

# THE PURPLE TESTAMENT



AN ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY  
FROM THE AFGAN AND IRAQI WARS

EDITED BY



# THE PURPLE TESTAMENT

# THE PURPLE TESTAMENT

An Anthology of Poetry  
from the Afgan and Iraqi Wars

Edited By



# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

 ..... v

## EPILOGUE

The Last Iraq

*Fadhil al-Azzawi* ..... 2

## I.

The Towers

*Yusef Komunyakaa* ..... 4

Before the Deployment

*Jehanne Dubrow* ..... 5

Mosul

*David Hernandez* ..... 6

Daisy Cutter

*Louise Rill* ..... 7

The Abu Ghraib Image

*Anis Shivani* ..... 8

## II.

The Hurt Locker

*Brian Turner* ..... 11

My First Lover Returns from Iraq

*Keetje Kuipers* ..... 12

Dithyramb and Lamentation

*David Wojahn* ..... 13

Cup Poem 2

*Shaikh Abdurraheem Muslim Dost* ..... 23

Death Poem

*Jumah Al Dossari* ..... 24

	Letter Composed During a Lull in Fighting	
	<i>Kevin C. Powers</i> .....	25
III.		
	Bush's War	
	<i>Robert Hass</i> .....	28
	Letters	
	<i>Frances Richey</i> .....	33
	Movie Night	
	<i>Brock Michael Jones</i> .....	34
	The Good Wife before Deployment	
	<i>Victoria Kelly</i> .....	35
	Operation New Dawn	
	<i>Hugh Martin</i> .....	36
	EPILOGUE	
	Iraqi Boy	
	<i>Elizabeth Arnold</i> .....	45
	COMMENTARY .....	46

# INTRODUCTION

*He is come to open  
The purple testament of bleeding war.  
—Richard II, Act III, Scene 3, Line 93*

Those who have faced the almost unarticulable dangers, dilemmas, horrors, tragedies, and miracles specific to war—in a word, its “muses”—have historically acted as its poets. From the ancient Greeks to contemporary Americans, baptism by fire has given these select persons permission to compose and comment publicly without questioned authority. Yet, there feels as though a gap occurs between what is defined as “war” poetry and the number of people not allowed to compose it. The feeling is this multitude of others fail to be actually affected by it. Of course, those that directly participate in war interact with the abyss and emerge from its depths forever changed. But the abyss travels much wider than the common audience likes to admit, and its staining rub is more easily transferred than by bullet hole or shrapnel wound, by means as traceless as a glancing brush, silent echo, or blind vision.

All poets possess a mechanism that registers these faint disturbances and whether the poet is patrolling the hills in Mosul, smoking a cigarette in her living room, or watching television in Mexico, the poetry written by these persons about the war in question serves as a comment on the war and in fact is *all* war poetry. I think it is important to define what in fact war poetry is if I am to make any sense out of the anthology I have compiled. By including the home front as a theatre of war and allowing poems by those who lack the traditional experience of

war, I have allowed for a kind of anthology that hopes to provide a more nuanced gesture of how war and its effects can be understood through verse.

The anthology is to act as a starting point for identifying and promoting the poetic voices and perspectives from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts and attempts to provide a democratic cross section of poems about, related to, or referencing the declared operations, or its collateral effects, in Iraq and Afghanistan following the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center until the declared end of operations. In terms of criterion, this was the most important—though, the rule was bent some—but in order to fully realize the democratic nature of the project I had to establish other rules as well. I did not allow more than one poem from each author. If I were to create a project that echoed a multitude of voices, then limiting the poetry to one per author would be an effective limitation to do this. Another way I tried to maintain alternative perspectives is by varying the authors themselves. Of the twenty authors, there are three that are combat veterans from the Iraqi and Afghani conflicts, one author a veteran from Vietnam and another a survivor of WWII. Several of the authors served time in GTMO and are from Pakistan and Iraq. Just under half the poets in the anthology are female. The majority of all the poets never served in the military. The idea is to create a pointillist like sampling that when seen from afar provides a clear picture of “war” but when examined inches away offers a more detailed and complicated understanding of the particulars the poems discuss. There was no specific aesthetic in mind when the project started. The poetry could be language poetry, new formalism, etc. All I required was that the poem relate an overriding feeling or state of being in itself in relation to the subject the poem discussed,

regardless of that feeling or state. Whether it is despair, elation, confusion, or understanding, I need to recognize that presence in the poem because so much is said to be unknowable about the experience of war. But with establishing these limitations, potential shortcomings that were never initially anticipated began to rear their head.

