

*Poetry*

Elegy Before the War

by  
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I

All the photographs are lies, she looks  
Normal in them, like other people,  
Not mad, not spilling lava,

Her eyes are compelling as doe's eyes,  
And she did not know this, and the worst of it is  
She looks alive.

Putting the photos away, I keep thinking  
How small and afraid she was in the hospice bed,  
How light abandoned the hopeful eyes,

How the mouth gap with its gurgle from the sad  
Lungs made us feel like Moses, allowed to see  
God's backside from a cleft in the rock,

The mystery diminished not one grain,  
The face and hands outside the cotton quilt  
Soft, horrible, fine—

How the jaw tightened then fell open  
Almost with a bang, and the aide nodded.  
Everyone left, and then there was her silence,

A silence in which I stroked her moist forehead  
Then patted through the nightgown her belly and breasts.  
O I loved her and this was her response—

I keep telling her to come back sometime!  
Come back! I wonder where she is gone  
And I have always wondered.

II

My mother is dead two weeks

We were holding her hands and singing to her

When she let go. Very little pain, lucid  
Almost to the end, correcting  
People's grammar  
A week before  
She died

And we burned her and flew to Arizona  
And the tanks roamed Ramallah and Nablus

I feel as if anything I have to say needs to be shaved down.  
I want my language to be like the desert. My words and phrases  
To be like ocotillo, yucca, saguaro. Prickly. Thorny.  
Able to collect moisture enough to survive extended drought.

The air I breathe is materially tropical, spiritually arid. These are dry  
Times in which one cannot even hypothetically construct an appealing  
future for one's species. Born to violence that steers the intelligence.

The air I breathe you breathe.  
Just now, a molecule breathed by the Buddha  
Might have entered your lungs.

Where is Shelley when we need him?  
"An old, mad, blind, despised and dying king,  
Nobles, the dregs of their dull race,"

He begins a sonnet after the Manchester riots in which  
British soldiers shot their fellow citizens dead.  
Where is William Blake, is he burning

Bright as the tiger in some grassy meadow of paradise  
Does he beat a drum and shout "Holy holy holy  
Is the Lord God almighty," or, on alternate days,

"Exuberance is beauty," and where is Walt Whitman  
And where is Ginsberg, genius of kindness?  
I beg my mother come back sometime.

The root system of the saguaro  
Spreads shallowly underground as widely as  
The cactus is high.

That of the ocotillo plunges.  
The tanks roll, the missiles fly.

Greedy teeth smile at the microphone.  
They know where the oil is. They have plans, big plans  
To connect the imperial dots.

I beg you awesome ones lift yourselves off the page be with us  
Blow through us like a hot desert wind please as if we were trumpets  
As if we were saxophones. Beat on our membranes hard

And let us be drums. Artillery  
Will always shout us, testosterone explosions  
Are more thrilling than anything, chain reactions

Brilliance between opposite poles accelerating  
At the speed of hate, we do this  
To you because

You did it to us first. Thrilling!  
The bus explodes,

The shelled house collapses over the grandmother  
And the gasping family, the tanks roll, the missiles fly

And perhaps the faster one dies,  
The better.

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But it does explain something.

I too look at the images

Of cruel death in the newspaper and on the screen.  
They taste good, I like them. You like them. They are their own  
Best advertisement. We like to shudder at them. We like to blame.

We bravely deplore. We enjoy a bit of fury.  
The nearer we get to death, the more  
We feel alive.

War, that great stimulant,  
let us drink to it.  
Let us join our friends, Israel and Palestine.

Our friends who have been seduced by it.

III

Now that it is spring I open the window at night

I lie awake in my cave, my well of night  
Pulsing like a bat

Making inaudible orphan sounds

Though the blinds stay down  
Soft air seeps in, a few cars  
Swish along the street

From the next house  
Where gloomy faded shingles fall like leaves  
And bedsheets hang in the windows instead of drapes,

I hear the man's chronic unstoppable cough,  
A poor man's cough, and the wife's hoarse voice  
Coaxing their dog.

Gypsy. Stop it. Come here.  
Good girl, good girl.  
I can work on

Making music of that.

IV

Where is Auden now? Is he attempting to rejoice?  
Is he happy that all he had was a voice?  
Does he engage Merrill in contests of puns,  
over in the heaven of the deserving ones?

V

Friday night getting smashed in America

Ignorant violence that stuns the intelligence.  
Dear animal inside us whom in other respects  
We cherish, is it you?

Whitman and Blake inside us, celebrants of war equally with peace, is it  
you?

Descendants of Homer? Is it our stars? Is it our cold reason?  
Is there a devil? Will somebody pass me that bourbon?

I think this impulse to destroy  
This need for an enemy  
Has actually nothing to do with sex

It is simply a human characteristic  
It has climbed the corporate ladder of the dna  
It is on the board of directors.

A joke in the Soviet Union went like this:  
Under capitalism man is a wolf to man.  
Under Communism it's just the opposite.

And there was that other one, about the economy:  
We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us.  
Very funny, but because of low morale

The Russians have become ineffective soldiers  
Like the Italians and the French.  
Long live the Italian and French armies!

Long live the citizens of Prague  
Whose twelfth century buildings stand  
Because a Czech will fight to the last

Drop of ink! The trouble with America  
Is that her morale is still too high.  
She needs to be a bit more depressed

Before she starts behaving better.  
The trouble with America  
Is she is a big bully

And a big coward,  
Also that she has no conscience,  
Not enough cynics, they are all in Europe.

Now let someone discreetly put on  
The Stones or The Doors or better yet  
Jimi doing the Star Spangled Banner

Like a cry of absolutely  
Pained rage, a train jumping the tracks.  
I like this party.

Perhaps you on the other hand like ignorant violence that stunts,  
Stints, stains, struts, standardizes, brutally strangles  
The intelligence. Somebody must, why not you? Well,

Here we need a few anti-American jokes.  
What are we afraid of?  
Where are the comedians

When we need them?  
Tucked in their cages  
Like tame monkeys.

Where are the accountants?  
Who will save us  
From the mudslide of dollars?

## VI

Blessed be the watercolorists  
Who do normal mediocre meadows and lakes  
As if the twentieth century never occurred  
And blessed be whoever buys their paintings.

## VII

She cried when she read Shakespeare

When I was young, she taught me not to hit or hate  
Anybody, she thought education was the answer, she said most people  
Were ignorant and superstitious but not us. No, we believed in liberty

And justice for all. I miss her hugs though they were like clamps,  
I miss her voice though she often mysteriously screamed  
With rage at us all, the shopkeepers, the neighbors.

What twisted and wasted her beauty and intellect, was it America,  
The promised land of her fathers, land of bankers and lynch mobs  
In her girlhood, land of brokers and bombs at her death,

Hammer to which everything is a nail?  
Or was it her pretty mother with the golden voice  
Not loving her enough, the way she claimed?

Or was it a tricky couple of cells?  
Little magicians sawing the woman in half?  
My mother's secrets die with her,

The obsession with germs,  
The obsession with money,  
The anger at the world for cheating her,

Like stains that fade in the laundry. Where did she go,  
My mother who promised we would overcome  
The bosses and bigots? I want her, I want her

To come back and try again.

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