

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: **America, Viet Nam and the Poetics of Guilt.**

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The “war poem” has, since Homer, served as a means for non-combatants to access the experience of warfare; evolving over time, the genre reflects and revises cultural attitudes toward war. Since the Great War, the war poem has become a tool of political protest, a declamation of war’s destructiveness and a plea for understanding on behalf of the soldiers forced or duped into fighting it. As a “literature of trauma,” this poetry is often seen as therapeutic exercise through which veterans can transcend the “nightmare” of war through cathartic expression. The American poetry written on Viet Nam challenges this interpretive model.

Previous war poetry casts the soldier as war’s ultimate victim. From Sassoon’s Christ-like trench soldiers to Jarrell’s eviscerated ball-turret gunner, it is what happens to the soldier, not what the soldier does that is the primary poetic focus. The violence the soldier does is a marginal concern in these poems, subordinated to a larger metaphysics of war’s suffering. In Viet Nam war poetry, however, this sublimation seems impossible: the poems are overwhelmingly concerned not with the overall victimizing experience of “war,” but rather with the soldier’s acute sense of personal moral transgression. Many

Viet Nam veteran poets resist the catharsis of an uncomplicated victimhood; instead of transcending the war experience, they dwell in it, asserting their place in the horror of war as both a victim *and* as an active agent of its suffering.

This dissertation argues that American veteran poetry on Viet Nam is governed by a “poetics of guilt,” an obsessive poetic need to articulate a sense of *personal* responsibility for the atrocity of modern war. The five poets discussed herein—Michael Casey, Basil T. Paquet, John Balaban, Bruce Weigl, and Yusef Komunyakaa—explore and formalize this sense of intensely personal, private guilt, creating war lyrics that, while advancing the traditional anti-war political agenda of modern war verse, resist the cathartic “renewal” or “transcendence” that in some way relieves the individual of responsibility for perpetuating war.

The Introduction is an overall history of individual culpability in modern war poetry. Subsequent chapters deal with the moral isolation of American GIs, the use of images of “merging” as a response to suffering, “survival guilt” and the elegy, the attraction to violence, and the mechanics of repressing empathy.

America, Viet Nam and the Poetics of Guilt

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## **Introduction**

### **I. He Was An American Kid**

Bill Ehrhart was an American kid, growing up in a place that would have made Norman Rockwell proud: Perkasio, Pennsylvania, a no-stoplight town between Philadelphia and Allentown. The sort of town where “people left their houses unlocked at night,” “neighbors called to each other on warm summer evenings,” and “kids went sledding on Third Street hill when it snowed in the winter” (Ehrhart 6). An American kid growing up in the 1950s, Ehrhart believed in the idea of America, that life was good, “and came as the direct result of the bounty and blessing of God, the wisdom of our Revolutionary fathers, and the sacrifices of preceding generations” (Ehrhart 7). He rode his red-white-and-blue decorated bicycle in Perkasio’s annual Memorial Day parade. His favorite toy was a plastic World War II machine gun, “with simulated sound and flashing red barrel”; he “mowed down thousands with it” (8). As a teenager, he admired Kennedy, feared Khrushchev and his shoe. One night in 1964, “fed up with Lyndon Johnson and his refusal to stand up to the communists in Vietnam,” Ehrhart “rode around Perkasio . . . on the back of a flatbed truck singing Barry Goldwater campaign songs.” The next year, when he was seventeen, despite admission offers from four colleges, he joined the Marines, refusing “to let somebody else’s kids fight America’s wars” (10).

In 1967 Ehrhart went to Viet Nam—and everything changed. In 1984’s *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired*, Ehrhart writes:

Do they think of me now  
in those strange Asian villages  
where nothing ever seemed  
quite human  
but myself  
and my few grim friends  
moving through them  
hunched  
in lines?

When they tell stories to their children  
of the evil  
that awaits misbehavior  
is it me they conjure?

This is not the poem one would expect from the kid from Perkasio who lived on baseball and apple pie and campaigned for ultra-hawk Barry Goldwater. Nor is this the poem of a stoic soldier who is admitting the hard truth that he has killed simply because his country asked him to. This is the poem of a man haunted by his own actions, tortured by the thought being labeled as “the evil / that awaits misbehavior.” Ehrhart is not the liberating G.I. Joe righteously blasting his way through the hedgerows of Normandy, nor is he John Stryker heroically charging a pillbox on Iwo Jima. Instead, he is a wanderer, trudging through “strange Asian villages / where nothing ever seemed / quite human”

“hunched in lines” with his “grim friends.” More disturbingly, Ehrhart frankly admits both the surreality and the racism of the war: nothing but himself and his “few grim friends” seemed human in these places; the Vietnamese were something different, something “other,” something they can kill.

It is a moment of reflection on this perspective, however, that occasions this poem. Ehrhart wonders, almost obsessively, if “they think of me,” in the villages he may have helped burn, if it is “[his] face they conjure” to scare the village children into behaving themselves. He wonders if he truly is the “boogeyman” in this poem, the “evil” that devours bad children in the darkness of their rooms. The anonymity, the facelessness that accompanies being a soldier, a U.S. Marine—the uniform, the language, the marine crew-cut—dissolves into irrelevance as Ehrhart imagines here: it is *his* face in their minds, they think *of him*. It is not “the Americans” or “an American soldier” that is the personification of evil in the minds of the Vietnamese, it is him, Bill Ehrhart, the flag-waving kid from Perkasio, Pennsylvania.

As an imaginative act, the poem has considerable power: the speaker, Ehrhart, succeeds in hypothesizing a version of himself as seen through the eyes of others. That vision, however, is a horrible one; he sees himself as the exemplar of evil itself, a monster to scare little children. This is the implied crisis of the poem: how does an All-American kid—with, of course, the very best of intentions—become the boogeyman? How does an innocent young man become, as Viet Nam veteran Philip Caputo called himself in *A Rumor of War*, “a bloodthirsty ghoul”?

Being both a citizen of a nation that prosecuted an immensely destructive war in a foreign land—for, what many would argue were specious reasons—and a willing

participant in specific destructive acts, Ehrhart's reflective tasks on the war are many. In a political sense, the poem is a protest against what America did in Viet Nam: it savaged the landscape through defoliation, terrorized the populace in search of insurgents, destroyed villages and cities in the name of pacification. "Making the Children Behave," then, is an implied political critique, its archetypal "grunt" a figure for the catastrophic American presence in Indochina. But the political task of this poem is only one part of its overall project—Ehrhart must *personally* come to terms with his own actions in Viet Nam, must both accept and understand the fact that he has killed in a questionably justified war waged by a nation whose policies were tragically misguided. He must learn to bear the burden of his own complicity in the war—its justification, its politics and its practices. The war, for Ehrhart and other Viet Nam veterans, is thus both a problem of "public" political responsibility and of "private" moral transgression, of public atonement and private penitence.

It is this acute consciousness of having sinned that marks "Making the Children Behave" as a prototype of the poems written by American veterans of Viet Nam. It is a poem wracked with a violent, unresolved guilt, the torment of one who has killed for the wrong reasons. Indeed, the focal point of the poem is its torment, reflected in its open form. Enacting the moral crisis of its situation, the language is flat and succinct, ordinary and "anti-poetic," stripping the moment of self-realization of any formal coherence or unity: where the poet desires resolution and unity, the poem resists, retreating to prosaic free-verse.

While some veteran poems on the war are more musical or formally constrained than "Making the Children Behave," the poem serves to illustrate the key problems of the

genre. The dominant formal and thematic focus on not simply the experience of war, but the intense guilt that experience generated makes the American poetry on the Viet Nam war unique in the canon of modern war poetry. In previous work on war, the accountability of the individual for his actions in war was a topic relegated to the margins, subordinated to a vision of war as a noble tragedy or as mass trauma; rarely do the best-known war poems dwell on their speakers' own guilt as a defining element of expression. But in the American poetry on the war in Viet Nam, guilt is almost all that matters.

## II. Beautiful Catastrophes: War Poems since the American Civil War

The willful assumption of guilt and personal responsibility is the core achievement of the American poetry of the Viet Nam war, which marks a major shift in the tradition of modern war poetry<sup>1</sup>. Prior to Viet Nam, when a veteran poet (or a witness close to the action, such as Whitman) discusses the psychic tribulations of killing for one's country,

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<sup>1</sup> The history of poetry and the history of warfare seem at times to be hopelessly intertwined. Some of the western canon's oldest and most masterful works—Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—take it as their subject, along with its complex personal, social, political, and metaphysical consequences. Re-reading these works can grant us even today often- uncanny insights regarding the nature of humanity's most destructive institution. Subsequent writers evidently took Dante Alighieri's admonition seriously when he wrote in *De vulgari eloquentia* that the most suitable topics for poetry were "love, virtue, and war" (Harris 321): many of Shakespeare's best plays and large parts of Milton's *Paradise Lost* deal extensively with war, either as a historical backdrop or as a complex metaphor for more spiritual or metaphysical struggles. One can even argue that the British Romantic movement, fascinated as it was with the zeitgeist of the French Revolution—as well as its radical shifts in consciousness regarding political and intellectual change—was a movement of extraordinarily oblique war poetry.

"Modern" war poetry, as I define it, is war poetry produced after the widespread introduction of industrial methods into the production for and prosecution of warfare. Generally speaking, this means the poetry written from 1861 onward, after the outbreak of the American Civil War. As nations became more industrialized, consistently able to produce a vast amount of goods and materiel, the wars they fought became both more violent *and* more a part of day-to-day "civilian" life. New inventions, such as the rifled barrel, which enabled far more accurate shooting, breech-loading and repeating rifles, the machine gun, tanks, the airplane, and chemical weapons provided means to levels of destruction never thought of before.

the matter is often diffused, rationalized, or sublimated into something else. The killing is often presented as secondary, undertaken as a necessary (though horrible) step toward an ultimately “worthy” goal—such as the preservation of the democratic ideal of “Union” or defeating fascism—or as a means of self preservation in an impossibly hostile environment, like the trenches in the Great War. Either way, the killing becomes “necessary,” placed into what is often a highly complex and problematic narrative of justification, an economy based on the exchange of lives and suffering for an economic or ideological goal. The expression of the participants’ “guilt” regarding their actions often becomes subordinated to other thematic foci in this overall rationale, marginalized in favor of political or rhetorical concerns, such as lamenting the noble dead or protesting the grotesqueries of modern war.

In the poetry of the American Civil War, largely panned by Edmund Wilson in his landmark study *Patriotic Gore*, the dominant poetic mode is elegiac, not melancholic; the work seeks to memorialize, even benignly mythologize the war dead, either “justifying” their sacrifice for the greater, “noble cause” of preserving the Union and ending slavery or consigning their loss to a mutually destructive (and divinely ordained) national tragedy. Daniel Aaron’s penetrating study, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*, laments the ease with which many writers retreat into myth, avoiding saying “something revealing about the meaning, if not the causes, of the war”:

Some, like the majority of their fellow Americans, . . . draped the War in myth, transmuted its actuality into symbol, and interpreted the Republic’s greatest failure as a sinful interlude in a grand evolutionary process. Others, traumatized

by the four-year nightmare, sought to distance themselves from it or suppress it or rationalize its terrors. (Aaron xviii).

While Aaron casts the mediocrity of much Civil War literature as a symptom of American culture's unwillingness to confront the complex racial dimensions of the war, I am more interested in the implications of this statement: that writers on this conflict were looking for a way out of accepting the personal and cultural burdens of killing, sublimating the devastating consequences of the "real war," (which, Whitman lamented in *Specimen Days*, "will never get in the books") into a sense of benign historical progress, a step in the continuing evolution of America into John Winthrop's visionary "city on a hill."

Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, two of the war's most eloquent (and, by now, canonical) apologists, concern themselves primarily with lamenting the tragedy of destruction on such a massive scale, not with examining the level of personal responsibility each individual bears toward it. Many of the poems Whitman (a nurse) and Melville (a civilian who rode with Union cavalry) wrote on the war are almost prototypical elegies, lamenting the death of youth or nobility, praising its virtues, and consoling the living. The consolation in this poetry resides in the fact that the profound wastage of human life and materiel ended in victory: Sumter was avenged, the Union was preserved, the evil of slavery abolished. Whitman's 1865 *Drum Taps*, perhaps the finest writing of any kind on the Civil War, opens with a brief *ars poetica* for the work:

*Aroused and angry,*

*I thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war;*

*But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd, and I resign'd myself,*

*To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead. (DT 1)*

This short epigraph, appearing ahead of the title poem, casts the rest of the book as the journal of a poetic process of maturation, the education and mellowing of a man caught up in the excitement of impending war. The book's opening poems, notably the title piece and "Beat! Beat! Drums!" evoke a tangible sense of what the "spirit of the age" in 1861 New York must have been like; as one reads, it is difficult not to become lost in the rhythmic deluge of images of the citizenry preparing for war, dropping everything for the war effort. Whitman's poems on the war, of course, are in some sense a romanticizing of the experience, fantastic renderings of an exceedingly complex history that was as internally conflicted as the nation itself. But Whitman is not concerned with the delicate complexities of the historical situation in *Drum Taps*; his project is more to capture an overall *sense* of time and place, eschewing specifics for a more compressed synecdoche-driven language of communalism. Whitman's work elevates the soldier to a superhuman, almost mythic status. The (Union) soldier becomes the paragon of virtue and manliness, the ideal to which everyone should aspire. Whitman's "1861" is a complex ode to both the "soldier-ideal" and to the conflicted spirit of the year itself:

AARM'D year! year of the struggle!

No dainty rhymes or sentimental love verses for you, terrible year!

Not you as some pale poetling, seated at a desk, lisping cadenzas piano;  
But as a strong man, erect, clothed in blue clothes, advancing, carrying a rifle on  
your shoulder,  
With well-gristled body and sunburnt face and hands—with a knife in the belt at  
your side,  
As I heard you shouting loud—your sonorous voice ringing across the continent;  
Your masculine voice, O year, as rising amid the great cities,  
Amid the men of Manhattan I saw you, as one of the workmen, the dwellers in  
Manhattan;  
Or with large steps crossing the prairies out of Illinois and Indiana,  
Rapidly crossing the West with springy gait, and descending the Alleghanies;  
Or down from the great lakes, or in Pennsylvania, or on deck along the Ohio river;  
Or southward along the Tennessee or Cumberland rivers, or at Chattanooga on the  
mountain top,  
Saw I your gait and saw I your sinewy limbs, clothed in blue, bearing weapons,  
robust year;  
Heard your determin'd voice, launch'd forth again and again;  
Year that suddenly sang by the mouths of the round-lipp'd cannon,  
I repeat you, hurrying, crashing, sad, distracted year.

The blend of “soldier” and “year” in this poem accomplishes two things: it celebrates the zeitgeist surrounding the war’s outbreak, and praises the young men who join into that spirit by going to fight. The male voice of the year in this poem is literally larger than

life, encompassing “Manhattan,” “crossing the prairies,” “crossing the West with springy gait.” It is no implicitly feminine “pale poetling seated at a desk”: it acts decisively and expands its will to power over the entire land. The language with which Whitman describes the soldier-figure is based both in sexuality and spectacle; by gendering the year as a male soldier, Whitman comments upon and expands both ideas. The year has power because it is *like* a powerful male soldier; conversely, soldiers moving and being seen become the signifiers of the overwhelming power of the year. This “larger than life” rendering of the soldier, however oblique and metaphorical in this example, is an instance of what Lawrence LeShan calls in *The Psychology of War* the “mythic” sense of reality that the state of war engenders (LeShan 65). Populations learn (or are skillfully taught) to mythologize their culture and its citizens—to more readily express faith and belief, suspend logic, and reduce their appreciation of cognitive and political complexity—when faced with a collective problem like a war. The world becomes divided into “us” and “them”; we are essentially good and value life, our adversaries do not. While Whitman in “1861” hints at a more complex or problematic characterization of this year-soldier blend, calling it in the ultimate line a “hurrying, crashing, sad, distracted year,” he never fully transcends the mythic reality LeShan talks about. The soldier is still a superman, and his inevitable future actions—killing and maiming other human beings—don’t even merit mention in the poem.

The mythic rendering of the soldier as extraordinary or ideal lends itself quite well to elegy: the “dead” are not hapless victims of an overwhelming social and economic force, they are “noble sacrifices” for the community’s ideological goals. The “enemy” is a vague, abstract idea in most of *Drum Taps*: Whitman’s focus instead is on

the suffering of the wounded and what Edmund Wilson calls the transcendent, collective “vision of the people” (479) involved in the war. Perhaps the most stirring poem in *Drum Taps*, however, is also its most direct treatment of “the enemy,” “Reconciliation.” The poem confronts the fact of war’s killing in an ethereal and symbolic gesture of redemption and contrition:

WORD over all, beautiful as the sky!  
Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in time be utterly lost;  
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night, incessantly softly wash again, and  
ever again, this soil’d world:  
... For my enemy is dead—a man divine as myself is dead;  
I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin—I draw near;  
I bend down, and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

This poem is awash in regret, but not in a confessional sense: the poem’s lamentation is of a tragic loss suffered in the course of an ultimate “cleansing” by fire and “deeds of carnage.” “Death” and “Night,” the figurative children of the war, its inevitable consequences, “wash again . . . this soil’d world,” resolving destructive conflicts and routing the unclean “evil” forces. And while the speaker’s “enemy is dead,” a man “divine” as himself, the speaker takes no personal responsibility for that death; instead, all emotion is sublimated into the final symbolic gesture of reconciliation, the kiss. Of course, this kiss means nothing to the dead; it is a symbol that exists only for the speaker, as an iteration of the self-righteous mercy only a victor could exhibit. The poem itself is

another such iteration, but one that has more power than the symbolic kiss. While asserting faith in a “word over all, beautiful as the sky,” Whitman implicitly extends a verbal “kiss” to his readers—and to his former enemies in the South. But this kiss has nothing to do with Whitman himself. It is more a synecdoche for a larger national effort at reconciling the transgressions inherent in a long, brutal, conflict; it is an effort at what Lincoln calls in the *Second Inaugural* “binding up the nation’s wounds.” Whitman—an intimate, involved witness and avid supporter of the Union cause, bears very little of a personal burden for what happened in the war: the “deeds of carnage” committed by those in his care are both out of his control and ultimately lead to a greater good, a positive (in his view) transformation of the culture.

Herman Melville’s *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War*, while extremely perceptive of both the war’s emergent “modernity” as an industrial struggle and the inherent consequences of that fact, is similarly empty of any sense of cultural or personal guilt. Melville’s vision of the war, though darker than Whitman’s and more unsettling, at times attempts to sublimate the conflict’s losses into “the holy cause.” Despite the fact that Melville, according to Helen Vendler, “appreciated the moral ambiguities of the war” and thought that “the American conscience was profoundly violated by a governmentally ‘sanctioned’ war pitting brother against brother,” (Vender 583) the temptation for a convenient self-absolution seems to overwhelm the poet at times. He writes in “Gettysburg, The Check,” an elegy for a soldier killed in combat:

O pride of the days in prime of the months

Now untrebled in great renown,

When before the ark of our holy cause

Fell Dagon down—  
Dagon foredoomed, who, armed and targed  
Never his impious heart enlarged  
Beyond that hour; God walled his power,  
And there the last invader charged.

Exactly who “Dagon” is is ambiguous at the outset of the poem; a reader is not sure on which side he is fighting. As “the enemy” dying in dramatic, romanticized fashion, he is an “infidel;” he falls “before the ark of our holy cause” by divine ordination: God “walled his power” and willed his death in the furtherance of a divine plan. Conversely, reading Dagon as a comrade killed in action, he becomes a sacrifice, a martyr for the same divinely-sanctified cause. As the poem progresses, however, Melville reveals “Dagon” to be an enemy, cut down in a volley of gunfire:

He charged, and in that charge condensed  
His all of hate and fire;  
He sought to blast us in his scorn,  
And wither us in his ire.  
Before him went the shriek of shells—  
Aerial screamings, taunts and yells;  
Then the three waves in flashed advance  
Surged, but were met, and back they set:  
Pride was met by sterner pride,  
And Right is a stronghold yet.

Here is a representation of a combat death more intimate and graphic than anything in Whitman; Dagon and his companions are jerked out of life by the violence of cannon fire, “the shriek of shells” that vault victims into “aerial” screams. But the violence of the passage, the violence of the “surging” of the enemy soldiers being cut down, again becomes transformed—the real blood-and-guts battle is reduced to a conflict of “pride” versus “sterner pride,” through which “Right” –the Union cause—can be preserved.

While the opening stanza of the poem consigned Dagon and his comrades, at least implicitly, to “infidel” status, the ultimate does almost the inverse. Here, the enemy dead are just as noble as any other soldier lost in a tragic battle:

Sloped on the hill the mounds were green,

Our center held that place of graves,

And some still hold it in their swoon,

And over these a glory waves.

The warrior-monument crashed in fight,

Shall soar transfigured in loftier light,

A meaning ampler bear,

Soldier and priest with hymn and prayer

Have laid the stone, and every bone

Shall rest in honor there.

The poem ends with elegy, the battlefield becoming consecrated with the lives of those it has taken; it shall “a meaning ampler bear” and its “monuments” will “soar transfigured

in loftier light.” There is no animus toward the enemy here, but there is also no guilt or torment over their deaths. Despite the violence of the first stanzas, the consequences of the speaker’s actions —on a personal level—are negligible. The responsibility is both collective and public (“*our* holy cause,” “our center held the graves”), subordinated to the greater good of the preservation of the Union. “Blame” for the enemy deaths falls on the divine and to fate, not unlike Lincoln’s similar diffusion of responsibility in the *Second Inaugural Address*:

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Perhaps this is an instance of victor’s privilege: the victorious side writes history—and narratives of justification—as it sees fit. In this case, both Lincoln and Melville cast the war as a grand tragedy, ordained in its conduct and outcome by the divine. Lincoln, of

course, had political aims for such a deflection of responsibility—to reintegrate the South into the Union. Melville’s poetic task is more localized; he must find a way for his speaker to justify the carnage that he witnesses and in which he participates. The “right” or “holy cause” offers a logical rationale for violence that absolves those involved from the full weight of responsibility for their actions. This rationale underlies what Jean-Francois Lyotard would call a “master narrative” for war and political violence: killing for one’s country in a “just war” is socially acceptable. The sanctioning community, in the “just war” absorbs *some* of the responsibility for the actions of the individual it recruits to fulfill its political will.

When the narrative of the “just war” is not applicable, however, individuals must search for a new one to justify their wartime actions. For the British poets of the Great War—most notably Sassoon and Owen—the “just war” was a delusional myth, a cultural construction that contributed to a nightmarish catastrophe. What might have begun as an honorable crusade in 1914, a “great venture” full of promise, became hell on earth, a carnival of industrialized, impersonal dying. Paul Fussell’s classic *The Great War and Modern Memory* explores both the explosion of this British mythos surrounding the Great War and the complex poetic responses to that explosion: “irony,” and “modernism,” a cultural loss of innocence that defines the post-war world. After the carnage of Verdun, The Somme, and the Ypres Salient, barely a scrap remained of the popular Georgian myth of war’s glory. As the war ground on in self-destructive stalemate, its “purpose” became more and more unclear, the daily death-toll more and more meaningless. For Siegfried Sassoon, then a Captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers (who had enlisted in 1914) the war became a crime perpetrated upon soldiers by those in command. His

“Soldier’s Declaration” was a willful declamation of the insensitivity of the military toward those in the trenches:

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow-soldiers entered upon this War should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible for them to be changed without our knowledge, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolonging those sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the military conduct of the War, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now, I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them. Also I believe that it may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise. (Sassoon, *London Times*, 1917)

For this recantation of his belief in the war, Sassoon was confined (by arrangement of his friend, Robert Graves) to Craiglockhart Hospital in Scotland, a sanitarium for shell-shocked soldiers<sup>2</sup>. What Sassoon avoids in his “Declaration,” what he is *not* protesting, is the violence that he and his comrades in arms have perpetrated against the enemy; it is not his focus. While obliterating the idea of the “just war” as a rationale for violence, Sassoon’s declaration implicitly develops another, which frames much of his poetry on the war: the justification of a suffering soldier-brotherhood fighting because it has no other choice. Sassoon’s soldiers, at least in his later poetry on the war, are not bloodthirsty ideologues; instead, they are the disillusioned victims of a corrupt and self-destructive society, what Pound in *Mauberley* calls “a botched civilization,” “an old bitch gone in the teeth.” The soldiers’ suffering here is unique and absolute; they are stuck in a cycle of meaningless killing perpetuated by the political leaders of their country, the true horror of which no one on the “outside” of the experience—home—can understand. Sassoon’s anger toward the military and political establishment was so intense that Paul Fussell once remarked that one who had no other knowledge of the Great War but through Sassoon’s poetry might think that it was fought between soldiers and civilians, not the British and Germans (Fussell 103). Indeed, one need not look very far in Sassoon’s canon to find bitter invective against authority. The last stanza of the anti-elegy “To Any Dead Officer” succinctly sums up the dominant feeling:

Good-bye, old lad! Remember me to God,

And tell Him that our Politicians swear

They won’t give in till Prussian Rule’s been trod

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<sup>2</sup> Sassoon’s term at Craiglockhart is the initial focus of Pat Barker’s trilogy of novels on the Great War: *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road*. Sassoon’s real-life psychiatrist, Dr. William

Under the Heel of England . . . Are you there? . . .  
Yes . . . and the War won't end for at least two years;  
But we've got stacks of men . . . I'm blind with tears,  
Staring into the dark. Cheero!

I wish they'd killed you in a decent show. (Sassoon 84)

The hatred the speaker feels in this poem toward both political (“our politicians”) and military (“any dead officer”) authority is palpable here. The politicians willingly continue the war, seeking to “trod” over “Prussian Rule” by feeding “stacks of men” like firewood into the trenches. The dead officer, “observing trenches” at the outside of the poem—the ironic envoy to an unfeeling god—is ultimately a useless patsy that the speaker would like to be rid of. In the exact opposite of a lamenting farewell to the dead, the speaker wishes that he could have gained some satisfaction from the death of this officer, by seeing him killed “in a decent show.”

One must look deeper into Sassoon's body of work, however, to see any reference to the Germans, the “enemies” that he enlisted to fight. Sassoon rarely mentions killing the enemy specifically, and when he does the language is bizarre, almost mystical. “Enemies,” from *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems*, is an odd meditation on a soldier's rationale for killing:

He stood alone in some queer sunless place  
Where Armageddon ends. Perhaps he longed  
For days he might have lived; but his young face  
Gazed forth untroubled: and suddenly there thronged

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Rivers, is one of the central characters in the trilogy.

Round him the hulking Germans that I shot  
When for his death my brooding rage was hot.

He stared at them, half-wondering; and then  
They told him how I'd killed them for his sake—  
Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men;  
And still there seemed no answer he could make.  
At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand  
Because his face could make them understand. (Sassoon 26)

Rendering a grim version of the afterlife, the liminal, still “queer sunless place / Where Armageddon ends,” this poem is at once both document of regret and stoic justification for killing. Probably written on the death of his close friend Edward Thomas (Means, 11/16/2003), the poem casts the speaker’s killing as a by-product of rage rather than an expression of patriotic zeal. The speaker shoots the Germans not for any real ideological reason, but more because “for his [the friend’s] death [the speaker’s] brooding rage was hot.” We can read this line as simple revenge—*because* of the friend’s death, he shoots the Germans in his rage. Conversely, though, one can read the speaker’s killing the Germans as a displacement or transference of rage that he feels toward the subject—his “brooding rage” was “hot” *to achieve* the death of the un-named “him” of the poem. In either sense, the speaker displays little remorse for his actions: the killing is simply part of the violent cycle of war, painful and inevitable. The Germans are mere “things” onto which the speaker enacts his pain and anger.

The second stanza, however, complicates the dynamic between speaker, “friend,” and “enemy.” The dead man is a non-character in this part of the poem, an empty vessel through which the speaker “connects” with the enemies he has killed. Evocative of a modern sense of numbness similar to that in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, language has no real place here: the Germans—“patient, stupid, sullen, ghosts of men”—explain to him how they were killed “for his sake,” seeking to understand the reason for their own deaths, to which the dead man can make no answer. The only communication comes in the form of a visual signifier: the dead soldier’s “face could make them understand” why the speaker killed them. The speaker’s implicit economy of anger and retribution is validated, it seems, by the “value” that the dead man’s face can show the Germans. The final attitude the poem expresses is an almost-Shakespearean lamentation of the loss of beauty: the virtue and attractiveness of the lost comrade justifies the anger and killing that followed. The intense sense of connection between soldiers, then, drives this poem. Sassoon rages and takes revenge only because of the intense attachment he has for one of his fellow soldiers: it is the severing of this intense connection that enables him to kill the “hulking Germans” with little sense of remorse or regret. The logic of retribution, then, provides moral justification for any act that the speaker takes as a part of the brotherhood of suffering soldiers.

Wilfred Owen extends the connection between soldiers to include the enemy as well. In Owen’s work, both British and German soldiers are victimized equally by the war, nearly reduced to mindless cogs working in a vast mechanism of death and suffering. Owen’s subject, as he writes in his *Preface* to his never-published collection of war poems, is “war, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity” (Stallworthy 126).

Like Sassoon, Owen also avoids for the most part representing the enemy—or the act of killing—directly. When he does, also like Sassoon, the language and situation becomes surreal. “Strange Meeting,” like “Enemies,” takes place in a pseudo-underworld, where the (British) speaker can interact personally with those he has killed during the war. The poem gives voice to an otherwise silent enemy, at once acknowledging his humanity and lamenting the violent exigencies of combat. Descending from the battlefield into a cavernous Hell, Owen’s speaker confronts a man he has recently killed, a tortured, mourning, German double of himself:

With a thousand pains that vision’s face was grained;  
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,  
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.  
‘Strange friend,’ I said, ‘here is no cause to mourn.’  
‘None,’ said that other, ‘save the undone years,  
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,  
Was my life also; I went hunting wild  
After the wildest beauty in the world,  
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,  
But mocks the steady running of the hour,  
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.      (Owen 125)

Equally enveloped by the cultural ideologies that enabled the war, the German both resists the victor’s consolation that the speaker offers—the idea that there is “no cause to mourn”—and casts himself as a transformed mirror-image of him. He resists the “peace”

of the afterlife the speaker assumes, instead mourning “the undone years,” and “the hopelessness” of his early death. The connection of the speaker’s “hope”—the privilege of the living—with the German’s former life serves to highlight the tragedy of his lost life, the loss of possibility, the continuation of his quest for “the wildest beauty in the world.” The German, echoing Owen’s own wartime *ars poetica* further laments that “something of my weeping had been left / which must die now,” which he calls “the truth untold / the pity of war, the pity war distilled.” By putting *his* words in the mouth of “the enemy,” Owen creates a tangible parallel between them, implicitly arguing that sensitivity to the horrors of the war is not unique to one side over another; *all* soldiers, regardless of allegiance, suffer the same ignominious ends.

The poem subordinates the killing inherent in the war experience to the greater problem of the soldiers’ suffering; the killing becomes incidental, a sad, tragic chore that each participant must complete. The last lines of the poem are the German’s:

‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned

Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.

Let us sleep now . . .’

(Owen 127)

The “frown” on the British soldier’s face is his defining feature for the German; it is through a recognition of the signifier of *sadness* in the act of killing that enables the productive connection—via the poem—between the soldiers. There seems no malice here, either on the part of the killer or the victim; though the British soldier “jabbed and

killed,” he “frowned through” the German, who dies simply because “[his] hands were loath and cold.” Neither soldier seems fully in control of himself; they seem instead compelled to violence by the overwhelming circumstances of the war, killing and dying in the course of a normal day. The last line, “Let us sleep now . . .” is at once a plea for peace and resolution *and* an implicit statement of camaraderie, casting the British and German soldiers as tired, tortured souls residing in Hell, seeking rest.

The fact that British soldier-poetry of the Great War is overwhelmingly anti-war has by now become common knowledge. As a genre, the subject is primarily the horror of war in the modern age, along with the dehumanisation and ultimate abjection of those fighting in it. The political agenda implicit in this poetry is, as Mark Van Wienen points out, “the abolition of modern warfare”(Van Wienen 7); “war” itself, along with those who make it possible is the only enemy that most of these poems are concerned with fighting. “The enemy” and “killing” are only ancillary concerns in many of these poems, subordinated in most cases to the metaphysics of protest against the war. In focusing so obsessively on the extraordinary suffering endured by the soldiers fighting the war, Owen, Sassoon, and other Great War poets effectively relieve themselves of any *personal* responsibility for their actions. Since the Great War was such an all-encompassing tragedy, equally traumatizing and marginalizing all involved, each individual’s actions become subsumed into the larger catastrophe. It is ironic that in a discourse of protest that implicitly seeks to re-assert the value of the individual there is no acknowledgement of individual responsibility for wartime actions. Instead, the poetry is lodged firmly in the “public” sphere of discourse; its power as personal testament serves to advance its primarily political agenda—the end of modern war.

The American poetry of the Great War, largely eclipsed by the success and resonance of its English counterpart, demonstrates a similar avoidance of individual responsibility or remorse. While home-front anti-war poetry—particularly from left-wing socialist and women’s groups flourished during the period,<sup>3</sup> little remains of an American “soldier-poetry” tradition akin to the English. While Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” or Rosenberg’s “Break of Day In the Trenches” endure as chilling anti-war monuments in numerous anthologies, few examples of American trench-poetry survive. Next to Canadian John MacRae’s “In Flanders’ Fields<sup>4</sup>,” the most famous of Great War poems from North America is Alan Seeger’s “I Have a Rendezvous with Death.” The poem, written when Seeger was a soldier in the French Foreign Legion, is a disturbing ode to a naïve version of patriotism. The last stanza reads:

God knows ‘twere better to be deep  
Pillowed in silk and scented down,  
Where love throbs out in blissful sleep,  
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,  
Where hushed awakenings are dear.  
But I’ve a rendezvous with Death,  
At midnight in some flaming town,  
When Spring trips north again this year,  
And I to my pledged word am true,

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Van Wienen’s anthology *Rendezvous With Death* and his critical study *Partisans and Poets* offer an interesting survey of the American poetry of the Great War as representative of the political conflicts in the U.S. during the war years. Included are examples of socialist worker’s writing, conscientious objector writing, pro-war doggerel, and “established” canonical poetry.

<sup>4</sup> McRae’s poem is often claimed by the American tradition of war poetry, appearing in “American” anthologies, and being appropriated—along with its central symbol, the poppy-- by American memorial movements in solidarity with the Allies.

I shall not fail that rendezvous. (Van Weinen 142)

Seeger's death in combat in 1916 makes this poem, posthumously published in 1917's *Poems*, eerily prophetic; his "rendezvous with death," dying for "his pledged word" in "some flaming town." Death here is a grand, noble gesture, the inevitable consequence of ideological commitment. The abjection and suffering that characterize English anti-war soldier poetry is absent from this text; while "doomed," the soldier is still a romantic hero, giving his life gladly for a cause.

"The Hosts," from the same volume, takes the implied soldier-hero romanticism of "Rendezvous With Death" and makes it far more explicit. The poem, a long, meandering elevation of the military ethos rejects intentionally—in a quite disturbing turn—both the moral *and* the political dimensions of the war. The speaker calmly asserts that the only valid context through which to evaluate his actions is the war itself. A representative excerpt:

Let idlers argue the right and wrong  
And weigh what merit our causes had.  
Putting our faith in being strong--  
Above the level of good and bad--  
For us, we battled and burned and killed  
Because evolving Nature willed,  
And it was our pride and boast to be  
The instruments of Destiny. (Van Weinen 142)

The war's morality here is left to the debating "idlers," those homebound (and implicitly feminine) thinkers on the "outside" of the war experience. The male "faith in being strong" makes the morality of war irrelevant, "above the level of good and bad." This rejection of "home" seems a radicalized version of Sassoon's distaste for what he saw as a morally bankrupt military and civilian authority. The soldier-culture here becomes a nation unto itself, the vanguard of an ongoing process of cultural evolution—"for us," the speaker argues, "we battled and burned and killed." The killing and battling and burning is meaningful only for the soldiers themselves—as acts of self-preservation, or glorious self-affirmations—apart from a nation-based political or ideological goal. Seeger sees himself and his brother soldiers as an extension of a natural order, the agents of change in the world, the "instruments of Destiny." The battling, burning, and killing the war brings is cast as part of a divine plan, necessary and just, ordained by God. The last lines of the poem:

We saw not clearly nor understood,  
But yielding ourselves to the master hand,  
Each in his part as best he could,  
We played it through as the author planned. (Van Weinen 143)

The war's destruction and loss is simply an extension of "the master hand," a grand narrative in which individuals solemnly: they kill as a part of God's great plan, and thus are blameless, their very personalities sacrificed to the war. Whereas Sassoon and Owen shift responsibility for their actions on the horrid conditions of modern war, Seeger adopts—or perhaps develops—a mythology of justification that removes individual

agency from the equation further, blaming violence not the inhuman nature of modern war but on the ever-present “story” of a divine author.

As naïve as one might now consider Seeger’s rationale for his participation in the war, it is stunningly effective as propaganda, advancing—and implicitly claiming as valid and meaningful—what Owen would call “the old lie”: that fighting, killing, and even dying for one’s country is a noble act. We all remember Seeger’s poem. The killing included in this model, of course, is not “murder”—it is righteous killing for which the individual bears very little responsibility. All the Great War poetry we have examined heretofore has avoided confronting the idea of killing as “murder” – soldiers do not “murder,” they “kill” or cause “casualties.” Soldiers undertake their actions as a part of a group advancing a socially sanctioned goal: they act publicly and as a community, sharing both the trauma of combat and the moral responsibility for the things they do. Even when the individual ceases to believe in the social rationale for violence, as does Sassoon, the fact of his immersion in the firestorm of war offers other systems of justification: self -defense, retribution, irresistible compulsion. The justification for one’s actions in war, on the individual level, seem less important in this poetry than an active articulation of the abjection suffered by those who fight. The moral violation—the “crime” of the war—is committed by those who start and prosecute conflicts such as this; the moral complications of killing are less of a focus.

World War II wrought catastrophic destruction on not only military but civilian populations: large-scale mobilizations of men and materiel, massive battlefield casualties, genocide, and strategic bombing combined for upwards of 85 million killed and wounded worldwide. Much of this killing, as in the Great War, was carried out by

citizen-soldiers, ordinary people who either enlisted or were drafted to fight for their country. The blurring of distinctions between “combatant” and “non-combatant” eroded the sense of uniqueness of the soldier experience; “civilians” in contested areas often suffered right along with those fighting. The intentional *targeting* of civilian populations—designed to terrorize, demoralize, and disrupt economic infrastructure—became an increasingly popular tactic for both sides as the war progressed. The German air-blitz over England reduced large parts of London to rubble; the Japanese rape of the city of Nanking killed 300,000 non-combatants; the Siege of Leningrad starved nearly a million Russians to death; Allied strategic bombing nearly annihilated the cities of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. This “total war” paradigm, explicated by Clausewitz in *On War*, that makes everything connected to one’s enemy a legitimate target of course invites intense moral and logical scrutiny. The essential problem, I feel, that underlies a moral analysis of “total war,” is deciding when the state-sanctioned politically motivated killing of civilians becomes “murder”—an unjust criminal act of depriving innocents of their lives. How does one, even in the context of a “just war” against Fascism and racist imperial aggression, justify the large-scale intentional killing of non-combatants?

Randall Jarrell, perhaps the finest poet—British or American—of the Second World War, addresses this issue directly. An aspiring pilot who “washed out” of flight school, Jarrell was a member of the Army Air Corps; he spent the war Stateside, attached to the Eighth Air Force as a celestial navigation instructor. In such a capacity, Jarrell worked in close proximity to the pilots and crews responsible for the carpet bombing of German cities; many of his most stirring poems deal with the moral and linguistic

complications of the “total war” waged on European and Japanese cities, on both the pilots and their targets. Jarrell’s “Eighth Air Force,” from *Losses*, is an intense meditation on the moral culpability of the members of the bomber crews:

If, in an odd angle of the hutment,  
A puppy laps the water from a can  
Of flowers, and the drunk sergeant shaving  
Whistles *O Paradiso!*--shall I say that man  
Is not as men have said: a wolf to man?

The other murderers troop in yawning;  
Three of them play Pitch, one sleeps, and one  
Lies counting missions, lies there sweating  
Till even his heart beats: One; One; One.  
*O murderers!* . . . Still, this is how it's done:

This is a war . . . But since these play, before they die,  
Like puppies with their puppy; since, a man,  
I did as these have done, but did not die--  
I will content the people as I can  
And give up these to them: Behold the man!

I have suffered, in a dream, because of him,  
Many things; for this last saviour, man,

I have lied as I lie now. But what is lying?

Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can:

I find no fault in this just man. (Jarrell 143)

This poem contrasts the humanity of the bomber crews with the seemingly inhuman acts they commit as soldiers. The innocence of the puppy drinking from a can, the drunk sergeant whistling disrupt the speaker's easy categorization of the fliers—he wonders if “that man / Is not as men have said: a wolf to man?” This line is ambiguous in that it can be read very specifically— as a wondering if *that* particular man (the sergeant) is a “wolf to man”—or very generally, as a statement “that man” (as a species) is by its nature predatory toward its kind.

The second and third stanzas make this conflict more explicit, compounding the jarring “innocent” representation of the crews with the actual label of “murderer.” The “murderers,” again portrayed as innocents, “troop in yawning,” play cards, count the missions they have left to fly before completing their tours of duty. The exclamation of “*O murderers!*” seems almost made in disbelief, its emphasis calling our attention to the fact of its status as a label. As the second stanza ends, the speaker surrenders to the accuracy of the label of “murderer,” while at the same time attributing its accuracy to the greater fact of the war: murder is simply “how it’s done / This is a war . . . .” But this attribution is not an avoidance of responsibility: the speaker at once implicates himself as similar to the bomber crews: he is “a man,” who has done “as these have done, but did not die--.” He *is* one of the guilty, one of the “murderers.” But the speaker’s guilt is the

guilt—somehow—of both the participant and the observer, a Pontius Pilate figure: he “give[s] up these” soldiers to the people, as if he were “contenting” a vengeful crowd.

The crews, or more specifically the abstract “man,” become then in the speaker’s eyes a Christ figure, a “last saviour,” for whom the Pilate-speaker suffers, “in a dream,” “many things.” But this suffering also causes the speaker to *lie* about the war, and presumably, those who fight in it; the central crisis of the poem, then, the labeling of these flyers as “murderers” and “Christ” becomes more ambiguous and more pronounced. As the speaker asks “But what is lying?” we as readers are intentionally disoriented, lost in the conflicting terminology *and* in Jarrell’s ironic voice. What we are left with is an image of “guilty” soldier-Christ-Pilate figures, washing their hands in blood “as best they can.” This image is graphic and revolting: the symbolic “cleansing” of responsibility through some grand narrative—such as the “just war”—fails here, leaving the “taint” of sin on the fliers. But even tainted, the speaker cannot truly condemn them: he can “find no fault in this just man.” The line is intentionally ambiguous: in one sense, the speaker can find no fault in the “just man,” a man killing and becoming “tainted” in the prosecution of a “just cause.” In another sense, however, the speaker decries the guilt of humanity as a condition of its existence: there is no “fault,” or blame here, “just [M]an” acting out its predatory nature. At the end of the poem, we are left with only a gesture toward moral judgment; it leaves us in a tangled mess of disparate images that cast doubt on our ability to judge. Simply put, we are unable to tell Christ from Pilate.

Jarrell’s writing on strategic bombing in World War II—what Studs Terkel ironically calls “The Good War”—reminds us of all that we so conveniently forget about

modern war: that death and killing are commonplace, that innocents will die, and that while the ends might be just, the means used to achieve them are not without moral complication. We must live with the taint of our own actions. Jarrell's willing acceptance of at least part of the guilt, or rather his analysis of the moral crisis of the "total war" paradigm, makes his work unique in the canon of modern war poetry. Refusing to mythologize his subjects, or even to cast them as the primary sufferers in war,<sup>5</sup> Jarrell holds them *as individuals* at least partially morally responsible for the destruction wrought by the war—they are the ones dropping the bombs and pulling the trigger, and they rightfully bear the burden of the innocent lives they take, righteous cause or not.

The war poetry we have examined to this point has been resistant to a direct treatment of the moral responsibility of the individual. Analysis of the psychological burdens of killing another human being has been, for the most part a marginal concern of most of this work, subordinated either to the tragic duties of a "righteous cause," or to the politics of protesting the horrors of modern warfare. Even Jarrell, for whom this is a major theme, seems ambivalent about the place of individual responsibility for war killing: his poems on the subject are dense and intentionally ambiguous, a moral quagmire in and of themselves. These poems seem written with a public voice in mind—these poems, from Whitman to Jarrell, are documents that speak with a communal authority, from the notion of a shared cultural experience. Whitman sought a redefinition and recuperation of a fractured American identity through articulation and elegy, the Great War poets a paradigmatic revision (or assertion) of cultural attitudes toward war, Jarrell a de-mythologizing of a "good war's" unspoken moral ambiguity. These are

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<sup>5</sup> Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," while one of his most anthologized and famous works, is really one of only a few protest poems in his body of work. In this poem, the soldier—a member of a

grand, cultural statements in which the individual is only a bit player, a necessary stagehand in the overwhelming drama of war. The individual is often reduced in this work to a tragic symbol, a mere figuration without a psychic and moral existence apart from the war—he is helpless, and therefore nearly blameless for what he does.<sup>6</sup> The organized killing in war, for most writers, is considered a cultural burden, not so much a personal one; an articulation of the private trauma of taking another’s life never happens.

### III. Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, We’ve All Been There

The modern Anglo-American war poetry written before the 1960s maintains a systematic avoidance of engaging in a dialogue on the personal morality of killing in war; what, then, makes the American poetry on the war in Viet Nam different? Why is the literature of *this* war obsessed with expressing its own sense of guilt, its own sense of *personal* responsibility for the violence and atrocity—two features central to all modern wars—of the conflict? The answers to this question, I feel, are many and complex, requiring an analysis of both the historical circumstances of the veteran experience and the specific instantiation of “guilt” as a response to those circumstances.

By its very nature, war forces those involved in it to adapt to new moral guidelines and standards of behavior. What is sanctioned by a community as “good,” “right,” or “just” in war—killing to advance the “mission” or goal—is most often a grievous criminal transgression in peacetime. The fundamental premise of the social

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bomber crew—becomes an inhuman tool of the State, a lifeless mass that only exists as a tool of war.

<sup>6</sup> This seems a big idea; I need to articulate this further. There are really no poetic “confession” narratives in pre-WWII lit, and Jarrell seems the only one really doing it in WWII writing. War is perceived as a public burden.

compact, the non-violent resolution of disagreement, becomes disregarded, even inverted in war; violence is the accepted norm, the standard methodology. Indeed, whereas in peacetime societies maintain immensely complicated juridical systems to enforce the social compact and repress violent and other non-sanctioned impulses, in wartime the same systems are deployed to *encourage* such behavior. Desertion, mutiny, and cowardice (“refusal to fight” or “throwing down of arms”), for example, are capital offenses under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, an elaborate system of positive reinforcement: medals, public recognition, advancement, luxuries unavailable to most soldiers are reserved for those who do their jobs—kill—most effectively. Audie Murphy, the most decorated soldier in modern United States history, winning every decoration the Army offers, including the Medal of Honor, is credited with the confirmed killing or wounding of at least fifty German soldiers; some accounts list him responsible for over 240 enemy deaths (Audie Murphy Research Foundation, 12/2/2003).<sup>8</sup> The community of soldiers—and presumably the population and the authoritative infrastructure that backs it—provides sanction for the things soldiers do as a part of their duty. Acting as a group, a squad, company, division, or nation, no one individual bears more responsibility than any other; the moral burden is diffused among everyone who took part, from fellow soldiers to those in command. Diffusion of responsibility was a standard response at the Nuremberg Trials—when confronted with their atrocities, many German soldiers replied that they were “just following orders.”

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<sup>7</sup> Private Eddie Slovik, a soldier with the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry in World War II, was executed in 1945 for desertion on the orders of Dwight D. Eisenhower, as a deterrent to further desertion after the end of major hostilities. William Bradford Huie’s *The Execution of Private Slowik* is an excellent account of the trial, conviction, and cover-up that surrounded the incident.

<sup>8</sup> After the war, Murphy became a very successful Hollywood actor and songwriter, starring in 44 films before his death in 1971.

Training and “education” also facilitate the revision of moral standards in wartime, enabling “normal” citizens to violate commonly-held principles against violence. Psychologist (and former U.S. Army Ranger and paratrooper) Dave Grossman’s penetrating *On Killing* is an interesting exploration of the mechanisms that the military uses to train recruits to kill. Grossman details numerous aspects of the training process, painting it as a complex matrix of group-identification, communal and authoritative sanction, personal disposition, and “distance” between the killer and enemy (Grossman 188). Identifying with a group—a nation, a company, a squad—and that group’s collective goals and embedded authority structures provides a soldier both anonymity and communal reinforcement, diffusing responsibility throughout the group and legitimizing the killing as an acceptable or necessary act. This group dynamic, however, is more complex than a simple ideological conformity: the soldier becomes bonded to the members of his unit emotionally, and grows to feel accountable *to them* for his actions in combat—if they’re fighting and killing, he must as well. Maintaining a “positive image” in the minds of his comrades—i.e., not being thought of as a coward—is an extraordinarily powerful incentive to participate in killing. Ardant Du Picq calls this idea, reminiscent of Foucault’s panopticon, “mutual surveillance” and posits it as a dominant force on the battlefield (Du Picq, cf. Grossman 150). This phenomenon is almost archetypal much writing and film on war: pieces often center on the reluctant soldier (“O’Brien” in *The Things They Carried*, Captain John Miller in *Saving Private Ryan*, Matt Eversmann in Ridley Scott’s version of *Black Hawk Down*) who “fights for his friends” rather than the objective “nobility” of the cause.

