

New Fiction from Gregg Williard: "Zone Rouge"

I got off the bus and a woman kept pace. Skinny black jeans with a fat silver belt of keys.

"I know how you feel."

"I feel fine." I was lost. I asked her for directions.

She took out a red inhaler, took a puff and told me where to go, in gulps.

It was not the way I would have taken. After a few blocks it only got less familiar and I went another wrong way that felt right.

Within seconds my old neighborhood was all harrowed mud. Creosote-black timber and dark machinery. I thought of my childhood puzzlement with the phrase "raze to the ground." Raise to the ground?

I lurched across the field. The machines intrigued. Like booby-traps. Like some people.

A hand-painted sign said ZONE ROUGE. I didn't speak French, but everybody knew rouge was red. Not everybody knew the Red Zone. I knew it. About another one, Verdun, in the northeast of France, where a year-long WWI battle killed more than 900,000 German and French soldiers. So densely shelled with unexploded artillery and gas shells that it would be uninhabitable for four hundred years. I knew because of my father. He read to me about military history, we watched war movies, read to me war comics and he told me how he played war with his friends. Seeing war technology in ordinary things was in his bones: Krupp toasters, tank treads in earth movers, gun designs echoed in power drills and blowtorches, airplane

plastics in radios, jet fins in chassis, airs scoops in car grills. Innocent seeming, now that real machine guns festooned many a man cave. Anyway, there's always been a Nazi pedigree in everyone's medicine cabinet, he said. In WWII American bombers were briefed on which German factories to bypass (the American-owned ones). Was there any point in fighting, (or not fighting) now that the peace prevailed? They said it prevailed.

Peace time. And everything was mined. For information. For market share. For death.

Ahead was a forested area I'd never seen before. The woman from the bus emerged from the dark. I walked on past her into the forest. It was silent and cool. Moss covered everything underfoot. She came up behind me and touched my shoulder. "Every step you take now."

I stopped in mid-stride. Returned my foot to the spongy ground. Turned. "I need to make some money. I'm going to lose my apartment. I can't lose my apartment."

She said, "I know how you feel."

"That's what you said before. It's not a feeling. I'm broke and not making enough to survive. I've got to make some money. If you can't help me then move out of the way."

"Don't take another step. But maybe you won't listen. Maybe I've got the wrong guy."

I was pissed but did as she said. Nothing. "You don't have anybody. Yet. What's the proposition?"

"It's dangerous, but a lot of money. Step where I step."

I followed her back across the mud and sat in the cab of a dozer.

I tugged at dead levers. Tapped gauges. "No key. Not going

anywhere.”

She pulled out the wad of keys and slid each around the ring, matching them to every machine in the field, keeping rhythm to a litany of functions. Her voice worked a spell, a comb tugged through thick, tangled dreams: “Earth mover, shaker, crusher, compactor, driller, blaster, incinerator, disintegrator, fracker, fracktaler, shifter, sifter, buster, eviscerater, pulverizer, driver, down-loader, switcher, coder, de-coder, up-loader, assembler, morpher, server, pubsmasher, browser, processor, ransomer, hackers, firewaller, coboler, encryptor, decryptor, infector, defector.”



Original artwork by Gregg Williard.

I said, “Show me a war where we haven’t armed both sides.”

“You want money. Someone has to clear the Red Zone. Children wander in there. You’ll find pieces of them. But most are killed by the gas shells. Slow. Like emphysema. Or poisoned from lead, arsenic, mercury, zinc. Makes the dumb kids.”

“Dead or dumb, huh.” I looked over the punished instrument board. Taped to cracked gauge was a photo of a little girl. I looked away. “Must be prime real estate here. Chernobyl pristine. What will you call it, Rouge Manor?”

She held up the last key in front of my eye. “This is a chance to make a difference. You want to do something good, don’t you?’

I didn’t answer and she squirted her inhaler again.

“What’s the shit in your inhaler? Albuterol? See that timber out there covered in creosote? It’s a medicinal plant that you might try. A bush of it out in the Mojave Desert is one of the oldest living things on earth. ‘King Clone.’ Surprised they haven’t plowed it over for a housing development.”

“Aren’t you the king of mansplainers.”

“I know about patterns. About codes. I can find mines. I don’t even need your damn keys.” I held up my Lishi Pick.

“Use that on my cab and you’re toast.”

“I’m already toast.”

“Then I don’t need you.” She reached over and opened the cab door. I got out.

