

Outposts Of Conscience: Torture and the Poetry of Resistance

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## Abstract

### Outposts of Conscience: Torture and the Poetry of Resistance

Niki Lambros

Preceded by an introduction giving background information on the factual context of this work, my own background in Christianity and ethics, and the methodology behind the poetry, this thesis contains sixteen original poems on the subject of torture and the history of torture in the contexts of war and martyrdom. A selected bibliography of sources from books, newspapers and videos follows the text and provides evidence of the veracity of my poeticized accounts where applicable.

Christian martyrdom affords a context for the glorification of human cruelty as much as jihad has been used for this purpose in the Muslim world. Conceptual doctrines such as the “war on terror” seek to justify the use of torture. The perceived necessity of achieving victory *at any cost* to the long-established, globally agreed rules of engagement – let alone guarantees of human rights which preclude allowing torture – is witnessed to and exposed as obscene. This thesis recalls episodes from ancient myth, iconography and classical history, as well as from wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Nigeria, blending them into a continuum of violence and destructive ideology that must be resisted by every individual and through them, government, if the cycle of war is ever to be ended or even diminished. It is the ambition of this thesis to challenge the reader to look from the poems to themselves, to consider their impact, and so to become a part of the witness against these atrocities, unreservedly and without caveat.

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## **Prologue**

On January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002, the first detainees were taken to Guantanamo Bay, a U.S. military facility in Cuba, and held in a secret detention area called Camp X-ray. The administration of President George W. Bush openly declared that prisoners of the “War on Terror” would not be entitled to any of the Geneva Conventions, which at the minimum prohibit “violence to life and person, including murder, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture, outrages upon personal dignity, and particularly, humiliating and degrading treatment” (Common Article 3). “Rendition”, whereby uncharged prisoners by the hundreds from all over the Middle East were secretly arrested and illegally transferred to “black sites”, foreign prisons with no oversight or regulation of “interrogations”, became a standard method of gathering “suspects”, regardless of a total lack of evidence that they had anything to do with Al-Qaida or any other terrorist organization. Many of these detainees, some as young as 14 years old, were subsequently transferred to Guantanamo Bay, or just left to languish or die in obscure cells, undocumented and untraceable.

Detainees, many of whom have not been charged with any crime to this day, were held indefinitely and subjected to CIA administered “enhanced interrogation” techniques which included hours and even days in stress positions, vicious and repeated beatings, severe temperature manipulation, waterboarding, enduring threats of harm to themselves, family or friends, consecutive days of sleep deprivation, sensory bombardments of noise and light, violent shaking and being repeatedly slammed into concrete walls, sexual humiliation such as forced public masturbation and homosexual acts, prolonged isolation in solitary confinement, along with sensory deprivation – and/or any combination of the above.

From just after the first U.S. military invasion in October 2001, “Operation Enduring

Freedom”, in the Soviet-built Bagram Theater Internment Facility in Afghanistan, uncharged detainees were being tortured and murdered by U.S. armed forces. Meanwhile, a prison in Iraq was established to detain people, also to be held indefinitely without charge, which by March 2003 had already become notorious for torture and obscene abuse: Abu Ghraib. As shocking as the initial photos of Specialist Lynndie England giving a smiling “thumbs up” beside a pyramid of naked detainees was at the time, or the infamous image of the hooded man, “wired” and standing on a box awaiting his supposed electrocution, or England holding a naked, beaten detainee like a dog on a leash, what was subsequently discovered about the extent of the development of a systematic program of institutionalized torture and abuse has shaken the world's faith in the American Justice system, and all but destroyed its international reputation as a guarantor and upholder of human rights.

In 2009 the Bush administration received a report on the Department of Defence stating that torture had been used at GTMO, “on one detainee”. Since the release of the 6000 page *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program* by Senator Dianne Feinstein in December 2014, detailing the torture and abuse of thousands of detainees between 2001 and 2006, there remains no doubt as to the fact that not only did military officials as high up as Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld know about the torture program – they authorized and approved it. Only days after its release Vice President Dick Cheney went on NBC's “Meet the Press” declaring that he and President Bush himself also knew in detail about the torture, and that he would “do it again in a minute”.

What “it” consisted of was not just the unsupervised torture which occurred at Abu Ghraib by untrained “guards” like England and Specialist Charles Granger, but in Guantanamo a specially developed program was implemented to establish “total control over the detainee” through forced “feeding”, not only orally but anally, via a non-medically justifiable procedure called “rectal

hydration”. In addition to this, Guantanamo prisoners endured continual forced nudity, frequent, sometimes daily rape, and threats of the rape and murder of their wives and children. Some prisoners were chained to the floor and raped by dogs. Hypothermia, caused by detainees being chained in subfreezing temperatures, killed at least one detainee. Detainees were made to stand for hours on deliberately broken leg or ankle bones, subjected to constant threats of execution and mock-executions, sleep deprivations which in some cases lasted 180 hours, a full week; some endured weeks at a time in total darkness, and in the case of one prisoner, being placed in a “coffin-sized box” for 11 straight days. This and much more was covered up by the U.S. and other participating governments for over a decade, but the complete lack of prosecution for any but a handful of the lowest-level perpetrators, inhumanity followed by depraved and persistent injustice, prolongs this obscene scandal indefinitely. This cover up would have continued except for the release of thousands of “classified” documents in 2010 by PFC Bradley Manning to Julian Assange at Wikileaks, who then began to release them to the public, eventually resulting in the Torture Report and the growing file of information about the illegal covert activities of the U.S. and some of its Coalition allies.

