

The Atomic Test Poems of Paul Zimmer

For readers of contemporary American literature, the poetry on nuclear weapons and testing that first comes to mind is usually that which overtly protests nuclear proliferation. Allen Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode," for instance, perhaps the most well-known anti-nuclear poem, was initially composed to be recited at a sit-in to block a train carrying "waste fissile materials" away from the Rockwell Corporation's Nuclear Facility and Plutonium factory in Rocky Flats, Colorado, on July 14, 1978 (10). Denise Levertov's "Rocky Flats" also protests against the continued manufacture of radioactive material, which the poet calls "that dust, / spreading . . . throughout the world, / spores of the Destroying Angel" (38). In "Watching *Dark Circle*" Levertov invokes Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* ("Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it") to gloss her response to a film about the above ground atomic bomb tests in the Nevada desert before they were banned in 1963: "The Pentagon wants to know / something a child could tell it: / it hurts to burn" (39).

Then in referring to the placement of live animals on test sites, she adds: "Men are willing / to call the roasting of live pigs / a simulation of certain conditions. It is / not a simulation. The pigs (with their high-rated intelligence, their uncanny precognition of disaster) are real, / their agony real agony" (39). By way of contrast, William Stafford's well-known short poem "At the Bomb Testing Site" approaches the bomb tests more obliquely than Ginsberg's or Levertov's by considering the point of view of a "panting lizard" in the desert waiting for history to change, as it watches "an important scene / acted in stone for little selves / at the flute end of consequences" (41). Rather than openly rail at our self-destructive behavior as the testers of nuclear death, Stafford belittles the

behavior from the perspective of those in nature whose species is liable to outlast our own.

Protest poems such as these approach atomic testing from an outsider's fearful yet antagonistic perspective, stirring horrors in their readers of an all-out nuclear catastrophe. Yet even more striking in their nuclear detail than these works are the atomic test poems of Paul Zimmer, a poet unique among American poets for having actually witnessed above ground atomic tests in the 1950s.¹ As a young serviceman who participated in the bomb tests not by choice but by assignment, Zimmer was predisposed to be neither in favor of nor opposed to the US testing program, nor was he especially conscious at that time of the peculiar nature of atomic bombs and the physical risk of his exposure to radiation. But in a number of poems he has written in the years following his bomb test experience, the psychic impact of that experience is registered both in recurring images that haunt his work and, more significantly, in his larger vision of the post-nuclear era.

In terms of fame, Zimmer has yet to gain the prominence of other U.S. poets his age, such as Amiri Baraka, Audre Lorde, and Mark Strand, all born the same year as he, 1934. Nonetheless, Zimmer has cultivated a serious coterie of readers who consistently admire his humor, his sense of irony, his lack of pretension, his application of nature (especially animals) to myth and social relations, and, perhaps most of all, his accessibility. Best known for inventing a set of characters who appear and reappear in his poems—predominantly, the inimitable figure of Zimmer; as well as the “Everywoman” Wanda; the melancholic, lustful Peregrine; the intransigent Imbellis and a host of others—Zimmer often composes his poems in thematic sequences built around familiar middle class American experience. Steadily, for the last quarter of a century he has established his own voice and focus. “What Paul Zimmer is conducting,” argues Sherrie Ford Hilton, “is a very risky but necessary destruction of the barrier between poets and large audiences. His whole work reflects this attempt” (79).

Elsewhere, Merrill Leffler considers Zimmer “among our most original poets” and describes his oeuvre as “a fitful comedy that rattles the dark for the light inside,” adding that “the context of his

