

W.D. Ehrhart

## Howard Fast's "Korean Litany"

Though the Korean War did not produce a body of poetry comparable in size to either World War Two or the Vietnam War, it has, contrary to both popular and scholarly perceptions,<sup>1</sup> served as a source of poetic inspiration for a number of writers, veterans and non-veterans alike.

In a previous issue of *War, Literature and the Arts* (Fall/Winter 1997), I discussed the poetry of Korean War soldier-poets William Childress; Rolando Hinojosa; James Magner, Jr.; Reg Saner; William Wantling; and Keith Wilson. Most prominent among those poets who did not serve in Korea but who wrote poems about the Korean War are Thomas McGrath, whose "Ode for the American Dead in Korea" first appeared in *Figures of the Double World* in 1955, and Hayden Carruth, whose "On a Certain Engagement South of Seoul" first appeared in *The Crow and the Heart* in 1959.

One of the most ambitious attempts to address the Korean War in verse, however, is Howard Fast's *Korean Lullaby*, a fourteen-page pamphlet containing three separate poems that almost certainly appeared while the war was still being fought.<sup>2</sup> In the issue of **WLA** mentioned above, though my primary concern then was on soldier-poets who had actually fought in Korea, I dismissed Fast rather more hastily than I should have. At least part of his *Korean Lullaby* has more to recommend it than I had previously suggested—or even recognized until I reread it with greater care at the urging of Philip K. Jason of the U.S. Naval Academy and my co-editor on *Retrieving Bones: Stories and Poems of the Korean War*.

All three poems are stridently antiwar, and not just in a general sense. Fast makes it clear that he quite specifically opposes American intervention in Korea. Anyone familiar with Fast will not be surprised by the stance he takes. A successful and prolific novelist, Fast had already published more than two dozen books by 1950 and would go on

to write *Spartacus* and *The Immigrants*, both of which would become popular movies (the latter on TV), and scores of others (most recently *Greenwich*, which he published in 2000 at the age of 85).<sup>3</sup> In 1943, however, he joined the Communist Party. Though he left the party in 1956, he was an active member during the Korean War, and since the war was being waged against North Korean and then Chinese Communists, it was a matter of Communist Party doctrine to oppose it. Not surprisingly, the pamphlet's publisher, the American Peace Crusade, was denounced as a "Communist Front Organization" by Secretary of State Dean Acheson in February 1951, an assessment that was largely accurate.<sup>4</sup>

*Korean Lullaby* seems to be Fast's only published excursion into the world of poetry, and the first and third poems in the pamphlet are strong arguments that one should be grateful Fast mostly avoided poetry. Both "Korean Lullaby," the title poem, and "A Song of Peace" are, says Jason, "undistinguished, manipulative rhymed verse," and "polemical" as well.<sup>5</sup> In "Korean Lullaby," for instance, Fast twice rhymes four lines in a row, having the unintended and almost comical effect of bringing to mind Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven." Elsewhere in the poem, he argues that the war is really being fought by western capitalists to fuel the economy and stave off depression, and he puts "free world" in quotes to make sure we get his point. "A Song of Peace" is not quite as ham-fisted with its politics, but as a poem it is no improvement over "Korean Lullaby."

Given these two poems, it is all the more startling to encounter "Korean Litany" wedged between them, for "Korean Litany" is as different from these other two poems as one could possibly imagine—in form, in content, in quality, and in impact. Written entirely in free verse, it is actually seven poems in one, each in the voice of a dead American soldier. Though Fast had no combat experience of his own—during World War Two, he was assigned to the Office of War Information—the voices he assumes are for the most part both compelling and convincing. While one can see Fast's politics at work in these poems, their deceptive simplicity and heartbreaking humanity transcend ideology and make them truly works of art.

All in all, "Korean Litany" works so effectively one wonders how it could be possible for Fast to have written anything as bad as the two poems that precede and follow it in *Korean Lullaby*. However that happened, "Korean Litany" is a poem—really seven poems under one title—that deserves to be treated as a major contribution to Korean War

literature. Instead, the poem has been all-but-lost. Only a few copies of the original pamphlet still exist, tucked away in research libraries. It is not in the Library of Congress, and a survey of rare book dealers I recently conducted turned up not a single copy. To my knowledge, no part of the pamphlet has ever been reprinted.

