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At War

Siobhan K. Phillips
Dickinson College

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Siobhan Phillips

Events seemed of such moment, screens
bright with charts, staccato stars,
and ad-hoc icons, we were almost
awkward, walking just the same
restless streets as always, bound
for the retrospective. There, the guards
in vacant rooms of art were forced
to look us over and over. One,
a tall recruit in training, trailed
an elder pair through permanent-collection
rounds, his oxfords squeaking, busts
to still-lives, portraits, landscapes; last
the long halls of history painting:
greatest of all, an era held
and now a dead (if death exists
in genre) genre. Awe, I thought,
a curious thing...My drifting, bored
glance moved off from canvas, down
to fingers jingling keys and coins
in creased pockets, nods: These two
can get the new guy hired nights
at a hospital ward; they moonlight there.
He'd rather have time off. They laugh:
young, single. Time will come
when cash...We left soon after. Full
of sights and strolling home, we talked
of art's decline and the fresh campaign.