

War Stories, Mostly Not Mine

Kamila Shamsie

Kamila Shamsie was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival to write a series of shorts, responding to The Sensory War exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery, showing 11th October 2014 – 22nd February 2015. This major group exhibition, marking the Centenary of the First World War, explores how artists have communicated the impact of military conflict on the body, mind, environment and human senses between 1914 and 2014. The resulting pieces called War Stories, Mostly Not Mine, were performed by Kamila at a special event as part of Manchester Literature Festival at Manchester Art Gallery on Thursday 16th October 2014.

Manchester Literature Festival
The Department Store
5 Oak Street
Manchester
M4 5JD
www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

Copyright © Kamila Shamsie

Manchester Literature Festival would like to thank Manchester Art Gallery, Arts Council England, Manchester City Council and HSBC for their generous support.



Sponsored by



**Manchester
Art Gallery**



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**MANCHESTER
CITY COUNCIL**

War Stories, Mostly Not Mine.

I.

After *Banking at 4000 Feet*, 1917, CRW Nevison

I missed a war by two years. That's how I think of it, with a younger sister's way of thinking about the time her family existed without her. The war I missed, in 1971, was either a Civil War or Liberation War, depending on the angle at which you view it. Either way, it resulted in the creation of the state of Bangladesh and the end of the nation of East and West Pakistan, which for almost a quarter of a century existed as two wings divided by the vast, bristling body of India. In the days after India entered the war on the side of its Eastern neighbours, my home of Karachi became the set for aerial war. When I was growing up, I heard my friends' parents talk of sitting on their roofs of their houses, glasses of Scotch in hand, watching dog fights in the sky above. But my family's story of those days was this:

An Indian Airforce pilot was trying to outrun the Pakistani jet on his tail. To aid this effort he dropped the heavy bomb he was carrying as he flew over a residential part of the city.

My parents were asleep in bed when the bomb detonated in the empty plot behind their house and every window shattered. While my father looked for a light my mother ran down to the nook beneath the staircase which an airforce relative had identified as the safest place in the house for a child's crib. My sister, just a few weeks old, was lying beneath a blanket which now had laid on top of it another sheet, this one of powdered glass. When my father reached them both with a torch in hand he saw my sister's face was as unmarked as were my mother's feet which had run across a floor coated in glass to reach her.

Years later, another relative who also lived beside that empty plot of land told me, the heat from the bomb was so intense the blades of our ceiling fan turned up like a tulip.

The story of the bomb that fell behind my house before there was a me is part of family mythology. I placed a lightly adapted version of it in the first novel I published. But it was only when looking at a lithograph of flight with its sense of wonder, its innocence, that it occurred to me to imagine the Indian pilot. Did he deliberately choose an empty plot of land to try to avoid killing civilians? I choose to believe this. Did he wonder if he'd succeeded? Does he wonder still? I

want him to find my voice online telling him my life was possible because of his humanity amidst war.

II.

After *Archies*, 1916, Christopher Nevinson

One night in Jordan, I stood in a garden which sloped down into the valley beneath. The darkness was almost total until that point near the horizon where the earth seemed more star-filled than even the cloudless desert sky - light upon light upon light garlanding the earth.

That's so beautiful, I said.

Those are lights from Palestinian refugee camps, a friend responded.

I wanted it to stop being beautiful, but it wouldn't.

III.

After *Helicopter, Eagle (Magnet), Victim*, 1968, Nancy Spero

'The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wrist watches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together, these items weighed between fifteen and twenty pounds, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism. Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over poundcake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-size bars of soap he'd stolen on R&R in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid-April.'

Some of you may recognise that as the second paragraph of Tim O' Brien's short story 'The Things They Carried', which came out of O'Brien's experiences in Vietnam with the 46th Infantry Regiment. It's a fine story; a story I used repeatedly while in America as a teacher of creative writing to talk to my students about the power of lists. And then there came the term when one of my students came into my office before class to say he hadn't written the assigned response

to the story, because he hated it. The student - we'll call him John - was older than everyone else in the class, including me, by decades. I knew little about his life.

What did you hate about it? I asked, starting into a teacherly moment which would end with him understanding that hating something was no reason to fail to write a response to it.

He said, I hated that he got it all so right.

I looked at him standing in front of me, a man in his late 50's, almost exactly the same age as Tim O'Brien.

He said, it made me remember things I don't want to remember.

Later that day he came to class - though I said he didn't have to - and was completely silent when we discussed the story. The next day he was back in my office again.

He said, Tim O'Brien got everything right. But he forgot about the smells. He doesn't mention what the smells were over there. So I wrote it.

