

WENDY BISHOP

Before Wars

*"I once returned to Rome from Auschwitz,
full of indescribable terror,
only to fall in love with a young Roman woman
a few days later.
While I was embracing her,
I continued to think of Auschwitz
and of what I could do to help stop the evil.
I was 'playing' simultaneously
with terribly serious things
and with lighthearted, amusing ones,
and only by approaching the serious things, too,
as a game, with a sort of lucid nonchalance, day by day,
did I manage to accomplish anything at all."*

Upon the low mock mantelpiece
glazed with mirror tiles
into which my three year old son
toasts morning cereal with regimental flair,
four cut glass German goblets
form a family aftermath—ruby, cobalt,
two aqua-green. I inherit
my occupation-Army Major-father's
penchant for orderly collection,
remember my mother's fears:
that fabled British Army WAC, cultivated
through thirty moves and married years
until both (mother and her well groomed
"other") died, twinned suicides,
though separate by water and by years.
Image strong enough perhaps

still to haunt breath-dusted
crystal bowls with pale gold rims:
brunette, crisp uniform, ancestral accent,
serious games, essential lies.

The souvenirs, unsheathed, escape
Icelandic wool and fox fur lined
footlockers. Newspaper shrouds
proclaim old columned news
in codes of Japanese.
For years, the Hummel figurines—
clean-limbed imitation Aryan forms
danced across lacquer tables
upon our borrowed tatami floors.
My mother novelized her life.
With each unpacking, told tales:
silver spoons sold for survival
in the Rhineland “and the awful
hungered eyes”; told the metal weight
of a Korean gunner’s shell turned to a vase,
necessary trophy of inlaid mother-of-pearl
from her “and-this-is” hoard;
told of a friendship plate—
bold warriors Kabuki style
stride down its three foot face—
exchanged politely for a Western
wedding cake, sent back,
returned again, retained.

Secret design of the twenty-eighth move,
born last and nobody told back home,
to save all worry about conditions
in the dawn of the atomic world.
For proof, I have a silver birth cup,
engraved with full-haired women in robes,
brocade obis, plum blossom fans. I
tended it myself, answered to Wendy-Chan,
took sentiment’s place of honor

on her crowded china cupboard shelf,
votary to their world-on-the-move,
their excitable, almost love.
When, more often, she was not herself,
I never saw her cry, until the day,
vacuuming behind, she tripped the entire
hutch of wood and a rain of souvenirs fell,
pieces and fragments on hardwood floors
of that, our final house.

*"This country is so beautiful,
when the sun is shining on the mountains,
farmers in their rice paddies,
with their water buffalo, palm trees, monkeys, birds
and even the strange insects.
For a fleeting moment
I wasn't in a war zone at all,
just on vacation"*

The President says
the purpose of the summit
is to assure
there will never be another war.

On a summit, it is hard to imagine war
while water buffaloes shine encouragement
like winter suns and the palm trees dance ads
across the easily deceived eyelid.

Monkeys, who doesn't want to own
one? Momentarily, we did,
donated to my father's
divorce apartment, it bit and flew

through the house scolding, like a wizened
comrade of colonizing guilt. I caught

it in a pillowcase and held it, squirming,
frantic heart. Remember? Like a party game,

groping beneath a bed sheet put on
to blunt the outlines of cocktail-
triggered 1950s folk—is it her or him,
the one I am meant for, the one I want?

Remember? Childhood summers,
traveling the war-strong highways?
Or some of us did, in white collar
Silverstream packs, webbed patio chair prides.

Back then, my father claimed to know
Westmoreland, maybe Ike: we wanted
a President who looked war in the eye
and said he'd win. Or why else vote?

Reading *Dear America* on a summer
night, I cry and feel sick of my skin,
my tribe, my whipped up frenzy—why
read ahead to decipher foredoomed

codes: KIA, MIA, or, anticlimax, “today
an electrical designer with an architectural
firm in NYC” before reading the words?
Children always die. Or live
. . . .for a minute it wasn't a war zone at all

From a summit, we think we see,
but don't see water buffalo sloshing
circles of water in rising humidity. Insects
we have never imagined test tense surfaces.

Monkeys, our much maligned doubles—feast,
fight, escape chattering through high jungle;
frankly, they just yack and yack, jeering:
never again, never again, never again .

*“What if he came home? What would
he be like today? When I played
high school football, I always hoped
that one day a man would walk up to me
on the practice field and say,
Hi, I’m your dad.”*

Mother kept lists of infidelities,
Father kept making
or catching the pass.
What do I have against sports?
Just this: the myth of winning;
the brawny pat on the butt;
the way such talk goes around
and over and beyond but never gets at;
legions of men in formation
who go down on the fields of war
until Guerrilla tactics echo on
ghetto ball courts.
And the shouts at night of man’s aspiration
may be plain urban murder, or may
engender this hero’s son
who dreams they would play
together just once.

