

# Randall Jarrell's Poetry of Aerial Warfare

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A GENERATION OF AMERICAN poets, such as Robert Lowell, Karl Shapiro, Richard Eberhard, John Ciardi, Richard Wilbur and W. D. Snodgrass, was engulfed by the tragic enormities of World War II. Their sensitive and often insightful poems convey the personal and political upheavals caused by that war. None of these poets, however, can match the unerring skill and powers of observation of Randall Jarrell (1914-1965) in communicating the sensations, thoughts and emotions—the entire experience—of the airman from basic training through aerial combat and the eventual return to peacetime. If the U.S. Air Force were to select its poet laureate, Jarrell should be a leading contender.

Jarrell, who enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, served from 1942 to 1946 at bases such as Sheppard Field, Texas; Chanute Field, Illinois; and Davis-Monthan Field in Arizona. Unable to qualify for pilot status, Jarrell, holding an A.B. and M.A. from Vanderbilt University, was assigned to teach navigation. Appropriately for a poet, one of his specialties was celestial navigation. Although he did not personally

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Quotation from Jarrell's poems and his commentary on these poems are taken from *The Complete Poems*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.

experience combat, Jarrell listened carefully to the flight crews returning from action and absorbed their stories of bravery, suffering, fear, and death. His knowledge of aviation, his powerful imagination and his creative powers enabled him to visualize and vividly express the human dimensions of aerial warfare, and his sense of brotherhood with his colleagues in arms invested his poetry with human compassion and understanding. As Robert Lowell wrote in an eulogy to Jarrell in 1967, "Nine tenths of his war poems are air-force poems and are about planes and their personnel, the flyers, crews and mechanics who attended them. No other imaginative writer had his precise knowledge of aviation, or knew so well how to draw inspiration from this knowledge" (108).

Jarrell understood that aerial warfare is unique in isolating the individual, miles above the earth and his fellow man, and then placing that lonely person in situations of sudden terror and mortal danger. The terrible isolation of the airman, severed from human ties, with all superfluties stripped away, facing a merciless, faceless, devastatingly deadly technology, is the theme of many of Jarrell's best poems. What gives the poems strength is Jarrell's singular ability to see from the perspective of the individual airman, and to convey that experience with honesty, authority, and compassion. For Jarrell, war could best be understood by concentrating on the ultimate factor in war—man in combat. Out of the chaos, cruelty, violence and random death of aerial combat, Jarrell created a poetry affirming the dignity and essential innocence of the warrior, and carried him from training camps in the States to combat operational fields overseas, from the cockpit of a fighter plane over the Pacific to the ball turret of a B-17 in Europe.

Jarrell's rendering of the airman's experience begins with the transition from civilian to soldier. In "A Lullaby,"

Jarrell sympathizes with a recruit who is learning “to fight for freedom and the State”:

He picks up matches and he cleans out plates;  
Is lied to like a child, cursed like a beast.  
They crop his head, his dog tags ring like sheep  
As his stiff limbs shift wearily to sleep.

Recalled in dreams or letters, else forgot,  
His life is smothered like a grave, with dirt....

(5- 10)

The recruit is like a foundling in an orphanage. He is dehumanized by the monotonous drudgery of police call and K.P., and is cursed, bullied and lied to as if he were a helpless child victimized by a household of cruel adults. There is a suggestion that the recruit plays the role of society’s sacrificial lamb (“they crop his head, his dog tags ring like sheep”) being led to the slaughter, a docile, obedient sheep. Like a child shuffled off to camp, the recruit imagines he is ignored or faintly remembered in a dream or an occasional letter. The poem’s title implies the ironic link between a child’s lullaby and the evening Taps the recruit hears as he is being prepared for war.

The recruit soon experiences estrangement from the lost world of the civilian. In “Mail Call,” Jarrell captures the desperate expectation that the soldier feels at mail call.

The letters always just evade the hand.

.....

In letters and dreams they see the world.  
They are waiting; and the years contract

To an empty hand, to one unuttered sound—  
The soldier simply wishes for his name. (1, 8-11)

The soldier waits for letters from the world outside to reassure himself that he exists and that he is not forgotten. But no mail comes.

