

Claudette Bass

## ELEMENTS IN WARTIME

What words matter?  
Would any specific assortment,  
arrangement of helium, titanium, argon  
create a stable, adequate structure,  
a platform to open ears, eyes, acumen?

With *precision* my country drops bombs  
upon the Evil One; we send our boys out  
there to defend the homefront and *democracy*.

I hear, instead, shrapnel, blood, injustice, injury.  
Others wave the flag as if it were air  
and not explosive,  
not a gas, which in huge quantities, becomes affliction,  
poisonous.

Once, it was Vietnam that held elections, chose a Communistic  
regime in order to be self-sufficient, repel  
Western elements which devalued what was not its own.  
Molecules are frenzied landscapes;  
by definition they bump, merge, dislodge, ignite.  
Asian political architecture was not allowed  
that groping toward form, those local voices.

Now million-dollars-at-a-pop rockets disperse  
Baghdad streets and marketplaces, instruct the Middle East  
that hubris and violence is not strictly homegrown:  
their leader and mine rule like twins,  
like nitrogen and carbon: atmosphere and petroleum  
setting the environment aflame.

Half the world screams foul  
while the administration of what wishes  
to remain a powerhouse (a europium —  
that rare metallic element found in sand deposits)

says we are building, laying foundation  
upon Babylonia, Persia, the Ottomans.  
We are the best-ever empire. Obey our will.

Yet all I hear,  
and see stretching across my television coverage,  
is sand

upon which countless *individuals*  
boys in fatigues, trying to be honourable,  
women in cotton chadors or caftans, going about life,  
die.

What words can express these tears that flow like oxygen?

Forty years ago my loving father gave me a birthday gift,  
*All Quiet On the Western Front*. Remarque.  
Illumination  
far clearer than missile bursts or God references.  
But certain voices rage on, and good,  
patriotic boys and undeveloped intellects *believe*.

