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War in the West

Robert E. Lee said, "It is well that war is so terrible else we might come to like it too much."

Maybe the premise isn't working. Or maybe war is still not terrible enough. For most Americans, knowledge of war is hearsay, second and third hand. Asked to describe their reactions to the Gulf War, a group of young television viewers replied "awesome," "fascinating," "incredible." Some of their answers were even more banal, and while "awesome" is an appropriate adjective, it's doubtful if the users understood it beyond its current click-phrase status.

Fascination, though, may come close to what many people feel. War as they know it, see it, read about it, engages them on the same level as a wide-screen, technicolor David Lean production. It pushes all the emotional buttons they're accustomed to feeling, offers excitement, diversion, a measure of forgetfulness of their personal problems, a few surprises--and if their side is winning, a shot of pride. A football game doesn't quite cover the whole spectrum and a movie doesn't last as long.

One war news junkie said, "I didn't want anybody I knew to get hurt, you know, but I really miss the nightly footage. Vietnam was before my time. But this war really brought people together. It's what we talked about at the office, Now it's the same old stuff--who's marrying or divorcing or being transferred."

"One serviceman even said, "It made life interesting. I don't think I'll ever do anything else that will give me such a high."

Privately, commanders admit their joy at being able to use their hardware and theoretical expertise in actual battle conditions. Other men and women of all ranks have expressed enthusiasm for the chance to test themselves.

All of this seems bleached, almost trivial and far removed from the essence of war which is killing. Bleeding. Destruction. Every degree of human injury, deprivation, grief and indignity. Even the military often speak in euphemisms. Blowing an enemy to bits is sometimes called "servicing the target."

But it seems we don't need verbal deflection or pulled punches to make war more palatable. Our own eyes and our own perception have glazed over the horror and filth more successfully than any public relations firm we might have hired to do it.

This, in spite of the fact that big screen entertainment sagas have spared no expense, no special effect, to show us depravity and death at its worst. So we've already seen it all. Now we have to consciously tell ourselves when something is actually happening. The wounded are not actors, the pathetic refugees are not extras. The property being demolished is not a plywood set on MGM's back lot. Also, the truth usually appears far less dramatic than staged versions. Audio-visual

productions have bludgeoned our sensibilities to the real thing. Experts have been warning us about that for years. Movies and TV are bound to be contributing factors but not the whole problem.

Maybe it's the late 20th century concept of self, the custom-fitted American designer dream. Everything that goes on is perceived in terms of how it affects us personally. Will it involve our own friends, our own relatives, US? Will it raise our taxes, cut down on our favorite consumer goods, cause gas to be rationed, put our jobs or our lifestyles in jeopardy? How will it threaten US? If we detect that we shall go relatively untouched by it all, the matter goes into a data bank on a different level, there to be processed by different sensors. Americans are an insular people. We've abandoned our larger kinship with those unlike ourselves.

Public wailing and handwringing won't help. And in order to survive it, people do have to become somewhat inured to the horrors of war. But many Americans are already inured without ever sitting in a bomb shelter for so much as an hour or missing: a meal.

The idea of our dehumanization via the media has been worked over enough. It's time for each of us to take responsibility ourselves. For all our spoon-fed, high-tech knowledge, our vicarious experience, we've forgotten how to feel, deeply and caringly, outside our own perimeters. We've forgotten that all of us, the entire planet's full of us, whether we acknowledge it or not, are children of the same God. We've forgotten that He commanded us to love one another and that He grieves for all who suffer. We need to review and practice understanding and empathy for mankind. Even if we seem to be forced to fight, even if we participate unwillingly, even if we win gloriously, war is still the ignoble last ditch of human failure.

CHICAGO: FIRST LADY OF THE LAKE

She moved leanly through Indian twilight,
shabby and unmet, slogging through swamps,
trailing her long skirts through blackest mud
and the evil smell of skunk cabbage.

She stumbled and fell on shores that bullied her
with dares and promises others never heard.
She lay on the flats in bosomy youth, gazing
blueward-- high hollow blue, pale-seamed
with deep wet blue, cerulean and indigo
priming the canvas, waiting for a subject.

Waiting for her to quiet her urgent hunger,
waiting for her to find a wintersmith husband
and breed a breed taller and stubbornner
than blue emptiness. Without first-glance beauty,
without dowry or lineage-- a razorish termagant
on Tuesday, demure as dimity on Wednesday,
racy as red sequins on Saturday night
then Sunday-caring through the rains
gone white and heavy on her head-- she was
an enigma-- fine figure, unfathomable sum.