In "Absent With Official Leave," Jarrell evokes the temporary, illusory escape that sleep and dreams offer the recruit.

The lights are beginning to go out in the barracks.  
.....  
He covers his ears with his pillow, and begins to drift  
(Like the plumes the barracks trail into the sky)  
Past the laughs, the quarrels, and the breath of others... (1, 6-8)

Comparing the soldier to a sleeping child, Jarrell tenderly carries him through a poignant dream sequence only to have him awake to harsh reality:

The night that is never silent, broken with the sighs  
And patient breathing of the dark companions  
With whom he labors, sleeps, and dies. (30-33)

In comparing the airmen to children, Jarrell is employing less the specific context and more the symbolic connotations of childhood. Jarrell does not mean that the aircrews are immature, ignorant and oblivious to the consequences of their actions, but rather that they embody an ingenuousness, an innocence, a childlike faith that something powerful and great will protect them, be it the State, God, Adults or the

Mother image. Their faith is foolishly childlike and misplaced, Jarrell implies, for there is no protection from the harsh reality of war. When the aircrews die, their deaths are as tragic as the deaths of children. Much of the poignancy of Jarrell's war poetry derives from the stark contrast between the helplessness, idealism, and foolish faith of children, and the implacable brutality of war. It must be stressed, however, that the childhood Jarrell depicts in his war poems is not his own, nor that of the characters he creates, but rather the child archetype present in the human soul—a symbol of innocence.

In "Second Air Force," Jarrell demonstrates his acute powers of observation. He describes a B-17 training base, such as the one at which he served in the Arizona desert.

... sand roads, tar-paper barracks,  
The bubbling asphalt of the runways, sage,  
The dunes rising to the interminable ranges,  
The dim flights moving over clouds like clouds.  
The armorers in their patched faded green,  
Sweat-stiffened, banded with brass cartridges,  
Walk to the line; their Fortresses, all tail,  
Stand wrong and flimsy on their skinny legs,  
And the crews climb to them clumsily as bears....  
(7-15)

A nostalgic search for the U.S. Air Corps of World War II could well begin in the lines of a Jarrell poem, for he creates a vivid sense of time and place. The image of the field, the Fortresses, and the ammunition-laden crews relive in the poet's palette of words. Of course, the wartime military experience was difficult not merely because the recruit was wrenched away from civilian life, but also because death lurked in the uncertain future. In an introductory note to "Second Air Force," Jarrell explains that a mother is

visiting her son at his training base, and she recalls, as she watches the crews file out to their planes, that she read in a newspaper the week before that a bomber in flames over Germany radioed to one of the fighters protecting it: "Little Friend, Little Friend, I got two engines on fire. Can you see me Little Friend?" The fighter pilot replies, "I'm crossing right over you. Let's go home." Of course the bomber was unable to return home, and the Little Friend was forced to abandon his charge. The mother in the poem then visualizes the bomber in flames and the crew bailing out, onto the burning German cities below:

She hears the bomber calling, *Little Friend!*  
To the fighter hanging in the hostile sky,  
And sees the ragged flame eat, rib by rib,  
Along the metal of the wing into her heart:  
The lives stream out, blossom, and float steadily  
To the flames of the earth, the flames  
That burn like stars above the lands of men.

(38-44)

The reader, like the mother of the airman, knows that soon the new crew her son belongs to is destined to ship out and find itself in combat, and is likely to meet the same fate endured by the crew of the newspaper report.

The airman lives close to danger not only from the enemy but also from nature. In "A Front," as Jarrell describes in a note, a weather front is "closing in over a bomber base; the bombers, guided in by signals from the five towers of the radio range, are landing. Only one lands before the base is closed; the rest fly south to fields that are still open."

Fog over the base: the beams ranging  
From the five towers pull home from the night

The crews cold in fur, the bombers banging  
Like lost trucks down the levels of the ice.  
A glow drifts in like mist (how many tons of it?),  
Bounces to a roll, turns suddenly to steel  
And tires and turrets, huge in the trembling  
light....(1-7)

These lines could have been written only by someone who had observed Flying Fortresses “banging” onto ice-covered runways. Compassion infuses the poem; the poet desperately wants the planes to land safely; he is both the professional, dispassionate observer in the tower and the sympathetic comrade in arms.

