

INSURGENT HEARTS

Dahlia Damoiselle

Performed June 17 2022 at



TRANSITIONING
Art, Politics & Technologies
of Gender Change

Video & more:

disruptionlab.org/transitioning

poetry

UNBORN

A Statistic: In 2016, 30.1 out of every 100,000 veterans killed themselves. Queer veterans are twice as likely to consider, attempt, & commit suicide.

A Cliché: Away from home & camp in summer. Flower, child. Discover a genderless nude desire.

There, a shirtless blond, freshwater lake, Virginia(l) shore. The boy's ribs & spine against muscles & skin tugged taut / cartography in which to lose oneself / pink suns for nipples yearning you to make tongued circles / never mind the burns. Other parts outlined by fresh water bathing. Other parts a mouth can take whole. He rises out of the water, but staring at the sun will make you blind & the world holds the word / faggot / to your throat & you two boys share a canopy of branches / oak laurel / twin beds of pine needles pushed together. The moon fucks open birch bough gaps & paints a forest on the boy's skin. Look at this foliage-speckled face, tell yourself he looks like a girl back home / that's what it must be / even if you never loved her. Turn away now child / forget his name.

Another cliché: Teen boy / Teen joys / riding up ninety-five. Best Friend in the front seat playing / odes to ache. He turns the music down begs you(r) / thoughts / you don't know / if this is love. The / hands held, defiant, to be truck-lynched kind of way / the unzipping Best Friend's pants kind of way the / lips wrapped around cocks kind of way [& forget the taste you'll get over it] but worst of all the imagine a future & you two / happily ever after kind of way / tell yourself you're no faggot—let that lie take you down this road. Another fifteen years 'til you're honest, & he's gone.

Muscle Memory: Parents fight. Hush now, child. Father wants the home long gone / Việt Nam—
Alternate reality where he never lost his daddy nor the colonnaded home nor the yellow flag
pinioned to soil never sown with steel like glass / shattered underfoot / rule one of gook homes—
take off your fucking shoes. Father never was a gardener but he plants / seeds grow unchecked in
abandoned homes / my worst fear: Mama in the mirror / you like / you ac/ex/cept / the younger
prettier version / whose name you can't know / they take the money / paper doesn't mix with blood
/ like water & oil but / shitty gardeners never water / never weed or / feed his crop makes it
through customs, these malnourished stalks / plaited into a noose wrapped around Mẹ's throat /
Mẹ: Northern word for Southern Má: Việt word for mother, mom, momma, ma. North—South—
Mother—Father / paired each makes my living room a free-fire-zone / momma, we are small
women & they are big men / I learned to fight from helicopters downed at Ấp Bắc & Bình Giã /
Marines starved at Khe Shan / the palace gates in Sài Gòn breached. Us fighting / skirmishes
small / arms hurled / plates / broken a dustpan over / dad's head / dragged up / stairs by mom's
hair / First things / first paragraph of an Army operations order: there's a reason the threat comes
/ before all / else there's a reason to / lace keys in your fist / make a flak vest of your teen / body /
there's a reason no one counts dead civilians. I learn who the enemy is every time.

A Tragedy: Best Friend signs a d-o-t-t-e-d l-i-n-e / marks a border be / tween you & him & an Army
/ at war / mother won't sign the papers / you are seventeen / & hate your country / you are /
seventeen & want to / die / for it anyway & / hold a knife to (y)our stomach / say you'll open / the
only door that that lets you back / inside, mother remembers / refuses still / fifteen years on you
tell her who you are / not the child at her breast / nor that teen boy / nor the camouflage that is
every man's skin, / but a woman / grown, like her / & blooded / & momma can refuse no more.

fiction

ON THEIR LIPS THE NAME OF GOD

This is the memory that stays with him as his blood abandons the body and life fades—this, the one comfort that will carry him into the next life. Dawran had waited beneath a mulberry tree in May of last year. He'd come to love mulberries in a small way—they'd always kept him company through the boredom of waiting. It was still cool in the mornings and evenings, the breeze shaking the branches, dropping the still tart clustered berries. So strange that trees bearing fruit must sacrifice their children to live. How an animal carries that seed away—the length of a kilometer, a province, a nation, to plant and bloom again. In this way, the child's sacrifice meant something. He'd liked that.

