I Brought the War with Me

STORIES AND POEMS FROM THE FRONT LINE

'Remarkable: combines her exceptional experience as a war correspondent with selected poetry in an act of witness'
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LINDSEY HILSUM

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Stories and Poems from the Front Line

LINDSEY HILSUM

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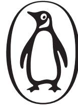

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I brought the war with me
unknowingly, perhaps on my skin, plumes
of it in my hair, under my nails.

Warsan Shire, War Poem

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For T. L.

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Foreword

In September 2022, a few days after Russian forces retreated from the Ukrainian town of Izium, I was standing outside an apartment block that had been split apart by a missile. Fifty-four residents had been killed in the Russian attack, which had taken place six months earlier. Purple and yellow wild flowers were growing in the rubble that filled the chasm between the two parts of the block.

'It is not the houses. It is the space between the houses,' I thought. 'It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist.' The words of James Fenton's 1981 poem 'A German Requiem', about selective memory in the Second World War, came to me when I could no longer find my own.

Back at my hotel in Kharkiv, I looked it up.

It is not your memories which haunt you.
It is not what you have written down.
It is what you have forgotten, what you must forget.
What you must go on forgetting all your life.

The idea that the spaces between the houses symbolised gaps in memory, and that forgetting might be essential if people were to live together in peace, encapsulated the future facing the Ukrainians I had met that day. After the attack on the apartment block, the Russians had driven out the Ukrainian army, and Izium endured six terrible, violent months of Russian occupation. A young couple told me that now the Ukrainian authorities were

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back, they planned to denounce their neighbours for collaboration with the occupiers. I couldn't know if the neighbours really had collaborated with the Russians, or just done what they deemed necessary to survive. Either way, war had brought bitterness and enmity in its wake. Just like those in Fenton's poem, from now on people's lives in Izium would be polluted by suspicion, by the mistrustful look and the whispered word behind the hand.

It is not what he wants to know.
It is what he wants not to know.
It is not what they say.
It is what they do not say.

My TV news report reflected some of this, but it did not have the allusive power of the poem.

In my nearly four decades as a foreign correspondent, I have always carried a book of poetry with me. While the images we show have great impact, I feel that journalistic language sometimes fails to convey the intensity of the experience. Maybe James Fenton's poetry resonates with me because he was a war correspondent as well as a poet – he sees what I see but has found a more compelling way of expressing it, as if he is working in three dimensions while I am stuck in two. We journalists pride ourselves on the clarity of our prose and on making complex stories simple. That's our job – to explain why terrible things are happening and to challenge the euphemisms used by politicians and military spokespeople. We also try to convey the thoughts and feelings of the people we meet, and a sense of what it feels like to be on the ground. Yet we may lose the deeper meaning, the universal import of what we have witnessed or the contradictory emotions that war engenders.

Sometimes poetry can serve as a vaccination against despair. On 7th October 2023, militants from the Palestinian group Hamas

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breached the high-tech fence separating Gaza from Israel and went on a rampage of killing, rape and abduction. It was the single worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. Israel proceeded to bomb Gaza relentlessly, destroying homes, killing tens of thousands of civilians and depriving all Gazans of food, water and other basic necessities. The Israel Defense Forces invaded in tanks and armoured vehicles, fighting Hamas which operated out of tunnels. The Israeli government told Gazans to flee to the south of the strip which would be safe. It wasn't – people were killed when bombs hit their tented camps. Many families were forced to flee multiple times – nowhere was safe. Even the dead could not rest in peace, as tanks ploughed up graveyards. Day after day Gazan journalists filmed terrible scenes of injured children, whimpering in overcrowded hospital corridors, sometimes unaware that their parents had been killed. Whatever and however we reported, journalists came under heavy criticism, accused of bias towards one side or the other, depending on the political orientation of the accuser. Stoked by social media, antisemitism and islamophobia surged across the world; everybody, it seemed, wanted to pick a side and deny the humanity of the other, to demand a monopoly on suffering. Slogans and propaganda are an anathema to good journalism as they are to good poetry.

I turned to the most famous Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, whose work expresses the anger and yearning of those living under occupation and bombardment, who gain strength from their ancestors' long history. 'I have lived on the land long before swords turned man into prey,' he wrote in his poem 'I Belong There'. Then I sought out his Israeli counterpart, Yehuda Amichai, who understood that self-righteous fury rarely leads to peace.

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

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The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

Poets don't have the answers. But they may help us understand our own actions and reactions and find a way through the darkness.

