

**Address for Caras Park Peace Rally - Gary Hawk, Poet  
February 16, 2003**

This past Wednesday the White House would have sponsored a forum called "Poetry and the American Voice." The event would have featured the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman. But when it became apparent that our current poet laureate, Billy Collins, and other former laureates had something to say about our plans for war, Laura Bush cancelled the event. She did not want to hear what they had to say.

There is, of course, good precedent for silencing the nation's poets. Long, long ago the Old Testament prophet Amos was told to get out of the king's sanctuary and take his words elsewhere. And Jeremiah, too, was arrested and thrown in prison because the king did not like the sound of his words. What happened long ago is happening now. The only problem with dismissing poets and prophets from the court of the king is that they are a nation's seers and visionaries. They have a feel for the deep currents of time. They have the courage to see through the dark designs of nations. Kings, history reminds us, had darned well better listen to the poets. But against this country's poets the current administration has stopped its ears and shut its eyes.

In honor of this nation's poets who have been told to shut up and go elsewhere here is a poem. It is called "The Sound of War."

On The News Hour we see  
a camera focus and hold on an Ethiopian soldier.  
The soldier (it could be any soldier in any war)  
has run across a hardscabble slope  
away from Eritrean fire.  
He headed for the slightest shelter  
of spindly trees, but under the weight of fear  
and the load of his automatic rifle  
he stopped short, caught out in the open.  
The microphone aims at his mouth.  
We hear him breathing hard at the forge of war.

On TV we never hear the breathing of wolves  
as they pump through spring snow  
on the hooves of winter-weary elk,  
nor impalas sucking and blowing  
to outpace the cheetah. We do not hear  
the roaring bellows of the cop  
nor the thief running to escape.  
The eye sees grace, speed, resolve  
not their underground empowering fire.

Now here, where a soldier sits in gravel and dust  
out of wind, unable to move,  
the last few feet as good as a mile,  
he looks up at us with wild black eyes  
then down again so as to concentrate  
on cooling the consuming fire in his chest.  
This breathing is the sound of war  
every bomb, bullet and blast brought down to this  
where one man pulls for air to fuel the fire  
of a racing heart that wants to beat one more time.

Dear people, we are living in a time of terrible uncertainty. There is so much that we do not know. Of a few things, however, I am fairly certain. In the days to come you and I will be under incredible pressure to say that one person's life is worth more than another person's life; that one person's life is worth much and that another's is worth nothing at all; and we will hear elaborate justifications for denying one life and favoring another.

In the days to come the most radical and the most human thing you can do is to remember

that the heart of an Iraqi child wants to beat one more time;

that the heart of an American soldier wants to beat one more time;

that the heart of the person to your left and to your right wants to beat one more time;

that the person opposite you has lungs that want to rise and fall again and again in the sacred rhythm of life.

Remember the preciousness of life and you will find an antidote to your fear. Remember the preciousness of life and we will not lose our voice in the court of the king.