

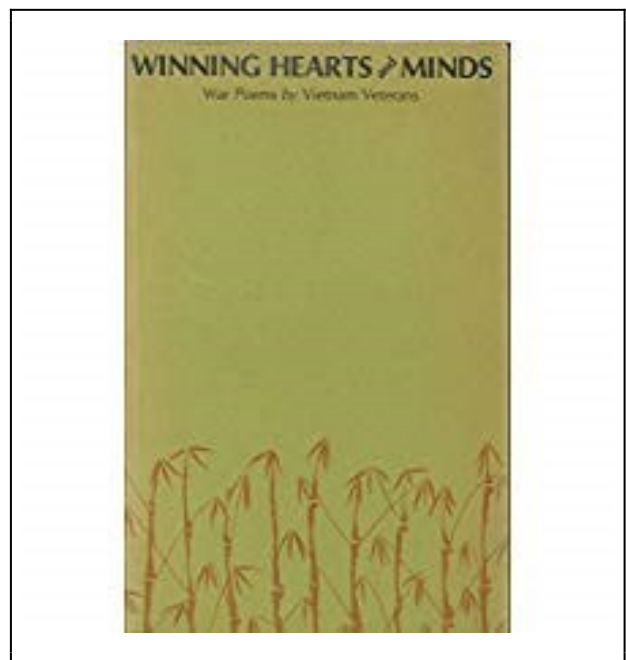
Lifting The Darkness: American and Vietnamese War Poets

Lorrie Goldensohn

Among the two million and more young men who went to Vietnam as soldiers, those dozens who came home to write about the Vietnam War evolved a poetry which deserves to be better known—allied to, but distinctively different from other anti-war poetry of the time. This piece considers the fact that American soldier poetry was not merely dedicated to battle and battlefield fraternity, but was emblematic of a frequently ambivalent engagement with the enemy and with the Vietnamese civilian population. Because the poems are their own best witness, I quote freely from combat veterans Doug Anderson, W.D. Ehrhart, Yusef Komunyakaa, Bruce Weigl, and others, choosing to look more at those with recognizable literary merit and at those for whom the flow of poetry did not dry up after one or two books. I also include the category-defying poetry of John Balaban—a conscientious objector who went straight to the heart of conflict for a term of engagement equal in exposure and intensity to that of the other poets I discuss. I will be looking at Vietnam War poetry both before and after 2003, narrowing my focus to a small group of poets whose war experience, full of guilt and regret, led them to a post-war body of work expressing an extraordinary subsequent interest in the country of their former enemy, and in its art, culture, and people. This move was new, and not duplicated by other generations of war poets.

The war poetry of Vietnam veterans generally favors vernacular, a frequent use of acronym, and short, stabbing cadence in place of traditional English meters. Vietnam War poetry is usually blunt and prosaic—its language indebted to popular culture, cinematic

montage, and a modernist wrenching of time and space. It is a less cagey verbal instrument than that wielded by forebears in the genre, but one no less eloquent, often no less lyrical, and certainly no less impassioned. Its largely first-person perspective sits easily within the candidly permissive world of autobiographical reference, from which issues a great directness and urgency of feeling. Nor is this war poetry, in its irony and skepticism, and in the lengthening retrospect which time affords us, any less rewarding than writing from other wars in its aesthetic content. For many of these poets—not just those I cite—there was a raw and burning guilt over wartime personal and group misconduct that represents a broadening of subject and an ethical leap.



A significant gathering of poems appeared in 1972, collected by members of the protest group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War. This passage from the introduction to the anthology,

Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans, was signed off on by Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil Pacquet: “Previous war poets have traditionally placed the blame for the horrors of war directly on others. 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. This recognition came quickly to some and haltingly to others, but it always came with pain and the conviction that there is no return to innocence.”

From the outset, the compelling poems by combat veterans of this war were against its glorification, and in profound rejection of claims to ennobling, mythic, or heroic properties. When Alexander of Macedon went out to wage his campaign of world conquest, he nightly tucked a dagger under his pillow, and waking or sleeping, also carried a headful of passages from Homer’s *Iliad*. This was neither the model nor the legacy of the Vietnam War for the soldier poets who fought it: their war caught them wrong-footed, ethically, militarily, historically and geo-politically.



David Connolly

A poem by combat veteran David Connolly, published in *Lost in America* (1994), focused on the Irish revolutionary history of his

antecedents--showing how his generation found themselves as soldiers on the wrong side of wars of national liberation. It is his sense, shared by many veteran poets, that American insertion into the Vietnam War was a catastrophic mistake, our mission of aid hopelessly flawed. In these lines from “To the Irish Americans Who Fought the Last War,” Connolly writes:

In the calmness of prisoners shot
for spite,

the brave James Connolly.

In the hit and run of those we
fought,

the “Flying Columns” of the IRA.

In Tet, so unmistakably,

that fateful Easter day,

In the leaflets found in farmer’s
huts,

the Proclamation of Pearse.

In all the senseless acts of racist
hate,

I felt the growing fears.

In the murder of unarmed peasants

with our modern technology,

we became the hated Black and
Tan,

and we shamed our ancestry.

The feeling of being shamed—of war as the source of shame—becomes a signature element of Vietnam veterans’ poetry.

Historian Christian Appy, in *Working Class War* (1993), shows that 2.5 million soldiers, out of the 27 million young men who were eligible, volunteered or were drafted to go to Vietnam. They were, on average, nineteen-year-old teenagers, historically our youngest army; while most were high school graduates, they also comprised our least educated military force. By contrast, the twelve million soldiers who went to World War II averaged twenty-six years of age. Until 1972, many of their counterparts in Vietnam were too young to vote. Whether Vietnam War recruits came from small towns, mid-sized cities, or urban areas, or were black or white, the dominant factor describing their composition was social and economic class: they were the children of “waitresses, factory workers, truck drivers, secretaries, firefighters, carpenters, custodians, police officers, salespeople, clerks, mechanics, miners and farmworkers.” In another significant difference, Vietnam wartime service represented a far smaller share of the national experience than that of their elders of the previous generation. In World War II, most Americans knew personally or were related to someone in uniform. This was not the case for Vietnam.

Draft deferment for college students allowed most middle and upper class youngsters to opt out of military service. Those from lower-income families who could only afford college enrollment on a part-time basis were vulnerable to draft requirements that refused deferment for those who were not full-time students in good standing. A certain number of gifted hell-raisers came from families who

neither prized nor expected college for their children. These kids may have failed to keep up their college grades because they preferred fields, bars, and pick-up trucks to classrooms and desks. Later, when the war and the military had shifted a toxic masculinity, many a maverick intelligence found college amenable. By the 1960s and 70s, even the officer class in the U.S. Army came from working class backgrounds. Rick Atkinson in *The Long Gray Line* observes: “Before World War I, the academy had drawn nearly a third of its corps from the families of doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. But by the mid-1950s, sons of professionals made up only 10 percent of the cadets, and links to the upper class had been almost severed. West Point increasingly attracted military brats and sons of the working class.” Ignorance of other cultures, of course, and chauvinistic patriotism, were not limited to the working class: many commentators have shown how narrow Cold War politics generally governed American military thinking.

