

VOICES IN WARTIME

Voices in Wartime Anthology  
Edited by Andrew Himes with  
Jan Bultmann and others  
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# VOICES WARTIME

A N T H O L O G Y



A Collection of Narratives and Poems

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with Jan Bultmann and others

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— Andrew Himes

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |                         |     |
|--|-------------------------|-----|
| <b>Introduction</b>                                | Andrew Himes            | 10  |
| <i>Part 1:</i>                                     |                         |     |
| <b>PERSPECTIVES</b>                                |                         | 13  |
| <i>A Prayer for Relief</i>                         | José Diaz               | 15  |
| <i>The Collective Madness</i>                      | Chris Hedges            | 17  |
| <i>Dulce et Decorum Est</i>                        | Wilfred Owen            | 35  |
| <i>A Soldier's Story</i>                           | David Connolly          | 37  |
| <i>War—The Concise Version</i>                     | Rachel Bentham          | 48  |
| <i>The Honey Comes from Within</i>                 | Nguyen Duy              | 49  |
| <i>The Trauma of War</i>                           | Jonathan Shay           | 51  |
| <i>The Order of War</i>                            | John Akins              | 61  |
| <i>Part 2:</i>                                     |                         |     |
| <b>VOICES</b>                                      |                         | 65  |
| <i>I Trace Your Name across the Sky</i>            | Emily Warn              | 67  |
| <i>Come Back Momentary Father</i>                  | Emily Warn              | 73  |
| <i>War Poetry and West Point</i>                   | Lt. Gen. William Lennox | 75  |
| <i>Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night</i> | Walt Whitman            | 78  |
| <i>I to My Pledged Word Am True</i>                | Paul Mysliwicz          | 80  |
| <i>I Have a Rendezvous with Death</i>              | Alan Seeger             | 97  |
| <i>Combat Is a One-way Door</i>                    | Craig White             | 99  |
| <i>Rockets Destroying a Happy Family</i>           | Ali Habash              | 122 |
| <i>Everything That Was Beautiful Is Gone</i>       | Sinan Antoon            | 123 |
| <i>Wrinkles on the Wind's Forehead</i>             | Sinan Antoon            | 134 |
| <i>Growing Up in the Shadow of Guns</i>            | Chris Abani             | 138 |
| <i>Stabat Mater</i>                                | Chris Abani             | 149 |

|   |                    |     |
|---|--------------------|-----|
| <b><i>He Went Out One Day,<br/>and Never Came Back</i></b>        | Antonieta Villamil | 150 |
| <b><i>Letter to the Brother<br/>That Went to War</i></b>          | Antonieta Villamil | 158 |
| <i>Part 3:</i>  |                    |     |
| <b>LOOKING BACK</b>   |                    | 161 |
| <b><i>Why Art, Why Now?</i></b>                                   | Alix Wilber        | 163 |
| <b><i>Strange Meeting</i></b>                                     | Wilfred Owen       | 167 |
| <b><i>Thirty Days on the Front Line:<br/>Sassoon and Owen</i></b> | Dominic Hibberd    | 169 |
| <b><i>A History of Poetry and War</i></b>                         | Jon Stallworthy    | 180 |
| <b><i>Drummer Hodge</i></b>                                       | Thomas Hardy       | 190 |
| <b><i>Toward a Future Without War</i></b>                         | Jonathan Schell    | 191 |
| <i>Part 4:</i>  |                    |     |
| <b>BEYOND WARTIME</b>   |                    | 199 |
| <b><i>Let's Get It Right This Time</i></b>                        | John Henry Parker  | 201 |
| <b><i>The Need for Hope:<br/>Civilian Casualties of War</i></b>   | Dr. Enas Mohamed   | 207 |
| <b><i>The Nuts &amp; Bolts of PTSD:<br/>An Insider's View</i></b> | Sheila Sebron      | 214 |
| <b><i>Opening of the Heart</i></b>                                | Beverly Boos       | 219 |
| <b><i>Hell-fire and Transcendence</i></b>                         | Andrew Himes       | 223 |
| <b><i>If You Are Lucky in This Life</i></b>                       | Cameron Penny      | 227 |
| <b><i>This is a Language Made for Blood</i></b>                   | Brian Turner       | 228 |
| <b>Index</b>  |                    | 236 |
| <b>Permissions</b>  |                    | 240 |
| <b>Appendix: The Voices in Wartime Network</b>                    |                    | 242 |

## INTRODUCTION

—**Andrew Himes**

From my childhood I lived in the middle of the idea of war, trapped between the World War II memories of my parents and my own terror of the imminence of World War III. I was born just before the outbreak of the Korean War and came to young adulthood as the Vietnam War spiraled toward its senseless and incomprehensibly bloody conclusion.