### **Personal History**

From the age of 24, for twelve years I lived as a Greek Orthodox monastic, a cloistered nun. It was an almost medieval life centred on the cycles of prayer and fasting, spiritual exercises known as *askesis*. After formally leaving this frankly idyllic life in January of 2000, and completing an MA in theology within the bucolic confines of Cambridge University – finishing my thesis on the morning of September 11, 2001 – I returned to New York City after an absence of fourteen years to find the world completely changed. The attacks on the World Trade Centre ushered in an era where



democracy and the rule of law would become threatened to a point I had grown up to believe inconceivable. In 2002 I visited Montreal and in 2003 immigrated here permanently, becoming a citizen in 2008 and renouncing my U.S. citizenship last year. My convictions, innocent and idealistic as they had been as a novice nun, eventually matured into a philosophy which has led me to the unshakable belief that all compromise is total; that one cannot remain outside culpability for the actions of society. In as far as I pay taxes, vote for officials who do not support my views, abide laws I believe to be unjust, accept injustices perpetrated by this country and government, city and province, I am guilty of a form of complicity. Just as in my personal life, where actions have consequences and choices I make indicate my preference for one thing over another, every moral failure adds to society's sickness. No matter how benignly I may try to conduct myself, however righteously I may endeavour to behave toward my neighbour, I must concede that I am implicated in the crimes committed by those over whom I have no control. To whatever extent one is capable, I believe it is necessary to resist acquiescing to the moral compromises imposed on us by those forces which govern and sustain society, and to act ethically. That even more powerful than an atomic bomb are the combined unethical actions done by individuals day after day, year after year, lifetime after lifetime.

One form of resistance, as has become especially clear since the Holocaust, is witness. The commitment to witness has always been the essence of a certain powerful type of poetry, the poet using language to reflect on and reflect back to society what it most needs to see and hear. When I first rejoined society in August of 1999, I became aware of the poetry of Nobel winner Seamus Heaney, and not long after heard a speech he gave at a protest rally held in Dublin, Ireland on September 11<sup>th</sup> of that year, against the continuing violence in *East Timor*. He said, “[e]verybody has felt the pity and the terror of the tragedy. But I think that we have experienced something more

revealing, which is a feeling of being called upon, a feeling of being answerable.” That is, that we are answerable for the rights of others.

And so, when I had the chance to select a subject for this Master's thesis, I thought in my own small way I could at least attempt to join this cloud of witnesses against what I believe to be one of the starkest examples of indifference to suffering and injustice of our time, the attempt to “normalize” torture through the context of an unending “war” which has begun to spread to and corrupt many aspects of society here in the supposedly democratic and free West.

## **Methodology**

To successfully develop a poetic language and idiom in which to speak of this was another matter. Eventually I began to look at Christian icons of martyrdoms, which depict glorified scenes of torture, as a model by which I could foil the images emerging from the Abu Ghraib photographs and the accounts of waterboarding, particularly the heinous treatment of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, one of the alleged 9/11 terrorists who was subjected to the procedure 183 times. I began with the poem “Dogface”, written in the voice of a character which combines an ordinary infantryman, a targeteer for drone operations, and a whistleblower (Manning), all based on actual newspaper accounts of people and events, to tell a story of disillusionment and the growing realization of his personal accountability for the illegal actions he was ordered to perpetrate in Iraq. The title comes from the WWII name for the common soldier, the so-called dogface, together with the story of an ancient soldier who became a Christian and a pacifist in the third century, St Christopher, who was often portrayed in early iconography as having a dog's head on his human body, alluded to in the opening epigraph of the poem. Among its many other allusions, the image of the dog, both loyal to his master's voice and as a derogatory term for the Arab fighters (or any Arabs considered to be part

of the “enemy”) used by U.S. soldiers, appears in many of the poems. I also began to focus on the instruments of torture used over centuries, and torture methods such as isolation and beatings, comparing them with their modern counterparts, to form a picture of torture's history and use in warfare.

Initially the poems appeared bombastic, angry and without a clear sense of who the speaker was to be addressing a subject so distant from personal experience. But over time, with the help of my uncompromising advisor Professor Mary di Michele, I was convinced of the value of using the newspaper accounts more literally, to take the poems directly from my research into the facts as they were becoming known, and craft poems that were more streamlined and effective in conveying the horror without the emotional overtones which threatened to overwhelm the work. At this point, I also began to write some poems from the perspective of a 9<sup>th</sup> century nun – a voice I had discovered while writing my first MA thesis on the translation of a hymn used by the Church during Holy Week – to interrogate the validity of viewing iconic images of crucifixions, beheadings, and other forms of torture, as “sanctified” and transcendent witnesses of God's power to work evil for good. This bait-and-switch had to be exploded, and took the form of seeing the tortured Muslim as icons of Western hypocrisy and depravity, as in the poem, “Looking at an Icon of a Heretical Saint”. Sainthood and martyrdom, which to Christianity are inextricable images of holiness, when applied to Islam seemed to have no currency for the jingoist patriots of the Coalition, and I felt this could be developed as a method of examining this double-standard.

I was deeply concerned by the fact that women's voices were, as usual, unheeded and unheard, though women are overwhelmingly the victims of war and almost never have agency in determining the military policies of warring nations. For this reason, I felt it imperative to include at least one poem which would be emblematic of their suffering. I chose to recall the Nigerian

schoolgirls taken by the group of militants calling themselves Boko Haram; but the form this poem finally took was a departure from the rest of the work. One of the most difficult aspects of writing these poems was to insure that I did not try to presume to understand how any of these victims “felt”, but instead to focus on what was done to them and to contextualize that in a way that would inculpate the perpetrators and masterminds of their suffering, as well as challenge the reader to be moved to resist complicity or acceptance of any “inevitability” of the horrors of warfare. “Collateral damage”, one of the most insidious euphemisms to arise from the Vietnam Era, has become far too ingrained in the Western psyche as an unavoidable outcome of conflict, and I felt this had to be confronted with as much force as I could bring to bear.

At one point, I began to look at the history of war beginning with one of the most famous accounts of prolonged war: Thucydides' *Peloponesian War*. It seemed to me that from the beginning of the conflict, the formation of guerilla groups in Afghanistan and elsewhere which culminated in the 9/11 attacks, resembled the stirrings of the Spartans and others against Athens, which invaded their territory in order to plunder it and rule over disparate groups as though they were a unified enemy. The many groups in the south, though lacking a central language and culture to unite them, eventually formed their own coalition of necessity against the Athenians, and became proficient – and then excelled – in the very forms of warfare they learned from the Athenian military. Capturing their weapons, techniques, bases, and soldiers, they turned the tables on the supposedly insuperable might of Athens, and brought Pericles and the Golden Age of Athens to an end. The comparison to the rise of ISIS, which has captured back not only most of the territory lost to the Americans over a decade of fighting but has spread well beyond the borders of Iraq, seemed to me a perfect narrative for conveying the folly of imperialist hubris the U.S. has been guilty of since its horrendous bombing campaigns in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. However, the project of

paralleling these two accounts proved a much greater task than my poetry was capable of, and I was forced to drastically scale back the ambition of this trope, though I believe it has significantly informed my thinking on the project as a whole.

