

Poetry Review: “The Light Outside” by George Kovach



The Light Outside
George Kovach

George Kovach’s poetry collection, *The Light Outside*, begins with a narrator who’s stuck holding open a window.

He’s a little embarrassed about it. The window, that is. He accidentally painted over it a few years past, in a hundred-year-old house, and only just now has gotten it to budge. And

so, finally, holding it, he's not sure that he wants to shut it again.

*With the window free a burdened balance replaces
the ease the architect intended. I have to hold it open.*

The situation is humorous, humble. It sets the stage for the way Kovach will approach many of his poems: curious, searching, and then decisive. The journey he is about to take the reader on is far from light, and sometimes darkness will overwhelm. But there is a unique resolve to this collection: "I have to hold it open."

It's a resolve befitting a poet who has chosen to try to see hard-won light, who has endured the Vietnam war and then, as an artist, worked (through his literary magazine, CONSEQUENCE, and other venues) to highlight and promote artistic voices often very different than his own: prismatic, divergent; contrasts and complements. Like the Rothko painting that graces the collection's cover—"Dark Over Light (No.7)," in which a charcoal square threatens to overtake the apparent delicacy of a smaller, pale rectangle—or the Sugimoto photograph referenced in the poem "Picture at an Exhibition"—the strength may not be in the encroaching square but in the sliver below that, against all odds, remains open.

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Hiroshi Sugimoto, "Boden Sea," 1993.

Kovach's poems often ring with the language of the sea—coves, moorings, ledges, gulls—though each word holds a far more distilled power than that of a natural world merely-observed. Here, nature observes you—the melded, overlapping nature of the populated Atlantic seaboard, where the human and the wild may have long cohabited but can't claim to be used to one another, not quite. The gray fog and tides meet low chain-link fences, lilacs, Catholic statuary, paved patios and Coppertone in summer, echoes of Pinsky and Bishop and Lowell.

The legacy of the latter is most overt in "Covenant," which opens with Lowell's famous line, "The Lord survives the rainbow of His will," borrowed from "[The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket](#)." Like "Quaker Graveyard," it is a poem about a shipwreck. Both poems share a rhyme scheme and irregular pentameter as well as a vein of bitterness-in-loss, of grappling with what could easily seem, from the ground, an

indifferent Almighty.

Whole families

*Left what failed them, but held close to their faith;
boarded the St. John in Galway,
threw sprays of white rock-cress leeward
and watched the green hills fade. October 8th*

1849, hard into a gale

*Within view of a sheltered cove the rigging
failed, shrouds ripped from the bleeding deck,
voices below screamed in the dark and wailed at God.*

Now a statue of John the Baptist stands watch there, over a shoreline that has eroded to his bare, stone feet.

Lowell, a conscientious objector who dedicated “Quaker Graveyard” to a cousin killed at sea in the Second World War, limned that poem with a tense and devastating ask: Why would a creator let so many people perish in such cruel ways, and why do we, as humans, seem hell-bent on heaping even more suffering upon ourselves?

Kovach, contrasting Lowell as a combat veteran of a different, perhaps in some ways more culturally fraught war, uses “Covenant” to ask the same. “Covenant” is subtler and shorter than Lowell’s poem, and equally compassionate, but it maintains its predecessor’s edge, the sharp intelligence that won’t let the reader off easy. If a rainbow must be initiated by massive loss and violence—survived, perhaps, only by the Lord with his iron-and-dew will—then it is a double-edged sword: a promise of an eternal love, and a promise that large-scale loss will happen again. Does it comfort you? In a stunning twist, Kovach’s final line reaches out to another Lowell allusion, this time from “For the Union Dead,” which uses a separate historical event to cast its evaluating eye on modern man. Kovach writes,

*Slick cormorants skim
with cruel black wings beyond the harbor's edge.*

and that judgment-by-nature, which may seem at first an easier thing to dodge than the judgment of God or man, is packed with all the horror and human-on-human hurt Lowell alludes to with his own famous final lines, *A savage servility slides by on grease.*

We are the mourners, of course; and we are the noble lost, the starving faithful. We are also the savage servility. Anyone can slide by, watching.

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I am not surprised that “Covenant” reads to me like an anti-war poem. Kovach is founding editor of the aforementioned *Consequence* magazine (along with Catherine Parnell and a [masthead](#) of other editors), which focuses on the “culture and consequences” of war and its effects. *Consequence* is an exceptional journal, wide-reaching and brave, and it has served, for me in my last two years with *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, as a model of what a real literary, intellectual and artistic effort toward justice, true exchange of ideas, and cooperation might look like. Dedicated to the voices of all people touched by war, the magazine has published a special issue featuring Cambodian writers, and its most recent issue—its eleventh volume—features poet Brian Turner as guest curator of a [selection](#) of searing and fantastic Iraqi poetry.

Kovach’s “Editor’s Notes” for each issue read like beautiful small essays in themselves. “Prejudice finds soft targets among the vulnerable,” he writes (Vol. 9, February 2018), making plain his opposition to the [Muslim travel ban](#). The Editor’s Note for Volume 7, three years prior, reads like a mission statement:

For me, reading these works [in the magazine] unfastens the flak jacket of my assumptions and enables me to enter a kind

of sacred space where the meaning of suffering and loss become complex, nuanced, spoken in a voice that's both strange and familiar. The cumulative effect is recognition of our shared humanity and how the experience of war is both different and the same, regardless of where it's fought.

"Unfastens the flak jacket of my assumptions": It is this humility—this willingness to make oneself a soft target, on par with everyone else—that sets a journal like *Consequence* apart, that sets the work it features apart. This is an age where it is so easy to turn away—to slide by, watching; or to dismiss the soul for the show, to over-watch, isolated, judgmental, and gaping.

I like the closing lines of Judith Baumel's poem "[Sputinu in Gerace](#)," published in *Consequence* last year. It is a poem about olives the way "Quaker Graveyard" and "Covenant" are poems about shipwrecks. The voice is one of both inclusivity and distinction. Some readers will be the voice of the colonized islander, describing the types of olives, and some will be the invaders. Perhaps this is historical and cannot be helped. Perhaps, being human, we can choose the way we proceed from here.

No. Don't say. I'll tell you. The invaders didn't call these cultivars nocellara etnea e Moresca and Biancolilla as we do now but it is what kept them here, wave upon wave, until we did not know the difference between them and us.

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Several of the poems in the first half of *THE LIGHT OUTSIDE* touch on veteran experience. "The Page is Empty," about the memory of a body—interestingly, the written-down memory of something the narrator claims he cannot remember—is almost too harrowing to read.

*He's uncertain, so he leaves out
the glottal stop of a lung*

*pulling air through the folds
of a fresh tear; leaves out the snap-
shot-silence of the others, prone
in rank water, transfixed*

*by a wall of patient reeds (the missing
sound's the soft sweep of reeds)*

It's followed by an equally unsettling but highly visual, energetic long metaphor, "[Another prose statement on the poetry of war]":

*Imagine war after a fix, gold studded and cuff-linked,
prowling the wedding reception, uninvited. He fingers the tip
of a rubber tube coiled in his coat pocket...He shakes hands
greedily with the wedding party. They beam at his glazed eyes,
sallow flesh, acetone breath. The groom's family thinks he's a
friend of the bride's, the bride's family looks at each other
as he slides to the maid of honor, the best man...*

Each poem in the collection hands off a word, theme, or object to the one that follows it. "Soundings," for example, a poem about tourists on a whale-watch boat, passes a tour guide (in another time and place) to the curious travelers in "Basilica." "Basilica" passes a watchful eye, as well as mentions of gods and trees (wood, oak, carvings) to the wonderful three-part poem "Siegmund," a lively and humorous recounting of Richard Wagner's "The Valkyrie" from the Ring Cycle.

