“To a Friend Dying of Cancer in a War Zone,” “Spring Offensive,” “’Paramilitary,’” “The Secret of Stealth,” and “Summit Summary” (poems)

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To a Friend Dying of Cancer in a War Zone

Fatigue—a word in English meaning more than tired or exhausted. Last summer your impassioned heart, Drago, your energy, unsettled me like sudden electricity, a jolt of love ten times the strength of men. Tonight I’m searching for that love again.

29 March 1999
Spring Offensive

*So little cause for carolings....*
—*Thomas Hardy*

The birds keep singing in the dark
as undeterred as Englishmen
in Africa; my neighbors quiet—
sound asleep—I lie here stark
and fast, near the millennium,
bewildered and as unconsolated
by all the things I thought I knew
as empires by their allies. Still,
this music fills my room, unspoiled
as though it were the one thing true
my country hasn’t tried to kill
or bind into its vast regime.
If I, too, could only sing, instead
of tossing dumbly through the night—
anxious to exorcize this dream
and rest in peace in my own bed—
I might not dread the morning light,
dread finding out what new assault
was launched in darkness from the sky
against whomever’s next in line
to be disposed of. So who’s at fault,
then, these exalting birds, or I?
Cowering in my own design

of arrogance, hung on the air,
I’m stuck, the victim of their song
(whether propaganda or prayer)
insisting nothing can go wrong,
and nothing I do can defy it.
“Paramilitary”

Is it like a faked orgasm,
adopting the same rigor,
the same artificial ecstasy
of that kind of power,
with its “clearly defined objective”—rushing

alongside the rest of us, we
who plod on, night after
night, week in, week

out, wedding ourselves to
a state we call, for lack
of anything better, “identity”—

a private, separate force
that says, I know what I need.
And I want nobody else
telling me when to put
forward, what rules to play by.
From an instinct no one

learns at school, how easily
I come to claim my prize,
pushing around whomever

I please. And who dares not
believe I’m real? For the sheer
hell of it, I sound out the part

more than the part itself, a
flash of a fantasy, a limit
others can only aspire to, lying
to prove there’s nothing
to mastering this or any art
but to sweat it out on your own.
The Secret of Stealth

for Adam Puslojic

What I don’t understand somehow
about the obscene pun on “Big Mac”
we saw scribbled across the U.S.
Embassy wall in Belgrade—Vi imate
mek, a mi tvrd—something to do with
the flaccid penis Serbs think of as
America, applies, too, to those bombers
tooling invisibly through an empty sky,
those black hawks we praise as heroic
in their removal. It’s like the guy
who charms the pants off the ladies
but never pulls his own zipper down:
Who are we fooling by sending them?

We are not at war with a faceless enemy
down there, hacking children apart
cool as you please, caught red-handed
in our blue sights, digitally targeted,
but with ourselves, too moot to die
readily anymore for anything
or anyone. Imagine the tiny cell
we want to impregnate everyone
everywhere with. Imagine getting
trapped there ourselves, tucked snugly
inside, as though locked in the cargo bay
on a slave ship. Imagine hard love (tvrd!)
within that tight berth. It’s no wonder
our bombardiers can’t wait to get home.
Traveling concealed, even in the dark,
has its liabilities. But to be hidden
in America is to be stolid and manly
as apple pie, the one jammed in the pantry
between the beets and lard. No weapon
in your hands, or cradled on your lap,
is ever quite so big as when, unseen
on its rack, untouched beneath your stiff,
shiny belly, it promises to spread its duster
of appleseeds, driven like pure snow
onto those flailing below, the same ones
otherwise sure to ruin your best laid plans.
Summit Summary

Tactfully irrelevant as the strategic plan tucked in the vest pocket of the colonel, third from left, beside the female translator in this wire photo of the president's parlor equipped with Queen Anne couches and tables during his meeting with foreign ministers newly arrived from the north and west by special convoy, under the protection of arms, to discuss the latest peace proposal both sides with the predictability of a boomerang will later reject, I continue my work here as, if not Melville's sub-sub-librarian overflowing with scholarly ambition but utterly forgotten behind his moldy stacks, a poet a little less academic than an argument on the relative market value in autumn of the butterwort between two carpenters assessing the property of a modest house whose blueprint has yet to be drawn up on a tract near the town center next to the bank about to implode under pressure from the mistargeted bomb now en route aboard the previously programmed missile launched, as it turns out, just before these same well-dressed dignitaries in this photo completed their lunch of beefsteak and peppers.

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John Gery has two new books forthcoming, Davenport's Version (Portals Press, 2002), a narrative poem set in Civil War New Orleans, and A Gallery of Ghosts (Story Line, 2003), a collection of poems. The recipient of a 2002 Artist Fellowship from the Louisiana Division of the Arts, he is Research Professor of English at the University of New Orleans and Director of the Ezra Pound Center for Literature, Brunnenburg Castle, Italy.