

# Life in Wartime

## *DogWatches: Stories from the Sea*, by Rolf Yngve

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Heard of some grave sites, out by the highway,  
A place where nobody knows.

—Talking Heads, "Life During Wartime" (1982)

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**F**rom a safe distance, from the vantage point of those left back home, war might look orderly and grand, movements on a map, clearly defined competing beliefs and ideals pitted against one another, all so comprehensible and reasonable. Or, as Rolf Yngve writes in "A Prerogative," the opening story of *Dog Watches*, out there along "a lean horizon" a destroyer might

seem so calm at a distance, the day gone, gun laid to rest, the decks stowed fore and aft, all lines rigged. The ends of such days, so much comfort from routine passage-making with the sun astern casting its light deep into the harbor, and he was there, in the pilothouse, the watch still keeping all at ease—helmsman and lookout, officer of the deck and messenger, navigator and he, himself, their captain, in command to bring this ship to its mooring, this ship he had been given. To deliver all the crew he served safely home.

Across the distance there's order and calm; there's God in his heaven, the captain in his pilothouse. But as that captain, now retired, no longer a captain in command, explains to the reader as much as to his audience in the story, the rest, the missing details, the messy parts that

glom up the neat story, "You don't have to see it." And then he disappears into the blank space at the end of the story.

In the rest of the stories that follow "A Prerogative," Yngve shows it to us—that which we don't have to see. But we have to learn to see it. War fiction has taught us to look from a distance, carefully maintaining the temporal and spatial buffer between home and war, Ithaca and Troy. Taken as a whole, and the stories work hard and well together as a whole, *Dog Watches* challenges our notions of war and war stories, forcing us to confront the conventions that we've developed to maintain the distance, the illusion, the separation that fosters a sense of war as a known or knowable object, calm in that way like a destroyer from a distance. Though he does so with a style that does not call attention to itself, Yngve dismantles the lines we hope to draw between home and war, Ithaca and Troy. And in these carefully connected stories, he's given us the ideal literary form for our new state of perpetual war.

A few pages into "Efendim," a negotiator working to free a hostage tells his interpreter to ask the teenage Somali pirates on the other end of the radio "How do they think this is going to end?" And though he "is comfortable with waiting," the negotiator thinks the timing is right for this question, the question offered when it's time to force the negotiation toward a conclusion. And the reader feels the tension. Up to this point in the story we've been trapped on a disabled lifeboat, sweltering in confinement with three teenage pirates and the chief engineer from the tanker they unsuccessfully tried to capture, their hostage; or we've been hunkered down on the *USS Michael E. Austin*, a destroyer tethered to the lifeboat, with the ship's captain, the negotiator, and the interpreter, waiting.

But then Yngve tells us that the negotiator “does not think his sense of timing comes from his years raising his two boys through their entitled adolescence.” Nevertheless, his train of thought reaches the conclusion that “All teenagers are the same.” The same, his entitled boys and these boy pirates.

We are contained in the crisis, given an insider’s view of one of the many small battles that make up our unending war on terror. And then, with his thoughts of his boys, of home, the lines around the seemingly discrete scene dissolve; rather, the small scene expands as the lines between war and home, combatants and civilians blur. The negotiator’s work forces him to cross lines, moving back and forth from us and them, between English and Arabic, from the present toward some desired conclusion in the future. His work blurs lines and so too do his thoughts of his boys and his conclusion that all teenagers are the same.

We like to imagine that the line between the front and the home front is stable and impervious. Americans were shocked when images from the war in Vietnam showed up in their homes on the nightly news. Following the end of that war, we quickly packaged it up neatly as that war from the recent past, a failure, a mistake, but behind us and over. Likewise, the literature of that war has tended to follow the patterns we learned from Homer. The war was over there, complete, and the journey home in the *Odyssey* or, say, *The Deer Hunter*, was long and arduous if not impossible, the cost of maintaining the separation between war and home, Troy and Ithaca. At the beginning of the *Deer Hunter*, the Green Beret in the VFW bar refuses to tell Robert De Niro what it’s like over there. “Fuck it,” is all he has to offer. It doesn’t belong here in blue-collar Pennsylvania, at a wedding reception, in Ithaca. Keep home and war in their separate lanes.

