He then went to work a few feet away, swinging a pickax over his head to dig up his brother's grave.

Small beads of sweat collected on his forehead.

"His children called and asked me to get the body," he said breathlessly. "They asked me to dig him up."

When the coffin containing the remains of Ljesić's son was uncovered, the grave diggers brought in a small backhoe to lift it out of the ground. As it was hoisted up, the dilapidated brown-painted wooden box spewed water into the hole.

Ljesić removed his hat. He pulled the nails from his pocket.

"We can put it back together," he said softly to Zeljko Knežević, one of the grave diggers. "Please do it for me. I will give you all the money I have. It is not a lot, but it is all that is left."

Knežević pounded nails into the three planks of wood that once formed the lid. The corpse, wrapped in a gray, damp blanket, faced the open sky. Ljesić, as if he were putting his son to bed, gently laid a clean blanket over the remains. An American Chinook helicopter passed overhead.

"I will put this plastic around the coffin," he explained to the grave diggers. "We will tie it up with string."

When the coffin was repaired, Ljesić embraced Knežević.

"I will never forget what you did for me," the father said.

The end of the coffin, covered with the milky white plastic sheeting, stuck out from the back of the van as it drove away.

Knežević, seated on another grave, lit a cigarette.

"We have to do five graves tomorrow," he said. "I was here when they put the first body in the ground. It looks like I will be here when they pull the last one out. When the cemetery is empty, my job will be done and I will leave with everyone else."

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone
However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards
However we follow the printed directions of sex
However the family is photographed under the flagstaff—
Beyond all this, the wish to be alone

Beneath it all desire of oblivion runs
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,
The costly aversion of the eyes from death—
Beneath it all desire of oblivion runs.

PHILIP LARKIN

During the war in El Salvador I worked with a photographer who had a slew of close calls and then called it quits. He moved to Miami. He took pictures of tepid domestic stories for one of the newsweeklies. But life in Florida was flat, dull, uninteresting. He could not adjust and soon came back. From the moment he stepped off the plane it was clear he
had returned to die. Just as there are some soldiers or war correspondents who seem to us immortal and whose loss comes as a sobering reminder that death has no favorites, there are also those in war who are locked in a grim embrace with death from which they cannot escape. He was frightening to behold, a walking corpse. He was shot a few months later through the back in a firefight. It took him less than a minute to die.

Sigmund Freud divided the forces in human nature between the Eros instinct, the impulse within us that propels us to become close to others, to preserve and conserve, and the Thanatos, or death instinct, the impulse that works towards the annihilation of all living things, including ourselves. For Freud these forces were in eternal conflict. He was pessimistic about ever eradicating war. All human history, he argued, is a tug-of-war between these two instincts.

"The meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us," Freud wrote in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. "It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of."

We believe in the nobility and self-sacrifice demanded by war, especially when we are blinded by the narcotic of war. We discover in the communal struggle, the shared sense of meaning and purpose, a cause. War fills our spiritual void. I do not miss war, but I miss what it brought. I can never say I was happy in the midst of the fighting in El Salvador, or Bosnia, or Kosovo, but I had a sense of purpose, of calling. And this is a quality war shares with love, for we are, in love, also able to choose fealty and self-sacrifice over security.

Happiness is elusive and protean. And it is sterile when devoid of meaning. But meaning, when it is set in the vast arena of war with its high stakes, its adrenaline-driven rushes, its bold sweeps and drama, is heartless and self-destructive. The initial selflessness of war mirrors that of love, the chief emotion war destroys. And this is what war often looks and feels like, at its inception: love. The ancient Greeks understood this strange relationship between love and death in wartime. When Achilles kills Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons, in the Trojan War, he falls in love with her as she expires on the battlefield. Once she is dead, once love is dead, Achilles is doomed.

We are tempted to reduce life to a simple search for happiness. Happiness, however, withers if there is no meaning. The other temptation is to disavow the search for happiness in order to be faithful to that which provides meaning. But to live only for meaning—indifferent to all happiness—makes us fanatic, self-righteous, and cold. It leaves us cut off from our own humanity and the humanity of others. We must hope for grace, for our lives to be sustained by moments of meaning and happiness, both equally worthy of human communion.