Among the Vietnam War poets whose work I looked at closely (a surprising number of whom were medics), many went on to acquire college and post-graduate degrees. Quite a few poets, some expressing interest in poetry since high school, in postwar life chose training in Creative Writing programs. Yusef Komunyakaa, however, having already received a Bronze Star for armed services publications, first wrote while serving as an Information Specialist in the U.S. Army. Poets Komunyakaa, W.D. Ehrhart, David Huddle, Doug Anderson, Bruce Weigl, and Kevin Bowen, among others, achieved distinguished careers as teachers and writers, with wide publication, including Vietnam-themed literature, that would extend over decades. Bruce Weigl comments: “The paradox of my life as a writer is that the war ruined my life and in return gave me my voice. Later, citing a poet mentor, Weigl wrote: “Charlie Simic told me a long time ago that the world had given me a subject, and that I could not turn my back on that subject.”



W.D. Ehrhart

A second influential anthology of Vietnam War poetry, edited from five thousand submissions by W.D. Ehrhart, was aptly called *Carrying the Darkness*. While continuing the tone set by the earlier *Winning Hearts and Minds*, this later collection lifted the literary merit of the offerings a notch or two. In "Guerrilla War," W.D. Ehrhart, the rebel son of a minister who had enlisted in the Marines in 1966, explains about the war into which he plunged as an eighteen year-old:

It's practically impossible
to tell civilians
from the Viet Cong

Nobody wears uniforms.
They all talk
the same language
(and you couldn't understand them
even if they didn't).

They tape grenades
under 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 Viet Cong.

After awhile,
you quit trying.





Top left: John Balaban, Bruce Weigl and W.D. Ehrhart

Bottom: Gen. Tran Kinh Chi

In 1985, on a trip he and other war veterans had worked hard to bring about for four years prior to departure, Ehrhart writes in *Going Back: An Ex-Marine Returns to Vietnam*: “I never thought I would ever see Vietnam again. Never in my wildest nightmares would I ever imagine that I would want to.” Nevertheless, in company with poets Bruce Weigl and John Balaban, Ehrhart is greeted in Hanoi by General Tran Kinh Chi, who hosts the three men as guests of the Commission for the Investigation of War Crimes.



John Balaban (right) and Bill Ehrhart visiting hospital

Reflecting bitterly on what he had encountered as a “newbie” in 1966-7, Ehrhart writes:

“I had been told that many Vietnamese civilians had been relocated to government-controlled safe hamlets to protect them from the Viet Cong. What I found was the wholesale forced removal of thousands of people from their ancestral homelands to poverty-stricken, misery-laden shantytowns where men had no work and women rooted through American garbage in search of food for their children.

I had been told that the Viet Cong managed to perpetuate their guerilla war only through violence and coercion inflicted upon the Vietnamese people. What I witnessed and participated in was the random destruction of livestock, civilian homes and sometimes whole hamlets, the detention and often brutal interrogation of civilians, and the routine killing of unarmed men,

women and children by the American military and its Saigon ally. The Viet Cong did not need to force people to support them or join their ranks; we were their best recruiters.

I had been told that the people of Vietnam wanted and needed our help, but I found that most people in Vietnam hated us...And ...wanted little else than for us to stop killing them and go away."

In the subsequent two-and-a-half weeks of this 1985 visit, W.D. Ehrhart, Bruce Weigl, and John Balaban were repeatedly brought face to face with the damages of U.S. Indochina policy, and yet were greeted with an almost inexplicable geniality, curiosity, and kindness by the victors of this war, in the struggling, still-poor country which continued to haunt them. His hosts habitually drew a distinction between what they viewed as the oppressive U.S. government, and "the progressive American people."

Ehrhart renders an afternoon of his visit in "Sleeping with General Chi," from which I quote:

The old general wants me to sleep.

He pats the bed and points to my shoes.

His voice tells me this is a man
accustomed to being obeyed.

But after a long, dusty ride to Tay Ninh, and hours of flat-voiced speeches—"so many wounded, so

many homeless,/ so many dead—even the general/ falling asleep in his chair"—Ehrhart wants to walk to the river, but is stopped by a young guard, holding his rifle at port arms.

So I turned away and found

the general under a fan in tropical heat...

I've never slept with a general before.

Men don't sleep with their officers

and don't take naps together in bed

in the afternoon in my country.

But this is not my country.

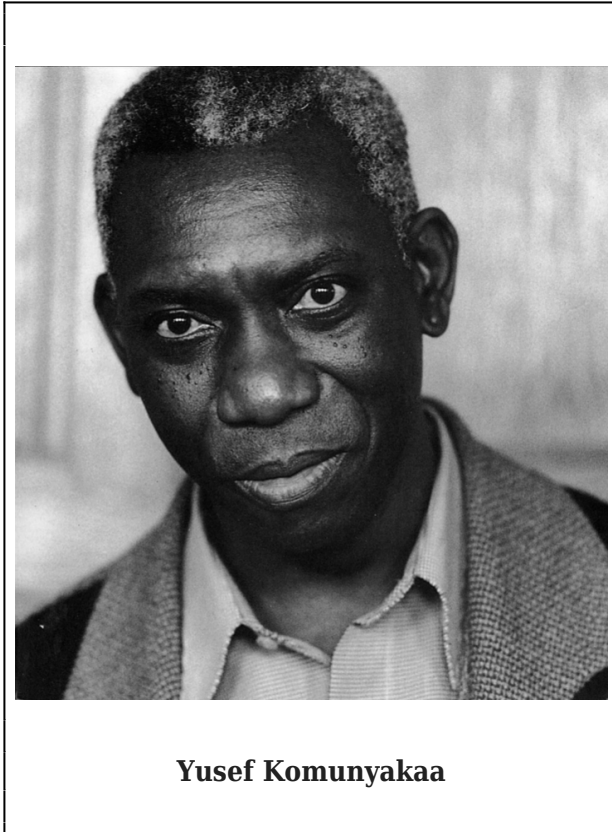
The general pats my arm and dozes off,

serene as any aging man content

to have his grandchild sleeping near.

If during this war, American soldiers could not distinguish friend from foe, then peasant families could not be differentiated by their manners or intentions either, and soldiers frequently killed or wounded in ambush by unseen or vanishing figures in black pajamas, took to suspecting and blaming the Vietnamese they did see, even those whose services they depended upon. Nor did they honor the Geneva Convention protocols of protecting noncombatant women, children, or the elderly. To what degree were they noncombatant? Which bar girls had double allegiances? What peasant family was storing food or weapons for the Viet Cong? Which street vendor was giving away intelligence? Or, as Doug Anderson

wondered in his memoir, *Keep Your Head Down*, was the beguiling, and in fancy, adoptable ten year-old, who normally emptied the garbage inside your battalion CP, also the one dropping an M26 grenade in the shitter?