## **Research**

The research that has gone into this manuscript has spanned more than two years of reading literally hundreds of newspaper and other journalistic accounts of the War on Terror, Afghanistan, Iraq, ISIS, and Boko Haram. Reading the hundreds of pages of documentation leaked by Manning to Assange's Wikileaks, most notably those by Glenn Greenwald in *The Guardian*, and Robert Fisk in *The Independent*, the thousands of heavily redacted pages of the Senate Report on Torture, and especially watching the videos of American soldiers firing on civilians in Iraq from helicopters (as well as other recorded operations), has been at once the most disturbing and difficult part of this research as well as the most productive and incentivizing. Jason Burke's 730-page book, *The 9/11 Wars* (2011) was foundational toward gaining an understanding of the origins of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1990), a first-hand account of the war in Vietnam and its aftermath, narrated by a former Vietcong soldier conscripted into the madness of his generation, brought me closer to achieving the transformation of the voice of the victim into the voice of the accuser, the witness to the atrocities which are even now only becoming fully known. I have also watched many hours of video of U.S. soldiers who have come to deplore their actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, their incurable suffering from PTSD and the guilt of having committed actions they now believe were atrocities and war crimes, and of the thousands of those physically wounded and maimed, and felt compelled to represent this too-often downplayed consequence of the War on Terror. Current statistics lowball the body count in Iraq at over 1.2 million, in Afghanistan at 50,000,

in Pakistan, in Somalia, in Syria, in Nigeria, hundreds of thousands, not to mention the millions of the wounded and displaced refugees created by this terrible decade and a half of what appears to be futile, cyclical fighting that has eroded the concept of human rights all over the world. It is hoped that these poems are at least disturbing enough to shake the confidence of any reader who might be inclined to seek justification for these acts in the “preservation of Western democracy” – a perception that must be shaken to its core and upended if we are to have any hope for an end to this war. Seamus Heaney, in his 1998 poem commissioned by Amnesty International, “From the Republic of Conscience”, speaks of the poet's mission in all this, and made me see as the task of this thesis:

to consider myself a representative  
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.  
Their embassies, he said, were everywhere  
but operated independently  
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

## The Brazen Bull

We know from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*,  
about an ambitious man called Falarais,  
of whom Stesichorus warned,  
"give no allegiance to this man, nor unchecked power;  
though he has built you walls  
and channeled in free water, these he did  
only to seduce; but given place and time,  
his sword becomes his scythe.  
He's brought his god:  
Phoenecian Baal has come through Crete to Rhodes,  
who is so strong our people call him Zeus,  
and Sicilians throughout Argentiū worship him,  
forgetting their own traditions day by day.  
Listen! To thank him for gentrification,  
will we reward this foreigner with – *all?*"

They shouted him down quickly enough.  
These people wanted the agora expanded,  
maybe moved downtown. Coffee houses  
to meet in, things that make life convenient  
and maximize leisure time. "Anyway, a god  
is a god, and if the golden calf brings wealth,  
why, now, let him pasture." That's what they said  
then. Further, according to Lucian, this:

Absolute power. So quickly did this builder  
become a subduer, a tearer-down, snicking  
off stalk-tops or uprooting outright,  
the people were cowed before they could raise their heads.  
Nobility was courted; he did  
enjoy the tribute, gifts and pomp of office,  
but most of all, he liked to show his might  
in shows of war. In other words, the usual.

Erasmus also wrote of Falarais,  
as did Pindar. The story goes  
that when this king's ascendance reached its zenith,

his subjects, free, as it were, from the duty of government,  
became a people of entertainments, sports and war.  
These occupations had royal approval,  
and most forgot the dignity of liberty  
(– *so what*. They lived so long ago  
in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.) *Anyhoo*,  
here’s the important part: an Attic brazier,  
Perilaus, bringing a majestic gift  
in hopes of winning imperial favour, journeyed  
to that calm realm. This sculptor of bronze  
was so renowned, Falarais received him readily.  
His gift, as one may read in Diodorus,  
was this: a huge, bronze bull, with straining  
head muscles rippling as though it were live,  
the pointed horns atop as sharp as poniards,  
curved and rooted in the massive skull.  
With nostrils flared and eye-holes filled with carbuncles,  
and the mouth open as if bellowing its rage –

let’s just say the king was impressed. Perilaus  
then began to disclose less obvious splendours:  
under the giant belly held high  
by the tree-like limbs, a brazier filled with coals  
was set, and on the beast’s left side was cut  
a door by which a man could be put in  
the hollow bull; the fire lit, he’d cook  
slowly to death, his flesh sticking to the hot  
red metal, searing him like a roast.

This was a lot to take. Falarais imagined  
turning the lock (the bull’s colossal phallus  
contained the mechanism) and letting  
down the trap to shove the victim in.  
“Such ingenuity in torturing,  
where did you learn it?”, Falarais inquired dryly.  
“O King, the best is yet to tell,” he answered,  
almost beside himself with pride in his own  
cleverness. “This magnificent head  
is shrewdly fitted from within with flutes  
so carved and poised as to transform the screams  
of the broiling evil-doer in the gut to sound  
as though it lows! The cries of pain  
will give you pleasure as they play through the pipes in the nostrils!”



Falarais stood silently considering this addition, while Perilaus longed to hear his genius praised and to receive his kingly reward. “Tell me,” said Falarais, finally, “where did you find a craftsman to fit flutes in a brazen bull’s head which would make music of tortured screams? Surely he knew to what purpose his cunning service would be put? And when the smelters saw the cast, and a hole where better art is seamless, and when they bolted the hinges on, and fit the lock, and when they set it on its dais and mounted the brazier, did no one feel squeamish about his task? None object, or, if they were not slaves, revolt against such cruel enterprise?”

Not a bad question. And one to which Perilaus did not reply because the king had ordered the trap-door opened, and motioned him nearer. “Demonstrate for me the way the pipes operate.” Yes, the door was locked, the coals were lit, the metal seared, and the head-flutes demonstrated.