He remembers Zafar's simple house. Not more than a small compound with a low wall and one building, one shed. The gate opened, Zafar standing there in the vestibule with his daughter propped on his hip; the dim outline of a woman behind them. A handsome woman and child. Zafar put the girl down, kissed her once on each cheek, on the forehead, and on both cheeks again. He turned to his wife, and the woman smiled. The sight of Zafar's family brought Dawran thoughts of the future, of blooming. At least, that's how he likes to remember it—a smiling wife, a doted-upon child. Things he'd hoped to have one day, but never would.

Zafar took him up to the mountainside, where they could see the whole valley. They took a small bag. Some naan. Dried nuts and fruit. Rice. They had some work to do. Checking vantage points, watching the Americans and the government troops and police, drawing up maps of the improvements the Americans made to their little outpost. These soldiers were tired or lazy or scared, so they rarely ventured out, and the summer that followed was as quiet and peaceful as anyone could hope. Before they began their descent down the mountain, a pair of shepherds came across their path, offered them a little food and tea. They sat in a little basin in the foothills, where soil had accumulated over the years from all the sediment washed down from snow melts. While the flock grazed or huddled together or slept, the men sat around the fire, telling tall tales, reciting couplets of poetry, and resuscitating dead memories. They ate, drank tea, watched the half-disc moon crawl up the sky, trading places with the sun. The insects in the green valley below sang their song. Torch flies lit the marshy canal beds and mountain streams. A stray dog howled, and Dawran felt himself fortunate for his belly, now full with warm meat and gravy.

He remembers being thankful for Zafar, who'd had always been a patient eater. Methodical. Careful. And Dawran loved watching his mouth take some things whole, tear other things off in small bites, and seeing the thin film of grease form, his lips reflecting a little of all that moonlight. In the dark, his commander's skin seemed more like polished stone than flesh. More than that, he loved listening to Zafar speak. He told a story about a book his father had brought back from Russia, about a giant fish and the mad fisherman who'd pursued it. We do such insane things for love, he'd said, tracing the outlines of the mad seaman's obsession. He'd said it was love that'd driven him to madness, that he'd loved hunting the enormous fish, for it was the fish that gave him life, it was the fish that'd given him purpose.

Dawran remembers all the questions he'd had of the strange tale, questions that, when he gazed at Zafar, he knew he already the answers to. He had thought on that while the meal warmed his belly, and the fire dried the sweat from his clothes. Love deriving from purpose comforted him. It meant he could say he loved Zafar, this man who'd given him purpose, given his life meaning. And he'd learn how far that insane love would take him, but he'd stay loyal. He would slaughter a fat landlord with a knife, bomb his countrymen, and in his last living moments, watch his beloved commander flee from the field. He remains, above all things, loyal.

Even with the moon, they'd climbed high enough to not want to risk broken bones on their descent. So they spent the night there, camped with the shepherds around their little fire. They had only one blanket—Zafar's—and Dawran was happy to let him have it, despite the night's still chilly air. But the man told him not to be foolish, it was common practice for fighters—indeed a common practice among soldiers everywhere—to make spoons of their bodies and nestle close to share heat. He'd assented, curled himself in his commander's embrace, his body like that of an infant in the womb, and listened to Zafar's strong, steady breath, took in his musk—smelling of damp soil and leather and burnt powder—and fell drowsy to the steady metronome of Zafar's heart against his ribs. They slept the whole night through, neither man moving a centimeter from the other. Through every challenge, every moment of doubt, every difficult choice, Dawran remembers this night above all other nights. When the rooster woke the morning, Zafar shook Dawran awake. Soon, they heard the muezzin in the valley below singing the call to prayer. The two stood side by side, knelt in unison, their bodies bending as one, and on their lips, the name of God.

Originally published in the wrath bearing tree

poetry

TRANS GENITAL MUTILATION

I.