Yusef Komunyakaa

The African-American poet Yusef Komunyakaa describes the potential trap of a sexual encounter. In "Night Muse & Mortar Round," a soldier's delayed response to a roadside invitation saves his life:

She shows up in every war....
 She's always near a bridge.
 This time the Perfume River.
 You trace the curve in the road
 & there she is

Trying to flag down your jeep,
 but you're a quarter-mile away
 when you slam on the brakes.

Sgt. Jackson says, "What the hell
 you think you're doing, Jim?"

...When you finally drive back

she's gone, just a feeling

left in the night air.

Then you hear the blast

rock the trees & stars

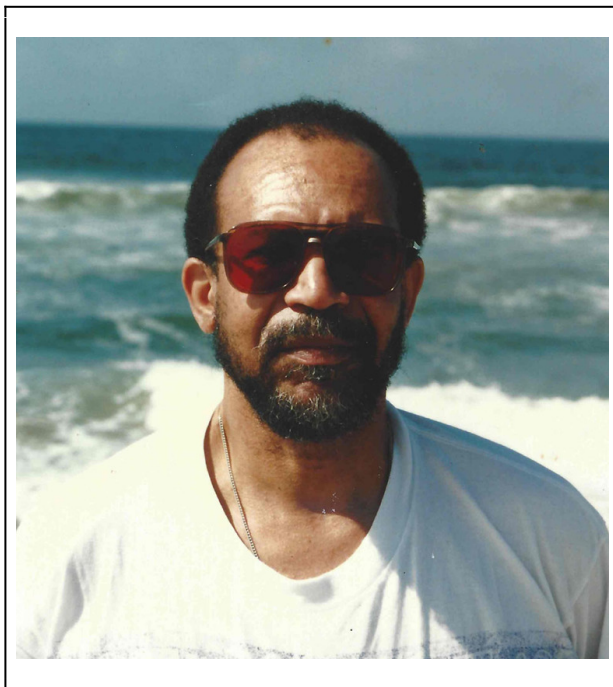
where you would've been that
 moment.

Komunyakaa's tour of duty in Vietnam was from 1969 to 1970. As a black soldier you would remember the legend, widely plastered across black protest marchers' placards, of Cassius Clay refusing the draft, purportedly growling, "No Vietcong ever called me nigger." You would also remember Martin Luther King, in his 1967 Riverside Church address saying: "We have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize they would never live on the same block in Detroit." And in your ears you would hear Hanoi Hannah's siren call, her nightly broadcast testing your divided loyalties, as in Komunyakaa's poem, "Hanoi Hannah":

"You know you're dead men,
 Don't you? You're dead

as King today in Memphis.
 Boys, you're surrounded by
 General Tran Do's division."
 Her knife-edge song cuts
 deep as a sniper's bullet.
 "Soul Brothers, what you dying
 for?"

In his joint affirmation of civil rights and anti-war activism, Martin Luther King wrote in the *New York Times* on 26th February 1967: "We are willing to make the Negro 100 percent of a citizen in warfare, but reduce him to 50 percent of a citizen on American soil." While the casualties of black soldiers were disproportionately high in the late 60s, they began levelling off. Christian Appy observes (20), "In fact, had the civil rights movement not brought attention to racial disproportions in Vietnam casualties, those disproportions would undoubtedly have continued."



Horace Coleman

By the time Horace Coleman wrote his poems about his Vietnam service in 1967-8, there was a discernible shift in white/black soldier relations in combat. Coleman's poems, however, do not reflect what historians like Charles Moskos registered as a more proportional distribution of risk and less elevated figures for black casualties. The thinking continues to run that black soldiers blocked by endemic racism in American society nevertheless continued to feel greater incentive for enrolling and enlisting in the military, which did increasingly present opportunity for black education and career advancement. As Moskos in *American Enlisted Man* put it: "The Negro has found in his nation's most totalitarian society—the military—the greatest degree of functional democracy that this nation has granted black people"; he also notes, "Black soldiers volunteered for hazardous duty, and re-enlisted at higher rates."

In "OK Corral East, Brothers in the Nam," a poem whose language is echoed by the title of Ehrhart's *Carrying the Darkness*, Coleman describes a bar for black soldiers, where "the grunts in the corner raise undisturbed hell/ the timid white MP has his freckles pale...he sees nothing his color here/ and he fingers his army rosary": the poem continues, "He can't cringe anyone here and our/ Gazes like brown punji stakes impale him[.]" The poem ends:

We have all killed something
 recently

We know who owns the night

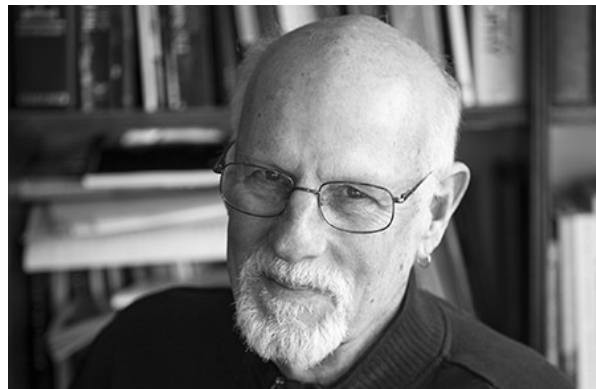
And carry darkness with us

Yusef Komunyakaa was fiercely aware of the uneasy parities in this racial reality. He reported the dilemma of black soldiers and their relations with Vietnamese prostitutes on Tu Do Street, a location well known to American G.I.s looking for sexual service. From

“Tu Do Street”:

Back in the bush at Dak To
 & Khe Sanh, we fought
 the brothers of these women
 we now run to hold in our arms.
 There’s more than a nation
 inside us, as black & white
 soldiers touch the same lovers
 minutes apart, tasting
 each other’s breath,
 without knowing these rooms
 run into each other like tunnels
 leading to the underworld.

All relations with women were compromised in a web of complex needs often leading to violent consequence.



Doug Anderson

Doug Anderson recalls a fraught encounter in

“Bamboo Bridge”:

We cross the bridge, quietly.
 The bathing girl does not see us
 till we’ve stopped and gaped like
 fools.
 There are no catcalls, whoops,
 none of the things that soldiers do;
 the most stupid of us is silent, rapt.
 She might be fourteen or twenty,
 sunk thigh-deep in green water,
 her woman’s pelt a glistening
 corkscrew,
 a wonder, a wonder she is; I forgot.
 For a moment we all held the same
 thought,
 that there is life in life and war is
 shit.
 For a song we’d all go to the
 mountains...
 find a girl like this, who cares
 her teeth are stained with betel
 nut,
 her hands as hard as feet.
 If I can live another month it’s
 over,
 And so we think a single thought...
 And then she turns and sees us
 there,
 sinks in the water, eyes full of

hate;
the trance broken.

When farmers were displaced from their anciently-held farmsteads, and destitute families were tumbled by American occupation into the cities, some sold their daughters into sexual bondage, and some wives and daughters, families broken by wartime death and injury, sold themselves. And again, American soldiers were left to digest the dazing confusions. After devastating combat experience, Doug Anderson, with bleak tenderness, records such an encounter, in "Purification":

In Taiwan, a child washes me in a tub

as if I were hers.