poems gives breadth to the implications of his work" (93). Agreeing, Sanford Pinsker labels Zimmer "a contemporary American poet that Kafka could love," one whose central persona Zimmer can be viewed "as sad sack, as flop, as lover, as drunk, as melancholic, as wild man, and most of all, as a wonderfully balanced lyrical voice" (257). Remarking on this consistency in his persona, Jared Carter notes, "This Falstaffian figure has grown so familiar to us, so rounded and believable, that when the poet offers a perfectly tranquil lyric, with no irony, no foolishness, we accept even this without question" (438). Finally, characterizing "Zimmer" as "the Charlie Chaplin / Buster Keaton / Woody Allen of American poetry" who as a "gentle and reflective clown" is "the director and star of a seemingly inexhaustible series of short-takes on the heart of a man and the foibles of humankind" (737), Stephen Corey praises most highly in Zimmer "what can only be called (even in the harsh, apocalyptic atmosphere of the late twentieth century) an aura of great-heartedness" (738). Interested in writing poetry neither as self-aggrandizing confessionism nor as political critique, Zimmer seems to have set his course from the start as a poet of praise, gently celebrating all things human, animal, and vegetable.

However, the chance occurrence of Zimmer's exposure to atomic testing has complicated his sometimes pastoral vision in ways not always recognized by his critics. Given the overpowering nature of the atomic blasts he witnessed—the bright flashes, shock waves, high winds, irradiated heat, and rising mushroom clouds—it is not surprising that the imagery of the bomb tests has come to permeate much of Zimmer's work, especially his poems of the late 1970s and 80s, the period when evidence of the long-term physical threat to those exposed to radiation from the atomic tests was first being widely publicized and debated. Yet rather than demonize nuclear weapons or raise them to the status of icons, as most anti-nuclear poets have done over the years, Zimmer writes in the colloquial voice of an ordinary man who happens, in the case of the bomb tests, to have observed extraordinary events.

By avoiding extreme language or unorthodox form, then, Zimmer has developed an even-tempered voice with which to

reflect on his memories of the Nevada desert, and he never exploits or overdramatizes the tests' display of destructive power. Instead, in various poems he returns again and again to that "terrible remembrance" of "the ultimate fire, / the great fire that smelled of death" (*Earthbound* n.p. ; Susina 38), in an attempt to reconcile its annihilatory power with the "delicate kinship" (*Great Bird* 6) he shares with nature. In more than a dozen poems that recall, either directly or through association, his bomb test experiences, Zimmer has sought personal consolation in the beauty and constancy of nature as a balm for what he witnessed as a young soldier in the Nevada desert. Over time, however, he has come to recognize that consolation is only partially or equivocally to be found in the natural world. And his most recent poems recalling the atomic tests show him evolving toward an ironic recognition of the fragility of nature itself, as he expresses an even darker vision of the constraints which the potential of nuclear annihilation has imposed on the human spirit.

As a drafted infantryman in the U.S. Army, Zimmer was assigned in Spring 1955 to work in the public information office for the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) at Camp Desert Rock, not far from the Camp Mercury, Nevada, bomb test site. Of the dozen or so bombs detonated during Zimmer's time at Camp Desert Rock, he observed eight firsthand, including one air burst or aerial shot, one underground burst, and half a-dozen bombs blasted from towers. During most of these tests, Zimmer was stationed with his fellow infantrymen in the "forward position" in trenches not far from ground zero where, after the blast and initial shock wave had passed over them, the soldiers were ordered to advance slowly toward the rising cloud until the AEC's geiger counters indicated too lethal a dose of radiation to proceed. As Zimmer has noted, being used as "guinea pigs" in order for the AEC "to observe how military troops—this is what they said—would react under atomic attack," the infantrymen themselves (most under twenty years old) were "of course, scared shitless,"² though they tried to maintain a tough facade.

In a prose passage from *Earthbound Zimmer*, Zimmer provides an unencumbered, compelling account of one of these

bomb tests. After recounting his troop's being awakened before dawn, driven in trucks into the desert, and told to crouch and cover their eyes as the countdown proceeded, he describes the blast itself, followed by his troop's advance:

