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Poetry of witness| Vietnam War veteran-poets (challenging American myth)

James Soular

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POETRY OF WITNESS: VIETNAM WAR VETERAN-POETS
(CHALLENGING AMERICAN MYTH)

by

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Two decades after the fall of Saigon and the official end of the Vietnam War, many Americans who fought in it are still engaged in a process of sense-making, an attempt to define the meaning of the "Vietnam Experience." Many veterans have chosen the medium of poetry to record the traumatic events they experienced and what they learned from them. Poetry arising out of traumatic experience or exposure to extremity has been defined by Carolyn Forché as "poetry of witness" (very similar to Kali Tal's "literature of trauma"). Poetry of witness embodies three elements: the experience of trauma or extremity, the urge to bear witness to that experience, and a sense of community, within which and to which one can witness.

Although often intensely personal, poetry of witness usually arises out of reaction to some form of political or "state" action or pressure. Poetry of witness is not a call to bear arms against the state; rather, it is a documentation of experience and an exhortation against forgetfulness. It does not appeal to immediate political rectification so much as it appeals to a sense of communal conscience or spirit.

Poetry of witness by veteran-poets is their effort to ensure that what really happened in Vietnam is made known and is not forgotten, and in that process, they challenge long-held American perceptions and myths pertaining to war. The works studied here include those by the earliest veteran-poets, represented by the 1972 anthology Winning Hearts and Minds, and later poetry represented by three veteran-poets who are today recognized as leading Vietnam War poets: W.D. Ehrhart, Bruce Weigl, and Yusef Komunyakaa. Collectively, these poets present a powerful collage of the fragmented nature of the Vietnam War and its many unspoken, forgotten, or ignored realities: the racism and atrocities, the needless and brutal deaths, the widespread destruction of the land, and the tremendous guilt and grief America's sons brought back with them from that war. Veteran-poets' poetry of witness is an outcome of their refusal to forget what happened and their need to remind us that it did.
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CHAPTER I

VETERAN-POETS AND THE POETRY OF WITNESS

During the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):
"Can you describe this?"
And I said: "I can."
Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

Anna Akhmatova, Requiem

Almost twenty years have thuddled by since the images were flashed to the world:
The American official punching the face of a panic-stricken Vietnamese attempting to board one of the last aircraft out of Da Nang, the helicopters perched on the rooftop of the U.S. embassy annex in Saigon as people climbed ladders to board the last evacuation flights euphemistically called "retrograde movements," and Vietnamese pilots desperately ditching their helicopters in the South China Sea near American ships lying offshore of South Vietnam.

The Vietnam War officially ended 30 April 1975 when a North Vietnamese Army tank crashed through the gates of the presidential palace in Saigon. As those gates clattered to the ground and the existence of South Vietnam dissipated as quickly as the
tank's diesel fumes did in the celebratory air, so too did that image symbolically end a conflict that had divided the United States more than any event since the Civil War. For many American veterans, however, it was only a symbolic ending. The war continues to play itself out upon the battered landscape of their minds, and it is upon this battlefield where the war's final resolution must take place. This struggle to come to terms with the war surfaces in the poetry of many veterans, in what Carolyn Forché calls "poetry of witness," which arises out of "the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination" (Forché 1993, 9). In the process of witnessing their experiences, these poets call into question many of the myths and perceptions of war that American society preserves and defends.

Poetry of witness is a record, documentation, that an event, usually dramatic or traumatic, has occurred. In fact, poetry of witness may be the sole evidence or trace of that event; its objectivity, its "truth," cannot usually be verified through independent means. These poems are as much experiential as imaginative; the authors cannot be separated from the events described.

Because poetry of witness arises out of personal experience, does it belong in the realm of the "personal" (lyric) or of the "public" (political)? Although witness poetry often arises out of reaction to some political or "state" action or pressure, it doesn't necessarily follow that all poetry of witness is strictly political. Likewise, though a poem of witness usually has its birth in personal trauma, that doesn't relegate all witness poetry to the realm of the personal.

To distinguish poetry of witness from either political or personal poetry, Forché
defines for it a space between the two that she calls "the social" (Forché 1993, 9). "[T]he social is a place of resistance and struggle," she writes, "where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated. It is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice" (Forché 1993, 9). Poetry of witness is not, however, a call to arms against the state; rather, it is a *documentation* of experience and an exhortation against forgetfulness. It does not appeal to immediate political rectification so much as it appeals to a sense of communal conscience or spirit. "Look!" poetry of witness seems to say. "This is what happened. This is what can happen again. What are we going to do about it?" Most poetry by Vietnam War veterans falls into this "social space."

Poetry of witness is very similar to what Kali Tal describes as the "literature of trauma," and, like Forché, she sees in it three common elements: "the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community" (Tal 1991, 217-18). Survivors of a terrible and at times ruthless conflagration, the veteran-poets to be studied here have found it necessary to testify to what is often euphemistically called the "Vietnam Experience." Tal sees in the literature of Vietnam veterans a connection to literature by other trauma survivors, including Holocaust literature, A-bomb literature, and rape or incest literature (Tal 1991, 217).

The urge to bear witness is a common characteristic of survivors of trauma. Usually occurring a decade or more after the experience, a process of *re*-visioning of the event begins to take shape in the survivor's mind. Along with this revisioning is a need to share the trauma with others. It is the collective cry rising out of the ashes of the Holocaust that
shouts "Never again!" (a slogan adopted by many Vietnam veterans). Terence Des Pres has written of the Holocaust:

The testimony of survivors is rooted in a strong need to make the truth known, and the fact that this literature exists, that survivors produced these documents--there are many thousands of these--is evidence of a profoundly human process. Survival is a specific kind of experience, and "to survive as a witness" is one of its forms. (Des Pres 1976, 30)

In a process similar to that of survivors of the Holocaust or other traumatic events, Vietnam veteran-poets, "survivors" of the extremity of war, have found it imperative to make their "truths" known, and those truths usually reflect the experiences of the war and the changes wrought by those experiences.

Survivors of trauma are transformed by their experience, and this transformation is, in a sense, a loss of innocence that can never be fully regained. The meat grinder of Vietnam assaulted repeatedly the innermost assumptions, the personal myths, that soldiers had formed about the way life is supposed to be lived and what war actually entailed.

Major revision of personal myth is at the heart of traumatic experience. In shaping one's personal myths, one draws from and buys into, in differing proportions, certain national or collective myths. Deeply rooted in the psyche, these myths help shape one's world, tending to filter or influence one's perceptions of what goes on around one. Traumatic experiences such as murder, rape, or war seriously threaten the mythos or "schema" one constructs to help shape and define the world. Tal writes:

Grand revision of a personal myth must always spring from a traumatic experience, for the mechanism which maintains those foundational schema will automatically distort or revise all but the most shattering revelations. Chaim Shatan, a psychiatrist who works with Vietnam combat veterans and other survivors of trauma, describes this drastic
uprooting of belief as the "basic wound" which creates a new, permanent, and adaptive life-style. (Tal 1991, 225)

These "basic wounds," brought on by traumatic events, forever changed many Vietnam soldiers, and they have never really looked at the world through the same eyes. Veteran-poets, because of this transformation, chisel away at the chimeras of American myths and say "it ain't so." They are re-telling the war and revising national myth, while attempting simultaneously to rebuild their personal myths, badly ruptured or destroyed in the deadly conflict that left 58,183 names on a black wall in Washington, D.C.

This century is unprecedented for its cruelty and loss of human life (twelve million dead in World War I and sixty million dead in World War II are horrendous examples of this). Television bombards us twenty-four hours a day with acts that question the very sanity of our times. We turn away from this horror, the act of denial and forgetting easier with each image that intrudes upon our sense of morality and self. "It becomes easier to forget," Forché says, "than to remember, and this forgetfulness becomes our defense against remembering--a rejection of unnecessary sentimentality, a hardheaded acceptance of 'reality'" (Forché 1993, 10). In other words, "Forget it. That's just the way it is."

The poems to be examined here, however, were written out of an inability to forget and a need to bear witness to the pain and guilt of what for many was the most traumatic and defining period of their lives. Though personal and intimate, these poems are also very public. Witness poems are like letters, postcards, or news reports, "ways of writing that stress the interpersonal aspects of poetry, the public side of literature. They underline the collective urgency that propels a literature of the social" (Forché 1993, 12). Vietnam
veterans' poetry is their effort to awaken society to the realities they endured in Vietnam, their hope that just maybe America will learn from them. Poetry of witness drives a wedge between forced complacency and reality, between the oblivion of forgetfulness and the living reality. It says, "Here's the truth. This is what really happened and what may happen again if we don't change something."

These poems are fragments of memory, snapshots of experience in a war that was the quintessential snapshot. It was, after all, our first media war, and America was bombarded daily with images of it. Most soldiers carried cameras and were forever taking pictures of the country, of its people, and of the war that engulfed it all. Vietnam was the sudden sun of a tripped booby trap, the pockmarked countryside that looked like a moonscape in places, the adrenalin rush of a firefight that could be over in thirty seconds, and the long line of corpses stretched out in the hundred-degree heat, the "body count." There were no lines, and there was never any progress; there were just places with names like Khe Sanh, Ia Drang, the Pineapple Plantation, the Ho Bo Woods, and Hue, fragments or splinters of a larger, unstructured whole. Poetry of witness, the "postcard," was the perfect form for the fragmented nature of the Vietnam War.

These fragments of trauma are usually terse, emotional, characterized by stark imagery, and written in a voice that C. D. B. Bryan calls "a barely suppressed scream. There is an intensity to these books similar to that which pervades the literature of the Holocaust. One is always conscious of the authors' efforts to stay calm, to contain the shriek" (Bryan 1984, 71). These "barely suppressed screams" forced the poems onto the page in a badly-needed de-compression, and they are what give veteran-poets' poetry its
hard edge. Vietnam veteran-poets, in reactions similar to those of other survivors of traumatic experience, "instinctively feel the desire to call, to warn, to communicate their shock" (Des Pres 1976, 33). These poets are compelled to shout a warning, to let us know of the horror of war and what it has done to them and to us.

What the war did to us is still being debated. The proliferation of works analyzing the war makes it possible to support virtually any position one takes on its causes and on what happened there. Difficulty in understanding the war lies partially in the fragmented nature of the war itself and partially in the inordinate length of it and the ever-changing list of players involved in the drama. Part of the answer lies in the veterans themselves. In "A Sense-Making Perspective in Recent Poetry by Vietnam Veterans," Lorrie Smith writes:

> Journalist Pete Hamill suggests why the actuality of this war continues to be so elusive: "The truth of the war was internalized, mythic, surrealistic, allusive; its darkest furies, deepest grief, and most brutal injuries could not be photographed. This war belongs to the printed page." Questioning the putative objectivity of documentary and film—our most visible attempts to come to terms collectively with the Vietnam Era—Hamill suggests that the war might be recovered more fully in imaginative literature. In fact, one valuable and largely untapped source of truth about the war lies in poetry by Vietnam soldiers and veterans. . . . Like the letters in Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam, poems by Vietnam veterans provide a repository of first-hand knowledge about the war and retain the living contexts of history by naming people, battles, dates, and places. Beyond this project of anamnesia, however, veteran-poets have begun to locate the larger significations of the war in American history and consciousness. Theirs is a poetry of witness but also, at its best, of retrospective and heuristic vision. (Smith 1986, 13)

Because much of what happened to veterans was internalized, "stuffed" way down inside, many of the war's deepest wounds remain unknown. Veteran-poets, through the "imaginative literature" of the poetry of witness, are helping us to remember, to re-learn some of the truths of the war. As survivors, they are, in Des Pres's terms, "disturber[s] of
the peace" (Des Pres 1976, 42), shaking the cage of the collective consciousness and setting the record straight by dissecting the myths and ferreting out truths. But why has it been so hard to tell the war's story? What made the Vietnam War unique, so strange?

The Vietnam War was a different war from others in which America has participated. First, there were no "front lines" or safe rear areas. In fact, nowhere in Vietnam was considered safe. Most troops, at least the earliest ones, were trained in conventional warfare in which opposing forces are encountered, and a block of land is either won or lost. That didn't happen in Vietnam. Often a hill or village would be taken at high cost, only to be abandoned the very next day. Weeks or months (occasionally days) later, the very same piece of ground might have to be retaken, again at high cost.

Kate Beaard Meyers contends:

The Vietnam War could not be followed on a map, victories marked with colored pins. Pieces of land, villages, even cities were "taken" and retaken. Place names were confusing. What came to be known as My Lai is actually a group of villages, the My Lais. The Massacre was in My Lai 4 (Meyers 1988, 548)

Vietnam didn't seem to have a stable geography; no matter how often you returned to the same place, it never appeared the same. Entire villages would move or be moved, only the charred earth or bomb craters left in their place. The jungle would quickly reclaim cleared land (at least any that hadn't been defoliated by chemicals), rolling over areas like a green tsunami. The country seemed like a deadly, amorphous mass, constantly reshaping itself into isolated fragments or islands with strange names and numbers like the Rockpile, Hill 875, Firebase Joy, and Hamburger Hill, all with a sort of green No-Man's Land separating them. Vietnam was, as Donald Ringnalda has observed, "the ultimate no place to be"
(Ringnalda 1988, 395), the place where even the most detailed maps, according to Michael Herr in *Dispatches*, were "like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind" (Herr 1978, 1).

Second, every individual serving in Vietnam, except general officers, knew before leaving the United States when he or she would likely return home. The tour lasted twelve months for everyone, except, of course, the Marines, noted for their one-upmanship, who served thirteen. Donald Ringnalda maintains:

Meaning well, General Westmoreland did the worst thing he possibly could have by introducing the one-year tour of duty in Vietnam. This is without precedent in American military history. He charged an already linearly-oriented people with what resulted in an obsession with time that surpasses the one with maps. Many grunts became metaphysicians of time. . . . And notice that the GI didn't number from one to 365, he numbered backwards. It was a process of total erasure, not filling. It was a process of trying to erase a totally alien reality . . . It was a nerve-wracking battle of time against an ominous space. Metaphorically speaking, the grunts were convicts counting down the days left on their sentences, or worse, praying for a stay of execution. (Ringnalda 1988, 30-31)

Soldiers, then, who had reached a high level of proficiency in jungle warfare during their tour, had also reached their DEROS (date of estimated return from overseas) and were rotated home. They were replaced by inexperienced "fucking new guys" (FNGs), complete strangers. Many soldiers in the unit, especially "short-timers" (those with little time left in "the Nam" and who could have taught the FNGs the most), avoided them because their inexperience could get a "short-timer" killed. The one-year tour led to a breakdown in unit cohesion, morale, and efficiency and created a survivor mentality in the combatants: "All I have to do is survive 365 days, and I'm back in the World" ("the World" being anywhere back in the United States).
Third, the ideology of the war was difficult, if not impossible, to grasp. No one could say definitively why the United States was there or whom we were really fighting. Stopping the Red Tide of Communism wore thin as the years dragged on and on, and there was always that nagging image of Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi on 2 September 1945, asserting Vietnam's independence from France, uttering phrases strangely familiar to the Western world. He had been quoting, of course, from our Declaration of Independence.

In World War II, the United States had clearly-defined, uniformed enemies, and the reasons for our involvement were well-understood and unanimous. In Vietnam, it often appeared that the whole country was hostile to American forces. The enemy was rarely uniformed, and American troops were often forced to kill women and children combatants. This element, along with other factors, was to lead to the committing of thousands of atrocities against the civilian population, a contributing influence to the poetry of witness that will be discussed later.

Fourth, it often seemed as though units were fighting an invisible enemy. A common saying of the war was, "We own the day, Charlie owns the night." American soldiers perceived the enemy as almost ghoulish, operating at will at night, rarely being seen, evaporating into the triple-canopy jungle like wraiths or disappearing like moles down into their dangerous tunnels. Large numbers of casualties were caused by booby traps such as punji stakes or "Bouncing Bettys" (mines that would spring up to waist level before exploding) that caused tremendous physical and psychological damage, once again without the victim or his fellow soldiers ever seeing the enemy. Witnessing friends mutilated or killed day after day, without ever being able to strike back at an enemy,
generated tremendous levels of frustration and anger, another contributing factor in the perpetration of atrocities against the Vietnamese.

Fifth, this was America's first teenage war, the average age of combatants being nineteen, compared to World War II's twenty-six. This age, around nineteen, for most adolescents, involves a psychosocial moratorium during which the individual requires time to develop a stable and long-lasting personality and sense of self. Cast into the role of combatant and survivor in a situation with uncertain moral and political grounds disrupted this moratorium and led to many psychological problems (Goodwin [no date], 10).

Sixth, alcohol and drug use, especially near the end of the war, became common methods of dealing with the overwhelming stress of combat. It contributed to the brutal behavior of some soldiers and was an influential factor in the committing of atrocities. Drug and alcohol use, coupled with the one-year tour, enabled many soldiers to endure the war, psychologically, until their return to the States, accounting for the high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) associated with the Vietnam War. With approximately 400,000 veterans suffering from serious PTSD as well as addiction and alcoholism, it wasn't long before "Vietnam vet" became almost synonymous with "crazy vet" or "druggie."