But Perilaus didn’t die in there. No, Falarais had him pulled out at the last minute, and thrown off a cliff. Still unsoiled, the bull was kept hidden in the palace. But rumour wailed the secret to the mob, who called it an urban myth. Artists boldly smashed taboos prohibiting instruments of torture from being called art. The media's slick spin made the tyrant merciful, people even said he was getting soft. Telemachus heard of it, brought his armies and launched his liberating forces. During the regime change, the bull was found, but Telemachus was no wimp. He put Falarais in there, and listened to that music in an armchair, while sipping fine wine. It’s hard to imagine those ancient times, people worshipping calves and all.

## The Whirlwind

*То есть как же это они основали?  
да и что значит вообще основать город или государство?  
Что ж: они пришли и по кирпичу положили что ли?!*

Somewhere in Phoenecia  
before recorded time,  
Zeus stole Europa,  
sister of Cadmus.  
She was never seen again.  
“Go search the whole world!”  
her father said to Cadmus,  
“do not return without my daughter.”

Cadmus went to Delphi  
to hear the oracle:  
“Forget that foolish quest,  
this is my word:  
Follow the sacred cow,  
marked with the half-moon.  
When she lies down,  
exhausted from wandering,  
there you shall found your city.”  
“I will,” said Cadmus,  
and so he founded Thebes.

But before the sacrifice of the cow  
to Selene, goddess of the moon,  
he sent his men to a spring  
to bring the Ismenian water.  
There lay the Hydra.  
It woke, and slew them all.  
The dragon was the dog  
of Ares, god of war;  
when he discovered the slaughter  
Cadmus killed it with his sword.

Then Athena appeared:  
“Take the teeth from its jaws  
and sow them in the ground”.  
Cadmus obeyed.  
The soil trembled, the thousand seeds  
sprouted into life-in-death,  
the naked warriors rose. Fierce, turning,  
blood-veiled eyes, fingers talon-poised,  
mouths gaping, teeth and growl  
were all their weapons.

From his hidden vantage  
Cadmus trembled at their numbers.  
“How will I control these savages?”  
he wondered. At once, his cunning  
calmed him. He palmed a stone  
and threw it into their midst,  
smashing the skull of one.

As that man was falling,  
frenzy seized the rest.  
Circling like fighting cocks,  
suspicion in every eye,  
they tore at one another  
ripping blindly at any flesh  
all the hours of the day.

By evening, only five were left.  
Then Cadmus said to those fragments,  
“Come, my men. We must away  
to sow the fields of the world.”

---

*1 In what sense did they found it?  
And what is meant by founding a city or a state?  
Did they go and each lay a brick, do you suppose?  
(Brothers Karamazov)*

## The Beating of Lakis

The 3<sup>rd</sup> century saint Mavrikios  
and his son, the martyr Fotios,  
appear in the icon to be content.  
The father, whipped with a barbed scourge,  
bloody, covered in honey and in wasps,  
and tied to a tree, head inclined downward  
toward the body of his beheaded boy,  
yet raises his eyes to heaven.

Today is their Feast Day.  
The vicious *bios* read this morning  
recalled my questions for these  
converts, the repentant killers  
from the infamous Theban legion.  
Did they even feel the lash,  
or was it grace that healed them?  
Did they grit their teeth behind their smiles?  
The icon will not say  
one way or the other. Like flies in amber  
the scene is set and no one dares  
interpret, least of all myself.

But I remember too, my ancient abbess  
on this same day some years before  
met her nephew Lakis in the church, the lad  
she had not seen in decades, said  
to him off-handedly,  
“Laki, remember when  
your father tied you to a tree  
and whipped you all day?”  
He smiled, lips compressed and twisted, then  
he turned his eyeballs into knives  
and cut her throat with them.

## The Martyrdom of St Christopher

"...the names of some saints have been deleted from the General Calendar..."

-- *motu proprio* of Paul VI for the reform of the Liturgical calendar, 1969

"Tell me his crimes!"

"Sire, he has misled two whole platoons,  
they've all gone awol!"

"What's that? The dogfaced man  
has always been a faithful, cunning cur,  
an ugly snout to count on.

What happened to rob him of his growl?"

"Sire, he follows the crucified slave  
and calls himself a pacifist.

They follow him, and will not sacrifice  
to any of our gods."

"Leave him to our dungeonmasters,  
they'll bring him to heel."

The tyrant's prisons burst with men  
in chains and used to every  
machine of pain and torture.

Only Reprobus – for that was  
his name – is kept apart,  
to see no human face.

Confined to nakedness  
he may not sleep  
a quarter hour before a bell's rung  
in his ear through days and nights  
for weeks on end.

Whenever he has strength,  
he paces in his cage.

"Still bloody-minded, is he?"

We'll try a different company.

Bring those whores Kalliniki and Akylina,  
and let them seduce and charm  
his monk-like fervour till it shrinks,

and lust restore his potency.  
Eros and Mars will turn him  
back to his proper gods,  
we'll see him fetch again."

*(One thousand seven hundred twenty years pass  
before a Cardinal, chosen for his sense,  
smiles at this folly as he reads. Such men,  
he knows, fanatics, never break  
until like oaks they are reduced by fire  
to humble ash. He takes a glass  
of wine with him to bed, continuing  
the Life which by his penstroke will be  
disappeared from future calendars.)*

"What, he will not yield?"  
"No, Sire, but now those women  
are spinning orisons –"  
"Decamp them to the block,  
let the axe fall on their necks,  
and to the brazen chamber  
he will go, to feel a fire below him heat  
his knees, burning in its gut! But listen,  
when he finds his god cannot deliver  
from fiery furnaces, then let him beg  
to serve me and recant  
his mongrel disposition."

*(No, Decius, you've got him all wrong.  
He's but a fiction, and such stories always end  
the same: he hath a journey, sir, shortly to go.  
His master calls him, he must not say no,  
et cetera. This dog has let slip secrets  
that belong to war, commands anonymous insurgents  
of his own, to spy out murderous drones like you.  
Ambrose laid 50,000 pagans to his credit,  
but none in the last century or two. So,  
he must go, and you will be forgotten too.)*

The fire was lit, but Christopher, as he was known  
among the baptized, hadn't made a sound.

