

*Recording Wars as human histories – one by one*

Kate Scannell

‘Death is closer than the shirt you are wearing.’

This phrase lingers in my consciousness as I close the book in which it is written. On this fragile morning marked with new threats of terrorist attacks on the Bay and Golden Gate bridges, I place that book on a small stack of others that I’ve recently read, and I choose a new one from a larger, unread pile. I am determined to read text that does not include “anthrax” in every other sentence, poems that don’t care about Cipro.

The new book, a novel, proves engaging, but text from the nonfiction I’ve just finished reading whispers in the background.

“We woke up to the sound of tanks.”

We were surrounded by snipers, and I saw a 17-year-old girl shot dead.”

“I cry constantly; I can’t find myself in myself.”

I retrieve the book I’ve just placed on the already-read pile: “No Place Like home – Echoes from Kosovo”, written and photographed by Melanie Friend (Midnight Editions, 2001). This time I just flip through its pages, revisiting the photographs it contains portraits of survivors who offer oral histories of Kosovo’s recent bloody wars:

Albanian Kosovar women who are suddenly ejected from the ordinariness of their homes and gardens into the squalor and chaos of a Macedonian refugee camp. Two Albanian children who have befriended each other in the camp and become inseparable survivors of the grisly trauma they suffered in their native Kosovo. An elderly man who proudly refuses to remove his traditional Albanian hat, despite beatings by Serbian police.

The oral histories in the book include descriptions of massacres and torture in the everyday language of the ordinary people who suffered them. They overpower the usual clinical accounts from newspaper and television reports to tell an insistently human history of war. In this book, the dead, the missing, the maimed, and the surviving are all fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and partners and friends, and their stories are grounded in the particularities of their daily trials.

“I saw the Serbs burn one house at midnight, with the mother, father, and three children still inside.”

“I had to hide in sewers... on a narrow ledge for hours, right above the sewage, wearing medical masks to block out the terrible smell and the germs.”

“We watch every single new program... I take tranquilizers regularly, but each time a mass grave is opened, I can’t sleep and I can’t eat for a week I am so afraid we will find him.”

“We were on the move for a year... constantly moving from village to village. From the hillside, we saw Serbian soldiers and police loot our home and burn it down... all we could save was ourselves.”

In reading the testimonies in this book from Kosovo Albanians and as well as those from Kosovo’s minorities-Roma, Serbs, Turks, Goranis, Ashkalia, Bosniaks – we hear of shared longings for peace and freedom and family and home. But these common desires are undermined by common tendencies towards ethnic intolerance and hostilities that are much older than any Kosovar resident’s living memory. And in examining the stories of these ordinary people whose lives were made extraordinarily nightmarish by sudden instabilities in chronic ethnic tensions, we hear a familiar refrain as an increasingly proximate disturbance: How could this happen to me?

I am compelled to write of this extraordinary book because of its power to humanize words like “casualties” and “collateral damage” -technical terms that sterilize the bloody, fleshy facts of human lives burned, shot, tortured, butchered, starved to death in war.

In the current American war with the Taliban, it is necessary to be reminded of the fireman’s crushed body, the night janitor’s burned torso, the Afghani mother whose leg exploded over the land mine, the rape of a young Serbian girl, the names of the bodies one by one.

The author’s photographs of the Kosovar survivors haunt. Ms Friend, a British photojournalist who has covered the Balkans since 1989, explains that she was unable to photograph “nameless people crying as they streamed across the border on tractors, as in so many newspaper images I had seen... I could not bring myself to take them”. Instead, Friend took studio style portraits of individuals over time while listening to their stories. The effect is one of depth behind the plane of the photograph, of time and experience expanded beyond a heightened moment of grief or terror caught by a wartime snapshot.

In these photographs, we are made to feel how layers of individual human narratives are embedded in the universal conflicts stretched across time and place. Each profiled person stares from the page in a manner that unsettles and that implicates the viewer as a witness to what has happened.

The stories and portraits in this book break through the distance of “foreign” war correspondence. In a timely and necessary way, they remind us, one damaged and tortured life after another, how individual human histories are uniquely lived or lost to wars. And how someone continues to live – to wash the sink, make tea, till the garden and fix the roof – when death is closer than the shirt one wears.

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