Seventh, the use of jets ("Freedom Birds") to return veterans to the United States often resulted in a transition from the jungle to southern California and civilian status in less than thirty-six hours. World War II vets took weeks, sometimes months, to return home, and they returned with units they had spent the entire war with, giving them time to discuss and come to terms with their war experiences. Vietnam veterans returned with
strangers from other units, leaving behind friends in Vietnam who still had to survive for their turn at catching the "Freedom Bird" home. This often created deep feelings of guilt, and most veterans never attempted contacting others from their units for fear that they might not have survived.

Eighth, we lost. This was a tremendous blow to our national hubris and to the image of the returning soldier. Even the suggestion that we could lose to a backwater like Vietnam was unthinkable. How could that small, backward country withstand our superior firepower and technology, our finely-trained army with its advanced weaponry? Everybody knew the forces arrayed against the most powerful country on the planet didn't stand a chance. Well, almost everybody. Someone had forgotten to tell the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese Army. Since they "dressed alike, looked alike, and talked alike," it seemed as if we were killing the same people in battle after battle. They would rise from the ashes of one defeat and attack again from another direction on another night in another place. Although the point could be argued that America didn't lose the war and performed instead a "strategic withdrawal," it was still perceived as defeat.

Last, upon their return, veterans were faced with anti-war rallies with themselves portrayed as "puppets" of the warmongering, imperialist United States. The veteran was confronted with ambivalence, scorn, or, worst of all, silence. In our attempt, as General Curtis Lemay once said, to "bomb them [our enemies in Vietnam] back into the Stone Age," we came very close to detonating ourselves and our society, and the veteran returned home as the war's scapegoat. He and she (for over seven thousand women
served in the armed forces in Vietnam\(^1\) learned all too quickly that the subject of Vietnam was off limits in the society to which they had returned. Not even their own families wanted to talk about it, partially because they, like the veteran, didn't understand what it had all been about, partially because the nation was traumatized and worn out by the first "television war" and its inordinate length, and partially because they felt guilty, responsible for sending their sons to die in that strange, surreal land for reasons no one seemed able to define. Consequently, many of the war's lessons, its truths, became internalized by its returning soldiers, a result, in part, of the war's unpopularity.

The Vietnam War fell victim to a collective or national amnesia, or, in the argot of today, to a classic case of denial. Indeed, an ABC News/Washington Post poll taken in 1985, only ten years after the war, found that "while most Americans believe U.S. involvement in the war was a mistake, one out of three does not know on whose side we fought" (Journal Bulletin 1985, no pagination). Among adults thirty years old and younger, "forty-eight percent did not know that the U.S. fought on the side of South Vietnam" (Journal Bulletin 1985, no pagination).

Tobey Herzog lists additional reasons for the war's uniqueness:

Let me suggest several other special features: advanced medical techniques leading to a low death rate among seriously injured soldiers; the extensive media coverage,\(^1\)

\(^1\)Although women certainly have written poetry about their experiences during the Vietnam War, they have not done so to the extent of their male counterparts. At least, they have not been published to the extent male veteran-poets have. Because of this and because they are, in themselves, the theme for an entirely separate paper, women poets of the Vietnam War will not be discussed in this study. For an excellent and moving anthology of poetry by women who served in Vietnam, see *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*, edited by Lynda Van Devanter and Joan A. Furey. There are also several noteworthy personal narratives and oral histories by women about the war, among them *Home Before Morning* by Lynda Van Devanter, *American Daughter Gone to War* by Winnie Smith, and *In the Combat Zone*, an oral history edited by Kathryn Marshall.
especially on television; constant rotation of combat troops; invisible enemy and battle lines; vagueness of military and political strategy; absence of overreaching ideological justification; a war of body counts; disproportionate number of draftees who fought in Vietnam drawn from poorest economic backgrounds; absence of duration tours; high drug use among soldiers; sharp division between career soldiers and one-term soldiers; widely held stereotypes for returning veterans—drug addicts, psychos, murderers; estrangement of veterans from traditional groups of support; inability of American society to separate attitudes about the war from feelings about veterans; a war not to be recalled with pride; America's longest war; defeat. (Herzog 1981, 742)

America just wanted Vietnam to go away; it wanted to crawl into a psychological womb and lick its wounds, or, better yet, pretend they never occurred and the pain didn't exist.

But its participants could not forget; nor, as is obvious in their poetry and other literature, will they ever be able to forget. As Kali Tal explains, "Survival literature tends to appear at least a decade after the traumatic experience in question. As the immediacy of the event fades into memory, the natural process of revision begins to occur in the mind of the survivor" (Tal 1991, 236). This process of re-visioning is still occurring.

With the official end of the war in 1975, one chapter ended and another began. For many veterans, the tank crashing through the gates of the presidential palace was another event to add to others that were, as the veteran-poet Bruce Weigl has written, "burned behind [their] eyes." It is those many images, those mean memories, with which Vietnam veterans continue to struggle, and that struggle is palpable in their poetry.

By the time Saigon fell, a small anthology of Vietnam veterans' poetry had been in print for three years. *Winning Hearts and Minds*, or *WHAM* as it was popularly called, contains 109 poems by 33 authors, all witnessing in various ways their "Vietnam Experience." This study of Vietnam War poetry as poetry of witness will begin with that small anthology and continue with three others. *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired* by
Poetry by Vietnam War veterans has evolved over time. The early poems, written under the extremity of battle or shortly after, are prosaic but lively. Containing elements of wry or sardonic humor and laced with obscenity, they are characterized by more visceral and concrete description than recent poetry by veterans. Many of the poems are very short, consisting sometimes of no more than three or four lines, fragments of experience. Somewhat of an intermediary stage occurred in the seventies, with several poets emerging whose perspective was broader, though still based in Vietnam. This poetry moved away, for the most part, from direct contact with the battlefield and dealt with larger, more universal, questions about the war and its participants. Still often prosaic, this poetry was somewhat more technically advanced with its use of metaphor, descriptive language, and other poetic techniques.

The final stage is a recollection of the war from a distance and a description of its ongoing effects back in the United States. This poetry is characterized by increased use of metaphor and "polished" poetic language. Many of the poets are now university-trained, and their technical skills are more readily apparent. Through a synthesis of memory and imagination, they are engaging the war and the myths surrounding it, while at the same time testifying to its effects upon participants since their return home. Lorrie Smith suggests:

Veteran-poets' continuing engagement with the moral and political questions raised by Vietnam dismantles the popular myth that we have regained our national innocence and forces us to scrutinize our well-meaning but still unexamined consensus that U.S.
involvement in Vietnam was a mistake. By continuing to bring the war home and inviting our empathic response, they map our common ground of history. (Smith 1986, 10-11)

Through the powers of creativity and memory, today's veteran-poets are challenging historical revisionists who would now portray America's entrance into Vietnam as a "noble cause." Instead, these poets confront head-on the reintegration of traditional national myths of war (we're always the nice guys, for example) by portraying the realities they endured in Vietnam. No longer restricted primarily to the battlefield, this stage of witness poetry by veterans also addresses the aftermath of the war: the nightmares, the grief, the guilt.

This study of Vietnam War poetry as poetry of witness will cover two of the stages mentioned: the earliest, represented by the anthology, *WHAM*, and the most recent and probably most mature Vietnam War poetry, represented by the works of Ehrhart (*To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired*), Weigl (*Song of Napalm*), and Komunyakaa (*Dien Cai Dau*). The middle stage will not be discussed because it closely resembles that of the final stage. The major differences between the two are the later poets' maturity and poetic skills, their distance from the war in time, and their increased meditation upon the war's aftermath.

The above works describe, in an overall sense, a violent invasion of the personal by the political. These men, many of whom were drafted, were, after all, sent to fight in a foreign land by their government, a government, furthermore, unable to articulate the reasons for sending them there. These poems explode upon the page and reopen wounds, laying the corpses out once again for a final body count. Their language inscribes upon
the consciousness the environment of extremity, and, through their individual and collective impacts, these poets erode our ability to forget, to deny, and to replace truth with myth. Even if nothing can be done directly about the traumatic circumstances portrayed, it is essential for these men that the story be told and recorded, if for no other reason than to "describe," like Anna Ahkmatova, what happened.
CHAPTER II

WHAM: POETRY AT GUT LEVEL

If you have a farm in Vietnam
And a house in hell
Sell the farm
And go home

Michael Casey, "A Bummer"

Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans (WHAM) first appeared in the spring of 1972. Edited by three Vietnam veterans, Larry Rottman, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet, who also contributed poems to the volume, WHAM "quickly became a classic: the seminal anthology against which all future Vietnam war poetry would be judged" (Ehrhart 1987, 246).

The volume's name was an official slogan of the American pacification and relocation program in Vietnam during the war. This program's aim was to drive enemy forces from rural areas and villages through the establishment of local "security forces," which would, at the same time, "win" the loyalty of the villagers to the government of South Vietnam and its main ally, the United States. Often, to dislodge the enemy, the villages were destroyed by South Vietnamese or American forces, and their inhabitants were forcibly "relocated" away from enemy power centers. This served only to alienate
the very people whose "hearts and minds" the program was attempting to win over
Troubled by a lack of coordination between American and South Vietnamese forces and
politicians, by competition between three American agencies (none of whom had authority
over the others), by a lack of knowledge of the Vietnamese people and their culture, and
by a host of other reasons, the program was a miserable failure.

Early poetry of the Vietnam War arose from a necessity to make sense of something
almost beyond understanding: "How bad can it get? As bad as a day in the Nam," said
the GIs who had to do the killing and dying. The Vietnam War clawed insistently at one's
sense of reality with its oxymora ("We had to destroy the village in order to save it"), its
warp and woof of the language epitomized by phrases or words such as "aggressive
defense," "pacification," "peace offensive," and "body count" ("if it's dead, it's VC," a
common qualifier used in Vietnam). For veteran-poets, their poetry is a bitter
exhumation of their experiences, an attempt to unearth sense from the non-sense of war.

As noted earlier, the government's rationale for involvement in Vietnam was never
adequately articulated, unlike World War II, in which the government's reasons for

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1 The uniqueness of the war, its sheer craziness, could only be told in its own language, and that
language was not restricted to the euphemistic obfuscations of the upper echelons. The rank and file
appropriated or created their own nomenclature for the fantasy-world of Vietnam. The war generated so many
terms of its own that many authors, fact or fiction, feel the need to include glossaries in their books. Nancy
Anisfield writes: "The world of the U.S. soldier in Vietnam is conveyed through the use of various jargons.
The words are mixed, mutated, and piled high upon each other to enhance the confusion and create an overload
guaranteed to send a jolt through the reader's linguistic circuits. First, there are the military acronyms and the
slang identifying the U.S./Vietnam environment, for example: LZs, ground fire, choppers, REMFs, FNGs, 1
Corps, frag, hootch, arclight, the World, LURPs, and a two-digit midget. Second are the 60s slang, rock lyrics,
and drug lingo exemplified by 'it made you feel Omni,' 'he's a control freak at the crossroads,' or 'really a dude
who shot his wad.' And, finally, there are the euphemisms and epigrammatic phrases which attempt to
emotionally distance the speaker from the pain of the situation, such as: 'There it is,' 'It don't mean nothin',
or getting wasted, zapped, blown away or greased." Nancy Anisfield, "Words and Fragments: Narrative Style in
fighting were also the combatant's. Deborah Holdstein writes:

In the Vietnam conflict, however, the war veteran's ideology is personally conceived, shaped through the realities of physical and psychological pain, injury, and death. The common thread for each veteran-poet is the destruction of war and the irrationality surrounding this one in particular; so, rather than governmental ideology and perspective influencing that of the combat soldier, the soldier, choosing poetry as his medium, uses imagery to create a different perspective on the conflict. The fragmented nature of the Vietnam experience parallels the diverse, imagistic expressions of that war as documented by the men who witnessed it firsthand. (Holdstein 1983, 60)

Rather than growing out of a national ideology, then, the soldier's ideology, his conception of the war, was shaped by the war itself and his experiences in it. The one-year tour, counted off in increments of single days, and the up-and-down nature of the war (hours of boredom interspersed with moments of sheer terror) led to a fragmentation of the veteran's perception of that war. The fragments show up, in veteran-poet Larry Rottman's words, as "nightmares in print" (Young 1972, 55).

In a review of *WHAM* for the *New York Times Book Review*, John Seelye wrote, "[I]f one or more or the impact of all these poems does not make you weep, then by Jesus Christ you are not human and ought to destroy your Social Security card" (Young 1972, 54). Often, the poems in *WHAM* are prosaic, gut-level matter-of-fact statements, written by men with very little, if any, formal training.

It is poetry written of the moment in the mood of the moment, often while these men were still in Vietnam or shortly after returning stateside. A common difficulty encountered in writing about traumatic events is that language begins to break down the closer one gets to the actual event. Skill in the use of metaphor, according to Aristotle, is the most important requirement in the art of poetry. Yet, where does one find a metaphor
for death from an enemy rocket-propelled grenade? Language, metaphor, becomes insufficient to describe the experience, and this is one reason for the preponderance of concrete or literal images in veterans' poetry. Faced with this breakdown in language, one finally has to say, like Neruda, that "The blood of the children / Flowed out onto the street like . . / like the blood of children," a horrible enough picture in itself and probably impossible to express metaphorically Instead, these early writers adopted a form of their own: mostly narrative, often prosaic, and lacking in metaphor but almost always imagistic and hard-hitting. Written in the language of the common man, these poems are usually short (sometimes only four or five lines), with very few continuing to a second page or more.

Unable to remain silent any longer, veterans turned to poetry as a means of witnessing what they had seen and done. Basil Paquet, one of the more literary contributors to *WHAM* and a medic in Vietnam, opens the volume with the poem, "They Do Not Go Gentle".

The half-dead comatose
Paw the air like cats do when they dream,
They perform isometrics tirelessly.
They flail the air with a vengeance
You know they cannot have.

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2Some poems from *WHAM* are quoted in their entirety. Although this may exceed the limits of "fair use" as defined by the Copyright Act of 1976, the editors of *WHAM* have included a long list at the end of the volume outlining how the poems may be used. It states, basically, that the poems may be copied and used anytime, for virtually any purpose. "Print a poem (or several of these poems)"; they write, "in your PTA newsletter, your community newspaper, your school or college newspaper; print selections from this book in magazines, college yearbooks, literary quarterlies, in anthologies. Reproduction (in your own hand or in print) is the second function, and quality, of poetry." Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil T Paquet, *Winning Hearts & Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), no pagination.
After all, their multiplication tables,
Memories of momma, and half their id
Lies in some shell hole
Or plop! splatter! on your jungle boots.
It must be some atavistic angst
Of their muscle and bones,
Some ancient ritual of their sea water self,
Some blood stream monsoon,
Some sinew storm that makes
Their bodies rage on tastelessly
Without their shattered brains. (3)

The poem makes an obvious reference to Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," but the similarity ends with the title. These "shattered brains," where once reposed the essence of all that makes us human, are no longer even aware that their bodies "rage, rage against the dying of the light." Unlike the "good men" of Thomas's poem, these men are not possessed of old age, and they are incapable of raging against the dying of the light. Instead, their brains destroyed, they "rage on tastelessly." They are men, probably young, who were swept up in that terrible monsoon called Vietnam.

It is indeed "some atavistic angst," "some ancient ritual . . . that makes their bodies rage on tastelessly": It is the ancient ritual of war that has shattered these brains, and Paquet is calling attention to that rite, that myth. "Here's what can happen to you," he is saying. It isn't some grand ritual; it is a bloody storm that can leave your brains splattered on someone's boots and you flailing the air with less purpose, less consciousness, than an animal dreaming. This is a poem of observation with very little apparent judgment taking place, except, perhaps, for the somewhat disdainful "tastelessly" inserted near the poem's end. The point is, however, that these human beings are beyond caring or knowing what their bodies do, and it is the war that is responsible.
Another poem of brutal recognition is "Full Moon" by W D Ehrhart:

We were on patrol last night;
And as we moved along,
We came upon one of the enemy.

Strange, in the bright moon
He did not seem an enemy at all.
He had arms and legs, a head. . .

. . . and a rifle.
I shot him. (14)

The poet is not just relating an act of war; he is also relating an act of recognition, at the moment not fully realized, that he is forced to kill one of his own, a member of the family of man. That one word, "strange," suggests questions, and perhaps shock, in the speaker's mind. No overt judgment of the act is made in the poem; rather, there is a sort of clinical detachment undercut by the fifth and sixth lines, a momentary hesitation (under what anywhere else would probably be a serene, moonlit night) before the fact of war takes over again, and someone must die. It is the environment of war that turns this man into an enemy with a rifle and the speaker into his killer.

The lunacy of the war is hammered home in the poem "A Bummer" by Michael Casey, a poet whose work Philip D. Beidler has called "the first really significant step forward toward a major poetry of the war as experience" (Beidler 1982, 78):

We were going single file
Through his rice paddies
And the farmer
Started hitting the lead track
With a rake
He wouldn't stop
The TC went to talk to him
And the farmer tried to hit him too
So the tracks went sideways
Side by side
Through the guy's fields
Instead of single file
Hard On, Proud Mary
Bummer, Wallace, Rosemary's Baby
The Rutgers Road Runner
And
Go Get Em--Done Got Em
Went side by side
Through the fields
If you have a farm in Vietnam
And a house in hell
Sell the farm
And go home (7)

What starts out as an almost comical confrontation results in an atrocious, brutal response.