the knife on my clit is momma crying when the nightly news snuff films surveil

shoppers in sarajevo disappearing into hemic vapor

& me wanting to know why daddy used mommas head to bore a hole in the drywall

& why the american dream™ meant an empty pantry

bills left unpaid on the kitchen table / instant ramen for dinner with a bit of spam

again

i watched daddy skimming maggots from boiling noodles onto his tongue

so as not to waste free protein

the razor on my face is daddy cutting my mother tongue from my throat

& shoving our rapists' language between my gritted teeth

as if i could speak your filthy pig-latin with a clean accent

as if a gook could ever camouflage her hide as white

as the walls of the home daddy couldn't afford / but hurled momma's body into anyway

so why did my parents come to america

only to freeze every winter just to save pennies

and suffocate through summers with no water to bathe

was it for a childhood

where father loomed like american bombers overhead

momma screaming when the fist first connects

like air raid sirens raising the alarm too late

blood on the floor bodies that might've been saved

our rooms hemmed in bladed wire strategic hamlets

a concentration camp by a different name

the only gift momma had left—a story:

to avoid capture / to avoid rape, the sisters bit off their tongues

hands clutched, & leapt into the red river

drowning themselves to escape disgrace

i didn't learn anything from mother

the shiv on my throat is daddy dragging me by my hair into that dark room

he uses the weapon that made him a french quadron

& the act does what legionnaires have always done with captured women

rending my clit sawing off my tits wresting from me what life i can make

& he finally makes me the man i never wanted to be

when he finally flees / my home is a thousand reasons to hate myself

i thought the best way out was joining

II.

the army is the bayonet that blades from my chest the best little tits the veterans

administration is unwilling to supply

the most i can get—hooker clinics full of heroes of wars domestic

a hospital for uncle sam's trauma whores humping afghan mountains

seeding the soil with leaden depleted-uranium seed

counting kills hearts & minds sweep &

no clear conscious as a serial killer at twenty-three
my commander says if there were a button that killed every pashtun
he'd tape it down on my knees at the bullet's crack
my white uncle promises to pay off my college debt as long as i keep my head down
ass up lips strangling the barrel of my pistol round in the chamber safety off
three years later in the cancer ward i'll wish i pulled the trigger to stop the memory of
nonconsensual bottom surgery for a child cleft in twain
entrails painting a hundred meters of sand
villages kissed by fire / their starry-eyed lovers
left air struck bleeding from the ears
like in the stories momma told me when
she begged me not to sign that dotted line
i see her in another mother screaming over her gutted child
in the lung-shot teacher 's son clawing the dirt
wailing like she did that time she wouldn't sign & i ran from home
don't go please don't go my afghan comrades say / Sai Gon 1975
i find momma's eyes in every face & find another reason to hate myself again
she's the girl telling me i never should've come / she's the teen boy spitting at my feet
the children i'll never bear / my barren womb slinging rocks at up-armored convoys
she glares up at a sky infested with B-52s pregnant with orphan-makers
her hands working the fields feeding
kalashnikovs burying bodies bearing bombs tearing out her
broken heart watching limbless dead who don't know it yet
her shell-shocked cousin's nightmares wake the whole family

each time he punches the wall a splintered shard of psychic shrapnel lodges
in her body in her bones she knows that she can't sign away her teenage daughter
knowing her signature condemns me to make her a refugee in her own country once more

III.

blood money is the rusty needle that makes the husband stitch so i can be broken again

blue bloods smearing red stripes staining white sheets screaming battle cries

one nation under god is dead long live adam smith & his prophet ronald reagan

capital gains cream-pie trickle down my thighs

I wish I could explain why daddy used to vote republican

like it would put rice in our stomachs & bleach our skin

but forgot the party of profit learned its lessons from the connex corporation

shipping our boys budweiser & bullets & dow chemical catastrophe

on next-day prime delivery so they'd never forget they swore

to support & defend a constitution enshrining

our racial caste system thirteenth amendment / three-fifths compromise

our own humanity when corporations are the only people who got their bailouts

it's so easy to sell yourself when you know your pimp will

pay for college & put a roof over your head & feed you & give you all your shots

uncle sam put me on the streets & put the needle in my veins track-marks of

the american dream™ trafficking martyrs / ads for black lives that matter only for profit

a thousand 9mm lynchings / a thousandfold more back in bondage & god bless our

pinkertons rubber bullets barrage & baton protecting the peace (if peace means property)

momma used to tell me to keep my head down always smile never speak your mother tongue
for if they discover what you are nixon will order more strikes on hai phong
i didn't know what she meant until this fatherland reached up my skirt
china doll walking while trans just a pair of legs catcall alarm fearing acid in the face
she fled one war just for us to fight another another & another more
i won't be surprised when i die in the same tax bracket as momma when she came here
& work started at midnight yellow gloves round toiletbowls knees bruising the tile floor
to survive in the west is to remember that white supremacy
isn't a burning cross on the lawn
but momma crying into her hands when the last paycheck won't go far enough
to survive in the west is to remember that genocide
isn't a gas camp chamber
but your teacher correcting your english when you recite the pledge of allegiance
to survive in the west is to remember that capitalism
isn't a monocled millionaire
but the men on the screen paying you fifty dollars to eat your own cum on camera
to survive the west is to outsource your body from your soul
& make a plantation of your body
& a colony of your heart
& never mind the policeman