She closed the door and started up the machine. It spun in the mud and rumbled into the woods. I waited until it was gone, then followed my footprints in the mud to the street. Twenty steps, there was an explosion. I turned around and traced my footprints back to the woods. Then ran toward the smoke. Maybe I’d end up dead, but I was done with dumb.

New Poetry by Amalie Flynn for the WWI Centennial

Zone Rouge

(for the centennial)



photo by Amalie Flynn

1.

When the land was.

2.

Full of bodies dead. And twisted.

3.
When the fighting was.
4.
Sustained.
5.
With bodies. Dead. Twisted on a riverbank.
6.
Wrist bent. Hand hovers. Over water.
7.
Dead bodies with fingers. Like feathers.
8.
Stretched feathers or the calamus.
9.
Attaching to bird skin.
10.
These are bodies. Bodies of war.
11.
Dead with. Feathered fingers.
12.
Wing of a bird.
13.
300 days of shelling.
14.
The shells were 240 mm. Full of shrapnel.
15.
Mustard gas.
16.
Hitting men and hitting ground.

17.

Making holes. Upon impact.

18.

Shrapnel bursting.

19.

Bloom and rip.

20.

Ripping through dirt and faces.

21.

Ripped skin. Ripping off tissue.

22.

A nose.

23.

Hole in the center of an ear.

24.

Exposing canal and bone.

25.

Missing teeth. One lower jaw is.

26.

Gone. A set of lips.

27.

The chunk of a chin.

28.

And the shells. Shells from Verdun.

29.

Are still there.

30.

Unexploded ordnance. Sunk.

31.

Into dirt pockets. Like seeds.

32.

This blooming. Metal war.

33.

Shrapnel that looks like rocks or.

34.

Smooth egg of a bird.

35.

Soil made of mud and men and metal.

36.

How. Metal leaches and clings.

37.

This soil of war.

38.

Chlorine and lead and mercury and arsenic.

39.

Where every tree and every plant and every animal.

40.

Each blade of grass.

41.

Where 99% of everything died.

42.

Ground stripped raw.

43.

Stripped earth tissue or how this is.

44.

What war also.

45.

Also does.

46.

Damage to properties: 100%

47.

Damage to agriculture: 100%

48.

Impossible to clean.

49.

Human life impossible.

50.

The government declared it *uninhabitable*.

51.

A no-go zone.

52.

Broken skeletons of villages.

53.

And the craters that bombs make.

54.

Deep and round holes.

55.

How the bomb craters filled with water.

56.

Making. War ponds.

57.

This is a place.

58.

Where almost everything died.

59.

But the land.

60.

The land was still alive.

61.

Grass stretching again and.

62.

Grafting itself over the bone.

63.

Bone of what happened.

64.

Stretching over trenches and scars.

65.

Like new skin.

66.

And plants and trees and vines.

67.

Rodents and snails and voles and mice.

68.

Deer. Wildcats with metal stomachs.

69.

Still living I say. To my husband.

70.

Who went to war.

71.

War that he did not want.

72.

Afghanistan.

73.

How he came home with hands and feet.

74.

Covered in blisters. *Lesions* the doctor said.

75.

Skin burning. Waking up to him crouched.

76.

On the floor and scratching. Saying *I don't know*.

77.

And I know.

78.

That this is how war is.

79.

Or later. I will lay in the darkness.

80.

And think about burn pits in Iraq.

81.

Black smoke and jet fuel and fumes.

82.

About Vietnam sprayed. The bare mudflats after.

83.

Defoliation of trees. And birds. Missing mangroves.

84.

How dioxin poisons wind. Sleeps. In a river or sediment.

85.

The fatty tissue of a fish. Atomic blasts in Hiroshima and.

86.

Nagasaki. The incineration of bodies and land.

87.

Tearing skin off people. Tearing trees out of ground.

88.

Tearing everything.

89.

Away.

90.

How black rain fell. Radioactive bomb debris.

91.

Into mouths. Of people and rivers.

92.

How radiation lives. In grass and soil. The intestine of a cow.

93.

About the GWOT. Blood soaked years and streets and.

94.

How many miles of land. Where we left bombs.

95.

Unexploded or forever.

96.

I will think about Zone Rouge.

97.

Trenches like scars.

98.

My husband gardening. The tendons in his arms.

99.

Moving like trees.

100.

Or how war never goes away.

Amalie Flynn

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New Poetry by Lynn Houston

You Leave for Afghanistan

If I'm writing this, it means I can't sleep and that
the rain outside my window drops blindly in the dark.