At fifteen she has tried to conceal her age with make-up, says her name is *Cher*.

Across the room, her dresser has become an altar.

Looming largest, photos of her three children, one black,

one with green eyes, one she still nurses,

then a row of red votive candles, and in front,

a Buddha, a Christ, a Mary.

She holds my face to her breasts, rocks me.

There is blood still under my

fingernails
from the last man who died in my arms.

I press her nipple to my lips,
feel a warm stream of sweetness.

I want to be this child's child.

I will sleep for the first time in days.

In *Keep Your Head Down*, Anderson blends other feelings into his leave in Taipei with "Cher," and the other adolescent who was his friend's companion: "I will think of them once a day for the rest of my life. Something about them changed me, permanently. Something about the poverty of people trying to make out any way they can at the edges of a war."

Interactions with children wounded mentally and physically are prominent in American lyrics. The 1972 anthology, *Winning Hearts and Minds*, was dedicated "To the Children of Indochina." By 1988, in "Bui Doi, Dust of life," Yusef Komunyakaa presents the plight of children fathered by American soldiers and born to Vietnamese women (the Vietnamese phrase, *bui doi* means *dust of life*):

Curly-headed & dark-skinned,

you couldn't escape
eyes taking you apart.

Come here, son, let's see
if they castrated you.

Those nights I held your mother
against me like a half-broken

shield. The wind's refrain
 etched my smile into your face—
 ...You were born disappearing...
 Son, you were born with dust
 on your eyelids, but you bloomed
 up
 in a trench where stones were
 stacked to hold you down.
 With only your mother's name,
 you've inherited the inchworm's
 foot of earth. *Bui doi.*
 I blow the dust off my hands
 but it flies back in my face.

The violation and wounding of children continues as a dominant thread throughout the literature of this war. In his 1985 return to Vietnam, W.D. Ehrhart is struck by the flagrant unhappiness of Amerasian street children. In *Going Back*, he is completely stymied when a child who has dogged him for days is unable to provide the least fragment of a paper trail to find a father, missing "in Texas." He can only say to the gaggle of children following him, "I'll miss you," and then, "Take care of each other."

In 1989, Balaban persuaded Penn State University to help finance a trip to trace the fate of several badly-wounded children he had helped to receive medical aid in the U.S, during his year of work for COR. While the outcome for many children has resulted in decent and rewarding lives, of the three he traced in 1989, one had drowned in a boating accident, one, naturally resilient, was thriving but lived in hardship, and one was in poor health. When John Balaban volunteered to go to Vietnam in

1967, he thought to bring his intense anti-war convictions to the site where they mattered most. Balaban left behind a safe identity as a Harvard postgraduate student of linguistics and comparative literature to speed towards the war his idealism rejected. His remarkable Vietnam War memoir, published originally in 1991, *Remembering Heaven's Face*, details how his first two years were spent in alternative service. The first, as a teacher of linguistics, until the war exploded at the doors of his university in Can Tho, putting an end to teaching. The second year in his work for the Committee of Responsibility to Save War-injured Children, he collected, cared for, and ferried severely-wounded children from Vietnam to U.S. hospitals and back.



John Balaban with child survivor of village massacre, whose flight to the US he is overseeing

Does another difference lie in the Vietnamese culture of *We*, versus the American culture of *I*, which played out in contrasting ideals of patriotic sacrifice? A general American tactic, bitterly remembered by survivors, was to use our own ground forces as bait to lure Vietnamese soldiers into engagement, where they could be pounded by superior American air and artillery. Yet Doug Anderson, sitting in Hue in 2009, listens to Lam Thi My Da, poet and former combat engineer, sing her sweet and mournful elegy, "Bomb Crater Sky." Anderson writes: "She stands and makes her

body small, like a girl's, and sings in a small voice." Anderson explains that her poem remembers "the young girls in the mountain villages who were ordered to run out into the fields at night with flashlights to attract the bombers, so that infantry and supplies could move down the mountain paths. They died like flies." Accepting this use of her as a pawn, Lam Thi My Da sings these lines:



As I look in the bomb crater where
you died

The rain water became a patch of
sky

Our country is kind

Water from the sky washes pain
away."

One of Bruce Weigl's poems, "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," displaces the myth of American GIs kindly dispensing candy with a

cameo of soldiers in Vietnam hurling cans of C-rations from a speeding truck, at children racing after them: one bloodied child triumphantly holds up the prize she catches. But in a second return to Vietnam as a civilian, Weigl comes to retrieve an 8-year-old girl, to take her home as family. In "The Circle of Hanh," the memoir Weigl published in 2000, which fuses autobiography with his two trips back to Vietnam in 1985 and in 1993, he writes, with confessional urgency: "I'd gone back to Vietnam that first time with myself at the center of my thinking...As I met people who had been my invisible enemy sixteen years before, that self began to lose its importance. One result would be my decision to return to Vietnam to try to give back something of what I had helped to take away." And later: "The old proud songs were gone now: ...the songs of burning shit and pulling guard, the songs of the surrounding blues." In 1996, he writes, "I'm...coming to get my daughter, I'm coming to make the circle whole again."

There is a sub-threading of daughters throughout this poetry. It tracks through Horace Coleman's backward look at his Vietnamese daughter, "A Black Soldier Remembers—"I have nothing to give her/ but the sad smile she already has" and follows through to the equal parts of love and heavy-weight history, running from John Balaban's own grim childhood particulars to the out-flung world, with which he loads his daughter in the title poem of *Words for My Daughter*. It is worth noting that while so many of the poems in W.D. Ehrhart's nine collections of poetry focus on war, politics, and male bonding, quite a large number approach love and marriage with intimate candor and gratitude--and many also brim with tenderness for a daughter.

Children remain in the weave in poems written from all sides. From *Writing Between the Lines: An Anthology of War and its Social Consequences*, edited in 1997 by Kevin Bowen and Bruce Weigl, there is a poem by the

Vietnamese poet Van Le, translated by Nguyen Ba Chung and Bruce Weigl, titled “Hearing the Argument of the Little Prisoners”; its context is the practice of Saigon regimes of confining political prisoners with their families. I quote in full:

The enemy opened the cell doors a few minutes each day.

The small prisoners—three and five years old—crawled out into the sun.

On the perimeter a calf chewed on grass.

The small prisoners told each other it was an elephant.

Hearing this the guards broke into laughter.

Then tears fell down their cheeks.

Coming even closer to guilt and shame for his nation’s infliction of injury on children, and the American medic’s limited ability to help, is Brian Alec Floyd’s dramatic monologue, “Sergeant Brandon Just, U.S.M.C,” which appears in *Carrying the Darkness*. In this poem, Sung is the lone survivor of a village onto which Sergeant Just had mistakenly called down rockets and napalm, obliterating it. In penitence, the sergeant visits the injured child every day: “Sung, knowing it was him,/ would turn toward the sound of his feet, her own, seared beyond being feet...And as he would come in,/ Sung would hobble up to him/ in her therapeutic cart...