IV

in my head i can't tell the difference between / cops & the taliban / my rapist & my family /
a man who tells me he loves me & the politician asking for my vote

& isn't that some kind of castrating blade?

you want it to be over & stare at that dot on the ceiling & pray he won't kill you when he's done

but the bank account's bleeding out & the helos aren't coming

no one is coming, soldier

cowboy up god is dead

embrace the suck

darling, you are your own mutilating touch

you don't know what you want / let men want for you

you invite them inside you / you, your wounds plastered with in personals:

SINGLE ASIAN TGIRL LOOKING FOR LOVE

YOU: CUTE PATIENT KIND

LET'S SEE WHERE IT GOES?

(you keep accidentally writing poems

when you should ask

for what you want

to fall

in a simple fool's love, but loving the line

you mistake aesthetics

for passion seeking the right words / if only the words translated to—his downy nape cracked

lip his breath on glass / but these stupid little words bar the way)

SINGLE ASIAN TGIRL

DOESN'T KNOW WHAT SHE WANTS
BUT WILL TAKE ANYTHING SHE CAN GET

(your body is a pale tropical flower, trans
planted in wet soil shower your thin limbs sing to him as you
would a child—though he'll bear
none cursed & uprooted
why can't you just ask for the one thing you
need: him, fucking you apart & let's
pretend for one night that he'll tend to you in the morning)

SINGLE ASIAN TRANS GIRL
BAD AT RELATIONSHIPS
GOOD AT SEX

(good was never descriptive / for him you'll arch your back
dinner unmade every mess you've made
splayed on his table you promise nothing but the sound of hands taking
for him you are a bird's bones
under a closing fist ask & you'll come take what he wants
but please ask nicely)

SINGLE ASIAN TGIRL
UP FOR ANYTHING

(REALLY)

(if you told him

you were easy, would he read between the lines

he broke to create new meaning?

& how many will read a poem when all you want

is teeth on your neck / your skin flogged wet / your darkest recesses

full of him & you, shattered at his feet?

you'll give him the blade, & tell him

now bury it in my flesh)

EXOTIC ASIAN TGIRL

AVAILABLE 4 HOOKUPS

IN BKLYN ME SO FUCKING HORNY BABY

(if you write enough poetry you can fool yourself into living a life

where you wake each day to a different dawn, a different lover—each a lighthouse

a flame / a lamp against whose side you fling your moth body

you can fool myself into tasting something wet & alive, fool your fragile frame

say his fire won't

devour you beating wings)

V

my body is the operating theater men pumping roofie gas in my lungs so I won't remember

gifts of filling of lengthening of

gasping proclamation

of softening dewy pored

screaming into the pillow

when they like you back,

they,

like you,

like you,

best friends scent still on the sheets we shared

wondering whether we'll be the ones who make it out alive

but i still wonder if i'll ever be

as pretty as she says

no matter how many times

she tells me

i am

lyric essay

THE INSURGENT IS A POEM

I

the insurgent is a poem in the way that poetry cannot be written

nor governed by the barrel of a rifle

instead poetry is an ambush

improvised literary device waiting in shade

the poem becomes

the forest watching for the moment

your mind drifts

when the sergeant drops

lung-shot

ribcage hugging

tearful organs

too tight grasping for voice

bystander trees bear witness to sweat-slick salted-skin against steel-cored fists

the insurgent is a poem the way poetry has made me cry into my hands

on the subway when I read the lines printed on my palm in blood

the train car

is the steel bird that takes him home

I laced my fingers into his fingers

and for once in my life a man needed me

and the poem knows

she isn't enough to make him to remember
your fingers between his fingers
your hands diking his flooding limbs
you didn't stop crying until the helos crossed the horizon
even when the colonel told you to stop weeping and be a man
because there are no girls in combat zones
your sergeant never speaks to you again
but how do you tell him what you are in language men could ever understand?