When I started the project the first obstacle was identifying enough material. I searched the more established poets who produced during the period and found some poems but not enough to give a proper treatment. I found more and more poems in literary magazines and if not for an issue released by the *Iowa Review*, I potentially would have been without two of the combat veterans listed in the anthology. If I had a team of dedicated interns toiling through the stacks of journals, magazines, and websites like say a *Best American Poetry*, I might have had a more representative selection of higher quality poems. Not that the poems in the anthology are not “good.” I believe that they all meet the requirements I established at the outset of the anthology. However, I do think by limiting myself like I did, I prevented other worthy poems from making the cut. The one poet that comes to mind is Hugh Martin. His selection of poetry provided at least three or four examples of perspectives that could have added a much needed enhancing from a military perspective, alas: one poet, one poem. Another shortcoming that works in hand with a lack of poems is the lack of perspective. Again, I managed to provide what I think is a fairly multifaceted multicultural perspective on the war, yet, I thought that there would have been poems that reflected the dynamic nature of the U.S. military: husbands writing poems about the loss of a wife, love poems from one wife to her female partner, female soldiers writing poems trying to explain the death they witnessed, Iraqis writing in English about



the war. These were never found. They could be written but still unfound, or they're probably still brooding away inside a poet waiting to come to fruition. Another issue I wrestled with was the inclusion of translated material. From a western perspective and with western tastes, I selected the poems I felt represented the kernel of my approach. But, with so much of the poets work depending on the ability of the translator, I wanted to ignore the poems. I also worried that the poems I selected failed miserably in the eyes of Eastern tradition. Despite these reservations, I thought it was too important to include the perspective of all combatants (even those rightfully or falsely accused).

The anthology's organization proved difficult in the beginning. Any action by the editor to impose a kind of meaning on the collection felt artificial. I wanted the poems to speak for themselves. So I had the collection organized by date of publication and left it at that. But I soon found that despite the nebulous ways of understanding war, organizing the book as such seemed phoney. I decided to add a prologue and epilogue to the work, then created three sections. I thought by organizing the poems in a more linear manner, one with landmarks and chronological significance, I would be able to not only offer poetry that comments on war but arrange it in movements that could possibly give and ebb and flow to war. I think that starting the collection with a poem written after the first Gulf War would provide an interesting context on the seemingly perpetual nature of war in the region. The first section begins with a poem titled "Twin Towers" and the third section ends with a poem titled "Operation New Dawn" a reference to the end of the U.S. military's active participation in combat operations (also the precursor to troop removal in December 2011), with the final

poem in the anthology offering a the kind of strength and love needed to even attempt to overcome the atrocities found in war. By having these four poems placed where they are and the other poems tied to them as events unfold, the anthology provides its own narrative, maybe not completely parallel to the war but close enough to cast an erie reflection.

As I compiled the anthology and revised the organization and selections, I noted several observations about the collection that I felt were worth addressing. The first was that I sensed a lack of “combat authors.” With the conflicts just over, I understand that it might take time for these poets to develop as writers or even decide to put themselves out publicly through verse, but given the number of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines that participated in the battles and mess halls and hospitals, the demographic felt sparsely represented. A second observation I watched develop was that of the stereotypical poem for women during war: loss of lover, husband, son. There are four poems in the collection that I feel fall into this category and despite their interesting and differing take on a similar motif, I wanted to acknowledge their presence. As mentioned earlier, I wanted vary the selections and provide other female poems that offer differing female perspectives but none were found. I also sensed a distanced feeling from the non-combatant authors in the text, especially when they wanted to make comments directly associated with the war. I felt as though they were waiting for some kind of permission and if they felt as though that permission was not allowed, then they would circumvent the direct comment by providing a similar example under discussion and make a direct comment on that situation, drawing a parallel. Not all of the noncombatant poets did this but enough to where it created a pattern.

