

Poems Against War

A JOURNAL OF POETRY AND ACTION

12 Poems From the Journal: 2003-2008

12 POEMS

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I Move Among the Dark Cubicles
by Rosemary Klein

I move among the dark cubicles that barely divide person from person that barely shield
soul and heart as an unfurled umbrella from the press of rain.

Power is nothing and everything to those without power, to those who waste in guilt
and fear, who wander in routine.

Why would a man want to be ruled when everything on earth is capricious and free?

To such I say all that is forgotten is the same as all that is denied.

Those who gossip and drink at the water cooler, who imagine themselves going to battle
with lesser than they,

those whose eyes drink too long on forms and applications, whose eyes rarely stray
from the computer,

those with ear pressed to the cell phone or fingers pressed to the palm pilot,

those who stay too long at meetings, workshops, conferences;

to them I say the soul agitates for renewal, for its place among all living creatures.

I do not judge one man above another. One man's shoulders are not higher than
another man's measure.

Whether in lockstep or alone, I guarantee each a destiny.

Clean War
by Patricia Wellingham-Jones

They are calling this the cleanest war in all of military history.

--Tom Brokaw, April 2, 2003

Tell that to the ravens
plucking out eyes
on the blood-packed sand

To fathers cradling
the last of their hopes
in torn bodies

To young girls swelling
with the unwanted gifts
of swift strong soldiers

To mothers and wives
pulling on veils of grief
as they wash their dead

Inform the children
who wander dazed with thirst, alone
among ruins

WMD
by Auset

They made weapons of mass destruction
and tucked their children in,
careful kisses for tender dreams.

They made weapons of mass destruction
and went about the daily tumble of life,
looking for love and ducking danger,
making rules for strangers.

They made weapons of mass destruction
and found enemies hidden in their fears,
pretending that children were safe
from evil living without borders.

When life is so big that it swallows us whole,
the earth remains beneath our feet
and there is no stranger that we meet whose
step is unfamiliar.

We make weapons of mass destruction
and cut up life into pieces that look foreign,
but at night
we tuck out children tight
as though evil had a map.

Baghdad Tattoo
by Janet Parkinson

Baghdad's morgues are full. With no space to store bodies, some victims of the sectarian slaughter are not being kept for relatives to claim, but photographed, numbered, and quickly interred in government cemeteries. Men fearful of an anonymous burial are tattooing their thighs with names and phone numbers.

—Associated Press, November 13, 2006

Jalal Ahmed 07901 295135

Ali Abbas 07901 567256

Atheer Mohammad 07901 469798

are incised on my thigh.

My wife sees them when we make love.

I see them when I bathe, change clothes.

They are high enough to be covered

at the beach. I do not want

the world to know my fear.

I do not want the world to know

I have reason to fear.

There is thinking that neutrals

are not attacked. But there are only two sides,

and they change with each conversation.

My wife is afraid these men will die first,

and there will be no one to tell her

about me. She wants her name,

our phone number on my thigh.

But you are engraved on my heart, I tell her.

I will not have you exposed.

You Have the Right to Make the World Beautiful!

by Alan Barysh

You have the right to make the world beautiful!

It's your right by birth!

You have the right to make the world hospitable to all forms of life!

You have the right to be creative and build a planet

that corresponds with your highest and boldest aspirations!

You have the right to make the world beautiful

and the right to create this beauty by any means necessary!

While You're Shopping, Bombs Are Dropping
by Gregg Mosson

Saturday sun
details the faces
of the marchers and the watchers.
We are shouting "no" to normalcy.

While I'm speaking,
bombs are nearing.

And meeting friends for dinner tonight,
I'll still have my life to solve:
Whom do I love, who loves me?

While we're breathing,
bombs are cleaving.

Solidarity with
fathers, sisters, neighbors, strangers
is how I live,
is what I can give.

People Must Raise Their Voices to Inspire Change



Washington D.C., January 2007

Poems Against War: A Journal of Poetry and Action
www.poemsagainstar.com

Poem for the Living

by Gregg Mosson

I:

Vows slip from stacked newspapers
like subscription mailers no one wants: They swirl under cars,
wrap around posts, flutter down
mucked with dirt and exhaust;
pile on sidewalks, a sea of stained papers. At dusk,
I scramble over garbage to get back home.