After her wedding for better and worse, feast
and fire, splinter and guilt, she took her time
with the art of ladyhood, more earned
than learned, writing her own music while moving
miles of gritty railcars, tons of bloody meat.

She roughed-in composition with charcoal,
handling mixture and brushes her way,
toning the flattering, fuming, prodding blues
waiting for their match, icing and steaming,
waiting for her to model her rising brood
with the back of her hand. Teaching them
to pose substance on air and water,
add the warm shades to the palette,
riches to the minor key chords. And at last
to put in perspective a million highlights
framing the watercolor palimpsest,
the sound and light-stretched gamut of blues.

ELF OWL - (*Micrathene whitneyi*)

The saguaros lose weight and pleat
and enter the death phase. It may last
for years. It's been so long since water
made good the sky's promises
there's a rattle in the desert's breath
not made by the sidewinder.

Leafless ocotillos comet lone blips of color
across day's end, arcing like sparks,
like warnings or red beacons
for the elf owl emerging to hunt.
In midnight sandshine, the tiny raptor
withdraws to its hollow in the oldest saguaro.
The cactus tightens on its own tall thirst,
narrowing its cells tough as hardwood,
its clustered spines like medieval maces
guarding its deep secret moisture.

Twice more the pigmy predator haunts the night,
silence feathering swiftly over empty silence,
coming home empty.

CLOSE HARMONY

Their camera-smiles in cracked sepia
insist nothing will change-- the lift
of her chin, her secret pressure on his shoulder,
his long Irish hands on the old upright Steinway
reeking of early Moonlight Sonata
and Gershwin jazz. Her dress is back in style
along with her untamed red hair
like mine. And I have the hands he had.

A month before their wedding, coming home
from graduation, their train derailed.
Her sister and his twin brother met
at the funerals, two years later they became
my parents. Outraged nature hates to lose,
refuses to lose it all. I'm the only red
in the family; I know her in my static electricity,
the low notes of my laugh. He's my walking bass,
my easy octave reach, my treble sass
and those late night blue chords
always looking for a lyric.

This piano still resonates with their chemistry
warming and fizzing beneath my touch--
telling me how to phrase this passage--
telling me this music composed in my head

is theirs...

THOUGHTS OF A BRITISH SOLDIER, BELFAST

News item, Northern Ireland: "A 15-year-old boy was killed by a pipe bomb he attempted to place in the vehicle of British military who sought him for questioning about earlier bombings."

There is my enemy's face:
He's young, unseasoned and scared.
Still another will take his place.

Shop doors hide him without trace,
Bluejeaned schoolboy, short, dark-haired.
There is my enemy's face.

Caught, he may cry in disgrace
Or curse us with eyeteeth bared.
Still, another will take his place.

Neighborhoods pose in workday pace.
I stalk reflections, self unprepared.
There-- is my enemy's face--

Will our kinds ever embrace?
When his last dare has been dared,
Still another will take his place?

Now arms hold death in winless race
of beliefs our rifles declared.
There is my enemy's face.

Still. Another will take his place.

NIGHTKILL - (Felis leo)

Not for hunger. His motives
as old as allegiance to his kind,
the strange cat followed the pride
for days. Four lithe females, three cubs.

He was part of kopje shadows and grass
extravagant with his smell. He chuffed
his presence on cooling twilight,
letting his sounds roll downhill
to bank off termite mounds,
rattle crumbling basalt.

In the seventh moonless dark, impatient
sovereignty moved black as his mane
to snap the neck of each hidden cub.
And while his blood was high, waiting
for the females to return, to feel
their triggered heat for him,
his oldest bane, always trailing
death, came near. Jaws that could break
his hindquarters missed their chance.
He left the boldest pair gaping
inches above the torn-out final laughter
as the lionesses welcomed their new king.

WINGING IT

Two brothers scanned the cold front stalled northeast.
Not promising at all, and yet their blood
Was humming yes! --their bones agreeing, genes
Evolved beyond the wax and feather stage,
The Icaros infection now afire
Inside a circuit rider's gangling sons.

Here where a continental splinter spared
The Carolina coast from Neptune's wrath,
Here where his aviary wintered, bred,
A new breed waited for its fledging time.
No more a cold pretender, now a bird,
Warm-blooded thirst for fuel in its crawl.