Despite the apologies and limitations and shortcomings, I hope the anthology at the very least provides an engaging cross-section of contemporary poetry.

# COMMENTARY

## *The Last Iraq*

My initial impulse after finding this poem was to hesitantly resign the fact that it was published well before the cut-off dates I established. But I reread the poem and decided to find some way to incorporate it into the work. al-Azzawi, writing after the first Gulf War, presents the reader with a country that has witnessed defeat and chaos, and the poem's narrator displays a disturbing sense of manic assertiveness, wanting a stasis of some kind. But when there is war, everything is in constant flux, nothing is sacred, and all bets are off. And for al-Azzawi, "a soldier running from the front" only confirms Iraq's doomed sentence to eminent violent upheaval.

## *The Towers*

Kommunyakaa provides a poem that encapsulates the weighty event that launched America into the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan: the destruction of the World Trade Center. He calmly paints an aura of normalcy and repetition, but, just as the planes fall from the sky and rock the north tower, he throws the reader into a state of immediate, resonate change, "boom(ing)...against a metallic sky." Discombobulation mounts just as the rescue workers scramble through the rubble and once the relentless dust settles, it provides a space for contemplation: the whole act reduced into some kind of "Hollywood" disbelief. Kommunyakaa has his narrator leave the reader with the kind of ponderous uncertainty that befalls a grief-stricken Daedalus as he questions the frailty of his design.

## *Before the Deployment*

Dubrow's poem presents its readers with a conflict between the peacefulness of half-conscious togetherness and the unexpected uncertainty of absence as it pertains to war. The narrator is saved the messy business of saying a fully cognizant goodbye while he leaves her in the warm bed, and she wonders if "perhaps all good-byes should whisper like a piece of silk." Yet, the uncertainty of her intimate other's wellbeing weighs on her as the transitory "citrus ghost of his cologne" lingers beside her. Ultimately, there is no resolution between the two perspectives, leaving the narrator in a state of marred quietude.

## *Mosul*

The bleakness of war is well represented in David Hernandez's poem. His use of short, muted sentences and focus on observable fact facilitates the absence in the poem. By complicating the importance of life and the importance of achieving objectives by suggesting that a donkey is merely composed of "donkey" and a mortar shell possesses "veins." And the American soldiers, laughing and covered in dust, (the target of the donkey drawn cart), fall victim to the designed trap, leaving only dust.

## *The Daisy Cutter*

In "The Daisy Cutter," Rill provides a mocking tone throughout, one that suggests a sense of intolerance and disdain. She points to the Daisy Cutter (a bomb) as the

symbol of the paralleled hate shared by Americans as well as the Jihadists they seek to destroy. By doing so, Rill points to the hypocrisy inherent in the conflicts. And the wholesale acceptance of death and destruction on large scales portrays the narrator as a horrid despot, catastrophically eradicating the populace in the name of accomplishing something.

### *The Abu Ghraib Images*

Shivani's focus on image and language as means to deceive and declare are at the quick of the poem, casting a shade of disgusted uncertainty over the poem. The narrator references the lasting images of war painted by Goya and Picasso, then dismisses their effectiveness when compared to the photos from Abu Ghraib. The "thumbs-up" and "wide grins" while "wires [are] trailing from genitals" confirms this grotesque reality. The narrator then identifies the deprivation of "rational bearings" at the hand of "benign names," names that blunt razor truth into tumbled deflection. And the poem utilizes the practice of deception, offering the benefits the image afforded, "the equality of sexes,/the equalization of man and beast,/the erasure of borderlines" but these benefits, once scrutinized by the subjects the reference, reveal an all too ugly truth.

### *The Hurt Locker*

"The Hurt Locker" apologizes for nothing. In fact, it does its best to give the reader the blood crusted sand from under its sun mangled fingers. There are no hidden evils and the narrator tell the reader that when forced to witness the

unthinkable in war, he'll "believe it when [he] see[s] it." This is what the narrator wants: a witness. And in sharp, bleak language, the reader does learn of the compilation of atrocities that populate the hurt locker. The reader, though separated by language, is crammed into a ruck with the narrator and these horrors, and is forced to make sense of the frantic fear that sits at the very heart of the poem.

