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**“Between history and a hard place”: Benjamin Hertwig’s *Slow War*  
and D.F. Brown’s *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag***

ON REMEMBRANCE DAY IN HIS TWELFTH-GRADE YEAR, Benjamin Hertwig read “In Flanders Fields” to a crowd of teachers and students. The famous Great War poem by Canadian soldier-surgeon John McCrae leapt from Hertwig’s lips, carried all his hopes. Hertwig wore his dress uniform for the occasion, having already joined the Canadian Armed Forces at sixteen.

“In Flanders Fields” gives voice to the dead cut down in the Second Battle of Ypres, the destruction of which McCrae knew well, as he was stationed in the trenches nearby. A failed German assault, Second Ypres nevertheless cost British and Commonwealth forces 60,000 lives, including a great number of Canadians. The Germans kicked off the attack with history’s first deployment of chlorine gas as a weapon.

On the bright afternoon of April 22, 1915, German forces opened their chlorine canisters and unleashed the deadly gas towards French and Algerian units. A favorable wind nudged the malevolent green fog across no-man’s-land, where it settled in the trenches like a curse. Gassed soldiers sprayed tears and vomit, collapsed under crippling headaches, drowned in the fluids their lungs poured out to try and dilute the toxin. Animals crawled out of their holes and choked. Some soldiers, maddened by asphyxiation, shot themselves. Two days later, gas again served as the prelude to the German attack on Canadian lines. While chlorine only caused a fraction of Second Ypres’ casualties, its psychological effect on opponents, especially before the development of effective gas masks, was devastating.

You wouldn’t know from reading John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields” that he wrote the poem in the aftermath of this technothanotic harvest. You wouldn’t know that he had witnessed a watershed of modern warfare. His dead don’t speak of bodily torment or mental terror. They speak of duty:

Take up our quarrel with the foe!  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high!

To bring these unquiet dead to such speech, they must first be tamed. They have no bodies; their spirits rise from the field in blood-red flowers. “Nothing more is known about the cases which prove fatal on the field within the first few hours of the ‘gassing,’” a 1917 book by a British physician put it, “except that the face assumes a pale greenish yellow color.” These the earth politely veils.

Reading McCrae’s lines as a high-school senior, Hertwig must have heard in them not only the summons of the Canadian war dead, but also the call of family tradition. “My brother was a soldier; my sister was a soldier; my father was a soldier, and his father, too. Our lineage includes Hungarian hussars, U-boat captains, and infantry grunts,” he writes. “My last name, Hertwig, means ‘hard war.’”

Which makes it all the more remarkable to read Hertwig’s “Somewhere in Flanders / Afghanistan,” one of the standout poems from his 2017 collection *Slow War*, published by McGill-Queen’s University Press:

in Flanders Fields some shit  
went down—  
  
flowers, crosses, the dead, etc. etc.  
but the dead do not speak John.

While preserving the iambic rhythms of McCrae’s stately, patriotic style, in the first line Hertwig replaces McCrae’s elevated speech with the vernacular of the contemporary soldier: poppies don’t spring up; shit goes down. I’m not amazed that Hertwig suckerpunches his old poetic idol here. After all, soldier-poets have been laying waste to the high style since the latter part of McCrae’s own war. I’m amazed that such dismantling still proves so necessary a hundred years on. The myth of *dulce et decorum* remains remarkably vital—like God, its death has been prematurely announced too many times.

In any case, exploding that myth in the culture isn’t the same thing as extricating from it your own head, your own heart, your own gut and hands and trigger finger. Hertwig goes on speaking to McCrae’s ghost:

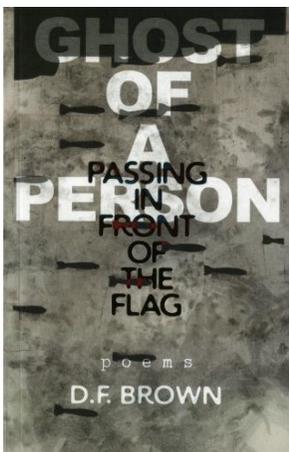
*carthago delenda est*, so on so forth.

you served our country, whatever  
that means.

