



Dry
Your
Tears
to
Perfect
Your
Aim

Jacob
Wren

a novel

Dry Your Tears to Perfect
Your Aim

Jacob Wren

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The title of this book is a slight variation on the line “dry your tears to improve your aim,” which comes from the poem “The News Vendor,” by the Nicaraguan poet Daisy Zamora. I first read it in the book *Risking a Somersault in the Air: Conversations with Nicaraguan Writers*, by Margaret Randall.

1: My Apologies

Dropping bombs is the purest form of capitalism. A Tomahawk missile costs US\$1.87 million. An AGM-114 Hellfire costs US\$150,000. The price of a GBU-44/B Viper Strike is currently unlisted but is likely also somewhere in this range. And the moment they hit the ground, the moment they detonate, the money is gone and you must buy new ones in order to do it all over again. A computer lasts from three to five years. A car lasts eleven. But a bomb, when you use it, lasts a split second and it's gone. A bomb that kills many and a bomb that kills no one costs the same amount. It is not like throwing good money after bad or watching money burn. It's like watching money detonate, watching money explode, like a Hollywood film in which the many explosions make up for the shortcomings of the script, filling in for absences of meaning and purpose.

The term *planned obsolescence* is generally attributed to the industrial designer Brooks Stevens, who used it as the title of a 1954 talk. Wikipedia says Stevens defined it as “instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary.” His view was to always make the consumer want something new, rather than to create poor products that would need replacing. But you do not need to wait for a bomb or missile to wear out or become obsolete, or for a newer, better one to arrive on market. Instead they incinerate themselves as an expression of their use. Profit and obsolescence meld into one indistinguishably violent act.

I'm ashamed I decided to take this trip. The moment I got on the first plane, I already knew it was a mistake. That by simply deciding to take this trip I was more part of the problem I hoped to solve than the solution I hoped to become. I paid taxes in a country that was involved in between seven and nine wars, depending on who you asked. My tax money went to pay for a minuscule fraction of the aforementioned bombs. In each of these seven to nine declared and undeclared wars, hundreds if not thousands of such bombs were detonated every year.

I felt a certain powerlessness—I could only read about these wars, only imagine them, had no idea what they were actually like, what it might feel like to be there, to put one's life on the line. For some reason, despite my severe and often literary depression, I did not have the courage to kill myself. But if a bomb that my tax dollars had a very small part in creating were to fall on me, there might be a strange kind of justice to it, as if something had come full circle. And if not, hopefully I would still learn about a situation that, against every ethical desire I held dear, I still played some small (well, minuscule) part in funding. I look around: almost everyone else is asleep. I've always envied people who could sleep easily on planes, always thought they were less tormented than me. I suppose most people *are* less tormented than me. I do not believe this is a contentious statement.

As I go through customs, they look at my passport, then ask the purpose of my trip. I say, "Tourist." They look skeptical, replying that no one comes to sightsee war. I think: that's probably not even true. I'm sure that every time there's a war, all sorts show up to have a quick look. To risk their lives in search of adventure. But that's not what I say. With no idea whether it is wise or unwise, I spontaneously decide

that it is better to lie, so I say that some of my ancestors had lived here, and I wanted to see what it looked like before it was completely destroyed. From the expression on the customs officer's face I cannot tell if he likes this answer, or if he believes me, or if he simply wanted a bribe. I rarely lie, and after I get through, I ask myself long and hard why I had chosen this particular moment to do so. In retrospect, it seems stupid to tell a border official that his hometown will be completely destroyed. And needlessly cruel, ignorant. I now wish I'd said something else.

