

WAR REPORTER

Dan O'Brien is an American playwright and poet living in Los Angeles. His play *The Body of an American* premiered in 2012 and was the inaugural winner of the Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama.

'*War Reporter* is a book-length sequence of poems that anyone interested in the fate of American poetry should read, even must read. As Wallace Stevens once wrote, poetry has to "think about war / And it has to find what will suffice." Dan O'Brien knows this in his bones. He has dug into American history, into our perpetual war, and found sufficient words – words that meet the people of his time with language adequate to their experience. I can't speak highly enough of these poems. The book is superb, subtle, memorable, and of a piece.' – JAY PARINI

'Dan O'Brien has discovered the poetry in the most harrowing of war stories, and made music of the ways in which we share in each other's guilts, doubts, and triumphs. Meanwhile, the poet's identity bleeds into that of war reporter, photographer, and reader. This is a tragic book about the human comedy.'

– MARY-JO SALTER

'The complex, disquieting truth of war as both lure and destroyer binds together poet and journalist. The result is a memorable book.'

– ANTHONY FEINSTEIN, author of *Journalists Under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War*

WAR REPORTER

Dan O'Brien

The logo for B editions, featuring a large, stylized letter 'B' inside a circle, followed by the word 'editions' in a lowercase, serif font. A horizontal line is positioned below the word 'editions'.

Call war damnable – there is nothing too bad that can be said
about it – and yet, it has a knack, which peace never learned,
of uncovering the splendor in commonplace persons.

– *The Love of an Unknown Soldier: found in a dugout, 1918*

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Paul Watson has been a war reporter for more than two decades. He is best known, perhaps, for his 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of the body of an American soldier dragged from the wreck of a Black Hawk through the streets of Mogadishu. When Paul took this picture he heard the dead man speak to him: 'If you do this, I will own you forever.'

These poems are derived from Paul's memoir *Where War Lives*, his journalism, recordings and transcripts and, most valuably to me, our emails and conversations. Some of the poems take place in Ulukhaktok in the Canadian High Arctic, where I visited Paul in the winter of 2010 while he was enjoying a hiatus from war reporting, covering the 'Arctic and Aboriginal Beat' for the *Toronto Star*. He has since gone back to covering Kandahar and other, more recent war zones.

Several years ago my birth family disintegrated for bewildering, mysterious reasons. That I discovered Paul's work around the same time wasn't a coincidence. Early in our correspondence Paul sent me something I'll paraphrase: 'Do you know that quote of Camus' where he says he's solved the mystery of where war lives? It lives in each of us. In the loneliness and humiliation we all feel. If we can solve that conflict within ourselves then maybe we'll be able to rid the world of war.' Paul's writing, and mine in response, are as much about our private, internal wars as they are about the constantly roving holocaust of modern warfare.

D. O'B.
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Los Angeles

Contents

3	The War Reporter Paul Watson Hears the Voice
4	The War Reporter Paul Watson Prepares for His Next Trip
6	The War Reporter Paul Watson on Winning the Pulitzer Prize
7	The War Reporter Paul Watson on Suicide
9	The Poet Hears the Voice
10	Portrait of the War Reporter Paul Watson as a Young Man
12	The War Reporter Paul Watson Imagines His Father
13	The War Reporter Paul Watson Was Talking to His Mother
14	The War Reporter Paul Watson's South African Psychiatrist Tells a Story
15	The War Reporter Paul Watson's Psychiatrist Takes Note
16	The War Reporter Paul Watson Describes the Ghost
18	The Poet Waits for the War Reporter Paul Watson to Reply
19	The War Reporter Paul Watson on Guilt
21	The War Reporter Paul Watson on Love
23	The War Reporter Paul Watson Lost His Camera
24	The War Reporter Paul Watson Has Dinner with Aideed
26	The War Reporter Paul Watson on Censorship
27	The Poet Runs
28	The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Poet Make a Plan
32	The Poet Takes Flight
34	The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Poet Go for a Walk in the Arctic
35	The War Reporter Paul Watson Pays the Poet a Compliment
36	The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Poet Try to Have Fun
38	The War Reporter Paul Watson Watches TV
40	The War Reporter Paul Watson on War Reporting
41	The War Reporter Paul Watson on God
42	The War Reporter Paul Watson Telexes from the New War
43	The War Reporter Paul Watson in the Ali Baba Room
45	The War Reporter Paul Watson Regrets the Escape