II

the insurgent is a poem and yes there is such a thing as bad poetry
lines too on the nose polemic pretending to be lyric
the first time you wore a dress a man whispers faggot in your ear
poetry
smile baby / I love your body / my dick is a lesbian too
poetry
are you listening / do you hear me / come back here you ugly bitch / stupid whore / filthy cunt
somehow this too is fucking poetry
so if you wove their words into exquisite corpse
write what their eyes sing instead—I want I yearn I ache I hurt I cry
I hate myself so much I need to make you afraid
but how do you talk the jumper off the ledge
cut the noose
jam the gun

blunt the knife between his legs
the poem is an insurgent you write alive because they won't let you live on your feet
they—one woman's terrorist—become another man's freedom fighter
but you can't write poetry by the letter of laws scarred across your wrists
the insurgent can be a poem written by a poet who hates poetry
you watch a thousand little boys in men's clothes charge up potemkin steps in january
to suck bolshivek bullets from romanov carcasses
your world awash in little boys
little boy for president
little boy shoots his toy car into space
little boy wins 99% of the vote
and no one is surprised
little boy insider trading changing the rules when he crashes daddy's stock market
into your ghetto / knowing daddy will buy him another anyway
little boy telling you relax baby just the tip / I promise to pull out / I swear I'm clean
democratic people's republic of little boys having another ICBM measuring contest
little boys for judges saying t(he)y can't sit by and let another little boy's life be ruined
because he made the immature mistake
of getting caught taking from a girl what wasn't his to take
they kick and scream toy soldier tantrums
make the rules / no girls allowed / in the playhouse popping cherry bombs on civilian targets
who gets to stick their model rocket in your toybox
so what does it matter if the glaciers melt and a million die sick and boys playing cops
sit on our necks and rob us of breath

and the only time a cop solves a rape is on TV

boys will boys because the only real men exist in fiction

japanese comics titled BOYS LOVE that only girls ever read

and the hero only saves the maiden if she saves herself

the insurgent is a pick-up-artist poem knocking at your door

how big is your dick?

I'm a top you know

you're so beautiful I want to fuck you in half

do you like to be choked?

you little slut you'll do what I say

a chorus of girls just like you warns

your time is a conscript casualty bleeding in no man's land

you: hungry widow nothing left but

empty medal penniless pension and rotting in his zinc coffin

and your body a countryside left barren after his defeated army marches over you

your sisters sing their warnings but no watchfire ever stemmed a tide

the insurgent is a poem and poems can lie

like how boys wear blue and girls wear pink and boys don't fuck other boys unless

they make those boys into girls into boys into whatever lies help them sleep at night

and best friend says [if one of us had been a girl it would've been love]

if one of us had been a girl it wouldn't be gay

it wouldn't be gay if his was the lance thrust into you

and real men are hollow adjectives they hold to your head

take what you want but please don't [hurt me]

tell it to your father when he slips in your bed
drown in what happens next
your father who smiles when he sees the towers fall
because America left his country for dead
and all you see is a scared teenage boy family forever lost
watching his home burn on the horizon
remember boys don't cry
daddy never talked about the war
real men don't weep don't speak and if you do
you're a pussy like the rest of the beta cucks
but they still play with dolls like you
reach up your skirt / muffle your breath / pluck off your limbs / tourniquet your neck
you / g.i. jane versus / firecracker IED / magnifying glass shaped charge / slingshot kalashnikov
you / p.o.w. under little boy's enhanced interrogation techniques
you / disabled veteran in line to die in little boy's cancer ward
the insurgent is a poem who doesn't know what he's about refusing every note to touch
until something tender and inevitable turns—
what if
what if
what if
I made you
make me
a toilet
your dumpster

your slave

what if

I wore women's underwear

lacy bras and tiny thongs mesh and silk and satin

and hose with the back-seam or chequerboard nets capturing the thighs

make me [they sing] make me beautiful and pretty and soft just like you

a-line dresses and wigs and miniskirts and acrylics and mascara than never runs

imagine being

wanted and imagine / wanting to be wanted so badly you'll

imagine being a vessel into which anyone might pour their yearning ache

but here is where they end and you begin again

you: fuckdoll never to be seen in public

you: perfect wings in the corner of your eyes dark shadow and blush to hide behind

you: product on the shelf / shrink wrap suffocation / the customer is always right

your waistband so tight you lose three sizes

tits smashed against the sternum to camouflage a lack of cleavage

you in the mirror, wondering how many times before your labor pays your debts

so write them the same lines

boys will be boys will be boys and nothing else but

how do you write them a poem in language men understand

when you think he's a friend / wait for the moment he pins you to your couch

how can you write them a poem they'll hear

when you think he's in love / wait for the moment he chokes you without asking

how can you refuse surrender when he puts his blade to your throat

when you think your words won't stop him / don't wait to bellow no
and bite off your tongue before he takes that too