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But this dynamic, however, is only one part of complex matrix that fosters an acceptance of killing: the soldier's perception of "the enemy" also plays a significant part. To kill another human being, Grossman argues, is an unnatural thing for most of us. Indeed, he argues early in *On Killing* that only 15-20% of American combat riflemen actually fired at the enemy in either theatre of World War II—a percentage that is an increase over earlier wars. To kill, and do so effectively, the natural empathy and identification that people feel for one another must be eroded: the killer must see his target not as a human being, but as something less. Grossman discusses this diminishment of the enemy's humanity in terms of theoretical "distance": physical distance, emotional distance, moral distance, and mechanical distance. The "closer" a soldier is to his enemy, the harder it is to look him (as a human being) in the eye and pull the trigger. To kill an enemy, he must be perceived as fundamentally different—and, by extension, inferior—to the soldier and his group (Grossman 160). This difference is most intensely manifested in racial and cultural terms: enemies become "dinks," "japs," "ragheads," "krauts," or "untermensch"; deriding the enemy's values and culture as inferior, evil, or primitive makes it easier to deny any essential similarity with them; they can become not people, but "targets."<sup>9</sup> This racist "othering" is also evident in the representations of the "enemy" in film and literature, reducing him often to no more than an ethnic-cultural stereotype: the stoic, mechanical Nazi killing machine, the sadistic North Vietnamese prison-camp warden, the fanatical Russian communist out to destroy Western capitalism. The Japanese, for example, in films like *Sands of Iwo Jima*, are shown as sneaky and dishonorable, often crawling away on their stomachs—like

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<sup>9</sup> The coding of racial and cultural superiority within groups is a process far too broad and complex for these few lines; works in disciplines such as critical race theory and post-colonial studies can offer far more

snakes—after ambushing (from cover) some unsuspecting American soldiers. This racial conditioning, used to chilling effect in Nazi Germany, became a common part of the U.S. military sub-culture in Viet Nam, resulting in the “mere gook rule,” wherein any dead Vietnamese could be labeled Viet Cong. Many historians of the period, including Grossman, cite the “mere gook rule” used as a key justification for much of the war’s near-indiscriminant killing, paraphrasing it as “If its dead and it’s Vietnamese, it’s Viet Cong.” The “grouping” here is especially relevant—“*our*” group is “more human,” “more noble,” and “more peace-loving” than this *other* group. “They” are corrupt, vile, insane, maniacal, or animalistic. Each participant’s individuality—soldier and enemy, killer and target—become irrelevant, subordinated to the motivations and wishes of the group.

Nowhere is it more apparent than in the state of war that it is the community in which one operates that defines, enforces, and rewards “acceptable” behavior. While critics like Marx, Althusser, and Foucault—as well as numerous works in the social sciences—focus on the discrete mechanics of social control, I want only to draw from this work one salient point: what one classifies as “moral” has much to do with what the community with which she identifies will sanction and reinforce. National, regional, religious, political, familial, social, or military communities—and their ideological apparatuses—actively shape and adapt their social norms, their “codes” of acceptable behavior. Any individual, then, is subject to a complex system of behavioral influences, a milieu of competing codes of conduct that he or she adopts or deviates from. What one might do as a “Christian,” for example, often competes with what one does as a “social liberal” or as a “soldier.” The result is that an individual must negotiate through these

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significant insights into this problem than can I.

complex, group-centered moral struggles, coming to an acceptable equilibrium between the rival notions of what is “right”—it is a struggle that defines, in many ways, modern life. But my subject is more specific than the incredibly broad study of community influences on “morality.” I am interested in what happens when individuals see themselves as having *violated* a communal standard of behavior—whatever its origin—that they believe is valid or just.

Many veterans of the Viet Nam war—and many who choose to write about their experiences there—feel as though they have committed just such a violation. Perusing the numerous oral histories and memoirs by veterans, like Mark Baker’s *Nam* and Al Santoli’s *Everything We Had*, it is easy to see the dominant mode: regret and remorse. Almost every major literary memoir on the war—O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*, Bill Ehrhart’s *Vietnam-Perkasie* just to name three—deals actively with the guilt the writers feel for having participated. Even more remorseful is *The Winter Soldiers*, a history of Vietnam Veterans Against the War; VVAW staged the “Winter Soldier” trials in 1970, which called attention to the “business-as-usual” occurrence of war-crimes and civilian deaths. These people believe that they did something wrong by killing in this war—not something minor, but that they committed a *crime*. Why? What makes the killing in this war (58,022 American casualties, 3 million Vietnamese) any different from that of the prototypical “good war,” World War II, in which 85 million were killed worldwide? What makes this war—and the people who killed in it—more criminal?

Perhaps the answer is an issue of community sanction: if the morality of an act is something defined by the community through consensus, the morality of the Viet Nam

war was doomed to perpetual impasse. Supported by three successive presidential administrations, numerous “hawks” in the government, and a significant portion of the population (at least until 1968), and opposed by a populous and increasingly contentious anti-war movement based on University campuses, in moderate and radical left-wing political circles, in the counterculture, and even (eventually) in parts of the military, the war in Viet Nam was perhaps the most divisive conflict in American history. Political, familial, and social communities clashed (and even disintegrated) over the war—it was a topic on which consensus was impossible, even in 1975, when the last U.S. personnel left Viet Nam. For hawks, the war was a just cause, necessary to stop the spread of international communism. For doves, it was an obscene waste of lives and money, a war that couldn’t—and perhaps shouldn’t—be won. In this scheme, reductive as it may be considering the complicated political atmosphere of the 1960s, an uncomplicated community sanction for killing as a soldier is impossible, at least in the “wider” communities outside the war zone. While any soldier, regardless of the war in which he fights, must evaluate the morality of what he has done against the ideals and standards of his community and his beliefs, the Viet Nam veteran is doubly cursed: he must also face the condemnation of his act (not necessarily of *him*, but of his *actions*) by the significant segment of the population that refuses to sanction what he has done in its name.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the veteran would be—to some at least—a sort of pariah, legally free and equal, but bearing the stigma of one who has violated sacrosanct principles. Conversely, those

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<sup>10</sup> This moral disagreement—often quite vocal and unequivocal—of the war’s killing has given rise to a popular myth, that of the returning veteran being spit on by anti-war protesters as they arrive home from overseas service. H. Bruce Franklin, investigates this myth in his study *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*. In the numerous interviews Franklin conducted and homecoming accounts he read, he was unable to locate a single instance of a protestor spitting on a returning veteran. Franklin situates this myth in the scheme of what he sees as a larger conservative representational bias against the anti-war movement, considering the negative portrayals of stateside anti-war elements in films on the period .

who support the war—the “hawks”—could view the veteran as “noble” or “heroic,” for having killed in the course of patriotic duty.

While I think that the public schism over the war’s morality does contribute greatly to the moral affliction of many veterans—and to the poetry they write—I feel that the criminalization of discourse on the conflict has even deeper roots. The way the war was fought tactically and the way the U.S. military structured the combat tour experience made the war—and its violence—seem both almost *meaningless* and intensely *private*, two things that can cause, according to trauma therapist Jonathan Shay in *Achilles in Vietnam* a “shattering of the cohesiveness of consciousness (188),” and an “undoing of character” (169).<sup>11</sup>

The long and immensely complex history of America’s involvement in Indochina resists easy paraphrase or facile politico-historical analysis. Literally thousands of books and articles have been written on it since the 1950s, on subjects as wide-ranging as the “root causes” of the Indochina wars, “Why We Lost” in Viet Nam, the story of the combat veteran, presidential decision making, and even the “Vietnam Syndrome,” the “sickness” of questioning the merits of large-scale U.S. military involvement in other countries. That said, I feel that when making any claims about the poetry that Viet Nam veterans wrote—and the sense of guilt that poetry expresses—reduction of this complex history becomes a distasteful necessity. The war in Viet Nam had a catastrophic effect on many of those who were called to fight in it, a far greater proportion, I would venture,

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<sup>11</sup> Shay’s book, written using both *The Iliad* and contemporary psychiatric methodology as a means to illuminate Viet Nam veteran trauma—its nature and its treatment—focuses on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), of which guilt and unresolved feelings of loss and betrayal are central parts. Shay’s “ruining of character,” the consciousness damaged by untreated PTSD is made up of 1.) a hostile or mistrustful attitude toward the world, 2.) social withdrawal / isolation 3.) pervading moods of loneliness,

than those of the “Greatest Generation” who fought in the Great War or the Second World War—or at least those driven to write about it.

The word most often used to describe the American war in Viet Nam is *quagmire*, an untenable, perilous situation that can continue ad infinitum. Militarily, the war was a Sisyphusian task: troops would eradicate enemy forces from a region only to have them re-appear in force weeks later; towns and villages seemingly under government control would harbor Viet Cong guerillas or fire on incoming troops; bases thought “secure” from VC attacks would be mortared nightly. Military authorities, then, had no geographical way to measure the success or failure of any given operation. The response of the McNamara Pentagon to this problem was the adoption of a quantifiable measure: the body count—to gauge the level of success of combat operations. “Winning” an engagement, then was not holding a piece of territory at the end of the day; it was defined by a positive kill-to-loss ratio. If we were killing more of them than they were of us, the logic ran, our efforts must be successful (Gibson). The war in the jungles of Southeast Asia became then, for the American troops that fought it, a chaotic jumble of meaningless, repeatable battles that seemed focused only on killing for killing’s sake. The ideals and policy objectives that got the U.S. into Viet Nam in the first place—most importantly preventing the spread of international communism—were unimportant to those on the ground, those actually asked to do the killing. Michael Herr offers in *Dispatches* a succinct summary of the grunt’s understanding of the war and its purpose:

Not that you didn’t hear some overripe bullshit about it: Hearts and Minds,

Peoples of the Republic, tumbling dominoes, maintaining the equilibrium of the

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emptiness, or meaninglessness 4.) a compression of linear time—the person is always “on edge” or “on alert” as if under attack 5.) “estrangement” from those close to him. (Shay 169).

Dingdong by containing the ever encroaching Doodah; you could also hear the other, some young soldier speaking in all bloody innocence, saying “All that’s just a load, man. We’re here to kill gooks. Period.” (Herr 20)

The ideology behind the war in this passage is reduced to nonsense, catchphrases without any real substance, mere sound-bites prime for the six-o’clock evening news. The problem, however, arises when real 19 year-old kids are asked to kill and die for these ideas, often with only the assurance of their leaders that what they were doing (and suffering) was right and good. When North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon in April of 1975, that tenuous moral and ideological justification for killing—which many GIs never believed in anyway—was shattered: our strategies and leaders were proved deficient, our sacrifices all in vain. Losing the war in Viet Nam, a war we entered with the flimsiest of abstract justifications, left thousands of veterans wondering: *Why did we go through this? Why did we do what we did?*

This question—this unrelenting *Why?*—becomes even more complicated given the immense destruction wrought by U.S. troops and air-power on Viet Nam. While the United States lost over 58,000 soldiers, the Vietnamese lost between one and four million; while the U.S. suffered domestic upheaval, 1/7<sup>th</sup> of South Viet Nam was defoliated using the dioxin-derivative Agent Orange. The asymmetrical suffering of the war puts the burden of its senselessness on the United States: we were a large, industrial country waging war on a small, rural one, killing civilians and combatants in large numbers without an appreciable tactical or strategic gain.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the war’s violence was

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<sup>12</sup> James William Gibson’s *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* is an excellent analysis of the strategy of attrition in Viet Nam developed by William W. Westmoreland and Robert McNamara. The logic of

not simply something that these veterans survived (though, obviously it was), but something that they also participated in, something that the system they believed in started, escalated, and perpetuated.

Peter Marin, in his disturbing, beautiful essay “Coming to Terms with Vietnam,” points out that Americans as a culture have yet to accept their part in the atrocity of the war in Viet Nam, allowing instead the veterans of that war to bear the guilt themselves. According to Marin the nation has not communalized the war, has not owned up to the part that it played in the suffering visited on the Vietnamese. The war remains “over there,” its veterans an isolated, guilty community. This isolation, I feel, is not surprising given the institutional structure of the U.S. military at the time. In many ways, a combat tour in Viet Nam was designed—intentionally or not—to be a private, individual experience, radically different than the communal and unit-based experiences of earlier wars. Soldiers were drafted or enlisted alone, trained stateside (“Basic”) and in-country (Advanced Infantry Training, AIT) with different units, and, when ready to be deployed, were usually assigned as individual “replacements” to depleted field forces. But once “in” a unit—a community that supports and sanctions his activities—the tour was still essentially individualized. Army conscripts were required to serve 365 days in-country, and were then shipped home; Marines were required, as a testament to their toughness, to serve thirteen months. All personnel, even officers, rotated out of their units after their designated tour was up—individually. For those serving combat tours, then, the war was about time, not about a tangible goal, such as taking back Fortress Europe, reaching the Japanese home islands. Soldiers often kept “short-timers’ calendars,” usually a drawing

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attrition dictated that inflicting more losses than the enemy could bear would secure victory. Unfortunately, Gibson argues, the NLF and Vietnamese nationalist elements were willing to sustain far

of a naked woman or some other picture divided up into 365 sections; with each day that passed, the grunt could color in another section. The goal, of course, was to become “short,” to have less than 90 days left in-country, after which one could get on the “freedom bird” to go back “to the world.” The grunt vernacular here is interesting: it is as if these soldiers are serving a prison sentence rather than fighting a war—they mark off time, feel cut off from the outside “world,” and want, more than anything else, “freedom.” Even being shipped home on the “freedom bird,” however, was an individual experience. One didn’t return to the United States on a troopship with other members of his company, battalion, brigade or division—he was rotated out based on the completion of his one-year tour, and arrived home by himself, at times too quickly to notify friends and family. My father, himself a Viet Nam veteran, once remarked to me that he found it odd—jarring, even—to be in the middle of a Southeast Asian jungle one day, and one commercial airline flight later, to be back in Baltimore, on his way out of the Army.

Any veteran returning from a war is isolated by his experiences: he has seen and done things that civilians—those outside of the experience—have not. Talking about the war, telling the “true war story,” as Tim O’Brien puts it in *The Things They Carried*, especially to those who were not there—those who opposed the war, those who don’t understand the conditions soldiers exist in—many found nearly impossible. Coming home individually, trickling in over the years of the war compounded the isolation that Viet Nam veterans faced. Like Hemingway’s Krebs in “Soldier’s Home,” they arrived alone, denied all the public “hysteria” of welcoming rituals like parades and ceremonies, rituals, Jonathan Shay argues that are a step toward social re-integration, a public signifier of communal acceptance of the veteran back into civilian life. A collection of

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greater losses—into the millions—than U.S. strategists understood.

stragglers, Nam vets, like Krebs found themselves without a public support structure through which to communalize the pain and trauma of war, through which to come to terms with all the things that he had seen and done. Isolated from those who experienced the war with them—most soldiers left their friends in the field—Viet Nam vets were often also isolated from veterans of other wars. The response of established veteran’s groups such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars toward Viet Nam veterans was—according to a number of apocryphal accounts—cool; they were, after all, the first vets to return home “losers.”<sup>13</sup>

#### **IV. The Personal is Political: Poetry and the Viet Nam War**

While communities of veterans like Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) eventually emerged as soldiers returned home, many veterans were forced to deal with the war—a war in which we were defeated, a war fought with a muddled moral justification and equally questionable tactics and strategy—essentially *alone*. It was a war that many could not find meaning in; they had killed and suffered loss, committed sins and witnessed atrocities, over and over again, for nothing. Without a community to offer absolution—to either affirm the essential “rightness” or “necessity” of their acts or to absolve them of responsibility—Viet Nam veterans were cast adrift, lost in a moral limbo. They were often paralyzed by the feeling of having transgressed against some kind of unwritten law, of having willingly participated in an unjust war waged by little

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<sup>13</sup> Many veterans, according to Jonathan Shay and a number of other therapists and scholars, actively dispute the perception that the U.S. “lost” the war in Viet Nam—they cite the fact that after every major meeting engagement during the war years, American forces held the ground when the day was over. For

lying men for specious reasons, of having been duped by the political fairytale of the absolute virtue of American democracy. Their country had asked them to kill on faith, and they had. And after, there was silence.

The writing that I seek to examine in this collection of work is an attempt, as all writing is, to break silences. In the poetry that follows, this silence is the silence of unresolved guilt. Unlike the war poetry of the previous century, the American poetry on the Viet Nam war is obsessed with articulating its own sense of *personal* responsibility for the atrocity inflicted on both the Vietnamese people *and* the Americans who fought during the war. This poetry seeks to assert its writers' status as what the veteran anthology *Winning Hearts and Minds* calls "agent-victims" of the war's tragedy. Agent-victims. Both torturers and tortured, aggressor and conquered, killer and victim, these writers seek both to admit wrongdoing and decry the systems—political, economic, social—that made it possible. This is a poetry that personalizes the horrors of war more directly than any writing in history. It is the *private*, personal negotiation of one's own culpability both *in the war* and *for the war* that serves as the impetus for any "larger" measure of public meaning. Nowhere do we see in this work the central, abstract, faceless soldier-sufferer of Owen or Sassoon, the archetypal masculine fantasies of Whitman, or even the symbolic shaving sergeant or ball-turret gunner of Jarrell. Here we get Bill Ehrhart, the kid from Perkasio who killed because he was asked to and never learned how to talk about it. This writing dissolves the barrier between the poet's "public" acts of protest, affirmation, resistance, and revision and the "private" personal assumption of responsibility for his actions. Moreover, it is *through* the act of

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them, "victory" was not achieving "peace with honor" via an advantageous political settlement—it was about taking ground.

confession, the act of admission of guilt and responsibility—not a sublimation of it, not an expiation of it—that the de facto anti-war political message of this work has any meaning; it asserts, sometimes violently, “[e]very deed is subject to moral judgment.” (Jaspers, cf. Marin 103).

This is not a poetry of redemption. It is a poetry of failure, of a failure so profound as to preclude the possibility of “atonement” or “penance” in a conventional sense. But in this failure there is hope; hope not for a release from responsibility, but for a deeper and more complex understanding of guilt. Peter Marin writes in “Coming to Terms with Vietnam” about the impossibility of one ridding himself of moral responsibility for the war:

The dead, after all, remain dead. The maimed remain maimed. It is not more possible to “absolve” oneself of guilt than it is to bring the dead back to life or erase the suffering one has caused. But it may be possible to live in future in a way that makes sense of the past, and to restore to one’s life the moral legitimacy that has been lost. . . . All of us, like all nations, are tested twice in the moral realm: first by what we do, then by what we make of what we do. A condition of guilt, a sense of one’s own guilt, denotes a kind of second chance; we are, as if by a kind of grace, given a chance to repay the living what it is we find ourselves owing to the dead (Marin 117-118).

It is the recurring sense of one’s own guilt, Marin seems to say, that enables an evolution of consciousness. The act of confession then, the cathartic renewal central to Christian

sacraments of reconciliation, becomes transformed in this poetry; no longer is it a seeking of forgiveness, but an acknowledgment of taint, a laying bare not in hopes of transcendence, but of understanding and caution, and hope itself. Owen's planned preface to his first collection said that "All a poet can do today is warn." This poetry is warning through confession—a warning not against the waging of war, but of what war brings out of us.

This project seeks to explore the complex varieties of guilt in the American poetry of the Viet Nam war. Each writer I have selected is a major contributor to the literature of the war; together, they form a canon of poets who articulate unique and necessary aspects of the trenchant guilt central to the genre. Some, while gaining public recognition early in their careers by writing on the war, have faded into obscurity; others are major figures in the contemporary American canon. In Chapter 1, "I Had Gloves On Then: Michael Casey's *Obscenities* and American Narcissism," I examine one of the first major books of poetry to emerge from a veteran of the war, Michael Casey's *Obscenities*; my analysis focuses on Casey's ironic use of self-absorbed speakers and unstable grammatical structures to both reveal and analyze the destructive solipsism of the American presence in Viet Nam. Chapter 2: "Useful Music: Basil T. Paquet and Literary Gestalt" examines the work of another key early (1972) war poet, Basil T. Paquet, an army medic, whose work laments his own impotence to alleviate the pain of the war; his fantastic "merging" or "gestalt" with the suffering subjects around him offers a masochistic escape from—and articulation of—his own helplessness. Chapter 3: "Gathering the Blood in a Cup: John Balaban's Elegies" addresses the work of the only non-combatant in this group. The chapter casts Balaban's elegies—for friends,

acquaintances, and colleagues “consumed” by the war—as a melancholic formalization of “survivor guilt.” The work of Bruce Weigl, perhaps both the most honest and most troubled of the veteran poets, is addressed in Chapter 4: “Living is a Darker Thing: Bruce Weigl’s Shameful Joy.” The chapter argues that Weigl controls his own destructive desires through the act of narrative: war for him was sexy and addictive. His is the guilt not over action, but of enjoyment. Chapter 5: “Ghost Pictures: Yusef Komunyakaa’s Empathetic Vision” deals with the work of a U.S. Army journalist and one of the most respected poets writing in America today. Komunyakaa’s is perhaps the most complex poetry of regret studied here: his writing, through an intense suspension of time and a focus on visual metaphors, meditates on the complex nature of empathy between soldiers, both “friend” and “enemy,” illustrating that in war, resonating, intense bonds can be forged, explored, and shattered in a fraction of a moment.

**One: Michael Casey's *Obscenities* and American Narcissism**

When examining the ever-evolving canon of American Viet Nam war poetry, the work of Michael Casey immediately stands out: one notices his unique mastery of aural contours, his formal experimentation, and his visceral, almost atavistic portrayal of life as an American soldier in Viet Nam. The poems in his first book, *Obscenities* (1972), are strikingly honest depictions of the experience of the war, focusing principally on the relentless, dehumanizing boredom that non-combatant soldiers—"rear-echelon motherfuckers" (REMFs)—endured. Casey's language most often is the language of the grunt, the plebian jargon of the uneducated, unrefined youth that made up the nucleus of the American presence in Indochina. While not a book (like most others on the war) that focuses primarily on the harrowing experience of combat, *Obscenities* nonetheless chronicles some of the essential truths of the experience of Viet Nam: the fact that it was, at its core, a war that profoundly corroded the American sense of reason, order, and morality.

In his discerning foreword to the first edition of *Obscenities* (the 1972 Yale Younger Poets Volume), Stanley Kunitz praises its success while at the same time lamenting the fact that American poetry took several years to even attempt to deal adequately with the quagmire of involvement in Viet Nam:

Michael Casey's *Obscenities* is, to my knowledge, the first significant book of poems written by an American to spring from the war in Viet Nam, though for more than seven years, since the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the American experience—and, in particular American youth—has been radically

transformed by that ill-starred adventure (vii).

This “radical transformation” that Kunitz asserts Viet Nam forced America to experience unfortunately does not apply to most of the literature of the war. Most of the poetry, Kunitz argues, fails to devise a “new” mode of poetic expression up to the task of responding to the experience of Viet Nam. Previous attempts at dealing poetically with Viet Nam, according to Kunitz, have “foundered in declamatory indignation or bored us with their redundance” (vii). Even previous modes of expressing ideas about previous modern wars fail here, as if Viet Nam, somehow succeeded in destroying all modes of traditional representation of conflict. “We can no longer respond,” Kunitz writes, “to rhetorical flourishes and sentiments borrowed from the poets who fought—and too often died—in the other wars of this century” (vii). Kunitz’s analysis asserts that poetic strategy—much like military strategy—must adapt to its new terrain. Work in the vein of the great tradition of modern war poetry—Owen, Sassoon, and Rosenberg in the Great War, Jarrell and Douglas in World War II (vii)—will suffer the same fate as the misguided, inappropriate military tactics of the Americans in Southeast Asia: it will be swallowed up by the jungle. “Rhetorical flourishes” and “sentiments” are the heavy tanks and air power of poetry—the American fist wielding great destructive power, but lacking the nuance to deal with an invisible, fluid enemy. Kunitz celebrates the iconic power of Casey’s work in *Obscenities*, calling it the “kind of anti-poetry that befits a kind of war empty of any kind of glory” (vii).

Stephen Spender, writing in *The New York Review of Books* on *Obscenities*, while agreeing for the most part with Kunitz’s assessment of the book’s importance, takes issue

with the terming of Casey's work as "anti-poetry." Instead, Spender calls Casey and other Viet Nam war poets "anti-poets," writers who, in contrast to Owen, Sassoon, Jarrell, and other poets of the world wars, seemed only marginally concerned with or self-conscious of their roles as poets. Whereas, according to Spender, Owen and Sassoon "carried their poems with them into the trenches and loaded their kit-bags with the Romantics or classics" (Spender 1), Casey and his compatriots worked from a much less "literary" mindset in terms of intent or subject matter. "While demonstrably interested in language" (Spender 1), Casey makes very little use of his poetic (and more specifically "war-poetic") "inheritance." Spender cites Casey's poem "Learning" as an example of his rejection of poetic convention. The poem is an austere meditation on the intersection between "European" concepts of war writing and the Vietnamese culture:

"Learning"

I like learning useless things

Like Latin

I really enjoyed Latin

Caesar and the Gallic Wars

Enjoyed his fighting

The Helvetians and Germans

And Gauls

I enjoyed Viet Nameese too

The language

Its five intonations  
Its no conjugations  
A good language to learn  
Viet Nam is divided in  
Three Parts too  
It makes me wonder  
Who will write their book (62)

Spender argues that in Casey's poems, literary language, influences of other poetry, metaphor, imagery, and, above all the presence of the writer himself as "poet" felt in his poem, are abjured. They are therefore difficult, by the standards of most poetry, to judge as poems (Spender 1). The power of this work, and consequently its value, thus comes not from its literary skill but from a "commitment to a phase of the fighting already superseded, to a place already nearly wiped off the face of the earth, and to a society transformed by neocolonialism" (Spender 1). As an "anti-poet," in Spender's estimation, Casey "seems to care for nothing except giving voice to a particularly infinite agony packed into a transitional moment" (Spender 1). What makes Spender's analysis of Casey valuable is his willingness to acknowledge the conflicted status *Obscenities* has as literature: it is "poetry" that is not "poetic," a literary representation of an unspeakable reality that refuses to be literary. As an early reviewer, Spender's assertion that this work is in some substantial, new way "poetic" –not anti-poetic—serves to validate the essential point that Kunitz makes in his Introduction to *Obscenities*: that Viet Nam, in all its complexity and moral catastrophe demands a non-conventional, revolutionary form of

poetic expression. Of course, though, this assertion is nothing new; emergent moral problems and cultural events always demand—or seem to demand—a new mode of discourse and representation.

From somewhat of a less strictly “evaluative” perspective, some scholars and literary critics have examined *Obscenities* as well. Phil Beidler, in *American Literature and the Experience of Viet Nam*, argues that Casey represents a synthesis or reconciliation of the “predictable division” that plagues much of the early writing of the war (c. 1958-70, according to Beidler): the distinction between what he calls “dogged concreteness—an attempt to render the experience of the war in all its brute sensory plenitude” and the structuring of “notes toward a new mythic iconography, attempts to devise new images for new experiences . . . images fierce and unsettling in their bitter originality of imaginative invention” (75). As an example of the “concrete” approach evident in the early war writing, Beidler cites W.D. Ehrhart’s “Viet Nam, 1967.” Below are the first two stanzas:

Air heavy with rain and humidity,  
Sky full of ominous clouds,  
Dank smell of refuse,  
Mosquitoes and flies like carpets on the wind.

Patchwork quilt of rice paddies,  
Winding rivers and swollen streams,  
Water buffalo lumbering though the fields,

High mountains on the horizon. (75-76)

Beidler calls this poem “prosaic,” and “relentlessly methodical” in its accounting of the details of Viet Nam; Ehrhart’s goal here, it seems, is to convey the nuance of the situation not through symbolic innovation, but through conveying an inventory of variegated (yet excruciatingly common) images grounded literally in the actual sensory experience of life in the Nam. The poem hopes, according to Beidler, that the deluge of detail will “yield up some unifying vision of horrible truth” (76).

In contrast to the “dogged concreteness” of poems like Ehrhart’s, Beidler posits a second mode, a more heavily symbolic representation of the war, characterized by poems like Basil T. Paquet’s “Night Dust-off,” featured in *Winning Hearts and Minds*. The first stanza is reprinted below:

A sound like hundreds of barbers  
stopping furiously, increases;  
suddenly the night lights,  
flashing blades thin bodies  
into red strips  
hunched against the wind  
of a settling liftship. (76)

A “dust off,” in grunt vernacular, is a term for an emergency medical evacuation via helicopter; Paquet’s poem elicits a much different experience for the reader than does

Ehrhart's. Instead of the technical details of the experience, we are provided instead with a language of simile—the movement of the helicopter's rotor is compared obliquely to the sound of "hundreds of barbers / stropping furiously." A move like this requires that the reader process information far more abstractly than in the Ehrhart poem—the reader must reason far more analogically to understand the sensory experience of the helicopter landing. One must, then, imagine how hearing the sound of the rotor blades beating could be like hearing amplified sounds of a barber sharpening a blade. Beidler calls this type of metaphoric representation "elaborate art-speech," and "a distracting hodgepodge of fractured syntax and figurative ellipsis" (77); this requires from its reader an entirely different method of approach to the poem, a different openness to the nuance of the experience, to the purely aesthetic or analogical modes of reasoning that poetry engenders.

These two models of expression in Beidler's estimation make up the "extremes" of the war's poetic representation. Casey's work in *Obscenties*, he argues, achieves a unique type of "organic mediating perspective" between these two extremes, a productive economy of exchange "between the quotidian and the aesthetic" (77). According to Beidler, Casey's best poems, such as "A Bummer" and "Hoa Binh" (Vietnamese for "peace") exhibit an "inevitability of poetic statement," when the juxtaposition of the simplistic, detail-driven concreteness and the elusive aesthetic symbols produce a moment of lucidity for poem, poet, and reader. A passage from "Hoa Binh":

August thirty-first

Stanley was all excited

She just made eighteen  
And got to vote  
For the first time  
There were sixteen slates  
To vote for  
In Viet Nam that year  
And every slate's poster  
Said that  
That slate  
Wanted Hoa Binh  
From voting  
She came back to me  
All excited  
Casee  
I vote for Hoa Binh  
That's nice, Stanley  
I did too  
Back in Hoa Ky<sup>14</sup>  
I hope your vote counts (Casey 81)

What powers this type of poem is the combination of the of the matter-of-fact tone with the “strange and even slightly ludicrous” image of the oddly-nicknamed girl (“Stanley,” a

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<sup>14</sup> The United States

Vietnamese servant girl) and her naïve faith in the “democratic” process of South Viet Nam. Stanley and “Casee” take part in an odd moment of connection, a moment that we as readers have access to, by seeing that “Casee,” the “powerful” American and Stanley, the naïve Vietnamese servant, are both helpless in the larger drama of the war. This is where we see the poem “stumbling across its own terrible truth,” (Casey 81) in Beidler’s terminology, offering, almost by accident, its reader a momentary epiphany.

Beidler’s analysis of Casey’s work in *American Literature and the Experience of Viet Nam*, while helpful in attempting to establish a poetic or thematic context for *Obscenities*, unfortunately does little more. Perhaps due to the comprehensive nature of the book—it deals only partially with the poetry of the war—Beidler’s passage on Casey deals almost exclusively with theme and epiphany, ignoring for the most part the formal and linguistic aspects of the text.

Vince Gotera’s expansive, in-depth survey of the poetry of the Viet Nam war, *Radical Visions*, situates Casey’s work within the scheme of what he calls GI Resistance poetry. Gotera believes that a central thrust of much early war writing, Casey’s included, is resistance to what he (via Michael Herr’s brilliant neologism) terms “the jargon stream,” the doublespeak, ambiguity, and tautological reasoning endemic to “official” discourse on war. Gotera makes extensive use of the theories of Thomas Merton and George Orwell on the problem of language in relation to warfare, in both Viet Nam and other modern wars. Orwell, in “Politics and the English Language,” discusses how language suffers when used for political and “war-making” purposes—any language of war must “consist largely of euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness” (“Politics,” cf. Gotera 96). Expanding on this idea, Merton argues that the language

surrounding the war was permeated by:

double talk, tautology, ambiguous cliché, self-righteous and doctrinaire pomposity and pseudoscientific jargon that mask[s] a total callousness and moral insensitivity, indeed a basic contempt for man. (Merton 117)

This type of linguistic evasion requires a response in a “revolutionary idiom,” (Gotera 97) which is by definition “racy, insolent, direct, profane, iconoclastic, and earthy”, but also a “language of power” and “self-enclosed finality” (Merton 117-118). Any “new” language, Merton seems to indicate, while necessary to describe the “world” that is Viet Nam, still contains remnants—ideological and ontological—of its antecedents. It must be “powerful” and “final,” while maintaining a moral and social sensitivity about its subject, embracing stability where previous modes of discourse embraced ambiguity.

Developing his analysis through the framework established by Orwell and Merton, Gotera shows, more implicitly than explicitly, that the sparseness of Casey’s language in *Obscenities*, the “anti-poetic” quality that numerous critics note, is ideological as well as aesthetic: the “language of power,” that, in Merton’s terms, is required to resist the ideology of the American war machine is in essence the opposite of the traditionally “poetic” impulse. The artifice and ambiguity inherent in language—that poetry exploits for aesthetic and rhetorical purposes—is also what, in many critics’ estimation, makes justifiable what cannot be justified.

Where Gotera’s analysis falters, however, is in its expansiveness; while providing an exhaustive survey of what critics have written about *Obscenities*, Gotera’s active

analysis of the work consists more of placing it in a specific theoretical context rather than tracing the text's engagement with its own attempts to deconstruct the structures that, according to Gotera's theory, it is resisting. The most fruitful parts of Casey's work in regard to the resistance to the "jargon stream" – the meta-linguistic aspects of *Obscenities*—are not addressed. Instead of reading Casey's text closely, Gotera establishes, via an extensive critical history of the text, that the writing is sparse and direct, "brutally spare and frugal" and that Casey continually occludes himself from the reader's experience of the poem, acting like "a tape recorder . . . playing back a conversation overheard" (Gotera 103).

Much of the criticism on *Obscenities* has been limited in this way, mired in an obsession with its "antipoetic" qualities, from Kunitz's early work to Gotera's more recent writing. Most works, even when simply referring to the book, note its sparseness and the directness of its language. What I would like to do here is not to simply illustrate or comment upon Casey's style, but to examine in depth the function of that style in a thematic context. I will stipulate that Casey's use of language is important, as it is to any poet; but what critics overlook is that this style is strategic in nature, working in service of a sophisticated analysis of the American mind as it relates to its catastrophic intervention in Southeast Asia. Thematically and formally, Casey dismantles the American psyche's willful isolation from its own sins—of commission, witness, and omission—in Viet Nam.

## **I. Casey, the Speaker, and the Experience of Suffering**

Pain is of the heart,  
And what are a few throes of bodily suffering  
If they can waken one pang of remorse?

Wordsworth, "The Borderers," Act III, ll. 140-142

In *Obscenities*, Casey uses a complex network of speakers, in addition to his direct, unadorned style, to engage with the particularly American response to "obscenities" in Viet Nam. Casey's collection of speakers in *Obscenities* seems almost pre-made in some regard, almost as if he is using "stock" characters from an odd war film. We get very little information on each of these speakers, usually the amount that can be yielded by one poem. As such, we learn not about the depth and complexity of these characters, their "humanity," but only of one defining aspect of their personality.

The use of stock characters is very common in cultural production regarding warfare and conflict: the vast majority of films and literature on war contains action centered around a few major types, most of whom are not developed beyond one or two major personality traits. Narratives and films on war and conflict often focus on the "squad" (5-10 man unit), using the micro-level representation of military experience as a figure for a macro-level investigation of the intricacies of the situation. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Hogan's Heroes*, *Sergeant York*, *Saving Private Ryan* and numerous other war stories have relied on these limited, accessible characters to explore the experience of combat. There are any number of set character archetypes in war literature: the "scared, neophyte private," the "lifer NCO" who is hardened toward the experience of war but compassionate toward his young troops, the "green lieutenant," fresh from West Point or

Annapolis, dedicated to the theory of military doctrine, yet ignorant of its practice in the real world.

A particularly telling example is the archetype of the “hillbilly deadeye,” a soldier who is from the South or another isolated area, usually very religious, but disturbingly effective with a rifle. This is perhaps most interesting because some “real” historical characters seem to fall under this archetypal pattern—one recalls Gary Cooper’s Sergeant York in his innocent, methodical heroism, eliminating German soldiers just as he would hunt wild turkeys, or the rustic Audie Murphy’s larger-than-life ascension into American cultural iconography in *To Hell and Back*. The enigmatic Private Jackson in *Saving Private Ryan* is interesting in this respect: we see him, in his final scene of the film, reciting Baptist prayers as he picks off German soldiers attacking his position. Robert DeNiro’s Michael in *The Deer Hunter* also embodies this archetype, although he expands and complicates it, offering a departure from the “flatness” of most “hillbilly deadeye” characters. Michael’s “one shot” mentality, relentless and Zen-like, is perhaps the central symbol that binds the film together—and makes him a compelling, complex figure.

There are any number of reasons for this use of stock characters. They offer a convenient vehicle for the discussion of something “alien” to most non-combatants. The vast majority of people who interact with this media will not ever experience war; they need an accessible device through which to understand the ideas and situations inherent in the experience. Identifying with a cultural stereotype, or even an artistic one, creates a tangible connection between the “alien-ness” of the experience and the “real” people who fought in it. The inner complexities of the individual in war are often obscured—occasionally we are graced with a character as complex as Benjamin Willard in

*Apocalypse Now* or Private Bell in *The Thin Red Line*, or even a symbolic agent like Heller's Yossarian—but all of these characters prove difficult to empathize with for most readers. Indeed, at times it is Willard's "alien-ness" and obtuseness that we must penetrate in order to understand the degree of Kurtz's insanity. Instead, we connect with the "easy" characters: Corporal Upham, who "wants to write" in *Saving Private Ryan*, the flawed, profiteering officers in *Kelley's Heroes* and *Three Kings*, or even the jingoistic cant of John Wayne in *The Green Berets*. Such figures provide us with recognizable symbols, cultural and social stereotypes that render the experience more understandable. When we as readers or viewers are not asked to think about the complexities of characters in war—the conflicts that every person experiences, the "human" conflicts in our own character—we can more readily transform these figures into symbols, either for moralistic social commentary, like Sergeants Barnes and Elias in *Platoon*, comic self-aggrandizement like *Hogan's Heroes*, or allegorical political satire like Gus Hasford's *The Short Timers*, which served as the basis for Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. The cultural and political associations for these characters are pre-established: readers have to do very little conceptual work to understand their purposes and motivations.

Likewise, this departure from the harsh realities of the "real" characters in war production also renders the experience "safe," not just pathetically or rhetorically effective. As readers, we do not have to appreciate the catastrophic disruption of these people's lives by this experience—as they are deprived of depth and complexity, their lives "back in the world" become less important or non-existent to the reader: we embrace the fact that they have no existence outside of the production we experience

them in. The limited context in which we meet most of these characters expires as easily as they do—they teach us a lesson about war by becoming a synecdoche of it, not by forcing us to empathize with them as whole beings

Conversely, this dissociation also works toward other, more questionable ends: the demonization of the enemy and the fetishism of the warrior. When characters are reduced to types, and we recognize them as such, we can easily dehumanize them, distancing ourselves from the human realities that they could represent: America did this in numerous World War II agit-prop films such as *Bataan*, in Viet Nam (*The Deer Hunter*, *The Green Berets*), and even during the later phases of the Cold War: 1984's *Red Dawn* shows Soviet invaders of the United States (with one notable exception) as ruthless, bloodthirsty imperialists, executing all dissidents and enslaving the population of the U.S.

In a similar vein, the stock character has been used to fetishize the warrior ideal, as well as war in general. Stallone's *Rambo* series, as well as Chuck Norris's *Missing in Action* illustrate the trend. In these films, the “avenging weapon of democracy,” Stallone's brooding, ex-Special Forces operator, Norris's haunted, guilt-ridden Col. Braddock, fight an ultra-violent war against demonized North Vietnamese prison administrators who are unlawfully holding American prisoners of war against their will. The way that these films, and other war films in the “action” genre, treat the idea of war, the act of killing another person, is almost pornographic: explosions eradicate scores of drone-like soldiers in stylized battle-scenes, while the warrior hero triumphantly executes the sadistic leader of the enemy forces, most often very personally with some sort of large knife, if not with his bare hands. It is almost as if these films—cold war relics all—

achieve something that America was unable to: a real, spectacular, satisfying “victory,” a sexualized conquest over that which damaged us. Much like pornography re-asserts the (ever self-deconstructing) myth of masculine dominance over women, films like these regenerate the myth of American superiority over historical forces. Frank Sweeney acutely observes that the *Rambo* series illustrates both an appropriation and re-writing of history: in returning to Viet Nam defeating the Vietnamese, he essentially (re-)conquers an American frontier (like the mythologized American figure, Daniel Boone) that had previously served only as a signifier of cultural limitation and defeat (Sweeney 63). Stock characters are, in short, a way of controlling and making more accessible—perhaps even “pacifying”—the “alien” experience of warfare: they help us understand what we cannot understand, enabling authors to use pre-existing cultural and artistic associations to explain and explore war. This type of identification is particularly important when dealing with a conflict (and a place) as alien to “American” sensibilities as Viet Nam most clearly was.

Michael Casey creates a new cast of Viet Nam “stock characters” in *Obscenities*: in this book of monologues we get not the hardened NCOs or troubled, inexperienced officers of most Viet Nam war fiction, but the bored military policeman, the National Guardsman, the LZ Gator “body collector,” or the company clerk, Big John. While deviating from the “standard” collection of characters in a Viet Nam narrative, Casey’s use of these intentionally shallow and one-dimensional figures succeed in connecting with his reader’s knowledge and expectations: while the “types” might be new, they are built from the familiar.

These speakers, mainly what field soldiers—“grunts”—would call REMFs (Rear-

Echelon Motherfuckers, non-combatants), engage almost daily with the suffering experienced by both Americans and the Vietnamese as a result of the war. “Suffering,” as a concept, is notoriously difficult to define; indeed, there is almost a literary sub-genre on the subject, with contributors varying from the Marquis De Sade, Sigmund Freud, and Victor Frankl to more contemporary theorists such as David Morris and Elaine Scarry. Such work explores the nature of what we call “pain,” in all its medical, psychological, sexual, and cultural complexity. For these authors the definition of pain is as varied as the tools used to describe it. Pain can be the means to the liberation of the ego (via both the feelings it engenders and its infliction onto others, willingly or no), it can be a religious and intellectual test (Frankl), a political tool that “makes” and “unmakes” the world (Scarry), or a complex, culturally influenced, deeply personal experience (Morris). Or, paraphrasing Freud, it can be an overloading of variegated stimuli in the world that the psyche seeks to avoid. David Morris, in *The Culture of Pain*, offers us an interesting insight as to the difference between “pain” and “suffering”—pain, however we define it, is an experience or an event. “Suffering,” is less of an event, but a response to the experience of pain: it is how we react emotionally and psychologically to painful stimuli. I agree with Morris’s differentiation, but for the purposes of this discussion, I wish to expand the definition of the condition of “suffering” as it relates to war. “Suffering” in my estimation happens when the experience of “pain” and “trauma” become endemic to one’s existence; when physical, emotional, and social oppression becomes an ontological certainty, expected as a continuing phenomena; when pain ceases to be momentary and shocking—when the termination of the experience cannot be anticipated. Thus, the “suffering” subject, be it American or Vietnamese, is continually responding emotionally

to some sort of adverse stimulus, such as physical wounding, personal or cultural guilt, or the violent loss of family or friends.

If any situation embodies this definition, it is the world of *Obscenities*. Casey's speakers interact with those who are suffering or in pain as a result of the war every day. They see the effects of combat more than combat itself: injured and dead soldiers and civilians populate all of the book's 70-odd pages. Casey gives us the war through their eyes, organizing the book as a series of isolated monologues, disconnected temporally, dramaturgically, and thematically from one another. We know painfully little about the episodes that each speaker relays to us, and even less about the "character" who speaks.

It almost seems odd that in poetry so concerned with honesty and "true" representation, that Casey would give us so little information to work with regarding many of his speakers. It is true that many attempts at rendering accurately the experience of Viet Nam have surrendered a strong, coherent viewpoint in favor of an approach that processes and represents numerous opinions: as an example, see any of the numerous oral histories done on combat veterans, such as Al Santoli's *Everything We Had*, or the collections of soldier narratives from books like *Dear America: Letters Home From Viet Nam*. Indeed, Casey's work almost reads like an oral history at times, giving us as readers an isolated glimpse into his speakers' lives, focused on an isolated episode in his experience. But we know very little about most of Casey's speakers apart from this isolated episode. Perhaps the best available literary analogues would be Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* or Anna Deveare Smith's excellent collection of dramatic monologues on the 1992 L.A. riots, *Twilight*

. As we experience these poems, the speakers' unique, sometimes flamboyant

personalities persist within our consciousness, even if we have to imagine who actually relays the text of the poem to us. In his Introduction, Stanley Kunitz goes so far as to suggest that we read the book “straight through, as though it were a novel or a play, in order to follow the implicit development of the action, a progress of awareness, and to make the acquaintance of a sterling cast of recurring characters” (xi). I think Kunitz’s suggestion is more than valid; it is essential—each of these “recurring characters” forces us to imagine in a different way, from simply theorizing who the speaker is to analyzing his moral or empirical processes. But this imagining is limited; since we recognize most of these characters as “stock” or redolent of stock characters, we are only willing to attribute to them a certain level of “real-ness” or authenticity. The stereotypical aspects of these characters highlights their artificiality, and limits our involvement with them. We can connect with these characters, but only to a point; this effect is crucial, I would argue, to the implicit point that Casey develops throughout *Obscenities*—the importance of and possibility of empathy in Viet Nam.

The poem that opens *Obscenities* provides a good starting point for a closer look at the complexity of Casey’s use of speaker:

“The Company Physical Combat Proficiency Test Average”

The company averag’d be higher

But Ramos there

He went into the mile run

With a near four hundred

Burnt smoke for the first three laps  
An then he got sick  
Ana committee group sergeant there  
Another Puerto Rican fella  
Told him ta quit ta leave  
An so he got a zero on the whole test  
An that brought the company average  
Down a point ana half  
In my opinion  
Ramos got fucked  
He could've lowcrawled his ass  
The rest a the way  
An still got a four fifty  
If I'd a seed that sergeant  
I'm not ascairt a nobody  
I'd a beat the shit out a him  
But don't feel bad, Ramos  
What's done is did  
That's all right, son  
Ya git another chance tomorrer  
Though that don't help  
The company average none (3)

The speaker here has a language all his own—definitely “anti-poetic” language—it is almost as if Casey were transcribing bits of conversation that he’d overheard. The speech patterns here are that of the uneducated: “to” becomes “ta,” “and a” becomes “ana”—the speech is rushed, almost slurred, evoking the image of Eugene O’Neill’s motley band of losers in *The Iceman Cometh*, or any other “urban” or working class environment. We are dropped into the middle of the progress of ideas here-- Casey, by starting this highly “conversational” poem in medias res, assumes a certain dialogic engagement on the part of the reader—he fashions the speaker’s story as somewhat of a response to a reader’s fictional questioning of the company’s physical combat test average scores. But still, even with the presupposition of a reader’s “participation” in this short narrative, Casey gives us very little to work with; we have no idea who is telling us this story, who “Ramos” is, or in what context this is being relayed to us. Casey does this repeatedly throughout *Obscenities*.

But Casey takes this “anti-poetic” impulse a step further, forcing the reader to formalize this piece as a poem. Despite its focus on “numbers” and “averages,” the quantifiable aspects of poetic form, the poem rapidly dissolves formally—it has no discernable meter or stanzaic form. By resisting this formalization, the poem suggests a number of things. First, predictably, it shows that the experience of Viet Nam resists quantification (the subject of the poem “fails” and throws off the projected Company Average). Human beings are more than quantifiable figures; they cannot be “averaged” as abstracts. This overwhelming urge to quantify, we might recall, was a driving principle—some may call it an obsession—of the Robert McNamara Defense Department. McNamara, Westmoreland and the rest of the Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon

military establishment were constantly seeking ways to gauge the level of success or failure in Viet Nam—their primary solution was the “body count” of enemy soldiers . Second, the poem’s focus seems to be on not simply the experience of Viet Nam, but more specifically on the institution of military culture as a whole—the “numbers” here signify the rigidity and “logic” inherent in military indoctrination. Authority, competition, and hierarchy are constantly in conflict with the fragile, fluid, unstable notion of a soldier’s – a human being’s—performance as a soldier. The poem, then, makes transparent the paradoxes in the Viet Nam-era military: despite its attempts at quantifying the experience, both of human beings through militarism and of “success” through physical body counts, the “logical” paradigm of “authority” fails. The poem resists quantification and formalization as its subjects resist indoctrination.

Casey achieves a markedly different effect in the second poem in the collection, “Transcribed Proof of Denial for Arthur Dore,” a poem about one soldier threatening another’s life. Note the differences in dialect, register, and tone in the following excerpt:

Mah man Blake  
Yo days is numbered  
They’s gonna open up  
An envelope  
At yo house  
Someday raht soon  
An they jus gonna be  
A lil piece of yo sorry hide

In ther an yo girl  
Gonna say whas this hier  
An Ahm gonna be ther too  
To console er  
With mah rod of salvation  
Yo dam raht (4)

The persona here has a much different feel to it—the speaker’s cadences, the hard spondaic repetitions, paired with the regional (Southern) and possibly racial (African-American) dialect, force us to imagine what is going on here: as in “Company Physical,” we have no idea who the speaker is, and why he is in conflict with “[his] man Blake.” We do know, however, that the speaker quantifies his subject: his days are “numbered,” controlled, counted. What makes this poem especially interesting is that Casey makes an appearance, not as a speaker, but as a background participant. Ironically, he is the one responsible for listening to the speaker’s tirade and “reminding” him to end Blake’s days on earth. Unfortunately for the speaker, Casey is “asleep” throughout the progress of the poem, having something of an implicit “awakening” near the end:

Morro’s you last day on earth  
Fo sho  
Cuz mah man Casey’s  
Gonna remahn me  
So as Ah won’ firget

Ain' that raht, Casey  
Casey?  
Sheeit  
Yo been sleepin  
An ain' heerd a word  
Ah been sayin  
Don' deny it now  
Ah ain' even gonna believe ya (5)

Here we see Casey playing with the dramatic situation that his “characters” and speakers are placed in—he makes reference to himself within this dramatic context, a version of himself that is passive, “sleeping through” the banality of the experience, and definitely not the central focus—he leaves that to his speakers and their own self-representations. We infer from the speaker’s tirade that he is somewhat of a violent person, “Yo days is numbered,” as well as preoccupied with religious ideas, via consoling Blake’s newly-single wife / girlfriend sexually with his “rod of salvation.” He takes this fascination further in the middle of the poem:

And Ahm gonna beg yo pardon  
An the devils  
Fo given yo some mo tahm  
To repent yo sins  
But be sho now

Ta pray to the good Lord  
Fo mercy cuz Blake  
Yo certain not to receive none from mah hands (5)

As telling as this passage is, indicating the seemingly unimportant contradiction between violence and Christian virtue present in the speaker's mind, Casey just as quickly disarms him, shifting the focus of the poem onto the speaker's obviously problematic short-term memory. The speaker, thus revealing himself, becomes a parody of the figure that he attempted to be in his threats to Blake—all of his power was vested in Casey, the sleeping “reminder” in the background of the poem.

