How to Write Violence
A Practicum

Donald Anderson / From the Editor's Desk

Collage, the art of reassembling fragments of the preexisting images in such a way as to form a new image, was the most important innovation in the art of the twentieth century . . .

—Charles Simic reflecting on Joseph Cornell

1

A camel has collapsed from exhaustion in the street outside the house. It is too heavy to transport to the slaughter-house so a couple of men come with axes and cut it up there and then in the open street, alive. They hack through the white flesh—the poor creature looking ever more pained, more aristocratic, more puzzled as its legs are hacked off. Finally there is the head still alive, the eyes open, looking round. Not a scream of protest, not a struggle. The animal submits like a palm-tree. But for days afterwards the mud street is soaked in its blood and our bare feet are printed by the moisture.

—Lawrence Durrell, from *Justine*

2

Later, high in the mountains, we came across a baby VC water buffalo. What it was doing there I don't know—no farms or paddies—but we chased it down and got a rope around it and led it along to a deserted village where we set up for the night. After supper Rat Kiley went over and stroked its nose.

He opened up a can of C rations, pork and beans, but the baby buffalo wasn't interested.

Rat shrugged.

He stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. He shot it in the hindquarters and in the little hump in its back. He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn't a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo. Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world. Later in the week he would write a long personal letter to the guy's sister, who would not write back, but for now it was a question of pain. He shot off the tail. He shot away chunks of meat below the ribs. All around us there was the smell of smoke and filth and deep greenery, and the evening was humid and very hot. Rat went to automatic. He shot randomly, almost casually, quick little spurts in the belly and butt. Then he reloaded, squatted down, and shot it in the left front knee. Again the animal fell hard and tried to get up, but this time it couldn't quite make it. It wobbled and went down sideways. Rat shot it in the nose. He bent forward and whispered something, as it talking to a pet, then he shot it in the throat. All the while the baby buffalo was silent, or almost silent, just a light bubbling sound where the nose had been. It lay very still. Nothing moved except the eyes, which were enormous, the pupils shiny black and dumb.

Rat Kiley was crying. He tried to say something, but then cradled his rifle and went off by himself.

—Tim O'Brien, from "How to Tell a True War Story"

3

I see Jeter firing into a corpse with his M16. The corpse is dancing. Jeter is red-faced, like a thwarted child. His eyes are all pupil. This is the kid who most often makes me laugh, who makes me feel most protective, the eighteen-year-old whose parents had to sign for him when he joined up at seventeen. He empties one magazine and slaps in another. He fires again into the corpse. The corpse dances, arms and legs flail, the flat face peeling off the shattered skull, the pink-blue brains scattering, the ground black with blood. Jeter stops suddenly, looks dazed.

—Doug Anderson, from *Keep Your Head Down*

4

Two of the women were in their twenties, the third was an old lady. Someone had shot her in the mouth and her shattered dentures cascaded with her own teeth down her front like mashed melon pips. One girl had been shot repeatedly in the chest. It was difficult to tell whether the other had had her throat cut or been shot; a great gash of blood crescented her neck. The expression on their faces had survived the damage. It was so clear. A time-valve that opened directly on to those last moments. So you saw what they saw. I hope beyond hope that I never see it again.

In the recess of the shed something moved. It was a cow. The only survivor in Stupni Do. Someone had pulled a large plastic barrel over its head. The neck of the barrel fitted tightly around that of the beast, whose horns impaled the sides, keeping it locked in place. It must have taken a great amount of time and energy to bring the cow to this state: unable to see or eat.

So that was how we spent our last few minutes in the dusk in Stupni Do. Fighting the impulse that wanted our legs to kick us out of that place as fast and far away as possible,

wrestling in a shed with a cow and a plastic barrel watched by three murdered women. Pulling and cursing and grunting with a torch that barely worked and a pathetic penknife because we wanted the cow to live. We wanted the cow to be able to see and eat again. We wanted that more than anything.

—Anthony Loyd, from *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*

5

You could do anything you wanted—shit, I was eighteen—kill anyone or anything in Vietnam and get away with it. It was like being drunk and walking around with a hard-on.

—Theodore Nadelson, from *Trained to Kill: Soldiers at War*

6

Nothing has changed.

The body is susceptible to pain,

It must eat and breathe air and sleep,

it has thin skin and blood right underneath,

an adequate stock of teeth and nails,

its bones are breakable, its joints are stretchable.

In tortures all this is taken into account.

—Wislawa Szymborska, from "Tortures"

7

In Midwestern farmlands rustling wheatcrowns,

spreading out with alfalfa and sorghum, sprouting corn,

I thought I was lost, in the crickets and songbirds,

But tire whine and bumper glare kept me on course

and when I picked up the soldier mugged in the bus station,

teeth kicked in, wallet taken, hitching back to base in Waco

to his tank-repair unit readying for another Iraq war

I knew I was on the right road, running like a lifeline

across the palm of America.

