Fall 1984

Telling Life from Art

Robert Cooperman
I remember watching television,  
a huge pillow in my lap  
while I punched it in a fury  
each time the villain  
in a cowboy movie  
snuck up behind the hero.  
People should face each other  
if they wanted to fight,  
I thought when I was seven.

My mother would rush into the room,  
out of patience with the pummeling  
that crashed out of me;  
she would calm me, for a moment,  
by saying it was only a movie,  
only happening to someone  
who wasn't real.  
But I knew better.

I have learned to hide my snarls,  
the bites I used to give  
with watch-dog ferocity  
to that ragged sack of feathers  
my mother kept for me to tear apart  
in tantrums of justice outraged.

I watch more quietly now,  
while newscasters catalogue  
the daily horrors of children abducted,  
odies found mutilated,  
policemen firebombed  
for praying in the wrong churches,  
villages smashed to rubble  
because they call their churches mosques  
or synagogues or churches.
After a while I turn the station
or switch off the set
and shake my head;
if I let myself I could shake it right off,
but I have learned my mother's lesson
all too well, perhaps,
and tell myself it is happening
to other people
and is therefore only a movie,
not the terrible, the real thing.