II.

Orderly squads of soldiers
pass crowds in business casual
to invade overseas for oil.

Under a Saturday March sun
parading draws shoppers and children
as dogs lope through nubile buds.

Dark sedans of decision-makers
blow red lights to reach meetings
while reporters tail celebrities.

Photojournalists frame icons
for people sleeping in neon
dreaming of sexy stardom.

The workweek rehauls itself
onto buses, subways, into cars,
as elsewhere populations snapshot to dust.

III: March 20, 2003

When bombs dropped far away, rain came the next day
to the U.S. Capital, a gray drain
seeming to say the whole world would pay.

In a small room I woke beside my lover,
but my bones
hijacked my mouth and said, "Mass Murder."

We refused to work that day Iraq was attacked.
We cooked, kept home.
Outside, justice crept into underground bulbs.

Birds on the street
argued with song
as if they didn't belong.

Human screams, attached to dust, began traversing the earth.

IV:

I vigil by the White House to answer with stillness,
"No Civilian Bombing" stenciled on a sign, squared in my lap . . .
until lullabies of evening strollers eddy past
through the layered glow and breezy leaves
of this ceremonial place. Nearing the placard
passers' chittar-chatter
collapses like bridges
imploded to air

as life drifts off
beyond the blackness
like cool winds touching down here, hinting
of the cold singleness of stars
and weaving off
into the vast elsewhere. Night is more spacious
than all our hearts;
in this space hearts can listen.
Human-perfected bombs
fall on praying families
in my person.

Evening tunnels to a dark of plums.

V:
Norma O'Malley waddles to the door;
two o'clock light sleeps on Iowa June wheat.
She's sixty-two, a rooted widow, and her son
Bill, whom she loves more than the sun,
plans to greet more than the dawn,
for whom she knits socks though he's forty-two—

Ms. O'Malley soon may shake
like a tree branch torn by an overfull river
and wedged taut across two rocks.
The news ricochets from field
command to base, and then from desk to desk.
It nears her door. . . . It shatters now.

VI: Diana

"Dear diary, this dorm room
is what I control: Four square walls
with Sara-Beth, who comes and goes blithely,
sequined and sequenced. But I can't rush out
today, have skipped my classes—the whole reason I moved
here to New York City. I need to be
indoors, dressed in sweats, stripped
of architectural prettiness, how my mother raised me,
and write of what I've only heard. But how?
I'll meditate upon a star, a zone where anyone can hide.
Stars soon to come out, do they tinsel a bombed-out building
in Fallujah? Is it night there now
and do I rotate under the same light
to where a chair
blasted into the street
invites me to sit?

Did they live there, like me—
in some Apartment 4B—smally?"

VII: Cape Cod

Flags flap from houses.
Tuesday's concert includes a patriotic song.
The gray newspaper armors its tones.
August rolls on.

Ocean rumbles through slicing mist.
Faintest clouds touch green dunes.
Birds chime from slightly tossed pines.
This is my home.

Opinions are honed like thin knives.
Puddles of silence coalesce in gutters;
on clear days they catch the sun's multicolors.
Watch the changes.

VIII:

Blood, seep into the fruit tree
alone in the desert of neon, desert of sirocco wind,
desert of televisions, desert of farmers' almanacs,
fallow of public speaking, reservoir of private censure,
and circulate the harvest, share this strange fruit.

A few have joined us, pass around the circle.
Wind, whirl incense of this wild wholeness
over oceans, needle through blocked mountains,
rush silent deserts, infuse tents and houses,
and widen the circle, coax more to sit among us
to share the suffusion, sumptuous with nutrients:
this vision of the fruit tree, fruit tree's vision,
vision of the apple seed, the whole apple.



Washington D.C January 2007



New York City, March 2004

The Old Warrior
by Marcus Colasurdo

for Philip Berrigan

When he emerged from captivity
the people crowded around him.