"Has someone put him in there dead? I'll kill the traitor!"  
"Sire, he is alive!" "How can that be?"  
They open the red-hot box  
and out jumps the martyr, praising Jesus.  
"Too much offence,"  
Decius thinks, I cannot let him live.  
"Strike that damned dog head from his shoulders!"

*(The Cardinal sighs. Christ.  
We've let this legend grow until  
it has outstripped the bounds  
of decency; are we to believe  
in fairy tales? He has lived long:  
enough. We'll strike him from the record  
lest our faith be lost  
by worshipping ideals. From heaven  
we'll drag him back to earth  
again, back to dust, into oblivion.  
We'll teach a better religion.  
His medals are revoked.)*

## What Can Be Said

*Trăm năm trong cõi người ta,  
Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau.  
Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu,  
Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng.  
Lạ gì bỉ sắc tư phong,  
Trời xanh quen thói má hồng đánh ghen.  
-- Truyện Kiều, Nguyễn Du*

Mulberry fields cover the conquered sea.  
On some plain genius battles destiny,  
Beauty must survive the jealousy  
Of the Blue Sky.

Earth covers all in time,  
Striving is all that is not futile,  
Achieve the purpose despite the absurdity.

When the sea is conquered and covered  
in mulberry fields, genius has overtaken  
destiny.

The Blue Sky squints  
at a maiden's rosy cheeks,  
despises and foils them.  
But they are heliotropes.

Without the seas between us,  
no one would survive.

All I can know I know  
is local. Genius lives on  
routes, fleeting  
ahead, the spirit of the place.

I am considering Viet Nam, brooding on it,  
hiding its seeds inside me until they spring up.

I know I have no beauty to fear the sky.  
so I will become a mulberry field  
and conquer the sea.



## **The Jungle of Screaming Souls**

On the Jungle of Screaming Souls,  
helicopters dropped napalm bombs.  
The battalion of men beneath  
ran in every direction, on fire.  
Scattershot blasts, and one by one  
machine guns cut them down  
until there were only ten.

This happened in 1969  
in a diamond-shaped grass clearing,  
in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.  
The bodies were piled high there,  
no jungle ever grew again.

The crows and eagles came, then  
the Americans left, rainy season began.  
Incinerated animal and human  
corpses floated side by side,  
bloated, drifted into a stinking marsh.  
In time the flood waters receded,  
all was dried into thick mud  
and rotting blood. From the womb  
of the diamond-shaped clearing  
the souls of ghosts and devils were born.  
There birds cry like humans, they don't  
fly. Only there are bamboo shoots  
the colour of infected wounds.  
Fireflies the size of helmets  
shine on the trees and plants  
that moan after dark. In '74,  
when the recovery team came  
to collect the remains, they built  
an altar and prayed, secretly.

Incense burns to this day,  
but the souls continue screaming.  
After that defeat, they refused to depart

to the Other World. Then it was called  
the Jungle of Screaming Souls:  
the unlucky Battalion 27, lined up  
on the diamond-shaped grass.

## **Dogface**

*Ο ως κυνοπροσωπος περιγραφόμενος μαρτυς Χριστοφορος κατηγγετο εκ χωρα ανθρωποφαγων.*

*One of the race of dogfaced men, the famous martyr Christopher was from the land of cannibals.*

### **I. Hearts and Minds**

We were here before our boots hit the ground.  
Targets, they are, scheduled for elimination  
from the virtual trenches; our weapons make no sound  
but bleeps. After the incomplete destruction  
we invade in person. The family house,  
the little sheep pen behind it – we search them,  
find their knives and tools lying in drawers  
or on shelves, relics of the unselved.

I thought I was born for this: to sit up, to guard,  
to bite. Not like the rest, not at school, not at home.  
The doctor had called it by a woman's name,  
my syndrome, aristocratic. My nose described  
like lingerie, the dark nostrils that stare out like eyes:  
*retroussé. The ptosis of my jowls, the fibroblasts,  
macrotia; I may as well have had the mange.*  
*Dogface, they called me.*

*Then I joined the pack and soon enough  
I was the Alpha, I wanted action. Man,  
we shot and stomped the hajis, and burned and terrorized,  
why not? We had right on our side. To be  
all I could be, I found, was to take the life of a dogface,  
crushing blood and bone into paste and posing  
beside it, asking which is uglier, this death or my face?  
That was always good for a laugh. And then one day  
I found out who controls the past controls the present,  
I have met the enemy, he is not fictional.  
He is the ugliness staring back from the mirror*

*when I look upon it in the dark.  
Not a reflection, an emanation, a haunting,  
a madness, not Other.*

*The smashed faces of the greying dead are pictures.  
The piled corpses rot and vultures pick them over,  
a rural scene. Though I slay him yet will he trust in me,  
and death is now their neighbour. No other deliverance  
will do. If anyone believes he lives, he must die.  
Live as though you're already dead, you may survive.*

## II. The Katharsis of a Dogfight

I used to hate imagination, then I hated memory,  
and what could save me from dreams?  
Our mission in Falujah was easy: drive the Humvee  
through the streets firing not altogether randomly  
at military targets. These can be anything that moves,  
whatever we say they are. Things have changed  
since Geneva. We go to war with the enemy we have.

We do it without irony.  
We burn the village to  
burn it. The only good civilian  
is a dead insurgent.  
One night – the one that is known, I mean –  
one of the Kill Team  
crept from the base and  
massacred most of a family,  
methodically, not with an  
I.E.D. Women and children  
only, some with a knife,  
and some he set on fire.  
He was a sergeant from Tacoma,  
now he is unmade,  
his head no longer fits  
in his helmet, he's quite gone.  
I saw myself in his helmet,  
one day I tried it on.  
It fit my ugly doghead perfectly.

Out amidst the depleted uranium  
I learned levity, how to laugh  
like Satan. I got all his jokes,  
even the ones on me. I shrieked,  
aimed into a crowd of dogs  
and fired. We tortured them too,  
you can see it on YouTube.  
*Their panicked eyes*  
just before their heads go "pop!",  
it's funny, you see.  
*My face became fierce,*

no longer laughable.  
Eventually it could wipe off smiles  
as easily as napalm.