While in most instances Casey makes his readers imagine and infer a great deal about his poems (even when drawing upon “stock” characters), his most important poems often introduce a more specifically conceived speaker, who is often characterized by some form of odd moniker, or by his occupation: “Big John,” “National Guardsman” “The LZ Gator Body Collector,” “Bagley.” Detached from the horrors of combat as they are, they nonetheless engage with the same principal issue as the combat poetry does: how one responds appropriately to the war's suffering, both their own and that of the Vietnamese.

## **II. Narcissism, Form, and the Reader as Context**

Given their direct experience with the suffering around them, one would expect the balance of the poems in *Obscenities* to be poems of protest, poems of elegy, poems of

disgust—but they are not. For the most part, these poems are poems of mere mention—focused not on the moral outrage felt by the speaker (a la Bly’s “The Teeth Mother Naked At Last” or much established anti-war poetry by Levertov, Stafford, or Ginsburg) but on the speaker’s personal reaction—not with the “idea” of suffering itself or the fact that it is taking place, but the reaction to dealing with or seeing other people suffering. The feelings expressed here are basic, at times almost callous: inconvenience, “dirtiness,” unpleasant smells, boredom, frustration, resentment, or embarrassment. In many of these poems, the speaker focuses on these ideas, making the “real” or “substantive” problems in the book—pain, death, torture—secondary or tangential, overshadowed by the speakers’ inability or refusal to imagine a world in which he is not the principle focus. Reading some of the more important poems in *Obscenities*, we can examine the models of interacting with suffering that Casey chooses to show us: how his speakers acknowledge pain, how they deal with senseless destruction, how they understand their part of the drama of the war, if they do at all.

“27th Surgical Hospital” provides an excellent example of one of Casey’s speakers revealing—perhaps accidentally—the inadequacy of his moral processes to deal with his situation. In this poem, the speaker is a soldier, most likely an ambulance driver, delivering an injured Vietnamese to a field hospital:

The honcho nurse there

Hates dinks

This head nurse

Always hassles me

When I bring one in  
The first thing  
She asks me is  
    Is he a combat casualty?  
        Hell no, lady  
        This dink just  
        Got hit by a truck  
        An American truck  
        That beat feet after hitting him  
        An he bleeding  
        All over my spit shine  
    Take him to the Vietnamese hospital in An Tan  
The woman don't realize  
That it's far away  
That her hospital's closer  
That blood makes me sick           (42)

Here, the actual fact of the Vietnamese victim's condition is of marginal importance to the speaker—the focus of the poem is really on the inconvenience that the speaker must overcome in dealing with the “honcho nurse” who “hates dinks.” While he acknowledges that Americans have responsibility for injuring the Vietnamese—it was “An American truck” that hit him—the injustice or tragedy of the situation in terms of the potential loss of a valuable human life escapes his notice. As we progress through the

middle of the poem, we might expect that, given the driver's almost angry objection to being "hassled," that the poem is going to be about the humanitarian righteousness of the speaker—he is, after all, taking a hurt man to a hospital. When he is instructed to "Take him to the Vietnamese hospital in An Tan," the tone becomes dour, bleak, but not because of the fate of the Vietnamese: he decries the idea that "The woman don't realize / That it's far away / That her hospital is closer / That blood makes me sick" (42). The climax / crisis of the poem—the three parallel repetitions of the strong "That[s] . . ." remains, surprisingly, focused on the "hassle" he has to go through in order to relieve himself of the injured Vietnamese: he is "bleeding / all over [his] spit shine"; the other hospital is "far away," and "that blood makes [him] sick." His spit-shined shoes and nausea are more important, evidently, than the innocent Vietnamese hit by "An American truck."

This episode is disturbing, in some ways, because of its "that-ness." The speaker's climactic repetition of the relative pronoun "that" distances the speaker from his subject, it is "not him," it is "that," implying a clear delineation between subject and object. This makes sense, given the speaker's unwillingness to acknowledge the injured Vietnamese as a real person, similar to him in any way. In another sense, the repetition of "that" indicates a search for reasons for the speaker's immediate release of responsibility for the Vietnamese. He goes through the "logical" humanitarian reasons for leaving the Vietnamese at this hospital, distance and convenience, but eventually comes to only the blunt, aesthetic force of his own "sickness."

While it is easy to read this disregard for Vietnamese life as simply symptomatic of the racism that pervaded the war, I think that Casey's point goes deeper: the speaker

registers no overt racist hostility toward the Vietnamese; the victim is simply the source of some unpleasant stimuli for the speaker. The poem's purpose, at least as far as the speaker is concerned, is to relay his problems to the audience, not those of the accident victim. The speaker registers a refusal, then, to acknowledge the injustice of the situation in a context beyond the immediate—this betrays a central failure of many of Casey's characters. While not hostile to those around them, they maintain a certain level of innocence or detachment, willful or not, from the situations in which they find themselves. In this poem, we get nothing of the "tragedy" of this situation: it could be said that Casey's speakers lack a certain "tragic vision" that gives form to the isolated instances in which they interact with the suffering and pain that war causes—instead, they elect to remain innocent in the worst possible sense of the world, isolating themselves, and consequently the poetic moments that they create, in a self-contained, ahistorical, amoral vacuum.

When I speak of "tragic vision" giving "form" to an event, I mean a speaker's ability to imbue an event with meaning in one way or another. Casey's speakers seem not to see the significance of the events that they perceive. Meaning or signification, any act of communication or contemplation is at least in part dependent on the context in which is developed or enacted. For a sign, symbol, gesture, or utterance to have meaning beyond the immediate sensory impulse, it must be seen as part of a larger system, within which it can be differentiated from other signs and situated in continua of other meaningful data. Likewise, for an event to have meaning beyond itself, it would seem that the observer must have in some way the capacity to contextualize that event within a spectrum of alternatives, either as part of a pattern or a divergence thereof. The concept

of history, if we are to believe E.P. Thompson, is made up of the recognition of patterns of behavior over time; to recognize patterns, we must be able to see similarities between events and imagine alternative happenings—things are part of a pattern because they are not those alternatives. As historical observers, once we see and recognize a pattern (like, say, the life-span of a human being) we can extrapolate and predict possible or probable extensions to that pattern—either a subsequent event “fits” the pattern of similarity or it does not. For example: if a bright, popular young student succeeds admirably at Harvard or Yale, we might expect that student to attain financial and social successes later in life; that would “fit” the pattern of success. A deviation from that pattern, something more unexpected, might be that the student goes on to lead a life as a violent criminal—the “pattern” that we see with the student’s life deviates from our hypothetical extrapolations.

The more patently literary idea of “tragedy,” (or, by extension, seeing an event as “tragic”) according to Richard Sewall’s landmark study *The Vision of Tragedy* depends on this ability to reason counterfactually, to see the possible in relation to the actual. Sewall conceives of “tragedy” as an art form as a complex negotiation of vacillating possibilities, in this case a symbiosis between notions of comic cosmic order and tragic, “real” deviation from that order:

What [Socrates] had in mind, perhaps, was the undeniable truth that the highest comedy gains its power from its sense of tragic possibility, and the profoundest tragedy presents a full if fleeting vision, through the temporary disorder, of an ordered universe to which comedy is a witness. Without a sense of the tragic,

comedy loses heart; it becomes brittle, it has animation but no life. Without a recognition of the truths of comedy, tragedy becomes bleak and intolerable.

(Sewall 1).

Sewall is talking about making art meaningful and expressive, but I feel that the same type of reasoning applies to historical events: to see an event as “good” or “bad” or “just” or “unjust” we must be able to imagine that it should have or could have happened otherwise. The power of tragedy plays on human hope and faith in human capacities: the biblical Job is tragic because we imagine that the reward for loyalty to God could be reward, not suffering; Othello because we can imagine Othello seeing through Iago’s ruse and living out his days with Desdemona. We imagine that Gatsby could marry Daisy—moreover, perhaps we hope for it, just as we hope against hope that Oedipus can ultimately overcome his own destiny.

Casey’s speakers seem to suffer a unilateral failure of this capacity to imagine; they lack the vision—for whatever reason—to see the results of war as anything but an isolated event, as something that simply “is.” There is no sense of an enabling narrative context here. Casey further develops this idea in subsequent poems in *Obscenities*. “The LZ Gator Body Collector,” one of Casey’s most famous poems, shows the same refusal or inability to see the historical “tragedy” of a situation:

See

Her back is arched

Like something’s under it

That's why I thought  
It was booby trapped  
But it's not  
It just might have been  
Over this rock here  
And somebody moved it  
After corpus morta stiffened it  
I didn't know it was  
A woman at first  
I couldn't tell  
But then I grabbed  
Down there  
It's a woman or was  
It's all right  
I didn't mind  
I had gloves on then           (56)

As in "27th Surgical Hospital," the speaker is an individual who deals with death and suffering every day—he is the "body collector" for LZ Gator, a functionary who has drawn the assignment of clearing dead bodies from the landing zone. The encounter here is extraordinarily grotesque: the speaker is moving the mutilated corpse of a dead woman. The poem, as so many of Casey's do, begins in *medias res*, with the speaker describing the woman's body to an unnamed audience. The opening image of the

woman's body at first seems appallingly sexual—"Her back is arched / Like something's under it" (56). But the image implodes with the next few lines, defusing and disarming the sexual image through a connection with a very real fear of death—the speaker does not view the "arched back" in a sexual sense; the woman's back being misshapen is the signifier of a "booby trap," rigged to explode when the body is moved. As the poem progresses, the speaker becomes more preoccupied with how the woman got into the sexualized position, more than the position itself: it must have been draped over a rock and stiffened by "corpus morta."

After this point in the poem, we discover what Casey's real subject is: the idea of discovering that the corpse was a woman through "intimate" contact with it. The corpse is mangled to such an extent that its gender is at first undetectable—the speaker only discovers that "it's a woman or was" when he "grabbed / Down there." The poem seems to take almost a cataclysmic turn at this point; the experience of touching the remnants of the woman's genitalia—or of figuring out that he has touched "Down there" (emphasized, contained as a line by itself) makes the speaker sense that something "wrong" has happened, that something "unjust" has taken place. As readers we might expect a statement decrying the loss of innocent life, or a protest on the horrors of how war "destroys" life and identity, but we never get it. Instead, the speaker returns abruptly to himself, and to his reaction to the aesthetic impulse of the moment—the fact that while unpleasant, touching her was not unbearable. As if anticipating an adverse reaction—i.e., some form of shock or horror from his audience, the speaker says: "It's all right / I didn't mind / I had gloves on then," as if the intensity of the experience would be dissipated simply because his flesh didn't come into contact with hers.

Like the collision victim in “27th Surgical Hospital,” the Vietnamese woman is grossly dehumanized, becoming “it” throughout most of the poem; perhaps more importantly, however, the fact that this woman has died in a particularly horrible way does not seem important in the least to the speaker. Instead, the speaker focuses on the unpleasantness of the experience for him, assuming both that that is the important idea and that that is what would interest his audience. The speaker does not seem to take any type of moral stance on this experience; the blunt language and matter-of-fact tone of the poem suggest that this is just another boring task for the body collector. Here, the idea of burial and interment, perhaps the most human of rituals if we are to believe Joan Didion in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, becomes only slightly more disturbing than an office worker making photocopies. The cultural form of the act of burial or collection here is destroyed, the greater tragedy unnoticed, subsumed into any number of things—Marxist division of labor (he is the LZ Gator “Body Collector”, alienated from the process of interment), military socialization (examined extensively by Gus Hasford’s *The Short-Timers* and Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*), or simple American-male bloodlust (as seen in Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* and Mailer’s *Why Are We in Viet Nam?*).

While more criticism exists on this poem than on any other in Casey’s oeuvre, it focuses more often than not on the sparseness of the language; the moral and philosophical issues in the poem are not addressed. In the closest approximation to a thematic analysis of Casey’s work, Theresa Brown discusses this poem as an example of what she calls “the technologizing of sex,” the method through which “the American military in Viet Nam transformed sexual intercourse into an ideological weapon” (Brown 55). Brown’s article sees the figuration of the woman’s body as a means for the soldier

to sublimate his own fear about the experience of war. For Brown, the

sexualized female corpse represents the ultimate possibility in privatizing trauma; even dead, she becomes the “point of transience” for the soldier’s experience of fear. (Brown 59)

This, I feel, is a somewhat over-theorized reading of the text, depending on the speaker’s willingness and ability to transcend his historical moment, to see the experience in a context outside of the immediate, as more important than a banal task on any given day. The poem suggests overwhelmingly that he cannot or will not endow this experience with meaning. The “fear” of warfare that Brown posits seems out of place in *Obscenities*: rarely do any of Casey’s speakers connect directly with the idea of losing one’s own life in war. Most often, when that fear is confronted, it is quickly transformed into something else: either ironic, self- or –institutionally denigrating humor or grotesque procedural analysis. In contrast to what Brown discusses, the dominant emotions in this text are not fear and trepidation; instead, they are disgust and inconvenience.

This radical understatement of emotion follows through many of the poems in *Obscenities*; while the speakers cannot choose but to experience these things, they exhibit a pronounced lack of empathy for the suffering subjects. Instead of decrying the conditions (war) in which this suffering takes place, they more often than not prefer to remain on the surface of the experience, relaying the experience to the reader in social or moral platitudes. In “On Death,” a soldier describes seeing a mangled corpse, but regards it only in aesthetic, not moral terms:

Flies all over  
It like made of wax  
No jaw  
Intestines poured  
Out of the stomach  
The penis in the air  
It won't matter then to me but now  
I don't want in death to be a  
Public obscenity like this (53)

The use of the aesthetic language here is important—"it" (again a dehumanized, objectified image) becomes not so much a figure for all that is wrong in war, but more a visual stimulus that is unpleasant for the speaker to experience. It is almost as if he is looking at an offensive picture, not a person. In the first part of the poem, Casey makes an issue of the visual horror of the corpse:

School children walk by  
Some stare  
Some keep on walking  
Some adults stare too  
With handkerchiefs over their nose (53)

This scene is “obscene,” a spectacle that is unpleasant for all to experience. The speaker’s reaction to this again remains distanced: he does not say that he wants to stop the chaos of war or alleviate the suffering of the Vietnamese; he merely does not want to become a public spectacle after he dies. It is the public experience of death that scares the speaker, not the experience / fear of death itself. Death, it would seem, would be an embarrassment that the speaker could not bear.

Embarrassment, perhaps the most inappropriate response to the experience of abject suffering and death, is an important issue in one of Casey’s other poems, “Road Hazard.” Again, this is a poem about a functionary’s dealing with a corpse: the “road hazard” in the title is a corpse decomposing in the sun. The speaker and “Eddie” move the corpse to the side of the road, covering it with a poncho. The grotesqueness of the speaker’s task is intense—he cannot avoid confronting the horror of this moment:

I pick up the loose hand  
A right hand  
That is still warm  
Because of the sun  
And go to the side of the road  
To tuck it  
Under the right side  
Of the poncho

The speaker “fixes” the body in a sense, repositioning (he makes no mention of his

“gloves” here) the lost limb as best he can. Unlike most of the other poems in this collection, we feel here and in the next lines a sense that the speaker is a bit shaken. He gestures toward a sense of empathy, but fails:

With my being a Cong Giao<sup>15</sup>

I think of making the sign

Of the cross but don't

Want to appear weak

To my public

Casey's speaker withdraws any sense of connection with the corpse, any sense that this event should be contextualized in some kind of historical or spiritual tradition.

According to the lineation of the line, the speaker “think[s] of making the sign.” The lack of punctuation here enables us to read this as a statement on its own: “making the sign” can mean, in Saussurian terms, as making a communicative (and hence meaningful) act. Again, though, the “public” aspect of this event—a context in which a symbolic act would have actual meaning, in which a gesture of empathy could have some larger significance, is exactly what prevents Casey from acting. He must, according to the poem, show strength in the face of his public, perhaps an imported form of Hemingway's “grace under pressure.”

But, as it does for so many of Hemingway's characters, the “act” of “taking it like a man,” of pretending that a given stimulus has no effect reveals itself to be no more than an act:

We Eddie and I  
Go back to the Jeep  
Where Hieu was waiting all this time  
With a handkerchief over his nose  
I still am having  
What poker face I have on  
But Hieu pats me on the shoulder  
And says okay okay no sweat no sweat  
And I'm put out that  
He doesn't do likewise to Eddie  
Maybe I did appear the weakling (55)

Here, Casey switches the focus of the poem back to the speaker's reaction to the aesthetic stimulus of the corpse, deflating any attempt to endow the event with meaning beyond itself. The speaker is again locked in his own head, and preoccupied with ideas that are less important than the cultural or ideological horror that the event is symptomatic of: he is more "put out" than horrified. The poem offers an explanation for the speaker's inability to empathize: it is embarrassing or "weak" to do so. To empathize with another is to acknowledge that their existence has validity, to admit that they have some power over the subject's feelings and experience. To acknowledge weakness in this context is to be overwhelmed by it. Of course, Casey effectively deconstructs this notion by showing the speaker as "weak," as overcome by the experience despite his outward appearance, he does "appear the weakling" to his "public."

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<sup>15</sup> Catholic

This lack of empathy Casey's speakers exhibit is the most disturbing aspect of *Obscenities*. These speakers cannot or will not "feel with" with those around them: it is almost as if they exist only as abstract providers of aesthetic impulses, not as real human beings, existing within a real, historical world, who have (or had) real feelings, thoughts, and experiences. For Casey's speakers, acknowledging the power of these events and the transforming power of witnessing them would result in some form of self-diminishment. The speaker in "Road Hazard" is obsessed with maintaining the "front" of strength for his audience; admitting weakness would make him less of a man, less of a "good MP." Likewise, for the ambulance driver in "27th Surgical Hospital" or "The LZ Gator Body Collector," establishing a tangible emotional or imaginative connection with the suffering / dead—or even a simple historical contextualization of the experience-- would either establish a sense of agonizing responsibility for that suffering (27th) or result in an intolerable contamination (LZ Gator). Accepting a burden of responsibility is in some way a diminishment of the self's power, as is being "contaminated" with a "toxin": both take away from the independence and intractability of the self. Connecting ourselves with other human beings, even if that connection simply means understanding or acknowledging that other person's experience as valid or meaningful, obligates us to that person in some way—we surrender our power to ignore them in our thoughts. This holds true not only for individuals involved in conflict, but for societies as well; when we are willing to empathize with those around us, or even those in conflict with us, we accept a certain level of responsibility as a culture. In certain ways, American involvement in Viet Nam was simply a refusal to be diminished: diminished as a world

power, as a capitalist guarantor, and as a mythic icon of democratic values.

This diminishment seems to be something that Casey's speakers cannot or will not handle: they retreat into platitudes, clichés, and simple, surface reactions. The “victims” of suffering here become, in many cases, little more to the speakers than convenient devices for self-aggrandizement. This impulse strikes me as symptomatic of what Freud and other clinicians, most notably those of the object-relations school of psychology, have termed narcissism. According to the myth, Narcissus was a beautiful young man, the son of a nymph, who fell obsessively in love with his own reflection; realizing he could never possess the image that he saw, he died a tragic death, pining away for the representation of himself. Clinical narcissism has numerous definitions, far too many for me to begin to touch on here; indeed, the debate as to what really defines narcissism has gone on since the inception of modern psychoanalysis. Freud speaks of narcissism, in its most basic terms, as when libidinal or attachment energy returns from objects—in my reading, people, ideas, things-- that it has been connected to (external object cathexes) back onto the ego / self: the libido that in “normative” development” attaches to sexual objects is placed onto the ego's ideal conception of itself, resulting in isolation, failure to empathize with others, and, in some cases, delusions of grandiosity. In this model, nothing else and no one else is required to fulfill the self's needs, as the ego finds everything it needs in its exaggerated, fantastic representation of itself (Freud, “On Narcissism”).

Freud, in his classic essay “On Narcissism,” perhaps the definitive article in the debate on narcissism, classes narcissism as primarily a refusal of the ego to be diminished by outside forces—a diminishment that is part of the natural process of human

development. He speaks of our attraction to narcissistic characters in life, myth and literature:

The charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-contentment and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us, such as cats and the large beasts of prey. Indeed, even great criminals and humorists, as they are represented in literature, compel our interest by the narcissistic consistency with which they manage to keep away from their ego anything that would diminish it. It is as if we envied them for maintaining a blissful state of mind- an unassailable libidinal position which we ourselves have since abandoned. (Freud 89)

A quick perusal of western literature will yield a plethora of these “great criminals and humorists” that, according to Freud, attract us because they maintain a state that we have given up: as “normal” people, we have let the outside world (and other people) into our lives, and given up the myth of our own primacy. In *Moby Dick*, the primary thrust of the novel is an examination of Ahab’s (particularly American) reckless revenge-obsession; in *Frankenstein*, we see the Victor’s relentless drive to conquer death, regardless of the cost in human terms, as ultimately his tragic undoing; in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, James Gatz’s refusal to accept time, society, and its consequences leads to his violent death; in Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!* Thomas Sutpen’s “innocence,” his refusal to see people as more than mere means to an end, destroys all he has worked for. Even if we look back as far as the Greeks: what was Oedipus’s tragic

undoing if it was not an over-extended belief in the power and validity of the self?

But with Casey's speakers, the "narcissism" is not as heroic or even as tragic: their only objection to the suffering of other people is that of its adverse aesthetic effect on their world, not on the injustice of the event in some grand relational cosmology. While it would be easy to trace, throughout Casey's work, very detailed instances of how speakers use other people as mere "reflections" of themselves (a more clinical, and perhaps literary-theoretical definition of narcissism), I am interested more in the term as a touchstone, a way of marking off a certain pattern of behavior, rather than as a tool for the analysis of that behavior itself. My point here is to show that Casey's speakers exhibit a certain tendency towards isolation within the self; each speaker maintains a narcissistic innocence—a refusal to historicize, to imagine, and to empathize--concerning the world around him.

Christopher Lasch, in 1977's *The Culture of Narcissism* sees this pervasive failure "to feel," as symptomatic of a larger malaise, based as much on cultural pathology as on individual: an isolated regression inward based on the rejection of personal and cultural history. Some critics, Lasch argues, in the face of a perceived waning in the adequacy of modern liberal humanism, have given up: they see the study of the past as "irrelevant" to knowledge of the present and, by extension, to the future (Lasch xvi). Such a disregard, of a knowledge and "respect" for the past—not necessarily mere nostalgia, but a feeling that the "lessons" of the past can mean something—is essential for survival in the cultural atmosphere of the late 1970s. This was, after all, an atmosphere, according to Lasch, of "diminished expectations," of "the welfare state" of "the emergence of terrorism," of "the multinational corporation." Without some sense of the relevance of past experience—

the importance of historical patterns, people become more and more isolated within their own psyches, embracing the idea of “competitive individualism” (xv) to the Nth degree. Without some reservoir of information about the past, a pool of “happy memories” or a “myth of a golden age,” we become hopeless: we fail to deal with the possibilities of the future in any real sense. This, according to Lasch, leads to a decadent society, rendering it a mere collection of “empty” individuals:

. . . the cultural devaluation of the past reflects not only the poverty of the prevailing [narcissistic] ideologies, which have lost their grip on reality and abandoned the attempt to master it, but the poverty of the narcissist’s inner life. (Lasch xvii).

Lasch argues that the increasing atomization of culture, the “fragmentation” of meaning—and history—that drives postmodern philosophies, forces people to turn inward as a means of self-preservation: they cannot feel because they cannot make the connections between themselves and others anything more than a superficial bond. We would be hard pressed to find a more “atomized” or “competitive” culture than that of the Americans in Southeast Asia, particularly among those whom Casey is writing about, those who are not forced to connect emotionally with their comrades for survival (like combat veterans), but who are nonetheless exposed to suffering and death on a daily basis. While “self-preservation” takes on a very literal sense when dealing with experience in combat, the “self-preservation” in this sense is more psychic, moral, and emotional: Casey’s speakers do not have the “luxury” of attributing any of their actions

or reactions to the cause of “survival.”

It is this narcissistic innocence that concerns me here—while we have shown that Casey’s speakers are often locked, willfully or no, into their own heads, the question remains: why does this matter? I feel that Casey uses this idea of “narcissistic innocence” or “refusal to empathize” strategically: he wants us to see that the lack of empathy on the part of his speakers is problematic, as, in some way, an obscene, inappropriate reaction to the horrors of modern warfare, and of the American war in Southeast Asia in particular. The situations that Casey’s speakers are put in are grotesque, even sickening, but they are meticulously controlled: each speaker has time to think, time to react, and time to process—but they fail, time and time again, to make it “mean” anything.” As T.S. Eliot says in “The Dry Salvages”: “we had the experience but missed the meaning.” As such, it is our duty as readers to imbue those experiences with a sense of historical context, to return to the experiences, to “approach the meaning” and “restore the experience in a different form / beyond any meaning . . .” We must, as readers who are “outside” the experience of the war, and “outside” the world of each speaker, compensate for his inability to connect, to imagine. We, as surrogates for Casey’s speakers must imagine and empathize for them. In most cases we do—the act of seeing a response to a situation as flawed requires that we have some ability to imagine a “proper” or “adequate” response, i.e., we must be able to step outside the moment and participate in the historical process—examining events with an eye to context. We must give tragic form—through the act of reading a poem critically—to the events that Casey chronicles for us. To put it simply: what doesn’t happen in the reader does—or can—happen in us.

Some of this compensation comes from our cultural experience: we know people are killed in war, we know that sometimes innocent people are killed in war, and we know that such killings happened all of the time in Viet Nam. But this cultural context is only part of the picture—Casey forces us to participate in these poems, to “correct” their failures, in another way as well, through their form. Similar to the way Casey asks us, by dropping us into the middle of his poems (and strategically withholding information), to imagine the speaker and his moral / historical situation, he also asks us to participate in the poem through the syntax and lineation that he uses. Since Casey does not use punctuation, and his lines are irregular, readers are forced at times to “correct” Casey’s texts, to reconcile the linguistic, linear, and syntactic peculiarities of each speaker with the organization and cadences of the language: this “correction” formally mirrors the moral corrective that the reader must supply for Casey’s speakers.

For a few examples of this grammatical corrective in action, we can return briefly to some of the poems that are best illustrative of Casey’s speakers’ moral failures: “27th Surgical Hospital,” “LZ Gator Body Collector,” and “On Death.” These poems all exhibit a certain level of instability in their form. While a number of Casey’s poems mirror spoken language in their lineation, with easily noticeable phrasal breaks despite the lack in punctuation or typographical markers, these poems seem to allow for a greater degree of flexibility in how the reader can parse literally the speakers’ words. Thus, the reader must “construct” the poem’s grammar. While the “meaning” of the phrase might not be significantly changed by this reconstruction, it requires the reader to engage actively with the text, supplying formally what is missing morally. The “structure,” then, of the poem is at least partially supplied by the reader

“27th Surgical Hospital” is a particularly telling example of this idea. Examine these lines from the first portion of the poem:

The honcho nurse there  
Hates dinks  
This head nurse  
Always hassles me  
When I bring one in  
The first thing  
She asks me is  
Is he a combat casualty?       (42)

Following this poem, for most readers, is not too difficult: even without the punctuation, as speakers of English, we have an intuitive sense as to where the vocal pauses should be, i.e., between the major phrases. The first independent clause consists of the first two lines, and can be parsed as such: “The honcho nurse there / hates dinks.” The phrase ends there; we cannot grammatically connect the first two lines to the next: “This head nurse.” The phrasal structure, though, breaks down a bit as the poem progresses, the lineation failing to mark off clearly the grammatical units. The next lines can be parsed in a number of ways (and as a number of independent units), all very similar:

- (1) This head nurse / always hassles me.
- (2) This head nurse / always hassles me / when I bring one in.

(3) When I bring one in / the first thing / she asks me is / “Is he a combat casualty?”

The phrases here thus become a bit more unstable, forcing the reader to confront the instability of the syntax: without such negotiation, without a reader’s insertion of vocal pauses, the lineation would become out of control, the constant enjambments rushing the reader through the poem at breakneck speed. It is the reader’s participation in this text that makes it coherent: as speakers of the language, we recognize (and hypothesize) where the pauses should be, marking off syntactic elements and enabling us to make sense of the poem.

“The LZ Gator Body Collector” is another example of the reader supplying, at least in part, the grammatical structure of the poem. For the experience of the poem to be in any way coherent, the lines depend on a reader’s intuitive ability to pause, to delineate discrete syntactic elements. But the same syntactic instability we found in “27th Surgical Hospital” is present in this poem as well—at times the phrases bleed into one another, forcing a reader to “control” the text on the literal level. The first independent grammatical unit in this poem is the first three lines: “See / Her back is arched / Like something’s under it.” The next clause, however, requires a bit more work on the part of the reader—we can read the next series of units as any one of the following:

That’s why I thought / It was booby trapped.

That’s why I thought / It was booby trapped / But it’s not.

Likewise, we can read the next phrasal units as similarly ambiguous with regard to the line:

It just might have been / Over this rock here / And somebody moved it.

It just might have been / Over this rock here / And somebody moved it / After  
corpus morta stiffened it.

After corpus morta stiffened it / I didn't know it was a woman at first.

This type of tension between the line and the syntactic unit (most notably the flexibility of the prepositional phrases) continues through the poem, forcing a reader to more closely manage where he or she pauses as the poem develops. What is important here is not where one chooses to insert a vocal pause, but that the text presents the reader with a number of choices—the syntactic structure is not stabilized by the line, it is intentionally disrupted by it. Thus, the reader must compensate for this disruption, becoming an active participant in the text's development.

“On Death” asks us to participate in the text in a slightly more complex way—the instability we must confront or “correct” is established not only by the syntactic or phrasal ambiguity, but also by its cluttered, imagistic construction. Each line contains a different image, the collection of which the reader must process into a coherent whole. While the first lines of the poem are fairly straightforward, showing a public reaction to a corpse, when we get to the actual description of the body we are faced with some ambiguous syntax and lineation:

Flies all over

It like made of wax

No jaw

Intestines poured

Out of the stomach

The penis in the air

Without punctuation, the first few lines of this seem a bit awkward: we can read “flies all over” as a unit on its own describing the scene, or we can connect this phrase with the next line via a vocal enjambment: “Flies all over / It.” Conversely, we can also link “It” with the next phrasal unit, marked off by the spacing—“It like made of wax.” “It” clearly refers to the body, as does “like made of wax.” This phrase, however, lacks a verb—the form of “to be” would be most logical, it seems. It “was” like [something] made of wax. Casey, however, leaves this out, perhaps forcing us as readers to make sense of the “incorrect” grammatical unit. The subsequent lines, “No jaw,” “Intestines poured,” “Out of the stomach,” “The penis in the air,” all describe a portion of the scene for the reader to synthesize (or, defensively, to avoid synthesizing). The patchwork of grammatically disconnected descriptors, the lack of a coherent grammar in this poem, indicates also a failure of language to describe this scene adequately. It is as if the “form” of the language breaks down (incompletely—the syntax and images are not totally “fragmented,” as in other poetry of the conflict) when it attempts to articulate what cannot be articulated. Or, perhaps, Casey is indicating that his speaker’s command over the language—his mastery of the cultural “forms” of communication falters in this episode, echoing the speaker’s failure to appreciate adequately the socio-cultural “form”

of tragedy and injustice.

Michael Casey said in a 2002 interview with me that he wanted to show the war as “an obscene waste . . . for so many people the worst possible tragedy” (Casey 3). And he succeeds. Victims abound in Casey’s work: not only the shattered Vietnamese, but also the narcissistic Americans “deadening” their own responses to the war. The persistent psychic isolation that the Americans consistently display in this book— isolation that, one could argue, is *needed* to survive in a war zone—is a figure for a larger critique of American solipsism in regard to Viet Nam. Like Frances Fitzgerald’s *Fire in the Lake* or James William Gibson’s *The Perfect War*, Casey very subtly puts forward the idea that America as a culture failed to “empathize” with the “alien” culture of Viet Nam: we lacked a sophisticated understanding of the history, cultural needs, and attitudes of the Vietnamese people. Fitzgerald’s book attributes the utter failure of American “hearts and minds” efforts in Viet Nam to a misunderstanding of the unique blend of Buddhist and Confucian philosophies that permeate Vietnamese culture. Gibson, a noted sociologist and historian, criticizes Robert McNamara and William Westmoreland’s catastrophic inability to understand the Vietnamese attitudes toward “attrition” and human casualties. We could not think like them, could not understand them, and thus could not form a lasting cultural or political connection with them. The result was fifteen years of brutal conflict: 58,000 American dead, along with over 3 million Vietnamese.

The political goal of Casey’s *Obscenities* was simple: to overcome the solipsism and cultural narcissism that enabled the war to continue for so long. Readers of *Obscenities* notice, by design, the clash between “appropriate” and “superficial” attitudes toward death and suffering, and are forced by the text to compensate for it. By inviting

readers to imagine that a change in attitude was possible—and, more to the point, necessary—Casey produced a powerful anti-war volume, one that goes far further than the simple declamations of the conflict in anthologies like *Winning Hearts and Minds* and in other political tracts. Casey's is a book that truly critiques and expands the American political psyche. In a time when we as a culture are faced with the constant prospect of large-scale involvements in foreign wars, *Obscenities* quietly reminds us of the legacy of our failure in Viet Nam, a failure that, once again, seems to be in danger of being forgotten.

**Two: Useful Music—Basil T. Paquet and *Winning Hearts and Minds***

**I. *Winning Hearts and Minds: The Politics of Peace***

Conceived in a Brooklyn kitchen in the early 1970s by the 1<sup>st</sup> Casualty Press—the collective name of editors Basil T. Paquet, Larry Rottmann, and Jan Barry-- the poetry anthology *Winning Hearts and Minds* was from its inception a political project, designed to raise the level of public awareness and understanding of the American war in Southeast Asia. All three editors of the volume, Paquet, Barry, and Rottmann, were involved in some way with Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), the first politically effective anti-war veterans' group (Sloccock 109). Jan Barry, ardent grass-roots political organizer, is often credited with being one of the founders of that movement (Stacewicz 200).

The ostensible goal of the 1<sup>st</sup> Casualty press was to provide an outlet for veterans' writing on the war in Viet Nam, in the hopes that it would increase the level of political understanding of the war. The project was meant to give a poetic voice to those who actually fought the war, who were mired in the rice paddies and burning villages of Indochina. To this point, few books of poetry, if any (Michael Casey's *Obscenities* being a notable exception) touched on the experiences of veterans, of, as W.D. Ehrhart has called them, "soldier-poets" (Ehrhart 149). Poets like William Stafford, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, and Galway Kinnell had tackled the war poetically, some very gracefully—Kinnell's "Vapor Trail Reflected in the Frog Pond" and Bly's "The Teeth Mother Naked at Last" rank among the best poems written on the subject. But these

poets were not in the Nam, did not watch their friends die for no reason—they were what Mike Bibby has called “dissident poets,” politicians for whom the war was a “cause,” not their “life” (Bibby 124). The 109 poems by 33 poets—most amateur writers—in *Winning Hearts and Minds* come not from training or a sense of tradition, but from a sense of urgency as brutal and criminal as they saw the war to be.

Rejected by some major publishing houses for its perceived lack of marketability, *Winning Hearts and Minds* was at first printed independently, surviving on the dedication of its editors and other supporters. It was only after selling 20,000 copies at rallies, meetings, and other venues, did a major publishing firm, McGraw-Hill, become interested (Sloccock 108). In total, *WHAM* eventually sold over 45,000 copies nationally. McGraw-Hill also published the 1<sup>st</sup> Casualty’s second effort, an anthology of short fiction called *Free Fire Zone: Short Stories by Vietnam Veterans*. While bolstered by the contributions of writers like Tim O’Brien, the anthology was a commercial and critical failure, in stark contrast to its poetic counterpart.

A number of critics reviewed *Winning Hearts and Minds* when it was published. It garnered near-universal praise not for its poetic accomplishment, but for its sheer intensity. In “Soldier Poets of the Vietnam War,” W.D. Ehrhart calls most of the poems in the volume “artless, lacking in skill and polish,” yet “collectively [impacting] with the force of a wrecking-ball” (Ehrhart 149).

Ehrhart is not the only critic to make note of this “wrecking-ball” aesthetic. John Seelye writes in the New York Times Book Review on *WHAM*’s unusual, almost surprising emotional power as political writing:

I am not given to crying over a book of poems and I am cynical and egotistical enough to say that if one or more of 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. (Seelye 2).

But Seelye's (over)-emotional reaction is not simply the result of strategically placed pathos—he is moved by what he sees as the senseless expenditure of lives, of energy, and creativity, what he calls the “expense of spirit in a waste of shame” (Seelye 2).

Stephen Spender, whose eloquent review of *Winning Hearts and Minds* and Michael Casey's *Obscenities*, “Poetry of the Unspeakable,” has become a cornerstone of criticism of Viet Nam War poetry, not only celebrates the pathetic power of the poems in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, but also their paradoxical status as “literary” works. The poetry, having such a forthright political agenda, must strive to remain beautiful and powerful *despite* that agenda. *Winning Hearts and Minds*, it would seem, succeeds almost in spite of itself:

The poignantly experienced American-Vietnamese situation results in the paradox that the poem seems the best means of expressing the attitudes of the writers, while at the same time nearly every quality that makes it “poetry” is thrown out. The poem is necessary because it provides the most concentrated way of fusing the elements of the situation within the minute, particular drama of a confrontation (Spender 3).

The iconic power of the poems in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, the paradoxical creation of poetry through the emulation of conflict and confrontation, is what makes these “artless” poems successful. It is through this “antipoetic” stance that the realities of Viet Nam can be explored<sup>16</sup>.

It is not, Spender argues, the point of the anthology to necessarily contribute to the greater canon of American literature; few of the poems in the anthology “derive from an idea of poetry based on past examples and [which] exercise claims on the future” (Spender 3). Their aim, as Spender points out, is to be “brief chroniclers” of events, to examine in detail the – expressly political—loss of “American innocence of expectation” as a result of involvement in Viet Nam. Spender calls this particular loss of innocence an (Spender 8). His analysis is worth quoting at length:

There is an American innocence of expectation: that the American among his compatriots knows the sort people he is dealing with, of whom a good many will be candid and reliable and not really wicked. The idea that the whole society is in the grip of really evil power and that in order to fight this you have to accept it in yourself as well as recognize it in others—leads to the loss of American innocence. The central experience of the authors represented in *Winning Hearts and Minds* is this loss and the recognition at the same time of an innocence murdered in the Vietnamese. (Spender 8).

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<sup>16</sup> See my discussion on Kunitz’s use of the terms “antipoetry” and “antipoets,” along with Gotera’s section on “antipoetry.”

This loss—or, more to the point, the *mythos* of loss-- is an oft-discussed aspect of involvement in Viet Nam. Viet Nam was where our cultural myths—“the city on the hill,” according to Loren Baritz, visions of technologically-based invincibility (James William Gibson) or manifest destiny—were deconstructed, at least for a moment. But to overcome this loss, to understand it, requires a self-examination as well as an acute political voice. The point of *Winning Hearts and Minds* is this painful act of self-examination—the result is poetry that is both a *confrontation* and an act of *synthesis*.

In the introduction to *Winning Hearts and Minds*, the editors acknowledge this need for self examination. Paquet, Barry, and Rottmann argue that this sense of self indictment—this poetics of guilt—is what separates Viet Nam war poetry apart from all previous war poetry:

Previous war poets have traditionally placed the blame 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. (WHAM v)

Even the eloquent protestations of Sassoon, Owen, and Jarrell tend to place the blame for atrocity and war on things *external* to the participant. In Great War poetry, the nightmare seems to be more cultural than personal—the ethos of death generated by fin-de-siecle British socio-political mythology. Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum est” is

essentially an attack on the classical traditions that make “dying for one’s country” possible and even “honorable.” Siegfried Sassoon’s work takes a similar confrontational stance, but was more expressly political. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory* wrote that if one were to only read Sassoon’s work on the war, not having any other referent, he would think that the war were fought primarily between soldiers and civilians (Fussell 183). The primary focus of Sassoon’s anger is directed *outward* from himself, onto external loci—the church, the government, women, ideology. His poem “They” is a prime example:

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back  
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
'In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
'New right to breed an honourable race,  
'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
'A chap who's served that hasn't found *some* change.'  
And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

(Sassoon 156 )

The speaker here attempts to convey the suffering of the war to a clergyman steeped in patriotic ideology, to no avail. Sassoon portrays the clergy as unfeeling toward the suffering engendered by and through their hawkish propaganda; the result is a scorching attack on those Sassoon feels are responsible for the prosecution and continuation of the war. Both Sassoon and Owen *project* some level of blame for the suffering of the Great War outward—they are, for the most part, victims in the larger scheme of the war.

Jarrell's Ball Turret Gunner is essentially the same type of victim; his condition is caused by an Orwellian "State" that reduces him to the condition of an animal:

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,  
And I hunched in its belly until my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died, they washed me out of the turret with a hose

(Jarrell 125)

For the poets in *Winning Hearts and Minds* the notion of "active identification" of oneself as an "agent-victim" requires an understanding of one's own duality, one's own simultaneous Blakean "innocence" and "experience." It requires that individuals blend features of the two roles, see themselves in a greater context than the immediate, and be able and willing to accept both responsibility and mercy. The poems in this anthology take as their primary task an exploration of individuals' attempts to do this. In 1972, this

righteous self-indictment was a powerful political project as well. When one sees oneself as an oppressor—as perhaps not innately but at least *capable* of great evil—political change can happen, and the war can be stopped:

This outrage has been too much, and still it goes on. This poetry is an attempt to grapple with a nightmare, a national madness. It is poetry written out of fire and under fire.

The war still goes on. We were, and are, a part of the evil . And the fire still burns. (WHAM v)

The anthology is structured, loosely, as a pastiche of scenes that roughly correspond to a combat tour in Viet Nam. The first “poems” the reader experiences are highly ironic. The first is a picture of a sign found in many basic training facilities:

If you kill for pleasure  
you're a sadist . . .

If you kill for money  
you're a mercenary . . .

If you kill for both  
you're a RANGER!! (WHAM 1)

Signs like these appeared all over U.S. domestic training facilities and across firebases in Viet Nam, in many different units—commanders simply replaced the “RANGER” with “PARATROOPER” or “MARINE” or whichever unit they were attached to. This type of indoctrination—of an essential identification with killing-- was the purpose of basic training, and Advanced Infantry training; trainees needed to learn how to kill with impunity in order to advance their units’ objectives and to stay alive. This process is most acutely examined by Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*. In Kubrick’s film (based on Gustav Hasford’s novel *The Short-Timers*) we are introduced to a platoon of recruits, and we watch as they “become” Marines, or as Private Joker says, “killers.”

This odd piece is followed (on the same page) by an Army marching cadence, recited in boot camp:

“I Wanna Go to Viet-Nam

I Wanna Kill a Viet-Cong

With A Knife or With A Gun

Either Way Will Be Good Fun

Stomp ‘Em, Beat ‘Em, Kick ‘Em in the Ass

Hide Their Bodies in the Grass

Airborne, Ranger, C.I.B.

Nobody’s Gonna Fuck With Me

But If I Die in the Combat Zone

Box Me Up and Ship Me Home

Fold My Arms Across My Chest

Tell My Folks I Done My Best

Place A Bible In My Hand

For My Trip To The Promised Land.” (WHAM 1)

The rhythms of this march are simple, and popular culture is replete with versions of this cadence. From *Full Metal Jacket* to *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Stripes*, images of basic training are not complete without a scene of white-shirted, bare-headed recruits chanting in unison. The themes are always simple, always the same: I want to become a fighter and killer for my country. In the above example, there is an odd turn; after the masculine rage of the first eight lines, the speaker grimly accepts his own mortality: “If I die in the combat zone / box me up and ship me home” (WHAM 1). The “role” here that the speaker takes is one of a patriot—someone who does what his country asks without hesitation and without question.

Both works conform to a certain sense of ideological and formal orthodoxy: the sign promotes an essential identification with killing within the context of a simple syntactically rigid syllogism; the marching cadence promotes patriotism through a familiar rhythmic pattern. Opening such an anthology with “works” such as these—

obviously contrasting sharply with the anti-war agenda of the book, tinges the subsequent poems with irony, asking the reader to juxtapose the simple jingoism of the chant and sign with the harsh self-examination and dialecticism of the veteran poetry. Through the experience of the opening poems, the reader is “indoctrinated” into the anthology through an exposure – however brief—to the ideologies that the book seeks to counter. This exposure is an illustration of conflict, and the anthology demands that its readers be willing to confront its ideas; they must be willing to see problems both in the world and in themselves.

The rest of the anthology is as variegated in style as it is homogenous in theme. Some works in *Winning Hearts and Minds* display what Philip Beidler calls “a dogged concreteness” in its attempt to describe the Viet Nam experience (78). According to Beidler, the concrete mode of Viet Nam war poetry bombards its reader with sensory images, hoping to convey the complexity of the experience of Viet Nam through sheer sensory overload. There is little comment or authorial voice, and much attention is focused on the details of the experience. W.D. Ehrhart’s “Viet Nam, February 1967” is a good example of this mode:

Air heavy with rain and humidity,  
Sky full of ominous clouds,  
Dank smell of refuse,  
Mosquitoes and flies like carpets on the wind.

Patchwork quilt of rice paddies,

Winding rivers and swollen streams,  
Water buffalo lumbering through the fields,  
High mountains on the horizon.

Thundering roar of aircraft on the prowl,  
Roads clogged with troops and trucks,  
Distant growl of artillery,  
Crackling whine of small arms.

Ramshackle buses crammed with people,  
Bamboo huts with straw-thatched roofs,  
Women bearing baskets from the market,  
A ragged child stares at passing soldiers. (WHAM 5).

Ehrhart himself tells us very little about his subject; instead, he relies on an imagistic simplicity, focusing his attention on relaying the sensory impact of the moment. Stanley Brownstein, a medic from Queens who served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Division, follows a similar mode, but relies a bit more on his readers' sense of pathos:

#### Sounds of War

The tympanic boom of the huge bombs.  
The cack-cacking of the enemy's gun.

The thud of napalm as it hits the ground,  
And the click of your weapon as your chamber a round.

The lightning crash of the Cobras,  
The whizzing slash of shrapnel,  
The tiny pops from a mortar pit,  
And the explosive shattering of a direct hit.

Then, the screams from the wounded,  
And whispered prayers for their lives.  
And the silence of the dead,  
Who hear no more the sounds of war. (WHAM 10)

Brownstein, perhaps even more than Ehrhart, depends on sensory depth to convey the experience of combat. Not only does Brownstein use simple visual descriptions, but the poem makes use of specifically *sonic* effects to convey “the sounds” of war. Note the low, round vowel sounds of “tympanic boom” and “huge bombs,” the onomatopoeic “cack-cacking” of guns, and the “thud” of napalm. The experience here is not only rendered by simple signification; the sub-verbal aspects, the assonance and intuitive symbolism of the phonemes become a central aspect of the poem. The “sounds” of war is Brownstein’s subject here—he hopes to bring his reader into the sonic experience of war through the sounds he uses in the poem. Of course, the final stanza’s melodramatic

pathos underscores what success the poem has: he “ends” the sound of war with rhetoric, not silence.

This “descriptive mode” is but one of several dominant styles in *Winning Hearts and Minds*. Jan Barry, one of the editors of *WHAM*, and a founding member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War takes a somewhat more direct, confrontational, or “argumentative” stance in his work. His poem “In the Footsteps of Genghis Khan” attacks the notion of American historical invincibility:

There, where a French legionnaire  
once walked patrol  
around the flightline perimeter of the airfield  
at Nhatrang  
ten years later I walked  
an American foreign expeditionary forces  
soldier on night guard duty  
at Nhatrang  
occupied even earlier  
(a year more than my nineteen)  
by the Japanese

Unhaunted by the ghosts, living and dead  
among us  
in the red-tile roofed French barracks

or listening in on the old Japanese telephone line  
to Saigon  
we went about our military duties  
(setting up special forces headquarters  
where once a French foreign legion post had been)  
oblivious of the irony  
of Americans walking in the footsteps  
of Genghis Khan

Unencumbered by history  
our own or that of 13<sup>th</sup> century Mongol armies  
long since fled or buried  
by the Vietnamese  
in Nhatrang, in 1962, we just did our jobs  
replacing kepi's with berets, "ah so" with "gawd!" (WHAM 6)

There is little that is "poetic" about this work, aside from its lineation. Barry's opinion is clear, and most passages would require little or no explication. Instead, the focus is on the narrative aspects of the poem—Barry tells us a story, from which we are supposed to take a moral, not unlike a poetic "fable." In the hindsight of 1972 (Barry was in Viet Nam in 1962 as an "adviser"), the moral is a powerful one: that the United States

fundamentally and fatally misunderstood the history of Viet Nam's tenacious resistance to outside invaders<sup>17</sup>.

Some poets make polemic the whole aim of their work, further stripping their poetry of "literary" convention. Julian Knaster's "I fail to be mesmerized" is a simple catalogue of the disillusionment fostered by his experiences in Viet Nam. The language is sparse, non-poetic, and angry, amounting to little more than a catalogue of his own disillusionment with American iconography:

i fail to be mesmerized  
by the American flag  
or churches  
or temples  
or synagogues,  
or men no better than i  
or you,  
bent on no other purpose  
than to hear themselves  
shout  
from heavenly pulpits.  
i wonder if at times  
the president  
ever takes a moment to weep. (WHAM 108)

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<sup>17</sup> Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* examines this failure, as well as the U.S.'s failure to understand key facets of Vietnamese culture when formulating strategies to deal with the communist insurgency.

Other work in *Winning Hearts and Minds* embraces the distinctive ironies of the conflict, making its anti-war statement more by implication than outright argument. Larry Rottmann's work is perhaps the best example of this "ironic" mode. His lyrics are short and memorable, tinged with an ironic sensibility that makes his poems some of the most acute observations of the horrors of Viet Nam. His "What Kind of War" echoes the more polemical of the work in the anthology, but seems tempered by a sense of self-qualification that the Barry and Knaster poems lack:

Ask what kind of war it is  
where you can be pinned down  
all day in a muddy rice paddy  
while your buddies are being shot  
and a close-support Phantom jet  
who has been napalming the enemy  
wraps itself around a tree and explodes  
and you cheer inside? (WHAM 97)

This poem is, as Kunitz would put it, "anti-poetic." Be that as it may, the poem has a certain energy; it asks its readers to think, as it is unraveling of "what kind of war" would encourage a soldier to cheer silently the death of a fighter. The answer to Rottmann's question is multiple: a war that embraces senseless killing, a war that fosters self-hate

and suicidal tendencies, a war in which we were (consciously or no) on the wrong side, or simply a war that makes no sense at all. .