And when it comes, the desired conclusion to the hostage crisis in "Efendim" happens offstage, in the white space between sections. We get the consequences, not the conclusion. So, in a way, there is no ending. We've grown accustomed to a constant and unending state of war. So how really do we expect this to end? The end of the hostage standoff isn't the ending. Nor, really, is the end of the story. The events of this one story bleed into the other stories of the collection, neatly listed as discrete artistic objects on the table of contents page, the image of the surviving pirate, for example, in shackles and with a probable future in which he will be "tried in our court somewhere by someone and interrogated in some manner" coming back to complicate another character in another story who is haunted by his participation in at least one instance of *enhanced interrogation*. We've grown to expect clear lines, neat packages. That's how our fictions of war have worked. There's the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, war and home, Troy and Ithaca, with a clear line between them.

Much of what happens in *Dog Watches* is implied, uncertain, taking place in the gaps, either in the white space on the page between sections within stories or during the breaks between stories. Our desire for clear lines is complicated both by the fact that the things cordoned off are never really discrete units and that the line is not simply a mark of separation. Thus, the fire team in "Efendim" takes out the pirates in blank space; a young Petty Officer in "Castoffs" fires on a small vessel shrouded in fog and mist off the coast of Mogadishu in a story's white space. And just as the word "pirate" sounds anachronistic, somewhere off the coast of Mogadishu seems like blank space on the map of our current war. We want war to be far in the past and far, far away. But Yngve refuses to grant our wish. In these stories the desired distance afforded by both time and space are illusions. As he has one character put it, "In the fog, you think you are alone. This weather lets you imagine yourself alone. Safe. Everything else

hidden, inconsequential. But you are not alone. You are never alone.” The separation, that is, is an illusion. And the line of separation isn’t nothing, a blank space between past and present, war and home. Instead, the fog is a setting in its own right. It’s connective tissue, the middle of things.

It’s December of 1989. I’m finishing term papers and studying for finals. The small TV in my room is on. David Letterman is over, and whatever comes on after is providing background noise. And then someone interrupts my normal viewing schedule and my studies to bring me word that we’ve invaded Panama. Austin, Texas, in 1989 is far removed from war; and war is something exceptional, alien to me and my life as a college student. The Cold war has conditioned us to think of warfare as small-scale and off stage, clandestine incursions and the fall of governments; something on the scale of a mobilization feels like the stuff of history books. The invasion of Panama was the most complicated military operation carried out by the U.S. Armed Forces since the Vietnam War. All that for a battle that lasted days, not years, and that would quickly devolve into our forces assaulting Manuel Noriega with bad and loud music from large speakers mounted on poles.

This memory of war seems quaint from our vantage point here in 2019. And this quaintness is a measure of how we used to think of war and of what has changed. We’ve been at war now for longer than we were fighting in Vietnam. And in this new war, our forces frequently carry out missions more complicated than the invasion of Panama as a matter of course. Most of them don’t warrant news coverage; they certainly don’t justify the interruption of my TV watching. No, we don’t watch this new war on TV as we did watch the war in Vietnam and even Panama. Surrounded

by fog that maintains the illusion of isolation, of separation, we can't seem to see the war we know is always there.

This invisibility is in spite of the constant presence of our "troops." No, on second thought, it's because of it. Now our warriors come and go, moving back and forth between war and home. But the war isn't over; it's always present. And our warriors, they'll be back: there's always another deployment. So, they are here in line with us at the Safeway; and then they're gone, sent back to serve in the perpetual war. Deployments are both frightening and mundane. In "Billy" the cat goes missing: "He was gone, absent, doing things but coming back. Like me. Deployed. Away." The cat's out: he's deployed. And as Yngve's character continues, "There's no wonder in this [deployment and return]. It's a hard life, but not like most people think. It isn't as if you spend day after day immersed in violence, one horrific assault after another. Nothing like that. And those things are generally not as bad as depicted." Back now, looking for the cat, knocking on doors, reintroducing himself to the neighbors, he learns a lot: "the gardeners think they're getting paid too little. The one neighbor's wife had died and another's husband had left." And, in the exchange of gossip and pleasantries, the neighbors find out a little about the narrator too: "They knew that Olivia [his wife] had been promoted. A rising star. They knew I was on my way back to the Pentagon. . . ." It all seems so very normal. And he also seeks to normalize the movement from war to home and back. For in addition to details about his job and his wife's job, "Everyone knew that when they asked, 'So how are things going over there?' I could only shake my head and say I was glad to be out of it for a bit." Unlike *Deer Hunter's* Green Beret at the VFW bar, he can't put it behind him; "fuck it" won't work. After all, he's only "out of it for a bit." He'll be back.