It's a wonderful interplay, not just between the lines of each poem but between the poems as partners and showmen, jostling slightly to tell you the story, as if they're saying, But there's more, there's more. You really didn't think that would be all, did you—that there was only one side to a thing?

I should mention, then, that the poems about war hand off to poems about family, parenthood, marriage—that they lead into poems about love.

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There is humor in these poems, too. "It's hard to watch immortal mid-life crisis," the poet muses in "Siegmund," as the Norse god Wotan throws a hissy fit. (Surely, Cosima Wagner thought the same thing about Richard a time or two.)

Another god, or demigod, arrives, in a playful rumination on Ansel Adams:

*He breathed the tops of hemlocks
spectral oaks and snow above the tree line.
When the aspens silvered, he came down*

*From El Capitan carrying plated images
of rivers slowly splitting mountains,
his hoarfrost beard brittle in the wind.*

Word play is in fine form; the poor, boat-bound tourists in "Soundings" "toggle in dramamine equilibrium between alarm and regret," and in "Basilica," there are "hubristic papal bees squatting between olive branches, a profligate pope's baroque addition."

More than anything, though, there is the joy and relief of a world filtered through this poet's searching mind. In many poems we are reminded of what we are not seeing—reminded, gently, to look back—or forward. In "Soundings," the tourists miss the whale after all: "But we're looking behind, to where we thought we were."

Frustrated, the narrator in "Basilica" observes a statue and thinks, "I can't make out what's in the pupil's blurred/geometry." Later, s/he says,

*There's no sense of scale; every perspective's
blocked by angles, ages of angles designed
for rapture, built on boxes of bones.*

*

The overwhelming mood of the book is one of a tender, intelligent hunger for illumination—to see the world for what it is and our human role in it. What is the point of us, so easily distracted, easily discarded, building our monuments? We rapture on boxes of bones. The stone god won't look us in the eye. "But why," Kovach asks, in "Lucifer's Light," "do I remember darkness better than light?"

I'd argue that he might not. After reading the collection twice, I'm still thinking of that first poem, "A Burdened Balance," where the narrator is holding open a window he's accidentally painted shut.

*Years ago, careless and in a hurry to finish at the top
of a tall ladder, I painted it shut from the outside.*

Now it won't budge.

And so the narrator is stuck there, having finally got the hinges to move.

*I hear inside the wall the window's counterweights recoil and
clang together,
bang against the wood mullion.*

*The brittle cord connecting them fails—they fall
and with them what I took for granted, the way things work.*

Fresh air flows in, rousing a wasp which has been nesting in the attic. The wasp flies out and the narrator, still indecisive, remains, laughing slightly at himself (the window is getting heavy), but waiting for something. "I've no reason," he thinks, "to keep the hobbled window open." This admission is funny, self-deprecating, and wry. The poem is about holding a window the same way "Covenant" is about a shipwreck and "Sputino in Gerace" is about olives. We are waiting, like the narrator, stuck, laughing, humbled, to see what will come next—some bit of joy or mercy, some bit of the light still outside. There's certainly been enough of the

opposite. Why not just shut the window?

I've no reason, I suppose

*To keep holding the hobbled window open. But I don't
want to let the heft of it drop, to close a way of returning.*

Kovach, George. [*The Light Outside*](#). Arrowsmith Press, 2019.

New Fiction from John Darcy: “Sorry I Missed Your Call”



An hour before the drive, Bubs finds himself sucking down an edible. A big blowout blowtorched dab of a brownie. He could feel it stonerizing his insides the second the swallow went down, that ashy grass-stained aftertaste staking a claim on

his tongue

Been doing a lot of things like that, lately. Ill-advised things. Bubs' best guess pins the start of it back to February. March at the latest. And he didn't know where the hell this getting out of bed problem came from. The brownie was the prize he'd promised himself for completing the task this morning. Bubs has even stopped spying both ways when crossing the street. He just kind of steps out off the curb.

The weed thing's, like, not a big deal? is the argument he tries to make to Omar, his driver's licenseless trip mate and his best friend, hopefully, still.

'Why the whole thing?' Omar asks. His jaw is doing that thing it does when he's not happy. 'Why not just a bite?'

Bubs sags his shoulders in a sort of shrug. He does, however, feel Omar's disappointment as if it's parental in origin, a weathered, rock-like thing, barely shining in the clear bluish glimmer of this dazzling late-May morning, a steely cold shamewave of the someone-expected-better-from-you variety.

Omar says, 'You do remember what we're doing here, yeah? Let's try not to forget.'

Bubs does remember what they're doing, thank you very much, but he gets to thinking about the purpose of the trip, about how Germ might feel when he understands that Omar and Bubs are not just saying hello, are not just passing through with their sights trained on simple catch-up, that their actual mission is to complete a very serious and sober welfare check.

'No snacks in that bag by chance?' Bubs says in his best McConaughey.

'Seriously?'

'There's this side effect of THC called the munchies. Familiar?'

Omar's face says he isn't having it, isn't going to have it, today. Head to toe, Omar is one smooth motherfucker. A good six inches taller than Bubs, he's got that chill studied coolness of a hipster high school teacher, the dark haired young socialist you could probably call for a lift after getting blind on UV Blue. It's a first impression thing, impossible to miss.

Bubs can still remember when he had the experience. Fresh off zero hours of sleep, Bubs was getting his face melted off by the acid rain spittle of a Ft. Benning drill sergeant, a walking little napoleon complex who still shows up in nightmares from time to time. For taking too long to get his ass off the bus, Bubs was sentenced to a viscous fucking tongue lashing and a hip toss up the aisle. When he finally made it down the rubber-ribbed steps up front, he saw the formation of new recruits caught in a chokehold of screams and he went to join them in the full nelson, this new clan, his first tribe. Some were doing pushups and it was hot, hot as Bubs could ever remember feeling, and mainly his brain told him, Might have messed up here, Might have made the wrong choice. Then he saw what would turn out to be Omar, front and center, not a drop of sweat even thinking about trying him, not a screaming campaign hat anywhere near, as if a memo had made the rounds before the shark attack, indicating one young soldier in particular it would probably be better not to mess with.

'Okay then,' Bubs says, 'coffee it is. Java. Brain fuel.' The high still hasn't hit fully. He is looking forward to its blanketing caress, the slow juicy haymaker of it.

Strapped in, tunes on, shades perched smooth on the oily bridge of his bony nose, Bubs pulls out of the dashed-off fire lane in front of Omar's building. Bubs wouldn't call himself handsome, exactly. Especially not next to Omar. Adequate, maybe. Passable. His lips are on the thin side, pincer-like where they curve into each other. On his head an orchestra of

dark black hair sits crazy and unbrushed, the texture of very fine straw. A spiraling tattoo of ones and zeros on his left forearm spells out BINARY CODE in binary. There is an efficiency to his composition. His dad used to say, *It's like you were made on an assembly line except with the brains God gave a dog.* Ignoring that last part, Bubs is thankful for the proportionality, though if anything he feels it makes him look calculated, indifferent, lame.

