



RANCID IDOLS PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS

# WAR

24-HOUR CHAPBOOK  
CHALLENGE VII

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Cover image: amended detail from Hallam Street Blitz Bomb  
Damage, 1940, City of Westminster Archives Centre

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## Foreword

Welcome to the seventh instalment of our sporadic poetry challenge series: we send out a one-word prompt to participating poets, they reply back with a brand new poem, we collate and have it online, available to download in a free digital chapbook, all within 24 hours!

'War' is a simple word, but it delivers much. One can't help, upon saying it out loud, to associate it with so many recent images of the onslaughts in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip, delivered daily to our news channels. Even with war so present in our current lives, the word can still also conjure up images from history: holocausts, trenches, dog fights in the air and more, as well as personal conflicts and our own daily battles. The iconography of war, no matter where we are in the world, is indelibly printed on our consciousnesses.

Our cover image is taken from the London Blitz during the Second World War. But it could easily be a street in modern day Gaza City, in Chernihiv, in Kyiv, in Al-Hudaydah. While reading the responses that our participating poets have offered, let us take a moment to consider the civilians of war, the ones whose words will not be heard today.

Colin Dardis, Editor

Katrina Kaye : *In the Wake of War*

The smoke will rise,  
          scatter,          stumble in the wind.  
The gentle opening of petals to sun  
will be smothered by air clouded over  
by a thick explosion of bravado.

The wildflowers will not survive,  
          but they might return.  
In time, the rain will return,  
                          as will the wind,  
as will the flowers;  
just as surely as war,  
and explosion          and the uprooting  
          of innocent life          will return.

Brian Kirk : *How to pursue a just war*

First you must cherish a grievance.  
Mind it, keep it in the dark for years,  
transplant it from distant memory  
to a place that is rich with a shared  
sense of injustice inflicted by another.  
Protect it from those who would  
water it down or make it palatable.  
It is a living thing so keep it alive  
by any means necessary. If a friend  
advises reticence then you should  
cut them off – they are dead to you –  
you have not lost a friend at all.

David Brazier : *Battlefield*

The earth remembers  
in the rocks and roots  
that drank their blood,  
in the soil that buckled  
under shattering shells,  
in boot-nails blossoming  
from clods of mud.  
In the crooked lean  
of an ancient tree,  
in the hollow where,  
every morning, mist  
pools like last breaths.  
The earth remembers  
what we forget.

## Catherine Ann Cullen : *Future Perfect*

No conscription letters will have landed  
and the young men will be at home  
in their own countries.

The therapists will have exhausted collective trauma,  
moved on to divorce and phobias.

Pedestrians will have tut-tutted at the van  
parked askew outside the station  
and ignored the sound  
of a car backfiring in the next street.

No one will have spoken in code,  
testing for shibboleths,  
and the children  
playing football on the beach  
will have dribbled their ball home.



Kushal Poddar : *The War Fable*

We found a dud bomb  
and my son  
ate it crumb by crumb.  
The newspapers from  
yesterday sang praising  
human goodness, but  
a late night blast in the cot  
made us deaf. We built  
a deaf colony outside the ruins,  
time and flesh made of plastic  
that wouldn't die, wouldn't live.  
The fairy tale of our survival  
became the words of mouth in the wars.

## Mark Roberts : *Gweagal Shield*

(British Museum number Oc1978,Q.839)

Fire tracked the progress, smoke  
parallelling the sails up the coast  
till they reached Kamay.  
Gweagal warriors watch the canoes  
and prepare. For the English  
this is empty country terra nullius --  
the confrontation an inconvenience.  
A musket is fired, then another,  
a warrior falls, shot through the leg.  
A shield pierced by shot is dropped.  
Collected and catalogued  
it becomes the first spoil of a long war.

*- while the providence of the shield held by the British Museum is in question, the campaign for its return to country is ongoing.*

Penny Blackburn : *The Boys are Playing War on the Back Field Again*

Me and Belinda Carr are making daisy chains,  
we've rolled down our socks. I watch  
sideways as Dan Foster machine guns  
all the other lads. They fall in heaps while he runs  
a victory lap. Surely standard army practice?  
Learned from his dad.

As he sprints past he shoots out  
an arm, tousles my hair, shouts *Death to the Nazis!*  
*Give over!* I yell back. *Dickhead.* A nod from Belinda,  
who doesn't realise I am roused  
by the heat of battle. She doesn't see my fingers tremble,  
my fierce need to crush the stalks. I fling  
the wilting flowers down, grind them  
urgently into the grass.

Marion Clarke : *Nadya*

The young woman has just arrived by stretcher. Her screams echo around the bullet-scarred hospital. In a makeshift surgery, a nurse holds her down, talking in a low voice to try to calm her latest patient. When she relaxes her grip the young woman tries to get up, oblivious that the lower part of her left leg is in tatters. As the nurse eases her back down, she begins sobbing, stopping only to whisper, "I must find her...I have to go back."

soft moonlight  
on a pile of rubble  
a tiny, white shoe

Maeve Heneghan : *And Repeat*

Science says, nature abhors a vacuum,  
empty spaces must be filled.

