Surrender Is Sweet (Never)

It takes an immense burden to make a person feel the necessity to surrender. Human bodies can be incredibly resilient, but after a prolonged period of distress—racism or wartime take a similar toll on the body—it may feel like one has no other choice but to surrender. Mike Brown was tempted to do so when he lifted his hands up in front of a gun held by an uncaring white police officer, and so was Wilfred Owen as he stood helplessly with the bodies of dead soldiers at his feet. However, the elegies “not an elegy for Mike Brown” by Danez Smith and “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen transcend surrender, evoking haunting emotion from the reader. The two elegies both insist that under extreme strain, humans should resist the urge to surrender even when they are engulfed by grief, and instead craft a forceful statement of their survival against all odds.

Although both elegies treat surrender and violence as forces that exacerbate and complicate grief, Smith’s elegy deviates from the condemnation of violence established by Owen by not fully denouncing violence as a means for protest against the dehumanization of marginalized groups. Of course, both poets grapple with the gut-wrenching mourning of someone whose life has ended too early due to degrading acts of violence. Unable to erase the imprint fighting in World War I had on Owen, the thought replays in his mind: “As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. / In all my dreams before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (14-16). The guttural description indicates a sense of ineptness — “as under a green sea”, “before my helpless sight”, “He plunges at me” — as if he regrets being the one who survived the deeply impersonal fight. More than anything else, he laments the randomness of the violence that has ended too many
innocent people’s lives, hoping that his provocative description will ignite a sense of resentment
toward systematic violence within the reader. Yearning for the impossible—a future in which these
atrocities cease to occur—Owen pleads to a deeply personal “you”:

My friend, you would not tell which such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. (25-28)

Wartime has created the extenuating circumstances for Owen to address the reader as if they were a
close friend of his by constantly dangling over his head the risk of instant death, so he feels the
responsibility to warn the reader against the dangers of developing unchecked patriotism. The “Lie”
in Latin, “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country,” is presented as a proper noun: much like
how patriotic acts are done in the name of the inanimate “country,” the “Lie” is also intangible, yet
both have seemingly infinite force in society. Smith initially takes a similar position against violence,
in what appears to be their initial reaction to Michael Brown’s death: “I am sick of writing this poem
/ but bring the boy” (1-2). Like how the physical effects of racism can have a tangible effect on the
body, they are nauseated by Brown’s death, grappling with a Black feeling in their stomach as they
realize how easily they could have suffered the same fate. But then, mid-poem, a shift in tone occurs.
Incensed by the double standard evident in the reactions to the deaths of white vs. Black people,
Smith laments, “always, something deserves to be burned. it’s never the right thing now a days” (18-
19). Their anger over America’s apathy over Black bodies leads them to believe that the only way to
get America’s attention is to start a revolution with brutal, permanent impacts, much like fire’s
effects. They refuse to let Black America surrender to America’s white supremacy, granting them
agency. Whereas Owen urges nation leaders to understand how the grating loss synonymous with
war is not worth the inconsequential thing they fight over, Smith takes a more radical approach by
“demand[ing] a war to bring the dead boy back / no matter what his name is this time” (20-21).
Resenting the fact that white America has taken almost no steps to enact systemic change against racism, they resort to the incitement of a war. It is unclear if this proposed war would be physically violent, but an allusion to violence is made with their praise of the “sweet smoke” (24) that appeared over Missouri during the Ferguson Unrest. Both poets demonstrate that the effects of loss can be violent—in rhetoric or even action—over the desire not to surrender to the oppressive status quo.

