

WAR NEWS

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Cover art: Andrea Hassiba

These days
you wrap
the shroud
of living
tight
around
your bones
and try
to breathe
again
above each
lengthening
grave

There is nothing left in our poems but obliterated words

Many believe that the sky above us is shared

While others claim ownership of every cloud that falls to earth covered in blood

The volume of the killing is so high

so terrible in its working machinery that we can hear it in our sleep

We get up and roam the house looking for our own distressed body in the piercing fragments of news

And in the early morning we will begin to hold ourselves in the arms of our children

Revenge reawakens every known atrocity and sends its lethal messengers from street to street

from door to door

relentlessly searching for the grief of others

In the trench with Mahmoud Darwish and Siegfried Sassoon I ask for directions to Gaza

Follow the gunfire through your mother's heart they reply as one

Follow the blown apart paper future and the rotting corpses of mercy

And once there bury your writing below the bodies of children But don't look for any beginning or end

Or consult any map of poetry to bring you home without tears

In 24 hours you must leave behind what is left of your life

And on every day in a future nightmare you will be allowed to return to it

These days recalling a line from a poem that you love is like being granted temporary safe passage through the collective unconscious of violence

Nothing will go back to the way it was

Nothing will look the same as it was

Only the deep emptiness of loss will be the same

Only the barriers to freedom will be recognizable

And made Stronger

How can I help explain one day to our daughter's twin girls how it is that we take the lives of one another

And never give them back

It's 5 a.m. here in California on October 15th 2023 and I can see Death pacing in our garden

His spirit outlined by the darkest of dead stars

He is looking east

waiting impatiently for the first screams to reach his purpose

He looks up at me standing at the kitchen window

I am still trying to see into his impenetrable rapacious desire

He is soon to leave and stay Always clutching his blood-soaked list of the innocents

Always asking me to choose the first of many for him

By simply turning my back on what I can plainly see War News (October 16th 2023)

Is this enough death and misery

Will it be enough tomorrow

or the day after

Tell us what metrics are being used

Are they adding in pain and anguish

subtracting the last shreds of freedom

Or the number of people killed in a single family

Must the multiplier of revenge be added

into each answer

And who is searching the bodies of children for a pencil and a crumpled sheet or shroud of lined paper from school on which to add things up for another generation

So much of what I write is from an almost lost moment just before forgetting

Except for the Palestinian voices that I hear and read that keep crying out that there is nowhere to go that is safe for them

Those pursuing desperate words reach me in an unending terrifying present tense of death that consumes my poems even as I write them

Those who are doing the killing always want to kill a few more

Those living at the edge of the abyss still have to be forced to jump War News (October 20th 2023)

We passed a playground full of children at play

their voices rising and falling like small quick seasons

We could not make out a single word as children ran and climbed laughed and whispered together

But hearing their rambunctious voices was a nurturing gift in itself

And today reading the ongoing news of this war I think about the violently silenced lives of so many children and the joyous voices that will never be heard again

I press down on the words in my small poems forcing them to be still to listen to the sound of a heart weeping

so close so very far away

In the midst of all the killing God has become the first stranger that we encounter in the morning and the last survivor that we bid farewell to each night

I read this war like a a novel of tragedy

and try to live in the last page first

wanting to know how things turn out on paper

well before anyone else is written into death War News (October 18th 2023)

On this present leaden day there are so many destroyed bodies that there is little room for words

One can only privately very softly sing a dirge in the street

or fill an entire sky with our collective lament

A child's shrouded name as a lyric

repeated thousands upon thousands of times

I thought
I could
contain
the war
in a jar
of words
and keep it
in our pantry
in the quiet
darkness
next to the
sour cherry
preserves that
I love so
much

I thought to keep the war's painful knowledge sealed in that jar away from my family

But each morning as I cut a slice of rye bread and reach for the preserves I notice that the jar has filled with blood again and that the letters

pressed against the weeping glass continue to spell my name

Once more I awake In the frenzied silence of the early morning

In my kitchen
I listen to the
radio accounts
of those who were
alive yesterday
at this very
same hour

And outside my front door along the length of my street

I hear the soft steady hooves of the dark horses of death carrying the souls of sleeping children away from their graves

These days I have no direct contact with myself and use my poems as an intermediary

