**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