capacity. Nevertheless, we are invariably reluctant to trust the eyewitness totally. Though a witness may earnestly swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but, there are inevitable limitations to any human perspective. Sometimes we see what we want to see, sometimes the opposite. Sometimes we flinch, sometimes memory is selective, and sometimes we unwittingly revise our perceptions. To witness, even at the most reportorial level, is always and inevitably to re-create, and to that extent it is an act of imagination, however devoted the witness is to "plain facts."

If one speaks of "bearing witness," the phrase might connote a spiritual matter, as in bearing witness to the wonders of the Lord. There is also the biblical injunction against bearing false witness. Bearing witness can also be a devotional act, an example of courage, as in being present to someone else during his or her suffering. Such witnessing not only records the event, but might also carry with it an indirect affirmation of human connectedness. One might also bear witness despite feeling overwhelming pressures to be silent or to forget. Such witness is especially valuable when the subject is trauma, whether on an individual or a massive social scale. A commitment to remember and to present realities many would rather not know is an act that is "against forgetting," to use the memorable phrase that Carolyn Forché deployed as the title for an international anthology of poems related to war and atrocity.[8]

So what exactly is the kind of witness that poetry provides? Some clues might be found in the far reaches of the etymology of the word. *Wit* is more than cleverness, and the word has the aura of heightened awareness, as in keeping one's wits during a crisis. *Wit* in this sense of the word is basically unchanged from its meaning (and

spelling) in Old and Middle English. In the deep background of the Old English *wit* is the Indo-European root, *weid*, which gives us *wis*, as in our *wisdom* and *wise*. *Weid* is also in the same etymological grouping as the Old High Germanic, *wissago*, meaning a seer or prophet, both of which suggest the ancient domain and function of poetry. Indeed, *weid* is also a cognate of the word *Vedas*, the name of those ancient Hindu prayers that are among the earliest extant poetry.[9] The deep etymology of witness therefore hints that witness, like poetry, has its roots in revelation. Let us examine now a handful of poems that bear witness to the wars of the twentieth century, and let us examine how their varieties of indirection — their night-vision — serve to reveal.

Principles of Collage: Yusef Komunyakaa and Seamus Heaney

Yusef Komunyakaa's "Facing It" is justifiably the most-anthologized American poem related to the Vietnam war. Recounting a moment spent in front of the polished black marble of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, "Facing It" consists of a set of visual overlays. As the speaker scans the names, he sees first his own face, then a buddy who died in a booby trap explosion, and in the sky behind and above the speaker himself, a plane, then a red bird's flashing wings, and so forth. Flowing from image to image, the poem as a whole is a collage of the speaker's mind during that moment of staring at the Wall. The poem thus provides something like a cubist image, a composite image made of multiple viewpoints, the whole being more than the sum of its parts.

The poem arrives at a climax in these ending lines:

> In the black mirror
>
> A woman's trying to erase names:
> No, she's brushing a boy's hair.[10]

This juxtaposition of perceptions is stunning, and it accounts for much of this poem's enduring impact. The physical gesture that looks like the erasing of names is probably the speaker's mistaken perception of the woman's hand gestures, for she is in all likelihood taking a charcoal rubbing of a name off the Wall. Or she is touching a name. The speaker's mind is moving like quicksilver through these perceptions and possibilities. In the juxtaposition of these images, the poem tacitly makes us wonder how they could all be so proximate in the speaker's mind. Why does he think she might be erasing a name, when, in fact, she might be taking a rubbing? Or just running her hand over a name? What might it mean that he would confuse that action with her brushing the boy's hair?

The dream-like proximity of these possibilities in the speaker's mind makes them almost metaphorically connected to one another. "Erasing" a name is like brushing a boy's hair. Taking a rubbing of that name is like touching the name, and both actions resemble brushing the hair of the boy who is standing beside her. All are possible, all are "visible" in the wall, and all are variations on this woman coping with loss. Komunyakaa has written about this poem and has said that in the memorial's polished wall, "the reflections move into and through each other," and thereby compose "a dance between the dead and the living."[11] The play of images in

the speaker's mind is that dance.

Across the Atlantic, at roughly the same time as the American war in Vietnam, sectarian violence flared up once again in Northern Ireland. In Belfast, Seamus Heaney, then a relatively young poet, was in the process, as he wrote later, of casting about for "images and symbols adequate to our predicament."[12] He then happened upon a book of archaeology discussing the various exhumed and preserved bodies that had been retrieved from peat bogs throughout Northern Europe, including Ireland. Viewing photographs of these miraculously intact corpses, Heaney learned that these people were either executed or sacrificed in some ritual on behalf of their communities. Here was an amazingly congruent historical analogue to the shot, bombed, and mutilated bodies of Heaney's own time. Here was a lens through which we all could see what was being done. Heaney's own private discovery of the "bog people" resulted in a series of remarkable poems in which there is a layering effect, a collage-ing if you will, of the past and the present.