But then the story of the missing cat turns out to be the narrator's search for peace, calm away from the war, and forgiveness. He doesn't find it, the cat or the forgiveness. And the comfort of war "over there" and the potential for his being "out of it" even for a bit turns out to be an illusion, a false, empty prayer:

And no one will say the word.

And I will not be healed. This I know.

Ever.

So even the separation between home and war created by returns and deployments turns out to be an illusion. He's never left. War's still there. The same war. The same there. Ever and ever, amen.

Thus, we've erased both time and distance as protective barriers between us and war. And with the line between Troy and Ithaca overcome, who needs the *Odyssey*? That soldier in line at the Safeway, she's back from Troy. She'll be headed back soon. It all seems so easy. Not worth a thought, certainly not worth an epic or even an interruption of the late-night TV regularly scheduled programming. And if we bump into one of these warriors, we'll thank him for his service; and, if he's our neighbor, we'll ask him "how it's going over there." We might not, though, know which part of over there he's been fighting in, and we might not even be able to find it on a map if we could name it. I'm sure that most of us living our lives safe and sound in Ithaca would fail to piece together a solid sentence if we were asked to define service, to explain who is being served by whom and to what end. "Your service" is neat, clean, calm from a distance, a distance the phrasing reinforces, insisting on the distinct categories of warriors and citizens. It's one of many ways that we maintain the new perpetual war, ever present, and invisible.

*The Odyssey* represents ten years of travel after the Trojan War; *Dog Watches*, the erasure of time in our war. In "The Mouse," Yngve takes us back to the time before the perpetual war. Early in the story a character looks "out of his office to see Arlington National Cemetery, and in those days, the gravestones had not yet crept down onto the flat treeless lawns but remained still within the deep shade of the mature trees planted for wars long past." He situates us in the Pentagon before 9/11. More to my point, he also introduces the fluidity of time that becomes the story's most striking feature. We move from this moment in the late 1980s to the "present" when an omnidirectional and constant state of war will have filled Arlington National Cemetery beyond the bounds required for all previous wars, those "wars long past." The phrase "wars long past," paired as it is with the placement "within the deep shade," seems almost mythical, referring to a time distinct from this present in which a new state of war has seemingly escaped time, that quaint, archaic measure of a war's duration.

Perpetual war is beyond time, and, thus, so too, is the story. But the various moments on the story's timeline all pivot on September 11, 2001, the marker between previous wars and the current, perpetual war. We move from the opening moment in a mythical, pre-9/11 past that somehow seems to be aware of the inevitable future of our present to 9/11 and the moment Flight 77 strikes the Pentagon. By that time, the character who looks out of the Pentagon onto Arlington National Cemetery

will have long been promoted to captain and will have commenced his graceful slide toward retirement. He will find himself at the US Embassy in Rome as the planes hit, wondering *what-the-fuck?* as three of his friends along with a couple thousand other people in the Pentagon, Manhattan and Pennsylvania shared

their versions of *what-the-fuck?* before finding themselves reduced to human remains.

The cataclysmic and collective "*what-the-fuck?*" serves both to mark a particular monument in time and to erase in its wake the significance of time, the meaning of time as we once understood it. All is after or before, and all that is after is present, the new always now.

The story captures this atemporality as it moves easily from the late '80s to 9/11 ("still years in the future") and back. The narrator follows connections to sailors he served with on the *USS Ferrell* and a pier in Naples to "the stubby black rock they erected in Arlington to memorialize those not found after Flight 77. . . . two decades in the future. . . ." And from that ship moored in Naples, we'll follow the petty officer of the watch, who "would discover that he'd earned the call sign 'Wyatt Earp' which would follow him through the Navy, into college, and finally his law practice where it would achieve great utility when he became a truly deadly practitioner." All of the movement through time has the strange effect of erasing the significance of time. We assume a God-like view of events and characters, watching them move into futures that they are not yet aware of, from moments of their pasts that they have partially forgotten. In this new, secular version of theological time, all actions exist in the simultaneous always present. So how do I expect this to end? I don't.

In the last few days I recall hearing a story on NPR about American soldiers killed somewhere. As is often the case, NPR is my background noise. But I want to hear this. I insist that it matters. Nevertheless, I don't hear the details over the sound of kids, spouse, and dogs. And it's time for homework, to feed the dogs, to get dinner started. Later, I look, scrolling through NPR.org. I can't find it, though. It doesn't seem to have been a story. It's just not there.

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