The enjambment at “whatever” turns a sophomoric sneer into a profound question: what does it mean to serve your country? Cato’s aphorism, *Carthago delenda est*—“Carthage must be destroyed”—epitomizes one vision of service, the imperative of retributive violence: for the sake of our dead, we must kill their killers. It’s an invitation to the endless grudge match of history. “Take up our quarrel with the foe!” For Hertwig, though, it is this imperative itself that must be destroyed, in the slow war of metanoia, an inward jihad.

What Hertwig still shares with McCrae, even after this poetic parricide, is the craving to make sense out of violent experience. To give form to force is the perennial office of the war poet, from Homer to Hertwig. “Carry on the mission so that these dead will not have died in vain”—McCrae’s answer—is one way of doing that (though Abraham Lincoln did it better; he had a more just cause in view). When Hertwig destroys the myth of patriotic sacrifice for himself, he’s not just left with reality, field-stripped, lubed, and lethal, free and clean of mythic gunk. Instead, he’s left looking for another myth. We humans, we can’t do without them. *Slow War* sees Hertwig build a new personal myth—one that promises him an escape from the cycle of retribution—by refashioning his Christian faith.

John McCrae battled chronic asthma and bronchitis his entire life. In 1918, he sputtered to his death in a French hospital he had formerly commanded, succumbing to pneumonia and meningitis. His symptoms were not unlike the acute pulmonary distress suffered by chlorine gas victims.



The blessed rage to order the all-but-unorderable that animates *Slow War* also propels D.F. Brown’s latest, *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag* (Bloomsday, 2018). After handling this volume of diamond-hard and dangerous lyrics, I’m astounded to find my hands aren’t bleeding. Like diamonds, these poems seem to be products of geologic time and pressure. Some of them first appeared in print as early as 1989, but here they are recut, remixed, repeated, retitled, and revised. The book’s structure, with its myriad echoing phrases and images, possesses all the fractal elegance of a crystal or a sonata—if the sonata was composed in concertina wire.

Brown, a Vietnam veteran and respected war poet, begins his book with the blunt title poem:

When I was king in Vietnam  
they loved us for the body count.

We choppered everywhere  
searching for some peace with honor

Spoiler alert: they don't find it, not in Vietnam at any rate. But that deliberately unpunctuated final stanza, opening onto the rest of the book, invites us to read the remainder as a search for peace. It's a restless one, with the tines of poetry always turning over the tith of memory, all the ruck and rot of the past, in the hope that it will finally decompose.

There may be a peace that passeth understanding, but for most of us, most of the time, achieving any kind of peace depends on making some sense out of our experience. But Brown's Vietnam won't settle into an intelligible shape. It's not that, like the aging Ezra Pound, he "cannot make it cohere," through a failure of imagination or intelligence; rather, Vietnam is essentially incoherent. Where Hertwig conjures a new myth, Brown splices together a "Fractured Fairy Tale":

Once upon a time  
from the left  
your left  
you're left right

Trading on homophones (left/left, your/you're), Brown sets his invocation to the meaningless cadence of an infantry march.

at the start beginning  
this is the fuck you part  
between history and a hard place  
many torn and bloodied boys  
twisted into facts

them in fucking salad suits  
as if the past were true

Between facts and fairy tales, between history and a hard place: this is the territory of personal myth, but—and this is the fuck you part—no myth can contain the chaos of Vietnam, in which bullets turn living boys into facts that don't add up to any truth, not even fifty years later. Brown concludes: “and no bread crumbs.” Unlike Hansel and Gretel, even the survivors of this war cannot escape its violence.

In *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag*, history is a “dance . . . around the fire / blood on our faces / shiny in the night,” a circle, an echo, a PTSD flashback, a doomed repetition; memory is “a swarm / smeared across the page,” illegible; and Vietnam “was a place / scraped from my brain / and splattered here explain.” Explain this brain-splatter? It's nothing but evidence that once violence was done here.

