

City of Orphans

John Haines

How strange to think of those streets
and vacant lots, the sandhills
where we played and dug our trenches;
the forts we built, the enemies
we conjured to aim our stick-guns at,
and then went home at evening,
to victory, to safety and sleep.

And now the vast acres of rubble,
the pitched and roofless houses,
upended stonework and sunken bridges.

The dog-packs roaming, digging,
for the one still-unclaimed victim;
the stray sniper aiming at dusk,
and in the roadside fields,
flowers that explode when picked.

The children wandering from one
burned suburb to another,
seeking that which no longer exists:
a neighborhood, a playing field,
a wading pool or a standing swing;
for a kite to fly, a ball to throw,

or just one pigeon to stone.

And through all this haunted vacancy,
from cellars and pits of sand,
come and go as on a fitful wind
such whispers, taunts and pleadings:
the scolding voices of dead parents,
the lessons of teachers no longer
standing, whose classrooms
are blown to ash and smoky air.

And far-off, unheard beyond the drone
of a single hovering aircraft –
in Paris, Zurich, Prague, or London,
the murmur of convening statesmen.