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## The Unsignificant War

...that we unparticipate in

**By: Usha Aroor**

*The US and Israel have wrought war on Iran; Israel continues to wage war on Lebanon and bomb Palestine. Yet we continue our lives doing the routine unconcerned about the death and destruction. Is this the new normal, with wars themselves becoming insignificant to our lives?*

There is a Flemish proverb which goes, 'And the farmer continued to plough', meaning that life goes on regardless of all that is happening around.

This was probably the basis of Breughel the Elder's painting, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus". On the face of it, it is a calm landscape. A farmer is ploughing his field. We see the sea and the sky, a ship sailing on. And suddenly, in the right corner, we see Icarus who has just fallen into the sea.

Young Icarus of the myth had wings made by his father and stuck with wax. He didn't heed his father's advice and flew too close to the sun. The wings melted away and he fell from the sky into the sea below. It was a calamitous fall and splash. Yet the farmer in Breughel's frame didn't hear the splash and 'continued to plough'.

W H Auden has a brilliant poem based on this, *Mus?e des Beaux Arts*.

*In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, But for him it was not an important failure...*

The US-Israel-Iran war, like Icarus, has plummeted on us and rages on. As I write, it is a real, flaming thing, literally. Yet other concerns cause it to be moved away.



Looming shortages of gas and petrol. An overseas flight we must take to see our loved ones. A holiday in a far country, planned long ago with friends. A wedding or other celebration. And the greatest supermost calmer of all situations-cricket. Habitually, today, we can switch channels from the War to cricket to local politics to Netflix.

Is there a way then, of looking at our divided gaze without judging it as apathy? But the DO-something app installed in us has great nuisance value. It will intrude on our daily actions to a lesser or greater extent. It will ask, now with the War on, what action and behaviour are expected of us.

For our parents and their parents before them, the decision was simple. There was a war on, nothing else mattered. The restraints on food and spending, the austerities-and the memory of hard times with rationing. My friend Patricia in the UK who lived as a child through World War II, still eats oatmeal dense, without sugar or milk. Because, she says, she must remember the times of hardship.

And for people like my young friend Nitya, when the Gujarat earthquake happened in 2001, there was no pause. She leapt up from whatever she was doing, and headed for the region to help rescue operations. She went planlessly, untrained, and dived into rescue. This was the only way she wanted to and could respond.

Is today somehow different? There are wars-real and potential-around us, and other calamities as there always were. Some people like Nitya will become a part of rescue corps in whatever capacity. Others like Patricia will freeze into austerities.

But most of us, like Breughel's farmer, will see the need to carry on doing our work.

And to describe this, I turn to a word borrowed from William Carlos Williams' poem on Icarus. As Icarus fell, the sun melted the wax on his wings and

*unsignificantly off the coast there was  
a splash quite unnoticed this was  
Icarus drowning*

Quite unnoticed. Though the situation is titanic and frightening. We feel it but we are held in our routine, our commitments, there is the field to plough. In the new normal then, is the War somehow...unsignificant?

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