That said, Bubs comes alive behind the wheel. The inside-out knowledge he has of his machine, a stock Impreza with more miles than he'd care to admit, makes him proud as an honor roll dad. It takes some foreplay to shift from second to third, but timed properly the latent torque is enough to shove his heart against his ribcage. It's two make-and-models away from being a full-on rally car, and Bubs loves to remind himself of this fact. He basks in it, the low-level ladder rung of his vehicle, its impossible potential.

'Can I get one of those?' Bubs says. Omar has a cigarette rappelling from his mouth. He smokes a snooty, hard-to-find Turkish brand. It's the kind of thing that'd drive Bubs up the wall with anybody else.

Omar says, 'Always hanging with the smokers, never has any smokes.'

'Come on,' Bubs says, and Omar lights one up for him.

Bubs rolls down the windows in reply.

A rush of air and motion.

Before long they're gaining speed.

The wind blasts a racket through the nicotined interior. Sunlight is just absolutely pouring down, swallowing them up, threatening to swallow them whole.

Bubs says, 'What I didn't expect is that it'd be Germ.'

'Not really about how someone looks or acts, you know? Germ's been through a lot.'

'I mean who hasn't?

'I think the divorce puts him in a higher tax bracket.'

'I get that,' Bubs says.

'And his mom's cancer stuff.'

'I really get it. But sometimes it is the biggest fuck up—right? It's the king of the fuck ups, who, you know.'

'Fucks up?'

'Nailed it.'

'Sometimes,' Omar says. 'Maybe sometimes.'

'Not that Germ is one of those guys.'

'Not at all.'

'Just generally speaking. You see my water bottle anywhere?'

Omar says, 'What happens when that shit hits you too hard and we have to pull over?'

'Not even on my radar. I like driving high anyway. There's this thing about it, yeah? There's this way it makes you feel.'

Omar had wanted to hit the road at ten-thirty, introduce themselves to Chicago traffic no later than one in the afternoon. Bubs makes no bones about the delay being his fault. Rolling from his sheets today, phone flashing a harsh nine thirty, it was about the earliest he'd mustered all year.

Omar, on the other hand, has really got his shit sorted. Bubs thinks he should run one of those schemey self-help seminars. Only with Omar it wouldn't be sleaze. It would be blue-suited

and cologned, sharp, deathly fucking sharp. When Omar was enrolled on the GI Bill, he did some day trading on the side. He came out of college well in the black, psych degree in hand. Bubs had signed up for a few certificate courses at the technical college in Janesville, decided not to go.

There is a possibility, Bubs sometimes thinks, that his closeness with Omar finds its bedrock on their uneven terrain of accomplishment. That it's a necessary condition for their continued buddy status, a cornerstone from the start. He supposes there are worse foundations for a friendship, although it seems to him like a fuel source that'll eventually burn itself out. Bubs prays it does not. While it collapses his heart to imagine life without his best friend, Bubs is pleased that he struggles to picture the full bleak immensity of it. It is a good sign. Like checking your own pulse, surprised to feel the beating.

Bubs curves the car through the interchange and hauls them onto I90. He asks Omar to remind him about the plan. 'The plan,' Omar says, 'is to just see how he's doing. Snag a beer. Check out where he's living. Face to face stuff.'

Bubs is glad about the beer. He is also glad his eyes are on the road, preventing Omar from seeing how bright they flare at the sound. That's another thing about Omar. He's never tapping on his phone during a conversation. He'll even say, like, *One sec, let me just pop this off, don't want it interrupting us*, and leave it clear in the other room.

'I'm excited to see him,' Bubs says.

'Yeah.'

'Honestly I am.'

'Okay,' Omar says.

Unsure of what Omar's deal is today, Bubs keeps focused on the southbound highway. The straightness of the road. Its continued reappearance on the far edge of his sightline leads Bubs to think that it wasn't so much built as dreamed, less engineered than imagined, plopped right into place from way up above, signage and all, aligned just so. If there's a single cloud in the sky Bubs cannot for the life of him find it.

'Germ is a good guy,' Omar says, apropos of nothing Bubs can gather. 'He'll be glad you came with.'

He asks Omar, 'How many guys we lose this last year?'

'I think it's three. Three or six. I can't remember which. But it's one of those.'

'How come we didn't go to any of the funerals?'

'I don't know,' Omar says. 'How am I supposed to know?'

'The war back home.'

'What?'

'That's what it's getting called,' Bubs says. 'The war back home.'

Omar rockets around, real intense with the motion. His dark eyes are little discs of deep set stormclouds. 'Why does everything have to have a name? Why can't it just be people trying to figure stuff out?'

'I mean it wasn't me that came up with it.'

'Sure,' Omar says, slinking his head back, turning it to look out on the sectioned squares of farmland around the road. It's the only thing a person could look at on this stretch of federal street. Bulky portions of agriculture and landmass, barbed and divided, flat yet somehow still rolling, rippling, flowing. Cows out to pasture whiz by in the distance, lifeless

specs against the green.

It's no surprise to Bubs that Omar took the reins in planning the check-up on Germ. What he can't figure out is why he himself was enlisted for duty. Bubs doesn't think of himself as a great instiller of confidence. Not really a compelling life-affirmer. But he is happy Omar asked him to come along, and he is happy he'd said yes since it would have been so much easier to say no. It's gotten so simple—and Bubs isn't sure why—to do nothing, nothing at all.

Germ is still an hour and a half away, but Bubs is getting the brunt of it now, getting socked by a storm of monster waves. A high tide of heady realizations. He has stepped up and done the right thing by coming along. This much he knows. He is doing what he is supposed to do: you help when you're able, you do what you can to endure; you carve out as much space as the world allows and if the world doesn't budge you gotta get yourself real low and push back, push hard, knowing it might not come to much. Bubs feels swaddled in something bright and endlessly comforting, wrapped and entwined, tight as granite, in the grand silky fabric of it. With a kind of worldwide tenderness moving through his body, the mot juste of existence takes shape on his tongue. For the first time in his life, Bubs sees the answers to his questions dead ahead. He's got them dead to rights. And it's just as he reaches out to grab them, to give them a healthy once-over, that a sweet lemony haze washes over the frontside of his horizon.

Bubs, higher than he has been in his entire life, sits in a patch of tall grass near the picnic area of a rest stop south of Rockford. Omar is on the phone.

Here, knees tight to chest, Bubs recalls with a good bit of nostalgia the appearance of Germ in his life. Jeremey Heck Jr., known as Germ, got his sticky nickname due to the

astounding biohazard dirtiness of his Ft. Bragg barracks room. More than the room itself was the way Germ managed to clean it up on inspection day. Bubs couldn't dismiss the possibility of little animated birds swooping through the window to help tidy up the filth. Bubs and Omar, bunkmates through basic training and airborne school, kept their lucky streak alive when orders came down sending them to the same platoon. The two of them learned early on that they had both grown up in Madison, had lived on opposite sides of the isthmus and attended opposing high schools, had both frenched Anna Cloverman and gotten the same tight slap of rejection when they'd tried to slither a hand down her jeans. And though they'd never directly met before boot camp, they sort of got the picture that this strange lifelong proximity meant they had most likely been at the same place at the same time—Eric Daniel's historic Halloween banger, most likely—and that this was as close to a sign from the universe as anybody was going to get. Unscrambling the source code, they figured it meant they oughta have each other's backs, ensure the other's safe return to the selfsame home. Germ and his petri dish lived straight across the hall from Bubs and Omar, and, according to Germ's account, got snatched up orbit-like in the pair's friendship. Bubs' nickname has an origin story, too. His last name is Bubsmiester. People just chopped off the suffix.