The flash was like a sudden immense snap of electrical heat. I could see the bones in my fingers. I stayed low, trembling, smelling ozone in the air. From several miles away I could hear the shock wave rolling toward us like a stampede. When it roared over the trench top a few seconds later I could hear things tearing from the land. We rose at last to see the fireball blossoming lavender on its great column in the dawn light. The sun came up as we began to walk forward. I could see the debris of the blasted desert all around us, the bushes and cacti ripped up. We came across corpses of the dead and near-dead animals of the desert. A brightly colored bird ran crazily past me, trying to find its burned-out eyes again. Then just ahead of me a blinded rabbit sprang from a bush amidst the men and began zigzagging through them, bumping into their boots. "Son-of-a-bitch!" one of the men said, and kicked viciously at the rabbit. It rolled in the dust but rose to hobble again. The men began laughing at its frantic movements. "Son-of-a-bitch!" another man said, and this time kicked it squarely in its side. It flew through the air and landed softly amidst the roots of the fractured Yucca plants and cacti. The rabbit did not move again. We walked on toward the grey column of dust as it drifted into the shape of a Z in the morning crosswinds. (*Earthbound* n.p.)

What is so striking about this passage, despite its understated metaphors ("Like a sudden immense snap of electrical heat," "like a stampede," "the fireball blossoming lavender," "the shape of a Z"), is Zimmer's emphasis not on the bomb itself, nor even on his own physical and emotional response, but on the frantic activities of the bird and the rabbit, turning our attention from the human to

nature itself. Indeed, together with the image of the fireball which appears in later Zimmer poems, this blind and wounded rabbit haunts his poems as a reminder of what he regards as “the ultimate human cruelty” of nuclear weaponry (“Importance” 20).³

Robbed of its sight, the rabbit’s aimlessness comes to signify in nature the aimlessness of the soldiers themselves after the blast. Yet rather than express compassion for their fellow sufferer, the soldiers divert themselves from their hostility toward the bomb (against which they are powerless) by kicking the rabbit (which is powerless against them). Striving to identify not with the poor “son-of-a-bitch” driven mad by the bomb, but with the destructive force behind the bomb’s detonation (even the Z shape of the dust cloud alludes to the poet’s name), the soldiers try pathetically to displace their own sense of victimization through the ritualized torture and murder of the rabbit.

In other works concerning both his immediate and his long-term fears of exposure to the bomb tests, Zimmer continues to use the natural world for contrast, as well as for consolation. In the 1981 “Poem Ending with an Old Cliché,” for instance, the death of the poet’s cat, in whose eyes he has watched “the clouds come down,” reminds him of the truism, “Life is precious,” as he again recalls “the flash and ram of those explosions, / The vaporized towers and mangled animals, / Caved-in trenches and awesome dawn clouds” whose radioactive “secrets” he might still be carrying within his own body twenty-five years later (*Ancient* 23). However, instead of despairing at the power of death and the annihilation of life through human acts and foibles “in the midst of terrible exchanges,” Zimmer in this case admits to his own powerlessness while still relying on his natural instincts to reinvest the “old cliché” with new meaning: “From down on my knees in fear / Of early death, senility or loss; / Even in happiness it cannot be forgotten” that “life is precious.” Invisible radiation here serves as a reminder to Zimmer of the value of the lives it endangers.

Although only obliquely related to his bomb test experience, another poem from this period, “Confession, Curse and Prayer,” finds Zimmer recognizing not his association with the victims of technological death, but his complicity with its perpetrators. Yet in acknowledging that complicity, he seeks forgiveness by confessing

to “all creatures I have killed” (*Ancient 12*). The poem begins with a litany of the insects and others for whose death the poet takes responsibility, from “flies, mosquitoes, roaches,” to “two snakes, a quail, four frogs, / One baby robin and a rabbit stoned / In a seizure of youthful cruelty,” a rabbit that may allude to the much maligned rabbit blinded by the bomb test. Indeed, the imagery Zimmer employs to recall killing these creatures is more military than domestic:

The first shock and brief fluttering,
The eyes turning slowly into themselves,
Or the small shell suddenly crushed
While the limbs still twitch and clutch
At the final glimmers of perception,
At the irretrievable thing that is gone;
And I am guilty of these destructions. (*Ancient 12*)

In closing this confession, though, rather than just invoke his newly gained respect for the value of life or ask for forgiveness, the poet further offers a prayer that he be spared from repeating these unnecessary acts of murder in the future. “God damn the man who calls this sentimentality!” he rages, refusing to trivialize even the tiniest evidence of animate nature. Then he closes the poem, “Let nothing cruel stir in my blood again.”