—John Balaban, from "Highway 61 Revisited"

8

Lynching, the first scholar of the subject determined, is an American invention. Lynching from bridges, from arches, from trees standing alone in fields, from trees in front of the county courthouse, from trees used as public billboards, from trees barely able to support the weight of a man, from telephone poles, from streetlamps, and from poles erected solely for that purpose. . . . The [telephone] poles, of course, were not to blame. It was only coincidence that they became convenient as gallows, because they were tall and straight, with a crossbar, and because they stood in public places. And it was only coincidence that the telephone poles so closely resembled crucifixes.

—Eula Biss, from *Notes from No Man's Land*

9

From the First World War—a soldier marches through a ruined village:

Just past the last house on the left was a small pond, whence protruded the grey-clad knee of a dead German. The water around him was green and on his knee was perched a large rat making a meal.

From the Second World War—a German infantryman is retreating on the Russian front:

We had just passed a bunker in which we noticed a body lying at the bottom. Two emaciated cats were eating one of its hands.

From the Vietnam War—a young officer remembers:

A man saw the heights and depths of human behavior in Vietnam, all manner of violence and horrors so grotesque that they evoked more fascination than disgust. Once I had seen pigs eating napalm-charred corpses—a memorable sight, pigs eating roast people.

—Samuel Hynes, from *The Soldier's Tale*

10

When I landed a few feet up the trail from the booby-trapped howitzer round that I had detonated, I felt as if I had been airborne forever. . . . I thought initially that the loss of my glasses in the explosion accounted for my blurred vision, and I had no idea that the pink mist that engulfed me had been caused by the vaporization of most of my right and left legs. As shock began to numb my body, I could see through a haze of pain that my right thumb and little finger were missing, as was most of my left hand, and I could smell the charred flesh which

extended from my right wrist upward to the elbow. I knew that I had finished serving my time in the hell of Vietnam.

—Lewis Puller, Jr., from *Fortunate Son*

11

In Poland alone, 860,000 Jews were resettled, with 75,000 Germans taking over the acquired lands. 1,300,000 Poles were shipped to Germany as slave labor, with another 330,000 being simply shot. The invading Germans, remaining Poles and Jews now stood in bread lines or, rather, three separate lines. Germans received 2,613 calories, Poles 669, Jews 184.

—see Diane Ackerman, from *The Zookeeper's Wife*

12

Now this is halfway round the world

the other side with all its smell

and it's almost like

you don't have to care

or there is no need

until somebody *eats* it,

buys the farm and then

all Asia bears down;

you never been so put upon

your whole life and it is your life

so you are moaning *it don't mean nothin'*

and it doesn't

and that's why you keep track of

it's all you care about and that's too much

one more day, one more dark

one more dying:

so you lie awake and repeat

hometown, girl friend

say *'59 Ford coupe*

—D.F. Brown, from "Keeping Days and Numbers Together"

13

In the moment after the explosion, an old man

staggers in the cloud of dust and debris, hands

pressed hard against bleeding ears

as if to block out the noise of the world

at 11:40 A.M., the broken sounds of the wounded

rising around him, roughened by pain.

Buildings catch fire. Cafes.

Stationary shops. The Renaissance Bookstore.

A huge column of smoke, a black anvil head

pluming upward, fueled by the *Kitah al-Aghani*.

Al-Isfahani's *Book of Songs*, the elegies of Khansa,

the exile poetry of Youssef and al-Azzawi,

religious tracts, manifestos, translations

of Homer, Shakespeare, Whitman, and Neruda—

these book-leaves curl in the fire's

blue-tipped heat, and the long centuries

handed down from one person to another, verse

by verse, rise over Baghdad.

—Brian Turner, from "The Mutanabbi Street Bombing"

14

In the 20th century, civilized people killed 150 million other civilized people.

15

The sun had struggled all day behind monsoon clouds before finally being extinguished by the turning earth and the dark wet ridges of the Annamese Cordillera. It was February 1969, in Quang Tri province, Vietnam. Zoomer lay above my hole in monsoon-night blackness on the slick clay of Mutter's Ridge, the dark jungle-covered ridge paralleling Vietnam's demilitarized zone where the Third Marine Division and the North Vietnamese Army had struggled together for two years. A bullet had gone through Zoomer's chest, tearing a large hole out of his back.

We kept him on his side, curled against the cold drizzle, so the one good lung wouldn't fill up with blood. We were surrounded and there was no hope of evacuation, even in the daylight. The choppers couldn't find us in the fog-shrouded mountains.