Bubs sees Omar standing above him. The grass is barely wet against his pants, coolly warm, smattered with leftover dew. Straight to his twelve o'clock, making a rug of shade for which Bubs is super grateful, Omar says something kind and reassuring.

'I'm really sorry, man,' Bubs says.

'It's all right.'

'I am really high.'

'You said that already.'

'I really am, though.'

Omar says, 'It's all good. Don't worry.'

Bubs likes the phrase, recommitting it to memory. How many times has he told someone not to worry? Not enough.

A spray of shade over Omar's collar. It passes quick. Bubs sees, understands, makes note of and comes to realize that he is happy where he is. Soothed. His best friend is a stone's throw. The weather is stupid calm. Exposed out here, sun on his skin, Bubs wonders if he might be able to undo all the damage he's done, unwind his own hurt into a manageable enough thread. He imagines constructing a kind of personal murder board for his own personal fuck ups. With enough hard work, he thinks he can do it. Because here's the thing: It's all bullshit anyway. So why not try. Failing that, he would settle for a glass of water. Sometimes he worries about having an unsuitable brain.

Sunlight. Slow breeze. Lulling hum of the interstate. Omar is out of sight now. Bubs knows he is arraigning things, talking with Germ, fixing what Bubs has broken. Impaired, definitely still impaired, Bubs stands up, wobbling, and goes towards the main a-frame building.

He passes the huge towering map of the state and the free-standing little dusty cubicle of waterpark brochures. The bubbler inside is broken; the vending machine doesn't take debits; the sink in the bathroom is automatic, and Bubs waves and waves his hand at the sensor but nothing comes. He is as thirsty as he can ever remember being, and fucking saying something, that is.

He decides to make himself stay with the discomfort, lets it ride through him like a train or a skateboard or some other thing that rolls and glides and breezes.

Inside the building, he slips out a side door. He makes his way over a field of mown grass into a thicket of sick-looking trees. Bubs keeps the trucker's parking lot on his right when he moves into the bramble. When he heads back, he's just gotta keep the blacktop on his left.

Now he is here, alone, standing at the mud-slathered edge of some kind of retaining pond. A nasty spot, about the size of an above ground pool. The water is dark, murky. A kind of loose film of grime covers its surface. The water buzzes with tiny bugs, the swirling gray leftovers of vehicular exhaust. A few branches hang over the water at uncertain angles. Bubs pulls out his phone, sees a missed call from Omar.

He feels the sun on his back, feels it lowering against his spine. His surroundings are summer and sky. He stares at the pond, dirty and calm, the color of old dryer lint. He watches its surface do things with the light. Bubs bends down, brushes away a layer of dirt and gristle, cups his hands, fills them with water, and drinks.

When he makes his way back from the water, a silvery trembling thrashing in his stomach, he tells Omar what he's done. Omar, without a change on his face or a clue in his eyes, balls his left hand and hits Bubs on the side of the head and Bubs hears the tinnitus in his right ear, always present, spike like a line on a chart and he is on the ground; the pain is hot and tender, but its heat is concentrated, boxed, not overwhelming him, and he groans a little mainly from the shock of it, the power of the strike and the unforgivingness of the ground.

Omar offers down a hand. Bubs takes it.

'I'm sorry,' he says.

'It's all right,' he answers.

'I shouldn't have done that.'

'I shouldn't have, either.'

The silence in a way becomes to Bubs like a kind of song, rhythmic and brassy and tempo-heavy. A few birds fly sorties along vapor trails in the sky. Part of Bubs' gut feel like it's at a rolling boil.

'You know what you have to do, yeah?' Omar says.

Bubs does know, thank you very much. He stares a patch of prickly grass, mainly at the space between blades. He says to Omar, 'Alright, alright. You know I'm a real retcher so plug your ears.' Bubs bends down and aims his middle finger to the back of his mouth.

They move to a different piece of real estate after Bubs' hurl. He flips his middle finger, the slimy one, at the mess he made. This makes Omar laugh. With the last of the high still dribbling out of him, Bubs recalls with a fondness bordering on sorrow when the three of them—himself, Omar, and Germ—timed their terminal leave and Army departures for the same day. Piled into a younger version of Bubs' beloved whip, together they drove off Ft. Bragg for the final time, flipping the bird to the gate guards on their way out, sticky pre-rolled already sparked, two or three extras stinking up the center console. For Bubs it's a source of serious regret. What good does it do to give your past the middle finger? Talk about a waste of time. It's the only thing that remains, sure as the resin on the inside of a bong—nothing is forever except your past. But Bubs knows they were different then, on the far shore of that four year lapse of time: Germ, down half a finger from a faulty .50 caliber spring, marriage on the rocks but hopeful for a rescue operation; Omar, newly purple-hearted, lost in a lagoon of survivor's guilt, dreamily hearing at all hours the deep metallic click of the pressure

cooker bomb whose fuse tripped but ordinance didn't; and Bubs—bias as he might be for knowing more about himself than his friends—coming off a less than honorable discharge for pissing hot, testing positive for an amphetamine they didn't mind him taking down range, driving too fast towards middle America with his two best buds, ripping huge and unholy tokes from the joint and feeling more than anything like he was alone, cheated out of some promised purpose and belonging, a sort of cancerous growth of dejection sprouting tendrilly in his guts, as lonely leaving the Army as he was going in.

'You can't worry about that stuff anymore,' Bubs hears Omar saying, either somewhere in his head or right there in front of him. He isn't entirely sure. 'The stuff you wish you did different? I think that'll eat you a-fucking-live.'

Back at home, three days later, Bubs snoozes his alarm only four times. It is Friday, and through the slats in his blinds the day broadcasts a teaser trailer: cloudless, bright, disturbingly blue. It's been like that for a stretch now. Bubs knows the rain will come, is coming soon, but it isn't here yet. Before leaving to pick up Omar, Bubs decides to call his father, himself a veteran. 'It's not so much the bad stuff staying with you,' his father tells him, 'as it is the good stuff that you miss.'

Germ is driving up for lunch. After the rest stop, Omar said it might be better if Germ made the jump north to Madison. Bubs agreed.

When Bubs sees Germ outside the restaurant, he is surprised to see a person that looks exactly like someone who does not need help. Healthy skin, clipped nails, sweater crisp like hospital cornering. A damn near pregnancy glow.

'This is the place you picked?' Germ says. He has a small nose, short sandy hair. The smile might burst off his face.

'Nah, no way, this won't work. You know what we need? Tall boys and a secret spot. You guys know a secret spot?'

'This fucking guy,' Omar says.

'I know one,' Bubs offers. 'I know where to go.'

Doubled up on six-packs, Bubs leads the way. It served as his go-to toke location in high school. They weave down the downtown one-ways and steam towards the lake. The stocky city skyline is a jagged EKG in the rearview. They park near the bike path trailhead. Exercisers stretch their calves against car tires, dressed in tight cycling attire. The air is warm and still, a breathy room-temperature bubble. It isn't a long walk to the clearing. Bubs hears Germ pop a preliminary can.

The spot hasn't changed. Set into a downslope, peeling towards the water, it's a dewy little outcrop shaded by oaks and maples and shrubs, a few logs and damp boulders for sitting. There is even a metal folding chair, a new addition. The memories Bubs has of the place come back in a clattering stampede. Starlight. Music. Older-brother-bought booze.

'This,' Germ says. 'Much more like it.' The water is so still Bubs can barely believe it. Doorway-cracks of light drip down through the trees. Beers are passed around.

