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Donald Anderson

## War, Memory, Imagination

*for John Wolfe, with respect and admiration*



Writing is not apart from living. Writing is a kind of double living. The writer experiences everything twice. Once in reality and once more in that mirror which waits always before or behind him.

— *Catherine Drinker Bowen*

When you have done your best, it doesn't matter how good it is. That is for others to say. . . . An act of the imagination is an act of self-acceptance. . . . Writing is a way of saying you and the world have a chance.

— *Richard Hugo*

Before we made fire, before we made tools, we made images.

— *Wright Morris*



I didn't serve in Vietnam, but my nation did. Because of my "memory" of what had happened—and *was* happening—to America and Viet Nam, I made decisions. For one thing, I joined the Air Force to avoid the army tour of Vietnam. I meant to beat the draft—it was not my imagination that more soldiers were being buried than airmen. I went on to serve for 22 years in the Air Force, but the point is my initial enlistment had everything to do with the war, and hardly would have surfaced as a career choice without the war. That I could imagine the war—its pointlessness

borne out in time—was why I worked to avoid it. We have, each of us, factual histories and imagined histories, backfilling, always, when memory proves deficient, though “it’s a poor sort of memory,” Lewis Carroll’s Queen says, “that only works backwards.”

Remember back far enough or imagine ahead and you’ll find war—or it’ll find you. All our lives are framed by war. My father had wanted to serve in WWII, but because of a damaged eye, could not. He’d wanted to sign up with his best friend, Sidney. The Navy was signing up pals for the same ships, same assignments. Had my father had his way, he would have signed up and served with Sidney. Sidney died at Pearl Harbor. Whatever would have happened to my father with Sidney aboard the USS. *Arizona* would have happened more than four years before my birth. Seventy percent of the ship’s crew perished. Are my feelings about these facts and potentialities memory or imagination?

Of my four children one son served as a Force Recon Marine. He managed to just miss Somalia. All during his hitch, I worried the Administration would manage to find some foolish place for my son to go. What was I doing, imagining a possible memory?

It gets complicated. What is remembered or imagined *becomes* reality. And: if we *don’t* create our personal versions of the past, someone else will do it for us. This is frightening and political fact. How many books, for instance, seek to refute the fact of the Holocaust, complete with proof in footnotes, etc.? And who can forget the opening pages of Milan Kundera’s novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, which describe a photograph from which a Party official has been airbrushed from history?

Then there is Cynthia Ozick’s “The Shawl,” a strafing account of a death camp murder of a stick-limbed child. Though born in time to have been interned in a death camp, Cynthia Ozick wasn’t; she was, at the story’s

fictional time, a cheerleader in high school in New Jersey. Memory and imagination are the *what* and *how* we have as artists and readers and citizens. To which we must cling, as if to luck or safety. □