The modern dogfight does not involve  
two planes. We need no aces or heroes,  
no one there to cheer or blame. The drone  
is said to act alone, the pilot has no name.  
In the small hours outside New Mexico, Afghanistan,  
the target is still, a tiny outbuilding,  
lone, deserted. It is. It is.  
No one is there. Fire the rocket, it's time.  
And then, while the targeteer counts back  
from seven, the child wanders out.  
The shell flies down and bursts  
into a puff of light which is flame. The brief  
nimbus hangs, collapses in  
on itself, the halo disappears  
in thick dust, and flesh made dust,  
just a bug squash on a screen.  
"Was that a kid?" he asks the silence.  
"Yeah, I guess it was."  
He types it in to me, the booted sentry  
on the ground, "*did we just kill a kid?*"

I answer: "No, it was a dog. Repeat:  
it was a dog." A dog on two legs?  
*Second Zero was the moment.*  
A dog? A man? A child? A dog?  
Suddenly they're not the same, again.  
I've returned to human being  
just as it's too late. I see I'm damned,  
we're all civilians now.  
Back, back from the rubicon I stepped  
through the mined field.  
Back to base, home base, a run,  
a screaming, a dying, a howling.  
Inward toward the dead centre  
darkness envelopes,  
'Classified', for no eyes only  
my mind's on a loop that plays  
again and again, until I was mad  
enough to tell. So I was sent to hell.

### III Dogface in Quantico

Box, locks,  
where are the clocks?  
Solo,  
*sola scriptura*,  
conscript,  
transcript,  
cryptic,  
crypt,  
stripped,  
naked  
ungripped  
warped  
weft-bereft  
cleft  
divided  
convicted  
convict  
racked  
trapped  
marshaled,  
where is the court?  
here is the trial  
penal  
penitent  
travesty  
injury  
suffer me, sir,  
the light is always on.

Panopticon,  
a camera,  
switched on,  
a face, a screen,  
a presence  
invisible  
for all the world  
unseen.  
Overlook

overlord  
oversight  
Overman  
overmanned  
unmanned  
guarded  
barred  
charred  
card  
ward  
warden  
listen, please  
the light is always on.

Signal,  
dog-whistle  
blown  
ears pricked  
listening  
to silence  
to them listening  
to him  
listening,  
still  
the light is always on.

Stream of consciousness  
scream of a conscientious  
abject.  
No fall of the dark  
day.  
Obey  
say nothing  
no sound  
jest  
rest  
no high zest  
say nothing is left  
but an old lie,  
an unsubstantiated story.



## Looking at an Icon of a Heretical Saint

His hands are stretched above his head,  
skin the colour of the dead,  
lain upon a tilted table

where the waters had flowed down  
into his nose and mouth  
over the filthy cloth

as though he was being drowned.  
“Tell us where the answer's hidden,  
how you planned the armageddon

in the land that once held Eden.  
Babylon the great has fallen,  
deep into a spider-hole.

There is no hope for you in heaven,  
tell us now, tell us now, tell us  
again, how, and where, and when.”

He did not think he was a martyr,  
then. Yea, he did not die, not once,  
not one hundred and eighty three times.

Mohammed, why hast thou,  
why hast thou forsaken  
all around you who were taken?

There was nothing more to say;  
it was extracted anyway.  
“I knew a man, I knew another,”

he babbled on and on, “oh yes,  
she was my brother. It was I  
who struck that face, saying, 'prophecy'.

With my terrible sword of vengeance, I  
plundered the pearl of great price,”  
(and this was later proven true:

the hagiographers had scanned  
the bulging vein in his blessed right hand  
and said, "yes, it was surely you.")

It was all done by him from A to Z,  
everything since 1993,  
including the bombing in Bali,

and shooting John Paul II --  
or at least, plotting to.  
His little children, 6 and 8,

were locked behind a metal gate  
and testified, and testified  
until they named everyone they knew.

So now the truth is known.  
The icon looks like all the rest,  
just a man, tortured to near-death:

ecce homo? The icon's model lies,  
unseen, in Guantanamo.

## **Archaeology**

### **NORTHERN IRAQ, 1973**

I

It was night. The Takbir rose up with the sun.  
*Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar.*

## II

Heat waved from the burning sand, blurring  
the temple and labyrinth walls of the dig.  
From the stillness emerged turbaned workers,  
flocks of goats, sheep, and camels  
driven along to the sound of pickaxes.  
Pickaxes, picking at the hard, burnt soil,  
excavating, revealing the ancient map  
of streets and lanes, foundations, caches.  
A surefooted boy ran the maze of dirt paths,  
halted before the quarry. *"They've found  
something."* -- "Where?" -- *"At the base of the mound"*.  
Slowly, the old man rose from his crouch,  
following the kicked up dust in the path  
to approach the mound. A guard stood by  
the Jesuit archaeologist in charge,  
acknowledged his right to see, to take.  
He knelt beside the small cave,  
his eye caught a glint in the sand.  
A Christian medal, he turned it in his hand.  
*"Different period."*  
Into his pocket. When he peered in  
the cave's mouth, cool wind blew out.  
A cold gust came out from the small cave.  
He put his hand into the darkness and felt it  
immediately. He pulled it into the light,  
broke the exterior clod of mud in two  
exposing the face hidden for centuries.  
Babylonian? Assyrian. He'd seen  
that head before. He'd seen its body, its wings.

### III

His heart, again. He staggered  
toward the crowd below the dig site,  
through the groupings of men amid the dust  
and tunnels, shuffled toward the  
scape of domes, minarets, the mosque in black  
shadow backed by the disc of the sun.  
Dazed and trembling, he arrived  
at a tea house. The arak  
jittered in his loose grip, he knocked it  
back, forced digitalis under his tongue  
and waited the necessary seconds.  
The graceful tea boy bowed and served.  
Sheep doddered by and camels sloped by,  
goat bells and glasses jangled softly.  
A man led a blind man with a cane.  
A madman glowered under his skullcap.  
The Jesuit watched, backed by a throng  
of various Arabs, sand-covered men,  
sounds of the market place surrounded him  
twisting his way through the alleys.  
He passed the open-hearth furnace  
where three men were mongering iron,  
hammering one after one on the anvil,  
the trinity broken when one stopped and  
stared out at him, wiping his burning brow.  
One of his eyes was whited-over,  
blank, unseeing as an idol's.

