Let the atrocious images haunt us.

Susan Sontag
Regarding the Pain of Others
Artillery battery and a tank. Fire power of war in colors and shapes, pallets of munitions, tarps scattered on slopes of summer dry grass. We look for what is human here. Soldiers crouch and cover their ears against the blast, small dark bodies curled on the tank, on the ground behind the tank. One tends a stash of rockets up-ended like sharpened pencils on their erasers. Others break open crates, feed machinery.

Fire of charge and double-charge lights up a white mass of cloud. Composition with blue and white flag, high in the bright, burnt air. Of all the photographs of the first day of war, an editor chose this one to fill the space above the fold under a terribly familiar headline. Retaliations. Recriminations. What has been done to us we must do to others. It’s the blood we obey. We who watch are in awe of the wreck of the world, destruction’s beauty, its litter and smoke, a beauty that tells us who we are.
Airport fuel tanks burn sun-orange above the night city, a fire that will not go out. A plane in the dark foreground is stuck on the tarmac, a spot of gleam on its landing gear, a thin, short streak at the end of its fuselage.

Up the hillside thousands of small lights like stars. The windows of Beirut where invisible people look out on blackness, coldness, stillness, and the furious fire. They hold no candle to the fire. There’s no way to fly out of here.

Home safe somewhere else, I look through a window and count my neighbors’ lights.
A soldier is standing where a building was, at the edge of a crater full of dirty water, sewage perhaps, even likely, structure and infrastructure bombed out.

What’s left of the building in the background is reflected in orange-brown water, the grace of its curve around the corner, the architecture of its blue windows and doors, the colors of signage high on the building clean-bright, the advertisements of a modern city. We can’t smell anything and so the picture is aesthetically pleasing. We’d say, he has a good eye for telling a story.

In the distance are people so small there are no expressions on their faces. But the soldier with his back to the crater has pressed the fingers of his hands in the edges of his hair, his head tilts, his knees bend weakly, his rifle droops at his waist, the barrel of it pointed down at a patch of shattered glass.
Three body bags are blue,
    unzipped, the flaps turned back
from faces. Eight more
tumbled roughly in blankets
    and black rubber sheets.

Five of sixteen are missing,
    already claimed or unsorted
pieces out of the picture.
The bags lie on squares
    of clear plastic sheets
on the concrete street
    of the make-shift morgue,
squares that grow smaller,
more infinite, the deeper
    I look in the picture.

On the curb of the street,
    forty or fifty people stand and wait
for what’s now to be done.
Arms folded, hands in pockets,
    they don’t look at each other.

In the center of the picture,
    a man in a white mask walks
between the bodies, toward
the camera. He looks for
    color of skin,
breath, movement of a finger,
    a wound that bleeds. He wears
green camouflage clothes,
his hands in white
    rubber gloves
level with his shoulders,
    like a surgeon who’s
scrubbed up and doesn’t
    want to touch
anything that is foul.
Red diagonal lines of the station platforms rake dramatically down from the top left corner of the picture and make whatever has happened here seem inevitable. The rails are heavy with speed, mechanical and black.

Bottom right corner, there’s so much more light, the figures larger, irregular, busy with gesture. Emergency vests a neon yellow, hard helmets a bright school-bus yellow, black yarmulkes, Hasidic beards.

The body on the gurney is strapped neatly in at the waist. Red strap around the bag, a glare of bright white with official blue insignia. I count seventeen workers carefully focused on recovery of the victim, of missile strikes on this train station. If I focus, can I feel the feelings of others? Is it moral to observe pain? Can I be moved by adjective and adverb, when noun and verb are the cries of somebody else? Slamming, damning questions speed toward me like my father’s trains, no lights sweeping the tracks.
Two men weep in a bomb’s crater, a clay pit, 
the ground where they sit gouged in rough shapes, 
irregular slopes and cracks, some roots of pipes. 

Old earth turned up is new again, the same fresh 
orange-red earth ancient peoples used to make mud brick. 
The modern recipe’s nearly the same. War is the same. 

The men are exhausted, their shoulders fallen, their wet trousers and shirts splattered with clay. One pushes his forehead into the older man’s back, the wild, spent energy of grief, his arm around his neck. 

When the bomb dropped, three children were swimming in an irrigation ditch, their bodies recovered, just out of the picture. 