The crops need it, the cashier told me earlier, ringing
me up for a pint of milk, making small talk, making change.

And now the tipped carton has marred the pages
on my too-small desk. I'm trying not to make too much of it—

this mess, the disasters my life and pages gather.
I'm trying to be kinder to myself, more forgiving.

Outside, a leopard moth lands on the screen, shudders
to dry its wings. One touch from my finger would strip

the powdered coating that allows it to fly in rain.

I wish it might have been so easy to keep you

from boarding the plane that took you to war.

In the predawn, my neighbors still asleep, I am the only one

to hear the garbage truck grind to a stop,
its brakes the sound of an animal braying.

The rain has stopped, too. I look over the smudged papers
on my desk. Nothing important has been lost.

When you come home safely to me in six months,
we will be able to say, *nothing important has been lost.*



You Send Very Little News

You don't know all the time I'm killin'.
I watch it pass 'til nothing's left . . .
I let my memory carry on.
–Buffalo Clover, “15 Reasons”

I try to imagine where you live now, try to read
beyond what operational security allows.

You say it's dirty there and hot. There's sand
everywhere. You have a French press for coffee.

Here, I keep things green for you—lie in the fresh grass
with the dog until we no longer smell like walls,

make entire meals out of honey and peaches. I choose
fields in Connecticut that remind me of the farm,

stare up at the now goatless clouds, imagine that the distant
bird I see is the shape of the plane that will bring you home.



They Lie Who Don't Admit Despair

*I'm trying not to think about you,
but when this combine rocks and rolls,
it shakes my mind and shakes my body,
the way your leaving shook my soul.*
—Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

I've had some dark moments
while you've been gone.
Mostly I've been okay, having
made up my bullheaded mind
to just get through it.
But last night you said
that in a few weeks you will
ask me to stop sending mail,
because you are that close
to coming home. And I felt
a lightness I haven't known
since meeting you.
From that first day,
this absence weighed on us.
When you return, we will
be together for the first time
without the threat
of imminent departure.

I imagine you this morning
with warm flatbread, steaming coffee.
I imagine you smiling.
I'm smiling, too, listening
to the house creak.
Imagining you here.

You Call from the Airport to Say You Are Home

When we began, our hummingbird bodies
did a thousand anxious pirouettes midair,

dazzled and unfazed by the sour nectar
we had to drink at end of season.

You are back now, and we will do it
all again, but with sweetness.
All the beauty of bodies in love.
How generous is war
to give us two beginnings.

At the Harbor Lights Motel After You Return

The fish aren't biting on Key Largo
the morning we spend together
after you return. You nap all day,
sheets spiraled like a carapace
around your torso and legs.

Next to you in bed, I touch your head,
stroke the hair you've grown long,
and ask what it was like over there.
But you pull the blankets higher
and turn away to face the wall.

Hours later, I call to you from the doorway
to show you a snapper on my line. You dress,
find me on the dock where we drink beer
as the sun slumps behind the palms.

You sleep through the night, and in the morning,
before you leave for a dive on a coral reef,
you tell me that turtles sleep like humans do—
you've seen them at night tucked into the nooks
of wrecks, heads withdrawn into shells;
you've seen their eyes blink open in the beam
of your dive light; you've even seen one wake
and swim away when a fish fin came too close.
They have nerve endings there, you tell me.

They can feel when something touches their shell.

When you return from the reef, I ask you again how it was over there, and this time you begin to tell me what you can.



The Persistence of Measurement

*There'll be a thousand miles between us
when I pass the border guard.*

*Is that thunder in the distance,
or just the breaking of my heart?*

–Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

The morning he leaves me, my lover buries
a lamb—a runt who'd only lived a few days—
on a hill of the Tennessee farm where we met.

Does he think, as he digs the grave,
as he presses his face to the cold wool
to say goodbye, of the last time he caressed
my hair or pressed his body against mine?
Or are his thoughts already in Memphis, with her?

I wouldn't know. I was not given the dignity
of a burial, just an email sent after he'd been drinking,
blaming me for asking too many questions, asking
too much of him, for failing to give him space.

In Connecticut, winter refuses to relent.
It is still the season of waiting.
I look out the window of the room
where I waited faithfully for half a year,
where I wrote him daily.

The sky is cruel: clouds still take the shape
of farm animals, and birds become the plane
that never brought him home to me.

Part of me will always be waiting
for the return of the man I met in summer,
before the deployment changed him.
But that man is thousands of miles away.
He will always be thousands of miles away.