Introduction: Poetry

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To Write Is to Bear Witness

Wanda Fries

When I consider war, the first word to occur to me is always *waste*, the destruction with wanton disregard of that which is beautiful and good. It has always been so. Historians say that despite the treasure trove aboard his ships when Agamemnon sailed home from ten years of laying siege, the years following the Trojan War were bleak not only for the Trojans, whose homeland was destroyed, but also for the Greeks, who found their wives and children strangers, their treasuries depleted, and their cities fallen into disrepair.

Wilfred Owen, who is, despite his slim body of work, one of the finest English poets I have ever read, understood the tension between the view of war as ennobling and hero-making and the utter waste that even the most necessary war represents. In one of his finest poems, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," he interpreted the politics of WWI through the lens of the story of Abraham and Isaac, but just as in Caravaggio's great painting, in this retelling, Abraham is so intent upon his bloody business, that he doesn't see the ram in the thicket, doesn't hear the voice of the angel. And in Owen's version (which is in all respects a sonnet, despite its two extra lines), "the old man slew his son / and half the seed of Europe one by one."

A Christian who believed war antithetical to the teachings of Christ, Owen was also a young man brought up to believe in gallantry and patriotism. Hospitalized for shell shock (the old name for PTSD), he could not embrace pacifism and conscientious objection because he had not yet proven his bravery. After a rest, he returned to the front lines in France as ordered, and according to himself "fought like an angel" in battle. For his valor he earned the Military

Cross. Still, he equivocated when he wrote home to his mother. Instead of telling her of the “considerable numbers” of the enemy the citation says he sprayed with a machine gun, he only admitted to killing one man and that with a revolver. Owen himself was killed in 1918. He was twenty-five.

Nearly a hundred years later, my own nephew, Jonathon Rape, was also killed at twenty five. Though he had won his own honors for his two tours in Iraq—at least one Bronze Star that I know of—he was not killed in uniform. As a civilian working for a contractor in Afghanistan in 2009, he and a friend were killed with an IED. Though he loved being an MP and returned to that work after leaving the 101st Airborne because it was good money and it was what he knew how to do, he is not counted among the soldiers who died for our country, though he died in service of the cause just the same.

Like many soldiers, it wasn’t the danger to his own life that was most haunting, but the decisions he had to make. We forget that it isn’t just the potential sacrifice of their lives that we ask of our soldiers, but the potential sacrifice of the easy sleep of peace. One of my students told me that what he had to get over was not just his own exposure to danger, but the memory of killing, of shooting another man close range, and seeing “the light go out of his eyes.” They do this in our name. They do this for us. They do this so that we won’t have to. Back home, my student says he once became so angry at a slight that except for pure luck, he could have beaten a man to death. “I was shaking,” he said. “I shook so hard that I thought my bones would fall apart.”

War leaves its mark among the families of warriors, too. In my own case, I had never really grieved my nephew. For one thing, I had been through the deaths of four family members within a twelve-month period between 2007 and 2008. I was the aunt, and though I had kept Jon at my house—sometimes for a week or so at a time—he had moved to Texas when he was eight or so, and I had seen him only sporadically. In some ways, I suppose I doubted it was my right to grieve. My own children took a different path. My own children (knock on wood, pray sweet Jesus) are still safe.

And yet, when I reread an essay Jon had written—an essay that appears in this journal—I spent the day in tears. Every time I looked toward the sofa, I saw his face: a blond, blue-eyed, dimpled mess of a little boy who could tell the most outrageous stories and keep up the pretense until all that was possible was laughter. He left behind a wife who loved him and a little girl who looks just like him. Of course, I must grieve him. We have to grieve them all. But we also have to celebrate and advocate for those who have returned to us.

War is politics, too, and like others, I have my politics. While not a pacifist, I believe that civilians need to check those who would send our husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, parents and children to war without having first done everything conceivable to avoid it. War is waste. War is carnage. War demands that we do that which in peacetime is unthinkable. War is a bloody business.

But none of the lives are wasted. There are no children who are mistakes. There are no lives which do not have value. Good men and women take their goodness wherever they go, and if they suffer because of the necessities of combat, if they do what we believe ourselves incapable, if they face and bear what we think unbearable, then it is because we have demanded it. As a writer, I do believe in the power of the written word to heal. Through words, we confess, we praise, we honor, we bear witness. These pages are full of the words of good men and women who have much to tell us if we will only listen.