Training completed, the airmen enter the real and brutal world of war. The transition is described in “Losses.”

In our new planes, with our new crews, we  
bombed  
The ranges by the desert or the shore,  
Fired at towed targets, waited for our scores—  
And turned into replacements and woke up  
One morning, over England, operational.  
.....  
We read our mail and counted up our missions—  
In bombers named for girls, we burned  
The cities we had learned about in school....  
(13-17, 21-23)

These last two lines are occasionally quoted to demonstrate the poet’s alleged anti-militarist views. However, Jarrell’s treatment is far from facile condemnation of the military. Jarrell understood that war, as he put it, is “the nest of all contradictions,” and that often the military are blameless victims of war, who curiously retain a child’s innocent perspective. They are like school children, naming

their planes for girls and recalling their geography textbooks. For although the air crews bombed the cities, their bodies, eventually,

... lay among

The people we had killed and never seen.

When we lasted long enough they gave us medals;

When we died they said, "our casualties were low...."(24-27)

Jarrell points out the ironic contrast between the reality of death for the combat crews and the routine, stereotyped casualty reports that are released to the home front. Certainly the air crews are as much the victims of war as are the inhabitants of the cities they bomb. Significantly, "they" in the poem control the missions, distribute the medals and release the casualty figures. Who are "they?" Politicians? Generals? The faceless State? Whoever "they" are, it is the individual airman who is sent out to do his nation's bidding, and who faces death in carrying out that mission.

Jarrell deals with the experience of the fighter pilot over the Pacific in such poems as "Pilots, Man Your Planes." Here the reader observes through the eyes of a carrier pilot who is scrambled to intercept a kamikaze attack. One sees the pilot, a "boy with a ball of coffee in his stomach,"

Snapping the great light buckles on his groin,  
Shifting his raft's hot-water-bottle weight  
As he breasts the currents of the bellowing deck  
And, locked at last into the bubble, Hope,  
Is borne along the foaming windy road  
To the air where he alone is still



Above the world's cold, absent, searching  
roll....(31-37)

Few poets have rendered so convincingly the transition from the beehive activity of the rolling flight deck to the release into the wind-borne freedom, silence, and loneliness of flight. The pilot sees one of the Japanese attackers hit by flak from the carriers, sees

...the maniacal convulsive spin  
Of the raider with a wing snapped off, the plane  
Trailing its flaming kite's-tail to the wave.  
A miss's near, near bloom, a hill of foam,  
Is bulged skyward, crashes back; crest after crest  
Patterns the ship's cat's cradle wakes, the racing  
Swell that hiss outward from a plane's quenched  
flame....(49-55)

As another Japanese plane approaches, the American pilot turns to intercept it, but is hit by flak from his own carrier and falls into the sea:

...the hammering guns  
Stitch one long line along his wing, his gear  
Falls, his dive staggers as his tracer strikes,  
And he breaks off and somersaults into the sea.  
Under the canopy's dark strangling green,  
The darkening canopy, he struggles free  
To float into the choking white, to breathe—  
His huge leg floating and immovable,  
His goggles blackened with his own bright  
blood....(64-72)

Here Jarrell narrows the reader's range of vision to the pilot's goggles, and then darkens the scene with the pilot's

own blood. One is reminded that it is one thing to read historical accounts of the great air battles over the Pacific in World War II, and quite another to have the vantage point of a participant in all that fury.