Rottmann's "S.O.P." works in a different way, attacking the "Standard Operating Procedure" of the Army through irony and wordplay:

To build a "gook stretcher," all you need is:  
Two helicopters  
Two long, strong ropes,  
And one elastic gook.           (WHAM 53)

Much like Michael Casey (whose work I would also group as using the "ironic mode"), the speaker here seems somewhat oblivious to the brutality of the situation. He offers the reader, in a matter-of-fact tone, a "recipe" for building a "gook stretcher." The term "gook stretcher" usually applies to a medical aid, not a grisly means of drawing and quartering a Vietnamese. The reader's expectations are violated here in a profound way, just as the body of the Vietnamese is violated beyond all recognition. The "gook" in this poem is not "elastic," but readers are: one sees, when his expectations are violated, that Rottmann is making a point about the corrupt, brutal practices of the Army. It is designed to make readers sick.

While certainly limited as a tool for analysis, a sense of the "modes" at work—"descriptive," "argumentative," and "ironic"-- in *Winning Hearts and Minds* can help us to see in some general ways how writers, in 1972, were attempting to look at the war. For the most part, these attempts were not "literary" in any conventional sense of the

word. Their value is not so much for their literary merit as for their status as cultural artifacts, pieces of a time and place.

## II. Basil T. Paquet: The Literary Gestalt

Perusing the sparse, gut-wrenching and often stunningly visceral poems in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, one comes to an easy conclusion: these are poems that are not literary; instead, they are “anti-poetic,” embracing the “revolutionary idiom” that Thomas Merton argues is a necessary component of any meaningful discourse on war—especially the American war in Viet Nam.

Our conclusions about *Winning Hearts and Minds*’ literary merit, however, are challenged when we confront the work of one of the volume’s chief editors, Basil T. Paquet. Paquet is, with the possible exception of John Balaban, the most self-consciously “literary” of participant-poets writing on American involvement in Viet Nam. His work is characterized by dense metaphors, abstract similes, formal and thematic allusions, and a distinct sense of poetic tradition. In contrast to the school of writers that Stephen Spender, in “Poetry of the Unspeakable,” called “anti-poets,”—Michael Casey, D.F. Brown, and others-- Paquet’s work displays a distinct consciousness of himself as a poetic persona. One gets the sense, reading Paquet’s work, that he “took with him to the trenches” (or, more precisely the “boonies” of Viet Nam) the Romantics and other major writers of his time. He also took with him, however, a sense of the inadequacy of those forms and modes of discourse as a means to examine “The Nam” as

experience—he constantly revises and expands upon the traditions he obviously respects so much.

Philip Beidler, in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, refers to Paquet's work as "notes toward a new mythic iconography, attempts to devise new images for new experiences . . . images fierce and unsettling in their bitter originality of imaginative invention" (75). In short, Paquet's work is an attempt to devise a new mode of poetic discourse for the "un-reality" of Vietnam, a discourse that lacks, for better or for worse, a "dogged concreteness" (75). Beidler cites Paquet's poem "Night Dust-Off" as an example:

A sound like hundreds of barbers  
stopping furiously, increases;  
suddenly the night lights,  
flashing blades thin bodies  
into red strips  
hunched against the wind  
of a settling liftship.

litters clatter open,  
hands reaching  
into the dark belly of the ship  
touch toward moans  
they are thrust into a privy,

feeling into wounds,  
the dark belly all wound,  
all wet screams riven limbs  
moving in the beaten night. (WHAM 18)

A “dust off,” in grunt vernacular, is a term for an emergency medical evacuation via helicopter. Instead of the technical details of the experience, such as those provided by poets like Frank A. Cross, Charles Purcell, and W.D. Ehrhart, we are provided instead with abstract deflection, a tenuous language of simile—the movement of the helicopter’s rotor is compared obliquely to the sound of “hundreds of barbers / stropping furiously.” A simile like this requires that the reader process information far more abstractly than in most other poems in *Winning Hearts and Minds*—the reader must reason far more analogically to understand the sensory experience of the helicopter landing. One must, then, *imagine* how hearing the sound of the rotor blades beating could be like hearing amplified sounds of a barber shop. Beidler calls this type of symbolic representation “elaborate art-speech,” and “a distracting hodgepodge of fractured syntax and figurative ellipsis” (77); others, like David Wyatt, refer to this (somewhat derogatorily) as “low grade imagism” (Wyatt, Personal Communication). Regardless of theoretical nomenclature, this mode of writing requires from its reader an entirely different method of approach to the poem, a different openness to the nuance of the experience, to the purely aesthetic or analogical modes of reasoning that poetry engenders.

Vincent Gotera, in *Radical Visions*, calls Paquet an “aesthete” and explores his poetry, in particular his use of elevated or “poetic” language, as what he calls a new

“metastyle” that is characteristically postmodern—a response to the “jargon stream” that differs markedly from the “antipoetry” practiced by Michael Casey:

This elevated diction is not merely highfalutin. The barrage of lexical complexity is meant as an antidote to the jargon stream, a faith in the fireworks of language, not merely what Orwell has decried as the ‘gumming together [of] long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. (Gotera 117, Orwell 134-135)

According to Gotera, Paquet’s “elaborate art speech” is an act of faith—a desire to see that language really can and does mean something—that poetic images and conventions matter, and can be used to *resist* destructive forces instead of becoming so themselves.

As discussed above, the overall agenda of *Winning Hearts and Minds* is expressly political, an attempt to gain a further understanding of the individual’s place—and his complicity—in the greater scheme of the Viet Nam experience. Most specifically, these poems seek to gain a higher understanding of themselves as, as the editors put it, “agent-victims” of suffering—they are at the same time the *perpetrators* of atrocity against the Vietnamese and *victims* of atrocity at the hands of a reckless bureaucratic, ideological crusade. This act of coming to understand the duality or complexity of one’s role in the experience of Viet Nam is the ostensible goal of the anthology, but it is only one aspect

of a larger network of unstated corollary efforts; efforts that are not only personal or political, but at times specifically literary as well.

Paquet is perhaps the most talented of the poets featured in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, second perhaps only to Michael Casey<sup>18</sup>, the author of *Obscenities*. W.D. Ehrhart, in his seminal “Soldier Poets of the Vietnam War,” shows his admiration for Paquet’s contribution to the anthology and to Viet Nam war poetry in general:

Of the dozen or so poems that Paquet contributes, three or four must rank as among the very best Vietnam war poems ever written. Literate without being literary, Paquet was, at the time, far and away the most skillful and practiced of the soldier-poets. [His work] is a masterpiece, capturing at once the new, sophisticated battlefield medicine of Vietnam and the ancient, ageless human misery and futility of all wars. (Ehrhart 150).

While polemical and didactic, Paquet’s work never seems cloying, despite his obvious reverence for overly “poetic” imagery; he constantly searches for new and interesting ways to synthesize his conflicting roles of “agent” and “victim” in Viet Nam. While lesser writers seem to wallow in their guilt (some of the less artful work in *WHAM* is plagued by this), Paquet seeks to integrate these two ideas imagistically, portraying in his poetry the brutality, guilt, and complicity of the “agent” part of his psyche, as well as the outrage and defeatism of the “victim.” At its best, Paquet’s work illuminates the

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<sup>18</sup> Casey’s *Obscenities*, the subject of Chapter 1, appeared almost simultaneously with *Winning Hearts and Minds*. Some of Casey’s most notable work, such as the “LZ Gator Body Collector,” was featured in *Winning Hearts and Minds* prior to the publication of *Obscenities*. Many reviews of either collection, such

almost symbiotic relationship between these two roles,<sup>19</sup> at times seeking an imagistic “*gestalt*” between his speakers and the suffering subjects that they interact with. In many instances, the two become unmistakably intertwined; their bodies (and representations thereof) interpenetrated and made one. This makes for odd war poetry, a poetry “grounded” in the most literal sense by the blood and guts of conflict, yet punctuated with moments of highly abstract psychic and spiritual connection.

The term “*gestalt*” derives from psychoanalytic work done by Fritz Perls and other clinicians during the first half of the twentieth century (1920s-60s). The basic concept of *gestalt* was initially developed as a response to theories of psychological behaviorism—the belief that behavior is governed by stimulus / response reflexes. Gestalt theory holds that behavior, indeed all psychological phenomena, are coherent wholes, more than “constellations of specific, molecular parts” (Passons 12) or even of specific cause-effect reactions. Simply put, human behavior cannot be analyzed piecemeal; it must be analyzed as something that transcends its components and that can only be understood as a whole. *The Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytical Terms* offers a concise if limited definition of a “*gestalt*” phenomena:

A form, a configuration or totality that has, as a unified whole, properties which cannot be derived by summation from the parts and their

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as Spender’s “Poetry of the Unspeakable” and John Seelye’s 1972 New York Times Book Review piece on *WHAM*, often make references to the other.

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* examines this idea, exploring theoretical arguments about the relationship between the torturer and the victim of torture. While the best known study on this topic in literary circles, Scarry’s book has been taken to task by many reviewers for its lack of evidence in support of its myriad claims. Other books, such as Edward Peters’ *Torture* offer more empirical, historicized analyses of this complex relationship.

relationships . . . . It may refer to physical structures, to physiological and psychological functions, or to symbolic units. (English and English 225).

Key to Perls' theories on gestalt is the idea that human behavior and experience only has "meaning" within a given environment or context: human beings are endlessly searching for ways to "fit into" or "escape" the situations that they find themselves in. This strive for synthesis, or "closure" as William Passons puts it, is a key tenet of gestalt theory—individuals naturally tend toward conceptualizing things as closed spaces, as wholes. He illustrates this with a few key examples:

A Gestalt which is incomplete or unfinished demands attention until it is unified and stabilized. A series of dots is seen as a line. A total conversation is disrupted when someone asks, "Who starred in that film?" and no one can remember. Finally someone recalls the name and the immediate Gestalt is closed and the conversation flows again. (Passions 12)

Often, gestalt theory has been used to discuss cognitive phenomena—the work of Reuven Tsur and others applies the theory to linguistics, figure-ground perception, and music. For example: if one sees a pattern of dots on a page arranged horizontally, one may recognize it as a *line* of dots, not just a random collection of data. If those dots are staggered into sub sections and punctuated by dashes, one might see them as forming a line of Morse code. Likewise, when one hears a distinctive melody, say the first few bars

of the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction," one can identify that distinctive pattern as more than simple successive sonic data of a certain pitch. The *meaning* of these things—the staggered line of dots that becomes Morse code, the grinding Keith Richards guitar riff—only becomes apparent when they are examined within a specific context. One must know Morse code for a staggered pattern of dots to carry any meaning; one must know something about 1960s rock to see the first bars of "Satisfaction" as meaningful or important. These things transcend their component parts and fit into a larger system of meaning<sup>20</sup>.

Other, more therapy-based work seeks to resolve polarities (conflicting aspects) within a client's psyche—to get them to transcend a certain role or pattern of behavior that they are immured in, to reconcile conflicting urges into an understanding of their whole personality. These often fluid polarities, gestalt theory argues, are a primary force in human behavior:

There is nothing new about looking at polarities in man. What is new is the gestalt perspective that each individual himself is a never-ending sequence of polarities. Whenever an individual recognizes one aspect of himself, the presence of its antithesis, or solar quality, is implicit. There it rests as background, giving dimension to present experience and yet powerful enough to emerge as a figure in its own right if it gathers enough force. (Polster and Polster 62)

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<sup>20</sup> Semiotically, this idea is somewhat similar to some structuralist and post-structuralist theories of signification. Signs acquire meaning by being differentiated from other signs; this provides the basis of much post-structuralist thought. Derrida uses this idea to argue for the instability or "play" of signifiers,

These polarities can be benign, as William Passons has pointed out, as simple as a forceful, strong football player who in his spare time works with disabled children, “handling them with gentleness and tenderness which stands in stark contrast to his Sunday afternoon behavior,” or as dangerous as the serial killer who was a “nice person who wouldn’t harm a soul (Passons 192). The point, however, of examining these polarities is not to deconstruct the binary into some psychological midpoint; it is to enable the client to adapt more efficiently to his or her environment and ever-shifting context—to be “in touch” with both aspects of his or her personality, and to be able to act appropriately when a situation demands it. Polster and Polster, in their influential text *Gestalt Therapy Integrated: Contours of Theory and Practice* illustrate this point:

The task in resolving the polarity is to aid each part to live its fullest while at the same time making contact with its polar counterpart. This reduces the chance that one part will stay mired in its own impotence, hanging on to the status quo. Instead, it is energized into making a vital statement of its own needs and wishes, asserting itself as a force which must be considered a new union of forces. (Polster and Polster 62)

To resolve these polarities, subjects must often attempt to vacillate consciously between them in a clinical or therapeutic setting, “becoming” the aspect of their personality (as directed by their therapist) that the situation demands. A person dominated by feelings of

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asserting that the endless reference of one signifier to another renders meaning unstable and self-contradictory. This, however, is not my main concern here.

helplessness might be asked to “perform” or react to a situation as a helpless person would, and then react as he or she thinks an “assertive” person would. Clients are asked to “project” the emotions that they feel—such as hatred, helplessness, confusion, onto their therapist or other members of their therapy group (Passons 21). Through this projection, the polarity can be addressed, enabling more control over the client’s feelings and reactions.

It is this type of projection gestalt that Paquet’s work often attempts. Paquet’s work seeks to reconcile the disparate aspects of his experience—as “agent” and “victim” of suffering and death through this projection, through the “connection”—imagistic, formal, or literary with others. His poems evoke this natural urge toward synthesis that gestalt theory posits, this working toward an understanding of one’s self and one’s experience as a coherent whole—organic and complex, transcendent and fluid. Paquet’s literary gestalts connect him indelibly with those he has seen, those he has killed, and those he has admired. At its most powerful, Paquet’s poetry blurs the line between self and other, “agent” and “victim,” “observer” and “participant”—the ideas and archetypes of these things become combined within the space of a few lines, forming a coherent whole, a literary gestalt.

Most important among these conflicting polarities in Paquet’s work is the split that much of *Winning Hearts and Minds* seeks to address—the conflicting feelings of being both and “agent” and “victim” of suffering. Through these poems, Paquet negotiates this terrain, forging a symbiosis between the two in his readers’ minds. “Easter 68” is one of the more successful attempts at this type of interaction, this gestalt between “agent” and “victim” of suffering. The poem begins as a rather garden-variety

Christification of the suffering, in the style of Sassoon's "The Savior," but radically changes course midway, becoming a failed or flawed resurrection, mired in the rice paddies of Viet Nam:

I have seen the pascal men today.  
long past rising to a passion  
they sucked their last sun  
though blued lips,  
buttressed their intestines in handfuls,  
lifting their wounds to the sky  
they fell silent as the sun,  
as words not spoken,  
broken Easters of flesh  
girdled in fatigue strips,  
red arching rainbows of dead men  
rising like a promise  
to give Jesus the big kiss  
and sinking down—  
only my breath on their lips,  
only my words on their mouths. (WHAM 37)

The poem is broken into two sentences, the first short and tense, the second longer and syntactically jammed-together. In the first, the "pascal" men seem to be a corrupted (or

“casual,” as Michael Bibby has written (Bibby 166)) version of “paschal” men, those observing Easter or the Jewish Passover. Alluding to this, the most sacred of rituals in the Judeo-Christian tradition, generates expectations of renewal, of sacrifice, of salvation: the rest of the poem works to violate those expectations completely.

As the poem progresses, instead of “ascending” to heaven as Jesus (or coming from heaven, as the Angel of Death in Passover rites), the suffering subjects here move metaphorically in an arc, perhaps a “Pascalian” parabola. In the rest of the poem, the dead are portrayed as “long past rising to a [divine] passion,” yet they still try to reach heaven: they “[lift] their wounds to the sky” only to fall back to earth “silent as the sun / as words not spoken / broken Easters of flesh / girdled in fatigue strips” (WHAM 37). This metaphor of “falling” is quite crucial to the poem overall: Paquet wants us to see these actions not as a meaningful sacrifice, a Christ-like death that leads to divine union and salvation, but of an aborted attempt at meaning: these people are pulled back to earth without salvation. But “falling silent” also means keeping quiet—the dying “fell silent as the sun” and “as words not spoken.” Articulation, then, becomes some sort of *cause* of spiritual failure / falling here: whereas Jesus had the Apostles to deliver the Gospel, thus securing some sort of inscribed, textual legacy for himself and his message, these people have nothing, they become merely “arching rainbows of dead men / rising like a promise / to give Jesus the big kiss / and sinking down” (WHAM 37). The Christian “promise,” for Paquet, seems to be an empty one; he must deliver the “Gospel” himself, through the poem:

only my breath on their lips,

only my words on their mouths. (WHAM 37)

With this image, Paquet appropriates the words of the suffering and dying; he speaks for them. But more literally, Paquet (or his speaker) places himself *inside* his subjects, it is *his* breath that passes their lips, *his* words that are “on their mouths.” Successful as poetry or not, we see Paquet here “merging” with his subjects, becoming in some way a coherent whole with them, involving himself in their experiences, and them in his, forcing us to connect the two conceptually. This is the *gestalt* that Paquet so craves. He strives to illustrate to his readers that the experience of Viet Nam, or even of war in general, cannot be divided into simple “sides”—the experience is more than the sum of its (horrific) parts.

This concept of “merging” or “gestalt” is reflected in the Christian Trinity of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” which, given the name of the poem, is obviously a concern here. While on one hand Paquet achieves a “gestalt” with the dead and suffering imagistically, he also uses the form of “Easter 1968” to mirror the paradoxical “wholeness” of the Trinity. In the second sentence of the poem, the last fifteen lines, Paquet uses three sets of strong rhymes: passion / sun, sun/spoken, and promise / kiss. Between those strong rhymes, Paquet varies his rhyme and meter greatly, but repeats a set of three lines, ending up with three sets of three. The result is a pattern of repeating threes: three discrete sets of strong rhymes *surrounded with and penetrated by* three sets of unrhymed verse. The result is a formal and thematic gestalt: varying patterns that merge into a discrete whole that transcends its component parts.

Paquet attempts a somewhat different “merging” with the dead and suffering near the end of one of his longer poems, “It is Monsoon At Last<sup>21</sup>”. Here, the gestalt between the speaker and the dead has a more pragmatic and symbolic function. The poem takes place as the speaker watches a helicopter assault from a morgue bunker:

Gunships are going up  
sucking devil dusters into the air  
We can see them from the morgue door  
against the red froth clouds hanging over Xuan Loc.  
We lift the boy into a death bag.  
We lift the boy into the racks.  
We are building a bunker of dead.  
We are stacking the dead for protection.  
This dead boy is on my hands  
My thighs are wet with the vomit of death  
His blood is on my mouth  
My mouth my mouth tastes his blood.  
  
The gunships are firing over the Dong Nai  
throwing fire into the river  
clouds are coming in from the sea  
I can smell the rain, see it  
over Xuan Loc, over me,

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<sup>21</sup> See the appendix to this chapter for a complete reprinting of this poem.

it is monsoon at last.

(WHAM 62)

In this poem, the “penetration” and “synthesis” is not as complete, but is more literal. Paquet’s speakers and his comrades are huddled in the morgue, literally surrounded by the dead. They “lift” the dead boys onto racks, and, more disturbingly, are “building a bunker of dead.” The dead here serve as a means of protection in this poem, a barrier between Paquet and the outside world: one almost imagines the frightened soldiers stacking bodies like sandbags for protection from the fight. Paquet’s speaker is “contained” within the deaths of his friends, enemies, and fellow soldiers. The “intimacy” of this containment, this extraordinarily close contact, gets developed further with the next lines, which seem to be the most crisis-filled in the poem:

This dead boy is on my hands

My thighs are wet with the vomit of death

His blood is on my mouth

My mouth my mouth tastes his blood. (WHAM 62)

The contact with the dead here is excruciating, physically engulfing experience. The “dead boy” is “on” the speaker’s hands, suggesting that the speaker “bears the weight” of the boy’s body literally, *and* that he has some responsibility for that death—the boy’s blood, the “vomit” of death, is on Paquet’s hands (and thighs).

A bizarre “communion” that would seem to be more at home in “Easter 68” takes place near the end of this stanza, sealing together in a corrupted act of consumption the

speaker and victim—the speaker, losing control of his emotions it seems, has not only the “weight” of the dead boy, but his “blood” as well. Paquet here is again creating a space for himself as a poet here, speaking for the dead—their blood—through his mouth. But the relationship is not merely uni-directional; Paquet’s speaker undergoes the communion as well, tasting the blood of the dead boy. The repetition of “my mouth” evokes panic, a searching for stability, but it also fractures the syntax of the sentence: subjects and verbs are no longer stable in the “crisis” of the moment. The single “my mouth” has been doubled into two: two mouths tasting each other’s blood, becoming some sort of symbiosis. In this sense, the disruption of the coherent syntax is a disruption of the discrete walls of the self—the speaker merges, at least for a second, with his subject.

The last lines, however, defuse the “crisis” of the moment here, offering a different sort of *dénouement* for the poem: the monsoon rains envelop the speaker, washing over him. While “washing” the blood of the dead away, this is also another image in which the speaker is covered, this time by water. This parallel image of the rain washing over the speaker is a baptism of sorts, an immersion designed to remove sin and provide a new life; whether the poem is skeptical about the possibility of that renewal, however, is unclear.

Paquet also experiments with the idea of poetry itself as a gestalt experience. In “Morning—A Death” Paquet employs many of the tactics used above—imagistic “merging,” and elevated, dense language—in addition to a complex notion of external form to further explore the symbiosis between himself as a poet and the experience of suffering and death. “Morning—A Death” follows the basic conceptual (if not rhythmic or sonic) form of a Pindaric ode. It begins with a “Turn” or “strophe” stanza, which is

followed by a “Counterturn” (“antistrophe”) and a “Stand” (epode). But this poem departs radically from the epideictic rhetoric of the ode form: this poem praises nothing, instead choosing to *lament*. There is no sense of *blame* here (which would turn the poem into an anti-ode or vituperation), just a pervasive, profound sadness that informs the progress of the piece. In addition to this thematic deviation from the ode form, the poem is structured as a sort of dialog, or more to the point a set of related monologues, as the speakers never actually converse. The speaker of the “Turn” and “Stand” is an army medic, discussing his efforts to revive a dying soldier; the “Counterturn” is spoken by the soldier himself.

Like Paquet’s other work, this poem is obsessed with the notion of gestalt with the dying; the medic’s relationship with the dying soldier is marked by an increasing level of identification, tempered by fatigue and burn-out. The first lines sexualize the relationship, implying the “penetration” of the dying body:

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,  
And twice you defibrillated,

And twice blew back my breath. (WHAM 22)

The image here is obviously of copulation, almost rape. But there never seems to be a climactic moment here—the pauses that govern most of these lines defuse any sense of rushing or urgency that could mark the culmination of a sexual act. Thus, there is a sense of sterility to this copulation, a sense of impotence, of lack of emission: the medic knows that nothing will come of his efforts. One does, however, see that the “doubling” notion seen in other Paquet poems is present here as well—the soldier “twice” blows the medic’s breath back, “twice moan[s] under [the medic’s] thrusts,” “twice defibrillate[s]” (WHAM 22). Again, the “doubling” moment comes at a time of close contact, of intimate involvement between the medic and dying man.

The “speaker” seems to be merged with the “poet” in the next lines, as the language of sexual contact becomes transformed into the language of creating poetry:

I’ve scanned the rhythms of your living,  
Forced half-rhymes in your silent pulse,  
Sprung brief spondees in your lungs,  
And the caesura’s called mid-line, half-time,  
Incomplete, but with a certain finality. (WHAM 22)

The movement here is from sex to poetry, but the essential theme remains—the inability to create something viable. The speaker “forces” rhymes, “springs” spondees into the subject’s chest cavity, his lineal caesura is “incomplete.” What is more interesting here,

however, is that the merger of speaker and victim that the sexualized metaphor implies is compounded here by a reference to the poetic process—the gestalt now includes the poet creating the poem, merging himself with the speaker and subject. These lines are disturbing in that they betray a certain anxiety about the metaphors that the poem uses to explore this subject; indeed, the real question is if poetic expression can “revive” anything.

The language becomes more “poetic” as the “Turn” progresses, almost becoming, despite its implied Christian allusions, lost in its own abstractions:

The bullet barks apocalyptic  
And you don't unzip your sepulchral  
Canvas bag in three days.  
No rearticulation of nucleics, no phoenix,  
No novae, just an arbitrary of one-way bangs  
Flowing out to interstitial calms.  
The required canonical wait for demotion  
To lower order, and your wash out pure chemical. (WHAM22)

The speaker is painfully aware of the limitations of his actions both as a literal “reviver” of the dead and as a person attempting to speak about death: the language here is obtuse, the vocabulary bordering on esoteric (“nucleics,” “novae” “interstitial calms,” the misspelled “phoenix”). The “regeneration” that one would hope for, physically and poetically, never comes. This passage seems to echo Jarrell’s “Death of the Ball Turret

Gunner” in its lack of closure, its almost apocalyptic charm. The soldier is “washed out pure chemical” just as Jarrell’s gunner is “washed out” of his turret with a steam hose.

The end of the “turn” retreats from abstraction, even from metaphor itself, recognizing its own impotence:

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. (WHAM 22)

The “turn” ends with a thud, a deadpan statement shorn of all remnants of poetic convention. The speaker is once again simply a medic—a burned out one at that—who is tired of his job, tired of watching people suffer and die, and tired of the language that he creates to deal with his experience.

“Character 2” takes over the poem in the “Counterturn.” Like Jarrell’s poem, here we get the actual voice of the dead; in this piece, however, the speaker displays a shocking aversion to life on earth:

I’d sooner be a fallen pine cone this winter  
In a cradle of cold New England rock,  
Less hurt in it than in nineteen years.  
What an exit! Stage left, fronds waving,

Cut down running my ass of at a tree line.  
I'm thinking, as I hear my chest  
Sucking air through its brand new nipple,  
I bought the ticket, I hope I drown fast,  
The pain is all in living. (WHAM 23).

The language here, even with its Frost-like references to “cold New England rock,” is much closer to the language of actual grunts than anything else in Paquet’s canon. This “counterturn” is in effect a reversal of the “turn.” Not only does the other character in the dramatic situation “speak,” he holds the opposite view: he does not want to be revived or “merged” with anyone. There is no sex here, just a desire for an end to pain, an end to the “hurt” of “nineteen years.” The “counterturn” forces us to see the irony that is implied throughout the turn: one sees that the medic’s efforts are fruitless—in the counterturn we see that they are not even wanted. The impotence extends even to the intent of his act.

The “stand” of the poem returns to the first character, developing a bit further the ideas that he came to at the end of the “turn,” exhaustion and despair:

I grow so tired of jostled litters  
Filling the racks, and taking off  
Your tags and rings, pulling out  
Your metal throats and washing  
Your spittle down with warm beer at night,

So tired of tucking you all in,  
And smelling you on me for hours. (WHAM 23).

The language here is still sexual, but seems quietly resigned, aware of its own emptiness. The lines are still enjambed, which would usually connote quickness and a rushed pace—that pace here, however, seems more monotonous than orgiastic. All of the speaker’s agency seems to be removed here—he is constantly repeating phrases structured by “your” – “your metal throats,” “your tags and rings,” “your spittle.” The speaker’s life is one of relentless servitude to the dead. The “gestalt” moments of the first stanza, the moments of connection between the medic and those he treats is now a burden or annoyance, lacking even the *possibility* of recovery or regeneration present in the first stanza.

Much like the “counterturn” stanza, the speaker shifts into a counterfactual mode, opting to discuss what he’d “rather” be doing (in, I would assume, a perfect world) instead of the grisly details of what he *is* doing. While the speaker in the “counterturn” would rather be in New England as a pine cone, the medic here would rather be himself, “with pine pitch on [his] hands than [the victim’s] blood” (WHAM 23). The speaker and the victim are still connected however; this time, though, the connection is more harmless—the speaker has been at worst cutting down pine trees.

The sexualized gestalt in the first stanza is undercut by the last few lines of the poem, depicting that connection as simply one of necessity:

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 slack lips  
I'd so much rather be making children,  
Than tucking so many in.       (WHAM 23)

The speaker returns here to normative (hetero) sexual contact, transferring any cathexis he might have had with the victim onto women, a literal, productive gestalt that creates new life. In the fantasy of this last stanza, the medic's sterility is gone: he can be intimate with another person—even achieve a level of gestalt with her—yet it is not a harrowing experience, one that “tires” him.

The “fatherhood” motif developed here is especially disturbing, paired with the highly sexualized language that marks medic's interaction with the dying boy. The “custodial” aspects of fatherhood—primarily the responsibility for another's well-being—but not the emotional or biological aspects are what is imported into the medic's literal relationship with his soldiers<sup>22</sup>. The result is a bizarre foster-parentage dominated by sterility, loss and death.

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<sup>22</sup> “A Midnight Clear,” William Wharton's novel set in World War II France capitalizes on this idea, naming the medic in the squad (also a former seminarian) “Father.”

Taken as a whole, however, the poem illustrates the symbiosis between the medic and his patient. The poem synthesizes two voices within a traditionally univocal form, the ode. Through the use of this form, Paquet illustrates the “merging” of two entities into a singular whole that transcends the limitations of the component parts: together, the victim’s voice, combined with the medic’s illustrates the “wholeness” of the war as experience, and how limiting single perspectives—and, by extension, singular notions of “role” like “agent” or “victim”—can be to an understanding of Viet Nam.

Examining Paquet’s work further, one can see that the poet is examining not only notions of metaphysics and politics, but also the efficacy of certain, specific modes of literary convention. Paquet’s work seems to embrace its heritage as an “elevated” art form—as “poetry” as we know it—but also strives for a certain baseness, a terrestrial grounding that enables it to accurately represent the experience of fighting and dying in Viet Nam. Paquet addresses this conflict, this paradoxical desire, through a rich network of allusions to and revisions of previous work on suffering, most acutely that of Dylan Thomas. In *Winning Hearts and Minds*, Paquet responds to two of Thomas’ most famous poems: “Do Not Go Gentle” and “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London.” Paquet’s “They Do Not Go Gentle” is the first “real” poem in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, placed just after the marching cadence and the Ranger philosophy. Thus, the first poetic experience the reader has echoes strongly a famous poem on resisting death:

## 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.  
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. (WHAM 3)

Alluding to one of the more famous poems in the modern canon illustrates that Paquet is aware of his place within a literary tradition—his work, to quote again from Stephen Spender’s insightful review—is “an exception in having ambitions which derive from an idea of poetry based on past examples and which exercise claims on the future”

(Spender 3). But, I feel that Paquet's work is not simply derivative, it is an act of revision. He is not simply imitating Thomas; the poem essentially *corrects* a flawed literary conception of death and suffering.

Thomas's villanelle, a tight, repetitive, highly metaphorically abstract piece, seeks to "control" the experience of death. We are lulled by Thomas' strict iambics, slowed by the spondees (Rage, rage) in the lexicalized metaphor of the refrain:

Old age should burn and rage at close of day

Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (Thomas 2524)

We are exhorted to "rage" against the "dying of the light" here, to fight against death with all of our emotion, but the poem undercuts this idea formally: it is measured and calm, in many ways the exact opposite of the "rage" Thomas wants us to feel.

Paquet, on the other hand, couches his poem as a *response* to Thomas's abstractions. He informs his readers that the dying *do not* go gentle into the night; their departure is physical, vengeful, and full of the "rage" so absent from Thomas's poem. They "Paw the air like cats do when they dream, / They perform isometrics tirelessly," and "flail the air" with an unreal "vengeance." Paquet is not describing some theoretical, "distanced" idea of death (even of a perhaps impending death, like Thomas' own), but depicting the actual, uncontrolled movements of one dying a violent death. The poem takes this "concretizing" a bit further in the next part of the poem, effectively transforming the "abstract" parts of the dying soldier into something visceral and real:

After all, their multiplication tables,  
Memories of momma, and half their id  
Lies in some shell hole  
Or plop! splatter! on your jungle boots. (WHAM 3)

The “abstract” here is made physical—the metaphorical “contents of one’s head” are made into the *literal* contents. This is an example of what Michael Bibby, in *Hearts and Minds*, has called “writing mutilation,” (Bibby 174) a political effort at revising the image of the soldier’s body as impenetrable, invulnerable, and unified. By focusing on the “shattered” or “mutilated” body, the ideological myths surrounding the glory of war can be defused. Likewise, Paquet here seeks to de-mythologize or de-sanitize Thomas’ version of the struggle against death: it is not a metaphorical, gradual extinguishing of a “light” that the soldiers must resist, it is the traumatic, *literal* explosion of their bodies.

Whereas Thomas’ poem resolves with its repeated refrain, Paquet’s moves into a crisis of sorts, an epistemological impasse that the poem leaves open. The exhortation in the Thomas poem is countered by a literal and formal instability, an “obstinate questioning” that is never fully answered:

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. (WHAM 3)

Note here how the speaker searches for an *embodied* language to describe the motion of the dying: the violent spasms always come from the inside out, culminating in the “rage” that Thomas aspires to. There is, however, no satisfaction in these lines—the speaker has not even decided on an apt metaphor to describe the action. He shifts from “atavistic angst” to “ancient ritual” to “blood stream monsoon” and “sinew storm” without pause, without the reader having time to process the language. The heavy phonetic fricatives here, the /s/ sounds dominate these few lines: atavistic, angst, muscle, bones, some, sea, self, stream, monsoon. The fricative /s/ sounds are dominated by airflow over the alveolar ridge and between one’s teeth—they indicate quickness, airiness, and smoothness. Such “quickness” and “smoothness” implies instability, etherealness—perhaps even a reversion to the mysticism that Paquet attacks earlier in the poem. Thomas’s refrain lines lack such smoothness:

Rage, rage against the dying of the light  
Or  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Both of these lines are more dominated by vocal stops, a much more percussive, controlled sound which reflects the rhythmic, calm, collected tone of the poem. Paquet’s revision of Thomas ends with a sardonic commentary on the “rage” against death.

Whereas Thomas' rage was noble and elite, it seems that Paquet's is more pedestrian, untamed, and disgusting: the bodies "rage on tastelessly / without their shattered brains." The idea of "taste" here is an aesthetic judgment: there is no "tasteful" art in this death; it is only death.

This re-writing of Thomas illustrates Paquet's willingness to claim his own poetic inheritance; at the same time, however, he questions the efficacy of that inherited tradition to describe the experience of Viet Nam. By doing this, Paquet asks his readers to synthesize these notions of "traditional" and "non-traditional verse." He takes this idea further in two other poems in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, "Mourning the Death, By Hemorrhage, of a Child from Honai," and a sonnet, "Christmas 67." In "Mourning the Death," a Thomas poem is again Paquet's medium: he revises Thomas' "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child In London."

Always the children are included  
In these battles for the body politic.  
Prefaced with mortars and rockets  
The Year of the Monkey was preluded  
By the mephitic  
Stench of blasted bodies sullenly drifting from the pocket  
  
Of refugee hooches at Honai.  
The enemy patriots knew the young  
Would be glad to die for the revolution.

The allies were certain the vox populi  
Called for a mandate for flag-strung  
Counter-attack and awful retribution.

The majesty of the annihilation of the city  
Could be heard clearly in the background,  
I could only wonder what ideology  
The child carried in her left arm—necessity  
Must have dictated an M-16 round  
Should cut it off, and her gaining the roll of martyrology.

Her dying in my arms, this daughter  
Weaned on war, was for the greater  
Glory of all concerned.  
There was no time to mourn your slaughter  
Small, denuded one-armed thing, I too was violator,  
And after the first death, the many must go unmourned. (WHAM 77).

Thomas's "A Refusal" was, for the most part, a protest poem that turned into an ekphrastic meditation on the power of elegy: the second "death" in Thomas's poem, the death that follows the physical death, is a "murder" of the "mankind of her going" though an "elegy of innocence and youth"(Thomas). Paquet's revision, however, *is* an elegy,

embracing again the physicality and “realness” that Thomas’ poem rejects. Paquet *does not refuse* to mourn and memorialize out of righteous anger; he simply didn’t have the ideological justification of the blitz to fall back on. Paquet’s speaker cannot find any reason in what he is seeing: things are blamed on “necessity” and the punning “roll [role] of martyrology.” Paquet “caves” where Thomas seems to be strong, admitting guilt and senselessness where Thomas (at least on the surface) advocates stern resolution and stoicism.

“Christmas 67,” a sonnet, offers another interesting juxtaposition of “traditional” vs. “non-traditional” representations of Viet Nam. Paquet uses the sonnet much like Owen did, applying the ultimate Shakespearean love form to war (Gotera 113). Paquet takes the traditional Christmas imagery and inverts it into a surreal trip through a combat zone. The “Bethlehem Stars” here presage not the coming of salvation, but the coming of death, the “thudding” of shells:

Flares lit the night like a sky  
Full of Bethlehem stars.  
Dark wings against a darker sky  
Laid down red ribbons and bars  
Of bright and crashing metal  
To warn of the on-coming  
Assault of men, the long battle  
Filled with cries of “in-coming,”  
That sent them crawling about,

Into the pocked earth, waiting for the promise  
Of thudding hosannas, like a gathering of devout  
Moths, aching for the flames, but frozen by the hiss  
And whistle of mortars and rockets sliding  
Down their air pews in a choring of dying. (WHAM 36)

This could, with a few historical adjustments, be a Great War poem by Owen, Rosenberg, or Sassoon—the thematic revision here is minimal. The form, however, is broken down a bit: it lacks any discernible meter, certainly not the measured conversation of iambic pentameter, and perhaps more importantly, lacks any kind of conceptual break or turn that delineates its logic. The free-versification here indicates, as it does most often in modern verse, a loss of control and loss of predictability; in combat, this lack was the expected status quo. The “turn” in traditional sonnets usually offers summation, reversal, or complication—it helps to clarify the poet’s logical argument. This poem lacks an argument, instead it “bombards” readers with images conveying the sense of being shelled—no logic, no predictability.

These types of uses of literary tradition define a good portion of Paquet’s work: he seeks to combine notions of literary novelty with a distinct sense of the poetic traditions in which he works. One sees “poetic language” at work here, at times describing the most “un-poetic” experiences—as a reader, one is forced to mediate between the two artistic / literary experiences. As was mentioned before, however, Paquet’s agenda is not only literary, but political as well. While seeking to mediate

between the competing notions of “traditional” and “non-traditional” verse, or “poetic” and “anti-poetic,” Paquet is also seeking to resolve the conflict that pervades *Winning Hearts and Minds*: that of understanding one’s place as both “agent” and “victim” of suffering in the war. In one sense, Paquet’s literary dialecticism can be seen as mirroring of this conflict: by resolving contrasting theories of poetry necessary to talk about the conflict, one can gain a greater appreciation of one’s own place as a participant in the greater political and social drama of the war.

### **Three. Gathering the Blood in a Cup—John Balaban’s Elegies**

#### **I. Balaban, the War, and the World**

In late 1967, John Balaban was a graduate student at Harvard, completing his master’s degree in literature, watching the American war in Viet Nam slowly unravel the world around him. While always active politically, Balaban was the moderate of his group of friends: one of his more radical undergraduate comrades joined the Weathermen; others were hunted by the FBI for Selective Service violations. Torn by his deep love of American democracy and what he saw as the perversion of that democracy, Balaban traded in his graduate student deferment for a conscientious objector’s. While opposed to the war, Balaban did not oppose service to his country: he went to his local draft board and demanded that he be sent to Viet Nam to serve out his Selective Service obligations as a human rights worker. They complied (*Remembering Heavens Face* 34). Balaban was assigned to International Volunteer Services (IVS), a Peace Corps-like agency that participated in various social programs throughout Indochina, from increasing agricultural efficiency in the Delta to sponsoring English-language training at Universities (and the remnants thereof) throughout the South. It was at one of these universities, in the city of Can Tho, where Balaban spent most of his first year in-country. Finishing his year in Can Tho, Balaban resigned from IVS and went to work for the Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Injured and War-Burned children (COR), an organization which evacuated severely injured children to the United States, where they received a higher-grade of medical care than what was available in Viet Nam. During

his two-year tenure in Viet Nam, Balaban worked very closely with the population, learning their customs, traditions, and, perhaps most importantly, their language.

After Balaban served his time in Viet Nam, fulfilling his obligation under the Selective Service Act, he went to teach literature and linguistics at Penn State University. Not long after his return to the U.S., however, Balaban received a fellowship to travel to Viet Nam to research, collect, and translate Vietnamese folk poetry, or Ca Dao. He went back to Vietnam in the early 1970s with his new wife, and spent months traveling around the country with a translator, some former IVS colleagues, and a tape recorder, asking peasants to “sing [him] their favorite poem.” Balaban’s time in Viet Nam, like that of most others who were there, became one of the defining experiences in his life. Michael Herr, in *Dispatches*, says it best: “Vietnam is what we had instead of happy childhoods.” The generation that came of age in the late 1960s was shaped, for better or for worse, by America’s involvement in Southeast Asia; it was, like World War II for a generation previous, the event that shaped their world. What Balaban saw in Viet Nam would haunt him for the rest of his life: the horrors of war, the victims ravaged by loss and privation, and the destruction of lives, both Vietnamese and American.

The poetry that Balaban produced in the 1970s and early 80s is a testament to his time in Viet Nam, a memorial for the things, people, and ideas that the conflict destroyed. Its masterful manipulation of language and deep understanding of cultural tradition make it markedly different from any other poetry that emerged from the war: it is a poetry that transcends the immediacy of the moment, situating the war (and its ancillary political, social, and psychological effects) in a continuum of historical catastrophe and evolution. It is poetry that condemns the cataclysm of war while embracing the possibilities of

drawing meaning and significance from the act of observing it. While interested in the immediate suffering of individuals affected by the war, Balaban rarely dwells on it as a subject, preferring instead to deal with the aftermath: his poetry is concerned primarily with the survivors, those who must make sense of the wreckage, physical, psychological, and cultural, that war creates. Balaban's first two collections, *After Our War* (1974), and *Blue Mountain* (1982), are attempts at, as Don Ringnalda says in *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*, at "whittling poems from bone," of creating beauty and meaning out of the ugliest possible situation. In *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, Philip Beidler says something similar, casting Balaban's work as an attempt to reclaim and reform cultural (and, by extension, poetic) tradition as an adequate and even desirable means of creating meaning for the suffering of war:

Balaban's book . . . is an unabashed attempt to recreate the function of culture as a sustaining matrix of vision, a medium of understanding that may still restore us to whatever is left of a sense of whole relation to the world, a context of human value and meaning. (Beidler 130).

Given the extraordinarily "postmodern" poetic context in which it appears, this characteristic of Balaban's work is surprising: the idea of "history" or "tradition" within the discourse of postmodernity is fraught with anxiety and trepidation. Often, postmodern thinkers—and artists—seek to "break" with tradition, disrupting the aesthetic or logical norms of the preceding epoch. Balaban's work, however, while not neo-formalist in any regard, demonstrates both a consciousness and mastery of his poetic

heritage. Balaban is a poet unafraid of allusion, drawing on both conventional and obscure references to give his work power and depth. In this sense, Balaban's work seems more "modern"—in the vein of T.S. Eliot-- than postmodern, a paradoxical reaching backward to a "sense" of tradition to give coherence to a fragmented world.

Perhaps the most stirring poem in Balaban's oeuvre, "After Our War," which appears, oddly, not in the collection of the same name but in *Blue Mountain*, is the most comprehensive statement of the goals of Balaban's poetic project, a complex undertaking concerned with war, survival, suffering, regeneration, and, perhaps most importantly, articulation:

After our war, the dismembered bits  
all those pierced yes, ear slivers, jaw splinters,  
gouged lips, odd tibias, skin flaps, and toes—  
came squinting, wobbling, jabbering back.  
The genitals, of course, were the most bizarre,  
inching along the 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 a swamp fog on the city streets  
on the evening altars, and on 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 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 daughters breast thickens a hard keloidal scar.  
After the war, with such Cheshire cats grinning in our trees,  
Will the ancient tales still tell us new truths?  
Will the myriad world surrender new metaphor?  
After our war, how will love speak? *(Blue Mountain 72)*

This poem shocks us with its absurdity, with its grotesque imagery, and with its agnosticism. This poem is the document of a poet who views the war as a truly cataclysmic (as opposed to simply “tragic”) event, something not only damaging to the physical world but to the underlying structures—master narratives, as Jean-Francois Lyotard would say—that make up “culture” as we know it. The cultural wreckage that the war engenders: pervasive social unrest, the presence of literal “casualties,” the international strife, “breaks down” culture to the point that the poet must question the value of conventional systems of meaning—tradition, metaphor, even love. The poem, then, is an exploration of the constant tension between the opposing forces of cultural “dissolution” and “tradition.”

The narrative of this poem is a chronicle of aftermath, a narrative of return and reintegration. The poem depicts the “snags and tatters” of those things—people, ideas, places—shattered by the war struggling to once again find their place in a culture affected profoundly by its participation in a corrupt conflict. Reading this poem, one recalls Eliot’s harrowing image in the Waste Land, of the dead returning into London, into the “Unreal City,” – one speaker cannot understand how “death had undone so many.” The image in “After Our War,” while very similar in some respects, is more grotesque and dirty than the Eliot passage. The “Waste Land’s” depiction of the dead returning to London is a commercial one: the dead seem as if they are “commuting” into the city—they are sterile, discrete zombies, consumed both by the Great War *and* by “modern” consumer life. In Balaban’s poem, though, these returning figures are not “whole” people, but damaged, incomplete shells—a fact that the representation through synecdoche makes unavoidable and shocking. The culture that has created these “shells” and sent them to war must now deal with them; it cannot conveniently forget them, much as a “ghost” can be forgotten. Balaban thus takes a version of the sterile, ennui-ridden reintegration of the lost after the Great War and makes it physical, bloody, and undeniable—a painful and grotesque “grafting” process.

However one chooses to read the synecdoches in “After Our War,” whatever the “snags and tatters” represent, they are *survivors* – the remnants of people and ideas—that have come through the wilderness to a place they are unfamiliar with. This new place is one where the war may be “over” but its effects linger on. People “hear” and “see” things differently, “handshakes are often unpleasant,” and we avoid “looking another in the eye” for fear of what we might see grafted onto them by the war: the “taint” of the

war, its “contagion,” not simply guilt, but the lingering psychic and cultural *effects* of that guilt, is frightening. The war succeeded in destabilizing some of the central myths of exceptionality central to American cultural-political identity: no longer was America the impervious “City on a Hill” that saved the world from Fascism—it was a power just as fallible and vulnerable as any other on earth. The survivors of the conflict, then, must learn to exist within this new paradigm—a paradigm in which previous systems of logic are no longer valid. As a culture, then, America’s sense of itself becomes problematic.

The poem articulates this fearsome uncertainty more explicitly in its last few lines: with the experience of Viet Nam in our past (and in our consciousness) how will culture survive? How will we as a culture come to terms with what we have done, what we have witnessed, and what we allowed to happen:

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

Will the ancient tales still tell us new truths?

Will the myriad world surrender new metaphor?

After our war, how will love speak?

*(Blue Mountain 72)*

However tempting it may be to read “After Our War” as a simple condemnation of a corrupted culture that participates in an unjust war, the poem is far more than that.

Balaban’s use of allusion as a trope here: to Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” to Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland,” illustrates a certain belief that the “ancient tales” *will* tell us new truths. We *will* use our rich textual and cultural traditions as methods of creating meaning in the world—our cultural “texts” are still valid, we must just learn to read them

in a new way. The richness and complexity that Balaban is able to create in “After Our War” is possible only because he draws upon not only the novel image of animated body parts, but also on the analogous image of the “fragmented” part of the Cheshire cat and the vague allusion to Eliot’s (un)dead masses. Our cultural knowledge, then, -- and by extension our knowledge of that culture’s history-- is *key* to understanding such a catastrophic experience as war, especially the Viet Nam war. The focus of much of Balaban’s most successful poetry is how the “snags and tatters” – those people, ideas, and things that survive the war—reconnect with and understand the culture that both created the war and enabled it to continue. Toward this goal, Balaban’s most powerful poems often chronicle an individual’s attempt to develop a personal vision—and a means of articulation-- that is adequate to situate the war within a continuum of human and American history.

This process of re-integration and understanding, as “After Our War” would suggest, is a complex and difficult process, which Balaban examines in numerous poems throughout *After Our War* and *Blue Mountain*—at times subtly, at times not. To understand this process, it is imperative to first see how Balaban characterizes the war itself. In many places, the war becomes divorced from its “human” agents, those who actively prosecute it on a daily basis. As readers, Balaban asks us to see the war in terms of its effects on people, on places, and on cultures. At times, the poems represent the war as amoebic and formless, de-humanized and de-anthropomorphized, existing simply in terms of its ambient presence. One of the first poems in *After Our War*, “Along the Mekong” is a long meditative observation on the war’s effect on the “landscape” of Viet Nam.