Zimmer’s preoccupation with cruelty, especially in relation to war and mass killing, predates his poems that explicitly recall the atomic tests, but as demonstrated best by the evolution of his “Imbellis” poems, the peculiar annihilatory power of nuclear weapons complicates and darkens what otherwise might have developed into a more traditional voice of pacificism. In an interview with Michael Pettit, Zimmer points out that the original set of nine Imbellis poems in his 1969 collection *The Republic of Many Voices* grew out of his distress over the U.S. participation in the war in Vietnam. By creating the menacing figure of Imbellis—a mythic figure who “born by mistake in a test-tube... has, as his name implies, war embodied within him” (Jellema 75)—Zimmer attempts to purge the cruelty inside himself in order to expose it in others, as he explains to Pettit.

I think about cruelty—my own and other people’s—and I’ve always been appalled by it. I want to regard that in poems. When the Viet Nam war was going on, I was so shaken by it, I was unable to write about it. My way of writing about it was to make the Imbellis sequence. To try and understand. My God, it was astonishing, the ultimate cruelty that was going on, and we were responsible for it! Imbellis becomes a cruel person, and he reappears in other work of mine. (Pettit 57)

In the first nine Imbellis poems, Imbellis suddenly appears from a “cell divided” in an agar jar, like the monster in Frankenstein’s laboratory, and “before we could / Control Imbellis, he was here” (*Republic* 11), even to his own and Zimmer’s utter disorientation. At first Zimmer protests his own innocence, and Imbellis himself experiences only “the gentlest of seasons” (*Republic* 14), as he ambles among the trees. But by the fifth poem, “Imbellis Strolls onto the Battlefield,” he is robbed of any sense of peace, once he observes “the innocents [be] ground into the earth / Like leaves and die in mortal terror” (*Republic* 15). Soon Imbellis has seen enough of this violence, so he emerges from his “hiding place” to repair the war-torn landscape around him. Yet in doing so he loses his own innocence. The poem closes with an image of him sitting beneath the moon and grinding his teeth, having become “as cunning as these childlike warriors.” Then in the next poem, “Imbellis Bellicose,” Imbellis explodes into a fully violent creature himself:

I am revived by combat.
 Peace has become intolerable.
 Blood! Oh only blood excites me!
 It is worth all torture,
 All pain that is not mine.
 Invincible, I strike and passion
 At the groveling and wincing.
 I, Imbellis, am king of terror,
 And peace is purry memory to me. (*Republic* 16)

Having exposed the belligerence within us which makes a war such as the Vietnam war possible, the poet Zimmer closes this original sequence by killing Imbellis and returning him to the agar jar where he was born. In the final poem, the character Zimmer refuses to compose "an anguished elegy" for this warlike figure, adding, "I will not sum up his existence. / Forget him. / A study of his life / Would show things we cannot believe" (*Republic* 19). Then, with an ironic nod at the inability of human beings truly to change, Imbellis is buried.

But he's not gone. Later in *The Republic of Many Voices* there is a hint of a second coming for this spirit of wrath who refuses to abandon Zimmer's sensibility, when the persona Peregrine refers to Imbellis as a god (32). Later still, the same character reappears in several Zimmer poems written in the mid 1970s, as well as in the two-part poem "The Ancient Wars," where the persona Zimmer writes a letter to Imbellis proposing reconciliation and friendship. Like a street bully, Imbellis refuses this offer, replying that, should Zimmer ever come "blundering" into his view again, "I'll clean your clock / But good, shred your cheeks, / Roll your bloody teeth, / Crunch your jewels and punch / Your dim lights out forever" (*Ancient* 15).