- 46 The Poet Asks the Graduate Student
- 47 The War Reporter Paul Watson's Looking for His Story
- 48 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Prostitutes
- 50 The War Reporter Paul Watson Goes to Hollywood
- 51 The War Reporter Paul Watson's Cold Open
- 53 The War Reporter Paul Watson Remembers a Flight
- 54 The War Reporter Paul Watson on the Bombing of the Dead
- 55 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Professors
- 56 The War Reporter Paul Watson Waits in Line
- 58 The War Reporter Paul Watson at the Widow's House
- 59 The War Reporter Paul Watson and Blue Body Bag #4
- 60 The War Reporter Paul Watson Remembers the War Reporter
Jana Schneider
- 62 The War Reporter Paul Watson on the Knock at the Door
- 63 The War Reporter Paul Watson Listens to Isaac
- 64 The War Reporter Paul Watson in the Colonies
- 66 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Secret of War
- 68 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Mountain Gorillas
- 70 The War Reporter Paul Watson Considers the Peacekeepers
- 71 The War Reporter Paul Watson Listens to Mohammed
- 72 The War Reporter Paul Watson and Dirty Business
- 73 The War Reporter Paul Watson Chases the Lion of Panjshir
- 75 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Boys with the Bomblet
- 76 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Economy of War
- 77 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the War on Drugs
- 79 The War Reporter Paul Watson Remembers the Freedom
Fighter Abdul Haq
- 81 The War Reporter Paul Watson Listens to the Teacher
- 83 The War Reporter Paul Watson and Ghosts of the Hindu Kush
- 85 The War Reporter Paul Watson on the Examination of Women
- 86 The War Reporter Paul Watson Skypes From Kandahar
- 87 The War Reporter Paul Watson Listens to Roya Shams, 17,
Describe Her Gift
- 89 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Lady Pol
- 90 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Chief's Embrace
- 91 The War Reporter Paul Watson Listens to the Translator's Story
- 93 The War Reporter Paul Watson Interviews the Negotiator
- 95 The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Sapper in the Vineyard
- 96 The War Reporter Paul Watson Retells the Story of the Diver and
the Goddess
- 98 The War Reporter Paul Watson Talks to Himself
- 99 The War Reporter Paul Watson Retiring
- 101 The War Reporter Paul Watson Reviewed
- 102 The War Reporter Paul Watson Meets Mother Theresa
- 104 The War Reporter Paul Watson Gives the Poet Some Advice
- 105 The War Reporter Paul Watson Also Hates Trucks
- 106 The War Reporter Paul Watson Tells His Son a Story
- 107 The Poet Gives the War Reporter Paul Watson an Excuse
- 108 The War Reporter Paul Watson Attends a Stoning
- 111 The Poet Recognizes the War Reporter Paul Watson
- 112 The War Reporter Paul Watson Listens to the Artist
- 113 The Poet and the War Reporter Paul Watson Go for a Sled Ride
- 115 The War Reporter Paul Watson Tries to Apologize to the Mother
of the Dead
- 116 The War Reporter Paul Watson is Forgiven
- 120 The War Reporter Paul Watson Invites the Poet

WAR REPORTER

The War Reporter Paul Watson Hears the Voice

We ask them, Have you seen the American soldier? Someone says he saw him tied up in a wheelbarrow. I take a picture of children bouncing on a rotor blade in the smoldering wreckage of a Black Hawk. Has anyone seen the dead American soldier? The mob parts around me, I look down in the street. And I meet the man. When you take a picture the camera covers your face, you shut the rest of the world out, everything goes dim. And I hear a voice both in my head and out. *If you do this, I will own you forever.* I'm sorry but I have to. *If you do this, I will own you.* I'm sorry, I'm not trying to desecrate your memory. If you do this I will own you forever. I took his picture. While they were beating his body and cheering. Some spitting. Some kid wearing a chopper crewman's goggles, face screwed up in rapturous glee while giving the dead man the finger. An old man's raising his cane like a club and thudding it down against the dead flesh. Men holding the ropes that bind the dead man's wrists are stretching his arms out over his head, rolling him back and forth in the hammering morning light. I'm standing outside myself. I'm watching someone else take these pictures. Wondering, You poor man. Who are you?

The War Reporter Paul Watson Prepares for His Next Trip

Reading glasses, check. Sensible shoes, check.
Endless tangles of cords. When I was born
I had these nubbins instead of fingers
till the doctor snipped them off. The hand is
attached to a wrist that bends, with a palm
as big as an infant's. In Kosovo
they used to think I was a wounded vet
and give me all kinds of free shit. iPod,
check. Satphone, laptop, checks. Bars of anti-
-microbial soap. There's a thunderstorm and
my son's asleep. Today he asked me, When
you're dead will you still watch us? Recently
on a riverboat in the Irrawaddy
Delta, one of the thousands of corpses
floating in the paddies is the body
of a child. In pajama bottoms with
teddy bear cartoons on it. The bleached skin's
like rotting rattan. The leg bones yellow.
The stench is unbearable, but the people
on shore don't seem to care. My fixer says
that as Buddhists they believe the body
is nothing more than an empty vessel,
and the soul has already been reborn
as someone new. After several stiff drinks
that night I lay on the roof of our boat
staring up into the stars, imagining
I was nothing more than a passenger
on this rotting vessel, my body. Pills,
estimate time away then multiply
by eleven a day for depression,
hypertension, polycystic kidney