Sung was child-happy
that he came and cared,

and when he would start to leave,
she would agonize her words

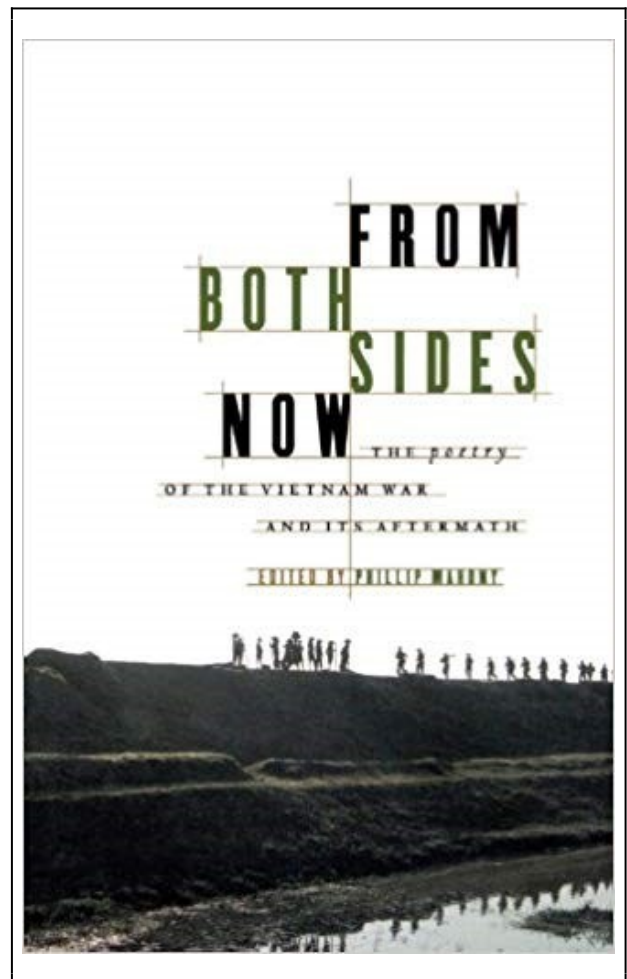
out of the hollow that was her mouth.

Her tongue, bitten in two while she had burned,

strafing his ears,

saying without mercy,

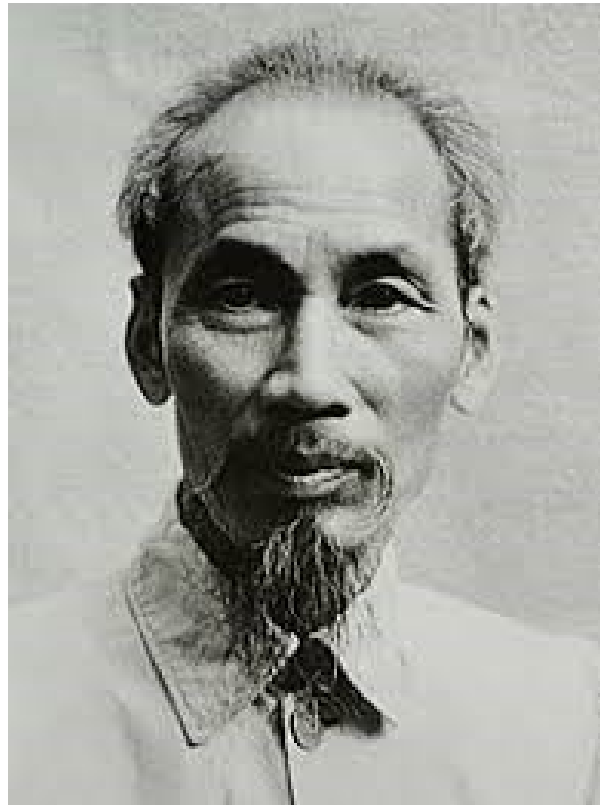
I love you.



Daily visits cannot assuage or protect survivors of these acts. Nor protect the children displaced by war, even in the shelter of their American homes. As adults, they, too, began to

write poems. In 1998, Phillip Mahony, a New York City detective, edited an anthology entitled *From Both Sides Now: The Poetry of the Vietnam War and its Aftermath*. Mahony tried to bring in all the voices. Tran Trong Dai asks why his mother left behind neither note nor photo to tell him not only who she was, but who he was. Christian Nguyen Langworthy remembers the cicadas chirring during nights when he and the children with him slept while their mothers and the soldiers went “out.” Tran Thi Nga says that in the hectic days before flight “We all wanted to bring our mothers”—but she brought instead sandalwood soap from Hong Kong and 12 of her best ao dais (the distinctive silk dresses for which Vietnamese women are known), and never saw her mother again.

Mahony also added Vietnamese soldiers, and included translations of poems by Ho Chi Minh. Besides exposing how much of the violence and pain of Vietnamese history had been engendered by fraternal conflict, of Vietnamese against Vietnamese, one of Ho’s poems also explains why the few minutes to which the little prisoners were exposed in my previous example were so precious to adults as well.



Ho Chi Minh

In “Tung Chung Prison,” Ho writes, from personal experience:

Tung Chung Prison, Ping Ma
Prison, the same thing,

Rice thin in tiny bowls, the
stomach collapsed.

But at least there’s water and light

And twice a day they open the bars
and let the air in.

Nor can the mind, swept by torrents of grief for lost freedoms and lost comrades, shield itself from the recurring memory of bloody acts. As soldiers were trapped in its complexities, whether or not they believed in the goals of the

war, in the field, they believed in survival and revenge. The rage for destruction blinding Doug Anderson's men in "Infantry Assault" was not unfamiliar to Greeks and Trojans, nor to the Norsemen who coined the term *berserker*. Here are the tense explosions of that poem, with minor cuts:

The way he made that corpse
dance

by emptying one magazine after
another into it

and the way the corpse's face
began to peel off

like a mask because the skull had
been shattered, brains

spilled out, but he couldn't stop
killing that corpse....and

the way they dragged that guy out
of the stream,

cut him to pieces, the stream
running red

with all the bodies in it, and the
way the captain

didn't try to stop them, his silence
saying *No Prisoners* and

the way when all the Cong were
dead, lined up in rows,

thirty-nine in all, our boys went to
work on all the pigs

and chickens in the village until

there was no place that was not

red, and

finally, how the thatch was lit, the
village burned

and how afterwards we were quiet
riding back

on the tracks, watching the
ancestral serpent rise

over the village in black coils, and

how our bones knew what we'd
done.

These poems by Anderson were written quickly: in them, he judges himself with absolute fearlessness, and yet with a great deal of non-self-exculpating compassion. About the long evolution of his work, Anderson writes: "The poems I wrote then seemed to come from just-opened veins." In a collection of poems titled *Horse Medicine*, published in 2015, he returns to Vietnam, and writes "My Enemy," placing the poem in Quang Nam Province, 1967. Here is the full text:

We imagined him as wily, reptilian,

squatting in a hole alive with
snakes,

or underwater breathing through a
reed,

his gelding knife glimmering in the
green,

leering with the cruelty he'd inflict
on us

if he overran our lines. But now,

see this prisoner two-thirds our

height,
 grey-faced, legs caked with mud,
 ribs showing, his rotten teeth
 outsize in his shrunk skull. How he
 stands there in the rain, dazed,
 perhaps
 looking past the torture to his
 death
 and maybe there, he'll find some
 sense to this.