"The Tollund Man" is about one of those bodies on display in a museum in Denmark. The poet has only seen the photographs, and begins his poem by saying some day he will go to "see his peat-brown head/ the mild pods of the eyelids." He associates the corpses with a saint's "kept body," a relic, and he imagines the possibility of praying to the corpse, asking it to reanimate the dead of his own place and time, the similarly executed, the four young brothers, for example, who were trailed behind a train for miles. "Out there in Jutland/" writes Heaney, "In the old man-killing parishes/ I will feel lost,/ Unhappy and at home." [13] In "Punishment," another poem of the bog-corpses, Heaney writes about a young girl who has been executed. He identifies with her, and begins by saying, "I can feel the tug/ of the halter at the nape/ of her neck, the wind on her naked front." He imagines her executed for adultery, and clarifies his own predicament through hers. He imagines himself as the silent witness to the proceedings of her death, feeling both civilized outrage, but also understanding "the exact/ and tribal, intimate revenge."[14]

Both of these poems work on the principle of overlay, the imagined, ancient situation clarifying the nature of the blood sacrifices to and by the community, and at the same time clarifying the predicament of the contemporary artist caught in such a moment, required to bear witness and, in so doing, registering his own complicities. This is what Heaney means in "The Tollund Man," when he says he would feel at home in the old man-killing parishes, or when he says he would have cast the stones of silence as the girl was led off to her punishment. In both poems the eye has been opened to the past in order to see through it into the present. And as with Komunyakaa's poem, this too is a dance between and among the living and the dead. The principle of collage is that juxtaposition itself, the simple placing of matters side by side, can spark meaning. Collage, itself a twentieth- century art-form, bears witness to the absence of organizing or coherent or permanent narratives. In the place of stories that sustain meaning, there is in the poetry of Komunyakaa and Heaney the glancing, transitory, but wondrously honed sense of finally having glimpsed something real amidst the chaos, the lies, and the suffering.

Silences and Leaping: Wilfrid Owen and Kevin Bowen

Collage in some way seems the supreme art form for a century of war. It emphasizes the broken as much as the connected, and the connections when they occur do not reassure. One could say, for instance, that T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is the premier poem of World War I, even though it never mentions that war. Published in 1921, its title and root metaphor is surely conditioned by an actual "no-man's land," and its savagery. Eliot's poem is, indeed, a broken poem, fragments shored against ruin. The poem does focus on the individual psyche, but it draws its principle of disconnection from the war years. From moment to moment and line to line within that poem there is a deep silence about how the mind is connecting these things. And so to the idea of collaged juxtaposition let us add another dimension that we can find in the war poetry of the last century: the importance given to silence.

Wilfrid Owen lived the last few months of his life in the literal no-man's land of trench warfare in World War I. He died there, just before the Armistice. The greatest of the English "war poets," his poetry in general is a combination of Keatsian verbal elegance turned in the service of trying to say something meaningful about what looked like meaningless barbarism. His "night-vision" comes in many forms, but one that so often goes unnoticed is his eloquent use of silence. Here is "Futility," a poem short enough to quote in full:

> Move him into the sun—
> Gently its touch awoke him once,
> At home, whispering of fields unsown,
> Always it woke him, even in France,
> Until this morning and this snow.
> If anything might rouse him now
> The kind old sun will know.
>
> Think how it wakes the seeds—
> Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
> Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
> Full-nerved—still warm—too hard to stir?
> Was it for this the clay grew tall?
> —O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
> To break earth's sleep at all? [15]

The dashes are the key to this poem. They are at first self-interruptions, veerings and swervings of the speaker's thoughts. The opening line's dash sets the tone. The speaker has asked someone to move a dead soldier into the sun, for if anything might rouse that dead man now, it would be the sun. But see how the dashes proliferate in stanza two. As the sun does not revive, there is a breaking down of an assertion into a set of questions, and then there is an eruptive and disgusted final question, the speaker calling the sunbeams fatuous. It is as if the dashes mark the snuffing out of a hope. And in the moment before the last question is nearly spit out onto the page, in the silence of that moment of the dash, there is a final recognition that nothing will bring this boy back, nothing. It is that irrevocability that bores into

the speaker's being from top to bottom of this poem until, at the end, it touches the living nerve.