The differing relationships that Smith and Owen foster with violence in their elegies can be explained by their difference in privilege and historical relationships with systemic oppression. Although Owen’s perception of the blood flowing from wounded soldiers as “Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues” (23-24) is certainly understandable, part of his shock may be that this level of gore is unprecedented for him. In contrast, the abuse, slaying, and complete disregard for Black bodies in America is nothing new to Smith: “his new name / his same old body” (2-3) is dead. Under the illusion of a “post-racial” society lie millions of dead Black bodies, translating to the modern-day worry that Black parents are constantly burdened by: “turn your head. / then, poof, no more child” (9-10). In contrast, as Smith alludes to in their poem, when one white person is kidnapped, people are incensed enough to start an entire war. Their question, “are we not worthy / of a city of ash? of 1000 ships / launched because we are missed?” (15-17) pinpoints the double standard between the worth of a white and Black body. Owen never has to grapple with this additional burden of the potential that he and all other members of his race could be slain solely for the color of their skin in peacetime. Yet, he could still empathize with Smith because in wartime, the benefits of white privilege fade. Any second, he could face a situation like the one he describes: “Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling / Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time, / But someone still was yelling out and stumbling” (9-11). In every wartime encounter, someone is bound to commit the “ultimate sacrifice” for their country—in reality, to maintain leaders’ privilege—by having their life fade into nothingness on a cold battlefield. Although
both Smith’s and Owen’s experiences are made arduous by systems of privilege, the two poets exist on different levels on the hierarchy, altering the understanding and nature of their grief.

Owen’s and Smith’s differing identities create important distinctions between their poems, but a notable characteristic they share is their deviation from the traditional intentions of an elegy with the use of irony and the seeming normalization of death and violence. Already the titles “not an elegy for Mike Brown” and “Dulce et Decorum Est” evoke question: Smith’s poem is surely an elegy mourning Brown’s unjust death, and the loss suffered by Owen in World War I is certainly not “sweet and fitting,” as implied by the title’s English translation. When Owen describes, “All went lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots / Of gas-shells dropping softly behind” (6-8), it becomes clear that his experience as a soldier has worn him down so much that he no longer has the capacity to feel shock toward what would be perceived as inhumane during peacetime. This revelation is in conflict with the traditional elegy, which serves as a medium for impassioned expression of emotion. Although Owen gives the reader a glimpse of his post-war trauma in lines 15-16, he himself is not conveying the intense emotion one would expect from an elegy—rather, his gory descriptions serve to evoke that emotion from the reader. Smith takes a different approach but manages to produce a similar effect. The use of lowercase and nonchalant language within their poem haunts the reader with uncertainty over whether they are supposed to feel grief or not. The striking contrast between their two statements, “I demand a war to bring the dead boy back / no matter what his name is this time. / I at least demand a song, a song will do just fine” (20-22) mimics the volatility of life for Black Americans. Smith grieves the surrender of “his same old body, ordinary, black / dead thing” (3-4) as if Brown was merely an inanimate object. They are so outraged over the normalization of Black deaths that they are unable to let grief permeate them. The unconventional nature of both elegies is also present in the endings, which are traditionally supposed to end in “consolation.” Yet, neither Owen’s Latin line, which he dismisses as blatantly false, nor
Smith’s praise of the Lord’s creation in Ferguson can be considered as true consolations. Owen and Smith are still left with their intense grief, and the reader does not feel like much has been resolved either. The effects of these deviations are powerful, creating a new way to grieve and avoid surrender in a world where death and violence are far too common.

Smith and Owen’s departures from a traditional elegy accentuate the poets’ struggles with defining the worth of a human body. To tackle this issue, they write elegies to help combat the limitations of human memory, combatting this forgetting that makes surrender inevitable. By inscribing Owen’s story in an elegy, it has a sharper, more poignant impact, revealing that the soldiers “like old beggars under sacks” (1) are both a collective unit and an individual with family and feelings—they are not expendable as society treats them to be. Similarly, when Smith reflects on what it means to be Black, they describe the warped nature of loss for Black America: “bring him & we will mourn / until we forget what we are mourning / & isn’t that what being black is about?” (4-6). It is not apathy but an overwhelming burden that creates this reaction, as they are mourning much more than the death of one worthful human body—they are mourning the existence of a system that regards them as worthless. As more dead Black bodies pile up on streets, Smith reminds us that we can never regard human bodies as easily replaceable, for that line of thinking is what leads to their slaying in the first place. Both poems reveal that as hard as society tries to diminish the worth of “disposable” individuals, the loss of one can still have a significant impact.

The body cannot so easily recover from humanity-stretching situations. Yet, Wilfred Owen and Danez Smith seize agency by wrestling themselves out of suffering’s control, tackling the complex relationship between violence, privilege, apathy, and the limitations of grief in the process. Their elegies coax the reader away from the fallacy that surrender should be a possibility in the face of hardship, for rising above the urge to do so is a more effective and meaningful option.