But in 2015 Doug Anderson ends a poem about
 the indiscriminate post-battle burial of ARVN,
 NVA, and civilians called "The Mass Graves at
 Hue" with these two lines: "Would that our
 dead have been buried with them and our
 brotherhood be known." In another short poem
 from this late volume simply called, "Letting
 Go," and dedicated to the Vietnamese writer
 Bao Ninh, he writes:



Bao Ninh

I asked him how he could not hate
us.

We killed his children and left his
country

a sump of chemicals and upturned
graves.

Ten years in the jungle, hammered
by

two-thousand-pound bombs. His
job,

to gather his comrades' body parts

into something like a whole to bury
them.

He said, *We had the Chinese*

for a thousand years, and then the

*French,
the Japanese. You are merely the
most recent.*

He lit a cigarette and looked out
into the smoky bar.

Finally, and I believed him, he said,

*We have nothing left to hate you
with.*

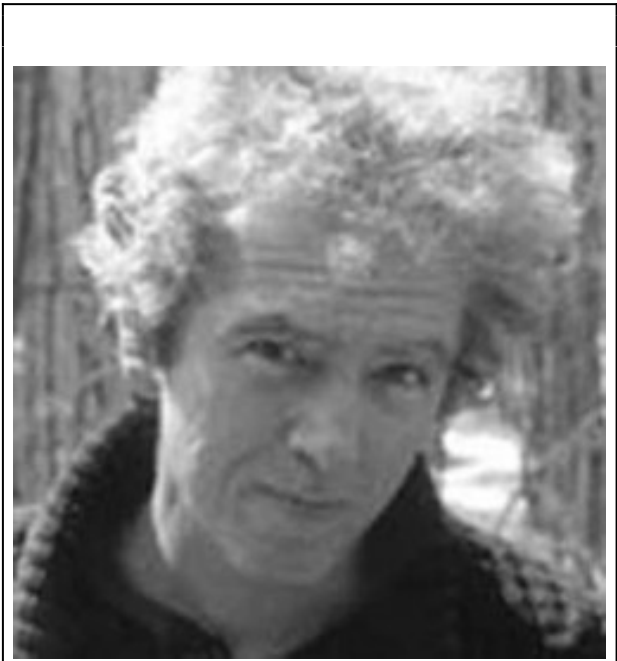
The war poems and the painful wondering did not stop after repeated meetings between American and Vietnamese soldiers in Vietnam. In 1993, after a second return to Vietnam, Ehrhart opens “Finding My Old Battalion Command Post” in this low key:

...after the years
we’ve dreamed if only we could
touch
the wound again, we could be
whole,
no small wonder to discover
only a lethal past between us,
what we thought a brotherhood
only a mutual recollection of fear.

Yet the poem concludes: “look, I’ve found a village where I once/ thought nothing green would grow.”

The “nothing” that W.D. Ehrhart feared seems genuinely deflected when he returns to Vietnam in 2011, and finds all about him an astonishing and bewildering prosperity. Yet the American veterans who returned—notably W.D. Ehrhart, Doug Anderson, Kevin Bowen, and Yusef Komunyakaa—all write of meeting their

Vietnamese counterparts with a heightened awareness of the historically blood-drenched, festering betrayals and quixotic loyalties existing within all parties. In the title poem of his 1994 collection, *Playing Basketball with the Viet Cong*, Kevin Bowen shoots hoops in his backyard with a former enemy, who, ten times in a row, sinks his shots:



Kevin Bowen

You stare at him
In his tee shirt, sandals and shorts.
Yes, he smiles. It’s a gift,
good for bringing gunships down
as he did in the Delta
and in other places where, he
whispers,
there may be other scores to settle.

If you lift up the words of these final lines, what

further menace lies beneath? Yusef Komunyakaa carries with him the guilt of facing people from home, with the loss of men between them, in “Cenotaph,” from *Thieves of Paradise*. Published in 1998, his tenth collection of poems still signals the lasting impact of the war. Here is the conclusion of “Cenotaph”:

I know his mother
 Tried to pull the flag to the floor
 & pry open the coffin. There’s no verb
 To undo the night he hit the booby trap,
 & I know shame would wear me like a mask
 Against a century of hot morning light
 If I didn’t slowdrag to Rockin’ Dopsie.”
 We might remember the surging joy in Siegfried Sassoon’s “Everyone Sang,” written in 1919:
 Everyone’s voice was suddenly lifted;
 And beauty came like the setting sun:
 My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
 Drifted away...O, but Everyone
 Was a bird; and the song was wordless;
 The singing will never be done.

Komunyakaa represents another moment, another sun, another sound. Much of his postwar work has been in collaboration with musicians and graphic artists as well as poets; much also reaches back to translations of other sources, primitive and mythic, like a poetic sequence on Ishi, the last member of his Native American tribe, and a dramatization of the epic of Gilgamesh. Postwar cultural fusion and cross-over also provides its grainy irony, as in “The Hanoi Market,” where a confounded Komunyakaa blinks at Marilyn Monroe silk-screened on a tee shirt, the skirt of her white dress billowing up from the grate. “Did we kill each other for this?” he asks; then moves on:

“I stop at a table of figurines. What was meant to tear off a leg or arm twenty years ago, now is a child’s toy I can’t stop touching.... A door left ajar by a wedge of sunlight. Below the T-shirt, at the end of two rows of wooden bins, a chicken is tied directly across from a caged snake. Bright skin—deadly bite. I move from the chicken to the snake, caught in their hypnotic plea.” (*TP*, 1998.)

But the return to Vietnam for many of these poets became a greening of communication, as so many American poets bent themselves to gathering and collecting the literary efforts, and in some cases, the literary remains of their opposite numbers in Vietnam. When Bruce Weigl, like W.D. Ehrhart, returns to Vietnam in the 1980s, as the guest of his former enemies, he meets his Vietnamese counterpart in the NVA, a poet named Pham Tien Duat, whose duties in the field included the task of reading and writing poems for his fellow soldiers as they traveled up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. To inspire them in their long struggle and to help them endure the decades-long toll of insurgent warfare, the constant specter of death far from home, and its enormous hardships, the North Vietnamese looked to poetry: what individual soldiers wrote themselves, and what was written for them, including the poems of leaders like Ho Chi

Minh, which were widely memorized and recited. In contrast, Weigl writes, the Air Cavalry Division “did not have a designated poet. We had Playboy and USO shows that featured starlets with bad voices, flashing cleavage and dancing in miniskirts.”