I know that the heavy sorrow in this war is weighing down my poems

And that soon my body will refuse to carry any of my words and offer only to bring me the worn cloth of a prayer that is used to wash the dead with

She brought news written on her wings of distant wars in Heaven and asked us how to weep and how she might pray herself to sleep

War News (for Marwan Makhoul)

I wanted to fashion amulets of protection made from my poems and send them to you and your family in the song of a house sparrow

But there was no house left standing on your street

only rubble and bodies wrapped in their shrouds of memory And the sparrow was killed as it began to sing

Who will identify the living after the dead give up on us in disgust

Who will arrange the family members for the photograph when there are no family members left

And for how long can anyone live within the violence of today

as it consumes tomorrow

Let us wear the shoes of the innocent dead and walk into their names and violently ended lives

Let us
walk
under
their
breathless
sky and
demand
once again
that they
forgive us

The sun has ripped up its own light over Gaza

Only the scarred moon

which has always refused to hide its wounds

watches

1. Bring me some words to bury in our garden

Bring me a bone whistle to play in our hallway

2. When death releases a child from under the rubble of a home

And allows her to be pulled back into life

I am stunned with the terror of hope

War News (for f.r.)

I look for the smallest most determined fish that swim from our shore and wonder what messages of peace they might carry for you

Unless they are caught with so many others in another tangled net of empty words

and die gasping for truth

I am
fastened
to the
muteness
of writing
poems
in an
expanding
darkness
that holds
the
accumulation
of all
murdered
light

And at the bottom of this infinite grave of witness

I place my name and weep

I can only save a quarter of the clouded moon's light in this poem

But it will be safe with me

Until you need it in one of your own poems

that they have stolen the very same light from

Every word in this poem wants to leave this poem

Every word belongs to someone else far away in pain

But the word for grief stays here alone and then leaves only to come back again

Because it knows me and surely you as well

I stare harder each night at the stars we share

looking for

the few that might still be unbloodied in your sky

What we try to say we hear our friend say in the street

She says

I will not surrender the love I carry to anyone's violence

I use one thought to describe another and consider that the door to this room could be unhinged to carry my body

Along with the body of the one that in the end I could not protect

There are roads that will bring you from one area of death to another unspecified area of death

There are streets that no longer exist that will guide you

Here is the bombed collapsed house where your mother was killed

This is where your Homeland is denied its existence every day

This is where the body of your child is still buried under the rubble

You know these ghost streets and their dreams by heart And even in this raw moment of collective grief

You try to move Heaven itself to one side to find the body of your child

You turn left instead of right

You walk to the window instead of the door

You read a poem instead of crying

And death is confused by your choices and luck

and allows you a moment to recall her favorite song of lost love

which ends up as a prayer that you sing over her body

Is it better to be killed in warm weather or cold

Is it better to die sitting or standing

Is it better to die alone or with your loved ones

Does it remain troublingly easier to read the murderous news than to live in it

What ruined body can you identify as they are pulled out from under the killing

What can you make sense of when you can't see her shy smile

Watching the wind in the trees

I recall
the BBC
video
report
from
Gaza
that
showed
assessments
being made
on the
hospital
hallway
floor

these were wounded people who had just been brought in

Which ones were beyond saving and which still had a chance at life beyond this murdered day

One woman knelt next to a woman that the

doctor was leaning over

He seemed to be searching the stillness of the wounded woman's face but then he turned away to study the face of the next person

Who was that kneeling woman who watched silent as a stone

I could not bear her approaching grief

Is everyone dying again under a sky that has been repeatedly torn apart

Here in California I watched the wind as it struggled with the trees I could not move my body in any direction

There is no balance between life and death

The camera turned away but I wanted her to open her eyes and share a breath with the woman who will not leave her side

I will hear the wind and see the two of them as one with the standing trees forever

These dead don't want their bodies written upon by politicians

or sewn into flags of war that fly over endless cemeteries

Their names are martyrs in any prayer in any language

These dead don't want our memory of them loaded into more violence to kill yet another child whose life defines someone's joy

I think myself awake each morning but the soft light that settles on me is filled with the chaos of what is killing you

I am not you but am instead the printed memory of myself thinking of you

I wish these terrible days would only reside in a poem that one might read or even destroy before it is written in this adjacent darkness