In the case of “Korean Litany,” this is a shame that is happily and finally corrected. Here then, for the first time in half a century—and with the kind permission of Fast himself—is the full text of “Korean Litany.”

### **Vernon Blake, Rifleman:**

My age reads, as long as the wood lasts,  
twenty-three, and read my name,  
I, Vernon Blake, who died in action  
from a sniper’s bullet—and rests in peace,  
or less than peace perhaps, in Korean soil.  
And fortunate perhaps, for only one question  
twists a little with the maggots.  
You see, the American way of life  
was all at one with me, ten generations on each side  
all from this soil, and the house I lived in,  
Chester, Vermont, white clapboard,  
and easy with all those generations.  
I ate, drank and slept and played,  
studied a little, grew strong and tall and proud;  
I saw it when my mother looked at me,  
and my father’s eyes were full of pride,  
and I wrote to him, “I make a good soldier,  
and all those days we tramped the fields  
and brush together were not wasted—”  
We went for rabbit and squirrel, and once a long shot  
at a deer. How my mother loved us both!  
“Two men,” she said, “the Bible notwithstanding,  
my own prescription for a happy home.”  
And I fought her when she wanted my college diploma,  
framed in the livingroom—why didn’t she  
have four children, tall and strong and proud like me?

I would have answered her question eventually,  
 for I had no doubts and no questions.  
 It was in her that the doubts grew, like a cancer,  
 “Why, why, why, why? Why are you there, my son,  
 and not with me?” I would have framed the answer,  
 given time, framed it proudly for her to hang on the wall—  
 for there must be an answer.

### **Harry Morgan, Machine Gunner:**

My old man never had much sense,  
 working on an assembly line all his life,  
 the candle burned at both ends, squeezed in the middle,  
 and always yapping of the pride of class  
 a worker has. “What future where the world is yours?”  
 I’d ask him. “You got only a past, old man,  
 and the smart money goes to the smart fingers.  
 Get smart, old man, get smart.  
 I’ll take a buck and you—you keep your commie line.”  
 He could have said a lot of things,  
 and talked of damn young punks,  
 but it wasn’t easy for him to put in words  
 the things he felt, and the one letter he sent,  
 I never answered. “Only remember,” he wrote,  
 “the men you fight are your brothers,  
 working with their own hands, as I work with mine,  
 and you with yours.” Where are my hands,  
 old man? Both of them blown off by a mortar shell,  
 and me looking at the stumps as I bled to death.

### **Arthur Dembrowski, Chemical Warfare:**

Dug up quickly, you would see,  
 snub nose, sandy hair and a broad face;  
 we never like what we see in our own mirror,  
 and I only started shaving three months before the service.

A girl would like or not like that face,  
making a better judgment than mine—  
but even love was postponed, this crazy kid  
making a pal of a three year old, my brother,  
sixteen years between him and me,  
me the child of my mother's youth,  
and he of her last bearing time.  
The way it was, I never loved anything  
the way I loved that kid,  
and we were better friends than most brothers.  
With his little fat hand in mine,  
we'd walk on my furloughs, and they'd say,  
"There's Dembrowski and his buddy."  
I was a flame thrower, and out of one burning house  
crawled a Korean child, blistered and singed  
all over his skin. I picked him up  
and cradled him in my arms, talking to him  
when a bullet blew off the back of my head.

### **Al Carlton, Medic:**

When I crawled up to a Korean wounded  
to heal him, and got a bullet in my gut,  
I hated for the first time in nine months,  
dying wastefully and painfully, whimpering,  
"Oh Jesus—what a lousy way!"  
And he, with one arm torn off,  
lay watching me and whispered,  
"Hey, Yank—what for you come here?  
Go home. Go home." And then we bled together,  
blood mixing with blood,  
and the last thing I thought of  
was blood brothers, and then I died  
by the side of the man who killed me.