This poem introduces two common elements in the poetry of Vietnam veterans, atrocity and racism, two ingredients at times so closely related it is hard to distinguish between them. In comparing Vietnam "survivors" to those of the Holocaust, it was mentioned earlier that much writing of the Holocaust and of the Vietnam War deals with what was done to the survivors. In literature of the Vietnam War, we also see a necessity on the part of survivors to witness what they did to others. The three editors of WHAM wrote in the introduction: "What distinguishes the voices in this volume is their progression toward an active identification of themselves as agents of pain and war--as 'agent-victims' of their own atrocities" (Rottmann, Barry, and Paquet 1972, Introduction, no pagination).

In this poem, the power and arrogance of America, symbolized by the names of the vehicles, is aptly demonstrated. Talk having failed, the TC (track commander), rather than continue on the way he has, indulges in what can only be called an act of wanton destruction. There is also a hint of racism in the name of one of the tracks, Wallace
(Wallace; the former governor of Alabama, is a notable symbol of racism). A warning is explicit in the final lines: war in Vietnam and, by extension, any war, is more brutal than living in hell, especially if you're a noncombatant caught in the middle of it.

Both atrocity and racism are also apparent in the short poem "S. O. P." by Larry Rottman: "To build a 'gook stretcher,' all you need is: / Two helicopters / Two long, strong ropes, / And one elastic gook" (53). Its very title--S. O. P. stands for Standard Operating Procedure--suggests that the "gook stretcher" was more than a rarity, or at least things like it were. From the outset, the juxtaposition of "gook," a disparaging, racist term applied to any Vietnamese, and "stretcher" is a ridiculing of anything redemptive or humanitarian in the poem. The word "stretcher" is usually immediately associated with an image of a device used for care-giving or of someone hurt or sick being carried on a stretcher to a hospital, not to one's death. The "stretcher" in this poem more closely resembles the rack, a torture device used to stretch victims until their limbs pulled out of place.

It was widely known as early as 1966 "that the United States [was] fighting the dirtiest war of its history in Viet-Nam" (Norden 1971, 265). American atrocities included torture, the use of poison gas, indiscriminate bombing of civilian centers, execution of prisoners, and the general destruction of the Vietnamese countryside. This destruction included the use of Agent Orange, a powerful defoliant that laid waste to thousands of acres of land, some of which hasn't recovered to this day. In addition to the "gook stretcher" mentioned above was "the long step," a horrendous innovation in which two or more prisoners were taken aloft, usually in a helicopter. One of the prisoners was thrown
out at several thousand feet to make the others more receptive to interrogation. Often, even though the other prisoners talked, they would still be pitched out to their deaths. In *Crimes of War* it was reported that "U.S. and Government [South Vietnamese] troops in the countryside . . . feel themselves lost in an enemy sea and tend to strike out indiscriminately at real or imagined guerrillas. Thus, no Vietnamese is exempt from mistreatment and torture" (Norden 1971, 266).

This is borne out in the many acts of atrocity mentioned in personal narratives and oral histories such as Mark Baker's *Nam*, Wallace Terry's *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*, or Charles Anderson's *The Grunts*. At the 1971 Winter Soldier Investigation in Detroit, one hundred Vietnam veterans testified to atrocities they committed while serving in Vietnam. Many declared that atrocity was the rule rather than the exception. Much of that atrocity was rooted in a deep-seated and traditional racism.

In "Cobra Pilot" Don Receveur goes all the way back to the "Wild West" with his metaphor, describing part of another myth through heavily racist signifiers:

Plastic blue eyes
and hair
the color of toggle switches.
He flies his cobra-shark
with the precision
of a god
or a gunfighter.
(Hickok
with a 38 in his armpit)
His Nebraska smile
is a mini-gun
and his bowels
are full of rockets.
He hunts
the Indian-gooks
in the Wild West
of his mind (49)

Evoked here is the racism of the Old West whites and their practice of genocide against various indigenous Native American tribes. The comparison to Hickok, whom Lt. Col. George A. Custer during his Indian campaigns called "one of the most perfect types of manhood I ever saw" (Halsey and Shores 1970), is not accidental. As a scout for Custer, Hickok hunted Indians. The word "Indian," coupled with the disparaging "gooks," enhances the racist overtones of the images presented in the poem. When American soldiers weren't labelling the Vietnamese as "gooks," "slopes," or "dinks," they were calling them "Indians" and labelling where they lived "Indian country." Once the Vietnamese were perceived as subhuman, American soldiers could "then righteously exterminate them" (Ringnalda 1988, 33). This indiscriminate killing is evident in a poem by Jan Barry, "Memorial For Man In Black Pajamas":

Trinh Vo Man was a poet
in his own land a scholar
to his own people a venerable

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3 Yonka Krasteva writes: "The Puritans' mythic belief in being God's chosen few is not alien to their heirs in the 20th century. Nurtured by the same sense of uniqueness, the conviction that the American style of democracy is the most advanced and humane and should be imposed upon the whole world, the belief that the American soldier was fighting Evil in the name of bringing Light and Liberty to the world has motivated his participation in all the military actions of his country.

"There are conspicuous similarities in the way in which the wars with the Indians and the war in Vietnam have been interpreted. In both cases the American soldier is deeply ignorant of the history and culture of the enemy, and this ignorance easily leads him to believe that his adversaries are inferior, a subhuman species. The pioneers fighting the Indians, and their descendants in Vietnam, experience frustration in the horrifying encounter with the alien land which becomes their enemy. Nature is seen as a relentless and unpredictable foe in all works about the conflict; it often renders high technology and military strategy ineffective and forces the American soldiers to engage in a kind of skirmish they are completely unprepared for." Yonka Krasteva, "Rediscovering America in Personal Narratives about Vietnam," _North Dakota Quarterly_ 60 no. 1 (Winter 1992): 161-173.
and wise old man
in his village
throughout his native land
a warm and kind man

til the blue-eyed visitors
came uninvited
and shot him

because a Man wearing
black pajamas
to them
was just a slope, a dink, a gook
was 'Vietcong' (94)

Here a wise old man, warm and kind, is killed because he was wearing the unofficial
uniform of the Viet Cong, black pajamas, actually worn by probably half the people of
South Vietnam, friend or foe. Truly, no one was safe in Vietnam, not even a "wise old
man."

The recurrent use of "blue eyes" as in "Cobra Pilot" leads one to believe that there is
also the faint stench of Nazis hanging about these poems. It is the image of the blond-
haired, blue-eyed Aryan, the Schutzstaffel, or SS, with the death's-head on their caps, the
"guardians of pure blood" and murderers of six million Jews.  

Technically, this poem, like many of the poems in *WHAM*, is a narrative written in

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4The comparison between American soldiers and German soldiers is not uncommon and will be noted
in subsequent poems to be studied. Kali Tal observes: "In the late sixties and early seventies the comparison
was made repeatedly between American soldiers committing atrocities in Vietnam and German soldiers
committing atrocities during the Nazi regime. 'Most American soldiers in Viet-Nam do not question the orders
that lead them to raze villages and wipe out men, women and children for the "crime" of living in Viet Cong-
controlled or infiltrated areas,' writes Eric Norden. 'To many critics of the war this "new breed of Americans"
bears a disquieting resemblance to an old breed of Germans.' Jean-Paul Sartre firmly maintained that the
Vietnam War met all of Hitler's criteria: 'Hitler killed the Jews because they were Jews. The armed forces of
the United States torture and kill men, women, and children in Vietnam merely because they are Vietnamese.
Whatever lies or euphemisms the government may think up, the spirit of genocide is in the minds of the
City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 217
free verse and in the language of the common man. Imagistic as opposed to metaphoric, it is apparent that the writer is more soldier than poet. The poetic form was chosen because these poets are dealing with fragments of experience, moments of trauma, rather than a "big picture." In a poem, the poet is going for the knockout, the one-punch headshot that puts the reader away, rather than the war of attrition, sustained body shots wearing down the reader's defense or resistance (or complacency) as in a novel. Kathryn Marshall concludes:

Vietnam war narratives didn't give me any aesthetic pleasure, any sense of the real. They seemed deformed--fragments, images, severed pieces of plot. There was no way to order them, and trying only made the war--the world itself--recede farther and farther from me, leaving me with a weird feeling of dislocation: space would angle away, juxtapositions would become illogical, everything would seem simultaneously fixed and disturbed. After a while, the Vietnam War story became so jumbled and ambiguous it was not a narrative at all. It was a kind of nightmare geometry. And it overwhelmed and undermined everything. (Marshall 1987, 14)

Vietnam: so big, so strange, so unreal, the soldiers said, experience it. And they did, millions of them, carrying away a myriad of experiences and perceptions. Poetry was and is a perfect form for the collage of Vietnam. Each poem is a fragment of Vietnam, an experience or an insight, and a collection, like WHAM, becomes a mosaic, a sort of composite picture of the parts. The form of the poems vary and is really secondary to the...
content, to the experience.

Czeslaw Milosz contends in *The Witness of Poetry* that "[p]eople thrown into the middle of events that tear cries from their mouths have difficulty in finding the distance necessary to transform this material artistically" (Milosz 1983, 83). Yet, in some instances, these veteran-poets come very close to it, as in these lines from Basil Paquet's "Morning--A Death":

I've blown up your chest for thirty minutes  
And crushed it down an equal time,  
And still you won't warm to my kisses.  
I've sucked and puffed on your  
Metal No. 8 throat for so long,  
And twice you've moaned under my thrusts  
On your breastbone. I've worn off  
Those sparse hairs you counted noble on your chest,

I've scanned the rhythms of your living,  
Forced half-rhymes in your silent pulse,  
Sprung brief spondees in your lungs,  
And the cesura's called mid-line, half-time,  
Incomplete, but with a certain finality.

You are dead just as finally  
As your mucosity dries on my lips  
In this morning sun.  
I have thumped and blown into your kind too often,  
I grow tired of kissing the dead. (22)

Using the rhymes, rhythms, and beats of poetry as metaphors for his efforts, the speaker realizes they are ultimately futile. Although his exertions at artificial respiration (rhythm an essential part of that procedure, as is the act of breathing) produce some lifelike responses, some false poetic-like starts, the "cesura," the pause, becomes final; the bullet has its way.
Wrapped hard around that metaphor is the reality, the mean work of trying to blow a fleeing soul back into a shattered body, the mucous from dead lips drying on living lips in the morning sun. A traditional kiss of romance has become the kiss of life, and that kiss fails: "still you won't warm to my kisses." Morning, when one is supposed to be waking from the death of sleep, alive, face to the sun, becomes a time of death. One could also assume, with nineteen years the average age of those killed in Vietnam, that this fallen soldier has died in the "morning" of his life. The speaker is tired of the war and of the dying going on around him, exhibiting not only anguish over a too-often-repeated tragedy but also despair over his impotency against death. This is poetry—it is Milosz's "cry of pain."

Paquet, who was a medic in Vietnam, saw a great deal of the senselessness, atrocity, and racism inherent in the war, during his service in the pre-op room of the 24th Evacuation Hospital in Long Binh. These behaviors extended even to the caregivers, those persons supposedly given the higher task of repairing the damages war inflicts upon its participants. Paquet, in a meeting with Perry Deane Young, remembered an X-ray technician who broke the arms or legs of Vietnamese patients before X-raying them. Nothing was ever done to this man because "he was considered a good soldier." Young continues:

Then there was the guy from Texas whom Paquet caught dropping spitballs down a GI's trachea tube just to watch his body twitch as each spitball stopped his breath. And there was the busy period during Tet when every Vietnamese casualty was shunted--three, four, five to a bed--into a Quonset hut until all of the Americans had been repaired. A little girl died because the hospital administrator would not delay performing a minor toe operation on an American. (Young 1972, 57)
Even in a hospital, where one expects care, acts of atrocity and racism were committed. One can only guess at its cause, but it seems to go beyond the dehumanization inherent in war to something that may be inherent in us. Perhaps war brings out the "worst" in some of its participants.

For Paquet and soldiers like him, it was this constant shoulder-to-shoulder contact with horror and death that led them to scratch their apothegms into the walls of bunkers ("I can't relate to this environment") or write their epigrams on their flak jackets and helmets ("Vietnam can kill me, but it can't make me care," or "LBJ's hired gun"). It was all too big, too crazy, too deadly; the jungle just sucked soldiers under, and if they stayed on top, they stood a good chance of becoming so many dispersed atoms or splattered parts. Paquet, a main contributor to *WHAM* and perhaps one of its more polished writers, saw firsthand much of the carnage inflicted upon those caught in the war. In the third part of "Morning--A Death," he laments his presence in the war:

I'd sooner be in New England this winter  
With pine pitch on my hands than your blood,  
Lightly fondling breasts and kissing  
Women's warm mouths than thumping  
Your shattered chests and huffing  
In your broken lips or aluminum windpipes,  
Sooner lift a straying hair from her wet mouth  
Than a tear of elephant grass from your slick lips  
I'd so much rather be making children,  
Than tucking so many in. (23)

Here the image of tucking "children" in is a grim reminder of the youthful age of the participants in the Vietnam War, young men not much removed from childhood. These dead should be, like the speaker, thinking of and pursuing love instead of being pursued
and caught by death. The images of lovemaking are juxtaposed with images of *lifesaving*,
grim efforts that too often are futile, with the speaker ending up "tucking" another "child"
into a body bag. The strong images of lovemaking are a cry from the other side of the
ocean, echoing the call of war protesters back in the United States: "Make love, not war."

The poem is an effective comparison of life in America and death in Vietnam, of the
similarity between the actions of lovemaking or making life and the effort in trying to
make life stay. Though violence has been done, these are not particularly violent scenes.
Yet, the almost gentle flow of these images is jostled by the intrusion of the war's sterility
and its technology, though ultimately futile, in the image of "aluminum windpipes." Even
in a moment of almost tender reflection upon the consequences of war, the mechanical
nature of the war intervenes.

Another element of the war that finds its way into some poems in *WHAM* is its
apparent hypocrisy. Larry Rottmann writes in "Priorities":

> At the 25th Infantry Division base camp at Cu Chi
> the commanding general rides around in an air-conditioned Ford
> While the wounded and dying GIs make the trip from the
> helipad to the hospital
> Bouncing around in the back of a truck. (25)

The poem is short and very prosaic, and the literal images are well-suited to the poetic
form. The epigrammatic character of these shorter poems lends itself to poetry rather than
prose, that is, to "docupoetry," poetry that documents the small but mean realities of the
Vietnam War. A collection of these becomes a hardhitting mosaic of the war.

These short, pithy statements, surrounded by all that white space, call attention to
themselves and what they are saying. Rottmann again in "Man of God"
The chaplain of the 25th Aviation Battalion
at Cu Chi
Prays for the souls of the enemy
On Sunday mornings
And earns flight pay as a helicopter door gunner
during the rest of the week. (24)

This poem reeks of the ultimate hypocrisy: a holy man on Sunday and a man of greed the rest of the week (flight pay was a paltry $55 a month), engaged in what this particular chaplain might rationalize as sending those misbegotten souls on to God. It also reeks of the contradiction and denial common to Vietnam. Here is a man of God turned killer for money, the Twentieth Century-Judas betraying the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Like the commanding general riding in his "air-conditioned Ford," the chaplain cannot see the immorality of what he does.

All these things made the soldiers in Vietnam skeptical and extremely cynical. For some, cynicism brought understanding, a perception of the forces at work that led them to that place beyond the edges of "the World." Patriotic and gung-ho upon their entrance into Vietnam, shaped by the movies of John Wayne and Audie Murphy, it wasn't long before the reality of Vietnam sent that myth flying like so much shrapnel. This is made clear in Harrison Kohler's poem, "The Cheerleaders":

  John Wayne
  Leads
  A charge of leathernecks against the japs or the jerries,
  He's tough and not afraid to die.

  Georgie Jessel
  Is
  Lean and mean in his tailored American Legion uniform,
  Grizzled veteran of hellish vaudeville campaigns.
Martha Raye
Has
Her green beret and combat infantryman's badge,
She goes where the action is.

Bob Hope
Travels
All over the world
To entertain "our boys."

War
Is
A paunchy worn out movie hero
A tired old man
A menopausled hag
A grotesque comedian
Parading
  Patriotic
  Obscenities. (43)

These people are as obscene as the patriotism they espouse. Entertaining "our boys," they
never realize, or choose not to, that they are championing a particularly lethal form of
nationalism for a war that nobody seems able to explain. "Watch out for these people,"
Kohler is warning us. "This is what we may become."