Most significantly, however, it is in his revised version of "The Sweet Night Bleeds From Zimmer," where Zimmer first connects Imbellis directly to his memory of the atomic tests.⁴ Rod Jellema argues that when Zimmer draws this connection between his personal history and potential global annihilation, his vision of cruelty goes beyond the merely psychological into "something genetic, racial, deeply human. That Imbellis might destroy us means only that we carry the urge for that destruction inside us" (Jellema 77). It is precisely this urge to annihilate our world that Zimmer explores. As in his other poems, "The Sweet Night Bleeds from Zimmer" is grounded in the imagery of nature. Rhetorically, it builds on its opening line, "Imbellis, the bully, catches me in the dark," a line later echoed in the first lines of the third, fourth, and seventh (final) strophes. The first three strophes recall Zimmer's being cornered as a child by a bully who beats him up until "the sweet night is bleeding from my skull" (*Family* 20). Then in the fourth strophe, in the same way that the original figure of the bully

who punched Zimmer as a child has been generalized into the godlike Imbellis,⁵ the memory of the beating itself “in a dark place” is generalized into a night landscape filled with stars, which

descend to coil about my head,
Buzzing about my gravity, sinking
Their stingers in my lips and eyelids.
In the trees each twig and sucker
Is pointing at a separate fire.
How could I have forgotten all these stars? (*Family 20*)

In an abrupt shift in the fifth strophe, this memory of seeing stars while being punched out suddenly stirs the poet’s memory of the atomic test site, where an even grander assault on his person occurred. As Jellema notes, the poem switches between strophes from present to past tense verbs, and reminiscent of the prose passage from *Earthbound Zimmer*, Zimmer catalogues images of nature being blasted by the bomb:

Stars in the desert faded at dawn;
Then the flash and shock wave rammed
Sand in my face, uprooted cactus,
Blasted the animals, birds from the sky.
Afterwards, under the fireball
And faint stars, we wanted to kick
Dead rabbits, throw stones at each other,
Call each other sons-of-bitches. (*Family 20*)

Imbellis is no longer simply a spirit of human cruelty, nor only the aggressive spirit of war that allows us to destroy others; he has become the spirit of annihilation itself, including self-annihilation, that is embodied in nuclear warfare. Yet by focusing again on the images of the cacti, birds, and rabbits, rather than global implications, not only does Zimmer maintain a human scale, but also, particularly in the image of the soldiers throwing stones at each other and calling each other (not the rabbit this time) “sons-of-bitches,” he expresses each individual’s complicity with

that spirit of annihilation. It is as though we cannot stop ourselves from destroying ourselves, together with everything around us.

The sixth strophe makes this complicity even more pronounced, as the poet switches scenes again (while still maintaining a natural setting) to a scene of himself fishing at night. He remembers going fishing on “a dark still lake” and catching a pickerel which “when I ripped it out . . . / Screamed like a wounded rabbit” (*Family* 21). Linking the fish’s cry with the irradiated rabbit in the desert, the poet expresses his horror at discovering his own destructive urge, so he rows his boat “out of the dark, / Churning the galaxies and nebulae” reflected in the lake water, thereby metaphorically wreaking as much havoc on nature by his escape from cruelty as by his participation in it, in either case “spoiling the perfect night.” Left with no escape, then, from his complicity with that which victimizes him, Zimmer echoes the opening line in his final strophe and remains “caught” in a dark place by Imbellis, who simply “won’t back off and let me be.” Unable to hide “under / Mother’s navel, behind father’s penis,” no longer able to see himself as inculpable, despite his sense of victimization, he recognizes the paradox that, once he acknowledges the opposing sides of himself in experience, he has lost his identity: “I can’t remember who I am,” he laments. At its close, the poem fuses the images of Zimmer being pummeled, Zimmer with his face in the desert sand, Zimmer rowing out of the dark to escape his own worst instincts, and by inference, Zimmer writing the poem—all into a single image:

Someone wounded and breathing hard,
 Trying to become the earth; sorry man
 Remembering each cruelty under the stars;
 Someone wagging submission forever. (*Family* 21)