The lives of those who have had war visited upon them, including children, conscripts and civilians, are desperate and miserable, as the stories in this book make clear. But those who have chosen to visit war – aid workers, journalists, military volunteers – share a secret. War gives your life purpose and meaning. Suddenly you believe you know what matters and what can be dismissed as unimportant. The colours are brighter and the mountains clearer. You live in the moment. There's a wonderful camaraderie with others going through the same experience, and surviving a near miss gives you a heady rush of adrenaline. Shared fear turns to laughter, which no one outside the group can understand. When you go home, or the war ends, you have to return to the humdrum reality of paying the bills and arguing about who takes out the rubbish. Even those who protest against war far from the front line may get caught up in the thrill of the cause and miss that feeling of urgency when it falls away.

As a servant suggests in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, not everyone hates war:

> *Let me have a war, say I; it exceeds peace as far as day does night; it's spritely, waking, audible, and full of vent. Peace is a very apoplexy, lethargy; mull'd, deaf, sleepy, insensible; a getter of more bastard children than war is a destroyer of men.*
> (*Coriolanus*, Act IV, Scene V)

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I came to war reporting reluctantly, having started my career in the late 1970s as a volunteer aid worker in Central America. If I'm honest, I didn't really know that war was brewing across the region – my concern was social justice, and, at twenty years old, I just wanted to have an adventure and change the world. (I succeeded in the former but not – needless to say – in the latter.) In 1982, I moved to Kenya to work for the UN International Children's Emergency Fund, UNICEF. A few years later, when I realised that – having no expertise in anything practical such as public health or agriculture – I was not much use as an aid worker, I pivoted to journalism, which required only the few skills I had, namely the ability to read, write and ask questions. Remaining in Nairobi, I managed to get freelance work for the BBC and the *Guardian*. Still, I tried to avoid war, thinking, somewhat piously, that I should be covering poverty and development. Reality overcame the illusions I harboured. Nearly every country neighbouring Kenya – Uganda, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia – was going through civil war. I couldn't avoid it. And I found that while reporting on people in warzones was at times upsetting and occasionally terrifying, it was also rewarding and exciting. I felt that I was living through history as it happened. Later, I was lucky enough to get a job with Channel 4 News, based in London, and while I have never been exclusively a war correspondent, I have spent a lot of my career reporting conflict.

Covering war can be addictive; a colleague who has since weaned himself off it titled his memoir *War Junkie*. My friend Marie Colvin, the *Sunday Times* correspondent who was killed in Syria in 2012, was another addict. After she was shot crossing a front line in Sri Lanka and lost her sight in one eye, she was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She received psychiatric treatment, recovered and promptly went back to war. 'Anyway,' she shrugged, 'it's what we do.' In recent years there's been more acknowledgement that PTSD is an occupational

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hazard for journalists who cover war, especially for prolonged periods. At first the research concentrated on western journalists, but now it's recognised that those who report their own country descending into conflict may be more vulnerable, not least because they have family responsibilities and can't just leave if it gets too dangerous.

Despite all this, many journalists are resilient, and – at least for now – I would count myself as fortunate in this regard. Witnessing the suffering of others, surviving danger and experiencing grief are all profound experiences, to which nightmares, anger, tears and bouts of despondency are all normal, human responses. They are not necessarily signs of a clinical condition. Pain and trauma are not the same. In February 1994, during a hiatus in my journalistic career, I went to work for UNICEF again, this time in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. It was a time of foreboding and sporadic violence but I had no concept of what was to come: you can't prepare for the unimaginable. Two months to the day after I had arrived, a plane carrying the presidents of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi was shot out of the sky. Almost immediately, men with machetes and nail-studded clubs were out building roadblocks. It was the start of a genocide, in which some 800,000 ethnic Tutsis were slaughtered by their Hutu neighbours and Hutu militia. In those terrifying first few days I was the only foreign correspondent on the streets of Kigali. The terrible things I saw have stayed with me all my life. In the years that followed, I used to feel that I needed philosophical more than psychological help – after seeing what they are capable of, it is hard to believe that human beings are inherently good. As time went by, I found solace in poetry, which provided both a connection and a way of distancing myself from what I had witnessed. Connection because a poet might express similar emotions to my own, and distance because a poem could transform the singularity of my experience into something universal.

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The dominance of the Great War soldier-poets – Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg – in British culture and education may lead to the assumption that war poetry is a male preserve, and that western poets have a monopoly on the form. This is far from the case. The first known war poet was a Sumerian high priestess, Enheduana, who lived in Ur, in what is now southern Iraq, in about 2300 BCE. A new translation of her work has just been published. Contemporary poetry, much of it written by women, reflects the fact that modern conflicts tend to kill more civilians than soldiers. The late Irish musician Frank Harte said, 'Those in power write the history; those who suffer write the songs.' A lot of songs and poems have been written in recent years, including by children like thirteen-year-old Amineh Abou Kerech, whose family fled Syria and ended up in Oxford:

Can anyone teach me
how to make a homeland?
Heartfelt thanks if you can,
heartiest thanks,
from the house-sparrows,
the apple-trees of Syria,
and yours very sincerely.