He handed me one of the most exceptional pieces of writing I've ever received from a student: a list of the smells of war in Vietnam.

IV.

After Bloated Bodies in the river over Yokogawa Bridge, 1973-4, Masahiko Nakata

Many years ago a journalist asked me, do you ever dream about your characters?

No, I replied, the question a surprise for the fact that it was one that had never occurred to me.

She laughed and said, I ask this of every writer I interview, and I've interviewed many. It's always the same answer.

I don't know why writers don't dream of the characters who inhabit our thoughts through the waking hours, whose eyes we see through, whose bodies we might sometimes feel ourselves inhabiting. But I do know that if I were asked the question now, I'd hesitate in answering. I'd

hesitate because of this dream which I had while writing a novel *Burnt Shadows*, that starts in Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 - the day of the atom bomb: in this dream, I am in Nagasaki. I have arrived there, in the present, and I know my way around because of all the time I've spent looking at old maps and photographs while researching my novel. There's a guide who wants to direct me but I get away from him, and go up on a cable-car that passes between the green tree tops of the city. From that aerial view, which is of course a writer's view, I can see the mountains and the sea and the city laid out between. I point out directions to the companions who are now with me - there's the former Foreign Settlement, there's the former Dutch colony of Dajima, there's 'Spectacles Bridge' so named because the stone bridge's two arches and their reflection look like a pair of glasses - and there's Urakami Cathedral less than 500 m from the epicentre of the bomb. Then, in that movie-like transition of a dream, I am kneeling on the grass in Urakami, and I'm weeping because a character I created - a German called Konrad Weiss - died here. In my dream, I have to scold myself. Real people died here - tens of thousands of them. What do I mean by crying over a character of my own invention?

V

After *The Debt*, 2013, Kader Attia

In 1939, the British Indian army numbered nearly 200,000 men. By 1945, it had grown to 2.5 million; the largest volunteer army the world had ever known. 67,340 men of the British Indian army became prisoners of war during World War Two. One of them was my great-uncle, held prisoner in Italy. Several years ago, I read the letters he had written home to his brother. In one he asks his brother to deliver a message to their mother. While he wrote to his brother in English, his mother only read Urdu; in the letter he explains that the censor at the prisoner of war camp who knew Urdu has left, and no one has replaced him, so he'll no longer be able to write to her. An Urdu speaking censor at an Italian prisoner-of-war camp in the 40's is hard for a writer's imagination to resist, but all the emotions of that story gather around my great-grandmother, a woman recently widowed, waiting for her youngest child to return home, the silence where there should be his voice deepening around her.

VI

After *West Bank*, 2004, Sophie Ristelhueber

As the day wore on, our numbers dwindled. First they let through everyone who was, or appeared, white. The two black Americans were the next to receive their visas. Then those who were brown-skinned but either older than the rest of us or without Muslim names. In the end, from our party of nearly twenty participants of the Palestine Festival of Literature, four of us - Sharif, Abdulhawa, Mahfouz, Shamsie - remained at the passenger terminal of the Allenby Crossing between Jordan and the West Bank, along with a few other individuals: a group of Muslim men with long beards, a mixed race couple (she European, he Arab), two Europeans whose presence there we enjoyed wondering about, finally deciding that their piercings and asymmetrical hairstyles had caused offence, and two young Palestinian women, university students, returning home from American campuses for the summer holidays.

We were all together, waiting to know if we'd be allowed across the border or sent back into Jordan at 4pm when the terminal closed, but even so we were in two sets of experiences. For those of us there as visitors, nothing of vast significance rode on the decisions made by the Israeli border guards who were barely more than children themselves. You enter, you don't enter. You have this experience, or you don't. The Palestinians though, were inside another story entirely. Home. Family. Dispossession.

We waited and nothing happened. We waited and understood there was no reason for the waiting except to let us know our powerlessness, and how unwanted we were. Finally, one of the university students was called up by the border official and received clearance to go through to the West Bank. Then the other one was called up. I didn't see her face when she turned away from the desk; I only knew that my friend Susie had stood up from her chair and walked over to the girl, and while they spoke Susie held her by the arms.