And yet, between the big histories that sanctify nations and their self-interest and the hard place of Vietnam where bad things happened that won't fit any narrative of national purpose or destiny, there's room for another kind of story: “a saga / history misses in its rumble through the ruins,” “a song that becomes my bones.” The precision of Brown's vision, the bone-deep jitter and crack of his consonants, his very *language* lifts these luminous shards of shrapnel above their bleak subject matter. Until, by the end of Part One, another, unmolested life slips into the book. Here's “Houston Spring, 2010”:

In the fairy tale that sets you free  
It's pickup truck month in Texas

Brown rarely capitalizes every line; here it lends the poem a quality of calm reserve, accentuating its end-stopped lines, so unlike the rough enjambments of the Vietnam poems. The “fairy tale” language returns, this time unfractured. From my experience as a Texan, I remember every month being pickup truck month, but in the next line, Brown clarifies: “April pushes pink tea roses through chain link,” like Eliot's cruel lilacs, and “Pecans flash out life green / Purple irises surround the patio / And the black smoker/broiler sets there cold.” It's a picture of middle-class happiness, Texas-style

(down to the dialect-pitch-perfect “sets” for “sits”). The fire, the terrible fire, that burns in the Vietnam poems lies cold here. But *In Arcadia Ego*. The poem ends:

So it is difficult to see our Afghan war  
Clotted in the shadows near the white picnic table

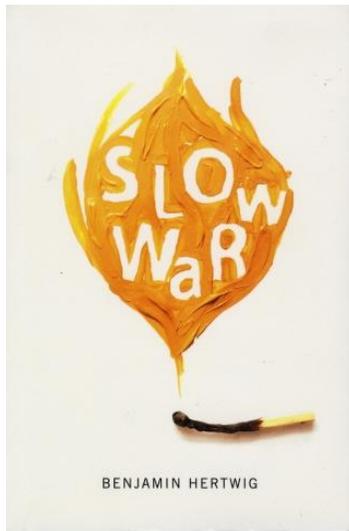
The rumor of war brings enjambment back, subtly fracturing the hard-won peaceful scene. It's Hertwig's war that haunts him now.

Hertwig's *Slow War* begins with a poem called “Genesis” and ends with one called “Exodus”: it opens with an autobiographical fall into violence and ends with escape. The speaker of “Genesis,” a grade-school kid standing by a “great wooden structure / that looks like Noah's ark,” witnesses one boy beating another. The victim's blood spatters the bystander's cheeks as “afternoon rain” falls on the scene. God sent the Flood because “the earth was filled with violence” (Gen. 6:11). Even in this first poem, Hertwig begins to disarticulate himself from his evangelical Christian heritage. He's not on the ark with the righteous; he's on the ground with the violent and damned, and the implacable rain has just begun to fall.

The second poem, “First Kill,” doubles “Genesis” as a record of original violence, just as the biblical Genesis repeats its every story. Hertwig's “opa” mercy-kills an animal they ran over in his pickup. “*I want you to see*, he says.” Again the speaker witnesses violence and doesn't lift a finger. God, too, folds his hands: “the sky is mute and you are twelve.” That feeling of powerlessness, of being swept up into a conflict you don't understand, persists in the poems about Hertwig's experience in Afghanistan.

This feeling also forms the background for his friendship with Omar Khadr, the Canadian national whose parents carried him off into jihad at 10 years old and who, at 15, had the misfortune to survive alone a firefight with American troops in Afghanistan. Accused of throwing the grenade that killed U.S. Army Sergeant First Class Christopher Speer, Khadr was charged with war crimes and imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay for 10 years. Khadr initially pled guilty, then appealed, claiming he had confessed to killing Speer because he thought it was his only way to return to Canada. In 2015, he was released from Canadian custody. Hertwig records his first meeting with Khadr in an Edmonton camping store in “A Compendium of Hands” and dedicates the penultimate poem of *Slow War*, “A Poem Is Not Guantanamo Bay” to Khadr. “I'm trying to accept that some people—

perhaps even some family members—will think of me as a traitor when they read this,” Hertwig writes in his essay about befriending Khadr, “Home From the War,” published in *The Sun*. “I love my family, and I’ve renewed friendships with my army buddies. I won’t push any of them away, even if we disagree about politics. But I would invite Omar to my house again. In my mind these two are not mutually exclusive.” To Khadr, he confesses his need “to be part of a world that is more complex than the one I once believed in—a world where a Muslim and a Christian can come back from war and become friends.”