### **Gerald Cartwheel, Tankman:**

The day my tank rolled through a village,  
 flattening those flimsy houses,  
 I saw a woman caught under a beam,  
 screaming as the tank rolled over—  
 on that day, I wrote to my congressman,  
 my free and democratic right,  
 “Was I sent here to do this kind of thing,  
 or tell me why, or have I no right to know,  
 or do you know?” I sought no easy answer,  
 knowing—as others don’t—  
 that things are not all black and white.  
 Others ribbed me, scoffed, and said,  
 “Tell it to the chaplain, bub.”  
 I wonder what the answer would have been,  
 and whether I would have felt at ease,  
 cooking in a burning tank  
 and screaming for my mother.

### **Aaron Klein, Rifleman:**

I did what I did, and followed orders through,  
 and died with one hundred and sixteen men,  
 all together, brave men who fought and died,  
 and left a wife and child, and a mother  
 who will die too, this being too much pain  
 for her to take and live with,  
 and I was brave, and asked no questions,  
 and never asked to know what I,  
 a Jew and kin to those six million  
 whom Hitler slew, was doing here, in this strange land,  
 making a desert and a graveyard  
 of a sunny place where people lived and worked—  
 and never asked what good dead children did  
 in freedom’s struggle. And if I thought,  
 am I or the man across the ridge and facing me,

fighting freedom's fight? I never changed  
 the thought to words or deeds—  
 then why do I rest so poorly,  
 in this strange soil?

### **Jamsie Anderson, Quartermasters:**

I used to laugh and say,  
 "I got no future, but lots of past."  
 Well, take my past and put it you know where,  
 all of it, cleaning toilets and shining shoes—  
 not like them that sat and sighed  
 for a glass of beer at five o'clock,  
 just that to walk on them soft heaven clouds.  
 That ain't no heaven for me,  
 promoted to driving a half-track through Korean mud;  
 and then they'd say, "You're turning evil, Jamsie,  
 evil as all hell." Oh, no, never, not no evil  
 in my now, but just a little plain damned common sense.  
 "Then keep it to yourself," they said. "Black man's  
 got no business talking common sense."  
 But never was a man could take his common sense  
 and force it to behave, and mine kept plaguing me.  
 Oh, what a lot of questions I could ask  
 of them strange men who blew me all apart.  
 Not white men, boss men,  
 no southern accent there,  
 but colored men like me,  
 with eyes as full of pain—  
 lifted me tenderly,  
 and buried me in Korean soil. I'd ask them calm and gentle,  
 not evil, but just with common sense.

## Notes

1. See, for instance: “The Korean War and American Memory” by James R. Kerin, Jr., unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1994, 42 & 182, or “Death’s Aesthetic Proliferation in Works of Hinojosa” by Donald A. Randolph in *Confluencia*, 1.2, Spring 1986, 42.

2. While *Korean Lullaby* carries no date or copyright notice, it could not have been published in 1950, since a *New York Times* article dated February 1, 1951 (8) describes the American Peace Crusade, the publisher of record for the pamphlet, as a “new organization.” But the contents of the booklet itself clearly suggest that it was published prior to the truce in July 1953.

3. Biographical and bibliographical information on Fast comes from Chapman and Jorgenson, eds., *Contemporary Authors*, New Revision Series, 54, 145-151, Anthony Manousos in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 9, 277-281, and [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com).

4. Acheson is quoted in the New York *Herald Tribune* of February 21, 1951, which is reproduced in Martin Duberman’s *Paul Robeson: A Biography*, 1989, 704. His accusation was confirmed many years later by Ellen W. Schrecker of Yeshiva University in a November 23, 1999 e-mail to Marilyn B. Young of New York University. According to Schrecker, though many prominent Americans involved in the American Peace Crusade were not members of the Communist Party (Cornell Professor Philip Morrison, for instance, who assembled the first atomic bomb on Tinian Island in 1945; Cal Tech Professor Linus Pauling, who had been given the Medal of Merit for his World War Two contributions to rocket research; and former Minnesota Governor Elmer Benson), others such as Fast certainly were. Among other things, the American Peace Crusade advocated withdrawal of American troops from Korea and United Nations representation for the Chinese People’s Republic. See also David Cauter, *The Great Fear*, 469 & 471.

5. Ehrhart and Jason, *Retrieving Bones*, xxxiv. Though the introduction to the book is co-authored, the description of Fast’s poems was written by Jason.

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