

TWO POEMS

The Collector

I knew a murderer, a long time ago, and eyeing for eyeing
toothing for toothings— oh, yes!— murdered, in time, by the State,
a time I kept the vigil, damned nice guy when you got to know him

went to Killeen with him and to Vietnam, all that training, yes,
he didn't kill anyone there, no, called hardly anyone a Gook, just
read quietly, all day, every day, unless working, listening to dots and

dashes, ditty-bops, in the commo hut, yes, Americal Division,
20th Infantry, Chu Lai, Vietnam, Republic of, Calley's group. He
was gentle, with a ring of scars, ridged, on his shaved smooth scalp.

Successful guy, ten years later, car dealership, richer, yes, than
either you or me, married well, big car, very quiet, head still sunk
in books except when selling other cars or buying yet one more auto

dealership. A quiet dealer with poetry in his soul, he fell
from love one day, a normal, dry day, the kind of day when
all things being equal he would have read or, yes, reread books.

He'd become a collector— Victoriana— Browning, Tennyson,
A little Clough, and, yes, Swinburne for his wilder moments,
all the Rossetti circle, a small Whistler hanging by his desk

though he did not own a single peacock feather— warm day,
hot Texas sun blazing overhead, not like a wafer, no moment
of communion, the kind of day, when, when he has fallen out

of love and does not want to divide his art, his Tennysons,
wants his Brownings safe at Baylor, his Christina to move in,
long white dresses, perhaps he isn't thinking straight. He's been

trained for this, not for subtlety. He'd stopped the day before,
bought an AK-47, a magazine, gold-tipped bullets, just enough,
to do the job. It's what he's dreamed about, the scene is fresh,

and when she wanders in, he smiles. The action moves easily,
a too large pattern, he thinks, should have zeroed in. He does not
see blood spatter on the wall, hardly hears her scream. He pulls

a copy of *Oenone* down, fingers the dark green cloth. He thinks
he'll read a while and then go back to work. He sits in his favorite
Queen Anne chair, the Whistler near. He doesn't even know he cries.

Had We a History

In France that sense of history is a part of everyone's consciousness; it doesn't matter if they're writers, intellectuals, or journalists, or people who are not at all politically involved: the greengrocer, the mother and daughter running a clothing shop.

—Marilyn Hacker on Carolyn Forché's *The Angel of History*

I'm sure you're right. Were I in France, history
would collapse into a certain vanished era, a war
that passed me by. But we are not bereft by any means

of substance for all that. We see them every day,
men and women on the street trapped in images of the past,
though of a different war. They do not, like so many French,

paint pointilist arguments of pinprick intent
about *le grand famille* Ngo or the brazen brass
of the soldiers' statue at the National Assembly.

And yet, with no grand architecture, in three bedroom homes,
they wake at night to see small children playing with grenades,
thin strips of wire that cross their trails— dark nights of wet terror.

They work at the corner store, a Stop 'n Go, a 7-11,
they wash your car, hold their hands out in the streets with
bundles tied upon their backs, mobile homes to the nth degree.

Some are on third wives (there's history there!), and behind it
all, the wives, the streets, memories swirl just out of sight, out
the corners of their eyes where spots gather and dance. They

reach out and touch what they can never find, refight old battles
wonder if any kind of war is ever won, not just theirs. When they
think of WWII, they do not see puttis glazed in gold along a wall,

do not see an Arc of Triumph, no chocolates or nylons to buy
women cheap, just cold hard cash, the currency of their generation.
But, I suppose you're right. History's more than reliving an old present.