Poems of War and Peace

Guernica, Pablo Picasso, Spain, 1937
TO A SIBERIAN WOODSMAN  
(after looking at some pictures in a magazine)

1.
You lean at ease in your warm house at night after supper, listening to your daughter play the accordion. You smile with the pleasure of a man confident in his hands, resting after a day of long labor in the forest, the cry of the saw in your head, and the vision of coming home to rest. Your daughter’s face is clear in the joy of hearing her own music. Her fingers live on the keys like people familiar with the land they were born in.

You sit at the dinner table late into the night with your son, tying the bright flies that will lead you along the forest streams. Over you, as your hands work, is the dream of still pools. Over you is the dream of your silence while the east brightens, birds waking close by you in the trees.

2.
I have thought of you stepping out of your doorway at dawn, your son in your tracks. You go in under the overarching green branches of the forest whose ways, strange to me, are well known to you as the sound of your own voice or the silence that lies around you now that you have ceased to speak, and soon the voice of the stream rises ahead of you, and you take the path beside it.

I have thought of the sun breaking pale through the mists over you as you come to the pool where you will fish, and of the mist drifting over the water, and of the cast fly resting light on the face of the pool.

3.
And I am here in Kentucky in the place I have made myself in the world. I sit on my porch above the river that flows muddy and slow along the feet of the trees. I hear the voices of the wren and the yellow-throated warbler whose songs pass near the windows and over the roof. In my house my daughter learns the womanhood of her mother. My son is at play, pretending to be the man he believes I am. I am the outbreathing of this ground. My words are its words as the wren’s song is its song.

4.
Who has invented our enmity? Who has prescribed us hatred of each other? Who has armed us against each other with the death of the world? Who has appointed me such anger that I should desire the burning of your house or the destruction of your children? Who has appointed such anger to you? Who has set loose the thought that we should oppose each other with the ruin of forests and
rivers, and the silence of the birds?
Who has said to us that the voices of my land shall be strange
to you, and the voices of your land strange to me?

Who has imagined that I would destroy myself in order to destroy you,
or that I could improve myself by destroying you? Who has imagined
that your death could be negligible to me now that I have seen
these pictures of your face?
Who has imagined that I would not speak familiarly with you,
or laugh with you, or visit in your house and go to work with
you in the forest?
And now one of the ideas of my place will be that you would
gladly talk and visit and work with me.

5.
I sit in the shade of the trees of the land I was born in.
As they are native I am native, and I hold to this place as
carefully as they hold to it.
I do not see the national flag flying from the staff of the sycamore,
or any decree of the government written on the leaves of the walnut,
nor has the elm bowed before any monuments or sworn the oath of allegiance.
They have not declared to whom they stand in welcome.

6.
In the thought of you I imagine myself free of the weapons and
the official hates that I have borne on my back like a hump,
and in the thought of myself I imagine you free of weapons and
official hates,
so that if we should meet we would not go by each other
looking at the ground like slaves sullen under their burdens,
but would stand clear in the gaze of each other.

7.
There is no government so worthy as your son who fishes with
you in silence besides the forest pool.
There is no national glory so comely as your daughter whose
hands have learned a music and go their own way on the keys.
There is no national glory so comely as my daughter who
dances and sings and is the brightness of my house.
There is no government so worthy as my son who laughs, as he
comes up the path from the river in the evening, for joy.

Wendell Berry, USA
from “Openings,” 1968
Juan Lopez and John Ward

It was their luck to be born into a strange time. The planet had been parceled out among various countries, each one provided with loyalties, cherished memories, with a past undoubtedly heroic, with rights, with wrongs, with a particular mythology, with bronze forefathers, with anniversaries, with demagogues and symbols.

This arbitrary division was favorable for wars.

Lopez was born in the city beside the tawny river; Ward, on the outskirts of the city where Father Brown walked. He had studied Spanish in order to read Quijote.

The other one professed a love for Conrad, who had been revealed to him in a classroom on Viamonte Street.

They might have been friends, but they saw each other face to face only once, on some overly famous islands, and each one of them was Cain, and each was Abel.

They were buried together. Snow and corruption know them. The incident I mention occurred in a time that we cannot understand.

Jorge Luis Borges
Argentina (1899-1986)
Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!-An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Wilfred Owen
Britain (1893-1918)

Note: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori means it is sweet and honorable to die for one's country.
For every hibakusha
there is a pilot.

for every hibakusha
there is a planner.

for every hibakusha
there is a bombardier.

for every hibakusha
there is a bomb designer.

for every hibakusha
there is a missile maker.

for every hibakusha
there is a missileer.

for every hibakusha
there is a targeter.

for every hibakusha
there is a commander.

for every hibakusha
there is a button pusher.

for every hibakusha
many must contribute.

for every hibakusha
many must obey.

for every hibakusha
many must be silent.