What of equilibrium in this world?

Must calm be cursed with chaos?

Must peace be marred by war?

What's yours was always mine.

I want it back again.

The wheel turns once more.

'You're welcome here!'

Until you're not.

'Who do you think you are?'

The cycle can't be broken.

It's in our rotten core.

## Jenny Cleland : *We Would*

We would stay locked in our homes and fear them,  
if the government says we are at war.

We would read words not written by them.

We would dance to beats that are not the beat  
of their hearts. We would not feel the warmth  
of their skin, not see our children in theirs.

Yet, without walls, borders, distance and lies  
we would look in their eyes, hold their children,  
take hands, wipe tears, find bandages. We would  
listen to every cadence, understand  
each nuanced tremor of voice. We would open  
doors, invite them in, put on the kettle.

We would apologise, we would console.

We would cry with them.

Marty McKenna : *gently, but a dream*

this blood-powdered child  
limp in his arms is all you need  
to break your silence on war.

these faces in bad suits  
still drop bad money  
in cold steel waste, this dirt payload.

what do we know about war?  
i dry this glass in comfort,  
i am as light as a nest

in my warm hotel bed.  
a visitor to horror,  
broken by the stories

as the news channel spills dark tourism,  
we bleed over the dull fuzz of her death.

## Colin Dardis : *Animal Sacrifice*

*“There’s enough cat meat for two more meals... It would be good to find another cat somewhere, then we would have enough to last us for a long time. I never thought cat meat would be so tender and so tasty.” - from The Diary of Lena Mukhina, written during the Siege of Leningrad, 1942*

*i.*

No mention of the deed,  
how the insanity of hunger  
must have steadied the blade,  
if the neck or the chest  
was thought best for  
guaranteeing a quick kill.

*ii.*

Bread rations were cut  
by twenty-five grams last week.  
There are few dog walkers  
out this morning.



John Carew : *Depression, I Live Alone*

She lay on a trolley bed  
in the corridor of Casualty.  
No privacy, no dignity.  
Her answer to a medic's question:  
"Depression, I live alone."

Meanwhile,  
in faraway Gaza City  
they pull the bodies of dead children  
from the rubble of a bombed-out hospital.

Stephen Knox : *After the Battle*

After the last shot was fired,  
the last bloody blade laid down,  
they ran to each other,  
embraced, shook hands,  
begged forgiveness,  
offered the other side of their cheeks,  
not one was struck.  
Selfish became selfless,  
helpless to resist the counterwar  
of outdoing the other in honour,  
lion and lamb together,  
kindness, love, generosity,  
full flow of harmony,  
where all share the victory.

## Clark Chambers : *The Battle of the Exits*

The battle of the exits. War within wars, without a cause.

Does humanity deserve a round of applause, for just showing a decency that should be within us as a rule?

We live this life as a rebel without applause.

Clapping mindlessly like a sail in the midst of a coming storm,  
does not mean you're aware of the struggles we cannot see.

Rachel Hedley : *Fault Lines Under The Full Moon*

I breathe deep and slow,  
Head turned upwards, the  
Living room glow the  
Moon looks in on.

It starts with a  
Tripwire, debris of  
My existence scattered.  
Too much on the floor.

The Moon watches on -  
A witness while I  
Edge in silence to avoid  
Sinking your battleship.

I greet your back and lack  
Of attention. I exhale, the Moon stares.

BeRn : *water is redder now*

raw flesh spilled on streets rotting under rubble bullets clean  
between their eyes

ricocheting from father to son daughter to mother all gone  
from river to sea water is redder now

Sarah James/Leavesley : *Gutting the horse*

In the bargain store, I pass a piñata patterned  
with bright tissue, a hollow Trojan horse, ready  
to be candy-stuffed, then thwacked with a stick  
until its papier-mâché sides split, raining sweets.

The only rain I know is sweet: the glisten of wet  
grass and spring blossom, a confetti of petalled light,  
not showers of gunfire, confettied blood and splattered  
body parts. How lucky it is to have another birthday,

each breath a celebration. For my son's 21st, I shower  
him in hugs and smiles, trying not to think of the sons  
that don't make this – the ones on a frontline or shivering  
in the debris of their world, while those in charge

thwack the life out of anything that has more to give.

Amy Louise Wyatt : *The Negotiations*

& me. At the kitchen table.

Weighing up which odd socks have most in common.

Pulling them over the swollen feet  
of my expectations:

*Someone will keep someone else warm*

*Someone will protect someone else*

If they look different—  
they are still socks.

Separated only  
by the rumbling machines,

patterns,  
stripes—  
their fading colours.