## IV

Back in the museum, he breathed  
to the steady tick of the Arabic clock, its  
face telling one in their symbols. The rooms  
were filled with catalogued stones, shards,  
pedestaled busts and torsos.  
He sat at his desk, entered the new finds.  
Cleaned, the medallion showed St Joseph.  
That, he's seen; not much interest there.  
Then, the little black stone demon head.  
*"Evil against evil, Father"*,  
his Iraqi colleague piped. Suddenly  
he noticed it: the clock's pendulum  
stopped mid-swing. He lurched  
to his desk and collapsed.

V

He had to make certain.  
Leaving the building he stumbled  
back into the road, past rows of men  
prostrate in prayer, the *Asr raka'at*,  
up through the canvassed passage lined  
with market stalls, women in niqabs.  
A furious coach appeared from an archway,  
high wheels missed him by inches, the team  
of black horses whinnying madly,  
long reins held by a black chadored crone,  
cackling, eyes crazed. She passed him,  
he clutched at his heart through his shirt.

## VI

Back at the dig at last, guards with rifles rushed out  
aiming, slowed, recognized, and withdrew.  
Breathing hard, heaving, he turned into the wind  
toward the sun, and saw it.  
A shot rang out. Dogs whined  
in the distance, growled and snapped.  
They stood opposed, elevated each on his hill:  
the American priest and the demon Pazuzu,  
its left arm raised, fist facing out,  
its black wings spread.



## **What Happened At Camp X-ray**

What happened at Camp X-ray  
to make it radioactive?  
It became a place to manufacture  
facts derived from torture.  
In short, GTMO. We claimed  
we didn't know what went on.  
But we suspected that we knew,  
even knew that we knew.  
We'd seen it all before and we knew.  
What they said was that valuable intelligence –  
“excuse me, what was that, sir?”  
valuable intelligence from 9/11 suspects  
was gathered, harvested, from a secret  
machine made of both kinds  
of people. A reducing factory.

Now, we know what happened  
at Camp X-ray, and at other  
Camp X-rays. We still can't measure  
the half-life.

## **The Torture Report**

Our intentions were good.  
We were developing techniques  
to keep our people sane  
if they had been captured and tortured.  
If some of the enemy suffered,  
they'd have done worse to our own  
had the tables been turned.  
You know they are savages.  
They would stop at nothing  
to kill us all. Well, that's true.  
Fanatics know no boundaries.  
They are capable of anything.  
They might have stripped our boys down,  
splayed and chained them to a concrete floor  
and raped them over and over,  
or let dogs rape them over and over.  
They might have caged them,  
naked, in darkness for weeks,  
or in blinding light, deprived of sleep,  
and raped them with hoses.  
They might have captured the innocent  
and beaten them bloody, every day,  
and left them to freeze that way,  
cowering until they stiffened in death.  
They might have built prisons  
all over the world, secret places  
to carry out the obscenities,  
run by the children they'd told  
to pull the wings off men.  
“Forced dependency”, they might have said  
when asked to explain  
the purpose of inflicting this  
humiliating, sadistic pain. But that's  
insane. And it was us, not them.

## Let Everyone Know

“What happened to us in Diwana  
was because we were *Shia* Iraqis,  
not Islamists, not Muslim brothers.

The men from ISIS divided us  
into groups, some to be tortured,  
some to die by firing squad.  
I was fourth in line.  
It began, one shot, two shots,  
then, to my right, and blood splashed my face,  
I saw my daughter in my mind  
saying 'father, father'.  
The bullet clears my ear, I fall  
face down into the trench, still.  
One of the killers began to walk by  
a man breathing still.  
'Leave him to suffer. Let him bleed.'  
I felt a great will to live.”

Four hours later when it was dark,  
Kadhim edged to the Tigris. On the bank  
hidden by reeds, he met an injured man.  
He too had been shot and put to bleed  
into the river. But Abbas could not  
live. Kadhim stayed three days,  
eating insects and plants.  
When Kadhim said he must escape,  
Abbas implored him to come back,  
and if he could not, to tell.  
“Let everyone know  
what happened to us in Diwana,  
the three days of hell.”

## **The Peloponnesian Wars**

Thucydides, an Athenian,  
recorded his war believing  
its import would surpass all wars.  
He thought it would alter  
humanity forever.  
Two and a half millennia later,  
it all happened again,  
just as he'd written it.

For Hellas, read ISIS.  
As with the Athenians,  
mistakes were made  
that lost the spoils taken,  
left the land barren,  
and the sons of the people forsaken  
rose from the fields of the world,  
to claim and reclaim  
what couldn't be held. Like sand  
that slips through the fingers  
of an overplayed hand,  
or through an hourglass  
that shows time run out,  
wasted, a wasteland,  
all right. A no-man's land.

The men of ISIS fight,  
they seem invincible now.  
Their weapons are the best  
the world has ever seen, the ones  
that were left to the tune  
of billions in warehouses  
for the taking. Boys  
and even girls follow the  
song across the seas  
to find the desert and die,  
their parents asking why  
and hearing the empty wind.  
The sound of jihad

in their ears, the imam's wail,  
the uncomprehending  
soldiers line up and fire,  
the hail of bullets,  
the sheer number of them,  
means they win today,  
tomorrow. They won't run out,  
they've got the oil this whole  
fucking war was all about.

There's always someone  
to sell them whatever they need,  
more ammunition, more bullets,  
more tanks, more anti-aircraft weapons,  
more rockets, more explosives for IEDs.  
But most important to everyone  
on their makeshift battlefields  
wherever there's a place to bleed  
comes the never ending supply of guns.  
M249 light machine guns,  
MK19 and MK19 MOD 3 grenade machine guns,  
M249 machine guns  
50 caliber machine guns  
M2 machine guns  
M60D machine guns  
M240B machine guns and rifles,  
M14 rifles  
CAR-15 automatic rifles  
M4 carbines  
M16A2 semiautomatic rifles  
M107 sniper rifles  
SR-XM1110 sniper rifles.  
Helicopters, grenade launchers,  
they've got them all.  
They ride in Humvees,  
using the Internet  
to post their videos  
of journalists and those  
they've captured,  
beheaded.