The wind increased as Orville thought of past
Debacles-- men he held in awe, who knew
Much more, and yet they clung to principles
Now proven false if he could dare believe
His own. He thought how Wilbur's first box made
The Bankers laugh: A kite, a straining toy

To lift a man and let him guide it down.
Then came a larger one. They set it free--
No lines to grounded hands-- a managed arch
Responsive to their afterthought of rudder
And shifting body weight. Its shallow glide
Was like a petrel's outspread, unflapped wings.

"Good lads but daft--" The Bankers winked and watched
The brothers sweat two summers on the beach.
One day a wizened fisherman had warned:
"You Wright boys had your triumph. Sailed the sky
Like seamen rolling combers in a skiff.
"It's time you set your minds on solid things."

Home in their cluttered shop when flight seemed doomed,
An artist's misbegotten fiction/farce,
Those words were added drag on Orville's hope.
But he, the uncured optimist, would spark
Once more the re-ignition of them both.
Today he revved his faith to soar again.

The coast guard station men came out to help,
No longer snickerers, but not convinced.
So many things gone wrong, so many times.
The shapes, the shafts, the theories of lift.
Just yesterday the half-tamed hawk had failed
When guards helped pulley Flyer up the hill.

It blundered down Kill Devil, broke a skid.
But now with gawkers gone-- today-- today
Could unchain history from gravity,

Could free man from the limits of his ground.
As Orville's big Ohio hand lay on his dream,
He felt it thrum with life, its substance sound.

Fresh winds concaved the dunes as Orville prayed,
An upturned-head, an unclosed-eyes petition.
Then Wilbur slowly nodded, yanked his cap
And hurried up the strand where Flyer stood
A hulking hawk with wings of forty feet,
Repaired, impatient to perform its role.

Old Bankers cooked fish stew and mended nets.
Out on its tracks, the hawk was warm, intent
On lifting its own weight with man along
To hold it true. And Orville mounted, prone,
The trembling species growling to be freed
Upwind, his leanness part of Flyer's form.

The hybrid, flesh and fabric, wire and oil,
Left wooden rails and climbed its element
As startled gulls veered from the creature's path.
And high as they fled, cheers went higher still.
In flight for thirteen seconds--but enough!
It vindicated its design, its name.

As Orville grinned, his brother ran to meet
The clumsy crate he rode. To take his turn
To keep the noisy dream aloft, inhale
Its fumes, extend its reach, exceed the the time.
Twice each, the brothers broke an earthly law
Until almost a minute Flyer flew.

It claimed the air and arced the emptiness,
Its altitude eight-hundred-fifty feet
For half a mile above the ancient shore
Of Hatteras, above the tossed-up caps
And shouts of coast guards plus one Dayton boy,
Half-owner of the dream he pushed so high.

A BOWL OF BLUE BLOSSOMS

As soon as the delphiniums bloomed
they insisted on their own container,
a chalice competent enough for such blue.

The bowl began cold and slimy
to my touch, a fat gray coil of earth
reluctant to accept my warmth or my will
while cut cosmos watched blandly
from pitchers. Unbiased persistence
produced a shape true and deep,
a reservoir to prolong the blue.

Free of my potter's hands,
the clay surrendered its moisture slowly,
rearranging its molecules, determined
to shrink like last May's dried roses.
Resigned to my intentions,
it began suspecting its future,
anticipating the touch of petals
like no other blue.

Settling grainy dry as a fossil
on a shelf, it lusted for light
and waited, its dark hollow encased
in continental crust, a sampling
of eons that started in stars never blue.

Graduate of the first fire,
its rough apprentice brown drank deeply
of earth's unguents; cool manganese
and copper anointed its flaws,
comparing its country coarseness \w:
to big buck-toothed zinnias
rampant in my studio jars and cans.

In its final revelation it vibrated
orange to white in the kiln, healed
and ripened in hereditary heat.

Today it came into its own
first flowering, gleaming iridescence
alloyed with now pollinated sisters
of the soil, sharing the meaning of blue.

STOPPING IN THE DESERT ALONE

Did you drive 400 miles just to bow
your head over your sweaty hands?
To memorize every blue vein
like ruckled roads crossing hot desolation
leading to the interior?
The interior is what you're running from.
Nothing in there
worth keeping-- mucked up
with misbegotten cells and superchemicals
that don't know good from bad.
Slash and burn, then poison for dessert.
You sit staring, a damaged ecosystem.
A logogram for ignorance posing
as medical prowess. When you die
the prime time experimenters
will cluck and say, Well, it didn't work
this time but maybe we'll hit the right
combo next time. And next time is
already sitting in their waiting rooms
filling out the forms that'll fill
coffers and coffins equally.