I heard Zoomer all night, panting as if he were running the 400, one lung doing for two and a body in shock. In and out. In, the fog, the sighing sound of monsoon wind through the jungle. Out, the painful breath. Zoomer had to go all night. If he slept, he'd die. So no morphine. Pain was the key to life.

To help him stay awake, and to calm my own fear, I'd crawl over to him to whisper stories.

—Karl Marlantes, from *What It Is Like To Go To War*

16

The next time you're with a group of around forty people, perhaps at a meeting, maybe on a city bus, imagine them all with the lean hard bodies of eighteen- to twenty-year old men. Arm them all with automatic rifles, rockets, and grenades. Add three machine guns and a supply of bullets backed by the industrial might of America. Understand that these armed young men will do, without question, absolutely anything you ask. Now add in the power to call in jet aircraft that shake the earth with engine noise alone and can spew jellied fire over entire football fields, make craters big enough to block freeways, and fire lead so thick and fast that it would pulp the body of a cow in an eyeblink. Add to this artillery with shells as thick as your waist and naval gunfire with shells the weight of Volkswagens. And you're twenty-one or twenty-two and immortal. And no one will ever ask a single question.

—Ibid.

17

re: What Fascists Do

Work to co-opt the justice system; work to diminish the Free Press; work to scapegoat large groups of humans.

18

It was pointless to tell the truth to anyone who crossed the threshold of the crematorium. You couldn't save anyone there. It was impossible to save people. One day in 1943 when I was already in Crematorium 5, a train from Bialystok arrived. A prisoner on the "special detail" saw a woman in the "undressing room" who was the wife of a friend of his. He came right out and told her: "You are going to be exterminated. In three hours you'll be ashes." The woman believed him because she knew him. She ran all over and warned the other women. "We're going to be killed. We're going to be gassed." Mothers carrying their children on their shoulders didn't want to hear that. They decided the woman was crazy. They chased her away. So she went to the men. To no avail. Not that they didn't believe her: they'd heard rumors in the Bialystok ghetto, or in Grodno, and elsewhere. But who wanted to hear that! When she saw that no one would listen, she scratched her whole face. Out of despair. In shock. And she started to scream.

So what happened? Everyone was gassed. The woman was held back. We had to line up in front of the ovens. First, they tortured her horribly because she wouldn't betray him. In the end she pointed to him. He was taken out of the line and thrown alive into the oven.

—Filip Müller, from *Shoah*

19

Shoah is a Hebrew word meaning *catastrophe*. It is often used as a replacement word for *Holocaust*.

20

Stanislas Lefranc, a devout Catholic and monarchist, was a Belgian prosecutor who had come to the Congo to work as a magistrate. Early one Sunday morning in Leopoldville, he heard the sound of many children screaming desperately.

On tracing the howls to the source, Lefranc found "some thirty urchins, of whom several were seven or eight years old, lined up and waiting their turn, watching, terrified, their companions being flogged. Most of the urchins, in a paroxysm of grief . . . kicked so frightfully that the soldiers ordered to hold them by the hands and feet had to lift them off the ground. . . . 25 times the whip slashed down on each of the children." The evening before, Lefranc learned, several children had laughed in the presence of a white man, who then ordered that all servant boys in town be given fifty lashes. The second installment of twenty-five lashes was due at six o'clock the next morning. Lefranc managed to get these stopped, but was told not to make any more protests that interfered with discipline.

Lefranc was seeing in use a central tool of Leopold's Congo, which in the minds of the territory's people, soon became as closely identified with white rule as the steamboat or rifle. It was the *chicotte*—a whip of raw, sun-dried hippopotamus hide, cut into a long sharp-edged cork-screw strip. Usually the *chicotte* was applied to the victim's bare buttocks. Its blows would leave permanent scars; more than twenty-five strokes could mean unconsciousness; and a hundred or more—not an uncommon punishment—were often fatal.

—Adam Hochschild, from *King Leopold's Ghost*

21

Except for Lefranc, few Europeans working for the regime left records of their shock at the sight of officially sanctioned terror. The white men who passed through the territory as military officers, steamboat captains, or state or concession company officials generally accepted the use of the *chicotte* as unthinkingly as hundreds of thousands of other men in uniform would accept their assignments, a half-century later, to staff the Nazi and Soviet concentration camps. "Monsters exist," wrote Primo Levi of experience at Auschwitz. "But they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are . . . the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions."

What made it possible for the functionaries in the Congo to so blithely watch the *chicotte* in action and . . . to deal out pain and death in other ways as well? To begin with, of course, was race. To Europeans, Africans were inferior beings: lazy, uncivilized, little better than animals. In fact, the most common way they were put to work was, like animals, as beasts of burden. In any system of terror, the functionaries must first of all see the victims as less than human, and Victorian ideas about race provided such a foundation.

