

DONALD ANDERSON

When War Becomes Personal

A BOOK, *WHEN WAR BECOMES PERSONAL*, is due out this fall. I'd sat down to think about an anthology made up of the best we'd published during the first twenty years of *War, Literature & the Arts*. As you probably know, we welcome poetry, fiction, critical essays, interviews, visual arts, personal essay and memoir. What I found in reading through two decades of work—at least from this data base—was that our most powerful material was the personal essays we'd published, and the memoir. *When War Becomes Personal* contains original personal accounts from the American Civil War to the latest American conflict in Iraq. All to say that to avoid personal reports of war is depend on what—the look of distance?—to guide you to truth? There is much to learn from war poetry, fiction, visual art and film, but the memoir, the personal seem at least to me to better strip away the romance, myth, and fantasy as they pertain to the hard verities of battle. Soldiers more than anyone know what they are capable of destroying and when they write about war, they are working to protect the world.

Remember back far enough or imagine ahead and you'll find war—or it'll find you. All our lives are framed by war. My father had wanted to serve in WWII, but because of a damaged eye, could not. He'd wanted to sign up with his best friend, Sidney. The Navy was signing up pals for the same ships, same assignments. Had my father had his way, he would have signed up and served with Sidney. Sidney died at Pearl Harbor. Whatever would have happened to my father with Sidney aboard the *U.S.S. Arizona* would have happened more than four years before my birth. Seventy percent of the ship's crew perished. Are my feelings about these facts and potentialities memory or imagination?

I didn't serve in Vietnam, but my nation did. Because of my "memory" of what had happened—and was happening—to America and Vietnam, I made decisions.

For one thing, I joined the Air Force to avoid the walking tour of Southeast Asia. I meant to beat the draft—it was not my imagination that more soldiers were being buried than airmen. I went on to serve for 22 years in the Air Force, but the point is my initial enlistment had everything to do with the war, and hardly would have surfaced as a career choice without the war. That I could imagine the war—its pointlessness borne out in time—was why I worked to avoid it. We have, each of us, factual histories and imagined histories, backfilling, always, when memory proves deficient, though “it’s a poor sort of memory,” Lewis Carroll’s Queen says, “that only works backwards.”

Of my four children one son served as a Force Recon Marine. He managed to just miss Somalia. All during his hitch, I worried the Administration would manage to find some foolish place for my son to go. What was I doing, imagining a possible memory?

It gets complicated. What is remembered or imagined *becomes* reality. And: if we *don't* create our personal versions of the past, someone else will do it for us. This is frightening and political fact. Why so many books, for instance, that seek to refute the fact of the Holocaust, complete with references and footnotes? And who can forget the opening pages of Milan Kundera’s novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, describing a photograph from which a Party official has been airbrushed from history?

Then there is Cynthia Ozick’s short story “The Shawl,” a strafing account of a death camp murder of a stick-limbed child. Though born in time to have been interned in a death camp, Cynthia Ozick wasn’t; she was, at the story’s fictional time, a cheerleader in high school in New Jersey. Memory and imagination are the *what* and *how* we have as artists and readers and citizens. To which we must cling, as if to luck or safety.

In the long haul of history, a stone ax crushing a skull is no different from a Tomahawk missile except in its efficiency, and we have as much to learn from *The Iliad* as we do from *Black Hawk Down*.

If it seems to fall to the historian to make distinctions among wars, each war’s larger means and ends, the trajectory for the artist, regardless of culture or time, seems to fall towards an individual’s disillusionment, the means and ends of war played out in the personal. It’s impossible not to hear Heller’s Yossarian:

“They’re trying to kill me,” Yossarian told him calmly.

“No one’s trying to kill you,” Clevinger cried.

“Then why are they shooting at me?” Yossarian asked.

“They’re shooting at *everyone*,” Clevinger answered.

“They’re trying to kill everyone.”

“And what difference does that make?”

For the individual soldier, the sweeping facts of history are accurately written not in the omniscient, third-person plural, but in the singular first. We live in a culture that values the individual. Our works of art about war mirror this welcome bias.

Of course Art and Life are different—if they weren't we wouldn't need art. And if Art generally strains towards making sense, most of us have lived long enough to know that Life is under no such obligation. W.H. Auden, who came into his fullness as a poet as fascism was creeping across Europe, wrote about that scourge and then concluded that “poetry makes nothing happen,” that nothing he ever wrote saved one Jew from the gas chambers. Yet, art markets authority. Why else would officials at the United Nations have decided to cover the tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica*, as council members met to discuss the start of Gulf War II?

At its best, war art—literature and art—is witness to the power of word and image and for the human craving for meaning. And if one of the functions of art is to disturb the status quo, to force us to view the world anew, to consider our capacities to build or tear down, then we must welcome those disturbances. I believe we might agree that Tim O'Brien hits the mark when he writes in “How to Tell a True War Story”:

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.

Aristotle's notion that History accretes, but only Poetry unifies is a notion we can subscribe to. Art grants access to a larger world, allows us to live other lives, allows us to examine the quality and meaning of our own lives. Whose very earliest recollections do not include the request, Tell Me a Story? The human race needs stories. We need all the experience we can get. Before we made fire, before we made tools, before we made weapons, we made images. Art, at its deepest level, is about preserving the world. And war art—the best of its literature and art—may be as close as we can get to that act of preservation.

This presentation was adapted from “War, Memory, Imagination,” an introduction to *When War Becomes Personal: Soldiers' Accounts from the Civil War to Iraq* (University of Iowa,

2008). **DONALD ANDERSON** is editor of **WLA** and writer in residence in the Department of English & Fine Arts at the United States Air Force Academy. His collection *Fire Road* received the John Simmons Short Fiction Award in 2001.