

Four Wars

by Mary Ann Noe

He halts suddenly, caught between flourishes,
Her hands dusted in flour, she pauses a moment,
Between the bassoons and basses of cannonballs.
Dough clinging warmly in her finger folds.
He pauses but a moment, but a moment too long.
The breezes bring the muffled sounds of April hoofbeats.
A missile meant for another finds a new mark.
Apple blossom and pain come to her through the window.
The Minie ball in his chest drops him to the frozen March furrows.
She waits to know what she already knows, her hands deep in the earthy dough.

He stumbles in the water, surf breaking over his knees, his thighs.
She squints into the ripples rising from the roadway.
I'm a duck decoy, he thinks, rifle lifted high over the pops of bullets on water.
Her hands, with a mission of their own, snap beans—pop! pop!
The fire in his belly, fear, recedes from his fingertips as his boots find dry sand.
Why are they always black, those government cars? For she knows it is a government car.
As he rolls to driftwood as to a lover, the marksman sees a flash of flesh.
The dust and the porch swing cradling her are the only movements in the silent yard.
Finding his neck, the bullet leaves him in the embrace of sand, wood, water.
Her hands and mind, quiet now, refuse to reach for the fluttering “We regret ...”

He fires at unexpected flashes of silver and white.
She turns her back on the television, lifts and drapes lasagna noodles.
Dropping to one knee, taking aim, “Get out!” he commands. “Fall back!”
“Special coverage” swings her head around, hands wet and slippery.
Bullets whine far out and long, nearing the soldier, camera now on him.
Before her on the screen, men stream past a reporter screaming over sound.
A push, the truck, they rise, they fall, the streaks, the screams; they move.
She stops unscrewing the jar of spaghetti sauce, hands, everything, frozen.
A man's back should not arch so, his arms not rise so; the camera still runs.
A splinter, a crash, her hands red and slimy reach futilely across the miles.

Her hands sit delicate on drone controls, fingers cramping.
He spoons mac and cheese, thumbs off chin spills.
Night vision reveals targets; she tenses, leans in.
He wraps laughing girls in towels, calls them “Your Majesties.”
She whispers, “Closer, closer,” directing the loads with fine-tuned control.
Settling the girls, he bends close, whispers bedtime stories.
At command, she fires; a voice behind, “Feel the kiss of death, suckers.”
He stows books, tucks blankets, kisses cheeks; thinks of her.
She, shaken, wonders whose mother, father, whose sister, brother, will never kiss again.

After earning Bachelor and Masters degrees, **Mary Ann Noe** spent twenty-nine years in classrooms, first teaching 7th grade Language Arts & Social Studies, followed by twenty-two years of high school English and Psychology. Upon retirement, she joined a writing workshop, to hone her skills. Mary Ann publishes poetry, non-fiction, and the novels *To Know Her* (2021), *A Handful of Pearls* (2022), and *Hannah's Eyes* (2023). Her poetry is in many print and online publications. "Four Wars" began as "Three Wars," but another conflict erupted, and she felt compelled to add another stanza to reflect the ongoing changes in the transmission of information from battleground to the homefront. Mary Ann spends time reading, writing, baking, and happily communing with nature in Wisconsin. Visit www.maryannnoe.com for her blog, a collection of photos, a Contact link, and more.