David Krieger, USA

Note: Hibakusha means atomic bomb survivor.
Give Back Peace

Give back father, give back mother,
Give back grandpa, give back grandma,
Give back boys, give back girls.

Give me back myself, give me back men
Linked to me.

As long as men live as men,
Give back peace,
Peace that never crumbles.

Sankichi Toge
Japan (1917-1953)

General, your tank is a powerful vehicle.
It smashes down forests and crushes men.
But it has one defect:
It needs a driver

General, your bomber is powerful.
It flies faster than a storm
and carries more than an elephant.

But it has one defect:
It needs a mechanic.

General, man is very useful.
He can fly and he can kill.
But he has one defect:
He can think.

Bertolt Brecht
Germany (1898-1956)
Harry Wilmans

I was just turned twenty-one,
And Henry Phipps, the Sunday-school superintendent,
Made a speech in Bindle's Opera House.
"The honor of the flag must by upheld," he said,
"Whether it be assailed by a barbarous tribe of Tagalogs
Or the greatest power in Europe."
And we cheered and cheered the speech and the flag he waved
As he spoke.
And I went to the war in spite of my father,
And followed the flag till I saw it raised
By our camp in a rice field near Manila,
And all of us cheered and cheered it.
But there were flies and poisonous things;
And there was deadly water,
And the cruel heat,
And the sickening, putrid food;
And the smell of the trench just back of the tents
Where the soldiers went to empty themselves;
And there were the whores who followed us, full of syphilis;
And beastly acts between ourselves or alone,
With bullying, hatred, degredation among us,
And days of loathing and nights of fear
To the hour of the charge through the steaming swamp,
Following the flag,
Till I fell with a scream, shot through the guts.
Now there's a flag over me in Spoon River!
A flag! A flag!

Edgar Lee Masters
USA (1868-1950)
**Speaking: The Hero**

I did not want to go.  
They inducted me.

I did not want to die.  
They called me yellow.

I tried to run away.  
They courtmartialed me.

I did not shoot.  
They said I had no guts.

I cried in pain.  
They carried me to safety.

In safety I died.  
They blew taps over me.

They crossed out my name  
And buried me under a cross.

They made a speech in my home town.  
I was unable to call them liars.

They said I gave my life.  
I had struggled to keep it.

They said I set an example  
I had tried to run.

They said they were proud of me.  
I had been ashamed of them.

They said my mother should be proud.  
My mother cried.

I wanted to live.  
They called me a coward.

I died a coward.  
They called me a hero.

**Felix Pollak**  
**USA**
This is the field where the battle did not happen, where the unknown soldier did not die. This is the field where grass joined hands, where no monument stands, and the only heroic thing is the sky.

Birds fly here without any sound, unfolding their wings across the open. No people killed – or were killed – on this ground hollowed by the neglect of an air so tame that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

William Stafford
USA (1914-1993)

Gettysburg Address
Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We have come to dedicate a portion of it, as a final resting place for those who died here, that the nation might live. This we may, in all propriety do. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow, this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have hallowed it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; while it can never forget what they did here.

It is rather for us the living, we here be dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth. —Abraham Lincoln, 1863

Misnomer

They speak of the art of war, but the arts draw their light from the soul’s well, and warfare dries up the soul and draws its power from a dark and burning wasteland. When Leonardo set his genius to devising machines of destruction he was not acting in the service of art, he was suspending the life of art over an abyss, as if one were to hold a living child out of an airplane window at thirty thousand feet.

Denise Levertov
USA (1923-1997)
For Mohammed Zeid of Gaza, Age 15

There is no stray bullet, sirs.
No bullet like a worried cat
  crouching under a bush,
no half-hairless puppy bullet
dodging midnight streets.
The bullet could not be a pecan
  plunking the tin roof,
not hardly, no fluff of pollen
  on October's breath,
no humble pebble in the street.

So don't gentle it, please.

We live among stray thoughts,
tasks abandoned midstream.
Our fickle hearts are fat
with stray devotions, we feel at home
  among bits and pieces,
all the wandering ways of words.

But this bullet had no innocence, did not
  wish anyone well, you can't tell us otherwise
by naming it mildly, this bullet was never the friend
  of life, should not be granted immunity
by soft saying - friendly fire, straying death-eye
why have we given the wrong weight to what we do?

Mohammed, Mohammed deserves the truth.
this bullet had no secret happy hopes,
it was not singing to itself with eyes closed
  under the bridge.