Let us shift forward from No-Man's Land to Vietnam again. Kevin Bowen's "Snapshots from LZ Julie" presents us with a different image of how the living dwell with the dead. "Snapshots" begins in documentary realism, but then leaps into wholly different domains of feeling and insight. It, too, is short enough to quote in full:

> After the passing of an arm or a leg,
> who cleans up the mess?
>
> Where are their maps?
>
> No, this picture is not a picture of men.
> Show us again.
>
> And this man's heart.
> Who will return it to its rightful place?
>
> Read me their names.
> The ones who were there.
>
> And the ones who sent them.
>
> Where are their pictures?
>
> Not in these boxes,
> these are old friends.
>
> Kiss them now.
> I ask you.
>
> Kiss these arms,
> this leg,
> this heart.
>
> Now bury
> them.[16]

Owen's poem is rhymed, in complexly mirroring stanzas. Bowen's poem, by contrast, is more fragmentary. But like Owen's poem, the shifting that goes on in the mind of the speaker is occurring in the silences of "Snapshots." The white spaces between stanzas, for example, are dramatic and meaningful in their implied pausing. Inside the silence we can imagine serious and even frantic activity going on. This is a poem, to paraphrase Wallace Stevens, that presents a mind in the act of trying to find what will suffice.[17]

One imagines the speaker working his way through a box of photos from the war. Here at LZ Julie, there are body parts, the landing zone in general, and fragments of the cleanup after fighting. The speaker could be talking to himself, or to any one of

us. His feelings seem to be a mixture of grief, anger, and an increasing sense of urgency. The pivotal moment in the poem occurs when the speaker wonders, bitterly, where the pictures are of those who sent these men to their deaths. Not here in this collection, he says, not among these friends. There follows a thought, rising almost out of nowhere: the speaker realizes he or we should kiss these images, these men. Now, after kissing them, we can bury them at last. Neither the dead nor the living in this poem rest until we have acknowledged how precious their lives were. Powered by emotion and unhobbled by narrative or explanations, such leaps of association trace the workings of the speaker's mind in its fullest sense. This is what Robert Bly means when he writes of "leaping poetry," saying that "in many ancient works of art we notice a long floating leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known."[18] The situation is similar in Bowen's "Snapshots at LZ Julie." The idea of kissing these men seems to flare up from the poet's unconscious. And, in this way, it is similar to Owen's sneering at the sun as being nothing but "fatuous." Both the sneer and the ceremony well up from within the white spaces — the breaks and pauses — of these poems where the soul of the speaker has been wounded.

War Music: Denise Levertov and Czeslaw Milosz

A war-wound in the soul is also Denise Levertov's concern in "Life at War."[19] Written around 1966, it examines the numbed feelings that come to everyone in a society at war, even to those far away from the combat, even to someone actively opposed to the war. She begins by saying that,

> The disasters numb within us
> caught in the chest, rolling
> in the brain like pebbles. The feeling
> resembles lumps of raw dough
>
> weighing down a child's stomach on baking day.

Coated by war, "filmed over with the gray filth of it," the imagination feels leaden. What oppresses us, she writes, is the relentless presence of the war in the mind. This is the knowledge that humankind, whose eyes "are flowers that perceive the stars" and whose music "excels the music of birds" is capable of turning with "mere regret" to the "scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk/ runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies." Levertov says that as she writes this very poem, she is also weighted down by the fact that she knows there is human flesh burning in Vietnam. The poem ends on the following notes:

> Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space
> in our bodies along with all we
> go on knowing of joy; of love;
>
> our nerve filaments twitch with its presence
> day and night,
> nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,

nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,
the deep intelligence living at peace would have.

Even though her stated intent is to show the war's deadening effects on her, these ending stanzas have the sound of a breakthrough. Syntactically, rhythmically, and emotionally these lines register the speaker's momentary shucking off the dull coating the war creates. She began the poem saying that "the disasters numb within us," which is itself a line somewhat clotted in meaning. Is numb an adjective? A verb? The poem throughout is characterized by similar uncertainties. Lines and stanzas are broken at odd places as if to highlight aurally her hesitations. But when we get to the "Yes" of the ending stanzas, the poem discovers a moment of earned eloquence. There is no "husky phlegm" in the parallelisms of the last stanza. Their clarity hints at what living in peace would mean. What is revealed in the last two stanzas is the "music" of peace. The ending of this poem has what Robert Frost would have called the sound of its own sense.[20]

So, too, is the sound an echo of the sense in Milosz's "Preparation." Milosz survived both the Nazi and Russian invasions of Poland in World War II, eventually defecting to the United States during the Cold War. A professor of Slavic languages at Berkeley for many years, he is a towering presence in twentieth-century literature. "Preparation," however, is a poem about being unable to write the war poem that will finally and truly get the experience into a book. "Still one more year of preparation," the poem begins, "Tomorrow at the latest I'll start working on a great book/ In which my century will appear as it really was." But he cannot begin it, and he knows it. It won't happen tomorrow or next year or in the next five or ten years.

