

we dig
small men's bones
in a small hole
a soup of khaki straps and steel buckles
stirred and sifted
for intelligence
1967 U.S. Army battles citizens in Detroit killing 43
1968 21,000 U.S. troops on streets in American cities after M. L. King assassinated
1969 U.S. Army and Navy attack North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in Cambodia

a bullet manages to live
without a mind of its own
slowed to sixteen frames per second
it barely precedes the out-flowering
crimson and grey
from the back of the skull

dead is still dead
despite the noise of martial music and honor
dead don't awaken
the bullet acts like it doesn't care

1970 U.S. troops invade Cambodia
1971 U.S. Air Force 'carpet-bombs' Laos while directing South Vietnamese invasion
1972 U.S. Army works with FBI in siege of Lakotas at Wounded Knee, South Dakota
1973 World-wide military alert nuclear threat during Mideast War
1974 U.S. command operation which kills elected Marxist president in Chile
the people are dumb — mute
they have no voice
that I can hear
except the faint responsorial
of what they've been told to say
and think
1975 U.S. bombs Cambodia during attempt to free captured ship *Mayaguez*
1976 U.S. command assists South African rebels in Angola
1978 U.S. Air Force provides logistical support to French in Zaire
1980 U.S. troops in aborted bombing raid/rescue Iran Embassy hostages (nuclear threat USSR)
1981 U.S. Navy shoots down 2 Libyan jets during maneuvers
1981 U.S. troop advisers and over-flights aid anti-rebel war in El Salvador
1982 U.S. Navy mines harbor in Nicaragua as part of support of Contras
*We have never interfered in the internal government of a country
and have no intention of doing so, never had any thought of that kind
~Ronald Reagan 09/28/1982*

ELIZABETH BARLOW

They've shut the doors, the engines are running
We're waiting for clearance

on a runway,
in the desert,
in the morning

Sweat pours off us, my black shirt will later be white
All salt crystals

It's hard to see
It's hard to breathe
But I'm smiling

It smells, boy, does it smell
Dirt, dried blood, sweat,
And toxic socks that haven't been changed in days
But I'm smiling

I tell them to hold onto their scratchy, OD green, wool blankets
Soon we'll all be cold
It always gets cold at altitude

I try to move the stagnant air with brightly colored cardboard fans
decorated with love
by children from home

It's so hot in here
I'm so tired
But, I'm smiling

Because they need me to.

both his arms are gone
I can't remember if he was another RPG or the helicopter crash
the one I'd heard about just earlier today
on CNN
he's really already dead
but not for his family
they're waiting 18 more hours
while his body travels home
while we breathe for him
while his young, strong heart
pushes blood to a brain already gone
while we look at his face
and wonder what he was like
knowing this is his last trip
anywhere

IS THAT REALLY WHAT I THINK IT IS?

RECTANGULAR SILVER BOX ON THE LOADING DOCK
DEFINITELY OUT OF PLACE
AMONG THE PALLETS OF EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES

IT SHINES IN THE SUN

I WONDER IF IT'S EMPTY
I HOPE IT'S EMPTY
COULD IT NOT BE EMPTY?

THE K-LOADER COMES AND THE BOX IS GENTLY SHIFTED ONTO IT
IT'S CARRIED TO OUR PLANE
HEADED FOR THE STATES
IT'S ROLLED ABOARD AND SECURED TO THE FLOOR
IT'S LABELED "HR"

IT'S NOT EMPTY

*Elizabeth Barlow served as a U.S. Air Force nurse in 2003 and
air-transported wounded Americans from Iraq and Afghanistan
to hospitals in Germany twice weekly. She recently moved to
Virginia from Astoria.*

