

MY NEW WAR ESSAY

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Will have the words *shit* and *fuck* everywhere. Also *Jesus Christ* and *goddammit to hell* and *Please God No. Shit and fuck* will be used when describing the action of war, the bullets and bombs. The others when describing the aftermath of the first.

My new war essay will be amorphous, random forms in morning fog. It will show shadows in sunlight, the moon ringed with frost on a cold night while oil fires bloom skyward, phantom shapes shimmering the stars. There will be cumulus clouds over the heartland, snowcapped mountains, rivers running to oceans.

Early in the essay there will be clubs, hurled rocks, then swords and spears. There will be walls and moats and then castles, gunpowder, cannons, flintlocks, repeating rifles. The industry of war will continue to grow, until there are all kinds of bombs, landmines, missiles that lock onto targets the size of small children, and men who stand around harrumphing and crowing and pleased, believing they have achieved something good with every new discovery, every invention of war.

There will be nothing good in my new war essay. There will be no birdsong before first light, no blue afternoons so beautiful it hurts to look at them. No stars flung across a night sky. There is no time for that. There will only be cold mud and dry dust. Freezing rain and snow high in the mountains, a thousand-degree heat in the depths of the desert. Just thunder and lightning, earthquakes, hurricanes, smog. Some of it will be real. The rest only imagined, or caused.

Fuck. Shit. Goddammit to hell.

There will be TV screens in my new war essay, lots of TV screens. Some of them will show soldiers in the streets of foreign cities, bullets ricocheting off buildings in little splinters of concrete. Others grainy night-vision litanies of anti-aircraft streaking skyward and the great green glowing of bombs mushrooming in the distance. Still others will show troops returning while people wave flags, and still others — though they will be hard to find — will show bodies bloated in the streets.

My new war essay will be covered with blood, and half-way through some kid will come home missing a leg and everyone

will pretend it is still there until finally an old friend — the closest friend, the one who will later get drunk and press the heels of his hands hard against his cheekbones — will make a joke about Ho-palong Cassidy and everyone will laugh a little uneasily.

In my new war essay there will be lots of rape. Plenty of pain. More murder and mayhem than stars in the exploded sky. There will be cracks and splinters, rocks and sand. Ricochets and high-pierced whining, the dull drone of engines, the thud of bombs off in the distance. There will be lots of bombs, lots of bullets, lots of flies, for it seems there are always flies in any war essay, and my new one will be no different — flies then, crawling on unseeing eyelids that shine like dull glass. Flies humming and buzzing like the paired planes overhead or the electric wires hissing in the street.

There will be white space in my new war essay. For reflection. A brief respite from the bombs and bullets careening around inside our skulls.

But not much. Because with too much reflection, the idea of war makes no sense. And my new war essay — any war essay — has to make sense.

There will be no marches in my new war essay, no drums, no songs being sung, unless they are forlorn cadences about soldiers lying dead in the rain, or bands on flag-filled streets echoing off the buildings, martial music striking up from speakers mounted on a military jeep. Any speeches will be kept short. They will confirm the need of what we are doing. They will provoke our patriotism and prove that providence has guided us here.

My new war essay will not slink through the streets like a dog. It will come brightly painted with slogans, and men in gray suits will cheer my new war essay from pulpits while people below them believe the words they spin into existence. There will be lots of flags. All colors, all sizes, all countries, little stick flags waving or jewelry flags pinned to lapels or bullet-ridden flags hanging limply from rusted poles above walls where twisting wires and broken shards of glass keep out the uninvited. People will salute the flags and bow to them because at the heart of war are flags, symbols of separation between us and them.

My new war essay will be set somewhere far away. (I don't want a new war essay where we live, do you?) So it will be set in Afghanistan or Iraq or Sierra Leone or along the Mexican-American border where carrion birds sit on telephone poles, waiting, while

the dead lie in the streets and the occasional outburst of automatic weapons echoes and whines.

Shit. Fuck. Goddamnit to hell.

There will be no human interest stories in my new war essay because war has no interest in humans. There will be dreams, but all of them will end with lightning, or fire, some physical manifestation of what we already know.

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My new war essay will use the words *freedom* and *democracy* and *liberation* and the phrases *maintaining order* and *stabilizing the region* and *pacification*. It will be named "Operation New War Essay" and that name will capture the hearts and minds of the people on our side, while showing us what we have to do to the people on the other side. It is a name chosen for its ability to strengthen our resolve and steel our softened hearts for the job that lies ahead.

It will be contradictory. We will fight for peace. We will kill to save lives. We will destroy so that we can rebuild. It will proclaim to be an essay about peace. It will go so far as to proclaim that all war is about peace, and in my new war essay there will be many who believe that.

Of course there will be hatred, and misunderstanding. There will be fistfights, and more curses — shit! fuck! goddamn! — and screaming and things being thrown. There will be people shaking their fists in anger and banging tabletops, their eyes as hard and wild as the sentences they speak. We'll all be able to find, in my new war essay, reasons to blow up people based on ethnicity, race, religious belief, sexual orientation, hair color or eye color or skin color, which hand they favor, if they like chocolate or strawberry ice cream more, the Steelers or the Cowboys, sweet potatoes or regular potatoes or no potatoes at all; and of course, you, the reader, will know that I am having a bit of fun at your expense, but you will also realize that many of the examples I come up with are just as silly as any of the other hundreds of thousands of reasons we have gone to war in the past.

There will be missing limbs in my new war essay. And missing children. Missing husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers. There will be missing teeth, and missing holes in people's lives, long stretches of time where they only worried about surviving, or worried whether the characters in my new war essay would

ever come home. Buildings will miss windows and walls. Cities will miss running water, and the children who miss food in the areas of my new war essay where food is missing will run through streets missing buildings with their stomachs distended and flies swirling around them and carrion birds waiting. My new war essay will be repetitive. It will show the same images over and over, mostly death, places where even life is now missing, great swaths of land missing what once lived there, before my new war essay was written.

My new war essay will not make people feel bad though. Because it is only an essay. The images may be real, but once we finish reading it we can put it down. We can walk away, and forget about the bullets and bombs and missing limbs and missing lives, and even if we do become overwhelmed by the words that are not written in my new war essay — the words that can never be written about war because there really are no words that can ever capture what war is — we will be bolstered by my new war essay because more and more and more my new war essay will come to assert, again and again, that it is right, and is always right, and always has been right. It has to, to believe in itself. It has to deny any logic — it has to drown out any opposition. For there will come a time when someone will question my new war essay, and then the smoke lying heavy in the streets will become not so much a screen as a silhouette. And then there will come a dull silence hovering over everything, all quiet but for a rusty wailing in the distance. And then the war will begin.