In part I of “Along the Mekong,” “Crossing on the Mekong Ferry, Reading the August 14<sup>th</sup> *New Yorker*,” Balaban offers a meditation on moving through the corrupted territory of Viet Nam; the result is an oblique tribute to Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” but one that makes an ironic reference to the ominous, ubiquitous presence of Agent Orange:

Near mud-tide mangrove swamps, under the drilling sun,  
the glossy cover, styled green print, struck the eye:  
trumpet-burst yellow blossoms, grapevine leaves,  
-- nasturtiums or pumpkin flowers? They twined  
in tangles by our cottage in Pennsylvania.  
Inside, another article by Thomas Whiteside.  
2,4,5-T, teratogenicity in births;  
South Vietnam 1/7<sup>th</sup> defoliated; residue  
in rivers, foods, and mothers’ milk.  
With a scientific turn of mind I can understand  
That malformations in lab mice may not occur in children  
but when last week, I ushered hare-lipped, tusk-toothed children  
to surgery in Saigon, I wondered, what did they drink  
that I have drunk? What dioxin, picloram, arsenic  
have knitted in my cells, in my wife now carrying  
Our first child. Pigs were squealing in a truck.  
Through the slats, I saw one lather the foam in its mouth. (Locusts 11)

Whereas in Whitman's 1856 poem the speaker rejoices in the democratic intermingling of peoples' souls in the moment of his crossing, Balaban's sense of interconnectedness is one centered on unseen corruption, the dioxin "knit[ing] in his cells," and tainting everyone who depends on the Mekong (and all of Viet Nam) for their sustenance. The landscape in this poem becomes a quietly toxic presence by the war, invading not only the lives and ideas of those who inhabit it but into their cells and DNA as well. The defoliation and thus corruption of the land is portrayed as just a part of the landscape; the poem does not make clear the *responsibility* for this corruption. Here, only the effects of human actions—not the actions themselves-- are present: the "hare-lipped" and "tusk-toothed children" the only physical evidence that something dangerous is happening. The speaker's Whiteside *New Yorker* article plays into this scheme, only *implying* that Americans have done this—notice the lack of strong subject-verb connections in this passage:

2, 4, 5-T, teratogenicity in births;  
South Vietnam 1/7<sup>th</sup> defoliated; residue  
in rivers, foods, and mothers' milk. (Locusts 11)

The poet does not say that *Americans* have done all of this to deny the Viet Cong cover and supplies—instead, the focus is on the lingering effects of that defoliation—the "teratogenicity," the fact that South Vietnam *has been* (in the passive) "1/7<sup>th</sup> defoliated," and that the vague "residue" resides in "rivers, foods, and mothers' milk" (Locusts 11).

The war here is ubiquitous and unspoken, pervading even the waters of the Mekong, even Balaban's cells, perhaps even the DNA of his unborn child. The hidden legacy—the war's persistent, unending cycle of indiscriminate killing—binds itself inextricably to Balaban's self, his memory, and even, perhaps, to his children.

Similarly, Balaban's longer work "Speak, Memory" examines how the war quietly dominates a scene. The first section of the poem, "The Book and the Lacquered Box" contrasts two strikingly different scenes, inspired by the complex interaction between the speaker's memory, the "Book" as an entity, and a destroyed lacquered box:

## 1 The Book and the Lacquered Box

*So the Soul, that Drop, that Ray  
Of the clear Fountain of Eternal Day,  
Could it within the humane flow'r be seen.  
--- Andrew Marvell, "On A Drop of Dew"*

The ink-specked sheets feel like cigar leaf;  
Its crackling spine flutters up a mildewed must.  
Unlike the lacquered box which dry-warp detonated  
--shattering pearled poet, moon, and willow pond—  
the book survived to beg us both go back  
to the Biblioteque in the Musee at the Jardin in Saigon,  
where I would lean from ledges of high windows  
to see the zoo's pond, isled with Chinese pavilion,  
arched bridge where kids fed popcorn to gulping carp,

and shaded benches, where whores fanned their make-up,  
at ease because a man who feeds the peacocks  
can't be that much of a beast. A boat ride,  
a soda, a stroll through the flower beds.  
On weekends the crowds could forget the war.  
At night police tortured men in the bear pits,  
one night a man held out the bag of his own guts,  
which streamed and weighed in his open hands,  
and offered them to a bear. Nearby, that night,  
the moon was caught in willows by the pond,  
shone scattered in droplets on the flat lotus pads,  
each bead bright like the dew in Marvell's rose. (Locusts 5).

In this poem, the war's very existence submerges into the detail of the scene. Balaban's interaction with "the book" creates an almost Keatsian suspension of reality here: the speaker is transported back through his own memory to "the Biblioteque in the Musee at the Jardin in Saigon." This layering of prepositional phrases, while serving to "extend" the moment of memory (a la Keats' "Nightingale"), give a sense of the narrowing of the scene while at the same time widening its geographical and mnemonic context: he goes back to a specific time and place *located in the war zone*. The war here, however, disappears in favor of a sort of urban-academic pastoral: children feeding carp, a man feeding peacocks, whores casually checking their makeup. In the next lines, the scene dissolves into simple images, the syntax merely connective--"a boat ride, a soda, a stroll

through the flower beds.” At this moment in time, at least in the speaker’s memory, the war has ceased to exist. As he says, “On weekends the crowds could forget the war” (Locusts 5).

But Balaban contrasts this placid image with that of a submerged brutality, marked by an anti-pastoral darkness: the police torture VC suspects in a bear pit, and one, in agony, feeds himself to a bear. This intense violence surrounds the almost Edenic Biblioteque, hiding just beneath its surface, always waiting to happen. The war, then, persists in its own ubiquity, even when masked by the sanguine scenes at the Biblioteque, emerging in a cyclical pattern . Balaban does not, however, simply use a binary description of good / day and evil / night to describe the brutality of the torture: he injects into the night scene an allusion to Marvell’s “On A Drop of Dew.” In Marvell’s poem, the evaporation of a drop of dew from a rose petal is a metaphor for the soul’s ascension to heaven:

So the Soul, that Drop, that Ray  
Of the clear Fountain of eternal day,  
Could it within the humane flow’r be seen,  
Remembering still its former height,  
Shuns the sweat leaves and blossoms green;  
And, recollecting its own Light,  
Does, in its pure and circling thoughts, express  
The greater Heaven in an Heaven less. (Marlowe 531)

Here, the dew becomes symbolic of heavenly purity, “recollect[ing] its own Light,” and “express[ing] / the greater Heaven in an Heaven less,” expressing beauty and divinity in a world that is “less” than heavenly. The scene of torture that dominates the last part of Balaban’s poem contrasts greatly – and perhaps provides balance to-- the “pure” figure of the dew on a rose. The juxtaposition of the two types of images—holy and profane—serves as an extension of the juxtaposition of placid daylight and violent night. The interpenetration of these images suggests that Balaban views the war (and, conversely, the possibility of peace) as something that is momentary and cyclical in its actuality, but always obliquely present in some form (perhaps in his / others’ memory?). The war is all around us, but only makes itself known in the moments of its greatest cruelty.

Balaban focuses on this idea in one of his more anthologized poems, “The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge.” Here, the war is a thoughtless routine, suspended into a state of perpetual possibility, of “almost happening” at any given second:

How still he stands as mists begin to move,  
as curling, morning billows creep across  
his cooplike, concrete sentry perched mid-bridge  
over mid-muddy river. Stares at bush green banks  
which bristle rifles, mortars, men—perhaps.  
No convoys shake the timbers. No sound  
but water slapping boat sides, bank sides, pilings.  
He’s slung his carbine barrel down to keep  
the boring dry, and two banana-clips instead of one

are taped to make, now, forty rounds instead  
of twenty. Droplets bead from stock to sight;  
they bulb, then strike his boot. He scrapes his heel,  
and sees no box bombs floating toward his bridge.  
Anchored in red morning mist a narrow junk  
rocks its weight. A woman kneels on deck  
staring at lapping water. Wets her face.  
Idly the Rach Binh Thuy slides by.  
He aims. At her. Then drops his aim. Idly. (Locusts 13)

This poem is a masterful study in tension and boredom, compressing the whole of a night-sentry's existence into a few short seconds, a mere twenty lines. Balaban succeeds, like Keats did with his nightingale, in extending the duration of a fleeting experience; unlike Keats, the experience here is not satisfying or beautiful but a troubling account of the arbitrariness of war. Human agency or intentionality—the *wishing* of one person to do harm to another—is absent from the poem, and, perhaps from the guard's psyche. He is almost demi-human, portrayed almost as a rooster or other such bird: he stands still in the (morning) mists, emerging from his "cooplike" sentry. In the "middle" of things—he is "perched mid-bridge / over mid-muddy river"—the guard could be a bird on a wire, vulnerable and powerful all at once.

The war in this poem is present only in its absence: the guard's experience on the bridge is dominated by the things that he *doesn't* see, *doesn't* hear, and *doesn't* experience, but that he knows *could* be there. The central crisis in the first 15 lines of

the poem is the crisis of the hypothetical—the guard (perhaps by definition of his profession) must constantly imagine what *could* happen to him at any moment, and remain vigilant. Note the following section of the poem—in the first phrase, the “guard” as subject is absent, defined only by his observations:

Stares at bush green banks  
which bristle rifles, mortars, men—perhaps.  
No convoys shake the timbers. No sound  
but water slapping boat sides, bank sides, pilings.

The guard stares at the “green banks” of the river, which could be teeming with enemy soldiers at any moment. Likewise, the silence of “No convoys” and “No sound / but water” is troubling because at any second the area could be bristling with action and death. Later in the poem, Balaban returns to the same disturbing contrast: the guard “scrapes his heel / and sees no box bombs floating toward his bridge.” The river here becomes an agent of possible destruction, absently, innocently bringing theoretical box bombs toward the sentry. The river is an inhuman, natural force, devoid of consciousness or malice; as the poem progresses, it becomes a figure for how the guard adapts to his own agnosticism.

Perhaps the only tangible, non-hypothetical presence in the poem enters in the guise of the woman washing her face on the junk:

Anchored in red morning mist a narrow junk

rocks its weight. A woman kneels on deck  
staring at lapping water. Wets her face.

Idly the Rach Binh Thuy slides by.

He aims. At her. Then drops his aim. Idly. (Locusts 13)

This woman is something that the guard *knows* is there- she exists apart from absence or possibility. But after the first phrase of her “scene,” she disappears as subject, present, similar to the “implied” guard in the first lines, only as her primary action—wetting her face. This focus on her *actions* defuses her humanity; she becomes merely another part of the environment with which to contend. Balaban juxtaposes the scene of the implied woman wetting her face with a mention of the “Rach Binh Thuy” flowing along “idly.” “Idly” denotes carelessness, indolence, nonchalance: the river acts without intention, without purpose. In the ultimate line comes the true climax of the poem, the resolution of the guard’s crisis of knowledge and theory-- he aims at the woman, then drops his aim, “idly.” The guard’s actions come not from any threat on the woman’s part—by all accounts, she has done nothing to provoke the guard-- but from the carelessness, boredom, and thoughtlessness of war. The river’s “idleness” and anti-anthropomorphism is paralleled here with the guard’s: they both act (or, in the case of the guard, choose not to act) for no reason—the river flows in a certain direction because it has evolved over time to do so, not from any intentional wish or volitional act. The same could be said of the guard: in an environment that by definition is governed by infinite doubt and infinite possibility, human action (and therefore intention) is rendered meaningless. He aims at the woman (and drops his aim) because at that moment—the

moment in which the war is present only in its absence—it does not matter what he does. The river thus becomes a symbol for the war’s effect on the human psyche: “humanity” becomes excised from action—things “flow” from one situation to another without understanding or context.

Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, in his extremely influential 1876 treatise *On War* writes that “War is a continuation of politics by other means” (Clausewitz). Balaban’s poetry seems to reflect this truth, but not in the conventional way that Clausewitz might have imagined. The war for Balaban is not necessarily a hate-filled racist crusade waged by those who completely understand what they are doing—as readers, we never hear a simple political tirade like some of the weaker poems in *Winning Hearts and Minds*. Instead, the war is an amoebic force, something that pervades the cultures in which it lives and moves, embedding itself into the landscape, into everyday life, and into the imaginations of those involved. Its effects are diverse and complex—and it is always present, even when its physical manifestations are not. The war then *extends* itself from the military-political sphere into the world around it: it is like a contagion, attaching itself to everything it touches. Clausewitz most likely could not have imagined the globalization of conflict that the 20<sup>th</sup> century birthed, but still his remarks carry a certain prescience.

This extension is not limited, literally or conceptually, to Vietnamese culture. Some of Balaban’s best poems illustrate how the war continues into America, how the same brutality that marks the conflict in Southeast Asia is present in New York City, State College, Pennsylvania, or any other place in the U.S. The poem “April 30,

1975”—the day American involvement in Viet Nam officially “ended”—illustrates that the war, although “over” according to all authorities, continues in many ways:

The evening Nixon called his last troops off,  
The church bells tolled across our states.  
We leaned on farmhouse porch pilings, our eyes  
Wandering the lightning bug meadow thick with mist,  
And counted tinny peals clanking out  
Through oaks, around the church belltower.  
You asked, “Is it peace, or only a bell ringing?”

This night the war finally ended.  
My wife and I sit on a littered park bench  
Sorting out our shared and separate lives  
In the dark, in silence, before a quiet pond  
Where ducks tug slimy papers and bits of soggy bread.  
City lights have reddened the bellies of fumed clouds  
Like trip flares scorching skies over a city at war.

*In whooshing traffic at the park’s lit edge,  
Red brake lights streak to sudden halts:  
A ski-masked man staggers through lanes,  
Maced by a girl he tried to mug.*

*As he crashes to curb under mercury lamps,  
A man snakes towards him, wetting his lips,  
Twirling the root of his tongue like a dial.*

*Some kids have burnt a bum on Brooklyn Bridge.  
Screaming out of sleep, he flares the causeway.*

The war returns like figures in a dream.

In Vietnam, pagodas chime their bells.

“A Clear Mind speaks like the wind.

By the Lo waterfalls, free and high,

You wash away the dust of life.”

(Blue Mountain 43)

In this poem, Balaban returns to one of his favored methods of describing the “reality” of the war, his tendency to juxtapose tranquil images (standing on the porch of his house) with violent or possibly violent ones, such as the “city lights” that have “reddened the bellies of fumed clouds / like trip flares scorching skies over a city at war.” Literally, Balaban is contrasting the tranquility of his life “back in the world” with that of his experiences in Viet Nam; but imagistically, he succeeds in doing much more—he transfers the images of the battlefield back home. The lines in italics highlight the violence that pervades our cities: street crime, sexualized vigilantism, teenage experimental brutality. The image of the kids burning the bum on the bridge is perhaps the most striking connection between the “Nam” and “The World,” bringing to mind the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc and other Buddhists in the streets of Saigon, Hue,

and Danang (Fitzgerald 74). “Combat” and “the war,” loosely defined, are everywhere Balaban looks: the conflict cannot and will not end as long as people see brutality as a way of valid social interaction.

The bells in this poem—church bells in the first part of the poem, pagoda’s bells later on—are supposed to be signifiers of peace, symbols of some sort of spiritualized new beginning. But here, the violence that emerges as the central action of the poem—sandwiched between two “soundings” of a bell—undercuts the power of the bell as signifier. “Peace” just becomes the “sound of a bell ringing” both in Viet Nam (whose regime would turn out to be more brutal than anyone would have guessed) and in the U.S. The emptied signifier of the bells in this poem suggests that while the “form” of peace has been achieved, the reality of war persists. The “peace” in America in April 1975 is thus an illusory one. The poem, with its straightforward depiction of domestic brutality, exposes that peace as a fiction.

Balaban ends this poem with a Ca Dao folk poem from Viet Nam:

“A Clear Mind speaks like the wind.

By the Lo waterfalls, free and high,

You wash away the dust of life.” (Blue Mountain 43)

By coming back to a direct allusion to an oral tradition of Viet Nam as a means of analyzing *America*, Balaban again links the two cultures. It is through a *poem* that Balaban makes the “connection” between the brutality of the war in Viet Nam and the brutality that he suggests is endemic to American culture. The inclusion of the

Vietnamese poem as a summary of that imaginative process, of that acquisition of vision, the gaining of a “Clear Mind” that washes away the “dust of life” -- that which, according to a Vietnamese proverb, has no value. This allusion establishes once again the connection between the function of poetry in both cultures: that of a complex means of self-analysis and thus acquisition of knowledge.

Balaban takes the idea of the “extension” of the war a bit further in “Story,” included in 1982’s *Blue Mountain*. “Story,” written while Balaban was hiking across the American west, shows how not all casualties of the war were soldiers:

The guy picked me up north of Santa Fe  
Where the red hills, dotted with pinon  
Loop down from the Divide into mesas and plain.  
I was standing out there—just me, my pack,  
And the gila monsters- when he hauled his Buick  
Off the road in a sputter of cinders and dust.  
And got out, a gray-bearded 6-foot 300 pounder,  
Who stretched and said, “Do you want to drive?”  
So I drove and he told me the story of his life.

How his father was a Russian Jew who got zapped  
By the Mob during Prohibition, how he quit school  
At fifteen and got a job as a DJ in Detroit,

How he sold flatware on the road and made a mint,  
How he respected his wife but didn't love her,  
How he hit it big in radio and TV, how he fell in love,  
How he found himself, at fifty, in intensive care  
Where his wife, his kids, his girlfriend, and his rabbi

Huddled in silence around his bed when his doctor  
Came in and whispered that maybe he ought to ask  
The wife and the girlfriend to alternate visits

'because it wasn't too good for his heart.'

"What about your kids?" I asked. "What do they do?"

"My daughter runs our store. My son is dead."

He studied a distant peak and didn't continue.

"What did he die of?"

"He died of suicide.

No, that's not right. . . Nixon killed him.

My son was a sweet kid, hated guns and violence

And then, during that fucking war, he hijacked a plane

And flew it to Cuba. He shot himself in Havana."

He watched the peak, then grinned and said,

"Brave little fucker, wasn't he?"

(Blue Mountain)

The war reached very personally into the “World” in this poem. The poem’s “white hot center,” as Grace Cavalieri would put it, comes at the end, a bizarre coda to an interesting but otherwise not compelling narrative of a salesman’s life. The man’s son is killed, however indirectly from the war, transformed from a “sweet kid” who “hated guns and violence” into a hijacker who shoots himself in Havana. At this point, the “story” becomes a “war story”: the son becomes another casualty of “that fucking war.” His father refers to him almost as a veteran would refer to a man killed in his platoon—unemotionally, with the candor and linguistic bluntness of a combat grunt, the son isn’t mourned as an innocent victim, but is memorialized as a “brave little fucker.” The war, then, in this poem extends to those involved in the greater (presumably radical) political environment of the sixties.

This seems quite similar to the sentiment expressed at the end of Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*: “Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (Herr 267). Herr’s comment was made as he surveyed the wreckage of 1960s American culture caused by the war—one could not tell the “Nam” vets from those who merely survived the Hendrix-Joplin-Dead rock and roll drug culture; in some way, the war touched everyone—either you fought in it, fought against it, or fought against being caught up its drama. Balaban is working with this concept in many of the key poems in *After Our War*, *Blue Mountain*, and his third collection, *Words for My Daughter*: learning how to deal with our status as casualty—or survivor of the most defining event of the generation. Balaban develops this theme most thoroughly in his numerous elegies: gung-ho journalists, Vietnamese soldiers, aid workers, and pseudo-famous alcoholic writers all become subjects through which Balaban can examine the effects of the war on himself and the culture around him.

## II. Balaban's Elegies and The Uses of Melancholia

We saw in Part I how Balaban depicts the conflict in Viet Nam in his poetry: it is an amoebic, non-anthropomorphic “thing” that spreads like a contagion beyond geographical and temporal boundaries. The war, by its very nature, claims casualties outside of those directly involved in fighting it: innocent civilians, aid workers, journalists, drug-addled semi-celebrities—even, perhaps, poets and their children. As with many writers who have experienced Viet Nam in one way or another, it becomes in many cases a defining point of their aesthetics, an experience so fraught with moral and political turmoil that it demands a literary response. The novels of Tim O’Brien always seem to feature a central figure who is trying to escape the legacy of the war—*In the Lake of the Woods* and *Tomcat in Love* both feature characters attempting to escape the consequences of their experiences in Viet Nam, seeking to “re-enter” society cleansed of both their deeds and misdeeds. By the same token, the poetry of Bruce Weigl can be seen as one poet’s attempt to restructure and revise his own memory of the conflict, a sort of “coming to terms” with his own actions. Even writers like Yusef Komunyakaa, who resisted writing about the war until years later, find themselves, once engaged, entangled with the complexity of their own experiences. Balaban is no different: many of his strongest poems are acts of negotiating through the war’s persistent presence in his consciousness, of discovering the burdens and responsibilities of being a “survivor.” Critic Donald Ringnalda, in his book *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* argues that Balaban muses obsessively on Vietnam because for him, “the war simply has not ended”

(Ringnalda 21): it continues in the consciousnesses of those who experienced it, who suffered because of it, and who were irrevocably changed by it.

Until the twentieth century, the function of the elegy as a form was that of consolation, a means through which those who have suffered the loss of someone close to them can “move on” and “survive” the experience psychically, usually through the assurance that their deceased loved one “lives on” in some way or another. Perhaps the most refined version of the pre-modern (pastoral) elegy, Milton’s “Lycidas” is a classic act of consolation: Edward King, Milton’s drowned subject, is “resurrected” in Heaven, and thus defeats the finality of death:

So *Lycidas* sunk low, but mounted high,  
Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves;  
Where other groves, and other streams along,  
With *Nectar* pure his oozy Lock's he laves,  
And hears the unexpressive nuptiall Song,  
In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love. (Milton 24)

The tightly controlled and crafted iambic pentameter quatrains that Milton employs throughout the whole of “Lycidas” echoes the sense of control, mythic or not, that the Christian ideology holds over death. King’s death is made a positive, even beautiful event by the fact that he is reconnected with the divine. Both the dead (*Lycidas*) and the living (the Uncouth Swain) are permitted to “move on” in this conceptual scheme:

Thus sang the uncouth Swain to th' Okes and rills,  
While the still morn went out with Sandals gray,  
He touch'd the tender stops of various Quills,  
With eager thought warbling his *Dorick* lay:  
And now the Sun had stretch'd out all the hills,  
And now was dropt into the Western bay;  
At last he rose, and twitch'd his Mantle blew:  
To morrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new. (Milton 25)

The “uncouth swain” who sings the song of Lycidas’ death literally “moves on” to “pastures new” and “fresh woods.” While we can easily read this easy transcendence of death as Milton’s poetic undercutting of the genuineness of the elegiac form (and, perhaps the ideology that serves as its basis?), there is an undeniable wish here for the amelioration of the pain of loss.

Likewise, Shelley’s elegy for Keats, the “finely wrought” “Adonais,” works in a similar manner. Instead of being “enshrined” in heaven, however, Keats, through the natural process of decomposition, becomes a part of the landscape that so central to the Romantic mindset:

Nor let us weep that our delight is fled  
Far from these carrion kites that scream below;  
He wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead;  
Thou canst not soar where he is sitting now.

Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow  
Back to the burning fountain whence it came,  
A portion of the Eternal, which must glow  
Through time and change, unquenchably the same,  
Whilst thy cold embers choke the sordid hearth of shame. (Shelley 406)

Again, the repression of sadness, of “weeping” recurs here, and is supported by the experience of the text: the speaker assures his audience that Keats, “wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead” even though he returns “Dust to the dust!” (Shelley 406). To take the idea further, the speaker argues that to *die* is a greater life than to live—“we decay /” the speaker exclaims “like corpses in a charnel” because of the grief that Adonais’s death causes. Keats transcends earthly suffering by divine sublimation into the world, blissfully deprived of anthropomorphic consciousness:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard  
His voice in all her music, from the moan  
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;  
He is a presence to be felt and known  
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,  
Spreading itself where'er that Power may move  
Which has withdrawn his being to its own;  
Which wields the world with never-wearied love,  
Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above. (Shelley 425)

Now, Keats has almost become his own nightingale, existing apart from human misery in a purely aesthetic sense: he is “one with nature,” and a “presence to be felt and known.” This is a different type of transcendence than that is present in the Milton poem, but is *still* an act of confronting (and getting around) the finality of death.

Jahan Ramazani, in *Poetry of Mourning*, argues that the modern elegy, in contrast to those written prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, offers a different perspective on the subject’s relationship to death. The modern elegy’s mode of “mourning” is more problematic: it often is conflicted, ambivalent, critical, angry, or even directly hostile to the dead. This mode of elegy, Ramazani argues, exhibits not “consolatory mourning”—mourning meant to help its audience (or writer) adjust to the loss of their loved one—but what Ramazani terms “melancholic mourning.” More often than not, it seeks to resurrect the melancholia—Freud’s term for a pervasive, inescapable sadness caused by the sudden redirection of libidinal attachment energies—that is endemic to the mourning process. The elegy, in this form, “stirs up” the sadness inherent in loss, creating the poem as site for the *exploration* of the experience of grief, rather than as a means of repressing it. These poems, from Wilfred Owen’s “war elegies” to Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy,” seek to interrogate humanity’s relationship not only with those that have died, but with the idea of death itself. This relationship is often conflicted, angry, and violent, at times diametrically opposed to “traditional” modes of mourning.

Elegies figure prominently in John Balaban’s oeuvre. Many of the strongest poems in *After Our War*, *Blue Mountain*, and *Words for My Daughter* are elegiac in nature, or contain elements of the elegy in them. These poems are written for a number

of different people: David Gitelson, an idealistic aid worker slain in the Mekong delta, Steve Erhart, a heroin-addicted IVS volunteer dying of cancer, Sean Flynn and Dana Stone, photojournalists who disappeared by the Cambodian border, and To Lai Chan a peasant conscripted into the army and killed in action. These elegies, while in many ways reverential to the dead and their experience, do not seek to sublimate the grief or sense of loss that Balaban feels. They embrace the tumult of grief and *use* it as a means of examining the war's effects on those who witnessed it and participated in it.

But these poems are not simply lamentations on the injustice of war. These elegies, and the figures that are their subjects, are a means through which Balaban can come to understand both his status both as “survivor” of the war and as elegist of its casualties, of the “voice” that has lived through the conflict and must tell the tale. What is perhaps most interesting, however, is that these elegies—in the act of “telling” about the war-- often gesture toward a longing to return to Viet Nam, a longing to return to the experience that so defined Balaban's life. In *Remembering Heaven's Face*, his memoir of his experiences in Viet Nam, Balaban discusses how Viet Nam has affected—rather than *damaged*--him:

Affected, filled with memories—like almost every conscious person who went there—memories that are sometimes more real than current reality, memories of moments in which we were marked and tested. Elusive memories, for despite their power, they often hold back in the vagaries of time certain key details by which we might judge more objectively what we did. (RHF 284)

For Balaban, the experiences that he lived through in Viet Nam—and the people that he lived with—can become more “real” or important than what is in reality “here” or “now.” It almost seems that Balaban seeks to mythologize his experience in Viet Nam into a Freudian “primal scene”- a scene that both “marks” and “tests” him, and thus gives definition and meaning to his life, and, by extension, his self.

Balaban’s life after Viet Nam was as an academic, first at Penn State University, later at the University of Miami at Coral Gables, where he is now the Director of the Creative Writing program. In another part of *Remembering Heaven’s Face*, Balaban discusses the urge to “return” to Viet Nam as a response to institutional apathy on the subject, a sort of academic disregard of one’s own dirty laundry:

At the University, some of my colleagues have even suggested that I stop writing about Vietnam, since it’s not part of my departmental duties. For them, as for most academics (despite Dante’s “The proper subjects for poetry are love, virtue, and war”) *our* war, just fifteen years over, is dead history. So, like most who have returned home, I find in best to keep Vietnam to myself.

No wonder so many of us—dwelling in charged, middle-aged silences—want to go back to that lost continent still sending live-transmissions on our special-pay channels. (RHF 288)

For Balaban, the “world” that he returned to after Viet Nam was, in some sense, a sterile one that did not foster the type of articulation or discourse that he (and perhaps a whole generation of veterans) needed. People would rather consider the history “dead,” rather

than as something that is a small part of a larger historical continuum of destruction and loss. Balaban explores these two worlds—State College / Coral Gables and Vietnam—in his poem for another IVS worker, Clyde Coreil. While not portraying a Saigon as a place of mystical meaning, the poem intimates that there is something pervading the city that is absent from “the world”:

Palindrome For Clyde Coreil in Saigon

Pigeons flutter in the eaves of the Music Bldg;

here there are a number of beautiful women.

Amid the clutter of books on my desk,

I prop my feet, lean back and read.

Hot lunches are served at a cafeteria nearby.

Each afternoon, I pick up the *Times*.

A secretary brews coffee. I get paid for talking

to students who don't care what I say

about subjects I don't care to talk about.

When I can afford them, I buy good cigars.

Every now and then, you get cigars from home.

Puffing on one, you dicker with a shopgirl

Over the price of a breakfast of French bread

And black coffee in a sugar-bottomed glass.

You study newsprint on a wrapper of dried squid.  
Elephant grass and rice fields expand beyond the city.  
Returning at evening, your feet plod along a street  
Crunching with fishheads, roaches, and shattered glass.  
A bargirl telephones to see if you'll be in. Outside,  
Music flutters in the wings of rising pigeons.

This poem is an imagistic palindrome; each image in the second stanza corresponds to a similar passage (in an inverted relation) to an image in the first. Balaban uses this form to connect life in Saigon with life in academia: both he and Clyde buy “cigars,” conduct their meaningless business (teaching or “dickering), reading the newspaper, either the *Times* or the Saigon paper that squid is wrapped in, relaxing, dealing with chaos, seeing pigeons. Both stanzas are isolated scenes from daily life; their juxtaposition serves to connect their subjects across a spatial (or even temporal) boundary. This “mirroring” would suggest a level of similarity between the two places, or even imply that they are identical, if not in actuality then in spirit. Both Coreil and Balaban seem to be dealing with very similar problems—monotony, boredom.

In “creating” Saigon in this poem, however, Balaban chooses to transform the lackluster images of State College into somewhat more “exotic” versions of themselves, working against the strict “palindromic” form. The images here strike us as alien in some regard: “newsprint on a wrapper of dried squid,” “elephant grass and rice fields,” “a street / Crunching with fishheads, roaches, and shattered glass.” The alien-ness of the delicacy of dried squid, the orientalized pastoral of the Vietnamese landscape, and even

the damage Saigon has suffered in the war offer a striking contrast to the “safe” confines of Balaban’s office at State College. The first and last lines offer an interesting example of the differing experiences of existing in “Saigon” vs. “State College”: “Pigeons flutter in the eaves of the Music Bldg” contrasts greatly with “Music flutters in the wings of rising pigeons.”

Here, the sterile, institutionalized “Music Bldg” seems *infested* with pigeons—despite their locale, there is nothing “musical” about hearing them. The abbreviation of “Building” to “Bldg” disrupts the rhythm and musicality of the line, offering us instead an academic shorthand for a place of work infested with pigeons. The “Saigon” version of this image, however, seems much more sublime—the music “flutters in the wings” of the pigeons. The trochaic beat here (the same rhythm as the first line) is more complete and resolved than the first line: “pigeons” is an unadulterated trochee, as opposed to “Bldg” which is hardly a phoneme at all, just an abbreviation that we recognize as standing for “building.” This “romanticizing” of Saigon here is, in a sense a thematic “return” for Balaban—he resurrects the “reality” and “beauty” that he saw in the city, which, while co-existing with his experience of life in State College, represents a past that will not recede from his memory.

Balaban develops a more pronounced juxtaposition of the “exoticness” of life in Viet Nam with the banality of life in State College in one of his more directly elegiac pieces, “News Update.” This piece is dedicated “*for Erhart, Gitelson, Flynn, and Stone, happily dead and gone*”:

Well, here I am in the *Centre Daily Times*

back-to-back with the page-one refugees  
fleeing the crossfire, pirates, starvation.  
Familiar faces. We followed them  
through defoliated forests, cratered fields,  
past the blasted water buffalo,  
the shredded tree lines, the human head  
dropped on the dusty road, eyes open,  
the dusty road which called you all to death.

One skims the memory like a Moviola,  
editing out the candid shots: Sean Flynn  
dropping his camera and grabbing a gun  
to muster the charge and retake the hill.  
“That boy,” the black corporal said,  
“do in real life what his daddy do in movies.”  
Dana Stone, in an odd moment of mercy,  
sneaking off from the Green Beret assassins  
to the boy they left for dead in the jungle.  
Afraid of the pistol’s report, Stone shut his eyes  
and crushed the kid’s throat with a bayonet.  
Or, Erhart, sitting on his motorcycle,  
smiling and stoned in the Free Strike Zone

as he filmed the ammo explosion and Lai Khe.  
It wasn't just a macho game. Marie-Laure de Decker  
photographed the man aflame on the public lawn.  
She wept and shook and cranked her Pentax  
until a cop smashed it to the street. Then  
there was the girl returned from captivity  
with a steel comb fashioned from a melted-down tank,  
or some such cliché, and engraved: "To Sandra  
From the People's Fifth Battalion, Best Wishes."

Christ, most of them are long dead. Tim Page  
wobbles around with a steel plate in his head.  
Gitelson roamed the Delta in cut-away blue jeans  
like a hippy Johnny Appleseed with a burlap sack  
full of seeds and mimeographed tips for farmers  
until we pulled him from the canal. His brains  
leaked on my hands and knee. Or me, yours truly,  
agape in the Burn Ward in Danang, a quonset hut,  
a half a garbage can that smelled like Burger King,  
listening to whimpers and nitrate fizzing on flesh  
in a silence that simmered like a fly in a wound.

And here I am, ten years later,

written up in the local small-town press

for popping a loud-mouth punk in the choppers.

Oh, big sighs. Windy sighs. And ghostly laughter. (Locusts 31)

Far more elegiac, almost wistful, than the “Palindrome for Clyde Coreil,” this poem mines its material not only from the “candid shots” of these people’s lives, but from the differentiation of those shots with scenes from Balaban’s life “ten years later.” The poem begins and ends in the same small town in America; Balaban uses the write-up of himself in the *Center Daily Times* as an opportunity to retreat into the past and explore the triviality of life outside of the experience of Viet Nam.

The same romanticizing impulse that drives “Palindrome” is present here. Erhart, Gitelson, Flynn, Stone, and even Balaban himself are presented in some way as larger than life. The “spots of time,” to borrow Wordsworth’s term, that Balaban returns to show these people in a moment of over-the-top theatrical crisis: Flynn, dashing and elegant, the “Son of Captain Blood,” rushing up the hill with M-16 in hand; Dana Stone mercifully killing an injured VC; Steve Erhart on a motorbike, high on heroin, watching explosions; David Gitelson, “The Poor American,” being pulled from a canal in an ironic recapitulation of the ignominious death of Graham Greene’s Alden Pyle. While it may seem that this “characterization” of these figures is simply evidence of what Philip Beidler calls the “re-writing” of Viet Nam (Beidler 13), a literary or filmic re-creation of a place or experience as a means of coping with its overwhelming surreality, the poem seems to have a deeper project: to enter a dialogue with a past consumed by itself.

Erhart, Gitelson, Flynn, and Stone, like most of the subjects of Balaban's elegies, are "casualties" of the war: all but Erhart died violently, or are presumed to have. Erhart was a drug addict who died of cancer at thirty-five, after living a turbulent life in the Saigon underworld. These figures, and to a lesser extent Marie Laure de Decker and Tim Page (who "wobbles around with a plate in his head" in Herr's *Dispatches* as well) are consumed by the war, used up on the "dusty road which called you all to death." Balaban implicates himself in the journey as well: "we followed them / through defoliated forests, cratered fields / past the blasted water buffalo, / the shredded tree line, the human head / dropped on the dusty road, eyes open" (Locusts 31). In doing this, Balaban again calls attention to himself as survivor—he alone has walked on the "dusty road" and survived it, gotten through Viet Nam without losing everything.

As an elegist, Balaban is strikingly unsentimental: while he discusses the dead and their actions in moments of extreme poignancy, he does so almost matter-of-factly; this makes sense, given the "journalistic" scheme of the poem. Even the death of Gitelson, one of Balaban's closest friends in Viet Nam, is almost devoid of emotion. The poem almost derides Gitelson as a "hippy Johnny Appleseed with a burlap sack / full of seeds and mimeographed tips for farmers / until we pulled him from the canal. / his brains leaked on my hands and knee" (Locusts 31). In some respects similar to the burned-out narcissism of Michael Casey's speakers, this type of treatment of the dead seems to neutralize Balaban as a sufferer of grief: Gitelson is no longer an intimate acquaintance of Balaban's; he is simply an "object" lost in the war, whose "brains / leaked on my hands and knee." The power of this scene is on the bluntness of the image,

not necessarily on any editorializing that Balaban does. In fact, his subjective persona is largely absent from the poem to this point.

Nearer to the end of the poem, Balaban re-introduces himself, this time not simply as one who “followed” refugees on the “dusty road,” but as a sort of dumbstruck casualty:

Or me, yours truly,  
agape in the Burn Ward in Danang, a quonset hut,  
a half a garbage can that smelled like Burger King,  
listening to whimpers and nitrate fizzing on flesh  
in a silence that simmered like a fly in a wound. (Locusts 31)

Like those who have been consumed before him, the primary subjects of the poem, Balaban is “injured” or “damaged” by his experience. He is rendered mute by the overpowering sensory impulses of the burn ward, its smell “like Burger King,” the “whimpers and nitrate fizzing” in a deadening silence, “like a fly in a wound.”

Nevertheless, the experience in the burn ward identifies him as part of the collective drama of Viet Nam, a drama that many of his “characters” did not survive.

But Balaban’s “victory” over the experience of Viet Nam seems, at least in part, to be a pyrrhic one: the “candid shot” of his post-Viet Nam life is banal, nearly meaningless. Instead of participating in some grand drama, he is “written up” for “popping a loud-mouth punk in the choppers” (Locusts 31). The ghosts of Erhart, Gitelson, Flynn, and Stone—or rather Balaban’s romanticized notions of their personae—

to take note of the cosmic joke that survival becomes: “Big sighs. Windy sighs. And ghostly laughter”(Locusts 31). Instead of becoming “enshrined” in nature or memory like Adonais or Lycidas, these figures become mnemonic benchmarks for meaning and vibrancy, forcing Balaban to confront continually the nature of his relationship with Viet Nam, both as a place and as a collection of memories. Is he one of Herr’s burned-out correspondents lingering in the figurative war zone for years on end, “trying to piece together [his] very real hatred of the war with his great love of it?” (Herr 221). This is a question that Balaban leaves unanswered.

In his long elegy for David Gitelson, the IVS worker slain in the Mekong Delta, “The Gardenia in the Moon” we see Balaban developing a more sophisticated – and patently politicized—sense of the elegy as a form. Gitelson was a tireless advocate for the peasant population of Viet Nam, providing them with agricultural assistance and serving as an unofficial liaison with the American military and civilian missions working in the region. As in “Palindrome” and “News Update,” Balaban begins the poem by contrasting the war’s presence in his memory with life “back in the world:”

#### 1 In Pennsylvania Woods

The wind was husking, hushing, hosting,  
worrying the slimed leaves of the wood.  
Moon’s light, thick as Witches’ Butter,  
stuck to branch bark and to lifting leaves.  
Standing under fitful oaks, under Orion

bullying the gods, I saw car lights  
stabbing past the rain-blackened trunks,  
and heard peacocks shriek, an owl,  
hoot. Men had landed on the moon.  
As men shot dirty films in dirty motel rooms,  
guerillas sucked cold rice and fish.  
Wind-spooked leaves scratched my cheek.  
Blood on the bark stung my hand.  
In a puddle's moon eye I saw a shape:  
A machine gun was cracking like slapping sticks.  
A yelling man smacked into the smooth canal.            (Locusts 20)

The sense of simultaneity present in “Palindrome” and “News Update,” of a certain beautiful yet banal existence “in Pennsylvania woods” co-existing-- both literally and in the consciousness of the poet—with the ongoing war in Viet Nam is central to this poem. “Men had landed on the moon,” Balaban writes offhandedly, matter-of-factly, while pornographers shot movies and “guerillas sucked cold rice and fish.” At the outset of the piece, Balaban contrasts and disrupts his hum-drum existence with his imaginary rendering of his friend's death. This seems like one of Wordsworth's “spots of time”; this, however, is a reckoning more terrible than sublime. As in some of his other work, the war continues, both in real history and in Balaban's mind.

The rest of “The Gardenia in the Moon” is an experiment in found poetry: like a poetic “collage,” conventionally “poetic” passages, written from Balaban's perspective,

intermingle with bureaucratic memoranda, actual documents written by Roger Montgomery, an IVS supervisor, and by David Gitelson himself. These passages are, ironically, some of the most conventionally elegiac of the poem, at least in their affect: readers “hear” Gitelson’s own voice, advocating more responsible civilian casualty policies for U.S.- South Vietnamese actions:

Previously I’ve had talks with the province and MSCR on possible ways to reduce civilian war casualties, e.g., get the families of soldiers out of the remote outposts by providing them housing in more secure areas. (Locusts 21)

The memoranda “document” Gitelson’s concern for the Vietnamese more effectively than any conventional rhetorical device could have— through the display of these documents, Balaban invites the reader into the process of Gitelson’s activism, invites us to share his outrage. Balaban’s use of these memoranda undercuts his voice as an “authoritative” one in the poem—indeed, as an “elegist” in any real sense. Instead, we see Balaban, yet again, hovering on the margins of the text, acting as an “observer.” “A Cyclo Ride to Town,” and “Gardenia” two other parts of the cycle extend this self-effacing portrayal of the poet. First, a passage from “A Cyclo Ride”:

Jolting past a dust-caked banana grove,  
by the Post Gate we come upon the crowd  
gawking at the farmer hauled in like a pig  
riddled dead, blood-splotted, trussed to a pole. (Locusts 22)

Just as the reader is invited into Gitelson's attempt to reduce war casualties, we are invited into Balaban's witness of one. But, just as Gitelson's report was lost in the bureaucracy of the war, this "obscenity" (to borrow a term from Michael Casey) is almost a part of the landscape. Balaban, for all his obvious moral outrage at this scene, remains quiet, passively chronicling the movement of the cyclo through the city. A more positive scene is present in "Gardenia." Here the sensory intensity of the moment overshadows the scene as a whole:

The scent of gardenia and campsmoke shifts  
across laundries, hammocks, and tents.  
With white, thick, waxy double petals a jasmine  
gardenia reeks, a prostitute in the stripped garden.  
Under a planked jetty, soldiers and their little sons  
skinny dip, foaming the silted river with suds. (Locusts 24)

This scene almost brings to mind Whitman's observation of the twenty-nine bathers in "Calamus," another scene in which a passive poet "absorbs" and transforms the landscape via his imaginative processes. Here, however, the image of gardenia persists as a somewhat ominous symbol: its scent, like Eliot's yellow fog in "Prufrock," covers the landscape, just as the memory of Gitelson's death taints the territory of Viet Nam in Balaban's consciousness. This "taint" is a jasmine gardenia that is a "prostitute in the

stripped garden,” a corrupt, sexualized presence that pervades the lush green of Viet Nam.

But Balaban’s persona—as does Gitelson’s —returns in the final section of the poem, “A Garden Becomes a Moon.” This part, the seventh short poem in the cycle, describes Balaban and Montgomery recovering Gitelson’s body:

Think of hot mercury trickling out  
or molten silver pouring in a dish.  
The webs and sluggish river-loops  
winked up the sun’s burst blooms  
as the plane droned home to Saigon.  
Zipped in a green vinyl sack  
shutting the stinks together, the body  
shook on the rivet-rattling floor.  
Strapped in, the two friends sat  
staring at each other’s shoes, the sack,  
their hands, the banana-green sack. The pilot  
sipped warm Coke and radioed the morgue.  
In the cratered Strike Zone far below  
smoke drifted up from a fragmented tomb.  
A man burnt incense at this father’s grave.                    (Locusts 26)

Balaban re-enters the poem here, but only as a character, a part of the landscape inside the cargo plane. The “observation” that he has performed throughout the rest of the poem continues here, even to the point of enacting a detached “viewing” of himself, Montgomery, and “the sack.” Gitelson, “the sack” becomes an object here, less the subject of elegy than a part of the landscape Balaban is observing: Gitelson is at once “human” and “object,” Balaban’s friend and mere subject of analysis. The images that dominated the previous “poetic” sections return here, but in a much more visceral and foreboding mode. In the earlier passages, readers were bombarded with the smell of “gardenia and campsmoke,” a sensory impression bordering on the bucolic; here, the smells are much more intense: that of Gitelson’s decomposing body inside the sack, “shutting the stinks together” of necrosis and canal water. The “smoke” is now not from campfires, but from bomb craters and funereal incense—the “reeking prostitute” of taint from the earlier passage is now a more directly “corrupted” image. The “passive,” observing Balaban now must come to terms with the landscape as Gitelson saw it: truly mangled by the war.

In the second half of “The Garden Becomes a Moon,” Balaban finally asserts his poetic voice on Gitelson’s death. But the “resolution” that the poem comes to is, in characteristically modern fashion, at best ambivalent:

Before their clouding, before closing, one sees  
oneself in the eyes of the dead,  
eyes of the children cut down like skinny chickens,  
eyes of the small-breasted women, wiry men.

Those who became completely wise cried out  
as the slugs shattered the windshield,  
glass flying into spiderwebs,  
as skipping bullets slivered their eyes.  
Gitelson, do-gooder? A fool?  
Am I some Christer or your corpse-monger?  
Dead, I am your father, brother. Dead, we are your son. (Locusts 26).

At this point, the poem becomes a means of self examination for Balaban: he learns to “see” himself “in the “eyes of the dead.” Gitelson’s death—as well as the death of countless others in the war—forces Balaban to re-examine his role as passive observer of the conflict. In particular, Balaban realizes the *limitation* of his observation of events. In some way, his “chronicling” of the war, his “documentation” of the scenes of the war distances him from “true” knowledge of it. Balaban describes the dead as those who “became completely wise,” becoming so close to the experience as to be inseparable from it. As an “observer,” Balaban cannot be “completely wise”—he will always be bound by his own limitations and agnosticism: of the reasons for Gitelson’s death (in *Remembering Heaven’s Face*, Balaban theorizes that Americans or South Vietnamese, not VC, were responsible for Gitelson’s kidnapping and murder), of the nature of human action, of the nature of “evil” in the world.

This agnosticism is not transcended in the last few lines of the poem, but taken further. Even Balaban’s feelings on the worth of Gitelson’s –and his own-- actions in-country become conflicted. Whether Gitelson is a “do-gooder” or “fool” is left

unresolved, as is Balaban's own role as resurrecting "Christer" or commercialized "corpse-monger." To extend the paradoxical relationship shared between himself, Gitelson, the poem, and the reader, Balaban ends the poem with a reference to a sort of bizarre trinity, addressed to an unspecified audience: "Dead, I am your father, brother. / Dead, we are your son." The indefinite pronouns here, paired with the lack of a specific addressee, make this passage extremely ambiguous, connecting all the participants of both war and text. Balaban is now Gitelson's "father" as well as his "brother"; the unspecified "we" becomes a singular *gestalt* of a "son." The Christian overtones of this image are palpable, suggesting a poetic "resurrection" that is as troubled and ambivalent as the rest of the poem.

Participation in this problematic trinity—and in the poem in general—serves to inextricably bind Gitelson and Balaban to the experience of Viet Nam. Through the process of meditating on Gitelson's life and death, Balaban comes to "see" himself more clearly. The version of himself that Balaban sees in Gitelson, however, is a tragic one: he was a non-combatant who *got involved*, who became "completely wise," transcending the agnosticism of being "outside" the conflict, and being consumed in the process. The poem, then, as an elegy, does not seek to sublimate the pain that Balaban feels about Gitelson's death (and the circumstances that surrounded it). Instead, the poem wallows in its own melancholia: its power resides in the fact that its perspective on the dead is conflicted, ambivalent, and skeptical. Balaban seeks not to mourn Gitelson—at least not conventionally—but to use the melancholic energy involved in the process of loss to make a point that is once political and deeply personal, a protest of both the war's consumption of Gitelson *and* of the agnosticism that accompanies it. Balaban also seeks

to differentiate himself *as a survivor* of the conflict that has consumed so many of his friends, and to explore implicitly the burdens of that status. He must *document* the loss, attempt to clearly articulate the tragedy of Gitelson's life, and give form and meaning—however tenuous—to the event.

“Gardenia in the Moon” in many ways refuses to be consolatory, refuses “resolution” in any real sense, both embracing and railing against the ambiguity and turbulence of loss. “Erhart,” Balaban's elegy for IVS worker Steve Erhart, mourns in a similar way: the poem laments Erhart's death by documenting—almost celebrating-- the tragedy and turbulence of his life. Erhart was a volunteer aid worker with Balaban, who then went on to live a violent, chaotic life as a heroin addict in Saigon. He developed cancer at thirty-five, and died after numerous unsuccessful attempts at treatment, both conventional and unconventional. A sort of triptych of a cancer-victim's psychopathology, the poem is a chronicle of his death as an extension of the chaotic life that he has lived.

The first part of the piece begins with an epigrammatic Vietnamese proverb: “Birds have nests; men have ancestors.” The sense of “history” —especially family history-- for the Vietnamese people, according to Frances Fitzgerald, is an extremely powerful force, transcending many political or social concerns. The sense of “home,” in Vietnamese culture, is primarily defined by one's sense of ancestral history. The centerpiece of the first section of the poem is a conversation between Balaban and Erhart, (who knows that he is dying of cancer) that directly speaks to the authority of this idea:

As I watch him watch a girl in the surf,

Erhart remarks that “birds have nests;  
foxes have holes, but the son of Man  
hath nowhere to lay his head.”  
“Birds have nests,” I add, “Men have ancestors.”  
Erhart’s father died manic and alone.  
A whore-child gave birth to Erhart  
at twenty-seven, in Asia, across the Pacific  
that glints on these bathers and defies our stare.           (Locusts 32)

In this passage, Erhart describes his life as one marked by dislocation, a life of constant movement and “homelessness.” The quotation he uses, from 8 Matthew 18-20, is from Christ himself, discussing his own necessary transience: the surrounding verses explore his wandering from place to place working miracles. Balaban counters Erhart’s self-Christification with a Vietnamese proverb: “Birds have nests; Men have ancestors.” While perhaps intended to offer a sense of remedy to his ailing friend, Balaban’s quotation serves only to highlight the ironic *lack* of familial history and stability in his life. His father died “manic and alone,” and his “whore-child” mother gave birth to him miles away in Asia. Not only is Erhart unable to find “rest” anywhere, but his personal history is a one marked by instability and isolation. If, in the Vietnamese mindset, one looks to their ancestors for guidance (a central idea in Confucianism and Buddhism), Erhart is truly doomed to constant movement, and perhaps conflict.

The second part of this poem is marked by a constant shifting of scene that further develops the idea of constant movement present in the first. Balaban alternates between “inside” and “outside” geographic locations, times, and “places” in Erhart’s body:

Outside Middlesex hospital  
the student unions queue,  
marching behind a rent-all truck  
from which a band plays “Hello Dolly.”  
They want bigger scholarships.  
Inside Middlesex, a blonde moppet  
zaps Erhart with cobalts  
to make his cancer go away,  
those narsty nodes, that ugly clavicle  
blossoming into a Kali-flower.  
She says it will be all right:  
never once has she died  
for all the patients she’s radiated.  
Erhart is going to India to meet  
a wonderful Indian guru, leaving England  
to its henna-haired boys and big women.  
Outside, the Bobbies badger the crowd.  
Inside Erhart’s insides  
his ionized cells are blue with rage

like Tantric demons blue-faced with rage.