It spreads, metastasizes,  
from Afghanistan to Iraq

to Syria to Nigeria  
and if history is any judge,  
goddamn certain  
it will find its way back.  
Can we ever run  
just one last Marathon  
to bring even a decade of peace?  
Not according to Thucydides.

## **Boko Haram**

We drive through the jungle  
we drive across the bush  
we drive across the bushland  
the bush land the bush land  
the jungle we drive through  
jump out of the trucks  
jump out of the trucks  
in a village a village  
machine guns machine guns machine guns machine guns  
machetes machine guns machine guns  
machetes machine guns  
machetes machetes machine guns machine guns

Jump out of the trucks  
burn all the huts  
burn up the huts  
scatter the people the people  
into the bushland the jungle  
corner the schoolhouse the schoolhouse

Western education is a sin against sin against  
Western education Western education  
a sin is a sin is a sin is a sin is a  
this is a *caliphate!*  
this is a *caliphate!*  
we don't need preaching  
we have no preaching  
we gonna teach them  
BAYonet BAYonet BAYonet BAYonet  
up between her legs  
ripping up the wo  
man  
the wo  
man  
she can't resist us  
who can't resist us  
the girls  
the girls  
two hundred little school girls

another hundred school girls  
another hundred school girls  
take it till they learn it learn it  
STICK STICK STICK STICK  
*THIS PRICK AND THIS PRICK AND THIS*  
PRICK AND *THIS PRICK AND*  
*THIS PRICK AND HIS PRICK AND*  
take it take it take it take it

the echoing screams  
echoing echoing  
scream into the jungle  
I don't even hear you  
nobody can hear you  
nobody will hear you  
no one is coming  
no one is coming

Goodluck Jonathan  
didn't do nothing  
didn't do nothing  
lying through his teeth  
lying lying lying lying  
even though the headlines  
are screaming for attention:  
Bring back our girls!  
Bring back our girls!  
Bring back our girls!  
Bring back our girls!

Now Michelle Obama  
is holding a placard:  
Bring Back Our Girls!  
Malala  
Malala  
is holding a placard  
Bring Back Our Girls!  
a thousand famous faces  
are holding up a placard  
and everywhere everywhere  
all the common people  
are tweeting and *tweeting*



#Bring Back Our Girls!  
#Bring Back Our Girls!

six months go by  
and one year goes by and  
two years go by and  
some, only seven,  
of the girls have escaped,  
and they're telling the world  
what happened what happened  
to end their young girlhood  
to end their young girlhood  
in a tent in a tent  
or under the branches  
tied with ropes  
tied with tied with tied with  
more girls are taken  
more girls are taken  
sold into slavery  
slavery slavery.  
Twelve year old girls  
nine year old girls

black milk of daybreak  
drink it drink it drink it drink it

## The Museum of Torture

Not every city has one, of course.  
Most people get their fixes  
by walking into churches: the *secondary relics*,  
jags of metal which splintered bones,  
flayed skin from muscle, a bit of Catherine's wheel,  
the crucifixion nails, the knouts, barbed whips and flails –  
These one dismisses  
as spurious, counterfeit, specious shams,  
their witness incredible, their day done,  
their power to heal the sick long forgotten.

Not so with those *objects de vertu*  
displayed in the museum's glass cases:  
these are made new, ever-expanding exhibits,  
sources of cool-tempered fascination.  
Some are crude, like old racks with ropes restored  
as if ready.  
Some from the time of the Inquisition  
lend their names to heavy metal bands:  
Iron Maiden, Head Crusher, The Brank,  
and Pear of Anguish. This last I have seen:  
the dozens of extant exemplars,  
crafted with filigree  
like Faberge eggs. Four slender spoons  
come together like fitted petals  
to shape the metalwork fruit,  
fastened on a ridged pin  
which opens like a bloom.  
Force the bulb into the mouth,  
turn the handle on top, the quatro-winged lever  
spreads inexorably out, and out,  
teeth cracking, shattering  
the jaw  
in  
the mouth  
breaking  
cranking open  
open, lips rip;  
thick, sticky streams dribble down the chin.  
Before the skull splits, the tongue swells

in the back of the throat, the windpipe blocked,  
hypoxia sets in. The heart stops,  
it is finished.

So it's worth a trip to the museum of torture,  
if only to remember  
these have no power  
to heal, either.

## **In my rooms which are like cells**

A wooden cross hangs  
by its simple black cord  
across the top of a large wooden icon.  
The icon shows the virgin-  
martyr Paraskevi  
holding up an icon  
of the dead face of Christ.  
This icon is special, it is given to a nun  
on the day her hair is cut  
and her old name disappears.  
The cross has been hanging atop the icon  
for the last fifteen years.

A prayer rope hangs  
in a similar triangle  
from the corners  
of the photo of an ex-lover.  
The man's face is bearded, his hair  
is long. It also has been on the wall  
for over a decade.  
Cord, rope, knots, icons  
hang in my rooms where I may stare  
at them each day, remembering  
what they once meant,  
marvelling to see them still there.

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## **Selected Video**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rXPrfnU3G0> Wikileaks has obtained and decrypted this previously unreleased video footage from a US Apache helicopter in 2007. It shows Reuters journalist Namir Noor-Eldeen, driver Saeed Chmagh, and several others as the Apache shoots and kills them in a public square in Eastern Baghdad.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20LkYvEZOZs> A secret video showing US air crew falsely claiming to have encountered a firefight in Baghdad and then laughing at the dead after launching an air strike that killed a dozen people, including two Iraqis working for Reuters news agency, was revealed by Wikileaks today.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8Q3dOWomVI> US troops fire on Iraqi detainees after burning their Holy Quran books in front of them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wU3xNLIIwdA> U.S Soldiers Kill Taliban In Afghanistan Shocking Footage

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyvVIi8K\\_ak](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyvVIi8K_ak) US Soldiers Abusing And Killing Animals In IRAQ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1f4ouauXvRw> US Soldiers Abusing and Killing Animals

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YO\\_sY-WTEU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YO_sY-WTEU) A little puppy abused by US soldiers in Iraq

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ormulIPpBZw> American soldier tells how they were ordered to kill innocent civilians

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uE1KAJoi4yg> Troops Committing Suicide Over War Crime Guilt