This poem evinces scenes of John Wayne in *The Green Berets*, one of the most
ludicrous and unrealistic representations of the war and the men who served in it ever
imposed upon the American public. The movie was another form of denial, a
reaffirmation that the myth was still intact, that we were, by God, Americans, and we were
going to help our little yellow brother or else. That the sun set over the South China Sea,
that is, in the *east*, is symptomatic of the movie's attention to detail. Furthermore, the
caricatures in the poem, the four "patriotic" Americans, stand as symbols of the generation
that fed its young men to those merciless jungles on the far side of Hell. John Wayne in
The Green Berets, after all, didn't fear death since the "enemy" wasn't shooting real bullets at him.

In Rottmann's "APO 96225" we see more of this denial, this unwillingness to face reality, by those back home in America. In the first part of the poem, a soldier writes home, detailing inconsequential things like the weather, the monkeys of Vietnam, the spectacular sunsets. In between his letters, his mother insists in her replies that she wants to know "what it's really like." Finally, the young man relents:

"Today I killed a man.
Yesterday I helped drop napalm on women and children. Tomorrow we are going to use gas.

And the father wrote, "Please don't write such depressing letters. You're upsetting your mother"

So, after a while, the young man wrote, "Sure rains a lot here..." (9)

Confronted with the horror and atrocities of the war, with its truths, the mother and father realize they don't really want to know what their son is doing. The sorts of actions he's involved in blaspheme American myth and violate his parent's delicate sensibilities. Like the four entertainers in the previous poem, these parents would rather feed their child to the myth than question it. "Nobody ever asks a veteran about the war," said Larry Rottmann. "They don't want to hear what a veteran has to say because they know they share in the guilt, and they don't want it spelled out for them" (Young 1972, 58).

What it amounted to was that the Vietnam War veteran was burdened with his experience and no one wanted to hear his story. It was his problem, and once he got back
to "the World," readjustment was his problem. Philip Beidler maintains:

[It was a problem of "vision" in its largest sense--of having undergone an experience so peculiar unto itself and its own insane dynamic as to make nothing in life ever look altogether sane again--and subsequently (and here would be their real point of difference from other veterans of other American wars), of being sentenced, by unspoken national consent, to solitary confinement with the memory of it, urged to tell no tales, please, on the grounds that even were the experience of Vietnam to prove susceptible eventually to certain methods of explanation, there would be virtually no one in the entire country who would care to hear about it. (Beidler 1982, 9)

The Vietnam soldier and soon-to-be veteran found his attempts at communication met with stony stares, retreating backs, and empty air, not even an echo to his frequently asked "Why?" Given the solitary nature of writing, it is little wonder that many veterans turned to pen and paper when the silence got too loud.

The hypocrisy, the horror, the impenetrability of the jungle and its imperviousness to our firepower, the feeling of "this can't be true," led to a questioning and eventual dismantling of America's myths and hubris by American soldiers in Vietnam. In a sense, the early poets of WHAM began challenging and rewriting those myths. They traded the image of the American soldier smilingly handing out candy to children for the reality of the American soldier brutally killing innocent women and children. Their writings are replete with the truth of war: atrocities, racism, hypocrisy, greed, tremendous suffering, guilt, grief, and death.

There is no single metaphor for the Vietnam War. One could, perhaps, argue that it was, like Conrad's story, a journey by an entire nation into the heart of darkness. There, in the jungle, like Kurtz, we encountered "The horror! The horror!" and, recoiling from that horror, discovered that it was not only war but also us. As Pogo said so long ago, "We
have met the enemy and he is us."

Much can be made of the poetry or lack of it in *WHAM*. For many, it is poetry simply because its publishers call it poetry and because it looks like poetry. Maybe that is enough. Maybe what is important is not so much its signification as poetry but what it signifies. Through concrete images, realistic description, narrative style, and language of the common man, veteran-poets are telling their stories. Through their depiction of the nature of man and his war in Vietnam, these poems make a much-needed and significant contribution to the poetry of war.

"[T]here are things impossible to imagine," Carolyn Forché has written, "and they are also the things most difficult to write about when they are actually seen" (Forché 1987, 10). In a reaction similar to survivors of other traumatic experience, these men have felt the need to testify to their experiences, and in the process, they are challenging the myths that surround the Vietnam War and why they were sent to fight in it. Furthermore, in their desire to make the truth known, they are calling attention to themselves as "agent-victims" of atrocity, challenging the national perception that America's soldiers are fair and civilized agents of their country.

The poems contained in *WHAM* represent a collective effort by these veteran-poets to ensure that what really happened in Vietnam is made known and not forgotten, that just maybe we will learn through their sorrow and guilt. Perhaps that was all they needed--that one momentary connection with others, sharing the word, the necessity of the word. For many, the poems written for *WHAM* were their first and last. If nothing else, they tried, and sometimes that is enough. They spoke for themselves and for those who no longer
could.

*WHAM* was a beginning, not an ending. Despite forty-two rejections by various presses, the editors persevered and finally saw the fruits of their labors realized. *Winning Hearts and Minds* went on to sell 45,000 paperback copies, not bad in an era of 500-copy press runs for works of poetry. They set an example, and, fortunately for us, others were to follow.
CHAPTER III

SONGS OF NAPALM: EHRHART, WEIGL, AND KOMUNYAKAA

Again, thanks for the dud
hand grenade tossed at my feet
outside Chu Lai. I'm still
falling through its silence.

Yusef Komunyakaa, "Thanks"

W D. (William Daniel) Ehrhart, an original contributor to WHAM, "is an ex-Marine, a Vietnam Veteran, a schoolteacher, a novelist, and one of the foremost poets produced by America's experiences in Vietnam" (Spark 1993, 94). His early Vietnam poetry rejected by eighty-five publishers, Ehrhart eventually paid a vanity press $1,500 to get it published (Freedman 1985, 55). He was an editor of WHAM's 1976 successor, Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam, a volume of poetry that dealt with the war's aftermath: the guilt, the fear, the anger, the loss. Ehrhart is one of the few poets from those early collections who continues to write and publish poetry today, although he has extended his writing into other literary domains as well. His 1983 autobiographical account of the war, Vietnam-Perkasie, A Combat Marine Memoir, was well-received, and in 1991 he released a collection of his essays, In the Shadow of Vietnam: Essays.

Attempting to understand the people whom he tried to kill and who tried to kill him,
he has made several return trips to Vietnam and says this of his 1990 trip. Alasdair Spark, in discussing Ehrhart's recent book of essays, *In the Shadow of Vietnam* (1991), excerpted the following quote from that volume:

For the first time in my life I was not made to feel like the odd man out because I am a 'Vietnam writer.' In the US I get invited to read at 'Tet plus Twenty' conferences, but I've never been invited to read at the Breadloaf Writer's Conference, or the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. My poems are taught in college history courses on the Vietnam War, but not in classes on contemporary American poetry. But in Vietnam everybody over the age of 35 is a 'Vietnam Writer,' and for once I feel like just one of the gang. No one thinks it odd to be writing about the War, much less its painful and lingering legacies. No one looks at you as if you are emotionally retarded. What I've done with my life and my writing makes perfectly good sense to them. They see it as I do, as a duty and obligation, a way of turning disaster into hope. (Spark 1993, 95)

Ehrhart, true to the process of witness poetry, feels compelled to testify to his experiences in Vietnam, hoping by doing so to prevent history from repeating itself. He contends that he continues to be for the most part ignored by mainstream poetry, and a reason for that may be the obvious political nature, as will be shown, of many of his poems. Despite this perception of neglect, Ehrhart perseveres in his work, and he has been recognized as an ardent supporter of Vietnam War poetry written by other veterans.

In 1984 Ehrhart released a collection of his previous Vietnam War poetry, *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired*, which encompassed work from six previous volumes as

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1Carolyn Forché, upon whose theory of the poetry of witness this study is based, has noted similar reactions to her poetry. She writes: 'I find it somewhat difficult to address the controversy concerning the issue of poetry and politics in the United States. I hadn't realized until the publication of my second book [*The Country Between Us*] in early 1982 that certain subjects were considered inappropriate for poetry in America, or beyond the grasp of American poets, who, after all, were not affected by politics as were the poets of Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. It became clear that this objection to the political wasn't limited to explicitly polemical work, slogans, chants and the flat, predictable poetry of those who would submit art to ideology, but was extended to include the impassioned voices of witness, those whose diction departed from the acceptable mode, those who left the safety of self-contemplation to imagine and address the larger world." Carolyn Forché, "A Lesson in Commitment," *TriQuarterly* 65 (Winter 1985): 35.
well as some new poems. It is a montage of Ehrhart's experiences in Vietnam and of the war's ongoing effects since his return to the United States. In *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired*, which includes poems that were also in *WHAM*, we move from primarily prosaic, rhetorical poetry to more mature, reflective poetry. Ehrhart, however, continues to be the most prosaic and political of the poets remaining to be studied and is often openly condemnatory about our involvement in Vietnam. His works portray many of the same elements as those studied in *WHAM*: racism, atrocity, confusion, guilt, and sorrow.

Ehrhart describes the wanton, destructive nature of the war and its participants in the poem "Souvenirs." Before the speaker leaves on what is most likely a routine patrol, his captain asks him to bring back a souvenir. Later in the day, the patrol finds a Buddhist temple:

Combing through a nearby wood,
we found a heavy log as well.

It must have taken more than half an hour,
but at last we battered in
the concrete walls so badly
that the roof collapsed.

Before it did,
I took two painted vases
Buddhists use for burning incense.

One vase I kept,
and one I offered proudly to the captain. (8)

The virtual destruction of a religious structure for a "souvenir" underscores the ethic under which the soldiers operated: namely, that the people of Vietnam were godless and their religion was of no consequence and therefore undeserving of respect. It is also the
destruction of another myth: that our American, God-fearing soldiers are tolerant, restrained and "civilized" in war, and don't partake in looting. The irreverent and destructive looting of the temple is reminiscent of the Nazi looting of Jewish synagogues, homes, and businesses. Pleasing his captain is more important to the speaker than respect for what some would consider a very holy site. Nothing in Vietnam was sacred, and that included the people and their property.

Like many poems in WHAM discussed earlier, this poem is very prosaic and deals with concrete images: Buddhist temple, heavy log, concrete walls, painted vases. It is a narrative poem in which Ehrhart's main concern is to document an atrocity committed by American soldiers, for no better reason than stealing "souvenirs."

In "Farmer Nguyen" Ehrhart portrays the hapless situation in which Vietnamese civilians often found themselves. Accused by "some people" (his own fellow villagers) of giving rice to the Viet Cong, farmer Nguyen is arrested by the Americans, imprisoned, and beaten, before being allowed to return to his hamlet. When the Viet Cong return to Nguyen's hamlet he is once again accused by "some people," this time of giving information to the "Round Eyes" (the Americans): "Wrong again, farmer Nguyen. / They took more rice, and beat you, / and made you carry supplies" (8). Trapped between opposing forces, the civilians were often at the mercy of whomever happened to be currently operating in the area.

Sometimes it didn't matter if no one was operating in the area. The war's effects and its haphazard nature could be far-reaching as shown in the following poem, "Time on Target."
We used to get intelligence reports from the Vietnamese district offices. Every night, I'd make a list of targets for artillery to hit.

One day, while on patrol, we passed the ruins of a house; beside it sat a woman with her left hand torn away; beside her lay a child, dead.

When I got back to base, I told the fellows in the COC; it gave us all a lift to know all those shells we fired every night were hitting something. (12-13)

The nighttime artillery fire described here was called "H & I fire," "harassment and interdiction fire," and it was designed to harass the enemy during his night movements. For the most part random in its targeting, "H & I fire" was notoriously, almost laughably, ineffective. Unfortunately, as shown in the poem, the rounds often killed or wounded innocent civilians. The uncaring attitude of the soldiers involved is indicative of the lack of acknowledgment of the Vietnamese as human beings and of their indifference toward their pain and suffering, behaviors common among American soldiers in Vietnam. They

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2These acts of cruelty are often explained as the result of the "dehumanization" of American soldiers through a complex psychological process that has its beginnings in basic training undergone by recruits and that continues through combat. Peter Bourne, M.D., identifies three objectives of basic training: "First, the recruit must reject his preexisting identity and envelop himself instead in the institutional identity of the military organization. Second, he must accept his impotence in the face of military discipline and recognize the crushing recrimination it can inflict if he should seek to challenge it. And third, he must be convinced of the legitimacy and righteousness of the system." Following this indoctrination, the GI is then sent to the brutal killing environment of Vietnam where the struggle for his survival begins. At this point, Bourne sees additional factors that contribute to the dehumanization process: the soldier's acceptance that his survival depended upon the military and what it had taught him; the general frustration among military commanders at the stalemate nature of the war, a frustration that seeped down to the troops; the "body count," which led to the counting of civilian casualties as Viet Cong and to a feeling that when in doubt, shoot first and ask questions later; racism (even in General Westmoreland's headquarters, there were separate toilet facilities for Vietnamese); identification of the Vietnamese as somehow "inferior" to American soldiers; officers who
were just "gooks," they all looked alike, and they were all probably VC (Viet Cong, the enemy).

This attitude toward the Vietnamese is explained in part by Ehrhart's poem "Guerrilla War" which describes how hard it was to tell the difference between the enemy and civilians because they both spoke the same language and because the enemy, at least until the North Vietnamese Army became involved, didn't wear uniforms. He writes:

They tape grenades inside their clothes, and carry satchel charges in their market baskets.

Even their women fight; and young boys, and girls.

It's practically impossible to tell civilians from the Vietcong;

after a while, you quit trying. (12)

Because of the guerrilla tactics employed by the Vietcong in the war, American soldiers came to consider all Vietnamese as potential enemies. American troops quickly came to believe that anyone--man, woman, or child--could kill them, and most soldiers treated the Vietnamese accordingly. Revenge was an additional motivation in the committing of atrocities. Suffering casualties from booby traps or from a seemingly invisible enemy,
American soldiers, often with open or silent complicity from their commanders, frequently took their frustrations and anger out on civilians for no reason other than that they were available. They regarded this as a genuine "military action" and the victims as their elusive adversaries.

As already noted, this general distrust, often outright hatred, of the Vietnamese also arose out of racism, and these two elements were often the root causes of atrocities committed against the civilian population. Combine distrust and racism with the sense that the Vietnamese were somehow "inferior," and we have a similar situation to that of the Nazis in regard to the Jewish population. It is easier to kill someone who is regarded as less than human.

Ehrhart speculates that perhaps the tables have turned and it is the Americans who are considered as something less than human. In "Making the Children Behave," the speaker wonders if the Vietnamese think of him now "in those strange Asian villages / where nothing ever seemed quite human / but myself / and my few grim friends / moving through them" (20). He asks, "When they tell stories to their children / of the evil / that awaits misbehavior / is it me they conjure?" (20). The protectors of democracy, those fine American boys, are now the bogeymen under the bed, the imaginary fiends who will come to punish misbehaving Vietnamese children, much as they "punished" their parents years before. There is an undercurrent of guilt in this poem, a recognition that what America did in and to that country was wrong and not deserving of a positive remembrance. The war, for civilian and combatant alike, was the "ultimate no place to be."

A soldier never knew when the Elephant was going to rise up and crush him, when
some round or rocket would be fired haphazardly into the air, and it would come down with his military serial number on it. Sometimes it came from directions totally unexpected, as Ehrhart demonstrates in his poem "Mail Call." Receiving mail from home was a major event for most soldiers, making mail call a two-edged sword: a soldier loved to receive mail but it was very disappointing to go to mail call and receive nothing. In this particular poem, Private Thomas, married only weeks before being sent to Vietnam and now only three months from the end of his tour, is one of the fortunate ones: he has received mail. However, it is the contents of that mail that disintegrate the event:

Ten months unmarked--
and over in an instant with a single shot
that punched a hole in the hot day; with Thomas, lifeless, sprawled across his cot;
with the lawyer's note, blood-spattered, crumpled in his fist;
with his last "I love you" trapped inside his throat
by the barrel of a pistol. (10)

So close to home and yet so far. Having borne the trials of Vietnam, the "boredom, body rot, pervasive fear of death" (10), Private Thomas is finally broken by the very thing for which he is struggling to survive. Dying is easy in Vietnam; living is tough.

It is not only the loved ones at home who forget the soldier. Those he serves with in Vietnam also want to forget, especially the dead ones, for their deaths only serve to remind the living of their own mortality. In "The One That Died," it could be any "one," even Private Thomas of the previous poem:

You bet we'll soon forget the one that died;
he isn't welcome any more.
He could too easily take our place
for us to think about him
any longer than it takes
to sort his personal effects:
   a pack of letters,
cigarettes,
photos and a wallet.
We'll keep the cigarettes;
divide them up among us.
His parents have no use for them,
and cigarettes are hard to get. (10)

Here we move from the dead soldier to personal effects to parents to cigarettes, constantly increasing the distance from "the one that died." The dead in Vietnam could too easily be one of the living. One needs to maintain the space, be hard, be practical. The next one out could be the speaker, so the sooner the dead one's personal effects are disposed of, the more quickly the survivors can forget. Out of sight, out of mine. Reduce death to splitting a pack of cigarettes. It's a lie, of course. It may work for the moment, but the war always looms in the background; the next firefight is just over the horizon.