The contrasting, seemingly unrelated scenes of “outside” Middlesex and the various degrees of “inside-ness” (inside the hospital, “inside Erhart’s insides) are designed to disrupt the account of Erhart’s treatment; the reader must then negotiate between two competing narratives, heightening the sense of dislocation and turbulence that marks Erhart’s life. The two narratives climax at the same time, however: while the “Bobbies” badger the crowd of “henna-haired boys and big women,” Erhart’s “ionized cells” become “blue with rage / like Tantric demons blue-faced with rage.” The “resolution” here is deflected: the stanza ends not with a sense of hope but with “rage” and a crowd being baited by police.

The third section, prefaced by the title line from Elton John’s “Rocket Man”:  
“Rocket Man, burning up in the highest sky,” continues the frenetic pace of the previous stanzas; this section is a record of the last months of Erhart’s life. In particular, most of the stanza focuses on his unwavering resistance to his sickness, his almost frantic attempt at finding a cure for his cancer. Balaban catalogues Erhart’s numerous new-age attempts to cure himself:

In L.A. a G.P. thought Erhart had an ulcer.

The surgery didn’t work. After the vegetable

diet, the German carrot-juice treatment,

the yoga chants, the asanas, the “breaths of fire,”

after the sautéed-lemon-rind cure,

the acupuncturist, the Reichian masseuse,  
after all the death-defying fucking in London  
Erhart has come to see Sai Baba  
who can materialize Swiss watches  
and pillars of holy ash. (But can he kill the Big C?)  
What else is left? Filipino psychic surgeons?

The paratactic grouping of Erhart's attempts at cure reads like a handbook of alternative therapies, each more futile and abortive than the last. While the lines are end stopped in the first part of the passage, controlling the pace of the poem, the movement is constant and unrelenting, mirroring the constant sequential shift from cure to cure. The line becomes rushed later, when Balaban discusses Erhart's trip to Sai Baba. The enjambed lines bring the search for a cure to a crisis, punctuated both by the hard /d/ sounds of "death-defying" as well as the smooth voiced and voiceless fricatives of "materialize," "Swiss," "watches," "pillars," and "ash." The questions that end Erhart's search process again illustrate the ultimate uncertainty of the cures that he attempts. The last lines of the above passage prepare Erhart for yet another shift in faith, each ("Filipino psychic surgeons") more tenuous than the last. Balaban characterizes this constant shifting as a sort of morbid cosmic joke in the next lines: "If one plays at dying, he doesn't die at all." It almost seems that within the context of Erhart's search for a cure, his "playing" at dying grants him a sort of provisional immortality, as if in resisting death to the end, Erhart regains some life.

The last lines of the poem become more straightforwardly elegiac, offering praise for Erhart's unrelenting spirit, at times almost bordering on sentimentality:

The river tide washes the embers of the dead.  
Erhart, diving and flying in whirl of methadone  
and realization, watches for star-nesting birds;  
spies a man-bird: beaked, crimson-winged,  
with a body of gold—Garuda,  
who routed the gods, their wheel of blades  
who severed the snake guard, spat back its poison,  
whose wing-beat rush could stop the world.  
Who spat back the poison. Who dwells in the sun.

In what amounts to a gesture toward traditional modes of elegy, Balaban elevates Erhart to near-godlike status here: he becomes Garuda, a figure in Indian mythology who was a hybrid of man and bird. As a familiar of Vishnu, Garuda was granted power over snakes and immunity to all forms of toxins. The “Garuda Upanishad,” according to Hindu myth, is supposed to grant the chanter immunity to poison (Subramanian 2003). This mythic elevation is similar to the integration with the landscape that Keats undergoes in “Adonais” and the “mounting” that Lycidas goes through. But this elevation does not seem strictly consolatory: it is a certain *quality* about Erhart that makes him worthy of this mythological status—his tenaciousness in facing death equates him with Garuda. His repeated “spitting back of the poison,” and “routing the gods”—the very turbulence,

resistance, and instability that marked the first part of the poem—creates a subject worthy of elegy.

Erhart's life –and death—was defined by chronic volatility; his family history, his treatment of his disease, and the final culminating crises of his death create an image of a character addicted not only to heroin, but to the frenetic energy of movement and instability. This is not something that escapes Balaban's eye. In a poetic "resurrection" of Erhart's consciousness, Balaban ends the poem with a direct address to Erhart: "Keep moving friend, and don't look down." The poem refuses to "resolve" or "console" either the reader or Balaban in any substantial way: Erhart, while ironically continuing to "exist" through the poem and through Balaban's memory, still lives his unstable, unrelenting life. The poem celebrates this lack of resolution, even draws its energy from it. The sense of the melancholic here, of the turbulence of the memory of Erhart resists any kind of consolation: to do so, to offer consolation for an early death would be an act of self-delusion, disingenuous to the self and to the memory of the lost.

"Erhart," by the virtue of the nature of its subject, offers an interesting example of Balaban's elegiac strategy. The character of Steve Erhart—transient, restless, resilient—requires a poem driven by a sense of interminability, a lack of resolution or "stillness." An elegy for such a figure must by definition be one that resists simple consolation—in short, an elegy bound and driven by a sense of endless melancholia. This sense of melancholia is a driving force in Balaban's overall elegiac strategy. In many ways, his method of elegizing those he has lost refuses to be self-consolatory, refuses to seek "closure" in any real regard. Instead, the poems seek to express an alternative form of grief, one that is reflective of the lack of resolution that Balaban feels in respect to the

war: the war is ongoing, therefore the grief that it engenders is ongoing. “Mau Than,” another elegy in Balaban’s canon is perhaps the best example of this idea.

“Mau Than” is an elegy for To Lai Chan, a friend of Balaban’s who was drafted into the South Vietnamese Army. More than simply an elegy for a lost friend, the poem serves as an elegiac *ars poetica*, a complex meditation on the aesthetic conditions that make elegy possible. Like the other elegiac work in Balaban’s oeuvre, it confronts loss not with transcendence but with acknowledgement and acceptance. In this poem, Balaban extends his model of “melancholic” mourning by examining his own status as both “survivor” of the conflict and as elegist of those consumed by it. The poem begins at Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year;

Friend, the Old Man that was last year  
has had his teeth kicked in; in tears  
he spat back blood and bone, and died.  
Pielike, the moon has carved the skies  
a year’s worth to the eve. It is Tet  
as I sit musing on your doorstep,  
as the yellowed leaves scratch and clutter.

The violence of the first image here is defused by the calmness of the subsequent. While the introduction of the new year is marked by violence, the “present” violently subsuming the past, Balaban’s reaction to it is sedate: he observes the movement of the moon, and “mus[es] on [the] doorstep / as the yellowed leaves scratch and clutter. The lines here

are even, dominated, until the ultimate line, by iambs and slightly varying strong and off-rhymes. This type of constancy and predictability helps to establish a calm, subdued tone even in light of the initial violence of the scene.

As the stanza progresses, dominated by the same formal patterns as the previous section, the scene becomes marked more by the *absence* of Balaban's friend than anything else:

The garden you dug and plotted  
before they drafted you, is now  
stony, dry, and wanting a trowel.  
“For my wife,” you said, taking a plum,  
but the day will never come nor will it come  
to bring your bride from Saigon .

The “yellow leaves” that “scratch and clutter” in the present, at the moment of reflection, are contrasted with the “dug and plotted” landscape of the garden—this is mirrored by an even further stretching of the end-rhyme: “clutter” and “plotted,” lack the phonemic unity of most other lines here. Most other lines contain some level of consonance *and* assonance: these two rhymes are marked only by a consonant repetition. The “garden” as a symbol here is a ruin, a representation of a past – a domestic, sculpted, controlled existence that the war denied To Lai Chanh. The lush, fruitful garden that should, in a perfect world (or a comic one, according to Richard Sewall) have existed is now “stony, dry, and wanting a trowel”— a ruined, desolate place more akin to Larkin's “Church

Going” than Marvell’s “Garden.” Balaban shifts seamlessly back and forth from past to present in this scene, contrasting the *possibility* inherent in the garden with the disintegration of that possibility in reality: “the day never came nor will it come / to bring your bride from Saigon.”

The conclusion of the section contrasts the fluidity of river commerce and children’s play with the static, unchanging sense of Chanh’s absence:

Still the boats fetch stone, painted eyes on  
their prows, plowing the banana-green river;  
and neighbor children splash and shiver  
where junks wait to unload their rock.

But shutters locked, the door of your house is locked. (Locusts 14)

At this point, the poem is more lamenting the end of possibility than To Lai Chanh specifically: simple absence and negation form the core of the poem’s narration, rather than an outright lamentation over Chanh’s death.

The second section is a catalog of the war’s cruelty, beginning again with a characterization of the “year” as a whole:

A year it was of barbarities  
each heaped on the other like stones  
on a man stoned to death.  
One counts the ears on a GI’s belt.

Market meats come wrapped in wrappers  
displaying Viet Cong disemboweled.  
Cries come scattering like shot.  
You heard them and I heard them.

The “stones” that were the markers of day-to-day river commerce in the previous stanza here become the vehicles of a grotesque simile—they become the acts of violence and cruelty heaped on the victims of war: the ears on a belt, the graphic depictions of war casualties, the cries of the wounded. The “world” of the poem—its present—is now the world of the war, dominated by barbarities, a dead world.

In the third section of the poem Balaban returns to the idea of possibility, in stark contrast to the violence of the second section. The scenes that he musters are similar to those in “The Book and the Lacquered Box,” in which the war remains a submerged yet omnipresent force. He begins the stanza:

If there were peace, this river would be  
a peaceful place. Here at your door  
thoughts arrive like rainwater, dotting,  
overspreading a dry, porous rock.

Prefacing a stanza such as this with a conditional statement confounds the “literal” and “created” scenes here. As readers, we do not know if these scenes—peaceful scenes all—exist in “reality” or simply in Balaban’s imagination:

In a feathery drizzle, a man and wife  
are fishing the river. The sidling waves  
slap at her oar as she ladles the water  
and steadies the boat with bored precision.  
His taut wrists fling whirring weights;  
the flying net swallows a circle of fish.

The caesurae in the first part of this passage, paired with the enjambed lines, give a sense of irregular, uneven but constant movement, much like standing on a barge or small boat. The images here are about as far from “the war” as one can get: incredibly domestic, even banal, again evocative of the “reality” that To Lai Chanh was denied by the war. At this point, though, the poem ceases to be an elegy in the conventional sense of the term, even ceases to lament loss altogether—it becomes an *analysis* of the moment of memory for Balaban, a Keatsian narrative of inspiration:

Here at evening one might be as quiet  
as the rain blowing faintly off  
the eaves of a rice boat sliding home.  
Coming to this evening  
after a rain, I found a buff bird  
perched in the silvery-green branches  
of a water-shedding spruce. It was

perched like a peaceful thought. Then  
I thought of the Book of Luke and, indeed,  
of the nobleman who began a sojourn  
to find a kingdom and return.

The poem now concerns itself not with the loss of a friend, with the war's barbarity, or with any surrounding domestic scene; it takes a turn inward, with Balaban—and his own imaginative process-- becoming the focus. Culminating in the “indolent” or “quiet” moment of recollection and contemplation, Balaban “comes,” after a fashion, to the “evening” of the poem, the “night” where some sort of imaginative process can begin. But the or “evening” that Balaban comes to is not simply a literal darkening: it is an increasing acknowledgment of the crisis of loss that plagues the poem—barbarities heaped on each other like stones, the reminders of the “absence” of To Lai Chanh. These “dark times” serve, as they do in Wordsworth, as a means to begin self-analysis, a trigger for more complicated imaginative or memory-based work. After Balaban sees the “buff bird” perched like a “peaceful thought,” an almost Keatsian moment of equilibrium (an “evening” of sorts), he is drawn backward into his own imagination.

As it is so often in Balaban's work, this movement inward is marked by an allusion: here Balaban looks draws from the Book of Luke's (Luke 19:12-27) parable about the nobleman who “begins a sojourn” to a far country to “find a kingdom and return.” The “sojourn” here can be paralleled to the “coming” to the “evening” that defines the meditative moment of this section, and, subsequently, the whole poem. Given the status that Balaban enjoys as a foreigner in Viet Nam, one can easily see the implicit

comparison the allusion asks readers to make: Balaban is going through the experience of the war—through the “darkness” of loss-- to “find” something of value. What that is, however, is left undefined, to be developed in the final section of the poem.

The “night” motif as a figure for the suffering recurs in the final section of the poem; here, however, the “evening” is something *through which* Balaban has passed, a terrible, violent experience that he has survived. The language here is one of defiant emergence, almost transcendence:

Out of the night, wounded  
with the gibberings of dogs,  
wheezing with the squeaks of rats,  
out of the night, its belly split  
by jet whine and mortar blast,  
scissored by the claws of children,  
street sleepers, ripping their way free  
from cocoons of mosquito netting  
to flee the rupturing bursts  
and the air dancing with razors  
--out I came, to safe haven.  
Nor looked, nor asked further.

Whereas the “the evening,” a precursor to the darkness of “night” was placid and restrained in the previous section, the “night” becomes more concretely identified with

the horror of war. The night is chaotic, almost apocalyptic: it is “wounded,” and “wheezing,” its “belly split / by jet whine and mortar blast,” and “scissored by the claws of children .” Balaban *escapes* this violent, tormented night, emerging into “safe haven.” Unlike those killed by the war, unlike those who were killed “ripping their way free / from cocoons of mosquito netting / to flee the rupturing bursts / and the air dancing with razors.” It is here that Balaban’s status as both survivor of the conflict and as an elegist of it becomes a focus of the poem: this piece, as with all of Balaban’s elegies, is written from the position of one who has *shared* the experience of the war, but not been consumed by it. He has come “out of the night,” achieving a vantage point “outside” the conflict.

To some extent, all of Balaban’s (and, indeed, elegies in general) are marked by this necessary perspectival shift. The elegies, through the act of memorializing (and analyzing) the dead as “casualties” of the conflict in Viet Nam, must come from a perspective that is able to categorize them as such; Balaban’s subjects are all tied together by their common status as “affected” by the war *in Balaban’s eyes*. Only someone who has lived through that common experience-- who can understand both the historical nature of the conflict (in this case, as an expanding, amoebic entity that claims victims outside its physical and temporal bounds) and its effects (real or imagined) on the personalities under observation. It is Balaban’s status as a survivor—as a veteran—of the war, his movement from “inside” the war to “outside” of it that makes these elegies possible.

But it is not simply the idea of “escape” or the privileged status of the “survivor-veteran” that enables Balaban to create in this elegiac mode. The concept of “return” or

“re-visitation” is also a necessary condition for these elegies to happen. Balaban must “return” either literally, imaginatively, or conceptually to the conflict – *with* the historical and cultural perspective he gains from his survival of it. Not unlike Wordsworth’s return to the Wye river valley in “Tintern Abbey,” Balaban’s re-visitation—in whatever form it takes—of Viet Nam and the personalities involved it enables him to give form and expression to the chaotic experience that was the war.

“Mau Than” reflects this sense of return, casting it as the crucial component of the sense of elegy in this poem, and perhaps in Balaban’s poetics overall. As Balaban transcends the “night” of war, emerging from its chaos into “safe haven,” he is cleansed, becoming a sort of mystic, and prepared to re-examine his own experience:

--out I came, to safe haven.

Nor looked, nor asked further.

Who would? What more? I said.

I said: Feed and bathe me.

In Japan I climbed Mt. Hiei in midwinter.

The deer snuffled my mittens.

The monkeys came to beg.

I met Moses meeting God in the clouds.

The cold wind cleared my soul.

The mountain was hidden in mist.

The images that dominate this section of the poem are those of a literal ascension up a mountain, in particular Japan's Mt. Hiei. But this "ascension" also marks a reversal of the traditional elegiac pattern developed in "Lycidas" and "Adonais." Instead of the dead being "mounted high," the ascension is undertaken by the poet; his movement skyward up the mountain becomes a mystical journey to enlightenment, even to "godly" knowledge. The scenes here are isolated and peaceful—deer "snuffling" his "mittens," "monkeys" coming "to beg." As the pattern progresses, Mt. Hiei becomes a version of Mount Sinai: Balaban becomes a divine witness, meeting "Moses meeting God in the clouds." Like Moses meeting God in the clouds, Balaban becomes a prophetic messenger, a witness to knowledge with a "clear soul" whose burden it is to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. In this case, the Israelites are those suffering because of the war in Viet Nam; Balaban's function as a prophet—and, by extension, an elegist-- is to survive the tumultuous "night" of the war give "form" to the chaos of suffering. The poem, the act of elegy itself, becomes the result of this travel *through* the experience of the war. Balaban's survival, intact and enlightened, enables him to gain an appreciation of the immensity, and depth of the conflict—he steps "outside" the confines of history, outside the immediacy of his own experience. Like Wordsworth recalling emotion in tranquility, Balaban mediates the intense experience of war with time and distance, enabling him to contextualize and understand what he – and others—have experienced. The final lines of the poem offer a stirring figure for this formalization of war's suffering. Like many of the other elegies in Balaban's canon, the ultimate line is a direct address to a lost friend: "Friend / I am back to gather the blood in a cup." This image forms a capstone to the entire project of the poem—Balaban, the survivor, who has seen war

consume his friends, must strive to understand what he has experienced, giving “form” to the formless, chaotic “night” of the war.

Balaban’s elegies are not simple lamentations for those lost in an incredibly destructive war. Nor do these poems seek to console either their speaker or their audience for the death of their subjects. Instead, there seems a tendency in these poems toward the willing sustenance of intense sadness here, of a sense of what Jahan Ramazani calls “melancholic mourning”—a perspective on the dead that actively resists resolution. Balaban’s depiction of the war as an expanding, consuming, ubiquitous force that continually transcends its spatial and historical bounds fits with this view. The war has not “ended,” its issues and effects not been “resolved” in any concrete way: it thus follows that the mourning for those lost in the conflict is as equally unresolved.

Further, these elegies are a means for Balaban to examine his own status as “survivor” of the conflict. Balaban’s repeated “returns” to the war, contrasted with the banality of his life beyond the conflict, create Viet Nam as a place of “real” meaning and significance in Balaban’s life, a sort of extended “primal scene” that serves as a means to evaluate and understand all subsequent events. In this case, Viet Nam, with all of its chaos, its death, its suffering—but also with its drama, intensity, and vibrancy—becomes the experience by which all other experiences are judged. The “sterility” of life outside of Viet Nam is something that haunts Balaban’s work, almost as if each subsequent episode of his life is a faint shadow of his experience in the Nam. “Surviving” the conflict, then, is a mixed blessing: one gains the ability to see the war in some kind of greater context, but is in turn forced continually, almost obsessively, to confront its legacy. The result is a poetics as ambiguous and unresolved as the war itself.

**Four: Living is a Darker Thing: Bruce Weigl's Shameful Joy**

**I. Bruce Weigl, Myth, and the Power of Narrative**

Bruce Weigl's career as a poet has been dominated by his experience in the Viet Nam War. In most poems in Weigl's canon, Viet Nam, even when the war itself is not a primary concern, hovers in the margins, inflecting his work with a tragic sense of loss and seriousness. Weigl seems a poet unconcerned with comedy: his task, as he noted in an interview, is "to find a shape for the litany of terror" (Keplinger 150) that he has experienced. In his memoir, *The Circle of Hanh*, Weigl writes about how Viet Nam has influenced, and even defined, his poetic sensibility:

The paradox of my life as a writer is that the war ruined my life and in return gave me my voice. The war robbed me of my boyhood and forced me, at eighteen years old, to bear too much witness to the world, and to what men were capable of doing to other men, and to children, and to women, and to themselves, trapped in the green inscrutable intention of the jungle.

The war took away my life and gave me poetry in return. The war taught me irony: that I instead of the others would survive is ironic. All of my heroes are dead. The fate the world has given me is to struggle to write powerfully enough to draw others into the horror.

(Circle of Hanh 6)

This “horror” is the central aspect of Weigl’s poetry: he seeks to envelop his readers within the darkness of his own life, to expand his readers’ understanding of the effects of war on the human psyche. Weigl’s poetic, however, isn’t simply a wallowing in the endless horrors of combat; he also seeks to show that the act of articulating horror in a sense “saves” one from it:

As if by a river we are all connected by words. We need words to eat and to drink. We need words to wash away the ugly reality that we sometimes allow ourselves to imagine is a life, and we need the dirt and grit of our struggle in order to hang on to the spinning green planet that is our only home, that is inside of us like a story.

(Circle of Hanh 156)

For Weigl, though, lyricism seems not an escape from torment, but a mastering of it: one must embrace the “dirt and grit” of his own life—to articulate the “nastiness” of it clearly—to keep perspective on reality and to exist in a meaningful way. “Say it clearly,” Weigl writes in 1992’s *What Saves Us*, “and you make it beautiful, no matter what.”

Weigl’s prolific nature (he has written, translated, or edited thirteen books of poetry and criticism since 1976) has generated a significant amount of critical attention. Along with the work of W.D. Ehrhart, John Balaban and Yusef Komunyakaa, many critics consider Weigl’s poetry the most sophisticated to come from the war. Philip Beidler, author of two of the premiere works of criticism on the literature of the Viet

Nam war, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* and *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in their Generation* considers Weigl's poetic accomplishment a major one, characteristic of what he sees as the defining aspect of later (post 1975) writing on the war, an "optative" sense that combines "an unrelenting fidelity to the experiential particular—with a distinct sense of literary contrivance" (Beidler 140). Transcending the strict "concreteness" or obsession with experiential detail of much early writing on the war, Weigl's work strives self-consciously for a more "literary" representation of experience—a representation tempered with time and imaginative meditation that places experience into a larger cultural and psychic context. Beidler writes of Weigl's first full-length collection, *A Romance* (1976):

Whatever the war once was or might have been, it is now as much explicitly "here" as "there," well along in the process of being assimilated out essentially private consciousness and into some larger context of collective myth. (Beidler 186)

Weigl's work is both "a ritualized formal remembrance" of the war as well as a "liberation" from it, a moving forward into new modes of imagining of the experience. As an example of this "re-imagining," Beidler cites Weigl's "Sailing to Bien Hoa:

In my dream of the hydroplane  
I'm sailing toward Bien Hoa  
the shrapnel in my thighs

like tiny glaciers.  
I remember a flower,  
a kite, a manikin playing the guitar,  
a yellow fish eating a bird, a truck  
floating in urine, a rat carrying a banjo,  
a fool counting the cards, a monkey praying,  
a procession of whales, and far off  
two children eating rice,  
speaking French—  
I'm sure of the children,  
their damp flutes  
the long line of their vowels.

(SON 4)

In Beidler's view, this poem is successful because it both reaches back into experience—the catalogue of details—and “reaches beyond” it, re-forming the deluge of experience as something profound and meaningful. “The imagination of romance,” Beidler writes, “in a world of remembered madness . . . , can still launch us in consciousness toward new understandings of the eternal and real that have perhaps been there from the start” (Beidler 184).

While Beidler sees Weigl's work as a gesture toward a cohesive textual “redemption” of the war (and perhaps of Weigl himself), other critics see his poetry in a much darker, more cataclysmic way. Lorrie Smith, in her seminal article “A Sense-

Making Perspective on Some Recent Poems by Vietnam Veterans” claims that the central project of Weigl’s poetry is a disruption of the notion that America can claim any sense of absolution for its actions in Southeast Asia. Weigl’s work, she argues, is a deconstruction “of the popular myth that we have regained our national innocence” by confessing that involvement in Viet Nam was misguided (Smith 14). Like Beidler, Smith sees Weigl as “go[ing] back to the war in an attempt to go beyond it . . .” but she notes further that “his efforts to reconcile past and present, memory and imagination, often end in dilemma” (Smith 14). Concerning Weigl’s 1982 collection *The Monkey Wars*, Smith argues that the book displays “a darker view of the limitations of transcendent and redemptive imagination” (Smith 16). As an example, she cites “Amnesia”:

If there was a world more disturbing than this  
where black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole  
and overgrown tropical plants  
rotted, effervescent in the muggy twilight and monkeys  
screamed something  
that came to sound like words to each other  
across the triple-canopy jungle you shared,  
you don’t remember it.

You tell yourself no and cry a thousand days,  
You imagine the crows calling autumn into place

are your brothers and you could  
if only the strength and will were there  
fly up to them and be useful to the wind.

(Monkey Wars 1)

The confluence of memory and imagination here yields not a sense of possible redemption, but a trenchant sense of helplessness. Coherent memory – a recollection of a “more disturbing” world than this-- disperses under the weight of the sensory details of the experience. Likewise, the imaginative response to the failure of memory – the comparison of the “crows calling autumn into place” to the “brothers” lost in the war— collapses as well. The speaker lacks the “strength and will” to reconnect with those lost, becoming a “whole” once again, reconciling memory and imagination. A skepticism, then, concerning the power of lyricism to console and redeem consciousness pervades this piece. According to Smith, this type of lyrical skepticism underlies many of Weigl’s best poems. Instead of easy consolation, Smith argues, Weigl offers a stark warning “against the peculiarly American habit of denying history” (Smith 18). “His memories,” Smith adds, “and nightmares and dilemmas are ours as well, drawing us into the fallen history we share” (Smith 18).

Mediating somewhat between Beidler’s and Smith’s take on Weigl work is Vince Gotera’s *Radical Visions: Poetry by Vietnam Veterans*. While recognizing the anxiety concerning the war that surrounds Weigl’s entire canon-- the war as a “subterranean” presence in the work—Gotera is ultimately optimistic about poetry’s ability to cope with

and represent the horrors of the Viet Nam experience:

Weigl forces us to re-view the war through the increasing eloquence and aestheticism of his attempts to revise his Vietnam-war experience. And each of his poems is a ritual of ‘cleansing’ (Gotera 284).

According to Gotera, these “rituals of cleansing” combine the dominant “modes” of representation in Viet Nam veteran poetry: the “antipoetic,” (Michael Casey), the “cathartic” (many poems in *Winning Hearts and Minds*), and the “aesthetic” (Basil T. Paquet, John Balaban). Weigl’s work, then, is a synthesis of the postmodern traditions of Viet Nam war poetry; it strives for “a lyrical aestheticism” that resists the “concomitant romanticization” such lyricism entails. Gotera discusses Weigl’s “The Kiss” at length:

All the good-byes said and done  
I climbed into the plane and sat down.  
From the cold I was shaking and ached  
to be away from the love  
of those waving through the frozen window . . .

(Once as a boy I was lost in a storm,  
funnel cloud twisting so near  
I was pitched from my bicycle

into the ditch,  
picked up by the wind and yellow sky,  
my arms before me  
feeling my way through the wind  
I could not cry above.  
Out of that black air of debris,  
out of nowhere, my father bent down,  
lifted me and ran  
to the house of strangers.)

And again that day on the plane  
he appeared to me,  
my forgotten orders in his hands.  
He bent down to put the envelope into my lap,  
on my lips he kissed me hard  
and without a word he was gone  
into the cold again.

Through the jungle, through the highlands,  
through all that green dying,  
I touched my fingers to my lips.

(SON 68-69)

According to Gotera, this poem represents a re-writing of American innocence, a transformed, flawed version of *The Wizard of Oz* in which Dorothy does not return home but to “the house of strangers,” a new place unknown to the speaker. The image of Weigl’s father in both primary episodes of the poem—the tornado scene and his departure for Viet Nam— is in some sense salvific, “saving” Weigl from the overwhelming danger that he faces. The salvation images here border on the romantic, but never quite reach the level of mythology. The father does not “save” him in the same way that he did as a child—the experience of Viet Nam obliterates the innocence that makes such salvation possible. It is the memory of the father’s presence and love – distilled into the kiss— that sustains Weigl “through all that green dying” (SON 36). The speaker passes through the horrible experience—almost experiencing a “death” himself—but manages, somehow to remain whole via the memory of human love.

While these critics provide considerable insight into Weigl’s poetic project, they tend to view his work within the somewhat limited framework established by much previous work on Viet Nam war literature: the examination and revision of American mythologies—myths of a “national innocence,” “a city upon a hill,” or of “technowar.” While the intersections between the individual and history, memory and mythology are of course extremely important to Weigl, I feel that in making such broad statements about Weigl’s revisionist process—the “reclamation” of the ‘Nam as lyrical expression—these writers neglect an aspect of this process that I feel is crucial to understanding it: the negotiation and examination of a uniquely personal guilt within the disruption of national mythology. The experience of Viet Nam needs to be reclaimed not simply because of our moral, imaginative, and military failures there; it needs to be reclaimed because we—

as Americans and, more importantly, as individual human beings—feel guilty about those failures.

Weigl’s psychic negotiation of his own responsibility for his actions is interesting in that it is a microcosmic exploration of the journey into the “heart of darkness” that was America’s experience in Viet Nam. Weigl’s poetry, in all its nastiness and brutality, reflects, in an oddly beautiful and poignant way, the corruption of a soul, the loss of one’s humanity in a political, social, and cultural quagmire. When one reads Bruce Weigl, one reads the story of one haunted by his own sins, from his early quiet complicity in killing to his eventual ecstatic attraction to it. Weigl failed to resist “the beautiful war,” as he called it, and was corrupted, made something less than human, turned into what Philip Caputo called (citing his own experience) “a bloodthirsty ghoul.” Weigl’s poems are a way to “own” that corruption and re-learn how to be a living, feeling, human being. There is no atonement here, only a willingness to accept responsibility honestly. Learning to live with the persistent guilt of Viet Nam without the romanticized lyricism of poetic “consolation” – the “lies” of poetry and redemptive myth is one of the central aesthetic problems present in Weigl’s work. As a poet and veteran, he must learn to articulate all of the story of Viet Nam, even those aspects that are self-incriminatory—especially those aspects—to master it, even for a brief moment.

For Weigl, it is the “story” that offers respite from the overwhelming burden of his own guilt—if he can say it right, say it clearly, put it in the right form, he can control it and make it his own. Each poem in Weigl’s canon, far from being a “ritual of cleansing” as Vince Gotera suggests—for cleansing implies a “removal” of taint—is a narrative of acceptance, a narrative that takes responsibility for what has happened in a

way that somehow reaffirms the writer's basic humanity.

Weigl's constant revision of his body of work—poems from his earliest volumes often appear, in slightly different variants, in later books—suggests a larger attempt at narrative creation, beyond the level of the individual poem. As Weigl's understanding of his own experience changes over time, so does the overall narrative that he creates. From his early chapbook *The Monkey Wars* to his later career-spanning collection of war poems *Song of Napalm*, Weigl re-masters his own memory with each successive volume, the language becoming more precise, the grouping more coherent. One of the foremost challenges in reading Weigl's poetry, especially from a non-veteran perspective, is to discern this greater narrative of the work; to do this, one must often examine Weigl's canon in its totality, searching for a narrative that is more often interior and implied than one of simple physical time, a narrative that chronicles the de-evolution of his moral consciousness.

## **II. Weigl's World of Hurt and the Evolution of Consciousness**

Bruce Weigl's war begins in Lorain, Ohio, a desolate mill town in the rust belt of America. It is a town of slag and grit, of Croatian immigrants and cold-water flats--in short, it is a somewhere from which people strive to escape. The army was that escape for Weigl, a way out of the hard, blue-collar life of his parents and grandparents. It was an education, a chance to see the world. What Weigl did not count on, however, was Viet Nam. As it was for so vast a majority of those who fought in it, the war became for Weigl the defining experience of his life, a transforming force so powerful that it forever

changed everything that came after. In his memoir, *The Circle of Hanh*, Weigl spends several chapters contrasting episodic flashes of “the before” versus “the after.” The description here is almost mystical, the transformation of his world complete:

In the before, on the night of my departure, I drove restlessly down the back streets of Lorain that I had memorized as if there were a door that had been there all along that I could find now and slide through and escape to another life where the stars would not explored in my face. (COH 141)

In the after, Christmas 1967, I waited with my chums for the morning death toll after a night of rockets and mortars. For forty-nine consecutive nights we were hit by 122-millimeter rocket fire launched from the mountains around our base camp. . . . During those forty-nine nights of rockets, I lost my sleep forever. Never before would I be able to find the kind of sleep that I’d had in the before. (COH 129)

Learning to not only describe but to understand how this “one irrevocable after” (COH 140) of Viet Nam changed his life is the principal project of Weigl’s poetry. As we examine Weigl’s canon, we witness the evolution of a consciousness concerning the war, a consciousness that struggles to reconcile the horrors of war—both witnessed and committed—with its sense of morality and justice. The articulation of the “story” of this horror, this “irrevocable after,” is an act of resistance for Weigl, a momentary respite from the oppressive memories of the “green dying” of the Nam.

At its most elementary, Weigl's poetic consciousness is one of witness in the strictest possible sense: the poetry is "observational," detached (for the most part) from the violence and chaos of the war. These poems are often about what others are doing: committing sins, suffering, killing, dying. The poet's persona hovers in the margins of these poems, at some times feeling helpless in the face of the overwhelming violence of Viet Nam, at others almost quietly complicit in it. The speaker here is neither victim nor aggressor, tragic hero nor villain: he is a spectator to the atrocity, "the new kid," or simply another nameless grunt. An excellent example of Weigl's use of this "observational" or "passive observer" mode is a poem that discusses one of his first experiences "in country," "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," from *The Monkey Wars*:

I was barely in country.  
We slipped under the rain-black clouds  
opening around us like orchids.  
He'd come to take me into the jungle  
so I felt the loneliness  
though I did not yet hate the beautiful war.  
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 and he hit the brakes hard,  
he spun the tires backwards 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 the 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.

(MW 26)

This is a poem of quiet indoctrination. In this episode, Weigl's speaker learns his first lesson about the "jungle" in Viet Nam: that it will "rot" him, both physically and spiritually. The poem opens with a statement of innocence, a setting of the scene: Weigl, the "newbie" or "FNG

is “barely in country,” new to war and to Viet Nam. The first major image here is of brotherhood, or even fatherhood: the older, experienced soldier is educating Weigl, the rookie. The language, however, isn’t pedagogical or even paternal, but sexual: the soldiers “slipped under rain-black clouds” that surrounded them “like orchids.” The smoothness of “slipped,” as well as the feminine (indeed, almost vaginal) image of orchids here creates a sense of tender intimacy: this relationship is not like a battle-hardened sergeant’s training of his raw recruit, a hackneyed mainstay in most war movies. This relationship is much closer than that, and more disturbing: he has “come to take me into the jungle / so I felt the loneliness / though I did not yet hate the beautiful war.” The syntax here is a bit unstable—as a reader, one is not sure whether Weigl is being taken “into the jungle” in order that he can “feel the loneliness” or that because a man has come to take him, he is feeling the loneliness. This isolation provides a stark contrast to the intimate tone in the opening lines, perhaps alluding to the complexity of the relationship soldiers must have toward each other and toward the Vietnamese. The senior man is indoctrinating Weigl’s speaker into a controlled isolation that is both physical (as in one being alone in the jungle) and psychic: one is always ultimately “alone” in the experience of war. Though the military preaches cohesion as gospel, there is no connection here between Weigl and the experienced soldier, at least not yet: he sees the brutality of the soldier as grotesque and alien, generating a quiet self-hatred. The key moment of the poem defines Weigl as a witness to the war’s atrocity, a witness to an act committed by a “brother of the heart.” For no discernible reason, Weigl’s trainer stops the jeep, calls the woman over, and proceeds to beat her senseless with the butt of his rifle. Rhetorically, the image of an innocent old woman being beaten by a

soldier is a powerful statement on the brutality of war. But Weigl takes this a step further, by inserting himself into the narrative as a witness—a passive witness to a heinous crime. It is the passivity here that marks Weigl indelibly, occasioning the poem: he states, prefacing the narration of the beating: “I have no excuse for myself.” Weigl sits, in the man’s jeep, in the rain, simply watching the soldier brutalize the mama-san. Weigl knows how wrong this is, knows that an old woman is being tortured for nothing, yet he remains still, a pupil watching and learning, noting the “plastic butt of his M16 / crashing down on her” (MW 16).

Weigl, however, reverts at the end of the poem to a more lyric mode of expression, retreating from the event – and his complicity in it—back to his own status as passive observer. The last lines seem paralyzed with shock and guilt. Weigl repeats the first line of the poem almost in disbelief: “I was barely in country,” as if the repetition could both soften the harshness of the experience and absolve him from his passivity. He allows what he has allowed to happen because he was “barely in country,” new to the standard operating procedures—arbitrary brutality—of life in the Nam. The poem ends with a blending of the resonant memory of the woman and the landscape:

I was barely in country, the clouds  
hung like huge flowers, black  
like her teeth.

(MW 16)

The clouds that surround the speaker at the outset of the poem return here, ambient

reminders of the defining experience of witness, markers of the violence embedded into the life awaiting Weigl during his time in country. The landscape of Viet Nam is now a constant signifier of Weigl's complicity in arbitrary violence.

And it is the passivity here that devastates Weigl: he allows this violence to happen, accepting it as given, a standard operating procedure. A similar idea dominates "The Last Lie," a poem in which the speaker's passivity at once absolves and implicates him in an act of arbitrary brutality.

Some guy in the miserable convoy  
raised up in the back of our open truck  
and threw a can of C rations at a child  
who called into the rubble for food.

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.

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.

While the passive witness in “Surrounding Blues on the Way Down” generates profound shame in the speaker, the experience here seems to produce anger and a sense of tragic irony—a response marked, however, by the same acute, shocked paralysis. The poem is essentially about the meaning and appreciation of a violent act, a “meaning” that comes from the dissonance between the perception of an act versus its intent. The “truth” of the American’s throwing of the C ration can at the Vietnamese child, in the world of the poem, is only accessible from the speaker’s point of view: as a witness, he sees the irony in the situation, the malicious intent behind the throw, and the “lie” that is the child’s innocent misunderstanding of it.

The speaker’s passivity in the face of this brutality at once absolves and implicates him in the moral crisis of the act. Weigl distances himself from the brutality of the repeated acts he witnesses—the soldier is throwing another can as the poem ends—through his understanding of the tragic irony of the soldier’s brutality and his non-

participation in the action. He “grits his teeth” in frustration and anger, “to remember the girl smiling,” the resonant moment of her unwitting victimization. Weigl uses his silence and inaction here, detaching himself from “American” intent; in this sense, the poem is a protest against the arbitrary viciousness inherent in the war. Conversely, the speaker’s silence and passivity connects him, as it did in “Surrounding Blues” to the perpetrator of the act—through his silent assent, Weigl is one of the “brothers of the heart” whose “rage ripped into the faces of children / who called to us for food.” The fact that Weigl has “no excuse for [him]self” —he never moves actively to prevent the violence -- is more implied than explicit, undermining the superior moral position that the truly detached, passive “observer” of violence might lay claim to. The success of “The Last Lie” as an “observational” poem is that it moves past representing the overwhelming shock and disgust of one’s initial experiences with arbitrary brutality, illustrating a more complex, ironic mode of understanding the event, a mode more sensitive to the unique obligations of the poetic witness.

The “passive observer” mode of engagement with violence is perhaps the most simple of Weigl’s treatments of the subject. Weigl’s most compelling work often investigates not only the nature of bearing “witness” to atrocity, but also the irrational, sub-verbal attraction human beings feel toward it. The willingness to admit that violence and destruction is, for lack of a better word, at times “sexy,” often makes the experience of reading Weigl’s poetry a disturbing one. It implies a brutal view of human nature, an animalistic model which suggests that on some level, it is possible not only to accept the “nastiness” and “brutishness” of life, but also, in some times and circumstances, to embrace it.

This acute awareness of the sexiness of violence manifests itself in many of Weigl's poems, even early work not necessarily directly related to Viet Nam. An example of this is "Two Men (A Neighbor Burns His House)" from Weigl's early chapbook, *Executioner*. This prose poem is a narrative of both masochism and voyeurism, of a thrill in destruction, rendered in terms so plebian that the "horror" of the situation loses all power:

The bills piling up like old sores. The old woman picking his pockets every night when he falls out drunk on the couch. So he crawled into the hall closet and with a Navy zippo set a blue coat on fire. They all got out in time. In fact, for a long time, we thought it would never really burn. But it burned. Despite the sleepy, almost bored firemen pouring thousands of gallons of Lake Erie down the roof.

A second man appeared next to me in half his pajamas, his great belly shining in the flames, his eyes wide in quiet delight—as if he had just been with a woman.

(Executioner 3)

The syntax of each phrase here is simple and declarative, forming the core of an anti-narrative which reveals only the bare essentials of the event's pathology and aftermath. The primary focus of the poem is not the actual commission of the arson, it is the spectacle that the fire becomes in the eyes of those that witness it. In a bizarre parody of entertainment, the neighbors gather around the house, speculating about whether it would ever "really burn," eventually watching it being consumed. This seems a haunting

transformation of the “zippo raids” U.S. soldiers undertook in Viet Nam, burning villages in order to “save” them from the Viet Cong. These raids, of course, were staples of the evening news during the war; even now the image of a young marine with a silver zippo lighting a thatched roof resonates as an iconic signifier of the war’s misguided “hearts and minds” strategy. Just as television audiences were drawn to the violent—yet safely distant—spectacle of the war, the neighborhood is drawn to the controlled chaos of the fire, a chaos contained by the “sleepy, almost bored firemen pouring thousands of gallons of Lake Erie down the roof.”

The speaker is one of these spectators, a quiet observer “enjoying” the scene. But what is most interesting here is the emergence of the “second” man next to the speaker. The man’s attraction to the spectacle of the fire is undeniable, even plainly sexual: he is half naked, “his great belly shining in the flames, his eyes wide in quiet delight—as if he had just been with a woman.” The experience of witnessing the fire is orgasmic for the second man; the “glow” of the flames is not simply reflected light, but post-sexual afterglow. The attraction to tragedy and destruction, then, becomes a sexualized event, an event marked by primal drives that exist apart from language—the markers of the man’s pleasure, one might note, are non-verbal, and, on the speaker’s part, analogical. This seems indicative of unspoken yet undeniable suburban *schadenfreude* operating here, a quiet joy in the misfortune of others that is at once unintentional and unrepentant. The “joy” that the spectators feel— at the rush of destruction, the sublimity of consummation—takes over the poem, effectively “erasing” the first man, his family, the “tragic” situation.

This sexualization of a primarily visual experience—this “scopophilia,” in

Freudian terms, frames a deeper struggle within the drama of the text, an implied, passive struggle for male power between the “Two Men” mentioned in the title. “Two Men” is intentionally ambiguous; as a reader, one does not know which of the three principal characters in the text—the arsonist, the spectator, or the speaker—the title refers to.

At its most basic, the primal conflict involves the arsonist and the fat spectator. The fat man, fetishizes the inferno—or rather the spectacle of the inferno-- of his neighbor’s house, “gazing” at the fire as if it were an object of attraction. Laura Mulvey, in the seminal “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” argues, after Freud, that the satisfaction that defines the scopophilic urge comes, in part, from the “controlling gaze” of a male spectator upon an objectified feminine object, an object defined by its phallic “lack.” In this sense, it is not necessarily the fire that attracts the spectator, but its place as a signifier of masculine failure, as a symbol of the arsonist’s inability to be an effective “male” figure. The fire, then, is a form of surrender for the arsonist, a surrender to the “bills piling up like old sores,” and “the old woman picking his pockets,” something that emasculates him in the eyes of the community of men. Through his curious and controlling “gaze,” the fat spectator intrudes upon the intimacy of the arsonist’s domestic scene—and its implosion— and subordinates it to his own sense of phallic efficacy. The sexual satisfaction the spectator feels, then, is not only a physical satisfaction but also a psychosexual and political one. The ecstasy of observation is also, borrowing war terminology, the ecstasy of seizing of male power from a defeated foe.

The speaker’s perspective in the drama of the text complicates this essential conflict further. While the speaker obviously does not gain an explicit sexual thrill from witnessing the fire, he nonetheless “gazes” at it, both within the world of the text and

through his formalization of the event. The speaker is a voyeur in a community of voyeurs, documenting in rigid, anti-lyrical prose the experience of the fire, its cause and aftermath. It is almost as if the speaker, through his prosaic (re)-construction of the experience is resisting the ecstasy that the fat spectator feels: the lines lack an organic rhythm, a pulse leading to the rapture akin to sexual release. This resistance—and our recognition of it—casts the rest of the poem, especially the fat spectator’s reaction, as an ironic commentary on the place of the cataclysmic spectacle of the fire. While we can identify with the speaker and (to an extent) the fat spectator—as one might recall staring compulsively at a car accident—we are asked as readers to step away from our own urges, to read the poem as critical of the implied cruelty of such an act.

There is, however, a disturbing trend of failure to resist the attraction to violence and destruction in Weigl’s canon, poems where the speaker enacts gains a sexual or pseudo-sexual thrill from witnessing, participating in, or contemplating an act of violence. In these poems we are asked to ironically examine the speaker’s position as both storyteller and witness to the experience of Viet Nam; we are forced, then, to evaluate (or recognize) the level of responsibility for his actions the speaker has as a soldier, a poet, and a human being.

As is common in much discourse surrounding warfare, the “equipment” of war often serves as a locus of attraction to the event. During the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars in Iraq, for example, television viewers were bombarded not only with jingoistic images of “America’s Bravest” (MSNBC) from the front, but with images of American war technology at work: television-guided cruise missiles flying into elevator shafts, unmanned Predator drones launching Hellfire anti-tank missiles at Iraqi armor,

paid military consultants explaining the physics behind JDAM (Joint-Direct Attack Munition, a smart bomb) and 2,000-pound bunker-buster munitions. This fetishism of technology seems a critical part of the discourse of war: devices become more than tools to accomplish a given political or military task; in some cases they seem to become newsworthy events in and of themselves. While the Gulf Wars provide the most convenient examples of the American fascination with war technology, the Viet Nam war was no exception; America confronted the technological signifiers of that war with reactions as conflicted as public opinion on the war. It was this “unrestrained” fascination with technology—and technocratic war management techniques—that James William Gibson, in *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* argues was the central flaw that plagued American policy in Southeast Asia. Depending so fully on the icons of American technological superiority—Cobra helicopter gunships, napalm, B-52 Arc light strikes—American policy makers and war planners failed to recognize the superior ideological dedication of their opponent, failed to account in their calculus for the overwhelming Vietnamese (both South and North) desire for victory over the “invaders” of their homeland.

One such central icon of the war was the Bell UH-1 Iroquois “Huey” helicopter, the ubiquitous vehicle that ferried countless Americans throughout Viet Nam. The Huey is one of the defining images of the American war in Viet Nam, as common in cultural memory as the phrase “search and destroy,” the archetypal image of an American on a “zippo raid” or the Pulitzer-prize winning picture of the young Vietnamese girl on a road, naked, burned by napalm, her village aflame in the background.

In the opening pages of *Dispatches*, perhaps the definitive book on the American

war in Viet Nam, Michael Herr examines the iconography of the helicopter in detail, describing the helicopter more as a symbolic construct than a utilitarian tool. The language here is both awed and skeptical, stunned and ecstatic:

In the months after I got back the hundreds of helicopters I'd flown in began to draw together until they'd formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going: saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder.

(Herr 9)

This passage at once embraces and exposes the mythos of the helicopter. While the almost compulsive recitation of the chopper's attributes dominates the passage, elevating the helicopter to a status far beyond "mode of transport," this elevation is hollow; these features belong only to Herr's composite imaginative construction of the helicopter. Herr seems to know, even while basking in the retrospective energy generated by the thrill of his airborne experiences, that in some way he is romanticizing those experiences: the sexiness comes, at least in part, from "in [his] mind." Herr develops the symbol of the helicopter further a bit later, discussing specifically his fascination with the mobility (or myths thereof) as a basis for his attraction. Like the previous passage, Herr presents two contrasting models of interaction with the concept of "mobility." "Flying over jungle

was almost pure pleasure,” Herr writes, “doing it on foot was nearly all pain. I never belonged in there.” The “removal” from the conflict, the ease of movement is attractive to Herr, a means to avoid the slow trudging of the grunt: he can “cover the war” most effectively while “mobile” and free. But Herr seems to contradict himself a bit later, illustrating some skepticism concerning the idea of “Airmobility,” undercutting the helicopter’s power as signifier of “true” American power:

Airmobility, dig it, you weren’t going anywhere. It made you feel safe, it made you feel Omni, but it was only a stunt, technology. Mobility was just mobility, it saved lives or took them all the time (saved mine I don’t know how many times, maybe dozens, maybe none), what you really needed was a flexibility far greater than anything the technology could provide, some generous, spontaneous gift for accepting surprises, and I didn’t have it.

(Herr 13)

“Feeling Omni” – omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient—is at the center of the mythos of the helicopter, a power granted by technology that asserts the superiority of the American imagination. It is this power, this mystical, sexy superiority that Bruce Weigl addresses in “LZ Nowhere.” The poem explores the dark fascination that soldiers can feel for their weapons, and presumably the killing they enable:

Nights I spent on the dusty runway  
under the green liftship

tethered down from the wind of the highlands

shaping the moonlit fields

surrounding us like care.

I stroked the length of the blades

those nights

and moved the rudder and flaps

so it felt like legs parting

or someone's arms opening to me.

(SON 40)

An "LZ" is military jargon for "landing zone," an area secured for helicopter ("liftship") landings. The title here, "LZ Nowhere," creates a sense of metaphysical dislocation, a sense of a place that is at once a purely symbolic creation, a "meta-LZ," as well as a generic representation of a number of "real" places in which the speaker has spent countless nights. The speaker remembers "those nights" on the LZ, and the serene intimacy he felt between himself and the "liftship." The poem begins as exposition, explaining where the speaker spent his "nights" in-country. The poem, however, resists a standard narrative structure, instead stacking verb phrases one on another, burying the

literal scene in modifier after modifier. The speaker's relationship with the helicopter seems almost filial: he huddles under it during his long nights in country. The next lines become increasingly ambiguous. While it is easy to see that the ship is "tethered down from the wind of the highlands," the referent of the two following phrases is harder to discern: "shaping the moonlit fields" and "surrounding us like care" can refer to both the "wind of the highlands" or, with a bit of conceptual work, the liftship of line two. The idea that the helicopter "surrounds" the speaker and his companions "like care" is a striking contrast to the "natural" image of the highland wind surrounding them. The helicopter—the inorganic symbol of American technological superiority—replaces the organic, natural landscape as the "caring" agent here, covering and protecting the speaker. Given the hostility literally embedded in the landscape of Viet Nam: landmines, tripwires, enemy soldiers, the jungle itself, the desire to "escape" via the liftship seems natural.