The younger man holds his smeared glasses. 
In the fingers of the older man, a cigarette burns.
It’s all about mathematics and geometry, these deaths, these dead piling up. What’s to be done with the bodies until, when the bombing stops, funerals are safe?

Here’s a system for you: plywood fence painted white, a row of big black numbers spray-painted on: 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34—

Here are coffins, trapezoids, bigger at the top for the width of shoulders and chests, one below each number.

Someone has scrawled Arabic script on each lid in red or black: name, identification, location, date? You wonder, are they color-coded?

Each coffin is shorter or longer, depending . . . well, you know.

Number 29 is the shortest, maybe three, three-and-a-half feet.

A long, heavy one is coming in on the shoulders of two young men, Giacometti-thin, one taller than the other. Their long strides and the sharp shadow of a leg under their feet construct perfect triangles, equilateral.

86 coffins in total, we are told, but you can’t see the whole picture in the picture. No one could capture the whole. So you hunt for an angle, a certain slant of clean light, a rectangular shape, and fit what you can in.
Four white plastic chairs on the pier
look comfortable for reading, or drying off
in the sun after a swim. There is sun and that Mediterranean
blue in the sky.

High on the skyline, smoke blows black and then gray
as it spreads like contagion, over beaches and boat slips,
over high-rise hotels, from left to right
like a train across the picture.

The chairs are clustered in no particular arrangement.
An umbrella closed down on a stand by itself. The pier is roped off.
Plastic floats in primary colors square
a neat area for swimming.

But no one is swimming or reading a book or sucking
something sweet from a straw. It's a resort but no one is here.
There are ghosts, but no one sees them. Even the lady in the harbor,
who lifts her hands to welcome ships,
cannot see them. She looks Greek, the stone folds of her drapery
carved classically. She bends a knee, as if she's walking
steadily on water. She refuses to look
at the smoke at her back.
To be in the right place at the wrong time where disaster is brutal, the burned face, the burned eyes of the adolescent boy—how do you do it, Tyler Hicks? What instinct, what cunning puts you within feet of the boy?

In the hospital parking lot at Tirens, the boy is rigid in the arms of his father, whose body, urgent and needy, wants his son whole again. You can see it in his face, in the quick, deep breath of his mouth, in his knees pushing the weight of the boy. Out of panic he wrenches a difficult determination. He leans into time.

Somehow you are aware of a script of doors. The father’s eye fixed on the hospital door. And that apparently useless detail in the background: the car door left open. You are aware of emergency, of emotions that come out from within. The heavy mother, kerchiefed, in black clothes, has her hand on her son. In the wind of the rush, her black coat opens, flowing with the speed.

But you, Tyler Hicks, I’m asking, when the shutter clicked open, was passion or dispassion the cue for this picture, this miracle of focus, except for the blur of the boy’s rapidly moving fist, like a bird?
The image we have: of Hecuba, Medea. We don’t believe her, dismiss her, assume this is performance for the stage or the camera.

Grief should go quietly inward, get to a nunnery. Or in silence off stage, she should hang herself, drown herself, eat hot coals.

The woman in Haifa is hysterical. Look at her, can I, and not turn the page?

High in one hand she holds a photograph of her brother, who’s dead. She knows it’s over. Three women sit behind her, patient, waiting for news. The oldest looks at her: she’s gone mad; she’s tearing her hair. It’s classic, this grief.

Look again, can I? Yellow dress with blue flowers. That sound in the throat.

Can I weep for her?

A photograph.

Four women in Haifa against a concrete block wall.
It’s victory or gloat—
depending on your point of view.

Three soldiers ride high
in an armoured personnel carrier,
the camera angle from below.

One stretches his arms like a Christ
to display the trophy: a red and white
Lebanese flag, with a green cedar tree,
the sign of victory in his fingers.

The Hezbollah flag is sideways and backwards.
Yellow and green, a green gun held up by a green hand.
A big ripped hole. The slogan in Arabic script from the Quran:
*Then surely the party of Allah are they that shall be triumphant.*

They look bloated in thick flak jackets, body-stuffed
like scarecrows, pockets bulging, hard helmets molded
extra wide at the ears for headphones, microphones bent
around to their mouths. Can they hear
anything but the noise of machinery?