### *My First Lover Returns from Iraq*

Kuipers has created a poem that sends its reader into the confines of absence and longing, states that possesses enough power to manifest specters. The narrator recognizes the importance of her past love and stops just short of declaring him as her penultimate muse. It's as if she physically takes his body and molds them into the objects of her art: hands to fruit, flowered feet. But the physical absence becomes more realized when she is left to dream of his presence, but the narrators longing only complicates her strong emotions and his absence. But the seeming absence becomes manifestly permanent, and the narrator's loss becomes all the more amplified, her soldiers missing more stark. The trauma inherent to tragic loss is on full display as the narrator proclaims that the "only body that visits [her]" is the specter of her fallen boyfriend.

### *Dithyramb and Lamentation*

David Wojahn has created a poem that focuses its energy on illuminating the abhorrent price of war. There is no easy emotion to solely identify as the poem's focus, except maybe that of disgust. In the first of six sections, the

narrative voice describes a beheading in China during the 1900s. The notion of death as spectacle is nothing new, yet the footage of decapitated reporters, obliterated film crews, and charred bodies that choked the 24 hour news cycle was consumed hoggishly. And the pulse Wojahn pushes the reader on continues. Epithalamium details the collateral damage of a rogue missile attack, while the Secretary of Defense stands idly at a podium. E-mail is composed of a number of fragments and phrases from emails about interrogation in American prisoner camps. At no point does Mr. Wojahn offer any excuse for the leaders in charge of the debacle in Iraq and instead, presents an entertaining picture of President Bush in hell a-la Dante's Inferno.

## *Cup Poem 2*

I selected this poem on the merit of its manifold meanings. The poem itself is very simple and direct, almost a haiku of sorts. In two plain declarative statements, the poet leaves the reader with a variety of meanings to take from the poem. It could be thought of as a vagueness, but the first statement cannot be anymore clear: "Handcuffs befit brave young men." It comes across as axiomatic. The association of handcuffs to young men places two strong symbols in volatile distance from each other. Dost then provides likenesses to his first pairing "bangles" and "spinsters or pretty young ladies". The lack of zeal associated to bangles and its reference to spinsters and "pretty" young ladies couldn't be a more stark, almost sexist, seemingly binary opposition. But the two statements coupled together leave the reader to provide a meaning, one that cannot be separated from the convoluting effects of war.



## *Death Poem*

In Al Dossari's poem, his narrator has surrendered to dark despair, offering the only thing of worth remaining: his body. This spiraling desire for a testament forces the narrator into a pleading for justice. And only through them "bear[ing] the burden" will the "sinless soul" find a reconciliation with its suffering. The narrator allows little insight into just what the injustice and malevolence were that he faced, but he knows that the "protectors of peace" should be held accountable for the suffering incurred. There is no hint of fear, for wishing death has removed all traces, and as the principled men and the fair minded wait to reconcile the death, the narrator scoffs as he awaits his peaceful oblivion.

## *Iraq Burial*

Donnelly's use of sparse, plain spoken expression aids her narrators attempt explain her troubled emotions. There is a strong sense of ambiguity in the poem and for the most part, the poem leaves the reader to impose much of the nuanced meaning. But it is in the simple sadness of the narrator mixed with these open ended meanings that makes the poem spark in the last line, when the narrator is forced to "cover [her] face with my hands."

## *Letter Composed During a Lull in Fighting*

This poem wants the reader to experience the awkwardness imposed by war. The narrator best does this by providing similes not commonly associated with love "not killing" and "a ten minute nap." This awkwardness manifests itself in the letter itself. Letters the tell of love usual-

ly smell of sweet perfume and echo of sweet language, but the narrator states that this letter will “stink...of bolt oil... and the things it says.” and true to the narrators claim, the letter mentions a quote from a Pvt. Bartle, reducing the magnanimous emotions and actions of war to “making little pieces of metal/pass through each other.”

