

KATHLEEN STRAFFORD

May 4, 1970

While tin soldiers armed with rifles
tear gas and bayonets
fired 67 rounds in 13 seconds
into mobs of unarmed students
wounding nine killing four

Kenny just back from Nam jumpy addicted & empty
smell of blood on his hands pushed
down our basement forced into hiding
where the dark is stored father said
they have their place but haven't dug it yet
grandma said they weren't to blame poor buggers
& neighbours organised vigilante meetings

In dankness we spoke in fragments until it was safe
he took it all in his stride
I was broken

In the iconic Kent State photo
the world stops as a girl's knees hit cement
sprawls her fingers as though counting last breaths
screaming beside a boy who opened his mouth
at live ammunition
Slave handwritten t-shirt, flowered jeans
face-down in concrete
some dare not look
a bandana clad boy pauses to stare at the camera

Four million students staged walk-outs
smashed windows
slashed tires
dragged parked cars into intersections
threw bedsprings over bridges into traffic
Nixon called them pawns of communism
Students buried the printed Constitution signifying its murder

I moved out
married Kenny
in a flashback
he decided to bounce my body against walls before leaving for Thailand

I composed the dear john driving home crying
so hard I had to piss down a side street.

Protest is language
of the unheard
ambulance of ideas
blowing cigarette smoke in faces
telling them they don't get the point
telling them effigies written on walls
 will haunt America's nights
telling them times are a-changing.

May 1970 by Kathleen Strafford was highly commended in the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (July 2020) judged by Terry Jones.

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