This same form of denial, of "distancing," is displayed in the "The Hunter." Taking careful aim on the body of an enemy, the speaker realizes that "I have never hunted anything in my whole life / except other men" (13). But war has taught him "where such thoughts lead" (13), and he turns his mind to "chow, and sleep, / and how much longer till I change my socks" (13). Even more disturbing and what the speaker leaves unsaid is the flip side of what he does: the hunter is also the hunted. It is better not to think of such things.

The center of that self-deception won't hold, however, and upon return home, the soldier-poet is haunted by the legacy of Vietnam: its soldiers, its dead, its unfathomable
jungle, the unanswerable "why?" of it all. Ehrhart's anger and resentment surface in polemic poems like "A Relative Thing".

We are the ones you sent to fight a war
you didn't know a thing about.

It didn't take us long to realize
the only land that we controlled
was covered by the bottoms of our boots.

We have been Democracy on Zippo raids,
burning houses to the ground,
driving eager amtracs through new-sown fields.

We are the ones who have to live
with the memory that we were the instruments
of your pigeon-breasted fantasies.

We are your sons, America,
and you cannot change that.
When you awake,
we will still be here. (17-18)

The soldiers soon realized that nowhere in Vietnam was safe, and, really, not even under their boots because of booby traps and mines. The poem covers a series of experiences symbolizing the Vietnam tour and what the soldiers saw and did: "we saw a breastless woman / and her stillborn child" (17), "we laughed at old men stumbling," "we fought outnumbered in Hue City / while the ARVN soldiers looted bodies / in the safety of the rear," "we have seen the pacified supporters / of the Saigon government" (18). These are all brutal, dehumanizing scenes depicting horror, fear, waste, and injustice. The speaker, angry at the deception, at the inability of our nation's leaders to articulate a meaningful mission in Vietnam, warns those responsible for the war that it isn't ended yet.
But this is also "a relative thing," and no one escapes Ehrhart's wrath. He's not just berating the military and the civilian leadership; he's rebuking all of us for sending America's sons "to fight a war / you did not know a thing about" (17). Though America won't listen now to its veterans, when it awakens, literally, from sleep, and, figuratively, from its collective amnesia, the veterans "will still be there," witnessing the truth.

In the title poem, "To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired," Ehrhart assumes a combative, in-our-face stance, asking us what we are going to do about Vietnam and the direction we have taken since the war. He writes:

After the streets fall silent  
After the bruises and the tear-gassed eyes are healed  
After the consensus has returned  
After the memories of Kent and My Lai and Hiroshima lose their power  
and their connections with each other  

After the last whale is emptied from the sea  
and the last leopard is emptied from its skin  

After the last iron door clangs shut  
behind the last conscience  
and the last loaf of bread is hammered into bullets  
and the bullets scattered among the hungry  
What answers will you find  
What armor will protect you  
When your children ask you  
Why (28-29)

"Look," Ehrhart is saying," this is what is happening to us--we are slipping back into our old ways." We have repossessed the old myths, and in that repossession lies alienation from ourselves and nature and, ultimately, our breakdown. After killing each other and the world we inhabit, we will have no answers for our children when they ask why
America's apathy, its uncanny proclivity towards forgetfulness, its ability to dis-connect, will extract a terrible cost, and that cost will ultimately be borne by our children.

These last two poems are not what some would call "good" or "mainstream" poetry. They approach the strident, the polemical; they are manifestly political. Choosing to eschew metaphor and figurative language, using instead concrete images and actual events, Ehrhart has unmistakably chosen to instruct rather than delight.

As noted earlier, Vietnam was a different war from any other war America has experienced. Because the war was so different, because language was so dreadfully distorted, the veteran-poet was faced with a problem of how to represent, or, rather, how to re-present the war. As was pointed out in the discussion of WHAM, veteran-poets adopted a form that is often prosaic and imagistic, and content is more important than form or style. Ehrhart's poetry is no exception to this, and, as his poems already studied demonstrate, he relies heavily on the narrative poem. He uses free verse with lines of varying length. Often, he breaks his lines in odd places, jarring for a moment the flow of words and calling attention to the line. This method of enjambment is common and was used frequently by the poets in WHAM. Yet, Ehrhart is capable of more metaphoric, figurative poetry, as will be shown later. He writes principally out of a need to, and he writes to record the realities of the Vietnam War. True to the character of witness poetry, he means to instruct and to warn.

Ehrhart emphasizes the theme of teaching in another poem "The Teacher" dedicated to his students at Sandy Spring Friends School, a Quaker school. On a moonlit evening, the speaker remembers his own youth when, hardly older than those he teaches, he spent
"colder nights / in hell when men died" (48). He recalls another moonlit evening when "beneath a moon not unlike / this moon tonight, / I swore an oath to teach you / all I know-- / and I know things / worth knowing" (48). He admits, however, that he keeps "fumbling for words" (49) and that he is afraid he will fail in passing on his knowledge. He asks for the students' patience until he finds the proper words, "the language / that you speak" (49). "Help me." Ehrhart is saying, "Help me and I will help you know those things worth knowing."

The importance of passing on what he has learned about war is illustrated by something he said at the May 1985 conference, "The Vietnam Experience in American Literature"

I find it extremely difficult to sit here and talk about the Vietnam War as art. I don't give a goddamn about art. I'm not an artist. I'm an educator, and my writing is a tool of education. I think I feel as strongly as Ron [Kovic, author of Born on the Fourth of July] does that, if I cannot affect the course of my country as a result of my experiences, then whatever I do as a writer is an utter failure. (Lomperis 1987, 32)

An almost obsessive compulsion to teach, to de-mythologize the war, is strong within Ehrhart--what he knows he wants to pass on to his students and anyone else who will listen. This is the driving force behind his poetry, the urge to witness, and his quest to understand the war and to discover "the language" that defines it is ongoing.

For the veteran-poet, however, the war will always be beyond complete comprehension, beyond total de-compression. It was too big, too violent, too surreal, and lasted too long to be completely understood, and because of this, the war and its horrors will always be with its participants. Ehrhart indicates this in "To the Asian Victors":

The great miscalculation
refuses to be covered over
I have tried every solution,
yet the paint always begins to peel
even before it is dry,
and the bare room comes back
again.

In school, as a child,
I learned about Redcoats--
I studied myself,
though I did not know it at the time.
The lesson remains;
only the teacher has changed.

Looking back
at the pale shadow forever
calling at dusk from the forest,
I remember the dead, I
remember the dying.

But I cannot ever quite remember
what I went looking for,
or what it was I lost
in that alien land that became
more I
than my own can ever be again. (20-21)

The speaker recognizes that the war was a "great miscalculation," and no matter what he
does, he cannot rid himself of it. The room, the reality, stripped of all its layers of paint,
stripped of its false myths, is bare. Yet, he understands the myths of America are still very
much alive; only the teacher has changed. Although he remembers the dead and dying, the
speaker can't recall the great why? of it all, implying, of course, that maybe there never
was an answer. A casualty of war, he suffered a wound for which one does not receive a
Purple Heart, and it is a wound that never completely heals. A part of him was forever
claimed by the green jungle, that strange heart of darkness that made him an alien in his
own land and calls to him yet.

This last poem displays a change in style, an increased use of metaphoric and figurative language: the "paint" as myth or placebo for truth and the "bare room" for the reality of Vietnam; Americans as just another variation of "Redcoats"; the "pale shadow," although clichéd, of the dead calling from the jungle. It is during moments of deeper contemplation of the meaning of experience that Ehrhart employs a more conventional poetic style.

Although the Vietnam War and its aftermath weigh heavily upon Ehrhart, there are moments of love and of peace. In "A Confirmation," the longest poem in the collection, we see the poet as a mature man, camping with a fellow veteran he hasn't seen since the war. They pitch their tent together, reminiscent of a distant time when they rigged poncho-tents "side by side in total darkness" (41). They regain their sense of ease with one another almost immediately, and though "older by a lifetime," they find that "nothing's changed" (41). They fish, and the speaker, after catching a trout and holding it helpless in his hands, tosses it back in an "awkward silence" (42) laden with meaning that the other man understands: the control over life and death, helplessness at the hands of others, compassion for other living things, and the recognition of the preciousness of life.

Later, the two men eat from cans, recalling long-ago C-ration meals shared in combat. Surrounded by nature and history, they share a special moment, a last time together:

The wind moves through the Douglas firs, and in the perfect stillness of the shadows of the Klamath Indians, we test
our bonds and find them, after all
these years, still sound—knowing
in the awkward silence we will always share
something worth clinging to
out of the permanent past of stillborn dreams:
the ancient, implacable wisdom
of ignorance shattered forever, a new
reverence we were never taught
by anyone we believed, a frail hope
we gave each other, a communion
made holy by our shame. (43)

Their bonds, formed during the war, are still solid, and they understand that they are
irrevocably joined by both the trauma they underwent and the ignorance they lost in the
maelstrom of Vietnam. Soldiers went to Vietnam with perceptions and assumptions of
how war was supposed to be, and these were soon shattered, along with dreams and
sometimes lives. Guilt-ridden over what they saw and did there, the speaker and his friend
realize that with their "shame" came wisdom and a new respect and hope for life. This
"holy communion" is, indeed, "something worth clinging to."

Although contact and friendship are renewed, there is a great sense of loss in this
poem, too, for both men understand they "will never / see each other again; once is
enough" (43). In a world without war, this bittersweet parting might never have occurred.
Like the "solemn Douglas firs drinking / the waters of the wild Upper Umqua / we have
come so far to worship" (43), these two men absorb solace from nature and distance
themselves for a time from the desiccated landscape of the war within which they both
recognize they will always live. Yet, even here, the poet is aware of the "shadows / of the
Klamath Indians" (43), another people who, like the Vietnamese, were brutally displaced
and underwent a similar "pacification and relocation" program at the hands of the
This haunting, sad poem is one of Ehrhart's best, both in content and in form. Using a narrative technique, he demonstrates an ability to employ descriptive and figurative language: "Solemn Douglas firs stride slowly / down steep hills to drink" (41), "the long / grim lines of soldiers, flotsam / in the vortex of a sinking illusion" (42), or "the river / tumbles through the darkness toward the sea / that laps the shores of Asia" (43). Variation in line lengths and skillful use of enjambment keep the poem flowing and fit well its subject matter and contemplative nature.

Ehrhart's contemplative, questioning nature also extends forward, beyond the Vietnam War to other military actions in which the United States was or may be a participant. In his poem "The Invasion of Grenada" he never mentions Grenada other than in the title. By doing so, he extends the poem beyond Vietnam to Grenada and on into the future:

I didn't want a monument,
not even one as sober as that
vast black wall of broken lives.
I didn't want a postage stamp.
I didn't want a road beside the Delaware
River with a sign proclaiming:
"Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway."

What I wanted was a simple recognition
of the limits of our power as a nation
to inflict our will on others.
What I wanted was an understanding
that the world is neither black-and-white
nor ours.

What I wanted
was an end to monuments. (71)
Without war, battles would not be fought, soldiers would not kill and be killed in either Vietnam or Grenada, and monuments would be unnecessary. The United States needs to recognize that the world is not ours, and it is certainly not ours to change according to our will. What Ehrhart wants, quite simply, is peace. Ehrhart, as Lorrie Smith concludes, "manages to be didactic but not dogmatic, lyrical but not transcendental; his plain-spoken, chastising style is appropriate for a moral and political re-conception of Vietnam" (Smith 1986, 15), and, one would think, of the United States.

This "re-conception" of the Vietnam War and America's involvement in it is a process most veterans are still undergoing. In trying to assimilate and understand his experience, the veteran quickly realized there was nothing to compare it to; it had been unlike anything he (or the nation) had expected. The reality of the military and of the war was so unlike the myth, it was staggering. For Vietnam soldiers who saw intense combat, the war will never be over, nor will they, like Ehrhart or the next poet to be discussed, Bruce Weigl, ever be able to come totally "home." The concept, the myth, of home was shattered on the battlefield. In fact, the Vietnam veteran didn't go home; he went "back to the World," as though where he was wasn't real, as though he had left the planet entirely. But leaving Vietnam to return to the World didn't mean Vietnam was leaving you, a distinction well-noted by both Ehrhart and Weigl.

Bruce Weigl, who served with the First Air Cavalry in Vietnam during 1967-68 and currently teaches in the writing program at Pennsylvania State University, is "considered one of the consummate poets" to come out of the Vietnam War (Smith 1991, 57). Primarily a free verse technician, he uses end-rhyme very sparingly but does employ
internal and near-rhyme effectively: "light-night," "know-bow," "sense-intestines," to mention a few. Imagery and symbolism are used effectively and often, but at the same time he writes in an accessible style that doesn't obfuscate or corrupt the horror and tragedy of war by shrouding them in symbolism or excessive figurative imagery. Like Ehrhart, Weigl's poetry is poetry of witness or, as Robert Stone says in the introduction to Weigl's collection of poems, *Song of Napalm*, "a refusal to forget" (Stone 1988, no pagination). Although one might want to forget, that was hardly likely given the intense nature of the experience. Through an intermixture of imagination and memory, Weigl recreates the landscape of Vietnam and the surreal nature of the war itself.

Weigl's *Song of Napalm*, published in 1988, includes new poems as well as poems from two previous volumes, *A Romance* and *The Monkey Wars*. Moving back and forth between Vietnam and the United States, between then and now, the poems in *Song of Napalm* are a montage of the horror of war and its sometimes indefinable and irredeemable costs.

In "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map," Weigl is more definitive and skillfully weaves a scene of almost pastoral elegance, lulling the reader into a false sense of security, much, perhaps, as the temple's elegance affected the soldiers themselves:

Dusk, the ivy thick with sparrows
squawking for more room is all we hear; we see
birds move on the walls of the temple
shaping their calligraphy of wings.
Ivy is thick in the grottos,
on the moon-watching platform
and ivy keeps the door from fully closing. (7)

After the speaker describes the interior of the temple and the man who sits in shadow in it,
"speaking something," one of the soldiers "moves toward the man / curious about what he is saying" (8). The poem continues:

We bend him to sit straight
and when he's nearly peaked
at the top of his slow uncurling
his face becomes visible, his eyes
roll down to the charge
wired between his teeth and the floor.
The sparrows
burst off the walls into the jungle. (8)

What is important here is what is left out: the explosion. Did the bomb actually go off? We simply do not know. This is the surprise of Vietnam, just time enough for the Elephant to kneel on your chest and poof! the rubber body bag for you, all without a shot fired or an enemy seen, just sparrows bursting off the walls, maybe exploding off the walls. You don't even hear the explosion that kills you.

A common fear in Vietnam was of booby traps, especially land mines, because they blew off a leg, or legs and arms, or, the wound everyone dreaded most, blew off testicles. In "Mines," the speaker admits to his fear of the thousands of mines laid by the war's many participants: the North Vietnamese, the Vietcong, the French, the Americans, "whole fields marked with warning signs" (43). He continues:

A Bouncing Betty comes up waist-high--
cuts you in half.
One man's legs were laid
alongside him in the dust-off,
he asked for a chairback, morphine,
he screamed he wanted to give
his eyes away, his kidneys,
his heart. . .
Here is how you walk at night: slowly lift one leg, clear the sides with your arms, clear the back, front, put the leg down, like swimming. (43)

One could think of this as mime, but mime with a twist: everyone clad in camouflage fatigues, and faces painted green and black, sort of reverse mime, the slow steps almost a dance as feet and legs feel unconsciously for wires, the sweep of arms in slow motion, tuned in to that slight brush of metal or twine, knowing that one misstep ends in the sudden flash and final rush of night. The soldier in Vietnam had a right to fear booby traps. They were responsible for approximately thirty percent of all casualties. "Here is how you walk at night," Weigl says, and likens it to swimming. It is that Vietnam strangeness again, swimming on land, destroying villages to save them, aggressive defense. Things are not what they seem. You can be killed without ever seeing or hearing an enemy.

Partially because of the many casualties suffered without ever seeing the enemy which generated deep frustration and a desire for revenge, partially because of an inherent racism already discussed, and partially because of the dehumanizing character of war, atrocities in the thousands were committed by our soldiers against the civilian population of Vietnam. In "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," Weigl witnesses an atrocity shortly after arriving in Vietnam. Riding in a jeep with another soldier who is taking him "into the jungle" and to "the beautiful war" he "did not yet hate" (13), he writes:

Eighteen years old and a man
was telling me how to stay alive
in the tropics he said would rot me--
brothers of the heart he said and smiled
until we came upon a mama san
bent over from her stuffed sack of flowers.
We flew past her but he hit the brakes hard,
he spun the tires backward in the mud.
He did not hate the war either
but other reasons made him cry out to her
so she stopped,
she smiled her beetle-black teeth at us,
in the air she raised her arms.

I have no excuse for myself.
I sat in that man's jeep in the rain
and watched him slam her to her knees,
the plastic butt of his M16
crashing down on her.
I was barely in country, the clouds
hung like huge flowers, black
like her teeth. (13-14)

For no obvious reason, this woman is brutally attacked, and the speaker's complicity in the act is evinced by his inaction, his silence. Looking back now in remorse, he offers no excuse for his inaction. The imagery Weigl uses in framing the poem, "the rain-black clouds" and the mama san's black teeth, enhances the darkness of the poem and the darkness of the deed. It is a presage of what this war is going to be like. New to the country and not yet hating the "beautiful war," this act might have planted the seeds of Weigl's eventual disillusionment with the war.