III

the insurgent is a poem because powerful men rarely write poetry

preferring prose its grammar its rules

its trickle down law and order genocides in bed stuy / food deserts and collars around our
necks so tight / when a man overdosed on your block your neighbors watched wondering
whether to call the cops instead of an ambulance / it's the lash on our backs sending us into

submissive states so deep / your vietnamese aunt who fled to the west spits on refugees
she used to be decades ago / freezing on their quisling barbed wire borders / don't talk to me
about ukraine when the same savages who'd sacked rome and wiped their asses with libraries /
throw molotovs into our proverbial jungle to make refugees twice over again / so when you

hear the words western civilization use them in your poem as another name for genocide

the insurgent is a poem because she must learn to fight without the master's weapons

drafts miss their mark / your aim unsure / your clumsy hands fumbling explosive words

you must spite your dead leave their bodies but take the ammo to feed your poems

despite the mnemonic pogrom in your blood that is your only inheritance

in spite of three million more murdered on democracy's dime

march on through this manuscript / fail / fail and fail again

as many times as many lives as it takes to write something true

the insurgent is a poem our masters keep out of our grasp

there's nothing more dangerous than

a gook

a faggot

a coolie

a tranny

a fucking woman

with a book

it's no wonder your students don't read poetry / because gun control began

so former slaves could never arm their rage / so smuggle them lyric and form and pen

make them cadres of dreamers / of memory / of desires not yet won

but don't poison them with genocidal hope that they too can have the american dream™

make your classroom a training camp / and damn the drones and their civilian-seeking missiles

teach them poetry is rebellion the way grandma taught you

how to bring down an empire with nothing but want

in turn your students teach you each day

where to hide their memories among their tenement tunnel networks should they fall

they take aim and name the policeman and executive the politician and the general the

profiteer

the insurgent is a poem who dies in the millions

but scrawl their couplets—last wills to read

so that every soul the enemy cuts down

inspires ten more to take their place

until a flood of odes tell us who we are

we who bear the children

we who harvest the wheat

we who bake the bread

we who feed the village
we who build our homes
from which no empire can profit nor claim nor raze

IV

the insurgent is a poem of shrapnel in your flesh
only words in the end yet her wounds still open
she tunnels through your veins
cuts a road across your landscape
no bombs to dislodge her long
march to your interior
she is a decade of you
finger on the trigger
back against the wall
checking and double-checking
the locks every night
the insurgent is a poem / an ode / to every bad coping mechanism
she's the hollow in your chest at the end of every one night stand
the thrill of a man in your bed / you: hoping this bad decision is your last
you: war-junkie looking for the next best thing
you: balled up on the kitchen floor after he's done with you
don't come to the poem crying because boys will be boys
she won't keep the drugs out of your veins to forget the men
and no matter how many you'd killed

they come again

the poem gives you useless things

the man you killed—a scattered purse

a wad of cash

comb missing teeth

a bag of hash

pressed-tin snuff box

folding scissors

cracked mirror

and two grenades

write the poem from the corpses you'd made

dog-fed-field / jawbone shard

shot in the neck / fleshy flowered

exit wound / cock in the dirt

one friend's garden / crimson stain where he fell

skin fused to bark / hairs somehow unburnt

the pink mist of waters / that once flowed through the heart

every friend you made / your country left to die

his wife's seething eyes / her eyes / her eyes

before you take him away / bag on the head

stripped bare / hosed down / full cavity search

newlywed bride / with nothing to bury

her husband's remains / a lonely charred shoe

mother like / your mother won't look

you in the eye / her son smeared gore
civilian casualties counted / as enemy KIA
enemy at your back / singing the star-spangled banner
each a poem hidden beneath the skin
one last turn: when all you have is a rabble of hungry yesterdays begging to be fed
how could you break the grammar of your body
of muscle memory / reflexive friendly fire
to feed the starving host
a decade on and you can't get the lines out of your head
once you stood in a graveyard green night-eyes watching
american boots trample the stones
how many generations rest in this paradise
if you knew who replaced the colors
when the jade alabaster sable and scarlet
banners fade will it be when the next war comes
from the field of ghosts you steal this line
[tell spring not to come this year
because the grass of your country
grows not green but red with blood]
pray—Great Reviser Peace be upon Her
write me a shield to stay each trust
write me your sword to feed to Her forge
fashion this fury into the tools I lack
let me resurrect the sons I took