1. What dream of being in your kitchen with the kettle whistling

with the kettle whistling were you awakened from to be in this open nightmare

2. In my own awakened dream I am not surprised to see that blood has appeared in the soil of our garden

I ask God to grant mercy to the Angels who must witness all of this killing

Mercy without words for those who still yearn to praise Heaven while enfolding

in their white but bloodied wings

those children who have suffered so much

I don't want to be alone in this poem
I want you next to me even after the words end

We all have a poem written under our wings

I know you want to fly above the crushing noise of killing and carry your loved ones with you

I will wait here beside your shadow my poet friend until death finally lowers its voice and goes away

I struggle each day with the Angel of Silence who wants to cover my body like steadily falling snow

But I do not want that soft blanket of childlike sleeping in the morning quiet

while you have none for yourself without first dying

We slow the hours in our poems

we imagine the killing ending

As best we can with words

But even so on some of the cruelest days we feel like foolish liars

who are unable to see our own lives between the pages

I want to climb the ridge line here in my California with you

and call along the rutted road of war for the dogs of peace to come to our side

I want to walk
with you and
these quiet
wisdom dogs
to where
we might still hear
children at play
below the
lifting limbs
of these
fire scarred
memories of
sheltering trees

1. The hospital corridors are filled with those who need to know if they are dead

2. The bitter kiss finds your lips as you leave the photograph of your father's father

3. No one here is allowed to remember anymore

Death above you

Death in front of you

Death behind you

Death to the east of you

Death to the north of you

Death to the south of you

And to the west beyond your shore is the body politic of my country

floating face down

waiting waiting

on every drowning abandoned road to peace

What can the wind see when it climbs to the tops of the trees

Maybe the body of a child held aloft by her father

Maybe killing next to killing

Maybe the startling sweet call of a living sparrow

I try to extend the familiar by writing of an apple which could be on our kitchen counter or on a kitchen counter in Gaza

If there still is a kitchen not yet destroyed along with the woman who would have cut the apple into slices and made tea out of kindness to my age and a certain poem that she read about apples so very long ago before the war

I searched for something in our home that could hold a small part of our sorrow in these days that curse the outcome of my poems

I found only a twisted piece of volcanic fired deep brown granite with white striations from the shore of Tomales Bay here in California

Formed how many millions of lifetimes ago it fit into my loose grasp so easily as memory

But then I noticed that if it was held tighter and its edges angled toward harm it became a weapon that sought anyone's desire

The light arrives on the page of this poem and I read the words aloud to you but not in their written order

I want to change the intention of killing

I want some way to bring the random text of days back to before it started to hurt so much

and keep it there

I want the word ceasefire to see why we write it

Tonight we will set the garden on fire trying to distract ourselves again

This morning my words look like small knots of children on some playground waiting to go back into a classroom that no longer exists

In a life that no longer exists

We are the thief of our own chaos and trade each morning with the nearest war for another memory

Why would anyone be in a hospital or find shelter there

unless they were a terrorist

Why would anyone dig through the rubble of their home

unless they were a terrorist

Why would anyone be directionless on a one way road

unless they were a terrorist

Why would anyone want to identify the bodies of their small children

unless they were terrorists

There is no distance that does not hold a body of witness

I write of the weight of grief that holds one down for the length of each breath

it is winter in my words and I pull them up like a collar and try to make my way home past your sorrow

I look for the soft hills that pull my dreaming closer

But all I see are the barren winter orchards that stretch into the days ahead

We have had our first winter rain and when I turned on the BBC news I saw that it was raining in Gaza

I felt even more helpless in this small detail of commonality

I stood on the sidewalk near our front door letting the rain pummel my body

and later searched in my words for the faintest echo of your falling sky

Who deserves to be lied to first

Is it the living or always the dead

Death comes back each night to offer safe passage out of this madness but in the end takes only those who don't want to leave

The sounds of waking

The sound of water boiling for tea

The sounds of speech across the table

The sound of a page being turned

The sound of dishes being washed

The sounds of words rushing to a child's tongue

Now lost without memory

Now only a document of violence

To live with one foot in the grave is not living it is waiting

Over and over I watch a sparrow fall up into the sky

The Museum of Collective Punishment has installed on its walls a permanent exhibit of the names and handprints of more than 4,000 children using common red chalk found in any bombed-out elementary school