During the first phases of the war in Kosovo I moved about the countryside in an armored jeep. I slept in wooden sheds and barns or on the floors of peasant homes. One bitterly cold winter morning I woke at first light in a hut. I watched the wind blow snow through the slates over my sleeping bag. I heard from local rebels about a Serb attack on a nearby village. The victims would be buried in a few hours. As so often happened, I had to leave my vehicle behind because of the extensive Serb roadblocks. I walked to the site on foot. It was, as usual, a perilous game of cat-and-mouse, one I had played for five years with the military in El Salvador. During the funeral Serb snipers opened fire on the crowd. We darted for cover. I filed my story,
quickly typed out and sent over the satellite phone I carried in my backpack. Then I walked out. To record the atrocities, even as I knew the killings would continue, was my task. But by then it was destroying me. I felt profoundly alone.

In the wake of catastrophe, including the attacks of September 11, 2001, there is a desperate longing by all those affected to be in the physical presence of those they love. When a heavy shell landed in Sarajevo, or an assassination took place in the streets of San Salvador, or a suicide bomber blew himself up in Jerusalem, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, and children paved through the onlookers seeking physical reunification with those they loved. This love, like death, radiates outwards. It battles Thanatos at the very moment of death’s sting. These two fundamental human impulses crash like breakers into each other. And however much beyond reason, there is always a feeling that love is not powerless or impotent as we had believed a few seconds before. Love alone fuses happiness and meaning. Love alone can fight the impulse that lures us toward self-destruction.

The question is whether America now courts death. We no longer seem chastened by war as we were in the years after the Vietnam War. The Bush administration has revised its “Nuclear Posture Review” to give us “more flexible nuclear strike capabilities.” Washington wants “more options” with which to confront contingencies “immediate, potential and unexpected,” “for smaller but more effective mega-tonnages to be deployed. This flirtation with weapons of mass destruction is a flirtation with our own obliteration, an embrace again of Thanatos.

There are few sanctuaries in war. But one is provided by couples in love. They are not able to staunch the slaughter. They are often powerless and can themselves often become victims. But it was with them, seated around a wood stove, usually over a simple meal, that I found sanity and was reminded of what it means to be human. Love kept them grounded. It was to such couples that I retreated during the wars in Central America, the Middle East, and the Balkans. Love, when it is deep and sustained by two individuals, includes self-giving—often self-sacrifice—as well as desire. For the covenant of love is such that it recognizes both the fragility and the sanctity of the individual. It recognizes itself in the other. It alone can save us.

I did not sleep well in war. I could rarely recall my dreams, waking only to know that they had been harsh and violent. When I left the war zones, the nightmares descended on me like furies. I had horrible visions of war. I would dream of being in combat with my father or young son and unable to protect them. But I could sleep in the homes of such couples. Their love spread a protective blanket over us. It was able to blot out the war, although the lure of combat, the distant rattle of automatic weapons beckoned us back, and we always went.

Aristotle said that only two living entities are capable of complete solitude and complete separateness: God and beast. Because of this the most acute form of suffering for human beings is loneliness. The isolated individual can never be adequately human. And many of war’s most fervent adherents are those atomized individuals who, before the war came, were profoundly alone and unloved. They found fulfillment in war, perhaps because it was the closest they came to love. If we do not acknowledge such an attraction, which is, in some ways, so akin to love, we can never combat it.

We are all tempted to honor false covenants of race, nationalism, class, and gender. They sometimes compete for our loyalty. War, of course, is often—maybe always—a false covenant.
Sham covenants are based on exclusion rather than universality. All covenants that lack an adequate sense of humility and an acknowledgment of the sinfulness of our own cause are false covenants. The prophets warned us about them.

The cost of war is often measured in the physical destruction of a country’s infrastructure, in the blasted buildings, factories, and bridges, in the number of dead. But probably worse is the psychological and spiritual toll. This cost takes generations to heal. It cripples and perverts whole societies, as Europe saw with the shattered veterans from World War I. But even for those who know the cost of war, it still holds out the promise of eradicating the thorny problems of life.