Stop it.
What can they do but try?
Listen, if you've got two months,
why spend it driving? You can still
dance, dammit. You could adagio Se
with that dust devil out there--
what's left of your hair
standing straight up-- grit to grind
your teeth on like a soft shoe rhythm section
--grit to sting you pink and alive--
enough grit to sand your scars smooth
and touchable as fine-grained wood.

Look at that wild thing dervish around,
winding down now--slow spins--almost graceful.
How strong is it? Could it lift you
like an apache partner? If you cover
your eyes and nose could it harm you?
Actually--
could anything?

THE SUITOR

I used to hear him talking to someone
Long after I had read him all the news,
Long after dosing him, dousing his light.

One morning I asked who. He sighed and said,
"Just polishing up how to court a woman.
I'd hate to be refused when I'm all set.

"When I decide to call her, I want her,
Not some pale imitation lacking nerve.
No youngish-looking dreamboat with long hair."

I asked about this lady-- when he met
Her, what her name was, where she lived--
"Don't be naive," he said, "we've yet to meet.

"My gripe is with her half-baked surrogates.
I've had my fill of false alarms and pikers.
It's her cold hand I want, no feverish

Caress, no teasing smile. A grip that won't
Let go. A full-out grin. A woman sure
Of what she wants exactly, wanting me."

I felt surprise that death could be a woman
But not that she was his intense desire.
Each day his praise became more like a lover's:

"Sweet stroke that changes everything there is,
The sweat of truth as bright as mercury--
There's nothing else on earth that's so complete."

Accustomed to a struggle, even from
The old in Morpheus's careless arms,
What woman could resist his ardent pleas?
I heard him pause, a muffled privacy

Exchanged, my hand around the doorknob's chill.
She locked the room a moment while they fled.

CLOSE HARMONY

Their camera-smiles in cracked sepia
insist nothing will change-- the lift
of her chin, her secret pressure on his shoulder,
his long Irish hands on the old upright Steinway
reeking of early Moonlight Sonata
and Gershwin jazz. Her dress is back in style
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A month before their wedding, coming home
from graduation, their train derailed.
Her sister and his twin brother met f
at the funerals, two years later they became .
my parents. Outraged nature doesn't like to lose,
refuses to lose it all. I'm the only red
in the family; I know her in my static electricity,
the low notes of my laugh. He's my walking bass,
my easy octave reach, my treble sass
and those late night blue chords
always looking for a lyric.

This piano still resonates with their chemistry
warming and fizzing beneath my touch--
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THE SPECIALIST

Confident in step and hand,
cachet of well-trained youth,
a coat of nineties gloss--

But his eyes are ancient.
He listens with them,
connecting deep behind
the asking eyes he faces. `
His patients--the ones beyond
sophistication's pose, ,
will tell you :
he has hearing of the heart.

Yesterday I needed
more than bottled nostrums
and prescribed smooth-speak,
more than surgical steel wizardry.

Consulting this practitioner
of modern internal medicine,
I recalled that blue comes from
the cool part of the spectrum.

But his warm irises incised
confusion and fear
and applied non-synthetic caring.
My hidden sore was lanced,
more balm applied
than words alone can deliver

and I slept in the healing ward.

THE VINING TIME

She didn't mind telling her age. At least
not in summer when she looked good
and the backyard honeysuckle detonated
enough possessive perfume to fill her pores,
or lie in wait in her pillows after dark.
Enough to make her want a man around.

But lately vines bothered her with lurking
metaphor. Some leaned limp on whatever
they touched. Some gushed out of containers--
luxuriant tips, atrophic at the roots.
Like her hair-- losing ground, paling.
Like memories when the house still smelled
of Jason's Kaywoodie and roast quail with almonds.

She'd taken to counting the hairs in her comb,
counting tiny lines sprouting around her mouth.
And she caught herself slavishly counting
the clock chimes or stair steps up and down
although she climbed them lightly.

There was some immutable law governing
the accumulation of the unwanted: great piles
of papers, drawers of generic clutter,
small somatic plagues-- and the diminishing
of the desired: old friends, her chances
of leaving Elm Street-- huge namesakes
stumped, diseased, marked for the saw's whine.

And the honeysuckle smothering
the verbena bed in hyperbole, sagging
the fence, strangling the trusting white phlox.
Nobody was interested in buying the place
anymore. Nobody wanted to do yard work
except the unaffordable "landscape architects"
boxed and fancy-bordered in the yellow pages.