As a boy in Tennessee, I fought imaginary battles against my brother Johnny's own imaginary army, from foxhole to foxhole through a field of Johnson grass, with plastic rifles and cherry bombs as weapons. My favorite weekly television program in the early '60s was *Combat*, in which Vic Morrow led a squad of exhausted, heroic, unshaven, hardened yet tender, fierce and frightened, and above all very human American soldiers through the French countryside in search of the German army in the aftermath of the Normandy landing. A decade later, my favorite program was *M.A.S.H.*, in which a bitterly funny Army surgeon patches up the wounded while railing against the ironies and stupidities of the Korean War.

Between *Combat* and *M.A.S.H.*, I grew up on the nightly bad news from Vietnam—Walter Cronkite reporting via *CBS News* on another village destroyed with its inhabitants in a B-52 strike, or another platoon of U.S. soldiers decimated by an enemy ambush, or another 39 or 412 or 16 bodies of “communist sympathizers” tallied as part of an ever expanding kill count, or another grenade tossed into a Saigon nightclub by a Viet Cong guerrilla.

I'm not a pacifist. That is, I've always been able to imagine how the use of military force might be required to prevent or mitigate crimes against humanity—to interdict Hitler's holocaust of the Jews, or stop the mass murder in Rwanda, or prevent the destruction of a skyscraper by a madman in an airliner. But I've also believed that most wars are preventable—caused by human error or avariciousness, ambition or cupidity, or by human pathology, or by plain evil. And I've believed it's possible to minimize wars by addressing the root causes of war—by alleviating poverty, suffering and resentment, and

by building more equitable and sustainable societies.

We can only decide wisely whether or not to go to war only if we truly understand the human cost and experience of war, the emotional reality of war. My decision, as the invasion of Iraq rolled toward Baghdad in 2003, was to make a film, *Voices in Wartime*, which would use the words and stories of poets and other writers who have been through war's crucible to explore that reality. I hoped that if all of us truly understood the trauma of war we might choose differently the next time we confront our options. But the film is a meditation on war, a reflection on war's cost and lasting trauma—not a statement of opposition to any particular policy or political decision of my government. It is an attempt to get at the heart of war itself.

We've inherited a world whose history reeks of blood and mayhem, suffused by the odors and emotions of war. We live in a world riven by violent conflict and its echoes, rumblings, sorrows, threats, and unforeseen consequences. We face a future, inevitably, in which war will be an engine of human politics, history, and possibility.

The central lesson I learned through the production of the film *Voices in Wartime* was that one fundamental reason for the persistence of war as a human activity is the trauma suffered by both individuals and societies through acts of collective violence. So a simple answer is that war itself helps to create the conditions that nurture successive wars. In the end, we will move beyond war only when we learn how to heal that trauma, and then how to imagine alternatives to war.

In this book, through the eyes of poets, war correspondents, doctors, soldiers, and historians, we examine the phenomenon of war. Fear and sorrow, the terrible suffering and distortions of character that emerge from the experience of war, the lasting trauma and the need for healing—all these are explored in the narratives that follow, based on interviews conducted for the film *Voices in Wartime*.

It becomes clear from reading these narratives and poems that the most powerful expositor of war is someone who has seen war firsthand and whose authentic voice can best tell the story. For a warrior, the act of writing about the trauma of war is an attempt to transmute the pain into something else: not relief, necessarily, or transcendence, and certainly not glory, but maybe a kind of understanding, especially if there is someone else who can hear the

story with compassion and acceptance. This may be so because witnessing war's suffering creates the need to speak about what one has seen, while it may also prevent the witness from speaking.

Many combat veterans have taken part in or observed deeds that have silenced them—deeds too shameful or impossible or morally ambiguous to explain to others, civilians, who have not shared the experience of the warrior. As Jonathan Shay (a psychiatrist and writer featured in the film *Voices in Wartime*) explains, for a combat veteran who feels compelled to remain mute, the price might be a continuing rage—for years or a lifetime—a sundering or crippling of relationships, a diminished capacity to love and accept love. So war exacts a toll from its participants that is deeper and more lasting than any physical injury.

Poetry itself may be the tool of alchemy best able to contain the contradiction of the experience of war—the terrible beauty, the pity, the heightened struggle between life and death. Vietnamese soldier-poet Nguyen Duy expressed this contradiction well in this line: “The maddening agony, the honey comes from within.”

Somewhere in the dark, nestled between the story and the silence, is the beginning of our healing.

— Andrew Himes