Three Israeli boys mugging the camera.
They carry their guns to the funeral. 
Green combat uniforms, red berets. 
One holds his face in his hands. 

Others look down at the grave 
the angle of the camera does not 
permit us to see. 

Seven fragments of faces. Planes 
of light, clean-shaven. Jaws set 
against grief. 

Soldiers. Highly trained 
and young. One nudges forward 
with the blue, bright metal of his gun.
A baby, still beautiful
in the arms of her father,
who stands by the grave
where he will lay her, cover her,
a clay box we see chiseled
in the sun-hard dirt, a red
hole just large enough
to hold her. Hands reach in
from edges of the photograph, palms up—
the instinct of neighbors
when no God is listening
and what can be done may be done
only for the father whose strength
comes like a miracle
from his hands. He bends
to the open face of his daughter,
her small body loosely wound
in fabric generously
folded and tied with white ribbons
above and below the face,
at the waist, at the feet,
the cotton smooth-white,
whiter than newsprint.
The paratroopers are singing as they march briskly from the battle. It’s over. The drop. The skirmish. The scramble back through live fire. Adrenaline still surging, they carry a wounded comrade level on their shoulders. Ten, fifteen of them. It’s easy. So many arms to hold him shoulder high, feet forward, his leg strapped with white. No blood.

There’s a rhythm, the crunch of their boots in the cracked earth. They are dirty, hungry. They kick up dust. Their mouths open. Heat in their bodies. Air in their chests.

Some are grinning. All are singing. Adam’s apples ripe in their necks.
TUESDAY, AUGUST 1, 2006
—photo by Tyler Hicks

She’s brought out of rubble
on a sheet from her bed,
too broken to walk,
her head on a pillow printed with flowers,
kerchief knot at her throat.
A grandmother, anyone’s.
I try to see, then to think:
impossible to act or to feel.
She reaches out in a gesture I don’t know
how to read. Her eyes, squint
in the sun, don’t plead so much as
command; mouth open
as if to speak or breathe.
It must be hard to breathe,
the dust and the stench.

She hid in a bathroom, then a basement,
a storeroom full of yarn, ate pieces of bread
and grain from her cupboard, lost track of time.

In the calm between airstrikes, strangers
haul her out from the ruin.
A hand in a plastic glove reaches
for her hand. A man in a green surgical
mask looks at the camera.

On the face of another I read:
it wasn’t easy to get here, the roads blocked,
the blockade in the harbor, the bombs
still falling after a ceasefire.

In the background, the blasted block houses—
walls broken, roofs collapsed.
Nearby, another woman in a kerchief bends
into shadow near the old woman’s face.
Sister, friend, neighbor? Whoever you are,
I don’t need to read the cutline below
to learn whose side you are on, what
village is yours, what country, what world.
The camera has composed the perfect shot.
They look down at blood on the floor, splattered and smeared like fingerpaint on a tile-block grid. She carries on her hip a boy, two or three years old. She’s caught by the hand a girl, four or five, and steers her to the side of the largest pool.

She’s not wearing shoes but seems not to worry about glass. Nothing’s broken. The walls are washed in hot afternoon light, yellow and pink.

Her face is intent, her whole body in a posture we know: instinct, speed. It’s a kitchen or a hallway from a kitchen—cabinets, doors.
Bright gray angular splashes—bombed out
floors of a concrete building exposed, the edges
of color muted, blurred. And below,
billows of cloud, friable smoke-dust debris
dispersed like fog. A stain painting
or water color abstraction, like landscapes I know
by Helen Frankenthaler. I study its geometry
and make out the black-scissor legs of a man
clinging to a jagged wall, the blue-gray shirt
of another on a ladder or ledge. It’s hard to see
what’s happening, but beautiful to look at.
I want it to be beautiful and a little something
astonishing to please me—the mauve-pink
light of reflected fire from somewhere.
Street scene in Damascus. Split frame, inside and outside. In the café a man smokes at a table under the TV. A couple we see from the back look up at the man with a tie on the Hezbollah station. She with long pulled-back hair, he with a bald spot. They listen intensely. Reports and reactions. Elbows, nerves. We can’t see what they’ve eaten, if it’s coffee they drink.

The TV floats over a wall of polished blond wood carved in shallow relief: hands up to Allah, a sacred text held by a man in a chair, and a muscular figure bent to a child, forehead to forehead. Allegories, prayers, quiet personal conspiracies.