It took a while to understand what Susie was saying when she came back to explain what had happened. The girl was from Jerusalem; her mother lived there, as did most of her family. They all - including the girl - had the most coveted of residence permits for Palestinians - the blue Jerusalem permit. But even if you've lived in Jerusalem all your life, as a Palestinian who is designated a 'permanent resident' rather than 'citizen' you need to maintain continuous residence if you are to keep the permit. The girl's father had moved to America a few years earlier, and she was now there for university. The border guard, seeing the U.S passport she'd qualified for because of her father, said that she was now living elsewhere and so had breached the rules that allowed her the Jerusalem permit. He returned her passport to her, but kept hold of the permit. Then he told her she was free to go into the West Bank. She just couldn't go to the city where her mother was waiting for her to come home, couldn't even step foot in it. When I asked Susie how long it would take the girl to get another permit, or some other form of permission to at least enter Jerusalem, she raised both arms in the air in a gesture of defeat.

VII

After 5000 Feet Is The Best, 2011, Omer Fast

I have no personal stories for this one. I forget to use the word ‘war’ to describe what is happening there. I have not dreamt of the locations in which it took place, I have no students who will provide me with its smells. The nature of this war means there are no prisoner of war camps, and the pilot will never fear for his own life. I will never enter the territory where it takes place to bear witness - even though I’m a citizen of the nation in which the bombs fall.

I can tell you the numbers I’ve found on the Bureau of Investigative Journalism website, but I can’t tell you how accurate they are. Total US drone strikes in Pakistan: 396. Total killed: 2,368-3,835. Civilians killed: 416-957. Children killed: 168-202. Injured: 1,116-1,688

I can also tell you what the *New York Times* reported on 29 May 2012 about the Obama administration’s manner of distinguishing militant from civilian, which presumably the Bureau of Investigative Journalism doesn’t adhere to: “Mr. Obama embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties that did little to box him in. It in effect counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants, according to several administration officials, unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent.”

Another way to say this is, if a drone kills a boy of 16, he was a militant, and it’s ok.

The *New York Times* goes on to say: ‘Counterterrorism officials insist this approach is one of simple logic: people in an area of known terrorist activity, or found with a top Qaeda operative, are probably up to no good.’ It might be instructive to add that North Waziristan that ‘area of known terrorist activity’ is also home to a population of around 600,000 people.

Even so, there is an almost compelling logic to the official quoted in the *Times* who says, “Al Qaeda is an insular, paranoid organization – innocent neighbours don’t hitchhike rides in the back of trucks headed for the border with guns and bombs.”

Set against that almost compelling logic is the the one story I know: the story of Tariq Aziz. In late October 2011, the 16 year old from North Waziristan, travelled to the capital, Islamabad, for a meeting - or Grand Jirga - to discuss the effects of drone strikes in the region in which he lived. Tariq’s cousin had been killed by a drone strike while riding his motorbike over a year earlier. What seemed to particularly attract Tariq to the meeting was the opportunity to learn

basic photography, and take a camera back with him to Waziristan in order to document the strikes, in particular the civilian casualties. The media isn't allowed into Waziristan; we see no pictures of distraught relatives holding photographs and heartbreaking mementoes of the dead in the aftermath of drone strike. We don't hear the stories of 16 year old boys who must be militants otherwise why would the drone have killed them. Tariq was to be part of a project, organised by Reprieve, and discussed during the Grand Jirga, to try and change that.

Prateep Chatterjee from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism was present at the Grand Jirga and spoke to Tariq afterwards, particularly about football, which Tariq loved; *Reprieve's* director, Clive Stafford Smith, also met him and remembered he was one of the first people at the Grand Jirga to smile. These are the scraps of details from which we must conjure up a life: he smiled, he loved football, he was 16 years old and volunteered to take photographs to document civilian casualties of drone strikes even though Stafford Smith warned him that he might attract unwanted attention from militants if he walked around North Waziristan with a camera.

The week after the Grand Jirga, Tariq, accompanied by his 12-year old cousin Waheed Khan, was driving to pick up his aunt and bring her home to their village, when a Hellfire missile, targeting the car, killed both boys.

We know Tariq's story because of Clive Stafford Smith and Prateep Chatterjee; we know his face because of the photographs taken during the Grand Jirga.

'Every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably,' Walter Benjamin said. But what of the images never recognised even in the present? It is hard not to read metaphor into Tariq's death so soon after he acquired a camera to document what wasn't being documented. Two and a half years later, his is still the only story I know of children killed in drone strikes. The rest are numbers and names and ages and the place in which they were killed and the date on which they died. In other words, their only story is their death.

In a world where we complain of information overload, we sometimes forget that there are places and happenings in the world where journalists can't reach, from which photographs rarely emerge. Then begins the work of the imagination, the work of today's war artists.

There is so much that can be problematic about the conjoining of art and war: voyeurism, glorification, propaganda, pornography, simplification, moral equivalency, de-politicisation. But nothing is more problematic in war art than the war art that isn't.