They flung their questions
like spears over heads of wheat.

The old warrior listened,
the lines of his face in raw books
of history.

On the gray steps,
the voices grew louder:
they wanted to know
what the battle was like
how many were killed
how the blood tasted.

The old warrior stood unmoving;
not even whispering
though something tectonic
jumped in his eyes.

He may have offered a flower
but I didn't see it.

He may have folded his arms in prayer
but I couldn't tell.

From his tongue
only the ocean rose

And when the questions brought down
Thunder,
he smiled at a child
and climbed the grey stairs again.

A Dream of the Wind
by Marcus Colasurdo

When the red dawn finally explodes
 upon our land
and the earth covering the hundred million
 trembles-

A new people will appear
 wearing symbols on their cloaks.

They will speak a language
 from the lips of the caves
of copper
and they will carry their shelter on their backs.

They will travel by foot
 and worship
the horses that still run free.

At night
 they will gather near fires
 preparing the food;
etching blankets and belts
 from what is left.

The women will measure great distances
 by charting the cross-eyed stars:
for these will be a people
 who have known imperfection.

The men will stretch tents into drums,
 thinking of new melodies:
for these will be a people
 who have known great silence.

The children will pantomime
 the sway of the trees:

for these will be a people
of whom nothing is known.

Pretending to be Dead

by Antler

How many boys who loved playing army,
Who loved pretending to be shot
 tumbling down summer hills,
Who loved pretending to be dead
 as their bestfriend checked to make sure,
Or who loved pretending to deliver
 their last-words soliloquy
 wincing in imagined pain
 or lost and dreamy,
Find themselves years later
 trapped on the battlefield
Hearing the voices of enemy soldiers
Searching for corpses to mutilate
 or wounded to torture to death?

What man remembers those idyllic
 boyhood days then
As he lies still as possible
Trying not even to breathe,
 hoping beyond hope
 the enemy will pass him by,
Knowing if he's discovered
 they'll cut off his cock and balls
 and stuff them in his screaming mouth
And then, before cutting off his head,
 disembowl him before his eyes?

Ah, thousands of boys and men
 have met this end,
Millions perhaps by now,
 so many people
 so many wars.

Do they go to a special heaven
 set aside for
 all who die like this?
Restored to the bodies they had,
The memory erased of that insane end
 to the story of their lives?

Do they still get a chance
 to play army with joy
And pretend to be shot
 and pretend to die?

After they meet this end?
Do they still get to thrill
 in pretending to be dead
 after they die?
After this hideous inhuman end
 will they laugh and wrestle
 their bestfriend again?

Pretending to be Dead by Antler, p. 2

What They Say
by Barbara Simon

So much to be thankful for
in America--Good folks
folded like handkerchiefs
into the pocket of our national
pride. How well our great country
churns through the vast swell

of world opinion. Dominance swells
our chest. So responsible, we are for
helping the little guy. Beleaguered countries
beg us to help their folk
learn how to grow a real nation,
one where the chief

executive would never lie. Chief
among the virtues of this swell
American ideal, we know we are a moral nation,
filled with people thankful for
liberty, freedom—democratic folk
willing to stand up for this great country.

To honor our country,
we let slide pomposity, pretension, and chief
among our cardinal sins, the folk
wisdom that we are right: the swell
of public debate always for
flag waving. Our national

patriotism, the refuge of a nation
that smiles after bombing a country
into submission for
weapons it didn't have, chiefly
to get the oil, the swell
reserves to feed the fine folk

at Halliburton or Bechtel, corporate folk
whose only interest is our national
debt they allow to grow to swell
their coffers, raping us, the country
going down as our chief
executive cowboy struts for

an image of victory, our country welcome
only to the Fortune 500 folk, their chief
goal to make the nation safe, or so they say.