Rosie the Riveter raised four alone
those years
then gave up her job
with thanks when he came home.

Mother’s manic lists inform:
his mustering out pay covered
birth expense of the *other one*.
Second, ghostly family—
photos, letters, unexpected body

gracing the unstable earth
to mock her everyday.
We met once.

*"That one day a man
would walk up to me . . . "*

Father dead,
and with him several
very certain generations.
May we give
unacquainted grandsons
what discouragement we can
for such manly and
terrible training.

*"Yes I do think our landing on the moon
was quite an achievement . . . I really
sweated out the time between the landing
and the takeoff once they were up there.
I only hope man doesn't go off
and louse up the rest of the solar system
with his pollution and family quarrels
like he has Mother Earth . . .
The light is getting bad now—
and for obvious reasons
there'll be no light after dark,
so I've got to sign off. I'll mail you this
when I get off the hill in two more days.
If you've got time and want to,
I'll let you write me (honest)
All letters accepted cheerfully
and answered when possible.
When not possible to answer all letters,
I'll answer in spirit."*

I was a girl, ignoring news,
on a California beach,
boyfriends looking for low draft numbers
or stationed in White Sands
sending turquoise jewelry.
So, what was the moon to me?
Much like my father's stories—
men in air-filled uniforms
would save us all,
and the hit-parade
of KACY 1520 would keep on coming.
Of course, I too later
could cry at isolate
footsteps on the cratered scape,
but girls can cry at anything
at seventeen. And boys,
they seemed then
to leave from other cities,
to not come home.

*“Do you remember the picture
that I had taken in front of the house
just before I went on active duty?
Well I found it in the bunch of pictures
and it no more looks like me
than the man in the moon.
Now I seem to be about twice as big
and three times as old.”*

My father argued enlistment
and solidarity,
from the summit of separation,
from the bunkers of remarriage.
Step-brothers turned the music
up loud, sang: “Fuck yourself.”
Escalation on every front,
TV adolescence, a new and skew ecology:
small pledges re: paper products;

muted dialogs between conscience
and commerce. Adversity always
helps Americans reinvent themselves.

*"I'll send a crate with my steel cot
and wall locker
and at least one more footlocker.
If I have too much stuff
to go in one footlocker
I'll buy another."*

In my teens science fiction
held the most alluring promise
and the most foreboding death:
astronauts marooned as the capsule
drifts into unplumbed depths.
In the safe trajectory of books,
note how these men
always regain
the cut glass bowl of Earth.

*"The light is getting bad—
and for obvious reasons
there'll be no light after dark"*

My three year old
toasts morning cereal.

The President says
the reasons for the summit.

I continued to think
of what I could do to stop the evil.

*"We are supposed to go about 60 miles
north of Pusan to a town by the name
of Haso-ri.
The only thing holding us here now
is politics."*

Only day by day,
do I manage to accomplish
anything at all.

Ruby, cobalt, aqua-green
what can be pieced
with materiel
from memory's highest shelf?

*"And please God
it won't be so long now
until I can be with you again.
Then we will have thirty days
to enjoy ourselves
and for me to get acquainted
with my daughter.*

This country is so beautiful.
Do you remember the picture?
The light is getting bad.
The only thing holding us here now
is politics. And please God
it won't be so long now.

Notes

"I once returned to Rome . . ."—"Profiles (Hans Deichmann)" by Harvey Sachs. *The New Yorker*, June 4, 1990.

"This country is so beautiful"—*Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*, PFC George Williams, April 1967.

"What if he came home? What would he be like today?" "We Never Knew Our Fathers" by Al Santoli. *Parade Magazine*, May 27, 1990.

"Yes I do think our landing on the moon"—*Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*, Sp/4 George T. Olsen. KIA 3 March 1970, age 23.

"I'll send a crate" and "Do you remember . . ." and "And Please God" V-Mail letters, Robert Loomis Bishop to Lillian Hagen Bishop, written from Iceland, 1940-1943. "The only thing that is holding us now . . ." Letter written aboard the Gen. Randall, Docked at Pusan, 27 December, 1950. From Robert Loomis Bishop to Lillian Hagen Bishop.

materiel—weapons and equipment of armed forces in combat

Wendy Bishop teaches writing at Florida State University. Her poetry, fiction and essays appear regularly in literary and composition journals. Her most recent book is a co-edited collection (with Hans Ostrom), *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing, Theory and Pedagogy*. Her guide to writing poetry, *Thirteen Ways of Looking for a Poem* will appear next year from Longman USA.