Omar says, 'You know what I was thinking about the other day? Adkins and his fucking trains. In the arms room, remember?'

'Jesus,' Germ says. 'The trainset. He had the fucking little trees and conductors and everything. The whole floor, covered with his trainset.'

Bubs goes, 'And then the suits came in to inspect the arms room? You remember that guys' face? Like he had to control-alt-delete himself because he had no idea what he was seeing.'

'And the chickens,' says Germ. 'You remember the chickens? We show up one morning, and it's pretty early, we were going to a

range or something, and what's-his-name had a fucking kennel full of chickens.'

'What was it that he said again?' Bubs asks. The lapping of the lake fills the gaps between his words. Omar hands each of them a cigarette.

'I said to him, like, basically, What the fuck? And he goes, Well, I couldn't keep them *outside*. As if that fucking answers my questions?'

'Man,' Omar says. 'What the hell was that guys' name? Apple-something. Something with fruit.'

'*Something with fruit*,' Bubs says. 'Helpful.'

'It's good to be here with you guys,' Germ says. 'We live pretty close, you know, relatively speaking, but we don't see each other enough. That's my fault.'

'Shut up. Nobody's fault,' says Omar. 'We all have stuff going on.'

Bubs, feeling like now is the time, says, 'It wasn't Germ we were going to check on, was it? If you wanted to do a little intervention or whatever, you didn't have to drag me down to Chicago.'

'You didn't actually make it,' Germ says. 'Just to be clear.'

'You guys could have just told me though.'

'Probably true,' Omar says. 'Guess I was worried you wouldn't come, you know?'

'I get it.'

Germ goes, 'How often would you say you're getting blitzed and driving, though?'

'Follow up,' Omar jumps in. 'How often would you say you're

drinking, like, industrial runoff?’

‘Choke on it. That was a one-time thing.’

Germ now, ‘Doesn’t seem like it.’

‘I’m figuring things out,’ Bubs goes.

Omar, his eyes jumping from the lake and back to Bubs, asks, ‘Should we head out?’

‘Not sure. What do you think?’ Bubs says.

Germ says, ‘What, nobody wants to ask me?’

Bubs takes a drink, then a drag. Sitting there with his friends, Bubs sees the moment as pound-for-pound one of the better ones he’s had in some time. He is also proud of himself for noticing this—the pleasantness, the ambient joy—while still in the middle of it. Not much feels like it’s changed, except for maybe everything. His stomach still gives him a pang or two, the side of his face faintly red.

They toss a few smiles back and forth. The summer daylight shows no signs of retreat. Omar, stubbing out his cigarette, looks over to Germ and says, ‘Okay then, what now?’

‘No idea.’

But Bubs has one. He polishes off his beer and slips his feet from his shoes. He aims his body at the shoreline. Moving towards it, he sheds his belt and his pants and his shirt. There are only a few yards left before the land gives way. He crashes into the water and strokes out into the blue. A chill comes over him in layers but before long it’s gone and he feels himself floating, sinking, floating again, drifting, and the silence surrounding him is broken by the sound of two splashes somewhere behind him.

Mr. Mendes' War: Film Review, '1917'

"You have to construct a journey for the camera that's every bit as interesting as the journey of the actor. What I wanted was one ribbon, like a snake, moving forward, in which the information that you needed happened to fall in front of where the camera was pointing."

-Sam Mendes



It is a glorious thing to live in an age that is learning to remember the Great War.

Once the Centennial passed, I started to worry that WWI would fade back into obscurity.

There would be nothing more to it than the occasional badly-produced documentary, rehashing all the basic facts. Or the once-a-decade feature film composed primarily of maudlin melodrama and scenery-chewing. Great War geeks would be reduced, finally, to re-reading what little their local library has on the subject (invariably, a shelf or two perched on the edge of the vast glacier of paper that is EVERY BOOK ABOUT WWII EVER PUBLISHED, which even the most modest county library is guaranteed to have).

We'd keep on of course, as we have for decades, finding solitary joy in studying the minutiae of this defining moment of the 20th Century, only telegraphing our interests by posting Siegfried Sassoon's "Survivors" on social media every Armistice Day. We know how to live like this.

And it may yet come to that again, in ten years or so. But for now, the Great War retains a prominent place in scholarship and the public eye. Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* (see my [review](#) for WBT last year) was the first great post-Centennial media event, generating accolades, controversy and awards, and proving so popular it was re-released in theaters twice in one year.

Sam Mendes' masterful *1917* carries on this legacy, and in my honest and no doubt potentially unpopular opinion, surpasses Jackson's film in almost every way. I know, we're talking about two fairly dissimilar things here. The statement stands. *1917* evokes the character of the Great War, it contains the soul of the War, and it conveys these ideas to the audience in a way that documentary cannot do. In short, were you forced to show someone who had never heard of the Great War only one film that evoked the nature of the War, you would choose *1917* over *They Shall Not Grow Old*.

For one thing, it is shorter; for another, it is much more compelling; finally, it is free from the glaring flaws of Jackson's film. *They Shall Not Grow Old* suffers from low-key

jingoism and Jackson's bizarre visual insistence on depicting only white British infantrymen (it turns out there were other people there).

1917 is the WWI movie I've been waiting for my whole life.

Yet after I saw it, and then read more than a few reviews of *1917*, I was left with one major question:

What movie did y'all see?

Because the *1917* I've encountered in the criticism is not in any sense the film that I watched.

For example, Manohla Dargis writing for the [NYT](#) describes a film containing "next to no history" and refers to the entire piece as "a carefully organized and sanitized war picture from Sam Mendes that turns one of the most catastrophic episodes in modern times into an exercise in preening showmanship."

Justin Chang on *Fresh Air* was generally more positive, but like many other reviewers spent ages decrying the film's technical skill. (If you're somehow unaware, the major conceit of Mendes' film is its use of a simulated single tracking shot, actually achieved through a variety of cinematic tricks—if you're interested you can see exactly how it was done on YouTube.) In fact, the most persistent line of bitching about this movie has been that it's "too perfect", with the NYT reviewer even throwing out an offhand line about the movie spending too much time on getting the buttons on the uniforms right.

To which I have to respond: have you ever MET a Great War geek? Get the buttons wrong on the uniforms and you will quite literally never hear the end of it on the Internet. And anyway, maybe I'm missing something here with this whole "sure, it's technically magnificent, BUT" angle. People WANT it to be sloppy?

This film is the opposite of sloppy. This is theater, ready for any contingency. This is opera, or better yet a musical, with sets and costumes meticulously and obsessively constructed. This is in every sense a careful production. I'm really missing why this is a problem. With that said:

Sam Mendes gets this a lot.

Fifteen years ago, people said the same shit about *Jarhead*.

Fie on the critics (for now, anyway). If you haven't seen this movie, you need to understand what it was really like to dive into it on the big screen. Because this film is beyond epic. It's beyond "a good film", beyond even the proverbial "good war film"—it is an *experience*.

It is immediate.

Overwhelming.

Shocking.

The success of this film lies in the concept of cinema-as-immersion. Toss the viewer straight into the milieu and drag them along, whether they will or no, through all the horror and the madness and the despair that was the soldier's lot in 1917. Of course it doesn't dwell on politics or slap you in the face with the grade-school primer on the whys and wherefores of alliances and Archdukes. There is, quite simply, no time for that.