In "A Pilot From The Carrier," Jarrell captures a pilot's desperate attempts to escape from his burning aircraft:

Strapped at the center of the blazing wheel,  
His flesh ice-white against the shattered mask,  
He tears at the easy clasp, his sobbing breaths  
Misting the fresh blood lightening to flame.  
Darkening to smoke; trapped there in pain  
And fire and breathlessness, he struggles free  
Into the sunlight of the upper sky—  
And falls, a quiet bundle in the sky,  
The miles to warmth, to air, to waking....(1-9)

Jarrell here equates the ejection from the cockpit to an infant's exit from his mother's womb; but there is no maternal succor for our stricken pilot who hangs suspended in his parachute, "slight, separate, estranged; a lonely eye." A Japanese fighter, wing guns ablaze, approaches him:

...the glitter of the wing-guns,  
Shining as the fragile sun-marked plane  
That grows to him, rubbed silver tipped with  
flame. (19-21)

In this, as in other of his poems, Jarrell introduces the world of childhood almost subliminally. For example, the pilot is strapped into a plane as in a carriage. "His sobbing breaths" are like a child's tearful gasps. He falls from the plane like a baby, "a quiet bundle in the sky." The carrier's wake is compared to "reading a child's first scrawl." "The

traveling milk-like circle of a miss” suggests the mother’s milk, and connects with the last words of the poem, “rubbed silver tipped with flame.” The pilot looks “on the little deck” of the carrier as if it were a child’s toy, and the carrier’s guns fire a “little blaze toy-like as the glitter of the wing-guns” of the Japanese plane that fires on him. The rounds which erupt from the fighter’s wings are “rubbed silver tipped with flame,” like the rubber-tipped nipples of a baby bottle or the nipples of a nursing mother. But here the life-giving milk becomes the steel cartridges which rip through the pilot’s body. Jarrell’s ironic allusions to childhood in his poems have a curious suasive power on the subconscious mind. It is unnecessary for the reader to be consciously aware of what Jarrell is up to. The subliminal effects reinforce the poet’s central metaphor in this poem: man in aerial combat is like a helpless child. He faces a universe of cruelty, fear, and anonymous, implacable violence. To further emphasize man’s helplessness, Jarrell depicts the pilot suspended in a parachute harness, isolated, distant from any possibility of human warmth or comfort.

Examples abound of Jarrell’s concentration on rendering the individual airman’s perspective. In “Siegfried,” which Jarrell informs is “about a gunner in one of the B-29’s which bombed Japan,” we see through the eyes of a ball turret gunner:

In the turret’s great glass dome, the apparition,  
death.  
Framed in the glass of the gunsight, a fighter’s  
blinking wing,  
Flares softly, a vacant fire.... (1-3)

Huddled in his plexiglass cocoon, the gunner, facing an oncoming enemy fighter, may be lucky or unlucky, may survive or die or be maimed, but there is little he can do to

affect his fate, for death comes “distributed, statistical.” Nor does the war’s justice concern him, for his is a separate, personal, isolated war:

The world’s war, just or unjust—the world’s  
peace, war or peace;  
But from a separate war: the shell with your name  
In the bursting turret, the crystals of your blood  
On the splints’ wrapped steel.... (41-44)

The gunner is wounded, and wakes back at the base hospital to “the knives of the surgeon” and the loss of his leg. Relentlessly, Jarrell continues to focus on the crippled gunner, who sits in the hospital “reading of victories and sales and nations” and who stumbles “to the toilet on one clever leg of leather, wire, and willow; staring past the lawn and the trees to nothing.”

The ball turret of the World War II bombers was, for Jarrell, symbolically significant. In his oft-anthologized “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” here quoted in entirety, Jarrell employs birth imagery:

From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State,  
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of  
life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died they washed me out of the turret  
with a hose.

There is much richness of meaning and complexity of expression in this short poem. One sees the gunner passing from the mother’s womb to another kind of womb, the presumed security of the State. In becoming an airman of that State, the individual is squeezed into yet another womb,

the plexiglass sphere of a B-17 or B-24. Suspended upside down in his spherical world, he resembles, as Jarrell explains in a note, a "foetus in the womb." His next "birth" is to face the flak and the enemy fighters. He is hit by explosive shells and what is left of him is washed out of the turret (womb) with a steam hose. Jarrell suggests that the airman never really was aware of reality, for he goes from the sleep of the womb to the false security of the State, and ultimately, like a foetus which never sees the light of day, he becomes war's abortion as he is forcibly ejected from the belly of the bomber. Aside from the intellectual content of this poem, its power derives from the haunting image of the gunner's annihilation. Through the use of concrete facts and simple, spare language the poet avoids both sensationalism and sentimentality. Jarrell well understood that a poem needs to be grounded in specifics, not generalities, and that it must convey sensations as well as ideas.