let them sing their stories

listen please

when they tell you their stories pray

let me remember every syllable

when they finally speak their names

V

the insurgent is a poem an ode to your defeats

when you find her wet on your cheeks tell your lover

you're sick of writing about war

let her reach inside your surrender

and suture your amputated past

to her perfumed room

her teeth for needles

your clothes on the floor

her lips for thread

the morning's exit wounds

bled through her gauzy curtains

but the insurgent is a poem who rebuilds you every night

from every pain a broken mirror / every loss a fratricide

soldier brother drunk in the dark / soldier uncle punching walls in his sleep

refugees falling to their deaths / from plane in bagram / a chopper in sai gon

and A fucks you / but does not love you / does not bandage your bloody eyes

when the war pins you down / tugs at your panties / and pries your legs apart

and daddy's on the last boat out / leaving your interpreter behind
he watches helicopters hurl themselves / off the north tower to escape the flames
you put the needle in V's arm knowing tomorrow she'll hate you
as much as the children by the roadside hurling stones at your armored column
and every man who gropes you on the subway
is your father slipping into your bed once your brother's asleep
and you can't see the man you killed in that fallow field his milky eyes catching dust
without seeing your father's hands on your hips
and your lover cries on your bed because no matter how loud she screamed
you couldn't hear her through your pain
so the insurgent is a poem that hides away your love
when love is an act of terror / and christ is on a watchlist / and your pantry is always empty / and
your bills have gone unpaid / and another student's brother was just shot down in the street / and
art will never feed you / so you take your ass to market but come up empty handed / and little boys
in the statehouse legislate you out of existence / and every cop is a reminder that your body is just
capitol / and this all makes you the child your father dragged up the stairs by her hair again and
again / and no matter how hard you try your country is still the blackout-blank memory of daddy
and you in that room / because no matter how loud you scream / no one hears the fucking poem
you tell your lover you're sick of writing about revolutions that'll never come
you: snot in the nose tears on the sheets face in your palms and screaming
for the war in your head to end
so the poem is an insurgent who digs up the love she'd hidden
this cache of joy to arm you / awake beside your lover / night fused to neon light
in tangled limbs for shelter / bite on the shoulder / ecstatic inside one another

camouflaged among clothes cast aside / pink and oche pallet / vanity mirror
and no matter how many times you find the invader / she'll sing your farewell
arm you / with sun breaking through the dark ringlets of her hair / her laugh / their smile
her skin on your skin / their scent in your hair / her murmur in your ear
she is the comrade at your shoulder / the cadre teaching you the right letters
to say farewell / say you'll return / say goodbye beautiful love
she is the photo kept by your breast / the armor strapped to your chest
she is the medic / hands to your breast / lips to your lips
she give you air and voice and language / her softest weapons
but only enough to keep you drawing breath

Dahlia Damoiselle

U.S. Military Veteran, Educator, Sex Worker, US

Dahlia Damoiselle is a queer, transgender writer, educator and child of war refugees of Vietnamese heritage. Her military service while deployed to Afghanistan with the US Army's 10th Mountain Division deeply radicalized her, and she returned home to pursue academic and creative work centered on legacies of violence. She has published in *Blunderbuss Magazine*, *McSweeney's*, *The Nation*, *Foreign Policy*, *Time Magazine*, *The Daily Beast*, *The Cut*, and *Columbia Journal*, among others. As a performer, she seeks to normalize trans sexuality and desire in pornography. Currently, she serves as an Adjunct lecturer in American Studies, writing, and literature in New York City. She also serves as an assistant poetry editor for *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*, an online space established by combat veterans, and dedicated to the publication of writing by those who have experienced military, economic, and social violence or their consequences. She lives with her two cats in Brooklyn, NY.