A plant that is green in the corner.

Outside two men on the neat brick sidewalk gesticulate, unaware of the camera. The man with the gray beard, gray suit, smart knotted tie, talks to the man in a blue open-neck shirt. They walk by the plate-glass window that splits the scene. A complicated exposure. The café is too bright. The electric lamps stream like fire up the street.

The talk, inside and out, is the same.
They’ve rolled into the river
pieces of a broken concrete culvert
and something that looks like a petrified tree.
The last link over rushing white water,
a red stretcher, set from rock to rock.

Three Red Cross workers, two wounded
fighters. They step gingerly on the make-shift
bridge over the Litani. It’s not easy.
Everything wobbles.

Red suits, white hard hats with red crosses.
One fighter, his back to the camera,
wears bare feet. The other limps,
his foot in a sandal, his knee bandaged.
He’s holding a white business-sized envelope
between his face and the camera, the black hood
of the Hezbollah fighter over his head.

Bridges blown out.
No way out, and no way in.
Except by furtive, make-shift
causes and causeways.
They have marched over the hill, following a road into a valley, toward the river, and a village. The road winds in that S-shape photographers love—for its picturesque grace, its definition of deep space. The soldiers are strung out along the road, and though they are loaded down with gear, and their green camouflage clothes are hot, they walk in clusters of friends, fool around a little, slap shoulders, tell jokes. They carry their weapons haphazardly. It’s a hike. It’s a lovely morning. The village in the distance is the color of the sandy road, the color of the wild weeds and thistles on the hillside. The thistles, already bloomed, are large dry balls of sharp needle-thorns. Seven miles north of the border, two miles from the river. An enemy in each house in the village.
Little girl, you have kept your doll close, though the building is broken, the floors slid down the slope of the street, the dust still rising.

The camera is tilted so nothing squares up. It’s disorienting, hard to know if you’re standing on flat ground. You’ve turned to look down the street.

There’s a ghost—someone at first I don’t see—the top of her face just visible above the head of your doll.

The ghost is your mother whose silk sleeve pulls you tight. She’s shy of the camera and hides behind you.

The woman holding the camera is not visible at all. She’s a professional. She’s erased herself, even as she views through a lens this picture I look at.

The hands of your mother I see now, clinched in a fireman’s hold. You’re too big to carry, she carries you anyway, her mouth near your ear.

I take pleasure in the bright green of your little girl skirt, the bright pink swoop of your mother’s embrace.

I hold a coffee cup level, steady in my hand and tilt the corner of the page to eliminate glare.
Night black. The bombing’s stopped.
Ink saturates the dry matte newsprint,
    almost the whole upper half
of the page, a black house wall.

Lower left: a square of glow
from candles in their hands, an open
door. The man and wife have stopped
a little way into their house and look
on nothing particular, a vacancy, the bombed out
interior in their metaphysical eyes.
    What they have lived through—
the rage, the reasons, even the history
of their fathers’ fathers—is what
they know and have known again,
    this still inexplicable moment
of shame they have come home to.

Nothing surprises. Nothing within them can ever
completely break. Over her head, a clean white
    scarf she has folded and wound
around her neck and shoulders.

The solid fact of his standing near her.
He looks through the door. The shutter opens
    and closes. It’s a portrait. Witness to a time
they will again and again obey.

Upper right: a large irregular hole,
like a puzzle piece punched through the wall—
    the same interior orange-pink glow,
which I mistook at first for sky.
FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2006
—photo by Dimitri Messinis

In Ouzai, south of Beirut, open trucks move war rubble. I count forty or more on three lanes of a wide highway curving by the sea. New trucks. Bumper to bumper, they wait for a turn at the dump ahead. A finger of new ground grows as the power shovel drops its load, flattening, rearranging the landscape. A billboard on the beach advertises a vacation spot. It looks like the coast of Normandy: large arched rugged rocks in a sea the color of this sea. A billboard band of white sky merges with a fringe of actual breaking waves. Photograph within photograph. Inside the curve of trucks, a geometry of side panels: parallelograms yellow and orange and blue. In the nearest ones, concrete chunks and cables frayed, twisted pipes. Each truck must have a driver, whose radio’s on—to music or news. Each driver must see the billboard and the giant shovel’s empty maw.