### *Bush's War*

A second title for Robert Hass's poem could easily read “This Too Shall Pass.” Throughout the poem the narrator never interjects any sense of furied emotion, but instead, keeps an even keel while relating events past, then present, all while projecting a voice of experience, wisdom. It is as if the narrator wants to comment on “Bush's War” in some manner but is then sent into a ponderous retrospect, reflecting on the pastoral of a Berlin at the end of the 20th century. All the decorously painted images reflect a timelessness and continuity before the narrator reminds the reader of wars past: WWII, Vietnam. Even their immediate and unexpected juxtaposition to the pastoral reflects the all-of-a-suddenness of war. Yet, the voice never gives over to emotion, but questions what he believes to be the impetuous of war, asking with the rhetorical reflection of a sage who already knows the answers. And as this generation witnesses the “heaped bodies (turn) into summer fruit” it's clearer how even the teeth bleeding chaos “will be quiet soon enough.”

### *Letters*

“Letters” uses the narrative voice of a military member's mother to convey the feelings of helplessness and anxiety

in the face of distant horror. She finds herself caught remembering the detailed measures her son took before he left, finding people to plow her driveway, and mow the grass, and reluctantly, hide a good-bye letter, just in case. The voice trembles with a cautious nervousness and then reflects on a previous mother's day. A controlled exasperation explodes when she receives a late gift, the carriage of his existence, and she clamors in a remembered catharsis as she receives "the salt from his hand, the words." His reassurance.

### *Movie Night: Baghdad, April 2005*

In the fog of war, sometimes masks are worn to hide the real. Sometimes, a person draws connections from coincidence in hindsight. Brock Michael Jones offers a work of prose (though it's poetic tendencies allowed it to be a part of the collection) that presents a mere moment during the war, a purely objective portrayal of an event during a movie night, but the conclusions drawn from the event leave the reader guessing, purporting, and ultimately questioning the "signs" (if any) of disturbance in Markose. I think the audience is supposed to "read into" the laughing of Markose as a sign of his disturbance, and once invited to do so, the reader can not help but to read into other aspects of the work. Like psychologists trying to peg an illness, the reader combs the work for other tells and finds that as more and more veterans return from the conflicts suffering from PTSD and varying other forms of mental stress, "We gotta see that shit again."

## *The Good Wife before Deployment*

I wanted this poem in the collection because I easily imagined the helplessness of the departing pilot and the almost omnipotence of the wife. The reader senses that the husband, potentially a devil-may-care flyboy at one time, is caught in a dilemma that is new and overbearing. As a pilot, he is a man almost always in control, yet, with a new wife his departure brings on a loss of control. She, left unattended, possesses a kind of control over the husband. And as the poem implies, the good wife knows this and probably works towards facilitating her husband's moral by staying in contact, remaining faithful. But, the narrator never comes out and says that she is the good wife, leaving the poem with a brooding tension.

## *Operation New Dawn*

Hugh Martin's narrator attempts to encapsulate the entirety of the Iraq war through his experience before, during, and after the war. The reader feel that the voice is attempting to make sense of his participation, to seek answers to questions like "Why were we there?" or "What good was done?". To answer the first question, he reminisces about the hat he traded from an Iraqi soldier for a Playboy, proof as to why he was there, but as the Lindsey Lohaned edition of Playboy reaches record sales, it's obvious maybe the tentacles of American capitalism could have been more the reason than mere service to a needy people. The good done sends the narrator into the time when he was greeted by an Iraqi man that spoke Saddam's name then spat, but the narrator cannot shake the men he and his fellow soldiers killed in their APC on a dark night. The poem works very hard at showing that

war never allows a clean, unconflicted answer to any question, especially those that pertain to morality.

## *Iraqi Boy*

In Elizabeth Arnold's poem, there's a general vagueness just as to how this poem references the conflict in Iraq or Afghanistan. The title mentions one of the countries by name, but what else? I think that the Iraqi boy in the poem and his wounds and their peculiarness points to a child who has fallen victim to a kind of mutilation. He has an absent leg that is hoisted by a "whole one" and the exclamation ("they're there!") when the narrator notes that the boy has both hands point to this fact. Even the broken endstops to some of the line help with this. The child flashed two thirds of a smile. Yet, despite the child's condition, he projects an attitude of joy, of perseverance.