The plot of the film centers on two Lance Corporals of the East Surrey Regiment, Blake and Schofield, played by Dean-Charles Chapman and George MacKay. Fans of *Game of Thrones* will recognize Chapman as an all-grown-up version of King Tommen Baratheon, First of His Name*.

*The fact of his starring role in this film prompted the following exchange. While we were on the way to the cinema, my wife said to me "Who's directing this?"

ME: Sam Mendes.

MARY: What else has he done besides James Bond?

ME: *American Beauty. Revolutionary Road. Jarhead.*

MARY: Oh. Oh God.

ME: What?

MARY: I just got this incredibly clear picture of Tommen dancing around with a Santa hat on his junk, to a tinny clarinet-and-piano '20s jazz version of "O.P.P."

ME: <inarticulate with laughter>

MARY (*imitating Cab Calloway*): Ya down with O.P.P? Yeah, you know me!

At that point I nearly wrecked the car.

I digress (but you laughed). Blake and Schofield are first seen on their backs in an unspoiled field, trying to get in one of the naps that soldiers everywhere can manage at the drop of any hat, when they're interrupted and summoned back to HQ in the trenches. Along their way, they pass by any number of black British soldiers from the West Indies Regiment.

Jackson's film made no acknowledgement whatsoever of the service these people made during the war. Mendes, whose Trinidadian grandfather was a messenger serving in much the same capacity as Blake or Schofield, is careful to honor the sacrifices of these brave people who served despite the racist and classist treatment they suffered while doing their duty. All of this is accomplished in the first five minutes.

Awaiting them is General Erinmore, portrayed by an extra-gruff-and-crusty Colin Firth. Our Heroes are informed that there is a mission of extreme importance that must be undertaken immediately; the German "retreat" to the Hindenburg

Line has been revealed through aerial reconnaissance to be anything but, and their comrades in the 2nd under Colonel Mackenzie are walking into a deathtrap. Their orders to attack will ensure the deaths of 1600 men. As Blake's brother is a lieutenant in the 2nd, Blake is chosen for this mission and entrusted with orders from General Erinmore to call off the attack, and as he is allowed to choose one man to go with him, of course he chooses his best mate Schofield.

These are literally the only moments of peace the film has until its end. From this moment forward, everything is propulsive, violent, and fast. Even the scenes of relative inaction are fraught, with the promise of calamity never further away than the next street or the next trench.

From here, the camera follows Blake and Schofield with all the obsession of a stalker. Through the use of wildly varying color palettes, Mendes carefully establishes "chapters" in the film. The British trenches they leave are orderly, earth-colored, dusty but tidy. Their entry into No Man's Land, with its foul slurry of churned mud, discarded boots, and body parts, is clearly Chapter Two: a sudden break with the imagery seen before reveals a landscape riddled with the grey of rotting flesh, the brown of human shit, the occasional burst of gold or green to remind one that this was once a place where people lived with their families, farmed, tended their business.

The initial shots of No Man's Land are strikingly reminiscent of Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II*:



Max Ernst. Europe After Rain II: 1940-42.

There is a moment of dark Great War humor when the two encounter Lieutenant Leslie (Andrew Scott, familiar to viewers of *Sherlock* as Moriarty) who lends them flare guns (“Throw them back when you’re done, we’re forever out of these”) and reminds them that on the way to their destination, they should “mind the bowing chap”. The Bowing Chap is revealed to be a decaying corpse suspended from barbed wire, a shoutout to the works of the inimitable Otto Dix, whose “Corpse on Barbed Wire” is one of the most memorable pieces of art from the War.

Further, a lingering shot on the corpses of two horses evokes the work of Dix, whose art provided an inspiration for Jackson’s *They Shall Not Grow Old* as well. “Horse Cadaver” is apparently every WWI movie director’s favorite; in both movies, the shots of dead and decaying horses are arranged precisely in the same aspect and POV as Dix’s picture.

Stomach-turning images of this kind can and should be employed by those who would make movies about war; *1917* pulls no punches here. During their dangerous sojourn in No Man’s Land and the German trenches, rats swarm everywhere and flies infest all surfaces, including *inside* a gaping wound on a corpse. Lance Corporal Schofield cuts his hand on barbed wire and then trips, firmly inserting his wounded fist into the bacteria-laden hole where rats were feasting not moments before. It is both disgusting and entirely realistic; the

chief cause of death in every war before the First World War was from infectious disease, not combat. If one were feeling particularly apocalyptic, one could definitely argue that the number of people felled by the Spanish flu during and after the conflict showcases the continuing role of Pestilence following along in the wake of War.



Otto Dix. Horse Cadaver, Plate 5 from 'Der Krieg' (The War), 1924.

From the German trench (where Schofield is nearly killed, only saved by the valiant efforts of Blake) they proceed to a bombed-out French farmstead. Here the plot takes an unexpected turn, as the corporals observe a dogfight between the Boche and two English pilots, which ends with the German plane crashing mere yards from the broken-down barn where Blake and Schofield have taken shelter.

And it is now where things begin to go horribly awry.

The German fighter plane crashes and catches fire. The pilot screams for help. Blake and Schofield don't wait for moral considerations or strategic concerns: they pull him from the wreckage as though he were their own comrade. He is burned and wounded, and Schofield suggest they employ the *coup de grace*, but Blake demurs.

Moments later, Blake is stabbed in the gut by the ungrateful recipient of his kindness.

Schofield shoots the German pilot over and over again, enraged at his perfidy, but Blake is mortally wounded. Schofield holds him as he dies, promising to write to his family back in Britain. "Don't tell them I was scared," Blake says, as he dies in agony.

From now on the story is Schofield's. In service both to his comrades in the 2nd and his fallen companion, he will not be denied in his obsessive focus on the completion of The Quest.

The frenetic pace increases. Schofield manages to catch a ride further into German territory from a group of British soldiers on their way into the battle zone. Among them is a Sikh, a figure common in the British soldiery, but one whose presence in this film inspired ridiculous accusations of "forced diversity" by racist English actor [Laurence Fox](#). To briefly address Fox's "concerns": one in every six British soldiers who served in WWI originated from the Indian subcontinent. Sikhs, Malays, Sepoys and others served proudly in many capacities during the War. In fact, there is a famous photograph of Indian lancers proceeding into the now-abandoned No Man's Land during the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line:



Later, Schofield is shot at by a German sniper while making a perilous crossing over the blasted-out girders of a destroyed bridge. He survives and kills his opponent, only to be knocked out by a ricocheting bullet. When he awakens, he is forced to flee through a bombed-out cityscape of arches and dark passageways lit only by flares and the roaring fires from bombing, which scene makes clear reference to the disturbing cityscapes of De Chirico.



“Melancholy and the mystery of the street” – Painting by George de Chirico, 1914.

The existential horror of solitude. The dread and horror of war, The War, any war. All are displayed here, experienced by the viewer in real time as the protagonist experiences them. As Schofield continues on his journey, the color palette changes again and again and again, from yellow to orange to blue.

At one point, Schofield falls into a river, ending up floating in a pool laden with cherry blossoms, creating a scene that is clearly a sort of genderswapped *Lady of Shalott* or Ophelia:



John Everett Millais, "Ophelia," 1851-2.

