



9/11's endless sorrow replaced with celebration?

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal
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While writing this article for Mother's Day and poetry, I got side-tracked.

"So what else is new?" sigh mothers everywhere. "Yes, what else," murmur parents and poets and young people on the battlefield and old people in a farm field. Dog-walkers and bargain-hunters.

Everyone has too much life to tend to. Everyone is side-tracked. But this week people stopped and turned around. Osama bin Laden is dead.

Like millions the world over, I was staggered by this news when I caught the ticker-taped words scrolling soundlessly across a restaurant's TV monitor. In the room where I stood, a powerful silence bloomed, followed by excitement and shouts of "Yes!"

It is not easy to take in Osama bin Laden's death. The tragedies he orchestrated not only killed thousands, but have traumatized too many people. I don't know how to write my sentence: Thousands of people? Hundreds of thousands? Hundreds of millions?

It is hard to reconcile our endless sorrow with the glee that surrounded news of his death. Our national emotions are complex.

My imagination responds to this event by going interior, balancing on stepping stones, as if to cross a treacherous current. The Twin Towers billow smoke, a cell phone's dial pad goes dark. My imagination conjures Osama bin Laden's visage in death.

Then my thoughts go to my children's faces—one, two, three, four—circa 2001. Guiltily I wonder if I have any right to grieve for them.

I did not lose them. But their world suffered a tremendous shock. Our nation's tragedy is that a generation of young people has grown up habituated to the cruel vocabulary of international terrorism.

Almost ten years ago, in my toddler's gym class I was told the news of 9/11. Several parents cried mutely. Yet we carried on with clapping games and songs.

Across town, I would learn, two of my children watched from their school desks as the second plane exploded into its target. My eldest daughter, expecting my granddaughter, called to say she got the job.

No one, no matter how well he or she deals with trauma, says the poet Carolyn Forché, can leave trauma behind. People do not live “through” trauma but forever in its aftermath. A person’s experience is part of who that person is—like a comet made distinct by the bright ghost of its tail.

Before the U.S. operation and bin Laden’s assassination was announced, I was trying to write about motherhood—how parenthood leads one to understand “otherness”—and what it means to be responsible for another being.

Bearing a child and bonding with a child, it seems to me, is just a step away from bearing responsibility for your wider community—for strangers in need, no matter their geography, economic circumstance, or ethnicity.

"Our relation to others [is] one of infinite obligation," Carolyn Forché argues in her discussion of “poetry as witness” in this month’s issue of “Poetry” magazine.

In her article, Forché quotes the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas: “The self comes into being through the address of the other.”

I was struck when I read a statement by a man who suffered third degree burns in his escape from the tower: "I just can't find it in me to be glad one more person is dead," he said.

Al Qaida and Osama bin Laden have dealt immeasurable harm to the people of the world. In the aftermath of that harm and suffering, perhaps our nation has gained strength and a more nuanced vision of people outside our borders.

To dissolve borders and create bonds is an impulse of motherhood—and the impulse of poetry, as Maggie Rowe and Amanda Newell show in these poems. Rowe’s “Rassouli’s Madonna” explores the strength and miracle of the mother-child bond, while Newell’s “April” deals with a tragic loss by examining the cycle of growth that follows.

April

The first hard rain of spring beats against
the window like small fists. I lie in bed
all night after labor, waiting

to go home. A cart rattles down the halls
of the NICU as the nurses change shifts.
The 6 a.m. news flashes today’s weather—

more rain. When I am discharged,
my husband wheels me to the car. I cling
to what I have been allowed to keep:

a striped blanket, an ID bracelet,
and four Polaroids. I doze until we cross
the Bay to the Eastern Shore.

Last month, I watched snow geese settle
in the fields, disturbing winter's calm
with their insistent babble.

Now they are gone. Soon the farmers
will till again. Then plant.

--*Amanda Newell*

Rassouli's Madonna
"The Voyager"

There's something lacy going on
In the skirts
Which makes me think
The picture's all skirts
the light of the mother
leading
and, nestled in her petticoats
a blue child sleeping
forming its gold
in the folds of the mother.
There's a horizon too
outside, and perhaps
whatever's beyond it
the real source of light,
but the light of the mother
is in the foreground
layered with the quiet
in which a baby grows
wrapped in lace,
in velvet folds,
the baby's eyes closed
for now
and, for now
the mother's eyes open.

--*Maggie Rowe*

Amanda Newell is the author of “Fractured Light” (Broadkill Press, 2010), winner of the 2010 Dogfish Head Chapbook prize. “April” originally appeared in the journal, “Poet Lore.” **Maggie Rowe** is the author of “Every Mother Moves to a New Country” (Finishing Line Press, 2011) available at <http://www.finishinglinepress.com/catalog.htm>

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You can listen to an April 23, 2011 podcast of these three poets reading poems and talking about writing at <http://www.artsdel.org/podcasts/default.shtml>