“The Sweet Night Bleeds from Zimmer” marks a turning point for Zimmer, plunging him into the complexities of how our internalized assumptions about war have led us to the brink of global and genetic suicide. Later poems, including those in which Imbellis returns again, further explore this troubling condition, as Zimmer continues to examine the bomb test imagery he cannot

abandon. Although in these mid-1980s poems nature itself (together with the lives of individual animals and people) remains a formidable opponent to annihilation, it also becomes increasingly subject to the destructive force of nuclear arms and power. In "Zimmer Sees Imbellis, the Bully, Rise from the Water," for instance, again the poet's haunted memory of the bomb tests is abruptly stirred when, mysteriously from the bottom of the lake where the poet fishes, Imbellis surfaces, and with a silent rage that resembles the physical behavior of radiation itself, he penetrates everything in the landscape around him. Helpless against this creature of violence and annihilation, who "ruts and strikes flint," "shits in the waters / Of our lakes," and "stalks our borders," the poet concludes, "We can do nothing but stand together" (*Great Bird* 14-15). Though Zimmer feels increasingly helpless to protect nature from the nuclear threat (and by extension, other environmental dangers), he still acknowledges nature's life-giving power, as he sides with it against the threat of eradication.

"Because of Duties, Zimmer Had Forgotten the Forest" also seeks consolation from annihilation in nature—not in animals this time but in trees: the first stanza praises the beauty of dusk in a forest whose trees' "great canopies begin to grow the stars," yet in forgetting the forest for the trees, as it were, the poet prefers not "to dwell upon this splendor" but instead, as darkness ensues, to build a wood fire to back its "glister away from my glare" (*Great Bird* 6). In the second stanza, though, the flames of that fire again remind the poet of the "ferocity" of those pre-dawn bomb tests, leaving him finally "no comfort" throughout his night in the forest, until "dawn begins to piece itself through the leaves" and helps him to remember his "delicate kinship" to, rather than the apocalyptic suggestion of, burning wood. In a mood of reconciliation he concludes this poem, "no matter what we do to trees they love / Us to the end, stroking our bones with root tips, / Topping the markers to purify our graves." By resorting to the forgiving power of nature, this poem closes, like other Zimmer poems that allude to the atomic tests, in a resigned, accepting mood, as the poet seeks, admittedly with less resolution than earlier, some kind of spiritual justification for his having been branded in the Nevada desert.

Unquestionably, by interposing the imagery of the atomic tests on imagery of nature, Zimmer's poems of the 1980s do not merely praise nature's beauty and power but begin to examine its vulnerability more carefully. While Zimmer's acknowledgement of potential nuclear annihilation may cast a shadow over the earlier comfort he finds in trees, bears and lakes—a comfort evident in his work of the 1960s that is diminished in poems such as “Because of Duties, Zimmer Had Forgotten the Forest”—it also deepens his sense of the “delicate kinship” he shares with nature. Furthermore, as he has become more aware of his role as a poet, and as he has chosen not to renounce his bomb test experience so much as to accept responsibility for it, he has extended that sense of kinship to people as well as to nature, in a newly tempered but forthright assertion of the value of beauty and love.

In particular, the recent poem “But Bird,” first published in 1991, varies from Zimmer's earlier poems in its approach to the atomic tests—first by juxtaposing the bomb test imagery not against the natural wilderness but against a memory of jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, and secondly by offering no consolation, opting instead to end more ambiguously. Like the world of wild animals, the world of jazz has long been a predilection of Zimmer's, though “But Bird” is his first poem to link that interest to the bomb tests. Juxtaposing the scene in 1954 of one of Parker's (or Bird's) last performances at Birdland in New York City against his own induction into the army, Zimmer alternates strophes between descriptions of the generative power of Parker's music as “something to believe in” and those of the deathly atmosphere of the bomb tests as one of those “things you should forget” (*Big Blue* 35). On the one hand, Bird

blew crisp and clean,
 Bringing each face in the crowd
 Gleaming to the bell of his horn.
 No fluffing, no wavering,
 But soaring like on my old
 Verve waxes back in Ohio. (*Big Blue* 35-6)

On the other hand, months later, when the poet finds himself “down in the sand” in the Nevada desert, after the atomic blast,

The bones in our fingers were
Suddenly x-rayed by the flash.
We moaned together in light
That entered everything,
Tried to become the earth itself
As the shock rolled toward us. (*Big Blue* 36)