Pham Tien Duat

After the experience of return to Vietnam, Bruce Weigl, Kevin Bowen, and John Balaban were among many Americans who worked on translations of war poetry from both north and south Vietnam. One of the most poignant of subsequent publications was *Poems from Captured Documents*, a bilingual edition of Vietnamese and English representing a collaboration between Thanh T. Nguyen and Bruce Weigl. As the Introduction to this book explains, “the source for copies of the diaries where these poems were found, came into existence as a result of coordinated

intelligence-gathering by United States, Republic of Vietnam, and allied forces in the Vietnam War...between October 1966 and late 1972.” Microfilm copies of these poems are archived at the William Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences at UMass Boston <https://www.umb.edu/joinerinstitute>. This institute played a vital role in initiating and sustaining postwar contact between American and Vietnamese writers.

The “captured” poems, as John Balaban describes them, are contained in “standard-issue notebooks crammed with copies of letters home, with medical records, with commendations, and with technical instructions for things such as how to figure a mortar’s trajectory.” They are saturated with deep love and longing for home country, for the familiar mountains, cascades, rivers, villages, and the sweethearts and family left behind. In the plaintive, simple English in which “My Birthplace, Namh Binh” is transmitted to us, Van Ky describes “rose pink sunlight.” At home, “During three harvests/ The color of rice covers the village and hamlet. / Bamboo trees make the village green. / At the foot of the mountain, / Almond trees overshadow the banyans. / Red tiles brighten many houses.” Elsewhere, wartime detail sparks into being: trucks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail driven without windscreens; Xuan Moi writing his poem before battle, “Third watch, cock-crow, everyone asleep.” Many poems are written to and for fellow soldiers, recording their loss. Translated by John Balaban from the notebook of Le Ngoc Hiep, who died in 1970, are these lines of apprehension for a friend whose fate is unknown to the writer: “I always think of you, Bui Huru Phai./Your life runs out like a red silk banner.” And then this cry, in closing:

How can one find one’s way to the future?

I think of you and weep these long

nights.

I think of us chatting in an
immense dusk,

listening to poems sung in the
evening,

the two of us drinking tea together.

The contrast between these poems by many North Vietnamese authors--some named, some unknown, some probably dead or imprisoned--and those written by American combatants is sometimes painful. Comparing the love poems of these captured documents, their artless-seeming declarations, with the compromised longing and desire that Doug Anderson describes in "Bamboo Bridge" and "Purification," for instance, one is at a loss to describe the experience of reading. "Meeting," is written by an unknown soldier, dated 20 April 1966, and details another bridge meeting: "Last night, walking behind my unit under golden moonlight,/ My rifle slung on my shoulder,/ I met a peasant girl in Van/ Carrying two buckets of rice for the soldiers./ She crossed the bridge " With such innocence this soldier concludes:

We met by chance

So I asked myself if such a love

Could ever be,

Shyly, she looked up at me.

Her dimpled cheeks made me love
her, secretly.

Perhaps we would meet again.

Even as the poems express despair—at New Year, Tuong Hac Long writes, "At thirty-four I feel lost and hopeless." Other poems affirm

longing for home village and birthplace, while others acknowledge war weariness. Yet on 23 February 1967, an unknown soldier writes a friend:

We shiver with fits of malaria

That come and go

Yet we move into our future.

We walk a thousand miles

And still the promised life stays in
our eyes.

The poems use traditional Vietnamese rhyme and meter with all of their untranslatable compact music. Faith in the purpose of their war comes through everywhere: "I cannot return/ While the enemy is in Vietnam./ I must fight until our country is unified." In "Spring Year of the Goat, 1967," Hac Long affirms, "Someday we will grow stronger than our parents./ We will hold the round earth in our hands." With less enthusiasm, Ong Giang writes in "My Thoughts," after admitting "I'm sick and tired of this damned life" he continues, complaining of military and socialist regimentation:

Corrupt people look down on us
here.

They teach us meaningless lessons

On how to shit, how to sleep.

They spy on who eats what and
when.

They talk nonsense and wonder

Why those who eat so little shit so

big.

Here the unease and frustration of the present are a better match for the American war poems I've quoted. In "The Distance We Travel" W.D. Ehrhart is still trying to grasp the tangled experience of the Vietnamese he fought. The poem puts him in a scene of return to Hue, where he is a strange American stepping out at night "into the flickering light of candles and small/ fires and open stoves cooking evening meals, families and neighbors clustered together," who are watching him:

Discreetly their eyes follow the man,

bowls and chopsticks rising, pausing,

gracefully rising, so subtle a gesture

he wonders if he has imagined it.

The stranger wants "to gather the heart of this place/ into himself, to make it forgive him." His explanation of who he is "lies on his tongue /like a bird with a broken wing." Two girls near him begin to play badminton without a net, and eventually offer him a racket and shuttlecock. Like Kevin Bowen with his old enemy, Ehrhart, too, begins to play—laughing at his ineptitude:

From out of the shadows a stool appears,

a cool drink. The girls' mother gestures

for him to sit. Unsure of himself,

he takes from his wallet a photograph.

"My daughter," he says, "Li-la."

He touches his heart with his pen hand.

He writes the name in Vietnamese.

She touches the picture. The father appears...

The father is reticent. Finally the stranger

Touches the scars on his neck and says "VC."

He points to the opposite bank of the river,

"Over there," he says, "*Tet Mau Than.*"

The father lifts his shirt to reveal

a scar on his chest. "VC," he says, then

drops his shirt and lights a cigarette,

offers one to the stranger. Together

they smoke the quiet smoke of memory.

Seven years the father spent in a camp

for prisoners of war. The wife

lightly touches her husband's knee.

Lightly his hand goes to hers...

The father points to the gap-toothed bridge

The VC dropped in the river, long repaired.

The children are playing badminton again.

The shuttlecock lands in the stranger's lap.

"Li-la," the father softly says, touching

the stranger's heart with his open hand.

In his second year in Vietnam, when John Balaban's service with the Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Injured Children was over, he went back yet again for a third year, gathering and annotating the two-thousand year tradition of Vietnamese *ca dao*, or sung folk poems, in delta, river, island, and mountain country where the sounds of mortar fire and temple bells mixed in the background of his field recordings.

The people Balaban met in Vietnam, those who were trying to mitigate the conditions of war, as well as various dissidents and people on the scene from many nations, form an abundant subject in his poetry and prose. It was not only the year in which he worked on what some referred to as "the burned baby business" that profoundly influenced him: as for all the others immersed in this war, violent memories clung. Through a translation of a folk poem from Hue, "The Ship of Redemption," Balaban manages to derive some balm for the still raw wound of his own memory of Vietnam:

The bell of Linh Mu Pagoda tolls,

awakening our drowsy souls,

probing, reminding us of debts,

washing us clean of worldly dust.

A boat crosses to the Buddha Lands.

It is not a boat on which one can easily embark. Much closer to Balaban's postwar American awareness are his lines from "After Our War," signaling overwhelming ravage, mutilation, and deformity, both moral and physical. I give the full text:

After our war, the dismembered bits

--all those pierced eyes, ear slivers, jaw splinters,

gouged lips, cold tibias, skin flaps, and toes—

came squinting, wobbling, jabbering back.