I have one friend here. (Perhaps another reason for my trip.) She kindly picks me up at the airport. I am exhausted after the long flight. In the car, we drive through bombed-out streets. The amount of destruction is almost breathtaking. I realize I've never seen anything like this and don't know how to react. I stare out the window of the beat-up car. You had to be a complete asshole to come here only because you wanted to see all this for yourself, but I thought it was even worse to ignore it, to pretend it wasn't happening or it didn't exist. I could have come as part of a humanitarian project, to help people, feed them or rebuild their houses, but it hadn't occurred to me until now. In the car we don't talk, I just stare out the window. For no specific reason, I begin to cry.

In her small apartment we begin to make dinner. We haven't seen each other in a long time. She moved back here to look after her ailing parents. Now both her parents are gone, but she has stayed. When I wrote to tell her I was coming, she was obviously surprised, so surprised I might even describe it as shocked. In her reply, she said she remembered me as someone who never travelled except for work. This is still basically true, and yet now I seem to be making an exception. In that same reply she also said something that is now

burned into my mind. She said that every single day she thinks of leaving. Of becoming yet another name on the list of an ongoing refugee crisis. That every day she's afraid for her life. But, at the same time, she feels there are things she can do here that are more important than what she can do anywhere else in the world. How she never realized home was home until its daily reality was under threat.

Over dinner we talk about surface things. People we used to know, where they are now, what they are up to. Books we've read, movies we've seen. We're both dying to talk politics but neither of us dares. I don't have many friends. When I was younger I had friends, but so many of them have moved away and I never managed to make new ones. I have stayed in touch with almost everyone who moved, but only in a perfunctory, minimal way. When we see each other we catch up, much like we're doing now. I wonder, if I were to die here, how long it would take anyone to notice. Eventually someone would, but it might be a while. I didn't tell anyone I was doing this. No one knows but me, the border guard, and my old friend sitting at the table across from me.

I try, I do my best, to explain the reasons for my trip, and I can tell right away that she doesn't like it. I knew she wouldn't. She says she's never heard such a stupid example of misguided thinking. I know she's right but also feel there's something she doesn't see. Some reason that I have to do this that neither of us will ever understand. What I'm saying suddenly feels mystical to me, and I've never before thought of myself as mystical. She tells me I should get on a plane and go home, protest against my own government back there, or fight to replace them with something—anything—better. If I want to do something, those are causes worth dedicating your life to. Not come here to experience

first-hand the violence almost everyone else she knows would give almost anything to escape. I know she's right. But I feel as helpless at home as I feel here, as unable to change anything about my government as I am to make all wars stop. Knowledge is experiential. I already know what it's like at home. I need to know something else, perhaps feel my life at risk, perhaps even let it go and find out if that changes anything. She's disgusted by my explanations. She tells me it's the most sickeningly apolitical thing she's ever heard. I wonder if I think what I'm doing here is political. It's agitated by political reflections but, if I'm honest with myself, it has more to do with being depressed.

In the morning we have breakfast and continue our disagreement. Over the night, a new thought has occurred to her. That I'm not just here to stupidly risk my life and take in the suffering of others—a suffering I feel partly responsible for but also don't know how to stop—but that I'm also hoping to make a book out of it. It is so obvious, she doesn't know why it didn't occur to her before. She tells me, almost as a confession, that she's always liked my books, that she feels I try to write about these questions in complex ways, to write my way out of my own political paralysis. But my books have always been works of pure imagination. I've written about suicide but never put my life at risk, as far as she knows I've never tried to kill myself. I've written about revolutions but never tried to make or join one. Why now? As works of pure imagination, my books were productive and perhaps energizing. But I'm only a tourist here, and no matter how much I observe, I will never get it right. I can't write her experience, much less the experiences of so many here who have it so much worse or who have already been killed or martyred.