Jarrell also looked to the end of the war and the return of the servicemen to stateside bases. What had appeared to the recruits as bleak, depressing, and monotonous, is enveloped with a magical aura to returning airmen. In "Transient Barracks," Jarrell's central point of view is that of a veteran, shaving in a barracks latrine, who can scarcely believe that his dreams of a safe return have come true.

Summer. Sunset. Someone is playing  
The ocarina in the latrine:  
You Are My Sunshine. A man shaving  
Sees—past the day-room, past the night K.P.'s  
Bent over a G.I. can of beets  
In the yard of the mess—the red and green  
Lights of a runway full of '24's  
.....

The man sees his own face, black against lather,  
In the steamed, starred mirror: it is real....

(1-7, 12-13)

He overhears someone calling for the C.Q. to have a departure clearance signed, but the C.Q. has "gone to the movies." An exasperated "gunner without a pass" cries out, "Jesus Christ, what a field!" When the gunner asks when the man shaving will be transferred out, the answer comes that he won't be transferred out, that he is home:

*...I'm back for good. The States. The  
States!*

He puts out his hand to touch it—  
And the thing about it is, it's *real*. (33-35)

The dangers of the war overcome, the veteran is ecstatic that his personal trial is over, that he is alive, and that he is back in the United States.

Yet, of course, the physical return from war and even the advent of peace is, philosophically, only a beginning in an investigation of the meaning of the experience of the Second World War, or of any war. Clearly, the child motif plays a vital role in Jarrell's war poetry, and is connected to his principal themes. Jarrell asks, is the warrior as innocent and blameless as a child? Are children capable of violence? Is the soldier a victim of war, a sacrificial lamb? What responsibility does he bear? Is he merely a tool of the state? Is the essential nature of man warlike? Nowhere does Jarrell handle more adeptly and artistically the essential nature of the airman than in his remarkable "Eighth Air Force," which offers a summation of Jarrell's thinking on the relationship of the bombing crews to their missions and, at the same time, moves beyond the specifics of combat in one

theater of one particular war to confront the larger, universal issues of the individual's responsibility for his actions.

The surface reality of the poem is relatively clear. A bomber crew is filing into its quonset hut in England. A pet puppy is drinking water from a can, a drunk sergeant whistles a theme from an opera as he shaves, the other crew members—"murderers" the reader is abruptly, and ironically reminded—enter yawning. Three of them play cards, one sleeps, and another lies awake and counts off his missions, agonizing over the final one that remains before he can rotate back to the states.

O Murderers! ...Still, this is how it's done:

This is a war... But since these play, before they  
die,  
Like puppies with their puppy.... (10-12)

Jarrell concludes with an "Ecce Homo" ("Behold the man!") comparison of the men to Jesus and the poet to Pontius Pilate. Jarrell adds the following note:

"Eighth Air Force" is a poem about the air force which bombed the Continent from England. The man who lies counting missions has one to go before being sent home. The phrases from the Gospels compare such criminals and scapegoats with that earlier criminal and scapegoat about whom the Gospels were written.

Much of the power of the poem comes from the delicate balance Jarrell achieves by referring to the crew both as children and as "murderers," and through his attempt to reconcile the essential innocence and inescapable violence that coexist in man's soul. The men "play, before they

die.” That is, they are children, not murderers. Yet, at the same time, Jarrell reminds us that man is a “wolf to man.” In war, man becomes a predator, a wolf, and the puppy is transformed into a savage animal. Cleanth Brooks had this to say about the poem:

How, then, can one say that man is a wolf to man..., since these men “play before they die, like puppies with their puppy.” But the casual presence of the puppy in the hutment allows us to take the stanza both ways, for the dog is a kind of tamed and domesticated wolf, and his presence may suggest that the hutment is a wolf den. After all, the timber wolf plays with its puppies. (398)

Jarrell seems to suggest that man is evil and innocence, violence and playfulness, wolf and puppy.