Viewers who have watched the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine and the Middle East unfold on TV have told me they struggle to find the words to express their concern, fear and compassion. As conflicts proliferate, they feel as the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova did in 1919, contemplating the wreckage left by the Great War and the Russian Revolution:

Why is this century worse than those that have gone before?
In a stupor of sorrow and grief

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it located the blackest wound
but somehow couldn't heal it.

Already overwhelmed by despair, Akhmatova had yet to face the Second World War and Stalin's persecutions, both of which she survived. Her era was indeed amongst the worst in history. In the second part of the twentieth century, Western Europeans and North Americans grew to believe that peace and prosperity were normal, that war was something that happened to other people elsewhere in the world. Now, many feel a sense of dread. History puts our era in perspective, as well as serving as a warning. Poetry helps us see parallels with the past, and puts up a mirror to our fears.

Back in the 1860s, during the American Civil War, Emily Dickinson wrote that poets can tell the truth in a more subtle, and sometimes more effective, way:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies

My aim, then, is to marry reporting with poetry, the 'telling it straight' with the 'telling it slant'. This book comprises fifty stories from conflicts I have covered, each twinned with a poem that elucidates or contrasts with it. Sometimes, the poem comes from the same country as the conflict, but mostly I have looked for poems from elsewhere, to establish both the connection and the universality.

In assembling his perennially popular anthology *Other Men's Flowers,* Field Marshal Lord Wavell, who commanded British forces in the Middle East in the Second World War, used the criteria that he should know each poem by heart – all 256 of them. I cannot claim such feats of memory. I have selected some poems I have known and loved for years, and others that I have only

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recently discovered. Poetry, like most things, goes in fashions. Lord Wavell favoured iambic pentameter, strict rhyme and a patriotic spirit; I prefer free verse and a more ambiguous and reflective approach. Most of the poems I have chosen are modern, but I have included a few from before the twentieth century. I am drawn to what Wilfred Owen described as: 'The pity of war, the pity war distilled.' Readers will inevitably wish that I had included their favourites, but I have omitted some of my favourites too, because I limited myself to fifty, and I wanted to explore new poetry from the countries where I have travelled.

Inevitably, many of my stories are tragic, but I hope that a few reveal the surreal, absurd and occasionally heartwarming situations that war throws up amidst the fear and sorrow. There is not a lot about weaponry and tactics, and it's not an objective account of the conflicts of the last few decades, but I hope it gives some insight into the way war transforms the lives of those who find themselves caught up in it. Rather than following a chronology, or dividing the book up geographically, I have sorted the stories and poems by theme. Every conflict is different, but the experience of war is in some ways similar, whenever and wherever it happens.

Lindsey Hilsum,
London, June 2024

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FIGHTERS

How easy it is to make a ghost

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Despite artificial intelligence and autonomous military drones, war is often still fought as it was more than a century ago. The trenches of eastern Ukraine in the winter of 2022 would have been only too familiar to the poets of the First World War who saw combat in the Somme. Of course there are changes – advanced weapons systems, remote targeting, female soldiers – but nonetheless, war frequently comes down to young men risking death to kill other young men, just as it always has done. Some of the soldiers I have met were utterly convinced by the cause for which they risked their lives, while others were plagued by cynicism and doubt. Once you strip away the opposing religious or patriotic convictions, the similarities between enemies can be almost unbearable.

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Donbas, Ukraine

November 2022

Autumn was turning to winter in eastern Ukraine, and the trenches were sticky with mud. Water sloshed up to the ankles of our rubber boots as we made our way to the lookout point, where twenty-two-year-old Vadym was peering through binoculars.

'How far away is the enemy?' I asked.

'About five hundred metres,' he replied.

'That's not very far,' I said. The boom of outgoing fire reverberated from another part of the trench complex.

Vadym led me through the labyrinth and down some steps to the surprisingly cosy sleeping quarters that the soldiers had hollowed out. They'd even hung a piece of cloth as a privacy curtain between their bunks and rigged up a rough table for their few comforts: a Snickers bar, a small gas stove, a comb. Vadym's tabby kitten, Olenka, climbed onto his shoulder. She was his companion and his mascot, as well as a good mouser. (Trenches always attract rats and mice.) He had lived in the Netherlands before the war, he said, but had returned to fight the Russians after they invaded in February 2022. His girlfriend was living in the Czech Republic.

I was with a TV team. We made our way back along the trench, bent over so as not to expose ourselves, but the cracks and booms of outgoing fire were growing louder. Suddenly I heard a different and unmistakeable long whistle: a single incoming sniper shot. We slid down the mud sides low into the trench.

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