Thunder
by Auset

In trying times to walk
On the heels of the ancestors
Quietly
Always giving thanks
Giving thanks always

Tread lightly
They will hear your step

Do not awaken the thunder
Sleeping in their hearts

It will rain soon enough

Why Twelve Anti-War Poems?
An Afterword by Gregg Mosson
09/04/08

The poems here are culled from the first seven issues of *Poems Against War*, a journal that began publishing in May 2003 in a limited edition at first biannually and then annually. The small-press journal is archived at the University of Wisconsin, Madison library—special collections department. In 2007, *Poems Against War Vol. 6: Music & Heroes* become available internationally through Wasteland Press, followed by *Poems Against War Vol. 7: Ars Poetica*. The magazine won a Puffin Foundation Grant in 2008.

Poems Against War says **artists must raise their voices to inspire change**. In mainstream American literary magazines still, scant literature dares to speak about war and other pressing social issues facing people in the 21st century. In this way, publications create a fiction that most people can live their personal lives outside of cultural, social and political changes. In addition, such silence endorses the status quo. Yet if the status quo is not tending toward peace and justice, it is not good enough.

In February 2003, U.S. First Lady Laura Bush invited a number of writers to a White House conference on the topic of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Langston Hughes. Neither Hughes nor Whitman would have come to that symposium on the eve of a war and remained silent. When it became rumored that invited West Coast poet Sam Hamill might mention his opposition to the then-brewing 2003 Iraq invasion, Mrs. Bush cancelled the symposium. The U.S. went to war with Iraq on March 19, 2003.

Hamill gave birth to a ‘Poets Against the War’ movement. He created a Web site allowing over 11,000 poets in a matter of months to contribute their poems from the U.S. and around the world. This movement exposed a swell of U.S. sentiment against the war. This journal takes its cue from Hamill and Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman—and especially from Whitman’s “Song of Myself”—in providing space for voices of witness, peace, anger, vision, and joy.

BIOGRAPHIES

Antler is author of *Selected Poems* (Soft Skull Press, 2000) and *Last Words* (Ballantine Books, 1986). He has been the poet laureate of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and writes poetry of vision. His long poem “Factory” is a must read. The poem here “Pretending to be Dead” can be found in his *Selected Poems*.

Auset is a name derived from an ancient Egyptian god, and is the stage name for an African-American woman who lives in Baltimore, Maryland. This poem comes from her chapbook, *Thunder*. Auset and poet Marcus Colasurdo perform a traveling poetic 2-person show, *Thunder and Lightning*.

Alan Barysh is a Baltimore poet, activist, and jazz enthusiast, whose dedication and work dates back to the 1960s. His work can be found in the anthology *Octopus Dreams* (Abecedarian Books, 2006), and on the CDs *Art Between Deliveries* (ABCD, 2007) and *Alan Barysh with the Buzzard Luck Ensemble* (ABCD, 1995—ABCD; PO Box 33127; Baltimore Maryland 21218).

Marcus Colasurdo is a poet and teacher whose performance company Gimmie Shelter Productions in Maryland has put on fundraising benefits using poetry for 15 years. He has inked *Bending Zen Wavelengths*, a book of poems, and *Angel City Taxi*, an unpublished novel based on his days as Los Angeles taxi cab driver.

Rosemary Klein is executive director of the Maryland State Poetry & Literary Society, and founding editor and director of Three Conditions Press. Her poems have appeared widely.

Gregg Mosson is the publisher and main editor of *Poems Against War: A Journal of Poetry and Action*. He has written a book of nature poetry, *Season of Flowers and Dust* (Goose River Press). His reporting, reviews, and poetry have appeared in *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *Poet's Ink*, and other places. If you dare, seek more at www.greggmosson.com

Janet Parkinson is a poet, editor and writer in Rhode Island. Her work has appeared in *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Arsenic Lobster*, and *Abys & Apex*.

Barbara Simon's first full-length book of poetry is *The Woman From Away* (Three Conditions Press). She taught at the University of Maryland--Baltimore County. She died from cancer in 2007 and shall be missed.

Patricia Wellingham-Jones has written *Voices on the Land* (Rattlesnake Press) and *Don't Turn Away: Poems About Breast Cancer* (PWJ Publishing). Her work has appeared widely. She is a former psychology researcher, and her Web site is www.wellinghamjones.com.

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