disease. Toss in a few extra in case
I get kidnapped. The lightning is lighting
up my son's sleeping face. Leaning in close
I whisper, Don't be afraid. I'll come back
home soon. Do not be afraid. Japanese
green tea for antioxidants, corkscrew
for the cheap Bordeaux I'll purchase en route
at Duty Free, more antioxidants and
some liquid courage to help ease the pain
of these five-star hotel room blues.

The War Reporter Paul Watson on Winning the Pulitzer Prize

Then somehow I find myself in a room
like the Pantheon and the Parthenon
confused. Wide gleaming chevrons of cold cuts
fanned out on aproned tables. Wearing shoes
and a navy blazer, wool slacks picked out
just this morning at Brooks Brothers. My boss
eyes me. *I guess I feel guilty about
that dead soldier's family.* Kevin Carter,
who only last month was snorting Ritalin
off the floor of my apartment before
blasting into the townships, wins also
for his picture of a vulture waiting
implacably for a skeletal child
to stop struggling to lift her swollen head
from the blood-red clay. Like Carter waited
for that vulture to unfold its sere wings
which it never did, which gives his picture
such leaden, boring doom. *Do you hear that
applause, Watson? They love us!* Months later
I'm back in Rwanda documenting
machete mouths in the legs of women
who'd hid waist-deep in mud. My satellite
phone relays a message. *Kevin Carter
took his own life.* Duct-taped a garden hose
to his exhaust pipe. Left a suicide note
that I'll paraphrase. *I have been haunted
so now I will haunt you.* With my eyes closed
I see him waiting in the shade ashing
his cigarette onto his lens. Waiting
for the vulture's promised embrace. Waiting
for the good shot.

The War Reporter Paul Watson on Suicide

On a bed we discover the body
of a child at the bottom of a pile
of children. Quartered like chickens. Outside
another's buried alive. The hand is
like a tuber. At the refugee camp
a girl stumbles barefoot into a ditch
of corpses. Some wrapped in reed mats. Looking
for help, crying. But nobody's coming.
I say to myself, This will make a great
picture. This is a beautiful picture
somehow. Raising my camera to my face
I step on a dead old woman's arm: it
snaps like a stick. In Nyarubuye
we push open a gate on a courtyard
of Hell. Tangles of limbs junked. They'd come to
this church hoping God would protect them but
it only made things that much easier
to be hacked to pieces. A survivor
shivers on the filthy foam. The mayor
asked for wallets, tossed them grenades. Men blown
into pieces in midair. *These are snakes
whose heads must be crushed.* Neighbors took neighbors'
children and bashed their heads together till
brains strewed the dirt. Infants keening beside
their decapitated mothers were plunged
head-first into latrines. A pregnant friend
slit open and her fetus extruded
like a docile calf. There was so much noise!
the survivor recalls. All I wanted
was to close my ears and lay on the ground
and sleep in my family's blood. Till her skin

The Poet Hears the Voice

itched with maggots. Then 40 days cowering in the charnel church. Praying I'd be killed too because I believed the world had been swept away. *Of course I've wanted to kill myself before*, writes the war reporter to the poet, but the truth is I lack the courage. So I tell myself, Just go someplace dangerous, let somebody else kill you.

In Princeton the leaves change like bells. Squirrels pass untouchable girls. Stalking the greens at night. Worth something. Running in lightning storms, peeling paint from balusters along the Victorian porch. Sipping vodka neat, cooking meat over charcoal. Watching the unified mind of the swallows come careering out of the twilight into our backyard maple tree. *I tend to be solitary. Dinner parties, I prefer to stay away.* This is you speaking though it might as well be me. *I've spent my life with war reporters, and I'll count myself foremost in this group: everyone's a mess of insecurities, looking for self-esteem through risk.* A hangar-sized Whole Foods beside a glinting field of Priuses, while you're off in Kandahar or is it Baghdad, Paul? *I'm sick of being lied to, so I simply take it as a challenge to find the truth.* My father cursing me: There are things you do not know. My mother not turning her mausolean face to say goodbye. Picking up our lives at the end of summer, I swear I heard a demon hiss, Don't leave us, please. *If something's risky and we probably shouldn't do it I'll say, Don't worry about me, I'm already dead.* The blind mob is calling, You poor man, who are you?