The second half of the poem, however, adds a disturbing twist to Weigl's relationship with the helicopter. The "intimacy" between the speaker and the helicopter becomes sensualized here, the "protection" of the first stanza transmogrified into a psychosexual thrill. The speaker "stroked the length of the blades / those nights" of the helicopter rotor, caressing it as a precursor to a sexual act. In a culmination of the act, the speaker also "moved the rudders and flaps / so that it felt like legs parting / or someone's arms opening to me" (SON 40). The intimate movement of the rudders and flaps—caused by the speaker's manipulation of the foot pedals and control stick of the helicopter—is an inorganic, technological replacement for human contact. The technological object here, then—the helicopter and all it stands for—is now a feminized

object fit for the speaker's libidinal impulses. It seems that it is the moment of anticipation here—the moment just prior to congress—that is the focus of this passage. There is no “release” image here, the poem willingly terminates at the moment of most intense attraction: the “desire” here is sustained indefinitely, the speaker's movements designed not for the completion of the sexual act, but to its continuation ad infinitum.

The speaker's sexualized attraction to the helicopter—and perhaps more to the point, to its power as a cultural signifier—implicates the speaker not only in the literal military system of killing in Viet Nam, but also in a psychological system that values violence as a means to psychic gratification. But this image can also be read as one of longing, of an isolation, engendered by war, so intense that the speaker has no other choice than to retreat into cathexis- “connection” with something else, the thing that “saves” and “protects” him unconditionally in the chaotic world of the Nam. In this sense, the speaker's sexualizing of the helicopter is an act of survival, a defense against his own reality, similar to the callous narcissism displayed by the characters in Michael Casey's *Obscenities*. Where Casey's characters retreat inward, insulating themselves from the horror they witness, Weigl reaches out, “connecting to anything possible.

While “LZ Nowhere” in some ways qualifies the excitement or thrill of the war, withholding the ecstasy of “release” in favor of an extended lyrical moment, other poems in Weigl's canon do not. These poems often depict the act of violence as rapturous, a moment of pure energy and excitement that overwhelms morality. These poems in particular are acts of confession, an articulation of the speaker's shameful joy over the violation of some of the basic codes of human behavior, a reversion and reverie in the

barbarity that humans often hope we have overcome.

One of the more prominent poems to display this sort of near-sublime transport in regard to violence is Weigl's prose poem "Hand to Hand," from what many consider his finest book on the war, *A Romance*. This poem, which takes place during basic training, is a complex meditation on "learning" and "experiencing" violence, cast in sexually provocative and near-sublime terms:

We sit in a circle around First Sergeant. Who wants to try me he says and my hand goes up and before I know what I'm doing I'm doing it. He slams me into the ground like someone made of water—my back, my lungs, some clouds. I take his hand and he spins me and I'm down again. I can feel the day lost, the night I'm in my rack, hurt, unable to sleep, he comes like so much man, leads me past the fireguard, past fifty sleeping soldiers, pushes his bunk aside, pulls me and we dance and I learn hand to hand brothers, learn the places on the body that betray . . . . Close my eyes. Open them. Fall violently upward.

(SON 12)

This poem, like "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," is part of Weigl's "introduction" to militaristic violence. Unlike "Surrounding Blues," however, this violence is controlled, openly sanctioned, and made a spectacle by the community of viewers. This poem, a prose work like "Two Men," seems almost antithetical to that work. In "Two Men" the syntax was simple and declarative, almost primitive. Here, the syntax seems

far more organic, its branching, layered phrases speeding up the poem as the speaker is “whirled” into the ecstasy of “learning” violence. The language here mimics the controlled violence of combat training, pulsing and surging for brief moments, then stopping for reflection. The speaker, like the others, “sits in a circle around First Sergeant”; this is as simple and declarative as possible. As the speaker “engages” the sergeant, though, the next sentence becomes a run-on, a prose enjambment that reflects the rush and excitement of the fight. The sergeant’s challenge, the speaker’s acceptance, and the beginning of the conflict become hypotactically collapsed into one breathless phrase: “Who wants to try me he says and my hand goes up and before I know what I’m doing I’m doing it.” The speaker, almost reflexively accepting the challenge, spins into the sergeant’s world; as he enters, he loses all power, becoming “like someone made of water,” his reality now simply “[his] back,” “[his] lungs, some stars.” The caesura within the prose line—the dash after “made of water” stops the narrative, enabling the speaker and reader to reflect, to catch his breath, to prepare once again for the “spinning” that the sergeant will perform.

In the last sentence of the poem, however, the hypotaxis of the first lines fades away, replaced by a paratactic layering of phrases that is highly sexual, describing a “private” lesson between the sergeant and speaker. The rhythm here is far more sensual, more intimate than the first lines, depicting a “private” version of the “public” initiation in which the speaker was hurt. The sergeant “comes like so much man,” “past fifty sleeping soldiers,” to “dance” with the speaker, to “teach” him “the places on the body that betray.” These phrases are separated by commas, the syntax strained and often at odds with the normative grammar of English. As the speaker “learns” to “take it like a

man” from the sergeant—instruction that is couched ambiguously as an illicit homosexual act—the text seemingly builds to a sense of euphoria, the phrases and narrative structure rushed. The “climax” or “transport” of the ultimate part of the poem is a rhythmic contrast to the rambling construction of the previous lines; the speaker reverts to terse, simplistic phrasing, framing the whole story as surreal: “Close my eyes. Open them. Fall violently upward.” The sudden end of the poem, its violent, jerking conclusion and bizarre, dreamlike, violent “ascension” toward something signals some sort of transformation on the part of the speaker. He is no longer the “weak” male, humiliated and “in his rack, hurt, unable to sleep” but a “hand to hand brother,” mythically elevated and initiated into a sort of fraternity of violence. Weigl’s speaker doesn’t resist this change—he is a willing participant in the rituals of transformation, both physical and sexual, that initiate him into the violent, masculine world of fighting “hand to hand.” The “transformation” is rapturous, a sudden, overwhelming, sexual thrill of combat that, at least on some level, delights the speaker.

A poem like “Hand to Hand” expands upon the scopophilic and masturbatory fantasies concerning violence present in Weigl’s canon, deepening immeasurably the speakers’ level of self-incrimination. The speaker reveals now his attraction to not only the fantasy of violence, but to the reality, albeit in an abstract, surreal way. The formalization of such acts is a memorial to them—not, as some critics have said, a “ritual of cleansing,” but of claiming, an attempt to articulate clearly and honestly even the aspects of the war experience that are hateful even to the self. One of Weigl’s first attempts to write about the war, composed at Oberlin College at the suggestion of Thomas Lux, (Schroeder 183) is one of these poems, a work that attempts, as nearly as

possible, to capture the ecstasy—the sublime thrill—of combat. The poem, one of Weigl’s most famous, is called “Him, on the Bicycle,” from 1979’s *A Romance*:

Him, On the Bicycle

“There was no light, there was no light at all . . .” -- Roethke

In a liftship near Hue,  
the door gunner is in a trance.  
He’s that driver who falls  
asleep at the wheel  
between Pittsburgh and Cleveland  
staring at the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Flares fall,  
where the river leaps  
I go stiff,  
I have to think, tropical.

The door gunner sees movement,  
the pilot makes small circles:  
four men running, carrying rifles,  
one man on a bicycle.

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.

(SON 10)

The literal action of this poem centers around a helicopter team strafing some Viet Cong while on patrol, killing them as they run away. What strikes one about this rendering of

the experience is the frantic, epiphanic transference that the speaker—in this case Weigl, if we believe his interviews—undergoes with those he helps to kill. Through the act of killing, Weigl becomes part of the narrative, becomes a target, becomes the VC fleeing from the helicopter. In the moment of greatest violence, Weigl is both aggressor and victim, killer and killed.

Like the other poems we've discussed to this point, the violent fantasy Weigl's speaker has in this poem is a sexual one, perhaps even more so than the overt homoeroticism of "Hand to Hand." As combat approaches, the speaker "goes stiff" and must attempt to focus his "tropical" thoughts. As the speaker sees the VC, in particular the one on the bicycle, Weigl's speaker transforms the literal landscape of killing into a dissociative, sexual, masochistic fantasy, he is "pulled" involuntarily from his vantage point of the helicopter into the killing zone. But the fantasy evolves further; the language of flight seems to evoke the language of (homo)-sexual congress: "Holding his hips," the fact that it is "hard pumping for two," the man "lifting his feet" and "never wasting a stroke" implies a connection more intimate than simple camaraderie. Franco Fornari, in *The Psychoanalysis of War* explores the unconscious symbolism inherent in an act of killing such as is depicted here, arguing that while more primitive weapons, such as the sword, spear, or lance, suggest a genital sadistic fantasy (a direct intrusion into the body of another), the use of a firearm—what Weigl and the other soldiers use—implies an anal sadism fantasy, where an object is "ejected" violently toward the enemy (Fornari 6). While Fornari's theories are at best abstract speculations, it is interesting to see the convenient blending of the ideas of "shooting" and "sodomizing" an enemy. The act of killing, Weigl seems to argue implicitly, creates an intense intimacy between the

participants, an intimacy that conflates radically the “normal” political, social, and sexual elements that structure the “traditional” adversarial relationship.

The speaker seems to occupy three interrelated spaces in this poem: he is a killer, a lover, and a comrade. At once physically harming (i.e., shooting) and sexually invading (through the images of sexual penetration) “Him,” the speaker is also depicted, in the “literal” language of the fantasy, as a colleague or comrade running from the Americans—a victim of the war’s violence. Reading the speaker as “victim,” the poem is a masochistic fantasy, a climactic attempt at self-annihilation, as Weigl occupies both the position of “shooter” and “target.” Whether this is a manifestation of what Freud called the “death urge” or “thanatos” is less interesting here than in how the text responds to the speaker’s fantastic rendering of himself as victim: the result of this is an anticlimactic erasure, during the moment of ecstasy, of the speaker and the Viet Cong soldier. The last few lines of the poem read as follows:

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.

(SON 10)

In these moments, we witness Weigl’s speaker and “Him” exit from the text, consumed

completely by the experience. After the speaker catches the VC's hat behind his back, "put[s] it on," and "want[s] to live forever,"—arguably the most vibrant and memorable moment in the text, both subjects vanish, "Like a blaze / streaming down the trail." Most critics have noted (Vince Gotera, Philip Beidler, among others) that this ending is extraordinarily vague: one does not know what "happens" in either the literal or fantastic narrative of the text. Does the VC become "consumed" by the hail of bullets and rockets fired by the Americans? Does, in his transference fantasy, the speaker join him? The simile here lacks a target; we as readers do not know what is "like" the "blaze streaming down the trail." What we do know is that this seems an image of release, of exit, of sublime escape: perhaps, even of a sexual climax.

The success of this poem is in the intentional conflation of "friend" and "enemy," subject and object, "literal" and "fantastic" narration. The poem reveals the complexity of the thrill of combat, the shifting, unstable ménage of sadism, empathy, and masochism that can be, on some level, attractive and beautiful. Poems like those we have discussed so far—"LZ Nowhere," "Two Men," "Hand to Hand," and "Him, on the Bicycle," seem to point out the hard truth of our attraction to violence and destruction. For whatever reason—scopophilic pleasure, suburban schadenfreude, technological fetishism, libidinal displacement, or even near-sublime sadomasochistic fantasies—there exists a tangible attraction toward destruction in the human consciousness, a capacity that we have that enables us to find violence beautiful, to suspend our moral instincts and training and to live, momentarily of course, purely within the aesthetics of the violent. Further, these poems signify a willingness on the part of the poet to face the ugliness of his own involvement in the war—he is devastated and troubled not only by what he has

“witnessed” and permitted to happen, but what he has done and the fact that on some level he liked it.

But Weigl’s poetry is not simply an act of self-flagellation. In his most complex lyrics on the war—which appear throughout his oeuvre, regardless of the time of their composition, from *A Romance* to *What Saves Us*—Weigl mediates his attraction to the war with a sense of its overwhelming power over his psyche. While in these poems we still see Weigl treating the war as a sexualized, ecstatic thrill, these lyrics depict that thrill as more a compulsive than volitional act. The war—and all it entails—in these moments is almost a drug for Weigl, a merciless addiction ceaselessly seeking to consume him. One of Weigl’s best known (and most anthologized) poems, “Monkey” is an example of this mode of relation to the war, this “addiction” to its chaos, its ecstasy, its violence. Here, the war—and his memory of it—becomes a “monkey” on Weigl’s back, stringing him out and draining him of his humanity. Lorrie Smith, in her path-breaking article “A Sense-Making Perspective in Recent Poetry by Vietnam Veterans,” sees “Monkey,” and indeed, Weigl’s characterization of the war as a whole, in a similar way:

In [*Executioner* and *A Romance*], Weigl images the war as a monkey on his back—a tenacious memory, potent and insidious as a drug, a carnivalesque Doppelgänger, both intimate and repugnant, a symbol of man’s unregenerate brutality. (Smith 16)

“Monkey” is a poem that nearly collapses formally in its attempt to render holistically the experience of the war; its language is fragmentary, its syntax terse and “antipoetic,” its

narrative coherent only in flashes. Smith characterizes this formal disruption as a near “disintegration” of language “under the pressure of physical and psychic pain” (Smith 16). When reading “Monkey,” however, in the scope of Weigl’s entire body of work, one can see the breakdown of narrative as something more than a response to “pain”—it is also the formal embodiment of a sexual, ecstatic high, an horrific sublime that Weigl neither desires nor controls. “Monkey” is organized as a cluster of five shorter lyrics, each one a chaotic gesture toward an understanding of the war. The more “coherence” the lyrics strive for, however, the more they seem mired in the instability of memory and the war; instead of forming a narrative, the lyrics slip from one subject and image to the next. The first lyric starts with an attempt at “grounding” itself in some form of reality, an attempt at narrative on its most basic level:

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.

The repeated (“obsessive,” as Lorrie Smith calls it) conjugation of the verb “to be” is an attempt at self-assurance through articulation. Vince Gotera calls this a “[getting] back to basics,” a rote exercise in reality. This “rote exercise,” repeated like a mantra, is redolent of the rigid thinking central to military discourse, “training” in thought and action that is supposed to give soldiers control over the experience of war. This control over experience, however, becomes twisted as the lyric progresses; each successive image, an

almost nonsensical “command” to do something, becomes buried in the reality of Viet Nam. In these passages, even the “routine” or practical tasks are surreal and almost mystical, shifting between the concrete and abstract:

When they ask for your number  
Pretend to be breathing.  
Forget the stinking jungle,  
force your fingers between the lines.  
Learn to get out of the dew.

And later, a vague warning:

Those small Vietnamese soldiers.  
They love to hold your hand.  
Back away from their dark cheeks.  
Small Vietnamese soldiers.  
They love to love you.

The only claims to any kind of knowledge here are either excruciatingly banal (advising the audience to “get out of the dew”) or extraordinarily ethereal (“pretend to be breathing”; “force your fingers between the lines”). The poem edges further toward abstraction with the repeated—almost imagistic—focus on “those small Vietnamese soldiers.” The speaker is instructed to resist the “love” that the Vietnamese show, and to

“back away from their dark cheeks.” The “love” here is at once violent and (homo)-sexual—the Viet Cong can “love” Americans by killing them, the “friendly” Vietnamese can, as is their custom, show male-male non-sexual affection by holding hands. This custom of handholding, as one might expect, was often misconstrued by Americans as effeminate or even homosexual (Chattarji). The “survival tips” that the speaker gives in this passage quickly become stalled in their own abstraction, becoming enveloped in the overall chaos and surrealism that defines the speaker’s experience of the war. The poem suggests a fundamental alteration of consciousness, a redefinition of linear experience and narrative into pure aesthetic impulse. Like Keats’ poetic response and mimesis of the nightingale’s song—an aesthetic, sublime intoxication that suspends time—Weigl’s speaker responds to the war’s overwhelming power by through a sublime disruption of the linearity of its “story.”

This disrupted narrative continues into the next lyric, the survival advice giving way to a meditation on the ambiguity of the speaker’s memories of the war. The speaker’s negation of his own memories here indicates a radical dislocation of sense; the speaker does not know what in his experience is real and what is not, what exists in his imagination and what in reality:

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.

And later in the same stanza:

I don't remember the heat  
in the hands,  
the heat around the neck.

The specificity of the “non-memories” here suggests a connection with a reality to which the speaker no longer has complete access. While possessing a hazy ‘sense’ of his experiences, the speaker cannot access these things in their totality; the “reality” of the experience is either obscured by its intensity or actively denied by the consciousness of the speaker. Trauma, in this case, begets the decay of memory, of what is “real.” Like Keats at the end of “Ode to a Nightingale,” the primary state is agnosticism, a pervasive liminality in the wake of an intoxicating experience. Instead of the sound of the word “forlorn” bringing the speaker back into some sort of reality, here, all the speaker has is the concreteness of violence, the recurring stimulus of killing and survival:

Good times bad times sleep  
get up work. Sleep get up  
good times bad time.  
Work eat sleep good bad work times.  
The water which refused to dry.  
I like a little unaccustomed mercy.

Pulling the trigger is all we have.

I hear a child. (SON 23)

“Pulling the trigger” re-grounds the poem in a sense of the “present,” a stark contrast to the syntactically jarring micro-narration of military life—“good times bad times sleep / get up work.” The violence here, then, is an horrific way of becoming “real,” a reality that cannot be denied or rejected by the speaker. Once he admits that “pulling the trigger is all we have” he now has access to reality once again: he “hear[s] a child.” Unlike the stimuli at the outset of the lyric, the speaker’s mention of this is unqualified—he remembers it clearly.

But the lyrical connection to reality through violence is a horrible one. In the third lyric of the cycle, Weigl’s speaker recounts some of his violent acts, distilling them into the symbol of “the monkey.” “The Monkey” –a symbol of “unregenerate brutality,” according to Lorrie Smith—is in this lyric both passive victim and haunting relic, a receiving vessel for the violence that Weigl’s speaker needs to survive Viet Nam:

I dropped to the bottom of a well.

I have a knife.

I cut someone with it.

Oh, I have the petrified eyebrows

of my Vietnam monkey.

My monkey from Vietnam.

My monkey.

Put your hand here.  
It makes no sense.  
I beat the monkey.  
I didn't know him.  
He was bloody.  
He lowered his intestines  
to my shoes. My shoes  
spit-shined the moment  
I learned to tie the bow.

Fractured and disturbing, this passage shows an instinctual violence at work: the speaker, reduced to an almost feral state, undertakes senseless acts of brutality. Immersed in the earth—at the “bottom of a well”—he “cuts someone,” anyone, with his knife, and “beats” him bloody, without knowing him. It hardly matters who is the victim here; everyone the speaker has killed has been compressed into the figure of the monkey. The speaker mentions, matter-of-factly, taking a grisly souvenir from the dead: he has the “petrified eyebrows / of my Vietnam monkey.” This is a symbolic transformation of the practice of grunt “souvenir hunting” (the removal of enemy fingers, ears, and genitals). This “souvenir,” however, is far more than a simple object—it is a recurring, omnipresent reminder of the speaker’s own inhumanity, a “taint” on his soul. One can also read this image in another way, as Weigl’s speaker comparing his own eyebrows to those of his “monkey.” His “petrified eyebrows” are frozen in place, unable to show emotion or reaction to what he has done. This violence, cold and unemotional as it is, is rewarded

her as well: the speaker's "shoes / spit-shined the moment / I learned to tie the bow." The "bow" is made up of the monkey's intestines, twisted and used by the speaker. The ghastly figure of the monkey's intestines covering the speaker's boots is contrasted here with the "spit and polish" ideal of the military: through the violence of killing, the spilling of intestines, one reaches the unspoken pinnacle of military life—the spit-shined archetype of the soldier, a "heartbreaker and life-taker," if we are to believe Gus Hasford's *The Short Timers*. While far more grounded in the literal and, for lack of a better term, the "real," than the earlier lyrics in the cycle, this poem almost becomes lost in its own symbolism, distilling the experience of violence in Viet Nam into a jarring meta-reality, a fantastic compression all of the speaker's victims into the abstract figure of "the monkey."

The final lyric in the "Monkey" cycle offers perhaps the most interesting use of the "monkey" as a symbol; here, it becomes not simply a figure for the victims of the speaker's violent acts, but also a pervasive, overwhelming memory, a relentless ghost that transforms and structures the speaker's relationship with everyone around him. The lyric begins with an echo of the first poem in the cycle, a grammatically simple summary of the war's basic drama:

There is a hill

Men run top hill.

Men take hill.

Give hill to man.

This seems an extension of what Vince Gotera calls the poem's "getting back to basics," summarizing in as concise a language as possible, what life was like as a soldier in Viet Nam. There is no sense of greater purpose here, no guiding ideology, just mindless, repetitive action. As "simple" as the literal action of the war seems to be however, its aftermath—the ubiquitous monkey—is anything but. The monkey, the symbol of all the acts of violence that the speaker has committed in the war, is permanently connected to the speaker's consciousness; it is now part of him, changing how he views the world:

Me and my monkey  
and me and my monkey  
my Vietnamese monkey  
my little brown monkey  
came with me  
to Guam and Hawaii  
in Ohio he say  
all my people he  
jumped on my daddy  
he slipped into mother  
he baptized my sister

There is an almost obsessive, panicked "ownership" of the monkey here, signified by the constant repetition of the phrase "my monkey." The monkey, and all it represents, is the

speaker's responsibility alone—no one else can share the “sickness” with which his own memories afflict him. But the monkey does reach out to everyone around the speaker, violating them against their will. The monkey “jumped on [his] daddy,” “slipped into mother,” and “baptized [his] sister.” The language of this violation is sexual: from sodomizing his father, having sex with his mother, and “baptizing” his sister in ejaculate, the monkey attaches himself violently to every part of the speaker's life: he sees his parents and sister differently, as violated in some way, because of his experience. As Weigl says in another poem—after he has been abused by a pederast—he could not “move among his people in the old way.” The monkey—his own traumatic memory—will not let him.

This figuration of an oppressive, traumatic memory altering “the world” back home is common in the American literature of homecoming: Krebs, in Hemingway's amazing “Soldier's Home” from *In Our Time* is utterly transformed by what he does and witnesses in the Great War; he can no longer watch his sister play indoor baseball, interact in a positive way with girls, talk to his mother, or derive comfort from prayer. Likewise, many films and other representations of the veteran returning home—Michael and Steven in *The Deer Hunter*, John Rambo in *First Blood*, and even the surviving veterans of the television series *Tour of Duty* all have trouble re-integrating with society after they return. From an obsession with self-destructive behaviors (*The Deer Hunter*) to antisocial isolation (*First Blood*), veterans are often described as troubled by their own memories

. Weigl is no different: the monkey as memory, the imprint of his own victims and the resonant guilt of his actions colors his vision and prevents him from moving past the

experience. What is perhaps more troubling in this lyric—and this is what, I feel, makes the cycle as a whole a step forward in the literature of war-trauma, is that Weigl is forthright about the monkey’s necessary place in his consciousness. During the war, one had to be brutal, had to be violent and unrepentant, in order to survive. To get through the experience of Viet Nam in one piece, one must embrace the monkey, must “tie the bow” with its intestines, to eventually escape. Weigl ends the cycle with an acceptance of this need; indeed, almost a sublime exaltation:

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.

In this passage, the monkey is salvation, the means to a literal transcendence of the horrific conditions of combat. Perhaps, through an embrace of brutality (the monkey

“giving his spirit”), one creates a personal myth of invulnerability, a fantastic resistance to the reality of instantaneous death at any moment. In this sense, the monkey paradoxically protects Weigl from the threat of death by submerging him deeper into the conditions (i.e., war and inhumanity) that cause that threat. At the end of this poem—and the cycle—Weigl’s speaker is flying, on the wings of his own violent past—above the battlefield, above the dead and wounded, above the wounded and dying. The scene of ascension to a “heaven” above the battlefield’s terrestrial hell is common in many narratives on the war: Michael Herr, as mentioned before, characterized flying over the jungle as heaven, plodding along on foot as “hell.” In a similar scene, the end of Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* has Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), flying to the safety of a field hospital after surviving both the “apocalypse” of a napalm strike and his brutal urge to kill Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger). The “escape” from the war that the monkey provides is only, as one would guess, a fantasy: the monkey neither “saves” nor “liberates” the speaker—it simply dulls the pain.

“Monkey,” in my estimation, is Weigl’s most complex work on the war, a document that seeks to articulate the totality of the experience of Viet Nam on one’s psyche; it seeks to find a language—as all Weigl’s poems do—to articulate the “story” of his change, of his total transformation through this horrific experience. While attacking, as any mediocre anti-war poem might do, the gruesomeness of the experience—the “evil” that he (or his speaker) has done at the request of his country—the poem is nonetheless honest about the shift in its speaker’s consciousness toward, using Lorrie Smith’s terminology once again, an “unregenerate brutality” as a necessary means of survival. Philip Caputo, in his memoir *A Rumor of War*, examines the same process, his

transformation from an “all-American boy” to a “bloodthirsty ghoul” capable of committing a war crime. But “Monkey” takes this idea further: it is also about the consequences of that transformation for Weigl; in a sense it is documenting the persistent, lingering presence of what was, a horrific memory that will not fade and that changes everything after. The monkey—all that Weigl has done, all that he has become, will be with him, chattering away, forever.

Weigl is, like John Balaban, extremely conscious of this, the war’s unrelenting persistence: even when he momentarily escapes the war (either literally or through his imagination), it is still there, plaguing him. Weigl writes in “The Way of Tet” about the way the war becomes a (literally) subterranean presence in both Saigon and in the mind of the speaker:

Year of the monkey, year of the human wave,  
the people smuggled weapons in caskets through the city  
in long processions undisturbed  
and buried them in Saigon graveyards.  
At the feet of their small Buddhas  
weary bar girls burned incense  
before the boy soldiers arrived  
to buy them tea and touch them  
where they pleased. Twenty years  
and the feel of a girl’s body  
so young there’s no hair

is like a dream, but living is a darker thing,  
the iron burning bee that drains the honey,  
and he remembers her  
twisting in what evening  
light broke into the small room in the shack  
in the labyrinth of shacks  
in the alley where the lost and corrupted kept house.  
He undressed her for the last time,  
each piece of clothing  
a sacrifice she surrendered to the war  
the way the world had become.

During the Tet Offensive of 1968, Viet Cong guerillas actually used graveyards as weapons and supply depots. Weigl's use of this image, particularly when paired with the what follows—the droves of generic “boy soldiers” undressing Saigon bar girls—“buries” the war, concealing the violence of combat in the almost ritualistic sex between GIs and bar girls. On the eve of Tet, rifles secreted in graveyards, boy soldiers sleep with their women. This escape from the war is dreamlike, a fantastic escape from the constant threat of death the war presented: “the feel of a girl's body / so young there's no hair / is like a dream, but living is a darker thing.” By both the implied pedophilia of the image of an underage prostitute as a center of dreamlike pleasure and the acknowledgement of his own grim reality (“living is a darker thing”) Weigl shadows this escape with a sense of hopelessness; the war is everywhere waiting to swallow him

whole, despite his “lover’s” “sacrifices” that she “surrendered to the war / the way the world had become.”

The war, the speaker knows, will re-emerge violently with the coming of dawn, the beginning of the offensive:

Tomorrow blood would run in every province  
Tomorrow people would rise from tunnels everywhere  
and resurrect something ancient from inside them,  
and the boy who came then thousand miles to touch her  
small self lies beside the girl whose words he can’t understand ,  
their song a veil between them.

The “resurrection” central to this passage, the new covenant inspired by the sacrifice of the bar girl, is not a Christian renewal: instead, it is a cleansing with blood, a return to the primal base of humanity, to the “monkey.” The killing, forgotten for the moment, returns.

Not even poetry or a moment of aesthetic beauty can prevent the war from returning, can prevent Tet’s inevitable violence and misery. In the following passage, the speaker moves from an imagistic, highly metaphorical rendering of the bar girl sleeping, to a pointed questioning of both the power of lyricism and his own capacity for empathy:

She is a white bird in the bamboo, fluttering.

She is so small he imagines  
he could hold all of her  
in his hands and lift her to the black  
sky beyond the illumination round's while light  
where should would fly from her life  
and the wounds from the lovers would heal,  
the broken skin grow back.  
But he need only touch her, only  
lift the blanket from her shoulders  
and the automatic shape of love unfolds,  
the flare's light burning down on them,  
lost in a wave that arrives after a thousand years of grief  
at their hearts.

The empathetic imagination here suffers a humiliating defeat at the hands of the boy soldier's more primal needs. Not touching her, he imagines a life for her beyond the war, outside of the white light of the illumination flares. The "ritual" aspect of the soldier-bar girl relationship emerges once again here, as he "lifts[s] her to the black / sky . . . where she would fly from her life . . . ." The boy imagines that he could help her toward a life in which her "wounds from the lovers would heal," and where "the broken skin" would "grow back." The boy, in effect, imagines a healing ritual of transcendence for the girl, a permanent, "heavenly" escape.

But the imaginative connection the boy feels for her suffering here evaporates as

he touches her. As he touches her, “lift[s] the blanket from her shoulders,” he loses control, once again relating to her only sexually; the “automatic shape of love unfolds,” between them: his sexualizing of her, her “automatic” response to his advance. This “automatic” failure of connection pushes both of them back into the war, into the “flare’s light burning down on them.” Both people here: the soldier and bar girl, are “lost in a wave that arrives / after a thousand years of grief / at their hearts.” What this “wave” is—the ease of sexual relations versus the difficulty of real empathy, the war itself and all its violence—Weigl never defines. We only know that it comes “after a thousand years of grief” to “their hearts.” Whether it is release from that grief or an intensification of it, the poem does not say. Given the tone of the poem, however, it seems that Weigl implies a darker worldview than such an abatement would allow. This poem’s central crisis is about the struggle to live within a world in which lyricism, faith, and even basic empathy are difficult to achieve. The war destroys these things, even when “buried” under the surface, just outside of view. “Escape,” from the war is at best a fantasy (here, a sexual one), at worst a self-delusory system of myths. Weigl’s characters—and even himself—cannot “heal” themselves or anyone else. They must learn to live ruined, learn to live “in the wave,” learn to live “with the monkey” on their backs.

Most of Bruce Weigl’s poetry is obsessed, in one way or another, with articulating the “story” of the monkey, of the utter and complete transformation of his psyche through the experience of Viet Nam, the “one irrevocable after” that haunts him and from which he can never escape. These poems are not “rituals of cleansing,” as one critic has said: there is no release from guilt, no Wordsworthian renewal—there is only the possibility of momentary respite, momentary control over the monkey. These poems

are desperate attempts to master the experience of Viet Nam through an honest reckoning, a clear accounting of what was done and by whom. Whether as a passive witness (“Surrounding Blues on the Way Down”), a fetishizing observer (“LZ Nowhere,”) or sexualizing predator (“Him, On the Bicycle”), Weigl seeks, above all else, to render the experience in all its ugliness, even to the point of self-incrimination. He must, through poetry, struggle to find a momentary solace from his own memories, his own unspoken complicity in a war that destroyed him.

Weigl’s poem “Breakdown,” one of his simpler lyrics, captures this struggle more succinctly than any other. It is a poem that, while showing a speaker “failing” to transcend the experience of Viet Nam, nonetheless articulates the fact of his helplessness clearly:

With sleep that is barely under the surface  
it begins , a twisting sleep as if a wire  
were inside you and tried at night  
to straighten your body.  
Or it’s like a twitch  
through your nerves as you sleep  
so you tear the sheet from the bed  
to try to stop the pounding spine.  
A lousy, worthless  
sleep of strangers with guns,  
children trapped in the alley,

the teenage soldiers glancing back  
over their shoulders  
the moment before  
they squeeze the trigger.

I am going to stay here as long as I can.

I am going to sit in the garden as if nothing has happened  
and let the bruised azaleas have their way.

The war is a physical as well as psychic presence in this poem, a torturous dream that plagues the speaker long after he has returned home. While he is “safe,” he must still learn to live in the world outside the “garden” of his innocence. If we are to believe this poem, Weigl’s world is full of bruised azaleas. It is a ruined world, a garden befouled by horrific memories, beyond redemption. It is poetry, however, that offers a momentary respite from this ruin. By articulating the experience, formalizing it, Weigl is able to exact a certain measure of control over it—even if that control is wavering or momentary. The “wave” or “the monkey” cannot overwhelm him, at least not totally, if he has made it his own, claimed it in all of its horror, its ugliness, and its truth. Weigl’s poetry is the poetry of a tormented man reclaiming, in the face of his own misdeeds and failures, a part of his soul. Damaged and corrupted as it may be, it is his, and is all he has left.

## Five. Ghost Pictures: Yusef Komunyakaa's Empathetic Vision

### I. Komunyakaa and the Scene of the War

Yusef Komunyakaa is one of the most influential poets writing in the United States today, and perhaps the most accomplished writer to be considered what W.D. Ehrhart calls a “soldier-poet” of the Viet Nam war. The author of a number of collections, including *Copacetic*, *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*, *Magic City*, *Dien Cai Dau*, and *Neon Vernacular*, Komunyakaa has achieved significant critical success, including the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Komunyakaa's earliest work, prior to 1988's *Dien Cai Dau* had little, if anything, to do with his experience as a soldier and war correspondent in Viet Nam in the late 1960s. Instead, Komunyakaa's early work explores a number of themes unrelated to the war, from local-color analyses of life as an African American in the rural south to the complex theoretical relationship between American jazz and other aesthetic traditions, from the Blues to surrealism. Komunyakaa's later work, from the chapbook *Toys in A Field* (1987) and his full-length collection *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), departs from these early themes and engages his experiences in Viet Nam more directly. The language in Komunyakaa's Viet Nam collections differs strikingly from that of his earlier writings, eschewing the learned aestheticism of his jazz-influenced and local-color work for a more threadbare idiom, a language focused on the realities, psychic, social, and historical, that defined life as an American soldier in Viet Nam. Unlike many of the other “soldier poets” of the war, such as Michael Casey, Basil Paquet, John Balaban, and Bruce Weigl, Yusef Komunyakaa was already an established poet when he started writing on Viet Nam. His

work, then, is not only interesting in its function as poetic memoir, but also in the fact that it makes transparent the process of aesthetic revision—of a *change* in poetic strategy by a developed poetic mind—as a method of representing and analyzing the formative experience of the Viet Nam war.

Given his status as an established writer, Komunyakaa's work has generated significant critical attention. While no one book-length study has been devoted entirely to his work, several articles and book chapters have been particularly insightful, both to understanding Komunyakaa's place both in the canon of American literature and in the tradition of literature on the Viet Nam war. In *Re-Writing America*, Philip Beidler sees Komunyakaa, along with John Balaban, W.D. Ehrhart, and Bruce Weigl, as one of the central "poets after our war," writers who "while speaking [the war's] memory, now trace out in addition the patterns of its broader mythic configuring within our life and culture at large" (Beidler 146). What Beidler means is that these writers are able, while using the war as one of their primary subjects, to examine the war's reverberation into the historical process, its lingering effect on American consciousness. Beidler's perspective on the literature of the war is that it *creates* new cultural myths—linguistic, moral, social—out of the "radical critique" of the old. According to Beidler, Komunyakaa's initial strategy of cultural revision of myth regarding Viet Nam is essentially elliptical, avoiding a "direct" treatment of the conflict in favor of a more oblique, implied analysis. Komunyakaa "tell[s] about Vietnam mainly by telling about America, and particularly about black America," using "the tradition of what Houston Baker has called the 'long black song' of African American experience in the New World" (Beidler 171). Beidler rightly assesses the importance of an aesthetic tradition rooted in race in Komunyakaa's

poetry, calling his early work an “opera of blues,” permeated by a voice that is uniquely aware of the collective story of African American pain and oppression. While Beidler willingly recognizes the importance of race in Komunyakaa’s jazz-influenced collections, he seems to evade the less obvious—and perhaps more interesting—connections to it in his Viet Nam work. Without these connections, it is difficult to see *how* Komunyakaa’s early work is about Viet Nam at all; the two worlds of “Viet Nam” and “America,” in this analysis, seem, save in few rare episodes, hopelessly split.

Beidler’s work on Komunyakaa’s Viet Nam-collections, *Dien Cai Dau* and *Toys in a Field* is more insightful, exploring the poetry as a quest for new mythic system, a new poetic sensibility able to render the war’s complexity:

[Komunyakaa’s work on Viet Nam] is an art at once of utter concretion and strange mythic otherness conjoined in new imaginative authority of vision and voice. (Beidler 175)

What Beidler means is that Komunyakaa’s Viet Nam work strives for a combination of concrete details and exotic appropriations of myth and image. The poems, then, are moments in which Komunyakaa’s voice makes coherent the “otherness” of Viet Nam and its “concreteness” together. As an example of this, Beidler cites “Somewhere New Phu Bai”:

The moon cuts through  
night trees like a circular saw

white hot. In the guard shack  
I lean on the sandbags,  
taking aim at whatever.  
Hundreds of blue-steel stars  
cut a path, fanning out  
silver for a second. If anyone's  
there, don't blame me.

I count the shapes ten meters  
out front, over & over, making sure  
they're always there.

I don't dare blink an eye.

The white-painted backs  
of the Claymore mines  
like quarter moons.

They say Victor Charlie will  
paint the other sides & turn  
the blast toward you.

If I hear a noise  
will I push the button  
& blow myself away?

The moon grazes treetops.

I count the Claymores again.  
Thinking about buckshot  
kneaded in the plastic C-4  
of the brain, counting  
sheep before I know it.           (Komunyakaa 194)

In this poem, both the “otherness” and “concretion” become fused within Komunyakaa’s “vision” of the scene. While the poem chronicles the minute detail of the scene—leaning on sandbags, the moon hanging “like a circular saw” and “graz[ing] treetops,” “the white-painted backs / of the Claymore mines / like quarter moons” (Komunyakaa 194), it also, through its meditative sense, its sense of interiority, suggests an exotic, dangerous landscape more defined by its surreality than its reality. The difficulty of perceiving this landscape not only comes from its literal darkness, the literal blackness of the triple-canopy jungle, but from the distraction of the speaker’s internal musings concerning the possibility of his own death. The poem diffuses any effort at stability or didacticism, instead dwelling on the process of thinking itself; the speaker’s pondering of his own possible fate drifts off into “counting sheep,” the mindless, repetitive act of falling asleep. The syntax and lineation in this work focuses on micro-managing the temporal experience of the poem. Lines consist of short phrases here, segmenting—and therefore emphasizing—each part of the speaker’s theoretical process in contemplating his situation in the surreal landscape of the war.

Vicente Gotera's exhaustive research project *Radical Visions* also connects Yusef Komunyakaa's work on Viet Nam to the tradition of surrealism, focusing on his "montage approach to lyricism" and his "characteristic method of balancing opposites and the incongruous" (Gotera 305, 308). According to Gotera, the surrealist tradition that Komunyakaa works from is based the jarring juxtaposition of opposites, a "serendipitous yoking in whose interstice an immanent, wholly startling signification can well" (Gotera 308). The *frisson*-like revelatory moment that comes from the seemingly haphazard or "serendipitous" connection of images serves—as in much post-romantic poetry—as the crisis of Komunyakaa's poem. Gotera analyzes "2527<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Buddha" as an example of this violent "yoking" together of images into a coherent narrative:

When the motorcade rolled to a halt, Quang Duc  
climbed out & sat down in the street.  
He crossed his legs,  
& the other monks & nuns grew around him like petals.  
He challenged the morning sun,  
debating with the air  
he leafed through—visions brought down to earth.  
Could his eyes burn the devil out of men?  
A breath of peppermint oil  
soothed someone's cry. Beyond terror made flesh—  
he burned like a bundle of black joss sticks.

A high wind that started in California  
fanned flames, turned each blue page,  
leaving only his heart intact.

Waves of saffron robes bowed to the gasoline can. (Komunyakaa 201)

Gotera argues that Komunyakaa's strategy of juxtaposition here of the "journalistic" narrative of the scene and the images that follow—"petals," leaves, pages—moves the poem into the "contrapuntal surrealistic plane," a departure from the concrete political narration of the immolation. The "surrealism" here—particularly the images of monks and nuns growing around Quang Duc "like petals"—lies in the fact of the two ideas' conceptual distance. The juxtaposition is shocking and interesting because of their difference—the monks and nuns are *not* "like petals," fragile and beautiful, moving in the wind—they are witnessing a particularly spectacular ritual suicide. The gruesomeness of the scene, contrasted with the beautiful images used to describe it, creates a sense of dreaminess to the poem, what Herbert Gershman calls "the attempt to actualize *le merveilleux*, the wonderland of revelation and dream, and by so doing to permit chance to run rampant in a wasteland of bleak reality" (Gershman 1). The strangeness of the scene, Gotera argues, serves as an intense trigger to a revelatory experience for both the reader and the poem.

Gotera sees Komunyakaa's use of the surrealist tradition as unique in the canon of Viet Nam war veteran poetry:

Komunyakaa's surrealism varies from that of the other veteran poets' because he does not depict Vietnam itself or the Vietnam-war experience as literally surreal, as do many of the other poets. . . . Through surrealism, Komunyakaa discovers—or perhaps more appropriately reveals—Vietnam and does not only document its *apparent* surreality for an incredulous audience. (Gotera 309).

In this sense, Komunyakaa's war poetry focuses not on an agenda of "sense-making" of a senseless—or surreal—experience, using the "oddness" of the war as a palimpsest, a baseline for the interpretation of something alien. Rather, the task Komunyakaa takes on is more process-based: he seeks to *use* the surreality of his Viet Nam experiences as a means to "underline the existential reality" (Gotera 309)—physical and psychic—of the situations he has witnessed. In using such jarring imagery, Komunyakaa seeks to educate us, not as an "incredulous audience" but as fellow discoverers to the complexity of wartime experience. It is not simply enough to illustrate that war *appears* surreal, but moreover it is necessary to explore the distortions of the real that war—and Viet Nam in particular—engenders. Each surreal scene is an episode of revelation, a process of self-enlightenment absent of polemic or vitriol.

Critic Michel Fabre, discussing Komunyakaa's work on Viet Nam takes a more conventional approach to Komunyakaa's work. He casts the poet as a consummate sense-maker, cohering the meaningless horrors of war into a resuscitating mythic narrative. Komunyakaa, he argues takes as his subject "those meaningless moments from whose fragments [he] restore[s] a sense of redemptive meaning" (Fabre 5). The "ironic

beauty” of scenes like the “holocaust of a fragile Vietnamese girl burning like a torch, ‘like a field of poppies’ under napalm” imbues them, according to Fabre, with meaning and importance beyond mere atrocity; they become testaments to the fragility of life in wartime, documents of the “precariousness of men’s lives performing a daily routine of violence” (Fabre 6). Fabre’s analysis, while for the most part a conventional argument about poetry’s recuperation of war’s horror, is interesting in its recognition of the centrality of *scene* in Komunyakaa’s work. The “ironic beauty” of the primarily visual episodes in Komunyakaa serves as the central site of meaning in these poems—what we “see” imagistically thus is often more revealing than what the poet *says* in the course of the poems’ narration.

Komunyakaa’s focus on “scene” and the visual has not gone unnoticed in other criticism of his work. Donald Ringnalda’s essays on Komunyakaa’s work have the been among the most penetrating yet written, particularly in regard to the poet’s use of ideas pertaining to “vision” and “seeing.” While many, including poet Toi Derricotte, have noticed that one of Komunyakaa’s main foci is the idea of the “ambiguity” of combat (and thus the “images” of combat), Ringnalda’s work is the first to link this awareness of war’s immanent ambiguity to the visual metaphors that pervade the poetry. The chapter of Ringnalda’s *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* that deals with the poetry of the war uses Komunyakaa’s work as the defining example of the better “misbehaving” poetry of the war, poetry that embraces without hesitation the “darkness” and ambiguity of the overall war experience:

Perhaps more consistently than any other poet of the war, Komunyakaa

embraces dark spaces in his search for truths that transcend the willful “clear images” of mapmakers. Everywhere in his Vietnam poems we find images “disappearing,” “blurred,” “splintered,” “blinded,” “dissolved,” and “shattered” in “shadows,” “darkness,” “mist,” “dust,” and “smoke.” (Ringnalda 158)

In contrast to the “illumination” that some of the “behaving” poetry of the war—poems that resolve themselves with clear, concise answers and perspectives concerning the war experience like a “map” or “guidebook”—Komunyakaa’s work seeks a different kind of knowledge, a “darkened illumination” (158) that resists easy answers and conventional definitions of “knowledge”:

A maker of anti-maps, Komunyakaa insists on seeking adventure “under our eyelids” [“Starlight Scope Myopia”]. A poet of insight rather than sight, he gains the freedom to explore subterranean, pre-rational landscapes. This results in a poetry of rich, surrealistic, disturbing associations. (Ringnalda 158)

The “knowledge,” then, that Komunyakaa seeks is not “knowledge” in the Platonic sense: generated in the “shadows” of an experience—the periphery, the minute scenes—the truth is intuitive, “pre-rational,” more subjective than objective. Ringnalda suggests that Komunyakaa’s poetry has what Garcia Lorca called “duende,” a “wild spirit of darkness, death, and blood,” that results in a “profound misbehavior” (Ringnalda 159). This sense of “duende” gives the poetry a “vital, nightmarish quality” that unravels the

“interior” aspects of the war; rejecting the “sweet geometry,” or clear determinacy of polemic, Komunyakaa’s work accepts its own agnosticism, what Keats would call “negative capability.” The task in Komunyakaa’s work, then, is more exploration and experience than illumination and education.

Ringnalda’s work on the exploration of the visual motifs in *Dien Cai Dau*, while interesting, limits its analysis primarily to the epistemological—as related to the aesthetic—problems that Komunyakaa explores. My interest in the use of visual “scenes” in Komunyakaa’s work is more pragmatic. I am interested in *how* Komunyakaa uses images of scene to navigate more immediate personal crises, how poems use visual scenes—and their implied perceptual processes—to understand the complex moral and political situation of a soldier at war. Komunyakaa represents the exploration of the political and moral aspects of the world as profoundly linked with the act of “seeing,” with the processing of a visual scene. When Komunyakaa’s speaker surveys a scene cognitively—when he penetrates the “sweet geometry” of the war—it is often the trigger for more complicated (and often highly abstract) meditations on the relationship he has with other people, the “nation” of which he is a part, and with his own actions.

## **II. Komunyakaa’s Empathetic Vision**

Yusef Komunyakaa’s work is characterized by a dependence on “scene” as a motif; elements defined in primarily visual terms often structure and guide the development of each poem. As readers, we are asked to “see” what Komunyakaa’s speakers see, whether

it is the shadowed shape of an enemy's body through a night-vision scope, a group of soldiers waiting zen-like in ambush, or a bizarre shifting strata of images from old television shows. These "resonant scenes" in Komunyakaa's work, the detailed, vivid, often surreal representations of the experience of Viet Nam, are the basis for all of his more sophisticated commentary – personal and political—on the war. These "resonant scenes" seek not only to represent the experience of Viet Nam in visual terms, but in semi-*dramatic* ones as well. Komunyakaa's poetry, at its best, re-creates the extraordinary tension of the moments he chooses to examine—the reader is not simply a passive listener to a narrative, he is a *spectator* to an emerging formal event through the experience of the poem. But not only is the reader a spectator to the events of the poem, he is a witness as well, in some sense *responsible* for the tragedies that Komunyakaa chooses to represent. This "seeing," however surreal it might be, diffuses the mythic "otherness" of Viet Nam, making it "present" and "real" and "here" to those outside the experience.

A prime example of Komunyakaa's use of "scene" as a motif is the opening poem in *Dien Cai Dau*, "Camouflaging the Chimera." The poem literally depicts the moments just prior to the opening moments of a jungle ambush, compressing time and space into a micro-narrative of tension and concentration:

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,  
content to be a hummingbird's target.

We hugged bamboo & leaned  
against a breeze off the river,  
slow-dragging with ghosts

from Saigon to Bangkok,  
with women left in doorways  
reaching in from America.

We aimed at dark-hearted songbirds.

In our way station of shadows  
rock apes tried to blow our cover,  
throwing stones at the sunset. Chameleons

crawled our spines, changing from day  
to night: green to gold,  
gold to black. 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. (DCD 3).

The poem captures the tension of the anticipation of combat by cataloguing the minute events leading up to the ambush. Instead of a narrative comprised of distinct events that happen sequentially, however, the events leading to the ambush seem to happen in a compressed temporal space, a space that exists within the zen-like stillness of the moment of anticipation. Instead of moving its focus through a sequence of distinct temporal frames, the poem continuously builds a single richly-developed one, with each line adding new layers to the scene.

The poem's opening lines illustrate an acute awareness of the "visual" motif of the work. Literally, the lines depict soldiers camouflaging themselves in preparation for

the ambush: they “tied branches to [their] helmets,” “painted [their] faces / with mud from a riverbank,” and hung “blades of grass” in the “pockets of our tiger suits.” The soldiers seek to become part of the landscape, to “weave [themselves] into the terrain,” and disappear from sight. They become flowers, “a hummingbird’s target.” All of this concealment, seems to have happened at an unspecified point (and sequence) in the past; the order of events is less important to the poem than the fact of their happening. The focus of the first lines is not so much the narrative of the soldier’s preparation for the ambush, but rather that they have attained a certain appearance. The reader is asked to visualize the soldiers as embedded into the landscape of the jungle, a part of the “scene” of the impending ambush.

The poem continues the scene-building in the next few lines, turning both more surreal and toward the soldiers’ interior lives: they “hugged bamboo” and “leaned on a breeze off the river, / slow dragging with ghosts / from Saigon to Bangkok / with women left in doorways / reaching in from America” (DCD 3). The first images here, hugging bamboo and leaning “on a breeze” suggest a particular posture for the soldiers: in the “scene” they position themselves a certain way. They are nestled in bamboo stalks, and leaning somewhat into the breeze. But here, Komunyakaa expands the scene to the interior lives of the soldiers: as they are positioned, waiting and still, memories—mostly of women—pulse through their minds like a wind off the water. The image, then, shifts seamlessly from the “real” visual world of the scene to the imagination of the soldiers waiting in ambush. All this seems to happen—compressed into a single moment—as they “aimed at dark hearted songbirds” (DCD 3).

While in the next lines the poem seems to cover an unspecified yet significant passage of time, very little actually happens in terms of real action: the soldiers merely exist in a “way station of shadows” where “rock apes” try to “blow [their] cover” (DCD 3), and “chameleons crawled their spines / changing from day to night / green to gold / gold to black” (DCD 3). The soldiers’ stillness defuses the obvious passage of time in this section of the poem, signified by the chameleon’s slow metamorphosis. Like an elapsed-time photograph, the frame or scenic focus stays the same, with changes happening slowly and almost imperceptibly. The “climax” of the poem is in many ways a non-climax: the soldiers “wait[ed] until the moon touched metal,” “till something almost broke inside of us” (DCD 3). The poem’s tension—in this case between action and stillness—is at its greatest intensity here, but still nothing “happens,” the reader’s focus remains on the still, waiting soldiers.