—Ibid.

22

Historians will tell you my uncle

wouldn't have called it *World War II*

or the *Great War plus One* or *Tombstone*

over My Head. All this language

came later. He and his buddies

knew it as *get my ass outta here*

or *fucking trench foot* and of course

sex please now. Petunias are an apology

for ignorance, my confidence

that saying *high-density bombing*

or *chunks of brain in cold coffee*

even suggest the athleticism

of his flinch or how casually

he picked the pieces out.

—Bob Hicok, from "The semantics of flowers on Memorial Day"

23

re: The French Revolution

Men will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.

—Denis Diderot

24

I'd start with an obscenity

a fat man in boils

pointing to the battle on a map

the queen secreting away her only son

disguised as a beggar

a labyrinth of sewers

spilling into the sea

an old man's rowboat

and a week's rations

a storm of men panting

behind the tree line

fletchers tearing asunder birds for arrows

pulling taut the gut strain of winches

locking down the catapults

the bones of philosophers tossed in dungeons

as deep as the earth's core

—M.K. Sukach, from "Raising the Dogs of War"

25

In Iraq, dirt was the environment. The soil was capable of rising above ground-level, billowing into atmospheric clouds, moving, the landscape shedding its skin. In June, when my mother was watching seedlings emerge from moist earth, I wrote home about the desertic soil:

It is now hot enough to sweat spinal fluid. Truly miserable and not yet even July. Dust storms have poured out of the dry spaces to the west. The air turns opaque with an orange tan of migrating particles. They move with the freedom of the air that moves them and cannot be kept out of anything. Eyes, nose, weapons. Dust seems to seek the places that it becomes most noticeable. When the wind finally thins, the entire city is left covered with a fragile layer of fine powder. The resident dust beneath is revealed to be a different, older hue of dirt by the first footsteps of the next day. More gray than colored, as if it has aged by settling. Our trudging begins the blending of sediments. Of dunes and riverbeds. Of bones and buildings. Mountains and of what lies beneath. There is something to be said about being dust. It is where we are all heading.

Northern Africa had the highest fecal content blowing in its winds, Kuwait had grit, Los Angeles had petroleum soot, central New York had my dander, and Iraq would have death in its dust. The Pentagon was still denying Gulf War syndrome as veterans hollowed out and died from it in VA hospitals. T.S. Eliot wrote, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." There was something else in the air with all of that dust and ash.

—Benjamin Busch, from *Dust to Dust*

26

The army wanting credit for using lead-free paint on artillery shells?

27

No weapon frightens me as much as the shell. Bullets have a certain logic. Put a sizeable enough piece of concrete between yourself and the firer and you will be untouched. Run between cover, for it is difficult even for an experienced shot to hit a man who sprints fast. Even when people around you are hit the wounds seldom seem so bad, unless the bullet has tumbled in flight or hit them in the head. But shells? They can do things to the human body you never believed possible; turn it inside out like a steaming rose; bend it backwards and through itself; chop it up; shred it; pulp it: mutilations so base and vile they never stopped revolting me. And there is no real cover from shellfire. Shells can drop out of the sky to your feet, or smash their way through any piece of architecture to find you. Some of the ordnance the Russians were using was slicing through ten-storey buildings before exploding in the basement. Shells could arrive silently and unannounced, or whistle and howl their way in, a sound that somehow seems to tear at your nerves more than warn you of anything. It's only the detonation which always seems the same—a feeling as much as a sound, a hideous suck-roar-thump that in itself, should you be close enough, can collapse your palate and liquefy your brain.

—from *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*

28

There is a philosophical element to it all too: a bullet may or may not have your number on it, but I am sure all shells are merely engraved with 'to whom it may concern.'

In Sarajevo there were times when we thought it was a bad day if a few hundred shells fell on the city. During the second half of the battle for Grozny the Russians sometimes fired

over 30,000 shells a day into the southern sector. It was an area less than a third the size of Sarajevo.

And so Grozny had the life torn out of it by the second most powerful military machine on the planet and the lethal dynamic were breathtaking in every sense. A concrete killing zone, it was as if a hurricane of shrapnel had swept through every street, leaving each perspective bearing the torn, pitted scars, the irregular bites of high-explosive ordnance. The remaining trees were shredded and blasted horizontal, while the snow on the pavements became covered in a crunching carpet of shattered glass.

Artillery, tanks, mortars, rocket systems, jet aircraft, helicopter gunships—the permutations of incoming fire were endless. It left the dead plentiful: dead people blown out of their flats; dead pigeons blown out of their roosts; dead dogs blown off the street. Death became too frequent and too abundant to deal with, so that often the bodies were left where they had fallen to become landmarks in their own right: 'Turn left past the dead guy with the yellow shopping bag and his wife, then right to Minutka . . .'