At long last, Schofield finds the 2nd, only to realize that they are already in the process of going over the top. In his efforts to reach Colonel MacKenzie with his letter calling off the attack, Schofield, gripped with the madness of obsession, runs *across* No Man's Land as the shells fall around him, perpendicular to the line of battle, knocking over his comrades and nearly getting killed over and over again. He reaches his goal, delivers his message, and while he is too late to save the first wave of men cut down by German machine guns, he does manage to convince Mackenzie (played by a particularly intense and mustachioed Benedict Cumberbatch) to call off the attack. In the aftermath, he locates Blake's brother, played by none other than *Game of Thrones*' Richard Madden (the irony of a Stark playing the brother of a Baratheon will not be lost on fans of the series) and delivers the news of Blake's death. "I am so glad you were with him," Madden says, as he shakes Schofield's hand and tries and fails

to prevent the tears from falling.

At the end, we discover that Schofield has a wife and child at home, whose picture he regards lovingly as he finally gets a few moments of rest beneath a twisted tree, still standing despite the bombardment and destruction all around.

In a last response to the critics, I have this to say. Yes, it was technically perfect. But this movie also had *soul*. This was a film that portrayed the horrors and the despair of the Great War realistically, that depicted soldiers who were anything but gung-ho, soldiers who questioned where they were and what they were doing. It could not have been set at any other time than 1917, when the German "retreat" freed up more land than the Allies had been able to recapture since August of 1914. The date displayed at the beginning of the movie is no coincidence either: April 6, 1917 is the day the United States entered the war. In its last moments, the film depicts a figure at rest, able to finally hope, to consider a future. This reflects the actual attitudes and emotions felt by the beleaguered British and French who had fought themselves into exhaustion and madness in the three years prior.

1917 is a masterpiece. It is the Great War movie that everyone can love. If the theater we viewed it in was any indication—it was so crowded I couldn't even sit with my family—it is reaching people. *1917* has accomplished what so many other films and television series produced over the last six years could not: it has engaged the general public with WWI. Mendes' triumph is thus not just one of aesthetics or skill or "polish"; it is a triumph of thought. If only we could have a film like this every year, the world might well reconsider its addiction to war.

New Poem from Olivia Garard: “Hurry Up”

Hurry up

—

Halt. And quiet,
Marines sleep.

—

Covers askew
necks cocked
weighted by
the waiting.
Dozing softly
in dark down-
time flutters by.



U.S. Army Soldiers from the 4th Brigade (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, in support of Talisman Saber 2013. (U.S.

Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Zachary Wolf)

—

Sweet & sour
breath bellows,
flickering life.
Bellies swell &
roll heaving
hearts into a
billowing pyre.

—

Ares kisses each
Achilles slowly.
From his lips—
welding dry ice—
wafts the incense
of men burning
in god's slag.

—

Still in sleep—
mouths *agape*.

**Poetry Review: Graham
Barnhart's THE WAR MAKES
EVERYONE LONELY**



1.

The book arrives. By mail and on the cover. There are clouds.

Gray clumped in altostratus heaps. A military helicopter headed.

Into thick sky that stretches off. The bottom right hand corner of cardstock.

Or how the title. *The War Makes Everyone Lonely* makes me think of 2007.

How my husband deployed to Afghanistan. And how lonely we both were.

When he came home.

2.

Graham Barnhart's poems are about war.

What war is.

What war is not.

Like clouds his poems
gather.

3.

There is a musicality to them. Barnhart's poems.

The transformer outside his sister's house –

still humming somehow

(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

How the hum makes memory.

Reminds Barnhart of war –

electricity quieting in the wire when the sun

scrapes its knee bloody up the mosque steps

(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

Or how. When he was at war. For Barnhart –

every insect droning is a cicada

(Unpracticed)

4.

Or bullets. How –

Bitterness sounds like this: steel-tongued

cascades pouring out by the handful.

(Range Detail)

5.

At home there is. A child playing an oboe.

Through a window and after.

After Barnhart comes home from war dull.

Growing dull or the music of it.

Human breath pushing down an oboe's neck.

Blast of sound. How the boy –

he sounds like a robot learning to speak,

but now and then an almost "Ode to Joy"

or "Lean on Me" outlines itself, and I forget

I am going to die.

(Belated Letter To My Grandmother)

6.

Barnhart's poems are electric.

Like voltage in a box. Or moving down a wire.

How it is this constant current.

The persistent hum of still being alive.

And then the jolts. When you remember.

7.

Remember yes.

Writing to his grandmother a letter about the letters
he never wrote.

While he was away. How Barnhart writes –

to say yes

yes, the guns were loud –

loud like gods applauding

(Belated Letter To My Grandmother)

8.

But most of all there is tension.

Tension in Barnhart's poems.

9.

Tension between war and home. Between remembering war and leaving it behind or how –

Flashbacks

don't announce themselves.

It takes so little.

(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

In one poem, Barnhart is flooded with it.

Memory of barracks and army green wool.

White sheets. Film reel dark rooms.

Passing moon.

The fire watch and screams. Of a drill sergeant.

How Barnhart writes –

*I told her all of this when she found me
standing in the bedroom doorway.*

(Somnambulant)

10.

The tension is a distance. Between
what happened and how he cannot
describe it. Or regret. When he does –

*Behind headlights growing darker
night against the snow, I regret saying
kind of like Afghanistan aloud
with my mother and grandmother
in the otherwise silent heat of the car
(Sewing)*

11.

In Barnhart's poems, there is a sense that
coming home from war is displacement or
this placement outside of time. How –

*tree branches, black
in the dawn sky, resume their grays and browns
by lunch. The black wrought fences continue
leaning into their rust, rigid and failing
(Everything In Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)*

Everything remains. Goes on.

And Barnhart writes –

there

is no war in this but me.

(Everything in Sunlight I Can't Stop Seeing)

12.

Or the tension between what is real

and what is not. How there is training

for war. Watching grainy videos of men

over there. Placing bombs. Or defecating

under almond trees. Set to pop music.

Only to emerge in America –

sunbright Texas

tobacco juice hissing on the tarmac.

(Capabilities Brief)

13.

How soldiers play *Call of Duty*. To pass time.

This game of war. Where –

*Rifles were weightless. Bombs fell with nothing
close to oversight. Injuries meant
heavy breathing –*

a red-tinged screen.

(Medics Don't Earn Killstreaks)

But in a video game, war is fiction. And unreal.

How –

there's no difference between urgent and expectant.

No need to estimate under fire

the percentage of a body burned.

How much fluid to administer. How much per hour

they should piss out. No need to pull the bodies to cover.

They disappear without you

checking their pulse.

(Medics Don't Earn Killstreaks)

14.

And the unreality of war is not limited to what is virtual.

Barnhart describes an army recruiting advertisement.

A child hugging a soldier. Her brother or her father.

How the word *army* is used five times. *Strong* six.

But there is little war. How there are no –

piles of feet

on airport roads

and no one assigned to shovel them.

(Notice and Focus Exercise)

And –

No blistered trigger fingers.

No depressions in quiet skulls

(Notice and Focus Exercise)

15.

In Barnhart's poems, war is –

Another year refusing water to children.

When they made the universal gesture for thirst

along roadsides you wouldn't stop.

(Days of Spring, 2016)

It is bombs –

*A bombing at the gate before you arrived
was just a story you knew about rubble.*

(Days of Spring, 2016)

It is guards at a gate –

hired to die so you wouldn't when another bomb came.

(Days of Spring, 2016)

16.

Barnhart's poetry acknowledges militarism.

Acknowledges aggression.

The physicality of deployment.

Occupying space in a country

that is not your own.

Barnhart remembers arriving in a village

raided by American soldiers. Arriving and –

Dressed

like the men who killed

their

husbands, we passed out sewing machines

to

widows so they could make clothes

for their children and embroider cemetery flags.