As the VC enter the poem’s “frame,” there is a hint of action—the “VC struggle with the hillside / like black silk wrestling iron through grass” (DCD 3). While indeed an “action,” Komunyakaa does not situate this struggle temporally, does not mark it as happening *after* the action earlier in the poem; one almost gets a sense of its simultaneity with all the other action—the hiding, the waiting, the slow passage of time—in the poem. The poem depicts the VC as the opposite of the “not there” Americans, abstractly rustling their way through the jungle, as much “not” a part of the landscape (like “iron”) as the hiding Americans are a part of it. This is an interesting inversion of one’s traditional understanding of the combat dynamics in the jungles of Viet Nam. In most narratives on the war, Americans (and other non-indigenous peoples) recount how the landscape itself

was an asset to the Viet Cong, providing dense cover and resources.<sup>23</sup> This “violation” of the expected schema of jungle combat serves to heighten the tension of the moment under examination even more: as readers we are acutely aware of the danger and tenuousness of the “scene” that Komunyakaa is showing us. It seems that the moment can collapse at any time.

But the poem never does collapse. Indeed, the poem never achieves the climactic “release” of the ambush coming to fruition—there is no “mad minute” of firing, no pulse-pounding action, no casualties. Instead, the poem once again turns toward the interior processes of the “still” soldiers—as small animals use them for cover, they “hold their breath,” and are simply “ready” to act, as a “world revolved under each man’s eyelid” (DCD 3). Capturing the idea of “readiness,” as Komunyakaa does in closing lines, may be the poem’s central aim. It is the singular frame of the moment just prior to action that is Komunyakaa’s focus here—he wants us to “see” everything in the scene of the ambush, from the camouflaged soldiers to the “L” shape of their tactical alignment, to the “world” of thought coursing through them as they struggle to keep totally still. The experience of this poem is odd, temporally speaking—though time obviously passes in the narration, nothing happens. As readers we are asked to understand an altered sense of time and action, one that heightens every sensation while withholding any action or release. The poem’s success is its evocation of heightened sensation *without* the expected release of action. The poem thus captures not only the intensity of the pre-combat experience, but also its complexity—time and thought exist differently for those about to kill.

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<sup>23</sup> This use of the landscape by the VC led to the widespread defoliation of South Vietnam using Agent Orange.

“Camouflaging the Chimera” is prototypical of the poems that populate *Dien Cai Dau* in that it intentionally manipulates imagery and time to create a definite sense of dramatic “scene” as a controlling idea in the text. Komunyakaa expands upon this idea in other poems in *Dien Cai Dau*. “The One Legged Stool” uses visual and dramatic motifs more overtly than any other poem in the book—a true dramatic monologue, the poem reads as a soliloquy, complete with stage directions:

*Semidarkness. A black POW is seated on a one-legged stool. He looks all round, slowly stands, then lets the stool hit the dirt floor. He’s in a state of delirium, partly hallucinating. Periodically a shadow of a face appears at the peephole in the door.*

Literally, this poem *is* a single scene, a poetic one-act play about a black prisoner of war. This version of the dramatic monologue—complete with stage directions—is by definition a visual form. Not only do we hear the speaker’s words, but the poem asks us also to imagine the experience of the poem as a staged event. We are meant to *see* the black POW sitting, precariously, on the one-legged stool delivering his diatribe to his captors. As a *dramatic* experience, an experience unfolding in actual time and delivered by a real, characterized speaker, the poem connects us to the speaker not simply as a passive listener, but as an observer—and *witness*—as well. The dramatized, inherently visual experience is thus made more real, existing in the “here” and “now” for those who go through it.

The scene of the POW's speech is in itself also preoccupied with "sight" as a trope. The prisoner's speech is an act of defiance in the face of an open-ended captivity (at the hands of the Vietnamese *and* American racism). This defiance is structured around the POW remaining balanced precariously on the "one-legged stool" provided by his captors; if he can remain on the stool, he can resist the pain of imprisonment and torture. But, as the stage directions indicate, the POW's stool has already fallen to the floor. Much of the poem after the stage directions is a series of attempts to defuse this failure through simple assertion of its non-happening. The POW attempts—however futilely—to control what reality his captors "see" in him. The poem's opening passage is an excellent example:

You didn't see that. My stool never touched the floor, guard. I'm still sitting on my stool. It's all in your head. Would you just drag me out into the compound, then put a bullet through my brains for nothing? Do you call that honor? I never left my stool! It never touched the fucking floor! Look, I've been sitting here hypnotized by dawn crawling under the door like a bamboo viper. (DCD 40)

Here the consequences for the POW's failure to remain on the stool—presumably summary execution—are more implied than explicit. Angry and desperate, the language seeks to violently re-create a reality that does not exist, a reality in which his own "breaking" is "all in the head" of his captor. If the guard didn't "see" the stool "hit the fucking floor," it never happened. Knowing that he is the subject of intense examination, that the guard's "eyes pressed against the face-window" control his fate, the POW resists

relentlessly, rejecting everything—even that which is true—that his captors have told him. He must “show” his fortitude as an American and as a soldier by staying on the stool and resisting propaganda:

Don't you know I'll never cooperate? No, don't care what you whisper into the darkness of this cage like it came out of my own head. I won't believe a word. Lies, lies, lies. You're lying. Those white prisoners didn't say what you say they said. They ain't laughing. Ain't cooperating. they ain't putting me down, calling me names like you say. Lies. Lies. It ain't the way you say it is. I'm American. (Pause.) Doctor King, he ain't dead like you say. Lies. How many times are you trying to kill me? Twice, three times, four, how many? You can't break me. (DCD 40).

The POW's resistance here is simple negation—everything the captor says is a lie, even though it resonates in the soldier's consciousness “like it came out of [his] own head.” On some level, he *knows* the other soldiers *are* racist, hating him despite their common nationality and situation. The result is a sense of a soldier “taking it” –the torture— despite his own intuitive sense of reality.

Later in the poem, the speaker denies the guard's “seeing” of things that signify his “breaking” in a literal sense, a surrender of his humanity after “pulling back into darkness” after torture:

With you always two steps away, always so goddamn close, listening to my thoughts. Sometimes I can hear empty locust shells crack under my feet when I was a boy, but I'm not broken yet. (Pause.) I wasn't scratching for earthworms. I was sitting here, not batting an eyelid. I wasn't sniffing the ground like a dog on all fours. That wasn't me. Your eyes must be tricking you or something. Watch this. Do you see that dung beetle? Look! You see, the hands are quicker than the eyes. You didn't see me eat that bug, did you? (DCD 41)

The poem repeatedly tries to defuse the guard's gaze through asserting that "the hands are quicker than the eye" and that the guards "eyes must be tricking [him] or something."

The speaker deflects—hopelessly—attention from his own desperation, steadfastly asserting that he can "take it" and that he will not "cooperate."

The fact that the POW is constantly the object of a controlling gaze becomes the climax of the poem, serving to parallel the captivity the soldier faces in Viet Nam with the racism that he faces back in America. Those in control—whites and the VC—"eye" him relentlessly, and he must remain in a state of constant resistance:

Yeah, VC. I've been through Georgia. Yeah, been through 'Bama too.  
Mississippi, yeah. You know what? You eye me worse than those rednecks.  
They used to look at me in my uniform like I didn't belong in it. (*Struts around in a circle*). I'd be sharper than sharp. My jump-boots spit-shined till my face was lost in them. You could cut your fingers on the creases in my khakis. My brass, my ribbons, they would make their blood boil. They'd turn away, cursing

through their teeth. With your eyes pressed against the face-window, you're like a white moon over Stone Mountain. You're everywhere. All I have to go back to are faces just like yours at the door. (DCD 42).

The face of the guard “like a white moon over Stone Mountain” (Georgia) recasts the POW’s resistance to the VC as an ongoing racial (i.e., American) struggle, a constant, torturous “balancing” on a one-legged stool under intense scrutiny. Despite his noble appearance, his prototypical “American” soldier-persona, with his boots “spit shined till [his *black*] face disappeared in them,” he still suffers under the controlling gaze of the “rednecks” in the American south. The resistance to the guard’s sight, then, is a continuation—or intensification—of a struggle that the POW has experienced his entire life. He not only must resist the literal torture and propaganda that a POW goes through, but also must continue to resist the idea of being *observed* and *seen* and *controlled* by anyone in power. The “scene” developed in “One Legged Stool” is a formal embodiment of this struggle over power and being “seen.” As an “audience” to this scene we are implicated in the POW’s struggle, passively exercising power over him through *how* we see him—as a veteran, a soldier, a black man, he must constantly negotiate the fact of his own objectification.

These resonant “scenes” pervade Komunyakaa’s poetry on Viet Nam. Most often, Komunyakaa’s Viet Nam work focuses on a singular moment within the larger chaos of the war, a fleeting glimpse into the trauma of the experience. Komunyakaa is interested in these scenes not merely for their political or rhetorical power—for their

persuasive power as grotesque spectacle—but as a trigger for more sophisticated conceptual and emotional work on the war. One of Komunyakaa’s most compelling subjects—and indeed one of the most complex problems facing war poetry as a genre—is the place of (or possibility) of human empathy in wartime. How does one maintain his basic humanity in an environment that is by definition hostile to most forms of human connection? How can one acknowledge another’s undeniable humanity in a situation that often requires him to kill?

Komunyakaa’s best work engages the process through which participants in war—primarily soldiers—engage the idea of empathetic connection. At times, the poems center around a scene in which the subject develops empathy for another human being, often an enemy. At others, the poems chronicle the *repression* of any connection they might feel, often as a means of self-preservation. Komunyakaa’s work, with its acute consciousness of “scene” connects this empathetic process with the cognitive concepts of “vision” and “seeing.” The moments of greatest connection between individuals in war-time, Komunyakaa’s poetry argues, depend on penetrating the “surface” reactions, impulses—the “easy” ways of “seeing,” thinking about, and understanding the war (and one’s enemy).

“Re-Creating the Scene” is a prime example of Komunyakaa’s examination of the development of empathy through a “visual” experience. The “scene” that the poem recreates is shocking but one that was all too common during the American presence in Viet Nam: that of a Vietnamese woman being gang-raped by American soldiers. The poem’s narration proceeds in flashes, touching on the key sensory moments of the crime and its aftermath:

The metal door groans  
& folds shut like an ancient turtle  
that won't let go  
of a finger till it thunders.  
The Confederate flag  
flaps from a radio antenna,  
& the woman's clothes  
come apart in their hands. (DCD 19)

The door's groaning and closing, the flag moving in the breeze, and the disintegrating woman's clothes create a montage of images—repeated “flashes” of memory—that forms the core of the rape narrative. The language could be far more explicit than it is; as written, Komunyakaa dwells not on the most graphic images (penetration, ejaculation) but on the details on the periphery of the experience. The result is jarring, an oblique rendering of the horrid reality of the assault:

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. (DCD 19)

It is not the violent kissing that is powerful in this passage; it is the woman “count[ing] the names of dead / ancestors,” and “shielding [her] baby” in her arms. The glimpse into the interior processes of the woman—her retreat to her ancestors—contrasted with the interior processes of the soldiers—their projection of their own memories onto her—creates a bizarre and perverse connection between them. As the woman “escapes” from the rape by immersing herself in the memories of her ancestors, the men dissociate themselves from their own actions by imagining her as their lovers “back in the world.” This lineation and rhythm of the passage echoes both the reality of the rape *and* the psychic dislocation of the participants through its repeated enjambments; the lines spill over from one to the next, pushing the reader through the poem at an irregular pace.

The rape scene culminates in an episode both surreal and understated, continuing the dislocation of the preceding lines:

She floats on their rage  
like a torn water flower,  
defining night inside a machine  
where men are gods.

The season quietly sweats. (DCD 19)

The poem moves from the “inside” of the experience (literally, the APC) to the outside, where “the season quietly sweats,” exhausted and ignorant of what is going on inside the vehicle. This contrast underlines the rape’s horror as well as diffuses its importance in the world; inside the APC, the woman is as fragile as a torn flower, outside, life in Viet Nam goes on as usual, hot, humid, and indifferent. While the APC is “droning like a constellation / of locusts eating through bamboo,” no one notices what goes on within it.

The second part of the poem is the scene of the rape’s immediate aftermath. In an image that reminds one of a resurrection, the woman “rises from the dust,” battered but still alive:

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.  
She turns in a circle,  
pounding the samarium dust  
with her feet where the steel  
tracks have plowed. (DCD 20)

The woman’s anger and defiance here—“staring after the APC,” “pounding the samarium dust / with her feet”—is, of course, a series futile gestures. And we, as readers, are meant to see them as such; surveying this poignant scene, we witness not a resurrection—a

phoenix-like “rising from the dust” into a new, pristine life, but a moreover the tragic reclamation of an old one, one in which the woman is horrifically injured and sexually violated. It is, like the passage directly before it, meant as a resonant moment of connection between reader and subject, reader and poem—Komunyakaa means for us to “re-create the scene” repeatedly in our heads. Through our witnessing of this scene, we learn to empathize with the woman—to feel, in some small way her anger, her sense of helplessness, her despair. But the poem complicates this empathy, moving past the simplistic pathos of much “political” poetry. Through another montage of flash images, Komunyakaa’s speaker invites the reader to share in the speculative processes—the imagination—of the woman as she ponders whether or not to report the crime. Again, the poem portrays the moment as “frozen in time”:

. . . . The sun  
fizzes like a pill in a glass  
of water, & for a moment  
the world’s future tense:  
She approaches the MPs  
at the gate; a captain from G-5  
accosts her with candy kisses;  
I inform the *Overseas Weekly*;  
flashbulbs refract her face  
in a room of polished brass  
& spit-shined boots;

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

This section of the poem is an interesting fusion of consciousnesses. Is “the world’s future tense” (where ‘world’ is possessive) the speaker’s intrusion into the “scene” of the poem with the “real” narrative as he remembers it—the “future” from the time and place of the rape scene? Or is “world’s future tense” meant to be read as a contraction: the world *is* future tense? The latter implies that the passage is either the woman’s internal speculation as to what will happen if she reports the rape *or* it represents such a speculation along the same lines that is *shared* by the speaker—and through him the reader—in some way. The “easy” pathetic empathy that a reader might feel for the woman here disintegrates under weight of the uncertainty of her situation; we might hope that “justice will be served” through her reporting of the crime, that the American authorities will stand up for her. But this is not to be, at least not in the ambiguous passage above. We are now *forced* to share the complexity of her experience, forced to understand not only something about *her*, but about ourselves as well.

The final lines of the poem return once again to the present, to the scene of the crime, once again in the “real,” not the future:

But for now, the baby  
makes a fist & grabs at the air,  
searching for a breast. (DCD 20)

Bordering on pure pathos, these final lines seem the weakest in the poem. Gone is the moment of connection—however tenuous and confusing—of the previous lines, in favor of an almost clichéd image of a baby reaching after an “absent” (either literally or figuratively) mother. But this return does serve a function in the overall scheme of the poem, returning the narration to a concrete, very visual—indeed almost pantomimed—scene that, as clichés often do, lingers in the reader’s memory.

“Re-Creating the Scene” illustrates one of the primary uses of the “resonant scene” in Komunyakaa’s work: the “scene” as a conduit through which both readers (and, presumably the author and his speaker) develop empathetic connections with those involved in the war. The rape victim in “Re-Creating the Scene” is an innocent, a non-combatant brutalized by the war’s senselessness; the empathy that the resonant “scene” generates is an easy empathy, a witness’s natural reaction to atrocity. But Komunyakaa’s use of “scene” as a means to empathy moves beyond the simple moral impulses of a witness—his poems often explore the power of the resonant scene to generate empathy for *all* involved in the war, even his enemies, those he has been trained to kill. Komunyakaa’s best work seeks to penetrate the consciousness of those under its observation, to recognize—or at least theorize—a sense of the humanity of those around him. At times this scene-based empathy for the enemy only develops on the most basic level, taking the form of an inchoate wonder regarding the nature of “the other,” his basic

motivations, desires. “Sappers” is poem concerned with exactly this level of empathetic connection. In it, the speaker wonders what motivates the “sappers”—squads of Viet Cong soldiers who attempt to rush American base perimeters —to display such suicidal commitment to their cause:

Opium, horse, nothing  
sends anybody through concertina  
this way. What is in the brain  
that so totally propels a man?  
Caught with women in our heads  
three hours before daybreak,  
we fire fill 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.

(DCD 24)

The poem—and its central scene—is an exploration of the poet’s own flawed attempt to understand the “otherness” of the Viet Cong. The first lines dismiss the notion of the VC zeal as based in a chemically altered consciousness—it is *not* “opium” or “horse” (heroin) that “sends anybody through concertina” wire the way that the sappers rush through it. Whatever it is “in the brain / that so totally propels” them is, as the poem begins, beyond the speaker’s comprehension. At this point in the narration, the enemy is an overwhelming force, a human wave that dispels the “women in [the Americans’] heads,” a force that even “fir[ing] full automatic” does not stop. While falling short of fully dehumanizing—or rather demonizing—the VC, the speaker stands in awe of them as a collective force, motivated by unknown, almost mystical forces that defy his comprehension. The VC take on a more “human” but still exotic look in the next lines. Like “torchbearers,” they “fall / & rise again”; here, Komunyakaa compares the sappers to Prometheus or Christ, a mythic light-bringing figure that continually regenerates itself. But this “awe” mutates into something more, an almost sexualized connection between the speaker and the sappers. Komunyakaa describes them in erotic terms: “with their naked bodies greased / so moonlight dances / off their skin,” terms that render their act of self-sacrifice—their suicidal rushing of American machine guns and bunkers—as almost operatic and beautiful. Unlike a writer like Bruce Weigl, whose work explores the dark—often sexual—pleasures of violence, Komunyakaa seems more interested in the “scene” of violence as a moment of productive connection between human beings. A

connection that is by its very nature fleeting and violently severed, but a connection nonetheless.

There is admiration for the suicidal bravery of this enemy; the poem, despite its firing “full automatic,” lacks any rancor toward them. Indeed, the poem even edges in its ultimate lines toward a (perhaps delusional) suspension of anger on the part of the sappers: with their “explosives tied around their waists” they “try to fling themselves / into our arms.” The final image here is one of *connection*—the sappers, by the nature of their attack, attempt to become physically close to the Americans. “Flinging themselves into our arms” implies an embrace, an act of love. Of course the implication of the success of the “flinging” is a violent death, by explosion, for all involved. A culmination of the embryonic “connection” that the speaker senses is ultimately hazardous to his health; he must, therefore, do anything in his power to prevent it. The “scene” of the sapper attack thus becomes an exploration of both the speaker’s impulse toward empathy *and* his active repression of that impulse through violent action.

Komunyakaa makes a more explicit—and much less dangerous—empathic connection with his enemy in “We Never Know.” In this poem, the speaker shares a vague link with a man his unit has just killed; the poem’s resonant scene takes place as the speaker examines the body:

He danced with the tall grass  
for a moment, like he was swaying  
with a woman. Our gun barrels  
glowed white-hot.

When I got to him,  
a blue halo  
of flies had already claimed him.

The near-eroticism of death and dying present in “Sappers” surfaces again in this poem. The soldier, in his spasm after being shot, looks as if he were dancing with a woman, “swaying” and “dancing” in the tall grass as he dies in a scene that borders on romantic. The admiration for the enemy that is implied in “Sappers” is made more explicit in this poem: the speaker sees the body as perversely angelic, “claimed’ by a “blue halo / of flies.” The “halo” is an iconic marker of “innocence” and of direct connection to the divine; this “elevates” the dead soldier, shows him as worthy of an almost mystical respect. The next lines of the poem create a more terrestrial, intimate connection between the speaker and the dead enemy:

I pulled the crumbled photograph  
from his fingers.  
There’s no other way  
to say this: I fell in love.

What is interesting in these lines is that the trigger for the connection the speaker feels with this dead soldier is primarily visual, viewing a photograph crumpled in the dead man’s fingers. Perhaps this photo is of a loved one, family, his home—the poem never tells us. What it does do, however, is show the speaker identifying on some level with his

victim—when he “sees” the soldier as having a life, he “[falls] in love” with him. It is as if the speaker witnesses, through his encounter with the dead man and his photograph, a micro-level ‘resonant scene’ within the narration of the poem itself, a narration that relays *to the reader* a sense of the overall “scene” of the encounter. It is the reader’s witnessing of the speaker’s connection that makes the poem powerful. Equally powerful are the poem’s closing lines, an image of mercy and respect at once poignant and pointless:

The morning cleared again,  
except for a distant mortar  
& somewhere choppers taking off.  
I slid the wallet into his pocket  
& turned him over, so he wouldn’t be  
kissing the ground.

As the scene of the poem concludes, the speaker, in a zen-like moment reminiscent of “Camouflaging the Chimera,” returns the photo to the dead man’s wallet, and turns him onto his back, “so he wouldn’t be / kissing the ground.” While most definitely an act of mercy and empathy, the speaker’s actions reflect a deeper tragedy, the fact that such a connection between the two men was impossible while both were alive; it is only in death, when an “enemy,” however constructed socially, can be treated as a human. The saddest idea this poem explores is left mostly unsaid: that despite the fact that the dead man will not be “kissing the ground” in death, neither will he be kissing anyone—friend,

family, a merciful enemy—in life. Again, the barrels “glow white hot” without emotion, keeping men safe from each other.

What is implied in these poems—those that focus on the resonant empathetic scene in wartime—is a dependence on “seeing” as a means of meaningful connection between people. The “scenes” that define the most intense moments of emotion in Komunyakaa’s work—both within the fiction of each poem and in the process of reading—require visualization, require “witnesses” to become powerful in any aesthetic, rhetorical, or political sense. Without such witness, such “seeing,” the poems fail. The complexity of the cognitive process of “seeing”, often guides and structures a reader’s—or witness’s—experience of the text. Dissecting the relationship between the emotional and cognitive aspects of the war’s effect on one’s consciousness—and by this I mean the development (and often subsequent repression) of empathy based on visual experience—is the central aim of some of Komunyakaa’s most complex and compelling works. In these poems, *how* one “sees”—in both the cognitive and epistemic senses of the term—is just as important as *what* he sees.

During wartime, and especially during the war in Viet Nam, “seeing” the enemy first often means a greater chance of survival: see first, shoot first, live longer. In the jungles of southeast Asia, where even during a bright day light would often fail to penetrate the dense foliage, the inability to see presented a unique tactical problem. One solution the military offered was the “illumination round,” an artillery shell coated with phosphorous which glowed brightly as it descended to earth on a small parachute. The epistemological metaphoric applications of such a device are obvious: small bits of light / knowledge descending through the darkness and confusion of war to light the way.

Michael Herr used the images of “Illumination Rounds” as sub-titles for the small “flashes” of insight in a chapter of his seminal work, *Dispatches*. Each short passage was revelatory in its own often gritty, grunt-like way, a moment of understanding for each minute episode of life in the Nam. Another solution to the problem of darkness offered by the military in Viet Nam, however, was the “Starlight Scope.” About eighteen inches long and four inches in diameter, the scope was one of the first night-vision devices to be issued to combat personnel. Mounted on a rifle like a traditional targeting scope or used separately like a telescope, the “Starlight Scope” magnifies the ambient light in its environment, enabling the user to “see” movement and figures in almost complete darkness. The Starlight Scope was the precursor of the night-vision technology so prominent in the 1991 Gulf War, technology now available to anyone with \$99.95 and the desire to see in the dark.

Komunyakaa’s fascination with the Starlight scope is more complex than the fetishism that naturally accompanies the advent of such “superhuman” technology, though such attraction is implied in the work. “Starlight Scope Myopia,” one of Komunyakaa’s better known lyrics, engages the *process* through which soldiers “see” their enemies in combat. Mediated both by the circumstance of war and its overwhelming technology, the soldier’s “vision,” in both the literal and epistemic senses, is propelled into a state of crisis; the subject’s mode of seeing and understanding changes profoundly. In combat especially, one does not often “see” what he thinks he does. Examining the complexities of this crisis—and its implications for the soldier’s psyche—is the task of the poem. Don Ringnald, in *Fighting and Writing The Viet Nam War* connects this type

of dissection of vision with the<sup>24</sup> meta-fictional aspects of Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*. O'Brien's novel continually disrupts what a reader "sees" as narrative, forcing that reader to examine the process of reading—and thus understanding—itsself. This metafictional process, Ringnalda argues, attempts to separate "myth" from "reality" (45), attempts to force its reader to deconstruct her own biases. Ringnalda argues that a character that penetrates the perceptual myths of war is O'Brien's Doc Peret, the "radical epistemologist" the medic in *Going After Cacciato*, the "radical epistemologist" who always preached "that observation requires inward-looking, a study of the very machinery of observation—the mirrors and filters and wiring and circuits of the observing instrument" (O'Brien 247-248). To truly observe—to penetrate, as Ringnalda suggests, the "sweet geometry" of mythic, easy conclusions about the war and about other people—one must by necessity not only scrutinize the subject under examination but one's own perceptual process as well.

Komunyakaa attempts this meta-seeing in "Starlight Scope Myopia," dissecting the "scene" just prior to the speaker's attacking a group of VC from ambush in the dark, aided by the titular night-vision scope. What the speaker "sees" through the starlight scope—real data from his "wires and circuits"—forces him to perform more sophisticated psychological work; in this case, to both develop and repress his sense of empathy for his enemies. The poem begins, as one might expect in the technologically mediated crosshairs of the starlight scope:

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<sup>24</sup> I feel that I should give Ringnalda's argument—which is a good one—about meta-seeing being "meta-fiction" when applied to the myths of America. We need meta-fictions because they force us to examine our own myths, the process by which fictions are developed. Where does this fit in? Meta-perception = real perception? Baudrillard would argue no.

Gray-blue shadows lift  
shadows onto an oxcart.

Making night work for us,  
the starlight scope  
brings men into killing range.

The scene here is reminiscent of that in “Camouflaging the Chimera,” chronicling the tension of the moments just before combat action. But here, at least explicitly, the focus is not on the attacker but the soon-to-be-victims. In these opening lines, the VC are “gray-blue shadows” lifting other “shadows onto an oxcart.” Despite the literal advantage that the night-vision scope gives him—the VC cannot see him at all—he still only sees “shadows,” only vague notions of the human beings in his sights. The inhuman, inorganic “oxcart” is the only thing he sees clearly through the scope, surrounded by the working human-like shapes. In the next lines, the scope “mak[es] night work for us,” “bring[ing] men in to killing range,” an inversion, similar to that in “Camouflaging the Chimera” of the VC’s domination of night in the jungle. The scope brings the VC, now “men,” “closer” to the speaker, both visually and conceptually—they are now within his rifle’s range *and* within the bounded space of the speaker’s vision. In these first few lines, we do not sense that the speaker “sees” anything more than targets in his crosshairs, vague “men” who are to be eliminated; these are participants in war, and thus are to be “hunted” with the tools of warfare.

The stoicism implied in this image becomes both more explicit and conflicted in the next passage:

The river under Vi Bridge  
takes the heart away

like the Water God  
riding his dragon.

Smoke colored

Viet Cong  
move under our eyelids,

lords over loneliness  
winding like coral vine through  
sandalwood & lotus,

inside our lowered heads  
years after this scene

ends. The brain closes  
down.

These images almost contradict each other. While the speaker describes the water “tak[ing] the heart away”—which most readers would parse as a dissipation of “feeling” or “emotion”—the subsequent lines imply guilt and feeling for what he is about to do. The VC “move under [his] eyelids,” owning his “loneliness” “years after this scene ends.” The tension between what the speaker “sees” in the physical world, in the moment of the ambush—shadows lifting shadows onto an oxcart—versus what exists in his imagination—VC “winding like coral vine / through sandalwood and lotus’—forces the reader to confront the dual ways of perception active here: one physical, “now,” and technological, one internal, temporally unstable, and organic. While the “heart” may be taken away—in a “flowing” water image parallel to the “winding coral vine” of the VC, the imagination is more stubborn, refusing to be “taken away” and repressed so quickly. And when the speaker’s mind finally does “close down” and surrender to the reality of the ambush, the representation is terse and un-poetic, ceasing all motion, imagistic and sonic: “the brain closes / down.” Grammatically simple, the line attempts to shut down the nascent dialogue between “seeing” targets through the scope and “seeing” them as living beings, the memory of whose violent deaths will persist in one’s memory far beyond the moment of the ambush.

The “seeing” that happens in the second part of the poem, however, indicates that the brain is not as “closed down” as the speaker suggests; he continues, while sighting the VC through the scope, to imagine them as more than targets, more than gray-blue shadows:

What looks like

one step into the trees,  
  
they're lifting crates of ammo  
& sacks of rice, swaying  
  
under their shared weight.  
Caught in the infrared,  
what are they saying?  
  
Are they talking about women  
or calling the Americans  
  
*beaucoup dien cai dau?*  
One of them is laughing.  
You want to place a finger  
  
to his lips & say "shhhh."  
You try reading ghost talk  
  
on their lips. They say  
"up-up we go," lifting as one.  
This one, old, bowlegged,

you feel you could reach out  
and take him into your arms. (DCD 8-9)

The VC gain human detail in this passage: personality, humor, solidarity, intimacy. As the speaker continues to imagine the enemy as human in some way he clearly resists the washing away of his heart, the closing down of his brain. He wonders what they talk about—women, the Americans--, imagines their laughter, and “shared weight” of ammo and rice. This replication and acknowledgement of feeling—though theoretical and speculative in the fiction of the poem—is an empathetic act: he *feels with* the Viet Cong in a crucial moment, penetrating Ringnalda’s (via Lorca) “Sweet Geometry.” No longer are these people the wisps and shadows of infrared figures—they are human beings with lives and feelings, worthy of being comforted and quieted, and “taken into [one’s] arms.” This empathy is made communal—as witnesses to the scene of the poem we are implicated—by Komunyakaa’s shift into the second person as the poem nears its climax. The poem asks readers to empathize with the speaker, to live as he does in the moment in which he connects in his mind with the Viet Cong. The tone is personal and instructional, almost as if a survivor is telling a cautionary tale to travelers embarking on the same journey: “*you* try to read ghost talk on their lips,” and “*you* could reach out and take him into your arms.”

But of course Komunyakaa’s larger project in this poem is a tragic one: as the “good soldier,” he does his job. The tragedy here resides in the fact that the empathetic connection that the poem struggles to represent—and indeed the speaker struggles to comprehend—must in the end be severed. No matter how close one may imagine

himself to be with the enemy, in a war, mutual empathy and respect is impossible. The probability is very high that if the speaker fails to act, his enemy will kill him. In this sense this poem is very much like “Sappers”; the respect and awe that the speaker feels—the desire to connect with his enemy—must be repressed in the interest of self-preservation. In “Starlight Scope Myopia,” the repression takes as its form a metaphorical de-focusing of the scene, a climactic dissolution of the image of the enemy’s humanity. The speaker develops intentionally—as a means of survival—a distinctly *myopic* vision of the enemy, a vision that refuses nuance and “blurs” his vision of the enemy. In the end, the image refuses even humanity:

You

peer down the sights of your M-16,  
seeing the full moon  
loaded on an oxcart.

The VC are no longer even “shadows” of men here; they are the image of the “full moon / loaded on an oxcart,” in the end non-human and alien, simply an image. Perhaps the “full moon” suggests something of the empathetic “cycle” that the speaker goes through in connecting with them; as the moon forces tidal processes, so does the presence of the VC force emotional ones.

This poem illustrates the confluence of a number of Komunyakaa’s key ideas: the idea of a resonant “scene,” the urge toward respect and empathy between combatants,

and the inevitable—and necessary—repression of that empathy. Similar processes dominate a number of the strongest poems in *Dien Cai Dau*—in many instances, speakers both express and repress their empathetic impulses within the span of a few lines or images. In “Prisoners,” the speaker recalls witnessing a “resonant scene” of captured Viet Cong suspects being moved:

Usually at the helipad  
I see them stumble-dance  
across the hot asphalt  
with crokersacks over their heads,  
moving toward the interrogation huts,  
thin-framed as box kites  
of sticks & black silk  
anticipating a hard wind  
that’ll tug & snatch them  
out into the space.

The empathetic process in this poem comes in its ultimate lines, compressed into an almost-gesture of admiration and respect:

I stand alone & amazed,  
with a pill-happy door gunner  
signaling for me to board the Cobra.

I remember how one day  
I almost bowed to such figures  
walking toward me, under  
a corporal's ironclad stare.  
I can't say why.  
From half a mile away  
trees huddle together,  
& the prisoners look like  
marionettes hooked to strings of light. (DCD 35-36)

“Amazed” at the fortitude and power of the VC suspects, the speaker “almost bow[s]” to them, “under / a corporal’s ironclad stare.” Like the speaker’s imaginative “reaching out” to the VC he sees through the starlight scope, here his first impulse is to *connect* to the prisoners by bowing to them. His urge to replicate the gesture of admiration and respect of Asian cultures indicates an unspoken camaraderie with the prisoners, an implied understanding of—and presumably sympathy with—their situation.

But, as in “Starlight Scope Myopia,” the bow—the outward signifier of his connection with the prisoners—never materializes, dissolving under the pressure of the “ironclad stare” of other soldiers. The war quite literally takes the speaker away here: he boards a helicopter and flies away from the prisoners, leaving them to their fate at the hands of the CIA, U.S. Army, or South Vietnamese interrogators. Most prisoners turned over to the South Vietnamese intelligence service did not survive interrogation (Source Needed- Karnow / Young). The final lines of the poem achieve, similar to “Starlight,” a

“distance” from their subject; “from a half a mile away” the prisoners are obscured by the image of clumped trees, and the prisoners become “marionettes hooked to strings of light” (DCD 36). Komunyakaa’s strategy here is one of imagistic diffusion: the images the comprise the ultimate lines of these poems—“the full moon loaded on an oxcart” and the “marionettes hooked to strings of light”—sublimate their referent subjects into images that diffuse their humanity. The speaker’s “vision” of what he sees—victims of the war, enemy or not—is necessarily transformed into something else, something whose destruction or injury the speaker can somehow live with.

This transformation of vision as an act of repression is not as successful in other lyrics; at times the empathic connection between the speaker and those around him persists despite the exigencies of the war. In “You and I Are Disappearing,” the transformed image of a suffering girl—perhaps an enemy, more likely an innocent bystander—replicates itself relentlessly in the speaker’s consciousness, creating an apocalyptic language of simile in which images do not sublimate the intensity of the experience, but simply leads to other analogous images. The poem reads as if the speaker is pushed from one failed referent to another, from one sanitized representation of atrocity to the next:

The cry I bring down from the hills  
belongs to a girl still burning  
inside my head. At daybreak  
she burns like a piece of paper.  
She burns like foxfire

in a thigh-shaped valley.

A skirt of flames

dances around her

at dusk.

In this first stanza, the speaker is still intimately connected with the “scene” of the burning girl. “The cry” that he “bring[s] down from hills” is connected to the image of the “girl still burning / inside [his] head.” *His cry is her cry*—in this sense, the poem represents the two characters as hopelessly intertwined. Unlike the previous poems in which distance and separation from the original resonant scene enable the speaker to escape his connection with other human beings, here the scene is “burnt” into his head. The representation of her “burning” is at “daybreak” a “piece of paper,” and then “foxfire / in a thigh-shaped valley.” Moving from a literal flame—a burning piece of paper—to “foxfire,” the organic phosphorescence given off by decaying wood, the poem attempts an imagistic distancing from the experience, a deflection of the idea of “burning.”

The distancing, however, is not a successful one: the “burning” keeps surfacing in other similes, none completely effecting an “escape” from the scene:

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 glows like the fat tip  
of a banker's cigar,  
    silent as quicksilver.

A tiger under a rainbow  
    at nightfall.

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.

The layering of similes here enacts the speaker's attempt to transform and diffuse the power of what he has witnessed; each successive image is a flawed act of transcendence, a flawed attempt at finding a referent both accurate—faithful to the experience—and capable of rendering it powerless against him. It is almost as if the speaker is searching, through the experience of the poem, for what Eliot called an “objective correlative” for the experience—but an objective correlative that he can control, toward which his emotional response can be attenuated. The “scene” endlessly replays in the speaker's mind, a constant reminder of what he has witnessed, imprinting itself indelibly onto his

consciousness. The search for analogues ends with the burning girl as a divine “sign,” a “burning bush / driven by a godawful wind” (DCD 17); this suggests the annunciation not of a new compact between God and humanity (as in the Biblical use of the trope), but of an horrific severing of hope and meaning. The burning here is not an act of sacrifice (a “burnt offering” to God), but a meaningless horror with which the speaker must come to terms. How successful the speaker is at this, however, is something the poem leaves unresolved: the image of the girl—her essential “burning” persists, no matter what analogue he chooses for it.

Komunyakaa’s work is often, as we have shown, a confrontation with the images ingrained in his own memory, the resonant scenes that force him to examine his intellectual and emotional responses to the Viet Nam war. However imperfect—and by imperfect I mean mediated and transformed by memory, technology, and his own emotional reaction to the trauma of history—these images form the cornerstones of Komunyakaa’s adaptive and poetic processes in regard to the war. Each poem, as it mediates on its central scene, explores the immensely complex process of empathic identification, illustrating how a visual stimulus, an act of witnessing with one’s own eyes, can trigger a connection, however tenuous, between those involved in the war. Each resonant scene in these poems is a site of connection; in Komunyakaa’s best work, he captures the tragic repression of that connection as well, the “sacrifice” of one’s sense of empathy in service of self-preservation. Komunyakaa’s connection with these scenes is profound and dangerous, at times bordering on overwhelming and dominating his memory completely. He writes in “Seeing in the Dark”:

We're men ready to be fused with  
with ghost pictures, trying  
to keep the faces we love  
from getting shuffled  
with those on the wall.

In this poem—a poem about soldiers watching a pornographic film while on a break from the field—the images of the lost, of home, of women, risk becoming merely “scenes” in an obscene movie. When Komunyakaa writes about a scene—and the processes that it evokes—he makes it more than an image, more than a meaningless “ghost picture” in his—or our—memory. In all of these poems, we are reminded that in war one’s emotions are never free. Our instinctual emotional connections with others—friends, enemies, innocent bystanders—are molded and controlled by the overpowering circumstances of history, circumstances both unchanging and unyielding.

Yusef Komunyakaa’s poetry, though, is not simply a brilliant psychic autobiography, not simply a catalogue of one soldier’s most indelible memories of the war. These poems, in their acute dissection of the act of “seeing” in wartime, force us to re-examine how we interact with the war images that permeate our culture: the Pulitzer-prize winning image of a naked Vietnamese girl running from her napalmed village, CNN’s footage of the green-glowing anti-aircraft fire over Baghdad in 1991, the grainy images of a smart-missile flying into the air ducts of a warehouse, a Delta force commando dragged naked through the streets of Mogadishu, the American flag draped over the statue of Saddam Hussein just before it was toppled. Recent cultural memory,

thanks to the zero-hour news cycle and 24 hour cable news networks, has become saturated with such images: Panama, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq—the scenes of war seem to be on an endless loop. Given such high-intensity exposure to the images of modern war, we risk becoming accustomed to them, to see the 1000-pound JDAM smart bomb obliterating an Iraqi armored personnel carrier as simply an image, as something not real, without consequence, a game. Komunyakaa asks us to penetrate these scenes, to see beyond what Don Ringnalda called the “sweet geometry”—eye candy—of war, to connect with those involved, even for a moment. Komunyakaa’s work, it would seem, wants to transform the deluge of war images that surround us into opportunities for imagination, opportunities to see other human beings as more like us than “the Other,” not simply blips on a screen or grey-blue shadows through a starlight scope. One must, these poems ultimately admonish us—and by “us” I mean observers and witnesses to war—to resist the transformation of living, breathing people into mere phantasms, to blurred “ghost pictures” projected on a wall.

## **Coda: The Poetics of Guilt**

Shortly after the annihilation of the Iraqi army in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush remarked elatedly, “by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” The first war in the Gulf was a return of sorts, an apparent vanquishing of what E.J. Dionne of *The Washington Post* called “the doomed to failure feeling” surrounding large-scale American military action. The quick resolution of the war in the desert could not have been more different than the tedious, years-long conflict in Viet Nam, the war George Herring called “America’s Longest War.” In Saddam Hussein, America found its ideal enemy: a dictator who openly invaded territory that was not his. What’s more, this ideal enemy fought exactly the way the U.S. likes its enemies to, in a pitched battle on open ground where the stunning superiority of its technology and firepower would ensure a total rout. And a rout it was: next to grayed and pixilated images of smart weapons flying down the ventilation shafts of enemy “command and control” structures, the most resonant pictures we have of the war are of legions of haggard Iraqi conscripts surrendering to anyone looking even vaguely American, including camera crews from CNN. In so many ways, the Gulf War was the war that Americans wanted every post- World War II conflict to be—an easily “evil” enemy with an army our technology and superior moral virtue could destroy. We wanted, in short, another “Good War” to erase the memory of the “bad” one in Viet Nam, to cure us of our own sense of inadequacy and moral uncertainty.

The thrill of the 1991 U.S. victory in the Gulf has proven a lasting antidote for the poison memories of 19 year-old American kids torching rural Asian hamlets, of napalm strikes and free-fire zones. With the victory in the first Persian Gulf War—however

imperfect and incomplete it now seems to be in retrospect—came the death of a healthy skepticism, the death of a relentless questioning of motive and cost and ideology that the debacle in Viet Nam fostered. Since 1991, the United States has been involved in several major foreign interventions: Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq. The army fighting these new wars is now a volunteer army, a small force of dedicated professionals armed with the most advanced technologies ever deployed: advanced information systems; continually more “intelligent”, accurate, and cheaper smart bombs; thermobaric weapons that burrow underground and detonate, liquefying rock; 15,000 pound munitions capable of obliterating anything in a 900-foot radius. The conscripted “citizen soldier” of the 1960s and 70s has been replaced by a corps of lifers and highly-trained techies— and they are the best in the world at what they do. We maintain the most advanced and efficient mechanism for killing in the entire world: we have fighter planes no one can see, missiles no one can stop, and thousands of dedicated professionals whose job it is to pull the trigger to advance the country’s worthwhile goals and ideas, our “noble causes.”

Many among us have conveniently forgotten that the war in Viet Nam was at one time thought of as a worthwhile—even essential—struggle against international communism, a crucial battleground where the “good” forces of Western capitalism and “freedom” combat the evil, totalitarian forces of the “evil empires” of China and the Soviet Union. We have in so many ways forgotten what that struggle cost us—not in terms of the Americans lost (the Wall is too unforgiving for such forgetting), but in terms of our own moral legitimacy, our fidelity to the democratic ideals that the Founders in theory (but, of course not in practice) embraced. When faced with the Vietnamese crisis,

we failed, as we have so many times before, to adhere to the principles of Enlightenment liberalism—freedom and self-determination for all people—upon which this nation was founded. In defending Viet Nam from communism, we violated those principles over and over again, prostituting them to the cause of anti-communism. We knowingly violated 1954 U.N. accords on Viet Nam that would have unified the country —through national elections—because of the possibility of communist victory; we willingly supported (and later betrayed) a brutal dictator in Ngo Din Diem, as well as a number of corrupt, undemocratic and unstable military juntas<sup>25</sup> as the rulers of the “nation” of South Viet Nam; our combat air sorties dropped more bomb tonnage on Viet Nam than had been dropped by both sides *in all* of World War II; we defoliated 1/7<sup>th</sup> of South Viet Nam’s landscape with Agent Orange; we supported the ruthless practices of South Vietnamese national police, which included torture and summary execution of prisoners; we killed, in the end, between one and four million Vietnamese men, women, and children, including countless civilians.

The war in Viet Nam was a “disease,” yes, but not in the way that George H.W. Bush envisioned—it was a sickness not of the erosion of American willpower, but of its unbridled expression. The war in Viet Nam, in all its waste, its excess, its sin, and most of all its abject failure, deconstructed the widespread cultural myths of an American innocence, the myths of American military power as a force for absolute “good” in the world. The catastrophe in the jungle revealed, for a brief time, a darker, alternative vision of America its myths laid aside. During the war and its aftermath, the United States was revealed not as the perfection of democracy, the “city on a hill” that is a

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<sup>25</sup> This support of distasteful and highly “un-democratic” dictators is, of course, not limited to the Diem, Ky, and Thieu regimes in Viet Nam. The U.S. actively supported such “thugs and assassins” as the Shah of

beacon to all the world, but as a flawed, imperfect nation like any other, existing in the “real” world of global politics. With any loss of innocence comes a consciousness of one’s own imperfection and capacity for wrongdoing, an understanding of one’s own limitations not of the ability to project power, but of the validity and morality of one’s claims to it. The quagmire in Viet Nam forced America to look at the hard, violent truth of its policies; in its wake there existed the possibility of a new lucidity, a recognition of the old mistakes of empires, and perhaps a real revolution in *how* the U.S. looks at the rest of the world.

But American thinking resists such fundamental revision—over the decades that followed it, we eventually came to treat the war in Viet Nam as a failure, not as a mistake, a botched attempt at achieving a worthwhile goal, not a tragically misguided misapplication of American will. Countless texts dissected the perceived “loss” in Viet Nam: the cultural focus was on “why we lost” and “what we could have done differently,” not on the *moral* issues of having gone in the first place. The war became a cliché, a “tragedy.” But this tragedy was something that *America* suffered—we lost 58,022 of our sons because “we fought with one hand tied behind our back,” or because Jane Fonda went to Hanoi or because the media called the war “un-winnable.” In some way, we wanted to elevate the war in Viet Nam to the level of tragedy, with ourselves as the tragic hero, doomed by the fates and circumstance—and perhaps one character flaw—to suffer such grave injury. We *wanted*, faced with the humiliation of the ‘Nam, to be Romeo or Lear or even Hamlet, hamstrung by a ruin beyond our control; what we were, though, was more like Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom! Absalom!* a deluded fool, stubbornly innocent, presiding over the wreckage of our own “grand design.” With

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Iran, Ferdinand Marcos, Saddam Hussein, Aguste Pinochet, and numerous others.

all the war's needless suffering and death in plain view, with its rotten foundations of arrogance, corruption, and lies exposed to the air, we were, unfortunately, just as willing as Sutpen to start again, to "fix" the problems in execution and planning—we were only too eager to seek out Wash Jones' daughter and start planning once again. Our moral vision sacrosanct, we sought only to adjust our methods, quickly forgetting the legions of dead—our sons and daughters, and countless others—sacrificed in its pursuit.

The attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 reinstated a mythic sense of innocence in the American consciousness. It is as if we were cast violently back into a new Eden, our moral slate wiped clean, the sins our soldiers and government committed against both Americans and Vietnamese forgotten in the haze of toxic dust and burning jet fuel. As the victims of atrocity, our understanding of evil is radically externalized; the "evil-doers" are those who wish us harm, those insane, bloodthirsty ghouls who seek only to destroy our way of life. Back in the Garden, we rail against the depravity of the serpent through a "War on Terror," forgetting in the panic of our fear and loss our own moral trespasses. Selectively burdened with history, we fail to recall our own violent sins against the Vietnamese and Native Americans, as well as our active political and military support for repressive regimes all around the world—the Shah of Iran, Marcos in the Philippines, and, most ironically, Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The possible moral consequences of U.S. policies around the world, whether it is support for the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the sale of weapons and technology to nations or groups, or even the bolstering of right-wing governments in Central and South America, suddenly become irrelevant. The world is not, in the hysteria of the new war, a complex place where myriad interests compete for resources and dominance; it is not a place

where history matters: it is a simple bifurcation of “good” vs. “evil,” of “us” vs. “them,” where, as George W. Bush puts it, “you’re either with us or you are with the terrorists.” This declaration ushered in a new age of American militarism—force is now an acceptable, even necessary tool to safeguard “freedom” against the “fear” of terror.

As America stumbles, unburdened by history, untroubled by a sense of moral uncertainty, I am reminded once again why the literature of the Viet Nam war—in particular its intimate, gut-wrenching lyric poetry—matters. As we as a nation, amnesiac and lost, frighteningly more powerful than ever, wantonly project—with, as always, the best of intentions—our will around the globe, I fear that the United States will yet again become what Martin Luther King called it in 1967: “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.” As we carry on, treating our past as if it is irrelevant, living in our newfound innocence, we risk committing the same moral sins as we did in Southeast Asia, whether it be in the mountains of Afghanistan, the deserts of Iraq, or the jungles of the Philippines: with the loss of history and responsibility comes an easy rigidity of moral certainty; with a rigidity of conviction comes the danger of moral catastrophe.

The poetry that I have worked with in this study: Michael Casey, Basil T. Paquet, John Balaban, Bruce Weigl, and Yusef Komunyakaa, is a bulwark against the erosion of memory. These poems, in their anguish, their trauma, their formal crises, their self-hatred and self-doubt, continually remind us of the consequences of our actions as a nation, both on our citizens and on our “enemies.” In the personal lyrics of these poets we find a profound guilt, a profound *personal* sense of responsibility for the “obscene waste” (as Michael Casey puts it) of life during the war. Through this most intimate of

poetic forms, these writers, pained and tragic—at once confess their sins *and* communalize the burden they feel. They sing their guilt into our ears until we acknowledge it as our own, until we see the *real* horror of our actions and take possession of it, until we see the calamity in which we have participated. It is not necessarily to make amends or reparations that we must do this, but to understand our own actions more completely, to see the things we do as a part of a historical continuum that may or may not ever evolve. Walter Benjamin writes in his *Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History*:

A Klee drawing named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 258)

Acknowledgement of the wreckage is all the past can ask of us. While the “storm” of progress pushes us toward forgetfulness, feeding us the lotus of our myths of cultural evolution, hope remains in memory. We must own our part in the tragedies of the past to

even *attempt* preventing them in the future; without a relentless inquiry, an unyielding dredging of the past, a re-opening of wounds, Benjamin's storm will erase it all. Peter Marin writes that the expiation of guilt is impossible; we must find a way to live more productively with our sins, to make ourselves more whole and complete, to find a better way through the hard truth of our transgressions. Guilt, he argues, is an unavoidable consequence of living in history; every action has a reverberation that we can neither foresee completely nor control. But an ownership of our common culpability for the towering wreckage of history, a refusal to eat the lotus that atrocity and victimization and suffering offer us, gives us a *chance* to learn, a chance to re-make the world in some small way.

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