She bought a magnifying mirror on a stand
to put on eye liner, redefining eyes
that still held the blue-violet flicker
of hummingbird wings. Feeling the sap
and celebration of morning-glories at her waking,
sometimes she still felt the green of promises
she believed she could keep. And sometimes--
sometimes honeysuckle was a whiff of hell.

THE ANSWERING - A Sequel to Browning's "Evelyn Hope"

Because no one has ever spoken
Back from here, we've all supposed
This coldest seal remains unbroken,
This ancient passage always closed.
If only you who think I died
Could know this is a sweet exchange,
Could know how boundaries fade inside
The spectrum's unimagined range!

You never would have come to me
Had I remained a normal length
In mortal phase. Oh, can you see
The structured weave, the narrow strength
Of patterns granting us a place
In that frame's weft? A giddy girl,
A proper gentleman of grace
In middle years allowed to purl

Into the fabric of acceptance?
Not while I lived, but only after,
Could you speak love without the chance
Of shock, rebuke, or even laughter.
Like you, I never dared express
My secret. Silly child, you might
Have thought. But by this leaf you press
Into my hand, we will unite.

Don't grieve, my dear, your words are not
Earthbound. I hear your lover's heart
With mine and don't despair our lot.
Now new dimensions frame my part
As they will yours at your last breath.
The cycling portals pivot, spin
On far-off stars that hinge on death--
An old wronged term that means begin.

And by your token, I transmit
My pledge through veins of green leaf stillness:
We'll meet renewed, a better fit
With time, my touch then free of chillness.
It's fitting that my name was Hope--
Please don't despair its muffled call
Or waver in transition's scope.
Here, time is nothing; love is all!

THE CRAFTSMAN

His hands were wise in the ways of wood,
understanding the grain and strength
of maple, cherry, oak. His hands could handle
a gangling board and know its heart, foresee
the gain from a saw's hot bite. He pursued
the hidden beauty of natural patterns,
bending and clamping as needed. And when
his sure pressure was released, no part
of his chosen trees returned to a former intent.

His hands are over eighty now, twin burls,
mahogany stained, dovetailed across his jeans.
They've passed their treasury to nimbler heirs---
a dozen boys, now men, who once knew
the cold clang of the state's steel doors.

He aligned them with a spirit level, turned
them on a lathe of love joining part of himself
with each-- mortise and steadfast tenon
from the plans of a Nazarene carpenter.

When people marvel at the finish, the old man
smiles. And bows to the Master Craftsman.

GULL-WATCHING

Some fly from cliffs where rock and sky are patched
With ice and snow-- to sueded cypress knees
Where shade-striped quietude is laced and thatched
With sun-bleached moss festooned from wading trees.
For weeks gulls ply deep sea, its folding foam
Uncertain as the earthbound ways of men.
But once the birds have claimed a southern home,
They troll tidepools and settle down again.
Some plumb the light-probed wells of tepid green
Or dive where sequin-flashing smelt appear
In silver schools against a coral screen.
Some hang around to steal fish from the weir.

White wings pursue all boats. And gulls in flocks
Of dark-eyed patience spend their days on docks.

LISTENING TO THE MOUNTAINS

Somewhere high and separate,
leftover music lingers,
recorded when old continents collided.

Pangaeian voices must have chanted
as shores of ancient seas heaved up whole,
as earth's fabric lifted
to block the unsuspecting sun
and wrinkled layers plunged, emptying
dark lockers of the deep.

There were surely trumpets and timpani
when hemispheres shook, folded, cleaved,
smoking for millenia as fluid fire spewed
the planet's melted viscera to the light.

The harmonics are here still,
maybe coded in these blue-gray graphs
on heaven-- or chambered in spirals
of crystalline shells, foundations of fish
and armatures of dinosaurs.

These granite seams are staffs
for fossil notes, an alien scale,
a key I can't yet read-- arranged
for instruments no man has played.

But if I climb with every sense attuned,
if I reckon right the season and the wind
and the rock beneath my boot--
and if the Jesus rope holds at the pinnacle--

those jagged treble notes will sound again.

SOMEONE ELSE'S TROPICS

The aroma of her hangs there
after she passes. Nothing she douses
herself with--just warm sweet hair
and skin and whatever wild herbs
she's been gathering to dry or press.

And sometimes when we talk,
if I'm close enough to smell ginger
or vanilla beans and green jungle
clinging to her--
which means too damn close-- I press
the minute in a public library volume
between pages that belong only to me.