—Ibid.

29

The woman in Pakistan who was raped—and under Muslim law convicted of adultery and sentenced to be stoned to death.

—David Markson, from *Vanishing Point*

30

August 6

God's Bomb

In 1945, while this day was dawning, Hiroshima lost its life. The atomic bomb's first appearance incinerated this city and people in an instant.

The few survivors, mutilated sleepwalkers, wandered among the smoking ruins. The burns on their naked bodies carried the stamp of the clothing they were wearing when the explosion hit. On what remained of the walls, the atom bomb's flash left silhouettes of what had been: a woman with her arms raised, a man, a tethered horse.

Three days later, President Harry Truman spoke about the bomb over the radio.

He said: "We thank God that it has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes."

—Eduardo Galeano, from *Children of the Days*

31

re: the fuller quote

In such condition there is . . . no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

—Thomas Hobbes, from *Leviathan*

32

At the age of twenty-four, I was more prepared for death than I was for life. My first experience of the world outside the classroom had been war. I went straight from school into the Marine Corps, from Shakespeare to the *Manual of Small-Unit Tactics*, from the campus to the drill field and finally Vietnam. I learned the murderous trade at Quantico, Virginia, practiced it in the rice paddies and jungles around Danang, and then taught it to others at Camp Geiger, a training base in North Carolina.

When my three-year enlistment expired in 1967, I was almost completely ignorant about the stuff of ordinary life, about marriage, mortgages, and building a career. I had a degree, but no skills. I had never run an office, taught a class, built a bridge, welded, programmed a computer, laid bricks, sold anything, or operated a lathe.

But I had acquired some expertise in the art of killing. I knew how to face death and how to cause it, with everything on the evolutionary scale of weapons from the knife to the 3.5-inch rocket launcher. The simplest repairs on an automobile engine were beyond me, but I was able to field-strip and assemble an M-14 rifle blindfolded, I could call in artillery, set up an ambush, rig a booby trap, lead a night raid.

—Philip Caputo, from *A Rumor of War*

33

There were a bunch of guys like me at Walter Reed—severe burn cases, the faceless. You would think we would have hung out together, but we avoided it as much as possible. We all looked the same; being around one another was like looking in a mirror. None of us wanted that. We wanted to forget.

Sleed was not faceless. He was okay—a few scars—but mostly intact. Back at Camp War Eagle, he had been standing beside me in the awards ceremony, both of us receiving commendation medals from the Division Commander, when the suicide bomber ran up and exploded himself. Sleed lost his cock and balls and one of his legs above the knee. My privates survived the blast—my right leg shielded them—but I was never going to need them again, not with how I looked. I don't know how it was Sleed took most of the shrapnel while I got the brunt of the fireball. There's no explaining these things.

—Brian Van Reet, from "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek"

34

He realized that his legs could not be saved, one was shattered, but both were long ago frozen and without feeling, probably in unarrestable gangrene, but he well knew that life without his legs was a question of amputations and adjustment. He accepted that—if only he could live. He had also largely lost feeling in his torn and frozen hands, and he wondered if, indeed, it was a sentimentality to believe that he would be willing to live life as a quadruple paraplegic. He considered that question soberly and long and knew that, yes, he could accept that—if only he could live. He knew that life was more impossible than that, that after this long time of freezing he probably had pneumonia and, to judge by his chest pain and his occasional lapsing away towards unconsciousness, he probably was ill and shattered in some way beyond reparation, and he wondered if he was willing to accept his quadriplegic life if he were not surrounded by the love of those he loved. So one by one, he thought of those he loved: of Lee, who was his girl, who was the center of his life—and he knew that he would be willing to live, if he lost her, without her, for could he, after all, wish upon her what he would be if he survived? And, similarly,

he thought long and carefully about his brother and mother and father, and slowly, reluctantly, let each fall from his hands, fall from his consciousness, knowing that life, to be had at all, had to be had at that severe a cost, the loss of all and every one of them. It was not as though he were falling into death, so much as he was releasing them, one by one, to a great darkness, letting them fall like irreplaceable jeweled stones of solid weight irretrievably through space and away into an impenetrable darkness. They were the sacrifices and the cost. Not he. At last he, seeing himself alone, in an empty room in a ward somewhere, and without a soul about him, near him, caring for or aware of his existence, he asked, BUT WHAT IF you were not only a quadruple amputee but also blind? Could you accept life on those conditions? Yes, yes, said his heart. Yes. But what if you were not only a quadriplegic blind man but also deaf and dumb? You know what I am saying, you hear what I am saying? And he, inside himself, shouted, yes, yes. Even then, Yes! All right, You, You Nameless, you Trunk of Body, you Flesh, you Thing, what if you were only Torso, to be propped by day against the rotting doorway of a shitted mud hut in the wastes of Siberia, and deaf and dumb and blind? Would you truly settle for life on those terms? And he felt the soft wind of evening go across his cheek, and he said yes, yes, if only to feel the warmth of sunlight in the morning move across the side of my face, to be able to feel the coolness coming on of evening, if only to feel the wind touch my hair, touch my cheek, if only that.