Jazz induces “soaring,” while bombs induce cowering. Through three musical sets, “Bird was giving it all away, / One of his last great gifts”; but in the desert the human guinea pigs clasp on to life and give nothing away, because “when the trench caved in it felt / Like death,” even though afterwards

we clawed out,
Walked beneath the roiling, brutal cloud
To see the flattened houses,
Sheep and pigs blasted,
Ravens and rabbits blind
Scrabbling in the grit and yucca. (*Big Blue* 36)

Once again, Zimmer presents the blinded rabbits, but rather than emphasize the brutality of the soldiers who kick them through the gritty air, he contrasts the rabbits’ “scrabbling” against the unwavering melodies of the genius Parker. Indeed, the final, unresolved irony in “But Bird” is that despite the energetic performance of Parker, in contrast to the morbid passivity of the poet during the bomb tests, it is the bold musician who disappears “Five months later, dead,” while paradoxically the timid soldier survives, only to remember being “down on my knees, / Wretched with fear in / The cinders of the desert” (*Big Blue* 37).

Zimmer’s conclusion in “But Bird” suggests not only the omnipotence of nuclear weaponry, but the equally magnificent though more fragile power of the beauty it threatens to annihilate. As Zimmer’s ideas of nature expand in a poem like this to include not only landscapes but human beings and even art, he becomes

increasingly pessimistic about the ultimate possibility of curbing the destructive power of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, this poem expresses with even more poignancy than his earlier work just how much the endangered world is to be treasured. His bomb-test experience manifests itself not only in a fear for the planet's survival, but in a deepening, sobered appreciation for the most vulnerable qualities of life, as well as for the beauty without which that life would have no justification.

Another recent poem by Zimmer, "Imitations of Fatherhood, Operation Desert Rock, 1955," also captures this contrast between the omnipotence of nuclear bombs and the fragile splendor of the life they threaten, when he once more recalls the imagery of the fireball and the blinded rabbits. This time, however, the poem takes an even larger imaginative leap than "The Sweet Night Bleeds from Zimmer" and "But Bird" do, away from the brutality against the rabbits displayed by the soldiers. In this poem Zimmer deliberately recreates the test site scene in the prose passage in *Earthbound Zimmer* in order to purge it of its previous horror, a horror based on ignorance. The rabbit here appears as a baby jackrabbit, "blinded and matted with blood" (*Big Blue* 29). But instead of kicking the rabbit or helplessly watching it die, as he does in earlier poems, there is a dramatic difference: Addressing himself, in the second person now, as the one whose boot the rabbit runs into, he writes, "you undo / a pocket and gently slip / the rabbit child into the warmth, / then fasten the button again," as the poet hurries to catch the others, "bearing" his "secret toward the fire." While the poem insinuates that both the rabbit and its surrogate father will eventually be decimated by the fire they approach together, it also conveys a tenderness toward and attachment to the threatened natural world with a grace and simplicity achieved in neither "Poem Ending with an Old Cliché" nor "Confession, Curse and Prayer." Without pretending to be able to prevent annihilation, the reconstructed self in "Imitations of Fatherhood" is shown acting out of a natural love and guardianship for life, regardless of whether that love will prevail or not.

After decades of trying in his poetry to atone for his involvement as a soldier and citizen in the proliferation of weapons of mass death, as well as to reconcile his sense of victimization as a bomb

test survivor with his enthusiasm for living, Zimmer has yet to declaim, and probably never will declaim, the demonic powers of nuclearism with the fierce, Pindaric stridency of Ginsberg and Levertov. Nor has his poetry fallen into the despair that informs the heart of many of the nuclear age poems written by younger poets who have never known a world not threatened by nuclear annihilation. Rather, because he approaches the specter of nuclear war from an empirical rather than a strictly political, technological, or speculative point of view, Zimmer's poetry offers a personal insight into such a war's horror in a language both accessible and imaginative: He tells us not only what he foresees a nuclear war *would* be like but what he has already experienced of its effects, on the soul as well as on the body. When in an interview I asked Zimmer whether he thought there was any possible justification for the atomic bomb tests and the damage they wreaked on the troops as well as on nature, he replied,

No, there was no justification for that, no . . . , and you're right, we were all scarred by that experience and carried it with us, at least mentally and some physically, for the rest of our lives. There was no justification; there was no justification for knocking off at least 100,000 Iraqis either [in the Persian Gulf War]. There's no justification for a lot of things and that's the despair.

