You Cannot Take War Out of the Soldier

Susanna Hast
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4370-4388

Abstract
This article is an experimentation in poetry on the topic of combat and killing derived from interview data. Such writing is called many things, but I named it documentary poetry which, regardless of its origins, is a manifestation of the indeterminacy and autonomy of art. I have taken the words of Finnish military cadets, poetic in themselves, and exhausted the possibilities of translation by abandoning accuracy for the sake of sensual precision. The zealless yet unsettling depictions of combat are reassembled in poems troubling the mystique and exceptionalism of the military while pointing to the fragility of the military itself.

Keywords
military, investigative poetry, methods of inquiry, killing, combat, arts-based inquiry

Explanations
As we have seen, the vast majority of soldiers cannot kill in cold blood and need to kill in a de-subjectified state, e.g., in reflexes, rages, and panics. But who does the killing when reflexes, rages, and panics are activated? [. . .] Even when a sense of agency is absent during the rage-induced or reflex-controlled act of killing, however, a sense of moral responsibility can be produced by a retrospective identification of action and ownership, a retrospective production of the moral sense of agency, even when the practical agent at the time of action was a non-subjective rage or reflex: “Oh my God, look what I’ve done!” (Protevi, 2013, pp. 130, 132)

This is documentary poetry.
This is poetry based on interviews with first-year cadets of the National Defence University in Finland in 2018 (Hast, 2020a).
Cadet is the military rank of those studying for a bachelor’s degree in Military Sciences. After graduation, the cadet becomes lieutenant. The degree is academic but includes practical training in operational skills designed to foster the desire and ability to win battles.

A question was asked. What is the soldier’s body like?
A second question was asked. What is combat?
A third question was asked. Is combat about killing?
It was not asked, but it came up, that soldiers can die in combat.

The conversation about killing in combat made time slow down. Words got stuck in the throat and, I imagine, saliva dried in the mouth. Fingers became restless and pitch of voice changed, bodies tensed, and the euphemisms spoke of “erasures” (Belkin & Carver, 2012) of the language of violence.

This poetry is imagination.
This poetry tries to capture how soldiers imagine war when war is distant to them.
This poetry speaks of soldiers who want to be soldiers of peace and how, perhaps as consequence, ideas about combat, war, and soldiering are dangerously improvised.

Improvised silence.
Cracking open the mystical box of militarism—the upholding and nurturing of military values, beliefs, and practices which rely on violence as the solution to insecurity.
This poetry is the struggle to articulate that war really does mean killing life.

This poetry has exhausted the possibility of translation.
Slang, dialects, gaps, sighs, blurts.
Finnish to English, oh, I could not.
The voicer of this poetry is a body against which words bounce.
The poet is all body.
Body attentive to language while transmuting.
Channeling because the reader cannot hear the original sound and has to trust the poet’s intention even when the poet does not write as I.

This poetry is a use of power, but it is certainly nothing compared to military power.
These poems are camouflaged.
How many speakers, even the poet has forgotten but can check if needed.
These poems are made with love and respect.
The meaning of love took another text spoken (Hast, 2020b).
Poetry exists for its own sake, even in a context like this.
Elizabeth Grosz (2008) saying, yes, art intensifies sensations.
Art not a representation. Art not explained, aesthetically evaluated, meanings un-uncovered.
Art of chaos, independent from the creator and perceiver (Grosz, 2008).

These poems are a risk.
“Militaries are a lot more fragile and contingent than elites will admit” (Enloe, 2015, p. 8).
Poems could romanticize and fetishize military bodies, but here we are.

Are You Able to Say It?

[Soldier body, what could it mean for you?]
My own body
but my body is more than a soldier

A soldier body (your soldier body?)
is not only ready to fight and commit violent acts
it is more than that

A soldier body
is more capable
is systematically and consciously prepared
Our capacity to perform –
it is preparing the soldier body specifically for . . .

[Capacity for what?]
Capacity to endure
to help
but also . . .
I would not like to
. . . to kill
It feels so . . .
so black and white

[Are you able to say it?]
Well, if I think about it
Yes, I can say it
I just saw this talk show
It made me think about this more

[This feels like a difficult topic to talk about. I can see: Bodies change when I ask about killing they change . . .
Is the idea of killing too abstract
Or what do you really think about it? Answer what you think, not what you are supposed to say
You can speak freely now]

In the conditions where soldiers end up in
they have to kill
Who would be better at that than a soldier
Who has the perspective on how and when

I think
we should all think about this more,
what killing means for us, to us
why I would kill
(to protect and defend myself, my family and friends, my country)

When it is necessary

Fear of Death

Is it about killing?
No . . .
you do not have to shoot a single bullet to be in combat to be a combatant
No one knows what combat would be like. You can try to simulate it, but you can’t simulate fear of death. I saw some situations, what-the-fuck situations, when someone attacked, they did not really do anything but. I realized my brain processed it for a while before I did anything. In a real combat situation, I don’t know how long the processing time would be if I would run away, or what I would do. Here you can laugh about it—“Haha, did you get your ass kicked?”—but fear of death makes it very different.

