**BY-STANDING: THE BEGINNING OF AN AMERICAN LIFETIME**

I am no flower child  
I do not wear glasses down on the bridge of my nose  
I do not brag my unshaven hair or hold illusions about the wisdom of the East  
I do not wave my fingers in a V to bid peace upon greeting or  
think that the revolution alone will be enough to save us

My family would more likely be mistaken for boat people

I do not know how the texture of bobby socks and poodle skirts changed for  
eyes learning to refocus on the blood of Viet Nam, Kent State, Malcolm X, JFK, MLK…

I’ve only read about these things.

1986  
I remember a third grade classmate talking about the commies  
And how blowing them up was a good idea  
Crayola tanks Rambo-ing over stick figure carnage  
Proud to grow up one day just like his father  
A drill sergeant who made a habit of hitting his mother

All I knew was that none of this seemed like a good idea

1991  
7th grade was the first peace protest that I had ever seen  
Girls wrote, “Make love not war” in bubble letters on poster board  
Cutting class to save the world  
As soon as Desert Storm was announced over the school PA  
The conflict, we were told, didn’t last much longer than the demonstration

I tied a yellow ribbon to a safety pin on my backpack  
Someone told me it was to remember the soldiers  
Who went off to war, I didn’t know any soldiers then

Our hippie teacher with the wild hair showed us a video  
About alcoholism on Native American reservations  
And asked my friend’s father to talk about Viet Nam  
We asked him if he’d ever killed anyone  
He looked at us so calmly that we knew he was mad  
He said that he didn’t have to answer that question

1995  
At 16 and 17, hallways were filled  
With guys wrestling, working my nerves  
Homosexuality, their greatest weapon for insult  
Too shy to say what they really meant  
Or be who they really were

Just like all of us

Scanning newspaper columns  
I realized that as much as I hated them some days  
That they could be taken away on their 18th birthdays  
And what would the emptiness be like that filled their places?  
And how would they know why that emptiness was made at all?

1997  
To make money during college, I joined the Army ROTC,  
Learned to tie knots and assemble semi-automatic rifles,  
Eat MRE’s and stop someone’s lips from turning blue

In class, a sergeant savored the memory of the food  
And the Cuban cigars during the invasion of Panama  
And everybody laughed

That was the day that I stopped ignoring  
That our practice targets were shaped like humans  
The words: chest, head, heart, brain, or life, were never used

Only the crackpots talked about killing openly  
It was a grave thing, an unspoken thing

They taught us  
Military history  
Field exercises  
Mountaineering,  
Rifle marksmanship…

They never taught us how to live with killing a man  
How to erase the memory of his blood starburst on his body  
Or the gun’s kickback in your hands

2000  
I didn’t know then that so many kids learn this so much sooner  
Before they take their SAT’s or ACT’s  
Before they go to prom  
They have seen the dead bodies walking home from school  
The arrangement of police cars around an intersection

They have become poets to write all of the eulogies necessary  
Because these are the deaths that we are taught are unimportant

They don’t make the news, and they happen all of the time  
Especially on those beautiful summer days everywhere in the city

When neighborhood politics come down like the weather  
We don’t call it a war because we’d like to say that racism has been laid to rest

Wrapped in gauze and medical tape,  
Babies at Cook County still die not knowing why

2001  
I was braiding my hair  
In a hotel room in Lower Manhattan  
As two planes exploded into the sides of two skyscrapers  
We didn’t know what was happening  
We called downtown and they told us to be there at 10:00  
We didn’t know what was happening  
We slid through the subway doors  
The metro lady said the trains were still running  
And that there were fires in the White House and the Pentagon  
We didn’t know what was happening  
Commuters read their newspapers and huffed  
As the train chugged and plugged  
We didn’t know what was happening  
A woman with fried hair hyper-ventilating  
Because she lost her palm pilot  
We didn’t know what was happening  
She lost it scrambling away from  
The bodies jumping from the buildings  
She was trying to get back to Brooklyn  
We didn’t know what was happening  
The train stopped below downtown  
And smoke started seeping in  
We didn’t know what was happening  
People cried, kneeled on the ground,  
Kept quiet, started yelling  
We didn’t know what was happening  
Every jerk of the train  
Was hope and terror at the same time  
We didn’t know what was happening  
When the train pulled up the train platform  
We didn’t know what was happening  
Walking up the staircase  
I had never been so happy to see sunshine in my life  
  
In the sunshine…  
We thought a bomb had dropped  
Everything covered in ash  
The masks over workers’ faces  
Motioning with their arms overhead  
Go north  
Keep walking keep walking north  
Go north  
We didn’t know what was happening

2006  
I am annoyed at Americans all of the time  
White activists begging us to come together  
Who forget why we are so often apart,  
Starbucks addicts,  
People who like khaki and sensible haircuts,  
Revolutionaries with inconsistent urgencies,  
Young men and women who keep enlisting  
To earn discipline or money,  
Political cowboys riding out anger and entitlement,  
People who think it’s hip to be radical  
and don’t strategize,  
vote or do shit beyond talk,  
My friends, my family, my lovers, myself  
We who slip back into what our lives were like before  
Making our convictions seem trendy

Yesterday, I went to study “happy” people at Navy Pier  
People who are regular people  
They don’t go to rallies or conferences  
They don’t talk about war  
They wait for a sunny day and go to Navy Pier  
They don’t talk about the politics between them  
They just hold hands and smile beneath their sunglasses  
They eat ice cream that they paid too much money for  
They come together because they need each other  
They decided to be thankful for that today  
They take advantage of the possibility to love  
They are lucky and everyone in this world should be as lucky

Never, nowhere, anywhere: this is why no war.

-Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai