

Book Review

***instead, it is dark.* Cynthia Hogue. Red Hen Press, 2023.
\$17.95, 96 pp.**

Reviewed by Hugh Martin
United States Air Force Academy

“I woke to the dead / and was among them,” the speaker says in the title poem of Cynthia Hogue’s collection, *instead, it is dark*. Disoriented, confused, but still alive, the speaker places us viscerally in the aftermath of yet another explosion somewhere in 1944 occupied France. Coming to, trying to gather their thoughts, trying to comprehend what’s happened, the voice tells us:

I’d gone to the corner
when the bakery opened,

mouthing regards
to a rare sun, and then suddenly—

though not—I remember
nothing else.

I feel around me now
and everyone’s near

who waited for bread
or God one morning.

Nearly trembling in shock in the muted post-blast calmness, the persona here remarkably captures the ineffable experience of being on the receiving end of a bomb; in this case—it’s not

stated directly and that's the point—the speaker doesn't know "how this happened," though it's most likely something dropped in an air raid. Eschewing more mainstream and stereotypical images of war, Hogue, in this poem especially, crafts the voice in brief couplets which gradually explore the psyche of a civilian in the brief, but lifelong, aftermath of a bombing. Though, from a distance, an explosion might light up a landscape and burst into the sky with color and texture, being inside of a blast is quite the opposite: "instead," as the title suggests with numb understatement, "it is dark."

Hogue's book probes this darkness with linguistic acuity and deep humanity. As a whole, as Hogue explains in the book, the collection coincided with her husband's sudden heart attack (which he survives) and a dream he had about growing up during WWII in occupied France. This near-death tragedy, along with the dream, led Hogue on a years-long journey to excavate, through her husband's family history, the subtle ways in which families are fettered to the often invisible remnants of war. "Hope is the thing that fetters," one narrator proclaims, riffing off Dickinson, as they recount a man's life during the occupation. In the latter parts of the book, when Hogue elegizes lives lost in another American mass shooting, the speaker says, "among the scattering of lives after violence & minds suddenly unfettered." Another unforgettable poem, "memory holds a trace that at times rises into words," documents a conversation Hogue had with her sister, a news producer, about the complicated pain of covering mass shootings.

While some poems capture the aftermath of her husband's heart attack, the majority of the poems document life in occupied France during the war. Through dozens of interviews, research, and her own journeys to France, Hogue has produced a book that is a masterclass on docu-poetics. Capturing the voices of both children and adults swept up by events outside of their control, the collection delivers these narratives with an attention to stark detail and a

profound attention to voice. A young girl tries to describe, and reckon with, an attack and instead resorts to an image more innocuous, more joyful, probably as a means to escape the fear through memory: “planes I couldn’t see bombs I could as they hit / the whole town different parts lighting up / like a carousel going round and round and round.” Other characters explore the rhetoric of warmaking and try to navigate that often uncrossable divide between language and lived experience: “Question it doesn’t matter it’s just war always called *the* / just war. I saw through words used to just- / ify war...”

Though we might not like to acknowledge the two world wars’ dust and trauma still settling around us today, Hogue’s book displays our inextricable connection to that past violence. One child says that the “invaders / knocked like death at our door.” We, too, would like to keep those doors locked and closed. But one of Hogue’s epigraphs—from H.D., another poet who wrote on, and lived through, World War II—warns us: “There, as here, ruin opens / the tomb, the temple; enter, / there as here, there are no doors.”

Hugh Martin, an Iraq War veteran, is the author of *In Country* (BOA Editions, Ltd., 2018) and *The Stick Soldiers* (BOA Editions, Ltd., 2013). His essays and poetry have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *GQ*, *The American Scholar*, and many other publications. He teaches at the United States Air Force Academy.