In the beginning war looks and feels like love. But unlike love it gives nothing in return but an ever-deepening dependence, like all narcotics, on the road to self-destruction. It does not affirm but places upon us greater and greater demands. It destroys the outside world until it is hard to live outside war’s grip. It takes a higher and higher dose to achieve any thrill. Finally, one ingests war only to remain numb. The world outside war becomes, as Freud wrote, “uncanny.” The familiar becomes strangely unfamiliar—many who have been in war find this when they return home. The world we once understood and longed to return to stands before us as alien, strange, and beyond our grasp.

In 1999 the British journalist Anthony Loyd published *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*, a book about his twin addictions to heroin and to the war in Bosnia. His account illuminates the self-destruction impulse that is fed by war and drugs as well as the highs that propel many into combat. For Loyd, like Michael Herr, war was the ultimate drug experience. It was the chance to taste extremes that would, he hoped, bring about a catharsis or obliteration. In times of peace, drugs are war’s pale substitute. But drugs, in the end, cannot compare with the awful power and rush of battle. This was not why I went to war, but the twisted voyeurism and narcotic of war Loyd described attracted many to the battlefields and held them there.

Deep down I was aware at the time that many of my motivations were fairly dark. On one level my sense of despair had been dispelled by therapy, yet on another it had not been replaced by either the desire for a future or the concept of one. I felt more aware of who I was, but that in itself—dominated as it was by sensations of fragmentation and isolation—filled me with no great hope, and in many ways only fueled an appetite for destruction.

There are those for whom violence is sexual. They carry their phallic weapons slung low at an angle toward the ground. Most of these fighters are militiamen, those who stay away from real combat, have little training or discipline, and primarily terrorize the weak and defenseless. And they look the part, often with tight black fatsigues, wraparound sunglasses, and big ugly jeeps or cars with tinted windows. For them war is about empowerment. They have turned places like the Congo into Hobbesian playgrounds.

These warlords rise to power with gangs who prey on minorities and the weak. When they are done, they turn on those they were fighting to protect. I was in the Bosnian Serb town of Banja Luka in the summer of 1995 not long after Serbian militias had driven out most of the ethnic Croats. Once the militias had finished looting the homes of the ethnic Croats and stealing their cars, they set up roadblocks to steal cars from the
Serbs who lived in the city. The cars were then driven over the border into Serbia for sale.

When the mask of war slips away and the rot and corruption is exposed, when the addiction turns sour and rank, when the myth is exposed as a fraud, we feel soiled and spent. It is then that we sink into despair, a despair that can lead us to welcome death. This despair is more common than many expect.

In the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, almost a third of all Israeli casualties were due to psychiatric causes, and the war lasted only a few weeks. A World War II study determined that after sixty days of continuous combat, 98 percent of all surviving soldiers will have become psychiatric casualties. They found that a common trait among the 2 percent who were able to endure sustained combat was a predisposition toward “aggressive psychopathic personalities.”

During the war in El Salvador soldiers could serve in the army for three or four years or longer, virtually until they psychologically collapsed. In garrison towns commanders banned the sale of sedatives because of abuse by troops. In this war the emotionally maimed were common.

Edilberto Ayala, a nineteen-year-old Salvadoran army sergeant, spent five years fighting, and suddenly lost his vision after his unit walked into a rebel ambush. The rebels killed eleven soldiers in the firefight, including Ayala’s closest friend. A couple dozen soldiers were wounded. He was unable to see again until he was placed in an army hospital.

“I have these horrible headaches,” he told me, sitting on the edge of his hospital bed. “There is shrapnel in my head. I keep telling the doctors to take it out.”

But the doctors told me he had no head wounds.

J. Glenn Gray, a World War II combat veteran who taught philosophy after the war, wrote: “Few of us can hold on to our real selves long enough to discover the real truths about ourselves and this whirling earth to which we cling. This is especially true of men in war. The great god Mars tries to blind us when we enter his realm, and when we leave he gives us a generous cup of the waters of Lethe to drink.”

This self-deception is powerful. It propels those in war forward. When it falls away, we grasp war’s reality, a universe collapses. Many of those who suddenly perceive the raw brutality and lie of war crumble into heaps.

