



War is Never a Choice

A reflection on “Blowin’ in the Wind” by Bob Dylan

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On the main street near to the war memorial, there is a veteran on a bench. Barely anyone notices him as he mumbles. Soothing is his voice, yet heart-wrenching are the words. He stares into the void, meditating on his past and future.

This is the scene conjured while I am listening to Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind”. The lyrics represent tormented souls forsaken in a society where the vested interests of arms dealers and politicians come before peace, admonishing warmongers that perpetuate blood and shrapnel.

Language-wise, the simplicity of the lyrics elicits a feeling of powerlessness, especially when “Blowin’ in the Wind” is sung repeatedly, as it emanates the desperation of pacifists. Dylan uses uncomplicated words, but he can still grab our attention with that childlike innocence, begging for just one thing – peace. Words like “mountains”, “sea” and “dove” make the song like one of those crayon drawings, crude and plain on a canvas, contrasting the sordidness of war with how fragile life is. The symbolism is also palpable and honest, unlike the hawkish generals who ignore the fact that “too many people have died”, boasting how glamorous it is to serve your country and stop the spread of communism, yet under the veneer of their words are only the desire for lucrative arms deals and the votes of flag-wavers. Such iconic images like “dove” and “cannonball” are the unpretentious portrayals of peace and war respectively. This classic song is not about the glory or honour of war but rather the desperation of young soldiers trapped at the bottom of the command chain, not knowing when “they’re allowed to be free”. Such an interpretation of war is truly impressive.

Dylan's voice reminds me of the murmuring of the softly-spoken but questioning American soldiers who were sent into the jungle in Vietnam. Their innocence was eroded under the relentless onslaught of guerilla warfare, never to return. Prompted by patriotic machismo, they were tricked into killing similarly young Vietnamese combatants, walking down the "road" of masculinity and aimlessly spraying the jungle with bullets to prove they are men. After they trampled along the 'manly' trail of blood and guts, the only thing left, however, was the irreversible damage done to their bodies and minds. Even though they were 'crying it out loud', never did they receive the proper recognition and support they deserved as war veterans. Instead, the public pretended that they "just don't see" and eventually forgot them. This saddening truth remains the same, and years later, we have witnessed a frustrating and contentious War on Terror waged by the American government. The ongoing war has only traumatized another generation of soldiers. God knows how they survive such trauma.

Our instinct teaches us to forget the brutality of war. We hate the putrid smell of flesh, the deafening roar from cannon-fire and painful memories aroused from the loss of loved ones. Yet, it does not mean that we can be numb and indulge in peace, especially when war is much more complicated than just "cannonballs". Its savagery and futility will wear ordinary men down, to a point where they will beg for an ending to it all. Rather, like the old Latin saying "Si vis pacem, para bellum", we should always remember war in order to enjoy peace. The serenity we are living in is shielded from cannonballs by piles of bodies. It will be utterly disrespectful to the fallen if we cross the line and act in a bellicose way again. Waiting for us above will not be a dove, but a crow feeding on carrion. By then, Dylan's words will fall on rotten ears.

Alas, when will people understand what is blowin' in the wind?