Andrew Epstein

Poem Beginning With a Line by George W. Bush

This has been tough weeks in that country.
I sit, back to scorching sunlight,
wondering how to write the day
from my post on the far edge of
a dying, gnashing empire.
The assertive growl of hot coffee in hot sun
with the tragic NY Times blaring yet again
how dire these straits are
we navigate rudderless.

The Soldier:

Specialist Silva said he had swung his gun around,
aimed, fired and watched the
troops close as the
enemy fighter come apart.

"He just exploded," he said.

Strings of Christmas lights unlit on the awning
in daylight, in May, a pleasure, still.
Bodies of schoolchildren burning inside the bus.
At the read-in, I recite "Dover Beach," "Dulce Et Decorum Est,"
"The Second Coming," and "The Pleasures of Peace"
outside the administrative building to protest
our own VP master of war, who's debasing
the language just a grenade's throw away, as

mortar-boarded blond coeds
snap pix by the big happy fountain in Florida.

Sure, poetry makes little happen but the relief
is palpable as we read and I
think of Kenneth Koch protesting
outside Hamilton Hall
in the backward abyss of insane '68
and dream of my own
meager odyssey here and feel absurd
(which reminds me of brave Allen, whose
"America" I read too, feeling the kick
of its acidic grinning lines, so strong that
when we hear helicopters thwack-thwacking
through the blue sky noon, we laugh that
they still have his spirit under surveillance)
and Kenneth was surely right about
"the whole rude gallery of war" paling
next to the pleasures of one stick of
pink mint gum, and it's no surprise
I almost wrote "gun"
given how the language of war
infects us these days.

The Historian:

The Cold War was a time when
official utterance
had become synonymous with deceit
and obfuscation.

This has been tough weeks in that country.
Fern fronds reach into hot light, symmetrical, regal.
Bodies burning in the skeleton of the shattered bus.
but I’ve come to expect the overwhelming. 
Time to note the lack of wind, the soft Muzak our brains use to wipe away the plaque that fester, the misbegotten tripe. 
The way pretty she with the stud glinting in her nostril drops coins in my palm, the two made-up blond women with time to kill and painted nails chatting over lattes in the courtyard as loud as possible about friends’ foibles. 
But America how can I write an autobiography in your awful mood? In our name they bring “democracy” with a broomstick in the rectum at Abu Ghraib, our My Lai. This skein of words would love to start to undo your lie, that lie, this lie.

The Detainee: 
*The soldiers handcuffed me to a bed.*
*“Do you believe in anything?” the soldier asked.*
*“I believe in Allah,” I said.*
*“But I believe in torture and I will torture you.”*

Palm trees and brick in a furnace of sun. Tallahassee and Fallujah are one and are not one. 
A mind and a country are one and are not one. 
A poem is the weather. 
Over there the leader lives in a mansion numb behind iron gates.

The Soldier: 
Ideally we would kill them all. But if they choose to change their mind and flee,
there's not much we can do.

We have been trying to kill
anything that is moving
towards the city.

On a trip north I see
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spraypainted on train station steel pillar:
dissent in my quiet hometown, New
Jersey, from where we used to
smoke and look at the twin towers
twinkling at dusk from your deck
perched on the cliff.

The Captain:
You have to understand
the Arab mind. The only thing
they understand is force—
force, pride, and saving face.

It is painful to watch an empire stumble,
or crumble, from the inside.
Liberation gibberish eaten like licorice.
For months, for 2 years, I've been waiting
to see a crack in the lunacy, a brake
at least on the torture
of language. The war is kill. The war
is freedom fried. To dream the neocon dream.

The Poet:
It is necessary to shake yourself free from the snot of words.

The pleasures of schlock and maw applied
like steroid cream on the itch of a nation.
The telescreen cannot be eliminated.
I weep for nuance, for nuance is dead.
Our platform:
to stamp out ambiguity and deliberation
wherever they rear their vile heads.

The Citizen:
Until recently when I spoke of the U.S.
government I said 'we';
now I say 'they' and feel disgusted.

To unseam the impossible seam: tear open the bag. Dad, and
you can make Pandora's box look like a dream.
I just love preemptive warts, justified by imminent treats.
I weep for nuance, for nuance is dead.

The Poet:
There is only one way out: to speak against words.
Drag them along in shame where they lead us,
and there they will be disfigured.

He was a bad man, the man to bag, a bag dad, a bagged man.
They are dead-enders, just remnants, revenants.
They hate free dumb. They hate limber trees.
They hate the mockcracy.

This has been tough weeks
in this country, in that country,
in this country, in that country,
tough weeks, tough weeks, tough weeks,
in this country, in that country,
tough weeks, tough weeks.