

TO THOSE WHO WOULD BE LEADERS

I'm not a rocket scientist
or military strategist
or political apologist.
Just a caring citizen
with eyes to see
and ears to hear
and heart to feel.
I see a country being ravaged.
I hear voices keening.
I feel anguish everywhere.

My country is behaving like a tyrant
grinding its foot in the faces
of the poor and powerless.
My government is not governing
wisely or compassionately.
My leaders are not leading.
They dissemble and speak
with both sides of their mouth.
They say, "We don't like this war.
We wish to end it."
Then they vote to fund it
again and again and again—
billions and billions of dollars,
each dollar a life ended or crippled
a dream demolished
a family decimated.
More dollars more rubble more ruin.
More weapons more toxins more tears.
More hatred more terror more harm.

I am perplexed by this duplicity.
Is it lack of courage or confidence?
Is it greed or fear or some kind of insanity?
Is it something rotten in the congressional water?
Would it be political suicide
to put our money where your mouth is
and end this war? Is that the fear?

Or would it be something else entirely,
something rare and genuine and true,
that pearl of great price—
Integrity—
Let what you say be what you do.
Is there no balm in Washington?
Leader...
Lead us!

--Laura Bernstein

Every Day

War is no longer declared:
Just continued. The unheard-of
has become the quotidian.
The hero weasels out.
The weakling is at the front.
The uniform of the day is simply patience.
The highest decoration is the pathos of a star
of hope above the heart.

It is awarded
when nothing happens,
when the drum finale of the artillery falls silent,
when the enemy has become invisible,
when the eternal armament's shadow
darkens the heaven.

It is awarded
for deserting the flag.
For courage in the face of a friend.
For betraying the secrets that shame us.
For the absolute disregard
of any and every order.

--Ingeborg Bachman
(translated by Eavan Boland)

Reflections on Political Power

Kingdoms are but cares,
State is devoid of stay,
Riches are ready snares,
And hasten to decay.

Pleasure is a privy prick
Which vice doth still provoke;
Pomp, imprompt; and fame, a flame;
Power, a smouldering smoke.

Who meaneth to remove the rock
Out of the slimy mud,
Shall mire himself, and hardly scape
The swelling of the flood.

--Henry VI of England