The recognition, through recollection, of an act as an atrocity is at the center of another poem, appropriately titled "The Last Lie," a poem that shatters the myth of friendly American soldiers and their kindness to foreign children. Riding in a convoy, the speaker witnesses another soldier throwing "a can of C-rations at a child" (18). Note that the speaker says at the child, not to the child. He continues:
He didn't toss the can, he wound up and hung it on the child's forehead and she was stunned backwards into the dust of our trucks.

Across the sudden angle of the road's curving I could still see her when she rose, waving one hand across her swollen, bleeding head, wildly swinging her other hand at the children who mobbed her, who tried to take her food. (18)

Often, the children in Vietnam were hated, sometimes because of racism, sometimes because they were perceived as dangerous. Horror stories abounded of children lacing the pop they sold with ground glass or walking wired with explosives into a group of American soldiers and detonating the charge. Although this happened, it was not as commonplace as the proliferation of stories would lead one to believe. However, rumor has wings and grows exponentially in flight, and, in Vietnam, the average soldier was understandably more predisposed to believe than not stories about the deadly nature of Vietnam and its people, even its children.

The pain of remembering is evident in Weigl's next lines:

I grit my teeth to myself to remember that girl smiling as she fought off her brothers and sisters. She laughed as if she thought it were a joke and the guy with me laughed and fingered the edge of another can like it was the seam of a baseball until his rage ripped again into the faces of children who called to us for food. (18-19)

It is a humorless laugh that the soldier laughs as he contemplates his next victim, fingering the ration can like a baseball. Baseball, the all-American pastime, played by every clean-
cut American kid, here turned into a vicious, deadly game, with metal "baseballs" hurled not at a strike zone but at desperately-hungry children.

One need only look at the pictures of the massacre at My Lai 4 to accept the reality, at least in the minds of some, of those feelings towards children. The incident Weigl describes was not an isolated one. At the Winter Soldier Investigation held in Detroit in 1972, these deeds and far worse were admitted to by one hundred veterans. Gloria Emerson writes.

In the pages of the testimony, in which the men give their full names--for they aren't cowards, they want redemption, not shelter--ranks, units, time in Vietnam, here is part of what a Spec-4 testified. "Also, we threw full C-ration cans [which are quite heavy] at kids on the side of the road, and they'd yell at us 'chop, chop, chop,' and they wanted food. They knew we carried C rations. Well, just for a joke, these guys would take a full can, as if they were riding shotgun, and throw it as hard as they could at a kid's head. I saw several kids' heads split wide open, knocked off the road, knocked into tires of vehicles behind them, and knocked under tank troops." (Emerson 1986, 224-225).

This Spec-4 testified that he often threw C-ration cans at the children. Atrocities committed by American soldiers were not uncommon as indicated above and in previous discussion, and some of these veteran-poets testify to those atrocities. Our supposed kindness toward children is a lie, another myth these veteran-poets are challenging. Not all soldiers committed these atrocious acts, but they occurred with enough frequency to cast doubt upon certain cherished American myths. The frequency with which atrocities occurred also displays a breakdown in leadership and a loss of control over not only the war but also over ourselves.

The chaos of the war, its disjointed nature, is depicted in Weigl's poem, "Monkey," which consists of five parts. It is a shorthand tour of Vietnam through memory, an
uncertain memory to be sure, which, like the war, ends in disintegration. In Part 1, Weigl engages the reader immediately: "I am you are he she it is / we are you are they are. / I am you are he she it is / we are you are they are" (20). "I am you," he says, and, as the old saying goes, "There but for the grace of God . . .," it could have been one of us.

Like Vietnam, the poem goes everywhere and nowhere. These are images percolating up from memory, and Part 1 ends with the speaker saying that actually he remembers "nothing but light" (21), an observation both true and untrue, for the poem is itself an act of remembrance, even if the speaker is having trouble filling in the gaps.

Lorrie Smith observes:

"Monkey" is a classic poem of dissolution. It eschews metaphor, proceeding rather through a succession of nervous, disjointed sentences . . , syntactically correct but semantically tied to the logic of nightmare. The world "after our war" does not so much surrender "new metaphor" as yield frightening new juxtapositions. All meaningful cause and effect breaks down in the poem's disturbing associations[.]

(Smith 1991, 57)

Weigl writes of pain both physical and mental. The disintegration of the speaker is evident in the fractured language of the poem and the juxtaposition of disparate images, a disintegration that worsens as the poem continues.

Part 2 slips in and out of past and present, and it is difficult to tell what is really going on or where, but there is a sense of something physically or psychologically traumatic:

I don't remember the hard swallow of the lover.
I don't remember the burial of ears.
I don't remember the time of the explosion.
This is the place where curses are manufactured:
delivered like white tablets.
The survivor is spilling his bedpan.
He slips a curse into your pocket,
you're finally satisfied.
I don't remember the heat
in the hands,
the heat around the neck. (22)

What has happened is left to the reader's imagination, because if the speaker remembers,
he isn't telling or perhaps can't because it was too traumatic. The speaker resists memory
through the quotidian, yet temporally disjointed, routine of existence, illustrated by the
following lines: "Good times bad times sleep / get up work. Sleep get up / good times
bad times. / Work eat sleep good bad work times" (21-22).

Memory, however, will not lie submerged, and the war surfaces, at times cartoon-
like, absurd: "I like a certain cartoon of wounds. / The water which refused to dry. / I like
a little unaccustomed mercy. / Pulling the trigger is all we have. / I hear a child" (22).

Here again, the reader must make the connections. Wounds, or death, may, in time,
become cartoon-like, Road-Runner caricatures, decapitated heads placed on their former
owners' chests, smoking cigarettes poised in their dead mouths, everyone standing around,
snorting and laughing (dumb deadfuckers), snapping pictures. Out in "Indian country,"
deep in the green, it was never dry, it was always sopping, if not from rain or humidity,
from sweat. Mercy was "unaccustomed" in a war in which atrocities numbered in the
thousands and the Elephant was always poised to step on you, right now. The order of
the day was kill or be killed, and sometimes when the trigger was pulled, a child took the
round, and it was intentional. Give none, expect none, but get some.

The erosion of the speaker continues in Part 3, with the speaker taking on the
characteristics of his monkey: "Oh, I have the petrified eyebrows / of my Vietnam
monkey. / My monkey from Vietnam. / My monkey" (24). Vietnam, the war, is a monkey
on the speaker's back; even more, it has been with him for so long, it has become a part of
him, his "monkey bones" (25). "It makes no sense. / I beat the monkey," the speaker says.
"I didn't know him. / He was bloody" (24). In an attempt at what Philip Beidler calls
"sense-making" (Beidler 1982, 10), there is no sense to make of this war. Weigl speaks of
myth: "My shoes / spit-shined the moment / I learned to tie the bow" (24). Learning to
tie those shoes in childhood is connected to the military spit-shine in boot camp during
young adulthood which, ultimately, leads to a pair of jungle boots and Vietnam where, "In
the wrong climate / a person can spoil" (25). "Spoil" in this sense may have a double
meaning: the spoiling that comes to a dead body in a hot climate or the spoiling, the
dehumanization, that occurs from the brutality of war.

In Part 4 the speaker is finally grounded in time, in the present, remembering the acts
of war he has witnessed. The images become more concrete, the memories more clear:

I'm twenty-five years old,
quiet, tired of the same mistakes,
the same greed, the same past.
The same past with its bleat
and pound of the dead,
with its hand grenade
tossed into a hooch on a dull Sunday
because when a man dies like that
his eyes sparkle,
his nose fills with witless nuance
because a farmer in Bong Son
has dead cows lolling
in a field of claymores
because the VC tie hooks to their comrades
because a spot of blood is a number
because a woman is lifting
her dress across the big pond. (26-27)

Tired of the monkey on his back, the speaker goes through a litany of memories from the past, from the mindless tossing of a grenade into a hooch to the likewise mindless military Standard Operating Procedure of counting blood spots as "kills." The speaker is tired of the same old myth, the same old mistakes. He counsels patience (or perhaps he is just being satirical?): "If we're soldiers we should smoke them / if we have them. Someone's bound / to point us in the right direction / sooner or later" (27). Will they, really, or should one just strike off in what one thinks is the right direction, sort of like we did in Vietnam? Finally, the speaker pulls the reader more intimately into the poem: "I'm tired and I'm glad you asked" (27).

It is, however, only a momentary respite. In Part 5, the disintegration comes full circle. The inanity, the contradictory nature, of the war is reflected in the first few lines: "There is a hill. / Men run top hill. / Men take hill. / Give hill to man" (28). As mentioned earlier, the Vietnam War was not conventional warfare. Often a piece of ground, or a hill known by nothing other than a number or a nickname given it by the soldiers (Hill 875, "The Rock Pile," "Hamburger Hill"), was taken at high cost, only to be abandoned the very next day. Some time later, weeks or months, this same piece of real estate had to be retaken, again at high, or higher, cost. The "man" here is, of course, both the military commander and the enemy. The infantrymen, at some cost, present the hill first to the "man," their leaders, who in turn "give" it back to the "man," their enemy. The speaker is bemoaning the military penchant in Vietnam to never stay anywhere, to never keep
anything once it was captured. When U.S. troops left, the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese troops moved right back in. It is a theme of non-accomplishment, of circularity, often at an unbelievable cost.

The speaker's "monkey," that is, the burden of Vietnam, returns home with him, "to Guam and Hawaii / in Ohio he saw / all my people" (28). The poem almost completely dissolves with the speaker slipping into fantasy and being saved by his monkey:

he's my little brown monkey
he came here from heaven
to give me his spirit
imagine my monkey my beautiful monkey he saved me lifted
me above the punji
sticks above the mines
above the ground burning
above the dead above
the living above the
wounded dying the wounded
dying. (28-29)

The reader knows, of course, that there was no rescue, no redemption, no resurrection.

Although there is an element of fantasy to the ending, it is also stream-of-consciousness wishful thinking because he hasn't been lifted above anything. Even years later, the war, the horror, goes on and on, and when the speaker attempts to transcend the horror, he can transcend it only through imagination. In reality, the monkey on his back will always drag him down, the "wounded dying the wounded / dying" will always be with him.

The attempt to transcend the war and the certain failure to do so is a recurring theme in other poems. In "Burning Shit at An Khe," which is both literal and symbolic, the war, the "shit," becomes too much. Having survived eight months in the jungle, the speaker is
now back at base camp, and he is on a detail to dispose of human waste by burning it:

I'd grunted out eight months
of jungle and thought I had a grip on things
but we flipped the coin and I lost
and climbed down into my fellow soldiers'
shit and began to sink and didn't stop
until I was deep to my knees. Liftships
cut the air above me, the hacking
blast of their blades
ripped dust in swirls so every time
I tried to light a match
it died
and it all came down on me, the stink
and the heat and the worthlessness
until I slipped and climbed
out of that hole and ran
past the olive-drab
tents and trucks and clothes and everything
green as far from the shit
as the fading light allowed. (37-38)

The war, however, can't be escaped; it is omnipresent, both "in country" (anywhere in
Vietnam) and now back in the World:

Only now I can't fly.
I lay down in it
and fingerpaint the words of who I am
across my chest
until I'm covered and there's only one smell,
one word. (37-38)

Human waste at the larger base camps in Vietnam was burned in fuel oil, giving off acrid,
black clouds of smoke. Any smell at all similar to that is a signifier of Vietnam for
veterans, just as the color bright green is, sending those vibrations jangling along to
memory centers. For the speaker in this poem, the "Vietnam Experience," war, came
down to one word, one signifier: shit, and he was, and still is, deep in it.
This effort to escape the war is also illustrated in Weigl's poem, "Him, On the Bicycle." Riding in a helicopter, the speaker witnesses the shooting of several enemy soldiers, spotted by the door gunner: "four men running, carrying rifles, / one man on a bicycle" (9). In a tremendous feat of empathy, the speaker even joins the enemy, wearing his hat, and helping him to escape (perhaps from the war?):

He pulls me out of the ship,  
there's firing far away.  
I'm on the back of the bike  
holding his hips.  
It's hard pumping for two,  
I hop off and push the bike.

I'm brushing past trees,  
the man on the bike stops pumping,  
lifts his feet,  
we don't waste a stroke.  
His hat flies off,  
I catch it behind my back,  
put it on, I want to live forever!

Like a blaze  
streaming down the trail. (9-10)

He wants to live forever, probably just as the enemy does whom he is helping to escape. The ambiguous image at the end, however, leaves the reader wondering if they blazed off into freedom or if they were "torched" by the pursuing helicopter.

In these poems, Weigl is showing us the hidden cost of war, the inability to transcend the experience or find anything redemptive in it. By witnessing his experience, Weigl is showing us that war is an atrocity, an obscenity: war is shit. Furthermore, once embarked on the mission of war, there is no turning back, and tremendous stakes are involved.
Even back home, years later, he can't escape the signifiers of the war which rear up in front of him unexpectedly. In the title poem, "Song of Napalm," he and his wife watch horses after a hard rain from the doorway of their home:

The grass was never more blue in that light, more scarlet; beyond the pasture
trees scraped their voices into the wind, branches crisscrossed the sky like barbed wire
but you said they were only branches. (33)

Years later, the images of war are lurking in his environment. The crisscrossed branches remind the speaker of barbed wire, one of the signifiers of the war. It kept Charles (the Viet Cong, Victor Charles, VC) away; it helped ward off the Elephant, coming to crush you. Concertina wire, spiraling in all directions, could entangle you, cut you, leave you hanging helplessly, an easy target. But Charles was also uncanny in his ability to infiltrate, greasing himself up and sliding through the deadly coils of wire like a snake, armed with his satchel charges to blow you up while you slept. Like the enemy in Vietnam, the war slips into the speaker's consciousness where and when he least expects it.

Trying to regain his equilibrium after the pounding of the storm, the speaker tries to convince his wife that he is all right:

Okay. The storm stopped pounding. I am trying to say this straight: for once I was sane enough to pause and breathe outside my wild plans and after the hard rain I turned my back on the old curses. I believed they swung finally away from me. . . (33-34)

It's not that easy, though. The branches, finally, are still wire, and the storm's thunder is the pounding of artillery Experiencing a flashback, he sees again a Vietnamese girl,
caught in a napalm strike, running, burning, "napalm / stuck to her dress like jelly" (34).

He continues:

So I can keep on living,  
so I can stay here beside you,  
I try to imagine she runs down the road and wings  
beat inside her until she rises  
above the stinking jungle and her pain  
eases, and your pain, and mine.

The lie works only as long as it takes to speak  
and the girl runs only as far  
as the napalm allows  
until her burning tendons and crackling  
muscles draw her up  
into that final position  
burning bodies so perfectly assume. Nothing  
can change that, she is burned behind my eyes  
and not your good love and not the rain-swept air  
and not the jungle-green  
pasture unfolding before us can deny it. (34-35)

Although the speaker tries to convince himself, "to imagine," that she rose like an angel  
away from "the stinking jungle and her pain," the lie won't, can't, hold. The image is too  
strong, the atrocity too horrible. He sees the girl, an innocent victim of war, caught in the  
middle of a napalm strike, one of the deadliest technologies of the war. If you were too  
close the heat would suck the air right out of your lungs. If you were really close and got  
some splashed on you, you burned and burned until it burned itself out. It conjures up the  
memory of the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1972 photo of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running,  
naked, screaming in agony from third-degree burns inflicted on her entire body during a  
napalm bombing attack by U.S. jets.

Through harsh imagery, Weigl shows us the war and what it could do, not only to
the immediate target of its ferocity, but also to its survivors many years later. Tormented by his memories, the speaker is desperately clinging to his sanity and his marriage and, perhaps, his life. Approximately 100,000 Vietnam veterans have committed suicide since the end of the war, more than died fighting in it. One could assume that memories such as these, and memories of other atrocities committed, could have played a major role in their reasons for committing suicide.

The final image of the girl dying, drawing up "into that final position," is almost a denegation of life. The "final position" that burning bodies assume is the fetal position, similar to the one spent in utero for nine months. With images such as these, Weigl brings the war home to us.

Writing in free verse with varying line lengths, Weigl recreates the spontaneity of Vietnam. With skillful enjambment of his lines, he jerks the reader around the corner to the next image, the next metaphor: "beyond the pasture / trees scraped their voices into the wind," "branches / like barbed wire," "napalm / stuck to her dress," "burning tendons and crackling / muscles," and "jungle-green / pasture." Most of these images are concrete; they speak directly to our senses, rather than to the mind, of the realities of the war.