*Slow War* shows how that transition to a more complex world began, for Hertwig, in Afghanistan. Its poems often find him attending church at the Kandahar chapel, especially on holidays. All the while, a muezzin’s Friday call to prayers floats in and out of the collection, a summons to Hertwig to remember other ways of marking sacred time, other languages for God. A gauzy image of “a victorian Jesus”—the pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt’s *The Light of the World*—appears first in a photograph of his hometown church in a care package. Hertwig receives ambivalently the image and its accompanying prayers. Later, in the Larkin-esque “Church-Going,” he sees the image again in person, but he leaves the service early “to watch dandelion heads / crushed fragrant on pavement, // flowers tossed by children at play.” That Jesus is no longer the image of Hertwig’s God. But he may glimpse a suffering Christ in the sacred heads of flowers now wounded.

John McCrae’s pristine poppies were the exhalations of the spirits of the disembodied dead. But Hertwig cannot escape bodies—neither the dead’s nor his own. When he leaves Afghanistan, he pisses himself repeatedly, first in an expensive Dubai hotel in “Homeward.” But bodily existence also pulls him back into the world of friendship, of love, and of making. “Remember your body / again,” he pleads with himself in a poem by that title near the end of the book:

the embryotic hum  
of a potter’s wheel,  
lego on the floor,  
clay that stuck  
to your mother’s hair,

to your beard  
to the creases  
of your  
hands.

Hertwig is also a ceramics artist, a man who works with his hands, teaching them to bring beauty where they once brought death: “a Bach cantata / makes you almost / forgive / your hands.”

In “Exodus,” he writes:

I did not always hate.  
  
I rub a ball of beeswax  
between my hands  
to remember  
that hope is not  
byproduct or waste,  
but deep synteresis,  
new words springing  
from raw soil  
after rain.

“Synteresis,” a lovely word; I had to look it up. It comes from medieval scholasticism, naming the practical function of conscience, the rudder in the mind that steers us towards the good and away from evil. In *Slow War*, Hertwig steers away from the maelstrom of Christian nationalism and glorified violence, with its everlasting spiral of revenge. He’s sailing into something else now, but the voyage has only started. From Genesis to Exodus is only one step.

Fritz Haber, the Polish-German scientist who developed the weaponized chlorine deployed at Ypres, fled the Nazis in 1933 and died in Switzerland shortly thereafter. He was ethnically Jewish, though he had converted to Christianity. Some of his relatives were later gassed in concentration camps.

Part Two of D.F. Brown's *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag* comprises a single long poem entitled "The Other Half of Everything." Here the tone shifts away from the shattering glass of his short lyrics; the long poem is more freewheeling, even funny:

You want an answer? Here's one! Here's the  
answer—this is the final surge of something  
Hittites started. You can call it progress.  
Sometimes it is.

Placing "The Other Half of Everything" at the end of the book argues the achievement of, if not peace, at least some kind of settled understanding, some lessons learned:

Vietnam taught me to survive mistakes. Even  
ones planned carefully over thirty years. Ones  
that kill several million people. But not me.  
Not you.

We are alive (for now). We made it (so far). So what do we do?

Remember.  
Doo-wop duck and cover.  
Ashes, ashes.  
You get an E for attendance.  
All of the above.  
You become fucked. You are glad you made it.

Is this what one man's peace with honor looks like? Hell if I know. But it calls for a benediction:  
*Shantih shantih shantih*

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