—Robert E. Gajdusek, from *Resurrection: A War Journey*

35

When we allow mythic reality to rule, as it almost always does in war, then there is only one solution—force. In mythic war we fight absolutes. We must vanquish darkness. It is imperative

and inevitable for civilization, for the free world, that good triumph, just as Islamic militants see us as infidels whose existence corrupts the pure Islamic society they hope to build.

The potency of myth is that it allows us to make sense of mayhem and violent death. It gives a justification to what is often nothing more than gross human cruelty and stupidity. It allows us to believe we have achieved our place in human society because of a long chain of heroic endeavors, rather than accept the sad reality that we stumble along a dimly lit corridor of disasters. It disguises our powerlessness. It hides from view our own impotence and the ordinariness of our own leaders. By turning history into myth we transform random events into a chain of events by a will greater than our own, one that is determined and preordained. We are elevated above the multitude. We march toward nobility. And no society is immune.

The hijacking of language is fundamental to war.

—Chris Hedges, from *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*

36

re: Religious Wars

Fighting to decide who has the better imaginary friend . . .

37

Tu Fu wrote that poetry is useless,

in a poem alive these thousand years.

Today our news is much the same.

Near Srebrenica, skulls dot fields

like cabbages, while in Rwanda,

the short tribe hacked up the tall.

"Blood is smeared on bush and grass,"

yet poetry persists through slaughter,

as if the systoles in our raging hearts

held rhythms that could heal, if heard.

—John Balaban, from "Reading the News and Thinking of the T'ang Poets"

38

Beneath the swarm of high-flying planes we were eating watermelon. While the bombs fell on Belgrade. We watched the smoke rise in the distance. We were hot in the garden and asked to take our shirts off. The watermelon made a ripe, cracking noise as my mother cut it with a big knife. We also heard what we thought was thunder, but when we looked up, the sky was cloudless and blue.

—Charles Simic, from "Three Fragments"

39

A 122-millimeter rocket is seventy-five inches long and carries one hundred pounds of explosives. This one had been so close to the bunker that we hadn't heard it come the way you heard the ones that pass. They sound like a train you might hear in your sleep, or like a storm in the dark. We didn't hear it come but we heard it hit, an explosion that shattered my hearing for

weeks to come. By the time we got to him he was drowning in his own blood. He had one boot on and his eyes were so wide I wanted to close them. He's taken a large piece of rocket shrapnel in his throat and the artery there was gushing. He was trying to cough up his own blood that was drowning him and that his whole body heaved against. The medic was too far away to help and the rockets still roared in around us. One boy with me in the bunker tried to press against the Captain's throat to make the bleeding stop, but the shirt he held there quickly soaked through with blood. I tried to hold Captain Carter down; he heaved so powerfully we were afraid he'd tear his heart out. We didn't know what to do. His eyes looked back and forth frantically at each of us, looking for an answer we didn't know. When his coughing and gurgling got loud and sounded like it came from deep in his chest, I suddenly put my mouth over his neck where the shrapnel had torn a hole. I hadn't thought about it. I found myself trying to suck the blood from his throat and lungs before I realized what I was doing. I remember that the other boys looked at me with such a great sadness that I thought they wanted me to stop. I know now that they knew it was too late and they were sad because they saw I didn't know. I began to suck the blood out of the Captain's throat. I thought if he could breathe again, he'd have a chance.

—Bruce Weigl, from *The Circle of Hanh*

40

The next morning we got up, brushed ourselves off, cleared away the air-strike garbage—the firefight junk and jungle junk—and dusted off the walking wounded and the litter wounded and the body bags. And the morning after that, just as right as rain, James, we saddled up our rucksacks and slugged off into the deepest, baddest part of the Goongone Forest north of our base camp at Phuc Luc, looking to kick some ass—anybody's ass (can you dig it, James?)—and

take some names. Yessiree! We hacked and humped our way from one end of that goddamned woods to the other—crisscrossing wherever our whim took us—no more sophisticated of complicated or elegant than an organized gang; looking to nail any and all of that goddamned giggling slime we came across to the barn door. Then one bright and cheery morning when our month was up, Private First Class Elijah Raintree George Washington Carver Jones (Jonesy for short, James) had thirty-nine pairs of blackened, leathery, wrinkly ears strung on a bit of black commo wire and wrapped like a garland around that bit of turned-out brim of his steel helmet. He had snipped the ears off with a pearl-handled straight razor just as quick and slick as you'd lance a boil the size of a baseball—snicker-snack—the way he bragged his uncle could skin a poached deer. He cured the ears a couple of days by tucking them under that bit of turned-out brim of his steel helmet, then toted them crammed in a spare sock. . . . Jonesy sat up way after dark stringing those ears on that bit of black wire and sucking snips of C-ration beefsteak through his teeth.

