

“The Most Urgent of Dispatches”: *One Language* by Anastasia Taylor-Lind, Sheffield, Smith|Doorstop Books, 2022

By Sarah Montin<sup>1</sup>



In his poem “Resistance”, written in March 2022, Simon Armitage draws on the collective memory of previous wars to comment on the recent Russian invasion in Ukraine. Quoting Philip Larkin’s celebrated “MXCXIV”, the Poet Laureate inscribes his response to the conflict in Ukraine in that eternal palimpsest that is war poetry:

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It's war again: a family  
 carries its family out of a pranged house  
 under a burning thatch.

The next scene smacks  
 of archive newsreel: platforms and trains  
 (never again, never again)

Like Armitage, unable to escape the spectre of the “archive newsreel” in an era overcome with the visual, where poetry, and in particular war poetry, has to compete with the aura of the ubiquitous screen, several contemporary British poets have recently offered reflections on war through the mixed media of poetry and photography — most notably Armitage's own *Still* (2016), “A Poetic Response to Photographs of the Battle of the Somme”, and, in a more intimate fashion, Jenny Lewis' *Taking Mesopotamia* (2014) and Seni Seneviratne's *Unknown Soldier* (2019) which both explore the link between remembered wars and photographs drawn from family archives.

Anastasia Taylor-Lind's 2022 debut collection *One Language*, is similarly premised on the confrontation of poetry and photography, though its object is contemporary war, with a specific focus on the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war in the wake of the 2014 Maidan Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Exploring different forms of violence gathered under the banner “one language”, the collection is primarily concerned with capturing the horrific brutality of war as well as personal evocations of intrafamilial abuse, while inviting reflection on more metaphorical forms of violation – namely the violence of photojournalistic practices and the ethical ambiguities of the (professional and amateur) photographer's role, showcased in the striking cover of the book featuring a reel of people crying as they take selfies in front of the evacuation of the Davikank Monastery in Nagorno-Karabakh (November 2020). In an era of civilian war poets, reacting to images of distant, mediatized wars, this collection written by a first-hand, non-combatant witness of conflict, is a rare and interesting feat, all the more original because it is written from the point of view of a female photojournalist – a challenge which Taylor-Lind addresses explicitly in her poems. Covering the various zones of combat she photographed over her career (Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, Donetsk, Eastern Ukraine in 2018, Ajdabiya, Jalalabad, Afghanistan in 2013, Libya in 2011), her

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the photographs featured in the collection also appeared in Taylor-Lind's 2023 exhibition “Ukraine; photographs from the Frontline” at the Imperial War Museum.

collection offers a renewed form of poetry of witness, while documenting the specificities of 21st century warfare, outside of the battlefield.

*One Language* elegantly borrows from the aesthetic of the army scrapbook, where posed, colour photos feature sporadically alongside prosaic verse vignettes, which take over the “telling of the story” where the camera cannot, or will not, go. Taylor-Lind’s terse, spare style, mingles matter-of-fact descriptions with rare flashes of lyricism, briefly transfiguring the warscape before bursting back to grim reality:

Our tyre blows at dusk on a dirt road and Zory changes it.  
Chainsaws murmur and woodcutters’ flashlights  
are constellations of fireflies on the dark hillside  
as Armenians loot the land for winter wood. (18.10)

Divided into three parts, “Field Notes”, “Stories” and “Stories No One Wants to Hear”, the collection offers a mixture of timed, verbal snapshots akin to war dispatches and longer, more haunting portraits of war victims, followed by autobiographical accounts of the poet’s own history of violence, in a fertile intermingling of macro and micro history. Like the poems attentive to the mundane details of war (a woman packing her fur coat, Russian peacekeepers taking selfies), the photographs offer snatches of everyday joy and tragedy in war (a table set for celebration, the picture of a young boy on a grave), working on visual clichés without ever falling into the banal. At the heart of this collection lies the photojournalist’s reflection on her own artistic practices and the ethical limits of war photography, offering an often ironic and disillusioned metacommentary on the world of media and its appetite for “newsworthy stories”. Poetry, by contrast, is perceived as form of autonomous, pure language concerned with the singular, which escapes the multiple smoothing frames (military, mediatic, financial, historical, institutional) which govern war photography. In this, Anastasia Taylor-Lind follows a growing trend among photojournalists who attempt to go against the perceived depersonalization of war photography, by offering a contextual commentary, a subjective testimony, running alongside their work – here, most strikingly, in the form of poetry. “Early on, I thought I might like to be a war poet when I grew up, like Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen” says Anastasia Taylor-Lind in an interview, a youthful aspiration whose traces are to be found in the language of her poems ringing with Sassoonisms, and, more fundamentally, in the high romantic celebration of poetic language as the sole medium of the

“truth untold” of war, as Wilfred Owen so famously put it: “I mean the truth untold, The pity of war, the pity war distilled” (*Strange Meeting*).

In “Making War Poetry Contemporary”, Rainer Emig concluded that postmodern war poetry can only take the shape of metapoetry, commenting endlessly on the impasses of war writing, or “post war poetry, in the sense of already dealing with cultural and media fallout of conflicts.”<sup>3</sup> *One Language* shows us this statement must be complexified: while writing in the tradition started with the WWI war poets and inscribing herself in the undeniable palimpsest that constitutes modern war poetry, Taylor-Lind offers a new form of critical, transmedial, testimonial poetry, rejuvenating the canon of war poetry and opening up its practices for the 21st century.

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<sup>3</sup> Rainer Emig, *Making War Poetry Contemporary*, in Erik Martiny, *A Companion to Poetic Genre*, London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2021, 522.