However, if there's one thing I truly know in this moment, it's that I'm not here to write about it. I didn't come here to write about the experience. For a brief moment I lost my mind, bought a plane ticket. Because I wanted to see for myself. And now that I'm here I have to go through with it. I remember an interview I read a long time ago with a writer, about their first book, how they said they were writing it in order to "stay alive," to keep despair at bay and in the process save themselves. That is also what writing has most often been for me. But this is something else. I'm not here to write about it. I'm here to experience something first-hand for once in my fucking life. To get something about the world. Something I'm complicit in but have never felt and therefore don't think I really understand. Or, to put it more concisely, tentatively, and against all reason: I have some small hope this experience will change my life. Like going to the casino and betting one's entire life savings on a single number: either you lose everything or you win in some way you're barely even able to imagine.

So often, when I argue, I get nowhere. We both dig in our heels, double down on our positions. I want to listen to her deeply, feel that I'm really listening, let her persuade me, but I already agree with so much of what she's saying. I tell her I understand her position, she laughs and looks at me almost in disgust, and I suggest we put it aside for now and go for a walk. She doesn't reply, but from the way she continues to stare at me I understand that one doesn't simply "go for a walk" here. It is too dangerous. She continues to stare at me, wondering what she could say to change my mind, to knock some sense into me. I ask her if we're still friends and she says that we are. That she'll write about what good friends we used to be when she writes my obituary. I laugh and say I'll go for a walk myself and she shouldn't worry. Then

she says that she *is* worried. That she's worried precisely because she's my friend. And that she's never thought of me as a person who knows a lot about friendship, but when you have a friend, you don't want them to die. And you especially don't want them to die stupidly, by strolling into a war zone, in a way that could so easily be avoided. But she can also see that I'm lost, she's always thought of me as lost, but I'm more lost now than back when she knew me. She can see that I'm lost, that I've painted myself into a corner, and there's an Italian expression I'm reminding her of right now: when you're painted into a corner, sometimes the only thing to do is shoot yourself in the foot. She just hopes I shoot myself in the foot and not in the head.

Out on the street, life is muted but goes on. It's true no one seems out for a casual stroll, but people are out on the street regardless, walking briskly, doing the things they have to do, going from place to place. There are even a few children playing, but few enough that I assume other children have been told to stay inside. Some of the people stare at me, I suppose wondering if I'm a soldier in civilian clothes (I assume I don't look much like a soldier), and if I'm not a soldier, what the fuck am I doing here, wandering at a pace considerably more casual than anyone else on the street, a flâneur on streets inhospitable to such activities. A formation of planes flies above, and everyone starts walking a bit faster, heading for cover yet without any real panic, as I stop in my tracks and watch the sky. I know nothing about planes, but these ones don't appear primed to attack, seem to be in transit, off to attack someone else a little farther along. They move smoothly through the serene blue sky, and just then, as I'm watching, one of the planes in the formation explodes. I see no reason for it. There are no shots fired, nothing under attack, nothing but five planes in the air, a ball of flame, a

trail of smoke, and then there were four. No one else on the street seems especially interested or perturbed by what we just witnessed—business as usual. They’ve seen it all and they’ve seen it all before. But I think, in the distance, I hear a few voices cheer.

When I get back to her apartment I tell my friend about what I saw, about the plane that exploded in mid-air. She doesn’t seem particularly interested, instead wants to continue our conversation about what I’m about to do. We argue more, but unlike before, now when we argue we also laugh. I think, while I was on my walk, she decided that if I was going to die we should at least have some good times together before I go.

That night she took me to a secret, illegal art party. I was surprised that she was unsurprised by the warplane I had seen explode. She told me it happens regularly and no one knew what to make of it. I felt there was something exciting about the phenomenon, that it presented possibilities, or at least promising questions, but my friend wasn’t so sure.

To get to the party, we drove to a suburb of a suburb. Several times, as we drove, we heard planes overhead, and each time we heard that sound we drove just a little bit faster. We parked by a fence, climbed over it (I ripped my pants as we did so), then walked for a long time, I would guess almost an hour. There was a door with a password, another door with a different password, and then stairs going down and down and down. After such a long journey I was thinking that no party could possibly be good enough to make it worth this endless travel but I was wrong. I had no idea what I was talking about.