Yet despite such hovering despair, Zimmer has found in it a renewed cause for the assertion of meaning. Though his poems sometimes skirt what Randall Jarrell called sweetness, he ultimately makes the choice of sentiment over cynicism, having discovered in his "terrible remembrance" of the bomb tests both a sense of our "delicate kinship" with the earth and, as a way of carrying on, an existential reason for loving.

To date, perhaps his best expression of this inextricable bond between horror and love occurs in "The Dream of My Second Conscription," a poem only obliquely related to the bomb tests themselves but one implicit with the fear of annihilation embodied in the Imbellis poems and more recent work. The poem evokes the "unendurable sadness" the poet experiences in a

dream he has of being drafted a second time, this time as a middle-aged husband and father. As he waves goodbye to his wife and almost fully grown children from the troop bus that will take him away, he sees them weeping over his departure and finds the sight of them

almost more
Than I can bear, that I would
Go again and not be with you,
That I would stand in freezing rain
And be assured of my inhumanity;
That I would go again to be
Taught the insult of how to kill. (*Great Bird 7*)

Without condemning military conscription more than his own participation in it, Zimmer nonetheless associates his own “inhumanity” and cruel instincts with his military experience. But then the poem’s last five lines invert that fearful memory by linking it, as a dream, to his joy at waking to the very circumstances of living he fears losing. “How could a dream so terrible,” he asks ironically, “Show more of love?” a question he answers for himself:

This is an illusion
So fraught with calamity that,
Were I to waken and not find you
Here beside me, surely I would die. (*Great Bird 7*)

Like this dream of being taken from his family, Zimmer’s imagery of the atomic bomb tests is “an illusion . . . fraught with calamity,” threatening to become a reality that will annihilate reality itself. Yet having walked in the Nevada desert, and having dreamt of and written about those walks again and again, Zimmer finally praises the natural and human world being tested by those bombs. In response to the complex sense of meaninglessness, haphazardness, and despair that are his legacy as a bomb test survivor, Zimmer affirms life not in open defiance of nuclearism, nor in isolation from its direct impact on his physical and psychic

experience. Ironically, it is the very uncertainty that nuclear technology imposes on our lives that requires as much as ever the special work of the poet to identify acts of beauty or tenderness and to express the essential, if not invulnerable, power of natural harmony and love. □

Notes

1. Another poet who witnessed atomic tests is John Engels, who was present at the Bikini-Eniwetok tests in 1954 and who later became a friend of Zimmer's. Engels served as a naval staff communications officer with Commander Task Group 7.3, the naval element of Joint Task Force 7, whose project was to explode a number of hydrogen and atomic devices in the Eniwetok-Bikini area. Assigned to the USS Curtis (and later to a jeep carrier) during the months that bombs were detonated some forty-five miles away, he was among the U.S. military personnel contaminated by radiation fallout. For chief examples of Engels' poetry which deals explicitly with his bomb test experiences, see the last five poems of the "Exorcisms" section in his collection *Signals from the Safety Coffin* 63-68, including "The Fish Dream," "The Garden," "The Bedroom," "The Survivor" (recently revised as "The Survivors"), and "From the Source," all of which make explicit reference to the tests at Eniwetok-Bikini, especially to the clean-up operations the observers performed on themselves after being exposed to the fallout.

2. Zimmer made these comments to me in an interview conducted in his office at the University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa, on 14 April 1992.

3. Included with the essay, "The Importance of Being Zimmer," from which this phrase is taken, is a photograph of Zimmer standing at Camp Desert Rock with an atomic bomb cloud rising in the distance behind him. See Susina 15.

4. In "The Importance of Being Zimmer," Zimmer himself remarks on the significance of this poem in his growth as a poet. For his comments, see "Importance" 20-21.

5. In the earlier version of this poem, Zimmer uses the name "Barney" where "Imbellis" appears here. See "Importance" 20-21.

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