1982 U.S. Marines expel PLO from Lebanon while U.S. Navy bombs Syrian positions
can a dumb people
create a smart bomb
can a smart bomb
distinguish
between
the 4 month old baby
and the
40 year old general
1983 U.S. military maneuvers used to build bases on border between Honduras and Nicaragua
1983 U.S. bombs and invades Grenada four years after their revolution
1984 U.S. military shoot down 2 Iranian jets over Persian Gulf
1985 U.S. Navy jet forces Egyptian commercial airliner to land in Sicily

does the bomb
value one
less than the other

1985 U.S. Army assists in raids on cocaine region Bolivia
1986 U.S. Navy bombs Libya killing Col. Khaddafi's daughter
1987-88 U.S. Navy bombs Iran on side of Iraq in their war
blue gulf
grey sand
black oil
White House
green money
brown skin
red blood

1988 U.S. Navy shoots down 2 Libyan jets
1988 U.S. troops invade Panama killing 2,000 while arresting Pres. Noriega
1989 U.S. troops used to put down Black unrest after hurricane Virgin Islands, St. Croix
1989 U.S. jets provided air cover for Marcos government against non-violent coup in Philippines
1990 U.S. troops used to evacuate foreigners from civil war in Liberia
1990-91 Gulf War: U.S. still has bases in Saudi Arabia
out here in the desert
golden hot sun
grey sand
made holy
by the footsteps of
the Prophet
from Medina to Mecca
out here in the desert
infidels from the West
foul the air
and land
for the faithful
out here in the desert

1991-2001 U.S. bombs Iraq hundreds of times killing many civilians maintaining no-fly zones
1990 U.S. Army and Marines deployed in Los Angeles during anti-police uprising
1992-94 U.S. Army and Navy bomb and raid in Somalia during U.S.-led UN occupation
1992-94 U.S. Navy and NATO blockade of Serbia and Montenegro
1993-95 U.S. jets bomb Serbs in Bosnia

I will teach you how
to perform a war
a clean operation
to remove that alien tissue
which can no longer be controlled
we first name it cancer
we curse it for a bastard
nothing legitimate to be found
the pathologic question
must be asked and answered
will a pound of flesh be enough
shared definitions in hand
we sharpen our knives
sanitary
chrome and steel
bright lights
remove any shadow
of doubts

patriotic anesthesia dulls the senses
common and other
of the loud cutting
ripping and
bleeding to come
once hidden viscera
bloody red
broken bone white
and hypoxic blue
stare out at us
unexpected collateral damage
can be dressed
with sterile white gauze
although the bloated smell
sometimes remains
afterwards
we will remove our gloves and
wash our hands

1994-96 U.S. Army and Navy blockade of Haiti
1995 U.S. jets bombed Serb airfields in Croatia
1996-97 U.S. Marines at Rwandan Hutu refugee camp Zaire
1997 U.S. troops evacuate foreigners from Liberia
1998 U.S. troops evacuate foreigners from Albania
1998 U.S. missiles attack pharmaceutical plant Sudan
1999 U.S. missiles attack former CIA training camps in Afghanistan

*I think that the targeting of innocent civilians is the worst thing
about modern conflicts today. And to the extent which more and more
people seem to believe it is legitimate to target innocent civilians to reach
their larger political goals, I think that's something to be resisted at every turn.
~Pres. Bill Clinton, 03/7/2000*

2001 U.S. forces attack Afghanistan in response to terrorist attack

I heard on NPR
someone said we're at war
yeah that's terror
here in North America
now we get a taste of it
we get to see the other side
now our children die
now we see there are no accidents
only consequences
we gag on the dust and rubble and fumes
in New York
in Washington
in Pennsylvania
in Kabul
in Baghdad
now we gag on the truth

*(Historical data gathered from several sources including Zoltan Grossman, the Library of
Congress and U.S. Navy military history website. I tried to find secondary sources to assure
historical accuracy, but this is a poem not a history book. Errors are mine.)*

Larry Kershner is a Vietnam veteran and a member of Veterans for Peace. This poem was
originally published as a chapbook by D Press 2001, Sebastopol, California.