Jon Steele, a cameraman who spent years in war zones, had a nervous breakdown in a crowded Heathrow Airport in 1994 after returning from Sarajevo, when for a moment he saw the cold reality of what he was doing, a reality that stripped away the self-righteous gloss and addiction to battle.

“I came back from Sarajevo,” he said in an interview in the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz. “We were in a place called Sniper’s Alley, and I filmed a girl there who had been hit in the neck by a sniper’s bullet. I filmed her dying in the ambulance and only after she was dead, I suddenly understood that the last thing she had seen was the reflection of the lens of the camera I was holding in front of her face. This wiped me out. I grabbed the camera and I started running down Snipers’ Alley, filming at knee level the Bosnians running from place to place. I think that I broke down because I got things backward—I thought that because I was trying to be a hero and get exclusive pictures, people were dying.”

War is necrophilia. And this necrophilia is central to soldiering, just as it is central to the makeup of suicide bombers and terrorists. The necrophilia is hidden under platitudes about duty or comradeship. It waits, especially in moments when we seem
to have little to live for and no hope, or in moments when the intoxication of war is at its pitch, to be unleashed. When we spend long enough in war it comes to us as a kind of release, a fatal and seductive embrace that can consummate the long flirtation in war with our own destruction. The ancient Greeks had a word for such a drive. They called it _skpyrosis_—to be consumed by a ball of fire. They used the word to describe heroes.

War throws us into a frenzy in which all human life, including our own, seems secondary. The atavism of war creates us in war’s image. In Chuck Sudetic’s book _Blood and Vengeance_ the former reporter for _The New York Times_ writes of how he was eventually overpowered by the culture of death in wartime:

I once walked through a town littered with the purple-and-yellow bodies of men and women and a few children, some shot to death, some with their heads torn off, and I felt nothing; I strolled around with a photographer, scratched notes, and lifted sheets covering the bodies of dead men to see if they had been castrated; I picked up a white flag from the ground near the twisted bodies of half a dozen men in civilian clothes who had been shot next to a wall, and then I carried the flag home and hung it above my desk. I once saw soldiers unload babies crushed to death in the back of a truck and immediately ran off to interview their mothers. I accidentally killed an eighteen-year-old man who raced in front of my car on a bike; his head was smashed; I held the door when they loaded him into the backseat of the automobile that carried him to the emergency room of Sarajevo’s main hospital; I expressed my condolences to his father; then I got a tow back to my hotel, went to my room, and sent that day’s story to New York.⁶

In Milovan Djilas’s memoir of the partisan war in Yugoslavia, he too wrote of the enticement death held for the combatants. He stood over the body of his comrade, the commander Sava Kovačević, and found that

Dying did not seem terrible or unjust. This was the most extraordinary, the most exalted moment of my life: death did not seem strange or undesirable. That I restrained myself from charging blindly into the fray and death, was perhaps due to my sense of obligation to the troops, or to some comrade’s reminder concerning the tasks at hand. In my memory I returned to those moments many times, with the same feeling of intimacy with death and desire for it, while I was in prison, particularly during my first incarceration.⁷

War ascendant wipes out Eros. It wipes out all delicacy and tenderness. And this is why those in war swing from rank sentimentality to perversion, with little in between. Stray puppies, street kids, cats, anything that can be an object of affection for soldiers are adopted and pampered even in the midst of killing, the beating and torture of prisoners, and the razing of villages. If the pets die they are buried with elaborate rituals and little grave markers. But it is not only love, although the soldiers insist it feels like love. These animals, as well as the young waifs who collect around military units, are total dependents. They pay homage to the absolute power above them. Indeed, it may be that at times they please or they die.

In the midst of slaughter the only choice is often between hate and lust. Human beings become objects, objects to extinguish or to provide carnal gratification. The widespread casual and frenetic sex in wartime often crosses the line into perversion and violence. It exposes the vast moral void. When life becomes worth nothing, when one is not sure of survival, when a society is ruled by fear, there often seems only death or fleeting, carnal pleasure. This is why Lady Ann in Shakespeare’s _Richard III_ goes to Richard’s bed. She sleeps with Richard because her moral universe has been destroyed. This kind of love is the product of the impersonal violence of war.