These are the realities Weigl wants us to see. His pain is his wife's pain is our pain. Though we tell ourselves lies, we cannot escape the reality, and the veterans won't let us escape it. He, and other veterans, cannot deny the impact of Vietnam and the terrible things that occurred there: they are "burned behind [their] eyes." Through their works, they can show us what happened and in doing so prevent its recurrence.
It is an uphill battle, though, as Weigl recognizes, because American society is a violent, warlike society; here, another war rages. In "Snowy Egret," the speaker is awakened by his wife at midnight. The neighbor's boy has killed a snowy egret and is in the backyard trying to bury it. It is symbolic of the long struggle with the Vietnam experience, the senseless, cruel killing carried out by young soldiers and then trying to bury that experience. It is what leaves the speaker, today, "half-drunk with pills / That let [him] sleep" (48). He goes downstairs and into the yard where the boy, weeping, is burying the bird because "his father will kill him" (48). The speaker continues: "His man's muscled shoulders / shake with the weight of what he can't set right no matter what, / but one last time he tries to stay a child, sobbing / please don't tell" (48). Like the soldiers in Vietnam, this boy has crossed a line that can never be recrossed; he has killed, perhaps for the first time, and he has killed without consideration of consequences. Though the boy sobs that he didn't mean it, the speaker knows otherwise. The poem continues:

I want to grab his shoulders,
shake the lies loose from his lips but he hurts enough,
his burns with shame for what he's done,
with fear for his hard father's
fists I've seen crash down on him for so much less.
I don't know what to do but hold him.
If I let go he'll fly to pieces before me. (49)

Here is an ideal metaphor for the war: The senseless killing of the egret mirrors perfectly the violence perpetrated against the Vietnamese people and their land by other young men from another time, perhaps not much older than this boy.

Weigl draws us all into the poem with the final lines, an indictment of these supposedly civilized times that allow such atrocities to occur:
What a time we share, that can make a good boy steal away,
wiping out from the blue face of the pond
what he hadn't known he loved, blasting
such beauty into nothing. (49)

This "time we share" is one of aimless violence, a time in which we kill things we should
love. Under different circumstances, things might have been different: if we had really
known what we were killing, the killing might not have happened. Perhaps if the boy had
taken the time to understand, to appreciate, the egret, he might not have committed his
impulsive act. Perhaps if we had taken the time to understand the Vietnamese and their
culture, they would have been humans to us instead of just "gooks," and in their children
we might have seen our children. We might have really seen the "snowy egret."

"All societies," Gloria Emerson has pointed out, "insist they love children and will
protect them, which of course is a lie" (Emerson 1986, 221). For over a dozen years
American parents fed their children to the war and said virtually nothing. It is no mystery,
given the environment American children grow up in, that the violence is easily extended
elsewhere. The problem lies in the myths we create to dispel or disguise the real reasons
things happen, and Weigl challenges those myths. "Look," he is saying, "Vietnam wasn't
the problem; we were." It starts at home.

To bear witness, to challenge the myths, one has to survive. While one survives,
others die, maybe not necessarily in one's place, but still the weight of those deaths lies
heavily on the survivor. That weight aids in compelling the veteran-poets to tell their
story. In "Elegy," the final poem in Song of Napalm, Weigl describes the innocence of
soldiers as they march into battle, not knowing how brutal, how final, death is, "how their
lungs would collapse, / how the world would twist itself, would / bend into the cruel angles" (70). The poem goes on to eulogize the dead, with a final turn back to those who survived.

    Into the black understanding they marched
    until the angels came
    calling their names,
    until they rose, one by one from the blood.
    The light blasted down on them.
    The bullets sliced through the razor grass
    so there was not even time to speak.
    The words would not let themselves be spoken.
    Some of them died.
    Some of them were not allowed to. (70)

Although the poem begins with and blesses the dead, it ends with the living. Death came to some so suddenly they had no time to say their final words. The madness, the horror, the extremity of the experience, were so severe that some couldn't and still can't speak of it. The words they cannot speak, Weigl will speak for them.

    The former soldier now turned poet, psychically burned and scarred by the napalm of war, will not allow it to be forgotten. Perhaps in some grief-stricken way, Weigl laments that he was not allowed to die in Vietnam (survivor's guilt), but since he wasn't, he will speak for those whose names the angels called, whose voices were snuffed out like so many candles in the harsh monsoon wind of Vietnam.

    Weigl is a more polished poet than the previous poets studied, particularly in his use of figurative language, which contributes to a less prosaic style. That doesn't, however, diminish the poignant qualities of his poetry. His ongoing agony and despair over the Vietnam War may be necessary to remind us "how the world would twist itself, would /
bend into the cruel angles" (70). Like the next poet to be studied, Yusef Komunyakaa, Weigl, with his "songs of napalm," is trying to fill what W. D Ehrhart calls the "awkward silence" after this strange and tragic war.

Yusef Komunyakaa, awarded a Bronze Star in Vietnam, served as a combat correspondent with the Americal Division from 1969 to 1970 and now teaches English at Indiana University. Dien Cai Dau is his fourth book of poems and the first that deals solely with the war. The long wait has given Komunyakaa distance from his subject and time to hone his craft. Like Weigl and Ehrhart, he is a free verse technician, and although he describes Vietnam and his experiences there with concrete, literal images, he is capable at any time of highly figurative language, as will be shown. Komunyakaa, like Weigl, avoids the strident, violent imagery of the earlier soldier-poets and the obvious political stance of Ehrhart.

His poetry weaves through Vietnam, forming connections with the land, other soldiers, the Vietnamese people, and even the enemy, connections that don't end with the war. Komunyakaa doesn't mortar the reader like many veteran-poets; rather, he informs us with illumination rounds, poetical surrealism that pushes a "white fist" through the black night of Vietnam instead of detonating around us and leaving dogtags hanging in the trees. Komunyakaa survived the trauma of Vietnam and, like other veteran-poets discussed in this study, he testifies to many elements of that trauma.

One must bear in mind that the title of his book, Dien Cai Dau (American servicemen pronounced it "dinky dow"), means "crazy" or "crazy in the head" in Vietnamese. It was one of the most-used Vietnamese phrases during the Vietnam War.
The Vietnamese used it to refer to Americans, and they in turn used it to refer to everything in Vietnam: the war, the people, each other, the military. It was one of the catchall Vietnamese phrases, and it is no accident that Komunyakaa used it for the title of his book. In passing from civilian life to military life to Vietnam, there was a loss of identity, a loss of the invisible link to cultural sustenance and restraint and Vietnam was the place where everything that constituted a person's makeup could all break down.

Vietnam was a crazy place, he is saying, and he's going to tell us about some crazy things that happened there, which, like other veteran-poets, includes acts of atrocity.

In "Re-creating the Scene," Komunyakaa describes a rape that takes place inside an armored personnel carrier (APC):

The Confederate flag
flaps from the radio antenna,
& the woman's clothes
come apart in their hands.
Their mouths find hers
in the titanic darkness
of the steel grotto,
as she counts the names of dead ancestors, shielding a baby
in her arms. The three men
ride her breath, grunting
over lovers back in Mississippi.
She floats on their rage
like a torn white flower,
defining night inside a machine
where men are gods. (19)

The very title of the poem is not just Komunyakaa's "re-creation" of an event from memory; he is also indicating that this will be the "re-creation" of a crime. Having abducted the Vietnamese woman and her baby, the men take turns raping her, finally
throwing her out and driving off:

She rises from the dust
& pulls the torn garment
around her, staring after the APC
till it's small enough
to fit like a toy tank in her hands. (20)

The woman goes to a U.S. base to report the crime, and a captain "accosts her with candy kisses" (20). The speaker, however, informs a weekly newspaper, and the publicity results in a trial, a trial that never sees a resolution:

on the trial's second day
she turns into mist--
someone says money
changed hands,
& someone else swears
she's buried at LZ Gator. (20)

The complementary elements of misogyny and atrocity tear like a jackal into the hindquarters of American myth: that its soldiers were humane, civilized. This woman and her child were abducted, and she was raped, trying all the while to protect the child she carried in her arms. Attempting to seek justice, we are led to believe that she was bought off, or, even worse, killed.

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3 Crimes against humanity are not uncommon in any war, and Vietnam was no exception. But, as has been noted earlier in this study, the Vietnam War was different from other wars in many ways, and this difference extends into certain categories of atrocious acts, the most notorious being crimes against women. Jacqueline Lawson notes: "What distinguishes the war in Vietnam from other wars is the number of atrocities committed against women (Vietnam was our longest war and involved more men) and the fact that these atrocities are copiously documented in the memoirs and oral histories produced by Vietnam veterans. These non-fiction narratives, the veterans' own accounts, are replete with misogynistic allusions to the women of Vietnam: acts of rape, gang rape, assaults on women, torture, mutilation, and murder crowd the pages of these texts, raising disturbing questions about this nation's combatants and the culture they sought to defend." Jacqueline K. Lawson, "The Misogyny of the Vietnam War," in Fourteen Landing Zones, ed. Philip K Jason (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 19. Lawson goes on to attribute the high incidence of atrocities against women to racism, to the highly misogynistic character of men in general and the military in particular, and to a fear of emasculation, with its resultant adoption of the Rambo or John Wayne persona.
This poem also raises the issue of racism, symbolized by the Confederate flag on the APC and the three soldiers from Mississippi. Komunyakaa never bludgeons the reader with this element, though he deftly insinuates it into his poetry, as shown here.

Komunyakaa, writing in free verse, demonstrates poetic expertise through his use of varying line lengths, skillful enjambment, figurative language, and attention to detail. Even in his description of a brutal event, his artistry is evident in phrases like "She floats on their rage / like a torn water flower, / defining night inside a machine / where men are gods" (19), or "They hold her down / with their eyes, / taking turns, piling stones / on her father's grave" (19). These rapists hold this woman down with their eyes, indicative of their complete control over her and her life. They destroy her virtue, her sense of self and honor, very important to the Vietnamese, and in doing so they pile "stones / on her father's grave." These are brutes Komunyakaa describes, not human beings. There is an immeasurable gulf between them and young, naive American sons and soldiers.

The armored personnel carrier in the poem is a technological symbol of America and what we tried to do in Vietnam. Its metal door closes "like an ancient turtle / that won't let go / of a finger till it thunders" (19). The APC rolls over the land, "crushing trees & grass, / droning like a constellation / of locusts eating through bamboo" (19). This is what America was like in the war: a swarm of locusts trying to eat Vietnam with its technology, trying to trample the land and its people under the treads of its tanks or to burn it up with its napalm.

"You and I Are Disappearing" echoes Weigl's "Song of Napalm" with its central figure of a girl burning after a napalm strike. Weigl's "burned behind my eyes" is mirrored
by Komunyakaa's "still burning inside my head" (17). While Weigl graphically, concretely, describes what happens to a burning person, Komunyakaa reaches vainly for a simile to describe the horror he is witnessing:

We stand with our hands hanging at our sides, while she burns like a sack of dry ice. She burns like oil on water. She burns like a cattail torch dipped in gasoline.

She burns like oil on water.
She burns like a cattail torch dipped in gasoline.

She burns like a shot glass of vodka.
She burns like a field of poppies at the edge of a rain forest.
She rises like dragonsmoke to my nostrils.
She burns like a burning bush driven by a godawful wind. (17)

The poet finally runs out of comparisons, out of language. Vicente Gotera observes:

The charged language grapples with a view that is both unimaginably beautiful and incredibly horrible, all at the same time. . . . Finally, he simply has to stop. And the final image points a biblical finger: the girl will always burn in the speaker's mind in the same way that the burning bush could have burned forever unconsumed. What really nails this image is the phrase "godawful wind" which puns on "awful God," straight out of the Old Testament, while it resurrects the root meaning full of awe, or more properly here, filling with awe. (Gotera 1990, 292)

The collective "we" includes us, the readers, in witnessing this terrible vision, and the "hands hanging at our sides" indicates our frustration, our helplessness and lack of control. What the speaker has witnessed goes beyond language, almost beyond comprehension. The use of the anaphora "she burns" makes it almost a lament, with the men standing in awe of this terrible vision, and though the poet finally relents, the imagery has succeeded. It is so horrible that it can only be compared to an act of God, a "burning bush," another
unknowable. Perhaps it is an "awful God" that allows atrocities of this nature to occur or perhaps this is an act that is too god-like for man to commit or even contemplate committing. It is an excruciating way to die, and Komunyakaa has tried to burn this behind our eyes.

Atrocities, crimes, weren't committed by Americans only against the enemy or Vietnamese civilians. They were committed against each other, too, as Komunyakaa makes clear in "Fragging." Convinced their lieutenant is too "gung ho," five men meet in a sinister setting ("damp smoke and mist") to draw straws to see who will "frag" (use a fragmentation hand grenade to kill or wound someone) him. "Think, man, 'bout how Turk / got blown away," one man says. "[N]ext time / it's you or me. Hell, / the truth is the truth" (16). The truth is their truth. One doubts very much that it is the lieutenant's truth. Huddled together in conspiracy, "their bowed heads" are "filled with splintered starlight" (16), suggesting something is amiss with the elements and, hence, with these men. The poem continues:

They uncoil fast as a fist.  
Looking at the ground, four  
walk north, then disappear One  
comes this way, moving through a bad dream. Slipping a finger into the metal ring, he's married to his devil--the spoon-shaped handle flies off. Everything breaks for green cover, like a hundred red birds released from a wooden box. (16)

The swiftness with which the men separate, "[l]ooking at the ground," suggests their uncertainty and feelings of guilt about what is going to occur. The executioner is "married
to his devil," a marriage to sin and guilt.

These are the acts many American sons committed in Vietnam, Komunyakaa is saying. It was far from a noble or even a just cause. Like Ehrhart and Weigl before him, the poet is saying we are guilty of atrocity, and though we like to pretend otherwise, nothing can change the reality "If it's dead, it's VC," said the military in Vietnam and added each "dead VC" to its grotesque method of measuring the war, the "body count," what Robert Jay Lifton called "the perfect symbol of America's descent into evil" (Lifton 1971, 25).

Earlier in this study, a comparison was made between survivors of Vietnam and survivors of the Holocaust, that each in their own way have felt a compulsion to bear witness. There is an additional comparison that can be made, but this time the comparison is not between American soldiers and Jews as survivors of war; rather, it is a comparison between American soldiers and Nazi soldiers as perpetrators of crimes of war against innocent people. Like the Jews during the Holocaust who suffered at the hands of the Nazis, the Vietnamese suffered a Nazi-like treatment at the hands of the US military, a comparison that has been made more than once. A soldier who participated in the massacre at My Lai 4 characterized it as "just like a Nazi-type thing" (Lifton 1971, 25).

As previously pointed out, a major difference between Vietnam War veterans and those of other wars has been their willingness, even their compulsion, to testify to the atrocities they committed or saw committed in Vietnam. What it comes down to, finally, is that the war itself reached critical mass and became an unstoppable meltdown that resulted in a failure of leadership and the commitment of atrocity after atrocity against both the human
body and the spirit of the Vietnamese people.

Even when the troops are taking a break, the violence is always there, hovering like a liftship, that *whop! whop! whop!* of the blades the heartbeat of the violence that was "the Nam." In "A Break from the Bush," the soldiers are taking a "break," playing games, swimming, relaxing:

The volleyball's a punching bag:
Clem's already lost a tooth
& Johnny's left eye is swollen shut.
Frozen airlifted steaks burn
on a wire grill, & miles away
machine guns can be heard.
Pretending we're somewhere else,
we play harder.

CJ,
who in three days will trip
a fragmentation mine,
rungs after the ball
into the whitecaps,
laughing. (27)

Even in their games, these men play rough. There is no relaxing in Vietnam; always, the war intrudes. Just over the horizon "machine guns can be heard," and a few days away lies a mine waiting to rip through legs and testicles, shredding the laughter of one young life and indelibly etching its impact on another. Always, there is the war to return to, the jungle to re-enter.

In "Camouflaging the Chimera," a patrol prepares to set up an ambush in a strange melding of man and nature:

We tied branches to our helmets,
We painted our faces & rifles
with mud from a riverbank,
blades of grass hung from the pockets of our tiger suits. We wove ourselves into the terrain, (3)

The soldiers fade into the landscape, become the landscape, "content to be a hummingbird's target," rather than the enemy's, as they wait for "dark-hearted songbirds" (3). The war never waits, however, and the enemy, as the moon rises, soon appears:

But we waited
till the moon touched metal,

till something almost broke inside us. VC struggled with the hillside, like black silk wrestling iron through grass.

We weren't there. The river ran through our bones. Small animals took refuge against our bodies, we held our breath,

ready to spring the L-shaped ambush, as a world revolved under each man's eyelid. (3-4)

The tension mounts in the poem, until the reader is holding his breath with these men who are thinking of somewhere else: the World and how they'd like to be there. When the VC (Viet Cong) make their appearance, the speaker says, "We weren't there." Wishful thinking, because they were there, and soon their world, their lives, might flash under their eyelids as they die.

It is a chimera, a foolish fancy, that one can hide from this war. Ironically, these men are successfully hidden only to bring the war to them. In almost elegant natural surroundings ("we hugged bamboo & leaned / against a breeze off the river," 3), it is a terrible vision of what ambush was: waiting in a blind for hours, a motionless hunt in
which the quarry comes to the hunter, but here the prey shoots back.