Naomi Shihab Nye
USA
Drum Taps

3
To the drum-taps prompt,
The young men falling in and arming;
The mechanics arming, (the trowel, the jack-plane, the blacksmith’s hammer, tost aside with precipitation;)
The lawyer leaving his office, and arming—the judge leaving the court;
The driver deserting his wagon in the street, jumping down, throwing the reins abruptly down on the horses’ backs;
The salesman leaving the store—the boss, book-keeper, porter, all leaving;
Squads gather everywhere by common consent, and arm;
The new recruits, even boys—the old men show them how to wear their accoutrements—they buckle the straps carefully;
Outdoors arming—indoors arming—the flash of the musket-barrels;
The white tents cluster in camps—the arm’d sentries around—the sunrise cannon, and again at sunset;
Arm’d regiments arrive every day, pass through the city, and embark from the wharves;
(How good they look, as they tramp down to the river, sweaty, with their guns on their shoulders!
How I love them! how I could hug them, with their brown faces, and their clothes and knapsacks cover’d with dust!)
The blood of the city up—arm’d! arm’d! the cry everywhere;
The flags flung out from the steeples of churches, and from all the public buildings and stores;
The tearful parting—the mother kisses her son—the son kisses his mother;
(Loth is the mother to part—yet not a word does she speak to detain him;)
The tumultuous escort—the ranks of policemen preceding, clearing the way;
The unpent enthusiasm—the wild cheers of the crowd for their favorites;
The artillery—the silent cannons, bright as gold, drawn along, rumble lightly over the stones;
(Silent cannons—soon to cease your silence!
Soon, unlimber’d, to begin the red business;) All the mutter of preparation—all the determin’d arming;
The hospital service—the lint, bandages, and medicines;
The women volunteering for nurses—the work begun for, in earnest—no mere parade now;
War! an arm’d race is advancing!—the welcome for battle—no turning away;
War! be it weeks, months, or years—an arm’d race is advancing to welcome it.

Walt Whitman, 1819-1892 (excerpt)
USA Leaves of Grass, 1900
The Wound Dresser

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground, after the battle brought in;
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass, the ground;
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof’d hospital;
To the long rows of cots, up and down, each side, I return;
To each and all, one after another, I draw near—not one do I miss;
An attendant follows, holding a tray—he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill’d with clotted rags and blood, emptied and fill’d again.

I onward go, I stop,
With hinged knees and steady hand, to dress wounds;
I am firm with each—the pangs are sharp, yet unavoidable;
One turns to me his appealing eyes—(poor boy! I never knew you,
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.)

On, on I go!—(open doors of time! open hospital doors!)
The crush’d head I dress, (poor crazed hand, tear not the bandage away;)
The neck of the cavalry-man, with the bullet through and through, I examine;
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard;
(Come, sweet death! be persuaded, O beautiful death!
In mercy come quickly.)

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood;
Back on his pillow the soldier bends, with curv’d neck, and side-falling head;
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, (he dares not look on the bloody stump,
And has not yet look’d on it.)

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep;
But a day or two more—for see, the frame all wasted already, and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me, holding the tray and pail.

I am faithful, I do not give out;
The fractur’d thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand—(yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.)

Walt Whitman, 1819-1892 (excerpt)
USA Leaves of Grass, 1900
A Little Girl’s Poem

Life is for me and is shining!
Inside me I
feel stars and sun and bells singing.

There are children in the world
all around me and beyond me--
here, and beyond the big waters;
here, and in countries peculiar to me
but not peculiar to themselves.

I want the children to live and to laugh.
I want them to sit with their mothers
and fathers
and have happy cocoa together.

I do not want
fire screaming up to the sky.
I do not want
families killed in their doorways.

Life is for us, for the children.
Life is for mothers and fathers,
life is for the tall girls and boys
in the high school on Henderson Street,
is for the people in Afrikan tents,
the people in the English cathedrals,
the people in Indian courtyards;
the people in cottages all over the world.

Life is for us, and is shining.
We have a right to sing.

Gwendolyn Brooks
USA (1917-2000)
Today is Not a Good Day for War

Today is not a good day for war,
Not when the sun is shining,
And leaves are trembling in the breeze.

Today is not a good day for bombs to fall,
Not when clouds hang on the horizon
And drift above the sea.

Today is not a good day for young men to die,
Not when they have so many dreams
And so much still to do.

Today is not a good day to send missiles flying,
Not when the fog rolls in
And the rain is falling hard.

Today is not a good day for launching attacks,
Not when families gather
And hold on to one another.

Today is not a good day for collateral damage,
Not when children are restless
Daydreaming of frogs and creeks.

Today is not a good day for war,
Not when birds are soaring,
Filling the sky with grace.

No matter what they tell us about the other,
Nor how bold their patriotic calls,
Today is not a good day for war.

David Krieger, March 2003
USA