

DAN O'BRIEN

The War Reporter Paul Watson on How Times Change

Remember necklacing in the townships
where they'd grab a white guy and slam a tire
full of petrol over his head and arms
and set him on fire? Under apartheid
you'd think I'd be just the person to give
that necklace to. But they were like, You're free
to observe. *When another tire blows out
in Helmand Province.* My fixer's chatting
inscrutably with a mechanic while
I burn in the sun. On the road again
he says: The mechanic was suggesting
we chop your head off and offer it to
the Haqqanis. Fifty-fifty. And what
did you say? My car is clean. Ask me when
my car is already dirty—ha ha
ha!

The War Reporter Paul Watson at the Courthouse/Jail

Our last hope for peace will come from lawyers
and judges in this apartment complex
-cum-courthouse/jail. Where shell blasts trouble
bones and windows. Assault rifles rankle
like a street festival. We're listening
to a policemen gripe about these ghost
-militias sucking blood from businesses
like America used to. Our millionaires
fled into Egypt, the shame of the rich
of Syria! he cries. The judge fumbles
for middle ground. Men of God will decide
with their hearts, he philosophizes, bulbs
stuttering, paint flaking. *But men of law
have no such luxury.* While below us
ghost-militias entangle like orgies
out of Bosch, on wall-to-wall carpet, sick
generator spitting. Lake of leaking
rainwater encroaching. The jailor's light
stirs the flesh. Razor spines as if threatening
to tear through skin. A fundamentalist
rebel admitting to raping two girls
smiles through the bars. The jailor says, He'll live
until we receive a mandate from all
the people. To do otherwise would be
a crime as well.

The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Boys in a Crater

full of water. *Joy could be agony
from a certain angle.* Wet clothes sticking
to their bodies like cauls. Dead wires, bent pipes
dangling from the apartment block behind
sheared-off walls. Summertime in Aleppo
and the blue sky is breezy. Blue water
from a blasted mains. Bright blue bicycle
parked in the rubble. *In an instant joy
should be sorrow.* One boy twists, his friend leaps
at us. Another boy in purple pants
considers, in danger of getting knocked
flat by the lung. One boy is rising
from his dip, football jersey wicking, hips
flexing as if surfing, pockets jam-packed
with something. Like what? Another boy's dropped
to his knees, collar of splashing water
almost regal around his neck, ulu
-lating with ecstasy, maybe. One slumps
on the lip of the crater, face in hands
as if collecting tears. *Their laughter is
sorrow's best friend.* I'm not in Syria
to take this picture, Freddie Paxton is,
but I can't tell you how happy I am
he's caught it.

DAN O'BRIEN is a poet and playwright in Los Angeles. His collection *New Life*, derived from his friendship with Pulitzer Prize-winning war reporter Paul Watson, will be published in London by CB Editions in 2015. O'Brien's award-winning play about Watson, *The Body of an American*, will premiere off-Broadway at Primary Stages in 2016. O'Brien is a 2015 Guggenheim Fellow in Drama and Performance Art.