The genitals, of course, were the most bizarre,

Inching along roads like glowworms and slugs.

The living wanted them back but good as new.

The dead, of course, had no use for them.

And the ghosts, the tens of thousands of abandoned souls

who had appeared like swamp fog in the city streets,

on the evening altars, and on the
doorsills of cratered homes,

also had no use for the scraps and
bits

because, in their opinion, they
looked good without them.

Since all things naturally return to
their source,

these snags and tatters arrived,
with immigrant uncertainty,

in the United States. It was almost
home.

So, now one can sometimes see a
friend or a famous man talking

with an extra pair of lips glued and
yammering on his cheek,

and this is why handshakes are
often unpleasant,

why it is better, sometimes, not to
look another in the eye,

why, at your daughter's breast
thickens a hard keloidal scar.

After the war, with such Cheshire
cats grinning in our trees,

will the ancient tales still tell new
truths?

Will the myriad world surrender
new metaphor?

After our war, how will love speak?

This pervasive sense of mutilation echoes in Vietnamese poems. From *Writing Between the Lines*, Nguyen Quang Thieu's poem "New Students, Old Teacher," carries a Vietnamese

veteran's sense of a similar fragmentation and deformity in the surviving natural world. Dedicated to "the American poets on the occasion of their reading," Nguyen writes of three-eyed poems, one-winged bats, chiming noses, half-deaf ears, waterless rivers and fish without fins or gills. Everyone left inhabits a world of lopped intimacy.

But speech, finally others' speech, provides its measure of healing. In addition to these bitter poems, John Balaban turned to translation. His bilingual edition of *Ca Dao* is the only one in both Vietnamese and English that preserves many of these folk poems, some of unguessable age: the habit, more than a thousand years old, of making *ca dao* remains as easy and natural for them as knitting or baseball might be to ours. The Vietnamese in which some of the poems are preserved draws from Nôm, an ideographic script so ancient that only a few dozen scholars are currently capable of reading it.





recorded children and adults during the day at work breaks, and then again “at night, by kerosene lamp, typically I would start taping with one person and then perhaps eight or so neighbors would gather, joke about my microphone, sit down with us on the floor and urge another to begin singing.” One person would spark another, and the singing would go on until bedtime. In the middle of a shooting war, where his tape recorder occasionally picked up mortar fire, Balaban recorded about 35 singers and about 500 *ca dao*. (About 5,000 *ca dao* are extant at any given time.) In the following example, the love of country is vivid and clear:



The Saigon River slides past the
Old Market,

its broad waters thick with silt.
There

the rice shoots gather a fragrance,

the fragrance of my country home,

recalling my motherhome, stirring
deep love.

Vietnamese singers of *ca dao*, recorded by John Balaban in 1971

A Vietnamese who knew the local dialects would accompany John Balaban on his gathering and listening expeditions, while he

The smell of the local water comes off the steaming rice bowl, and literally stirs the speaker’s love of home. Balaban writes of this work: “Take these poems as a guide to a world of Taoist sages, parted lovers, melon gardens, concubines, exiled kings, wheeling egrets, rice paddies, bamboo bridges, fish traps, and shimmering moons.”

Making poems is not something that only Vietnamese peasants do. Poetry throughout Vietnamese society stems from the Confucian belief that no more important practice exists in a state. Balaban cites, from an ancient text, “Literary people” are “state-sustaining elements.” He quotes a Confucian exchange from around 400 B.C:

Tzu-lu said, “if the prince of Wei were waiting for you to come and administer his country for him, what would be your first measure?”

The Master said, “It would certainly be to correct language.”

Why? The Master replies, “If language is incorrect, then what is said does not concord with what was meant; and if what is said does not concord with what was meant, what is to be done cannot be effected. If what is to be done cannot be effected, then society falls apart.”

The poems are quite difficult to render in English. When you glance at the Vietnamese mirrored above the English text, you quickly see that the Vietnamese syllables (Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language) occupy two-thirds to half the space that English translation requires. John Balaban describes the intricate and punning rhymes of the originals, the exigencies of their cropped meter. In his indispensable introduction, he shows the six syllables of a Vietnamese line, which he translates: “Oh girl bailing water by roadside”—and then gives the exact configuration of these eight syllables as best he can: “Why (girl) ladle light moon gold pour out?” Which becomes: “Oh girl, bailing water by the roadside,/ why pour off the moon’s golden light?” The leaps are huge, and so is the linguistic ingenuity needed to get there.

Besides the ingenious rhyme, there is the formidable barrier imposed by a tonal language. In addition to rhyme at fixed intervals within lines and at the ends, the pitches, or tones, are as predetermined as the verbal rhyme, and must fall in fixed patterns of steady, then rising and falling, and falling and rising patterns. Any reader not knowing an Asian language is familiar with the bewilderment caused by most transpositions of Asian classics into English, in which usually the better the resulting English poem the greater its distance from its language, culture, and customs. Helpfully, Balaban offers an on-line

posting of some of his original tapes, and text with which to follow his songs. His *Preface* to the *ca dao* concludes with this trenchant Vietnamese proverb: “Go out one day, come back with a basket of knowledge.”

The thrust of this whole postwar American veterans’ enterprise to try to bridge, to mend faith, to transform and heal, stands in that proverb.

In his translations of the late 18th to 19th century poet Ho Xuan Huong, Balaban adds to our knowledge of Vietnamese poetry with an enduring woman’s voice. Her name, appropriately enough, means “Spring Essence.” Balaban asks, “how did she get away with the irreverence, the scorn, and the habitual indecency of her poetry?” By way of reply, her poem, “Country Scene,” ends with three Vietnamese words, *mot tui tho*, signifying that after the passing of the material world, what lasts, in the literal meaning of the metaphor, is what lies in the “poetry bag”:

The waterfall plunges in mist.

Who can describe this desolate scene:

The long white river sliding through

The emerald shadows of the ancient canopy

...a shepherd’s horn echoing in the valley,

Fishnets stretched to dry on sandy flats.

A bell is tolling, fading, fading
 Just like love. Only poetry lasts.

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NOTE: Adam Gilbert's superbly comprehensive study, *A Shadow on Our Hearts: Soldier-Poetry, Morality, and the American War in Vietnam* (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst and Boston: 2018) came out after I had finished writing this article. His emphasis on the unique ethics of this generation of soldier poets is immensely valuable. Gilbert's perspective is that of a historian and ethicist.

Lorrie Goldensohn published *American War Poetry: An Anthology* (Columbia University Press, New York: 2006), which contains a substantial selection of Vietnam War poetry, as well as *Dismantling Glory: 20th Century American and English Soldier Poetry* (Columbia University Press, New York: 2003), which contains a lengthy chapter on the same subject. Goldensohn's "Dying in American War Poetry" appeared in the *Yale Review* (2:1) April 2012. She taught war literature and film for many years at Vassar College, from which she retired in 2000. In October 2018, she will lecture on the pacifism of Wilfred Owen and the American Vietnam



War poets at Wolfsohn College, Oxford University, at a conference entitled *Wilfred Owen and Beyond*.