Yet, the poem delves deeper in investigating the moral significance of war and the men who fought in it. Related to the childhood motif is a recollection of the childlike innocence of the ultimate scapegoat, Jesus. The men are seen not merely as wolves (“...shall I say that man/Is not as men have said: a wolf to man?”) and wolf cubs or puppies, but, as well, as the mystical body of Christ. They are the disciples asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane; they are both Christ and the Roman soldiers who played with dice, if not cards, while He hung on the cross. Like Pilate, the poet-narrator agonizes over the responsibility for the destruction of Europe by the Eighth Air Force. He returns in his dream to a pre-conscious state in which he is warned not to condemn Jesus (the crew-members). In Matthew 27, verse 19, it is Pilate’s wife who sends to her husband, saying, “Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of



him." Later in the same chapter, Pilate, when he hears the multitude crying for crucifixion, washes his hands, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person." Jarrell, the poet, reenacting the role of Pilate, refuses to condemn the crew.

The Biblical allusions enrich the poem. Pilate, true enough, found no fault in Jesus, but he did turn him over to the mob for crucifixion. Although he washed his hands clean, he remains morally responsible. Is Jarrell similarly culpable in withholding judgment on the crew members? Surely Jarrell, fond of verbal ambiguities, was conscious of the homonyms, Pilate and pilot. In the poem the Pilate-narrator "did as these have done, but did not die—" The suggestion is that Jarrell, too, is a potential murderer, as we all are. It is wrong, he suggests, to assume a moral superiority over the bomber crew, since all men are capable of murder. Yet, if the crew are murderers, how are they Christlike? Christ was pure innocence, and yet he was condemned. Jarrell responds that just as Christ was the lamb sacrificed for the sins of mankind, so, too, are the crew members sacrificial victims of society.

In fact, it could be argued that the air crews are mankind's last savior. In a war in which the forces of the West were perceived to be aligned against the evil of Nazism, it was not difficult to view the Eighth Air Force as the saviors of civilization. Though wolf-like in their destructiveness, the air crews were, after all, striking out at the heart of evil. Although the moral dilemmas such as those arising out of Vietnam did not play a significant role in the public's perception of the Allied bombardment of Germany, it is noteworthy that Jarrell's friend and fellow poet, Robert Lowell, was a conscientious objector in World War II, principally because he objected to what he considered unprincipled bombing of population centers. Lowell served five months in prison rather than condone what he

considered the murder of innocent civilians. "Eighth Air Force" is a poetic rejoinder to Lowell's position.

There is much to be explored in this complex poem. Nevertheless, the principal elements suggest that the airmen are essentially childlike in their innocence. Although predatory wolves, they paradoxically die as sacrificial lambs in order to insure the survival of civilization. Christlike, they bear the sins of mankind on their shoulders.

From depictions of the recruit's first days in the air corps to the veteran pilot's death over the Pacific, and from reflections on the dehumanizing effect of military duty to, ultimately, the moral responsibility of warfare, Jarrell's war poetry is sweeping and comprehensive. Because of his unique ability to recreate the essence of experience, Jarrell enables his readers to see, feel and relive the airwar of World War II. In a eulogy in *The Nation* in 1945, Jarrell fulsomely praised the wartime correspondent, Ernie Pyle, because of Pyle's ability to see and relate accurately in prose what he saw (170-171). Jarrell shared Pyle's ability. But, as possessor of the poet's special ability to see beyond surface reality, Jarrell provided in addition, metaphoric, mythic and philosophical dimension to the World War II experience.

Whereas other twentieth-century poets sometime sought to condemn not only war, but also the warrior, Jarrell was charitable and compassionate. For the veterans of the war, he had great understanding, and for the war's dead, immense respect. In a prose work entitled, "1914," Jarrell contemplates the photograph of a dead soldier of World War I and tersely expresses his sympathy for the military victims of all wars:

He has been dead for months—that is to say for  
minutes, for a century; if because of his death his

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armies have conquered the world, and has brought to its peoples food, justice, and art, it has been a good bargain for all of them but him.

In his poetry, too, Jarrell focused on the solitary airman to create an intellectual and emotional record of combat. Rooted in the unique experience of aerial warfare in World War II, the war poetry of Randall Jarrell achieves a universality that redefines the essence of war.

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