(Sewing)

17.

Or in Iraq. Dinner with a man who called himself. King of Kawliya.

Who fed them meat peeled from goat bones.

How they fed each other from their hands.

Barnhart writes –

I remember my fingernail

against a man's lip .

(Shura)

Or how later –

the women who had prepared our food

and waited with their children for us to finish

were given to eat what we had left.

(Shura)

18.

There is leaving in Barnhart's poems.

War and

what it leaves behind.

Remembering transitioning a village, Barnhart writes –

all the small corners in that small base

were pulled open. Picked blessedly clean.

Before our dust-wake settled, no stone,

if we had stacked it, was left standing on another

(How to Transition a Province)

This is the tension.

Between going to war but not staying.

Between leaving a mark and wanting

to leave nothing at all.

And the complicity when it is not possible.

19.

Barnhart remembers H.E. rounds. Their smoke and

dust. How –

illuminate

shells – packed light and smoke

and

shot too low – drop phosphorous

*through
civilian fields we aren't
supposed
to burn, so we wait down
the cease-fire in the bus that brought us.
(Indiana-Stan)*

There is privilege in leaving. Because –

*Over there, if the wheat
or poppy crops catch, we can leave
those fires as soon as they start.
(Indiana-Stan)*

20.

This is the complexity of going to war.

21.

When imagining himself on a dating site.

And choosing a profile picture.

Barnhart writes –

*Hope it all says: confident
and responsible.*

As an aggressor

aware of his complicity.

(Tinder Pic)

He acknowledges –

there will be left swipes

for that arrogance.

For trying to play imperialist

and dissenter without seeming too

patriotic or worse –

apathetic. Naïve or too reckless.

Unwary and soon to explode

(Tinder Pic)

22.

This is the complicity of it.

23.

Or how

because. Because Barnhart is a medic. D18.

U.S.

Army Special Forces Medic. There is a tension.

Between going to war and going to war as a medic.

24.

How the word medic in Latin.

Mederi

Means to heal.

25.

During
deployment, Barnhart works with a physical therapist –

*learning
to scrape sore tissue*

*with
a slice of machined steel*

*curves
to match the shape of the musculature.*

*Like
a cradle or scythe, you said to no one*

(Days of Spring, 2016)

In
Barnhart's poems. This is the tension.

How
he is both. A cradle. And a scythe.

He writes

–

And that was how morning found you,

sometimes

a cradle, sometimes a scythe

(Days of Spring, 2016)

26.

But out

of it. Out of this complexity of war.

The

complicity of it. Comes Barnhart's poems.

Like

the purple loosestrife he describes. That

grows

at the prison near Mazar-i-Sharif –

gathered

trembling

against the walls

(Tourists)

27.

Barnhart

imagines himself –

a glowing green eye in a gargoyle mass.

(0300)

28.

He
describes going to see an informant.

How
he is remembering the man and his cell phone video –

Hacksaw tugging neck skin.

*The careful
way you spoke in English*

*my
uncle, my brother, my uncle's son. Your
finger*

*touching
each shemagh-wrapped face.*

*The
one you couldn't name I knew was you*

(Informant)

Or how
Barnhart's poetry is like this.

How in
his telling it. He straddles worlds.

Reveals
secrets. Identifies himself. And

invites

the reader. To find themselves.

29.

The
war. The war stretches on like sky.

Across
countries and deployments.

How this
war does not ever end.

30.

Because how many years ago. When I stood on that corner
watching.

As a plane
hit the first tower. And a plane hit the second tower. Fire.

Or
people clinging to the metal. Slipping and jumping and falling
and

how
the two towers crashed down.

31.

There is a poem about post 9/11 tear gas training.

Words *PRO PATRIA MORI* in red.

Above a cement hut door. *To die for your country.*

Or how. After. Barnhart writes –

*Somehow
outside, somehow after*

*on my
knees with everyone else, purging
years
of sediment phlegm from scraped alveoli,*

*I saw
the line waiting to go in, heard
the
men behind me learning to drown.*

*Learning
to breathe that evil pure as air.*

*Motes
of gas, like dust in sunlight,
wafted
from the exit labeled DULCE ET*

(Post 9/11 Gas Training (II))

32.

How
many. Soldiers have gone to war. Gone to
war
post 9/11 and how many have come home.

And how
many.

How
many dreamed of its *sweetness*.

33.

There
is a futility.

Poems
about training and more

training
or the feeling that it may

not
matter.

34.

Barnhart writes –

Today
I can deadlift four-oh-five.

When
I can move four-ten it will

not
stop a bullet or

the
overpressure of a bomb

(Cultivating Mass)

There is a sense of inevitability.

Because

—

A

tourniquet will work

*unless
it doesn't*

(How To Stop the Bleeding)

35.

Language
is questioned.

Its
privilege. How Barnhart inscribes diplomas in Pashtu.

Only
to be told. By the Major. To write them in English —

*The
Pashtu,*

*he said,
is lovely*

but unofficial.

(Certificates of Training)

36.

Or the
task of announcing he will deploy again.

How Barnhart
imagines his words as bats. How –

*I'll
probably just open my mouth,
wait for something to fly out
(Telling You I Will Deploy Again)*

Or when the words don't come.

Barnhart describes hitting them
with a racket.

Scoops and sloughs them outside.

And –

Regretting,

*only
a little, the need, the abrupt*

*cessation
of a fragile thing,*

*that terrible
satisfaction, even*

*with
these apologies hanging limp,
crumpled in the rhododendrons.*

(Telling You I Will Deploy Again)

37.

In
trying to describe to his father –

*the
dull machine chunk*

*of a
rifle's sear reset between rounds*

(What Being In The Army Did)

Graham
offers –

*maybe
there is no word*

(What Being In The Army Did)

Just
space.

Air
between bars. Distance between keys.

To
which his father replies –

*No,
he said,*

*there
is definitely a word*

(What Being In The Army Did)

38.

And
Graham questions poetry.

Remembering
a photograph of two dead bodies.

Men wrapped and left on a dirt field. Barnhart writes –

bodies

*sloughed
in a field then photographed.*

*In
their repose*

*deserving
more than this poem*

*and
its portions*

*of
sky framed by power lines.*

*(Deserving
(II))*

39.

Of
course. Loneliness is this.

This
futility. The question.

Of
whether anything makes a difference.

Or if
words are enough.

40.

But
in Barnhart's poems. His words
are
the answer. The raveled call to
prayer.
Or his surprise to see a boy –

kneeling beside his bucket to kiss the dirt.

*(Call
to Prayer)*

The shared
humanity of experience.

Even
in war. Even in our loneliness.

41.

In
his poems, Barnhart sews together.

The pieces
of war. Memory. Leaving

and coming
home. What it means to

fight
a war and care for its wounded.

42.

He
describes history as a skeleton –

each city suturing

new skin to the skeleton.

(Pissing in Irbil)

Or
how his poems are flesh.

Attaching
themselves to the

skeleton
of what happened.

Wrapping
bone in meaning.

43.

At a poetry
reading, Barnhart sees a bee
dragged
by a spider. As the poet who is
reading
says –

*Those
with the time*

*for
poetry don't deserve it*

*(Deserving
(I))*

Barnhart wonders –

*The
poetry or the time*

*(Deserving
(I))*

44.

I am
not certain we deserve either.

But,
as I read Barnhart's *The War Makes Everyone Lonely*,

I am
grateful.

Grateful
for both.