Death will not accept our poems as barter on your behalf So we are left trying to write of beauty in a way that will not offend you

The body of a forest is cut down and fashioned into products to be sold to us

During a temporary pause in the killing new trees will be planted again by the surviving children

I can only conclude that God is afraid of falling into a mass grave without our keening prayers and so stays away from these killing fields until there is a sufficient amount of adoration

We have no authority over the moon except in our poems but we know that its surface reflects our violent misery

Which is why I refuse to slow my words or cover my eyes under this blood-filled harvesting moon War News (for Heba Abu Nada)

I keep reading your beautiful poems each night in part because in them you are still alive on each closing page

You hold this momentary ceasefire as close as any still breathing child pulled from the rubble of this war

There are no days left to count without loss
There are only hours of despair that remain in each minute of the next absent future

The clouds are misshapen with our sorrows and darken as if holding rain instead of our tears

We search our nightmares for signs of life among those who are forced to carry their own graves from place to place

Now we only see our dreams clearly because once awake our lines of sight are blocked by even more bodies

Sometimes I am able to leave the words that hold me to the page

And then I feel truly free

But now in this time of killing I want to stay with my words and offer them to you as some kind of rough shelter over the last of your dreams

I am in my funeral suit and walk the farthest road singing a dirge for fallen sparrows that line the path along the lifting unbalanced sea

I look for you each day and sometimes find you on this page waiting for me in the last breath of your childhood

I will save the measure of light that I find in all your poems because one day you will need to have all of it back

I cannot stand the profound sadness of these trees that are weighted down with painful leaves and branches

In Gaza the sidewalk falls down behind you

In Gaza sadness has replaced breathing

I turn the corner on my street and glimpse the confusion of cars

my country is filled with the wreckage of our lives

And year by year our sadness grows heavier as we near home

The last breath of a child can silence everything except for the terrible sounds of more killing

I stand in our garden waiting for the small birds that have always carried my sorrow away

But they are now absent in their own sorrow for these same days that will not leave us

The child lay in her bed which was not there any longer and listened to her mother who was not there any longer

sing a lullaby

These violent days do not come alone with their killing and bloody mayhem

they come instead in the company of other almost forgotten days

maybe a birthday party with so much laughter

that someone fell out of their chair

and hurt themselves but kept on laughing

Now all the compass points in Gaza have blood on them

There must be a way to sleep and not rise up to a new grief

There must be a way of hearing the songs in our ancient bones without despair emptying our hands

There must be a way to live our lives in freedom that does not require the death of anyone's child

I wish that one day you and your family could live in a map of cities that are still standing

But on this day I wish that you and your family could be lucky

and find enough food and water

and sleep somewhere that does not call attention to your breathing War News (for Rafaat al-Areer)

I cannot translate your dying into any minute within which you are still alive in Gaza

All I can do

is

write

this

narrow

poem

and

use

it as

a kite's

tail

to steady

your

journey

towards

another

page

filled

with

beautiful

cloth

squares

of sky

There are still patches of ground where no one has been killed

live there until you are told to move

There are still patches of ground where no one has been buried

dig a grave there and climb into it

Poet's Note

Writing poetry is the means by which I think through both personal and global events. I began writing these poems on October 8, 2023 with the onset of the violence in Gaza and I have written one, sometimes two, each day of this ongoing war. They are, to me, markers of witness, and each one holds my thinking and somatic reaction to this monstrously evil war.

It is also my wish to jolt readers with these poems, to remind them, as well as myself, that we cannot turn away. That our humanity, our collective morality, requires that we bear witness and then take some kind of action. Each morning, when I have no words left to address what is going on, I begin to write. In the end, these poems may be both useless and necessary.

Beau Beausoleil is a poet and activist based in San Francisco, California. His two most recent chapbooks are: The Killing of George Floyd (Intermittent Press, 2023) and Poems for Ukraine (Barley Books, UK, 2023). He is the founder of Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here, a global arts response to the car-bombing of Al-Mutanabbi Street (the street of the booksellers) in Baghdad, Iraq in 2007. It is a project of witness, memory and solidarity with the Iraqi people by poets, artists, and writers.



UNSETTLING KNOWLEDGES