—Larry Heineman, from *Paco's Story*

41

Kien knows the area well. It was here, at the end of the dry season of 1969, that his 27th Battalion was surrounded and almost totally wiped out. Ten men survived from the Lost Battalion after fierce, horrible, barbarous fighting.

That was the dry season when the sun burned harshly, the wind blew fiercely, and the enemy sent napalm spraying through the jungle and a sea of fire enveloped them, spreading like the fires of hell. Troops in the fragmented companies tried to regroup, only to be blown out of their shelters again as they went mad, became disoriented, and threw themselves into nets of

bullets, dying in the flaming inferno. Above them the helicopters flew at treetop height and shot them almost one by one, the blood spreading out, spraying from their backs, flowing like red mud

The diamond-shaped grass clearing was piled high with bodies killed by helicopter gunships. Broken bodies, bodies blown apart, bodies vaporized.

No jungle grew again in this clearing. No grass. No plants.

—Bao Ninh, from *The Sorrow of War*

42

The world's most powerful hydrogen bomb detonated on October 30, 1961, over Novaya Zemlya in the Soviet Union. The bomb had an explosive force of 58 megatons, 6,000 times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. Dropped by an aircraft, and detonated 1,200 feet above the earth's surface, the Novaya Zemlya shock wave circled the planet three times, the mushroom cloud extending 38 miles into the atmosphere.

43

My first shot had missed him, embedding itself in the straw wall, but the second caught him dead-on in the femoral artery. His left thigh blossomed, swiftly turning to mush. A wave of blood gushed from the wound; then another boiled out, sheeting across his legs, pooling on the earthen floor. Mutely, he looked down at it. He dipped a hand in it and listlessly smeared his cheek red. His shoulders gave a little spasmodic jerk, as though someone had whacked him on the back; he then emitted a tremendous, raspy fart, slumped down, and died. I kept firing, wasting government property. Already I thought I detected the dark brown effluvium of the

freshly slain, a sour, pervasive emanation which is different from anything you have known. Yet seeing death at this range, like smelling it, requires no previous experience. You instantly recognize it in the spastic convulsion and the rattle, which in his case was not loud, but deprecating and conciliatory, like the manners of the civilian Japanese. He continued to sink and he reached the earthen floor. His eyes glazed over. Almost immediately, a fly landed on his left eyeball.

—William Manchester, from *Goodbye Darkness*

44

There were six in my bay. It was my turn on duty for a couple of hours. They said, 'Let's go to the next bay; they've got some cards in there—we can have a game of cards.' Away these other five went. That made about twelve in their bay and only me in this one. All of a sudden there's one—God, honestly and truly I'll never know what happened—it was such a bloody explosion and it blew me, the sandbags, the barbed wire all in a bloody heap. I just don't know what happened, it must have fallen quite near me. While I was trying to get myself together a young officer came along, he says, 'You all right?' I said, 'Yes.' I was a bit dazed. I said, 'Where did that shell fall, then?' He said, 'You should see the next bay, all dead, all of them!' He said, 'Can you help me dig them out?' I was half dazed myself. He got another man, but when we got round the bay he put his hand to his forehead and said, 'Oh Sir, I can't look at them, I can't touch them! It makes me ill to see them!' We got down to it and did the best we could. Pulling bits and pieces out. We got hold of a fellow's neck bone—his head was off—to pull him out of the loose earth and all it was was his two legs and his backbone. Next one the shell had scalped him, so that all his skull was

peeled white, a hole in the skull. As I tried to get my hand under his chin, all his brains shot out all over my arm. . . . The officer got his water bottle out, got some rum, and we had a good sip.

—Private William Holbrook, 4th Royal Fusiliers, *Voices from the Front*

45

"Man, I'm glad I didn't see any dead little children," Garza says.

"How do you think we would feel if someone came into our country and lit us up like this? Carazales says. "South of Al Gharraf I know I shot a building with a bunch of civilians in it. Everyone else was lighting it up. Then we found out there were civilians in there. It's fucked up." Carazales works himself into a rage. "I think it's bullshit how these fucking civilians are dying! They're worse off than the guys that are shooting at us. They don't even have a chance. Do you think people at home are going to see this—all these women and children we're killing? Fuck no. Back home they're glorifying this motherfucker, I guarantee you. Saying our president is a fucking hero for getting us into this bitch. He ain't even a real Texan."