I still think too much about the mothers
And ask what is man born of woman.
He curls himself up and protects his head
While he is kicked by heavy boots; on fire and running,
He burns with bright flame; a bulldozer sweeps him into a clay pit.
Her child. Embracing a teddy bear. Conceived in ecstasy.

I haven't learned yet to speak as I should, calmly.[21]

This stanza has many of the attributes of the other poems we have considered. It has a speaker with an overlay of visions; it has meaningful silences and leapings of thought. But, above all, it has a kind of mimetic music, a sound that replicates thought and feeling. As the vision of the suffering comes into view, whether from memory or imagination, the poem breaks into fragments, enacting itself and its own meaning in "Her child. Embracing a teddy bear. Conceived in ecstasy." The speaker has not yet learned to speak calmly. The poem is co-translated by Milosz and the contemporary American poet, Robert Hass, and thus there is every reason to think that Milosz himself insisted on the English fragments of the penultimate line. Syntactical correctness and smoothness of expression just do not carry or reflect the burden of mind this poem is trying to show. Those fragments are in recognition of the fundamental pressures that war's atrocities force upon all our systems and methods for constructing meaning. That pressure creates a music all its own. It is the harsh, grating music of what Levertov says is life at war.

The Responsibility of the Poet

Extended metaphor; overlays, juxtapositions, and collage; leaps and eruptions emanating from the silences; lines vibrant with multiple tones and broken cadences, these are, sequentially, the methods of night-vision I have discussed in the poems above. Allow them together to stand for the art of poetry as a whole. What do these elements of the art help the poet to articulate? What does this artistic effort overall give us that, if Williams is right, we really can't live without? And perhaps most pressing, what do these poems tell us about the wars of the past that might be of use to us in the future?

Levertov has argued that a poetry that would articulate what is happening in our time should make readers "not only just know *about* it but feel it." Art, she has written, is "a way *into* history" because it requires that a texture of feeling inform our sense of the facts of the matter. "The imagination gives us a vision," she says "presents (makes present) the unwitnessed, gives flesh to the abstract."[22] The poem's intent is not to offer us an idea about the experience, but to offer a doorway into the thing itself. The poem tries to induce in the reader a felt experience. This witness that art can uniquely provide, is what makes it, as Washington Irving once wrote, invaluable to a true sense of history."[23]

If this is so, then it follows that the responsibility of a poet is first and foremost to write poetry that will witness the life lived. The challenge to the poet is not to flee, abandon, or distrust the methods of the art just because those methods are indirect. That challenge is also to claim for poetry, and perhaps all art, a region of being that is illuminated in no other way. Yusef Komunykaa has said that for him poetry is "a kind of distilled insinuation." He called it "a way of expanding and talking around an idea or a question," and sometimes "more actually gets said through such a technique than a full frontal assault."[24] The responsibility of the poet is to believe that the insinuations of poetry will ultimately say more than other uses of language. Seamus Heaney makes a similar point when he argues that poetry "cannot afford to lose its fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness, its joy in being a process of language as well as a representation of things in the world."[25] This does not mean that the witness of poetry is somehow removed or exempted from the pressures of history, or that there ever can be an art that is exclusively for art's sake. The poem must be, as he writes elsewhere, "a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated."[26] This is how the poem and the poet bear witness. This is the poet's response, a night-vision. To grapple with such night-visions might be one of the few ways in which human beings might find reasons to turn away from war.

Notes

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3. Holden, *Guns and Boyhood in America*: *A Memoir of Growing Up in the 50's (*Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 124–26.

4. William Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1978), 3.
5. Ibid.
6. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 56.
7. Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 93.
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12. Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 23.
13. Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 65.
14. Ibid., 118.
15. Wilfrid Owen, *The Collected Poems of Wilfrid Owen* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 58.
16. Kevin Bowen, *Forms of Prayer at the Hotel Edison* (Willamantic, Ct.: Curbstone Press, 1998), 6.
17. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 239.
18. Robert Bly, *Leaping Poetry: an Idea with Poems and Translations*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 1.
19. Denise Levertov, *The Sorrow Dance* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 79.
20. Robert Frost, *Poetry and Prose*. eds. E. C. Lathem and L. Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 281.
21. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Collected Poems, 1931–1987* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1988), 418.
22. Denise Levertov, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 147.
23. Washington Irving, *The Complete Tales of Washington Irving* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975),1.
24. Komunyakaa, *Blue*, 143.
25. Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 5.
26. Ibid., 8.

Nasiriya

— *Fanny Howe*

Children growing older and older
Cannot believe that their leader
Was murdered.

Electrifying,
A flash fire out of a window
And into a fig tree. Granny

Crying, *Go back to school*
To learn resistance!

The children are lapping
At the black dish of her thoughts
Light-slurping thoughts

Turning to slick
Till no nourishment or taste is left
Of the one who taught them to be good.