**Something that Will Haunt You**

terminal things  
final decisions  
terminal things take place  
there is no undo button, no retake  
right and wrong  
wrong to take life  
right to defend the fatherland

hard to give an answer  
when I have not been in that situation  
depends on what you have actually done  
if it is something that will haunt you  
if you fail to act  
and as result  
end up losing half of your group  
if you have murdered  
taken the life of  
an innocent person  
I hope I never encounter such a situation

**The Inevitable**

Combat,  
*Seven seconds of silence*  
it is a situation no one wants to end up in . . .  
That is why it is military combat . . .  
No civilians would be involved  
Someone has to make the sacrifice for others  
Because it would not be fair  
if women and children and old people had to suffer  
so it’s become “men’s work”  

Anyone can be made a soldier  
But what does it take?  
Most do their military service, and then they are supposedly soldiers

*I cough, and apologise*

But some decide to let themselves crash after their conscription  
and think they don’t have to do anything like that again  
But the inevitable fact is that One day war will come

*I cough, and cover my mouth, cough some more*

Okay, how could I say this elegantly  
the inevitable fact  
war will come one day . . .  
It is some kind of a duty  
No, not “some kind”  
It is all of ours—a duty  
to be able to make sure that  
those who do not have to suffer  
will not suffer  
Well they can still suffer, second-hand  
but military force doesn’t target them

[Well, all wars include civilian victims. What do you think about being involved in a war with civilian casualties?]  
It is inevitable  
I am not saying it is right . . . it is not right . . . but it is inevitable . . . it is not justified . . . let’s say it might be necessary
[Have you considered . . . that military work might include killing?]  
[War time]

War time

You have to make a choice, my life or the other’s life, the other will think the same.

You don’t necessarily want to be in that position:

You don’t necessarily want to be in that position to take a life

but you just have to think.

If I don’t shoot

the other will –

that is for sure

There is no situation where

one or other thinks “I won’t shoot”

and the other also thinks “I won’t shoot”

because then there would be no war

I Would Kill a Terrorist

[Combat]

It has a mental and physical side.

Tough, really tough

[On the march, I threw another word to go with combat: killing]

What do you think of that?]

Sounds a bit fierce

If necessary, if demanded

[You are sold-]

In extreme conditions,

it can be done

For sure

Has to be done

True

I value life that much

I’d rather fire first than be shot

Kill or be killed

Hah

But we are talking about war

otherwise I would not kill—

under no circumstances

and even in

war you think about it for a long time

[Well, do you ever think about it?]

Isn’t that why you are here?]

Has crossed my mind

I don’t even know what my task would be

In one group

Killing would be quite unlikely for me

I would likely witness a bombing from above

I have thought about what war would be like

If I think about the terrorist acts

I would not hesitate one moment

about killing a terrorist

That is for sure

For the common good

I would too.

I would sacrifice myself.

Sounds a bit heroic now, hah

We are trained to think with our brains

We are not here for our own benefit

this is altruistic

Killing has a lot to do with-

It is not personal

I don’t know the person

It is not personal

It is not the same as stabbing on the street

I would run in that situation

but in war it is different

In an extreme situation

99 percent of us can do it

I cannot say everyone can

But I am quite sure we can all do it

if it is kill or be killed

I do not know about my future

But I have thought about it
[I wonder if this topic is not really dealt with here]  
No, it is not bypassed  
when we go shooting at the rifle range  
we are thinking about the war context  
We are not trained as shooters on a range  
but soldiers  
We are simulating real situations,  
we use battle gear  
There is always some reference to the real situation  
It is in the background  

We don’t associate killing with torture  
or anything like that  
It is stopping aggression  
Avoiding casualties  
It is about stopping  

We are talking about the Defence Forces  
But remembering we are facing other  
human beings,  
and we are human beings too  
We have not forgotten this  
We all know what we are here for  

Someone Always Dies  
It has to be done (it is an assignment)  
Sometimes you need to  
destroy the enemy  
Then you do it  
This is what I think  
as a soldier  

[Does it mean killing?]  

It has to mean someone dies  
I have never heard of combat where no one dies  

When Your Flesh is Torn  
a soldier’s body is injured  
the self with bullet holes  
occupational hazard but i rarely think about it  
enemies die, but not me  

“my wishes”  
i have thought a lot about war, about death, about  
friends dying, enemies dying,  
even my family dying, but not me  
it was sobering  
we are all vulnerable  
in the end, it matters very little how determined you are  
mentally  
when your flesh is torn  
for even a regular person  
what do i leave behind?  

His Body Tenses and He Massages His Fingers  

it was confusing  
that i had not thought about it  
dying,  
if i have thought about it,  
Dying  
i have not imagined my wishes  
the words i want to leave to my closest ones  
to my closest one  
about myself  

it was moving, the entire atmosphere  
i think for most of us  
for me it was the first time to write such a letter  
it was moving  

[okay, so thank y-]  
and then  
[yes?]  

those words were difficult to write  
even if it was not real  
how they still were  
m-y-y own  
it was just an exercise  
collectively  
but individually  

it came from my heart, really  
not words on a paper for the sake of putting words on  
paper  
it moved something inside me
References