—Evan Wright, from *Generation Kill*

46

They have mandatory boxing at the United States Air Force Academy where I teach. Makes sense to me. If you are going to drop things on people's heads, unscathed from the sky, you should, at least once in your life, get hit in the face. Make sense?

47

Everybody suffers: War, sickness, poverty, hunger, oppression, prison, exile, bigotry, loss, madness, rape, addiction, age, loneliness. We suffer, depending on our religions or ideological

convictions, because we are born in sin; because God has chosen us; because he is punishing us; because we are bound by craving and illusion; because suffering makes us better. We suffer because some of our cells are programmed, when exposed to certain biological stressors, to turn cancerous. We suffer because some of us have nothing and others have everything and those with everything want even more. We suffer because some reptilian portion of the brain delights in murder and sways not only individuals but entire nations to its purposes. We suffer because at a very early age we learn that we are going to die and spend the rest of our lives in dread of it.

Everybody suffers, but Americans have the peculiar delusion that they're exempt from suffering. In support of that statement one might cite everything from the rate of medical malpractice claims to the national epidemic of incomprehension and rage that followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when in a matter of moments the distant, negligible world was revealed to be no longer *there* but *here*, its breath hot in our faces.

—Peter Trachtenberg, from *The Book of Calamities*

48

Ezra Pound once suggested Homer was an army doctor because of his keen descriptions of the honor displayed and the horror rendered in combat deaths. I seek honor in my posthistorical air war, but it is difficult to match deeds with the ancients. I am cloaked in the conceit of technology.

I look down at a map and figure angles and distances in my head based on our current heading. The Greek Peloponnese is off our nose, out of sight, over the horizon. Ancient Sparta. I

look up and left, past the wingtip. Honor is, at best, diluted in the binary code of the most advanced airplane in the world. I place maps and mission papers in a lidded case behind the throttles to my left and pull out the *Norton Book of Classical Literature*. I linger on a highlighted section of Hesiod. By his description, the Olympian gods were petulant, arrogant, inhuman. When brilliant—yet inevitably flawed—mortal heroes approached the gods in deeds, their deaths were tragically orchestrated. But they lived on in myth. They reflected great truths, truths that were refined with the first spoken art—an art that began around campfires, in caves, in halls, on wooden ships: the poems and stories we have always needed to bring meaning to the random acts of man and nature that thwart our best plans.

Tonight, I will shoot Apollo's silver bow, which never misses. I will be miles above the Olympian mountaintops. The skin of the airplane that shields me from my enemies' eyes also shields me from renown. Popular stories of pilots are more often about machines pushing the limits of human capacity and endurance than about the nature of the individuals who fly them. Technology trumps our shared human nature. I tell myself that my actions will help save the lives of soldiers who are racing north out of Kuwait. This is honorable. It is not honor.

—Jason Armagost, from "Things to Pack When You're Bound for Baghdad"

49

The war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. . . . Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.

—Tim O'Brien, from *The Things They Carried*

50

War stories are always about more than war. They are about memory and love and resentment and loss and disbelief and defiance and humiliation and earnestness and blame and shame and blood and sacrifice and courage and sorrow. War stories, even if set in the past, seem to exist in the urgent and immortal present. They identify us, war stories. They are about us.

51

Does the very act of thinking about the Holocaust . . . diminish its horror by refusing to treat it as unthinkable?

—James Carroll, from *Constantine's Sword*

52

"Boy, I don't like you. You better move, you Communist motherfucker. I'm going to crawl up your ass and fuck you. I know the ragheads sent you to fuck up my Marine Corps."

—Taped dialogue at Parris Island

Profanity, swearing, and verbal filth is discouraged. A person who must resort to profanity demonstrates his inability to verbally express himself in a socially acceptable fashion.

—U.S. Marine Corps instructional manual

Knife Attack against a Sentry:

a. Be noiseless.

b. Your attack must be launched not less than five feet from your opponent.

c. Your attack should be immediate and from your opponent's rear.

d. Thrust your knife upward, into his kidney.

e. Place your free hand over your opponent's mouth and nose.

f. Withdraw your knife with a ripping motion.

g. Lift your opponent's head and slash his jugular vein.

—Ibid.

Profanity . . . is discouraged.

53

Fritz Haber, the inventor of Zyklon B, was a Jew?

54

re: In the Event of Nuclear War

Don't try to hide, run toward it with your mouth open. That's what I'd do.

Coda

Fragments, indeed. As if there were anything to break.

—from *The Book of Shadows*

Donald Anderson is the editor, since 1989, of *WLA*. Many of these excerpts are culled from *Fragments of a Mortal Mind: a nonfiction novel*, forthcoming (Spring 2021) from the University of Nevada Press.