The interminable nature of the war, the incessant killing of an enemy that seemed to rise from death to fight again, are apparent in Komunyakaa’s poem "The Dead at Quang Tri" in which the speaker is counting enemy dead after a firefight:

This is harder than counting stones
along paths going nowhere, the way
a tiger circles & backtracks by
smelling his blood on the ground.
The one kneeling beside the pagoda,
remember him? Captain, we won’t
talk about that. The Buddhist boy
at the gate with the shaven head
we rubbed for luck
glides by like a white moon.
He won’t stay dead, dammit!
Blades aim for the family jewels;
the grass we walk on
won’t stay down. (12)

Formerly-killed enemies reappear, wraith-like, making the counting of the dead seem aimless. Like the jungle, like the razor grass the military machine tramples, the dead of Vietnam "won’t stay down."

This element of a seeming resurrection from the dead appears in another poem, "Sappers," about suicide squads whose sole purpose was to sacrifice themselves while blowing up American installations, aircraft, or soldiers. "Opium, horse, nothing / sends anybody through concertina / this way What is it in the brain / that so totally propels a man?" Komunyakaa asks, almost in desperation. Patriotism does, of course, love of land, a cause, the same things that motivate and inspire Americans, but here the guerillas are fighting for their land against what they consider to be intruders. The poem continues:
Caught with women in our heads
three hours before daybreak,
we fire full automatic
but they keep coming,
slinging satchel charges
at our bunkers. They fall
& rise again like torchbearers,
with their naked bodies
greased so moonlight dances
off their skin. They run
with explosives strapped
around their waists.
& try to fling themselves
into our arms. (24)

This is the image of the savage, the greased primitive in the heart of darkness, madly
flinging himself against civilized man. It was, actually, a clever antagonist, greasing
himself up so he could slide easily through the concertina barbed wire and make his special
delivery of death. This is commitment to a cause in the face of overwhelming, superior
firepower. It didn't matter: "they ke[pt] coming," and we didn't realize that they would keep on coming until we left their country

One way, of course, to get out of the country was to be "tagged and bagged,"
tucked into the olive green bags of death. In "Roll Call," the dead haunt the poet years later:

Through rifle sights
we must've looked like crows
perched on a fire-eaten branch,
lined up for reveille, ready
to roll-call each M-16
propped upright
between a pair of jungle boots,
a helmet on its barrel
as if it were a man.
Sometimes I can hear them
marching through the house,
closing the distance. All
the lonely beds take me back
to where we saluted those
five pairs of boots
as the sun rose against our faces. (15)

It is a scene reminiscent of Paquet's "Morning--A Death," discussed earlier, with the sun rising on the living who are looking at five dead soldiers or, in this case, artifacts representing the dead. It is a military ceremony honoring the fallen, a rite whose memory lives on in the survivor. The sounds of dead men "marching through the house" and the image of "lonely beds" evince the speaker's feelings of guilt over surviving the war, guilt shared by many veterans (as was noted in discussion of Weigl's "Lament"). Even more, though, it is a snapshot of ongoing grief that lies just below the surface, resurrected at certain times, usually in loneliness. This is the price America and its veterans paid.

Those dead soldiers, however, are not the only casualties of war. For the soldier who survived the war and returned to America, the war was far from over. Komunyakaa makes this undeniably clear in his poem "Losses." It is about a "tripwire" vet, a name applied to those veterans who returned from the war but who felt they could no longer live in and with society. Often, they retreated to remote areas, living in the "bush" like they once had in Vietnam. "After Nam he lost himself," the speaker says, "not trusting his hands / with loved ones." Having lived with violence and atrocity, having learned to kill, and kill well, the tripwire vet retreated from society because he believed he couldn't control himself, and sometimes he couldn't, detonating into violent action for no apparent
reason. The speaker continues:

His girlfriend left,
   & now he scouts the edge of town,
      always with one ear
cocked & ready to retreat,
   to blend with the hills, poised
      like a slipknot
becoming a noose.
   Unlike punji stakes,
      his traps only snag the heart.

No, never mind--

he's halfway back, closer to a ravine,
   going deeper into saw vines,
      in behind White Cove,
following his mind like a dark lover,
   away from car horns & backfire
      where only days are stolen. (61)

These men are only "halfway back," still locked and loaded on the war, preferring the jungle, the "vines," to the jangling, startling sounds of "car horns & backfire." These men are still on search and destroy missions, scouting the World, ready to retreat, and by now many are considered psychologically irretrievable. These men are 
dien cai dau, crazy in the head, and chances are they will never come home entirely. Komunyakaa calls our attention to these "losses," and if "a small voice" doesn't reach them soon, they will just go deeper into the vines. But like so many things about Vietnam, it is easier not to think of them, to pretend things are all right.

Komunyakaa constantly challenges that self-deception, calling our attention to the realities still out there, even extending his vision back to Vietnam, to the Vietnamese child
"with American eyes / who keeps singing / rat-a-tat-tat, hugging / a broken machine gun"
("Toys in a Field," 56), or to boat people clinging to each other, seasick, and daydreaming of "Jade Mountain / a whole world away, half-drunk / on what they hunger to become"
("Boat People," 57). In "To Have Danced with Death," he speaks of the black sergeant first class and "[t]he empty left leg / of his trousers," rocking "on his good leg / like a bleak & soundless bell" (46). There are still many empty trouser-legs, still many tripwire veterans, still much pain, confusion, and denial left over from the "beautiful" war.

Denial can be carried to considerable lengths as shown in "Between Days," a sad poem of a mother still waiting for her son, killed in Vietnam, to return. She clings to false hope and self-deceit:

"That closed casket
was weighed down with stones."
The room is as he left it
fourteen years ago, everything
freshly dusted & polished
with lemon oil. The uncashed
death check from Uncle Sam
marks a passage in the Bible
on the dresser, next to the photo
staring out through the window.
"Mistakes. Mistakes. Now,
he's gonna have to give them this
money back when he gets home."

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
His row of tin soldiers
lines the window sill. The sunset
flashes across them like a blast.
She's buried the Silver Star
& flag under his winter clothes. (62)

Weighed down with grief, the mother's only recourse is to deny the reality, insisting the "closed casket" contained stones instead of her dead son's body. "Between days" are
those nights, long, black nights of the soul, her chair facing "the walkway / where she sits before the TV / asleep" (62), listening for footsteps that will never be heard. She waits for a ghost.

In the last poem of the book, "Facing It," Komunyakaa confronts his own ghosts when he visits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.:

My black face fades,

hiding inside the black granite.

I said I wouldn't,

dammit: No tears.

I'm stone. I'm flesh.

My clouded reflection eyes me

like a bird of prey, the profile of night slanted against the morning. I turn

this way--the stone lets me go.

I turn that way--I'm inside

the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

again, depending on the light
to make a difference.

I go down the 58,022 names,

half-expecting to find

my own in letters like smoke.

I touch the name of Andrew Johnson;

I see the booby trap's white flash.

Names shimmer on a woman's blouse

but when she walks away

the names stay on the wall.

Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's wings cutting across my stare.

The sky. A plane in the sky.

A white vet's image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes

look through mine. I'm a window.

He's lost his right arm

inside the stone. In the black mirror

a woman's trying to erase names:

No, she's brushing a boy's hair. (63)

The poet faces the ultimate poem of the war, that massive tombstone into which are
carved the names of all the brothers and sisters who never got to ride the Freedom Bird (any plane that took one out of Vietnam), except in aluminum caskets. He finds he is still one with the dead, his blackness blending into the black granite. At the same time, he realizes he is not stone but flesh, and flesh weeps, even when its determined not to. Confronted by the power and weight of 58,000 names, still questioning his own survival, he half expects to find his own name engraved "in letters like smoke."

He presents a series of images, juxtapositions, that almost seem to contradict one another. Things are not as they seem--it depends "on the light / to make a difference," the point of view. Touching a name summons a memory of sudden death. "Names shimmer on a woman's blouse" but "stay on the wall" when she leaves. The names are permanent; the lives they represent weren't. Though the world goes on living, these voices have been silenced forever, and it is the poet's "brushstrokes" that will keep the memories, the truths, alive. Like the Wall, the poet is a window through which we look to discover truths, to learn the stories, to read the names.

One story Komunyakaa sees reflected in the polished black granite is the potential for history to repeat itself. First, there is the sky, then the plane in the sky, a symbol of the power used extensively in Vietnam. Next comes the white veteran, missing an arm, followed by a woman, a widow perhaps, trying to "erase" her dead husband's name. Komunyakaa leaves us with the final image of a boy, a representative of the next generation, inviting, with the suggested image of the absent father, the possibility that it will be his name carved on the next wall. Lost arm, lost husband, lost father, lost son? Or is it the image of rebirth, of hope in the ability of the next generation to avoid the mistakes
of this one? It all depends on the light, on the point of view.

Komunyakaa's poetry is poetry of witness. A "survivor" of war, he is testifying to that experience and challenging America's myths about the Vietnam War and the soldiers who fought it. He is one of the most skilled poets to come out of the war, and with *Dien Cai Dau*, he has made a significant contribution to the genre of war poetry in general and to the canon of Vietnam War literature in particular.

Komunyakaa, Weigl, and Ehrhart are the most active veteran-poets currently writing poetry of witness about the Vietnam War. Ehrhart is unquestionably the most didactic and openly political of the three. He may also be the most committed to the cause (fragging the myths) and to the literary works of other veterans. Weigl and Komunyakaa are perhaps more advanced poetically, employing more figurative language and utilizing techniques, such as enjambment and internal rhyme, more effectively than Ehrhart or their *WHAM* predecessors.

Although poetic form and technique are certainly very important to these three men, *what* they say is unquestionably the center around which their art turns. It is through the medium of poetry that they have chosen to challenge society's illusions of innocence and its venerated myths about war, especially the Vietnam war, and the soldiers who fight America's battles. These men are on a quest, bringing the war home to America through memory of experience united with the power of imagination, creating a new vision, the true vision, of what Vietnam was and what it did to us. Collectively, they are pushing a "white fist" through the long, black night of Vietnam, illuminating once again the shattered landscape for all to see, if they will only look.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: ILLUMINATION ROUNDS

*It is either the beginning or the end of the world, and the choice is ourselves or nothing.*

Carolyn Forché, "Ourselves or Nothing"

The poets of *WHAM*, along with Ehrhart, Weigl, Komunyakaa, and many other veteran-poets not discussed here, have fired illumination rounds that light the distant Vietnam War landscape and give it an entirely new perspective. Through the poetry of witness, they have begun a re-visioning of the Vietnam War, a way of *looking* that challenges the tattered myths surrounding America's hubris.

Today's popular perceptions of the Vietnam War and of its soldiers, of Vietnam as "Rambo," will always be offset by the reality of the veteran in our midst. Lorrie Smith writes:

In opposition to popular treatments of the Vietnam War stands an astounding body of poetry by witnesses who live with its nightmares. Inherently more subversive than narrative, poetry is well suited for a literary project that seeks to disrupt and reimagine cultural myths and values rather than reproduce the status quo. Good poems threaten the social order and offer, in the words of Hélène Cixous, "the very *possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structure." (Smith 1991, 50)
Veteran-poets are out there, plying their craft, motivated by need and a hope that they can make a difference, that things really can change. For the most part, Vietnam War poetry has remained out on the fringes, along the treeline. Veterans publish their own and each other's works and edit, anthologize, and critique each other's works. In a sense, they soldier on, telling their stories to anyone who will listen, unceasing in their efforts to confront, like Wilfred Owen, "The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori" (Stallworthy 1986, 117), or, "it is sweet and meet to die for one's country." Their remonstrations go further than that, of course. These veterans use poetry of witness not just to inveigh against wrongful or needless dying for one's country. Their poetry is also an indictment of war itself and the actions of its participants.

Today, we are faced with individuals claiming that the Holocaust never occurred. Will one day the same be true of Vietnam? At least the real Vietnam? Will the truths still being discovered about our role there be overwhelmed by the Rambos and the neo-John Waynes? Will the myths supplant the truths? "Never again!" say these poets.

Robert Pinsky has written that one of the responsibilities of poets "is to mediate between the dead and the unborn: we must feel ready to answer, as if asked by the dead if we have handed on what they gave us, or asked by the unborn what we have for them" (Pinsky 1987, 424). That is, poets are bound by those who have gone before them to preserve the art of poetry for those who come after them. We, the living, in keeping alive the art of poetry, an art passed on to us, must in turn pass it on to those who follow us, so that they may accept it if they like, change it if they like, or not accept it at all.

Pinsky goes on to give poets an additional trust: "A second task has been defined by
Carolyn Forché, in a remarkable essay, as 'a poetry of witness': we must use the art to behold the actual evidence before us. We must answer for what we see" (Pinsky 1987, 425).

The veteran-poets studied here have not flinched from either of those responsibilities. They have passed on what the dead gave them, not only from the many poets before them but also from the dead who fell in places like the A Shau Valley, Khe Sahn, or Hamburger Hill. They have borne witness for those dead, testifying to the horror of war and its realities, rather than to jingoistic or spurious myths. They have admitted to terrible deeds committed by their hands, identifying themselves, in the words of the introduction to WHAM, "as agents of pain and war--as 'agent-victims' of their own atrocities" (Rottmann, Barry, Paquet 1972, Introduction, no pagination). By doing so, they have made their anguish America's, and they have warned us what grim possibilities lie in war.

"For poetry makes nothing happen," said Auden, but he also said in almost the same breath that "it survives." This poetry will survive. The undaunted commitment of men like Ehrhart, Weigl, and Komunyakaa to the act of remembering and testifying to that remembrance, may rewrite the myths, and as more veterans like those studied here move into the classroom with their experiences, poetry may just make "something happen."

Odysseas Elytis once wrote that "when the nightingale isn't heard, the Molotov cocktail is" (Elytis 1988, 3). Substitute "fragmentation grenade" for "Molotov cocktail"
and, as the grunts (infantrymen) used to say in Vietnam, "There it is." There is the truth of our history as opposed to the fiction of our myth, a myth that is a weird conflation of history, idealism, and wishful thinking. The violent nature of this country is evident from its tempestuous founding, through its genocidal execution of Manifest Destiny, through its participation in two world wars, Korea, and Vietnam, and up to its curious and tragic willingness today to sacrifice its sons and daughters in the world's brawls, great or small, such as Somalia. With all of it shrouded in the nation's perception of itself as Christian and peace-loving, it is questionable whether America has ever heard the sound of the nightingale. And this is exactly what veteran-poets are saying through their poetry of witness: America has been listening to and believing in the wrong myths, and the reality of our actions belies those myths.

One of the major myths challenged by these poets is the long-held belief that America fights fair even though others don't; only the enemy commits atrocities or war crimes. The poetry studied here is in strong opposition to that myth, beginning with "A Bummer" by WHAM's Michael Casey and ending with Komunyakaa's "Fragging," or, even further, if one considers our pullout an atrocity, to Komunyakaa's "Toys in a Field" or

1 "There it is" became the major cliché of the war. It was a catchall referent for the myriad events that occurred in Vietnam and might indicate one's insight into the why of those events. Or it might indicate one's complete lack of understanding why something happened, a realization that war was just that way, that mysterious forces were at work here and thinking about it too much could make you dien cai dau, crazy. It was also the signifier of irony, an understanding that "shit happens," and sometimes there isn't any logic to the happening. It was what two GIs would say to each other as the smoke of battle cleared, and the GI who had been fighting alongside them lay dead at their feet. It is what they would say to each other when a mortar round exploded and only one man would be killed, maybe because his flak vest hadn't been zipped shut. "There it is." It says it all; no need to say more. It was also a sort of buffer, a euphemism, between them and the big "it," death. It's what the grunts would say to each other when a man with only a few days left on his tour would get killed in a random rocket attack. It was an acknowledgment that as soldiers they understood certain knowledge implicitly, a form of communal understanding and sharing. "There it is," one would say, and the rest would nod their heads in agreement. There it is: the Nam.
"Boat People." Their poetry is a dark re-visioning of America at war and a grim portrayal of the execrable actions of many of its sons.

Their poetry takes many forms: it is long or short, end-stopped or enjambed, prosaic, strident, impassioned, ironic, or full of guilt and grief. It is written in the language of the common man, laced with obscenities or black humor, and it is written in figurative language, highly imagistic, and alive with metaphor. Finally, however, it comes down to not how these men write, but what they write. Their poetry is the outcome of an inability, or refusal, to forget "the beautiful war" and the terrible events that occurred there.

Carolyn Forché writes: "The resistance to terror is what makes the world habitable: the protest against violence will not be forgotten and this insistent memory renders life possible in communal situations" (Forché 1993, 16). These poets "protest against violence," and they will not let us forget what it did to them, nor they will let us forget what they did to others, during that madness. "There is nothing one man will not do to another," Forché insists in her poem "The Visitor" (Forché 1981, 15), and these men, through their "songs of napalm," are witnesses to the truth of her claim.

Since Grenada, Panama, and the Gulf War, the American people are reappropriating the traditional myths (if they ever really lost them), and America's leaders perceive the nation's role as that of world policeman. We need these Vietnam veteran-poets of witness to speak the truth, to help correct and rewrite the myths, and, most important, to help keep our children alive. It is ourselves or nothing.
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