

Dale Ritterbusch

Three Poems

Thế Miếu

Nine urns in the temple
courtyard are as much truth
and beauty as anyone can stand
especially on a hot afternoon in Huế.
The Citadel is being rebuilt, and I apologize
noting long deep grooves in the urns
tracing trajectories of small arms fire,
but Hoa is unreceptive—
Americans did nothing, she says,
The French destroyed it all in 1948;
you have nothing to be sorry about.
She knows the story, says nothing
of the massacre, but I want repentance
full measure, for everyone, accountability
meted out with Christian vengeance,
justice finally for the dead, the bastards living.
She suggests mango juice, knowing
it cools my temper, hot-headed American
who knows little, a calm Mahayana acceptance
far beyond my reach. I stop
and touch the bas-reliefs, the bronze cooler
than I'd imagined, move my hands over
the length of a dragon, the intricate scales
of a carp, feel the sharp horns
of a banteng, the soft feathers of a crane
wading along the shore, and a Ch'í-lin—
symbol of absolute goodness—
regales my touch with the wisdom of detachment
its fanciful wings trailing along
a .50 caliber groove that burns my lingering hand

Viet Nam 2000

Note: Nine dynastic urns, cast between 1835-1837, stand outside this temple in the Citadel, site of the Emperor's Palace, at Huế, Viet Nam. The urns weigh as much as two tons and stand about six feet tall. The guide's name, Hoa, means flower in Vietnamese. The Battle of Huế in 1968 destroyed much of what was once the flower of Vietnamese cities. Several thousand civilians suspected of bearing allegiance to the South were killed by NVA and VC forces. A banteng is the wild ox of S.E. Asia. The mythical Ch'i-lin has the wings of a dragon.

Far from the Temple of Heaven

I

In a room of what's left
of the Hanoi Hilton, a guillotine
stands cold and resolute,
a reminder of the promise of blood,
a fleur-de-lis of l'Ancien Régime,
deep memory trope, sculpture of its own
a semblance prefigured
in years of monolithic art
Marxist style in the courtyard
reflecting the glory of men in massive
blocks of stone, the overthrow

If one could go back, reassemble
the disassembled, recall head
to body, the body still warm,
eyes burning with their own
historical dynamic:
Define, then, or delineate
this inherent schematic,
a violent rubric capturing
the sun's light and heat
like blood on vegetation;
explicate the throat, cultivate the pleasure
of the wholeness of a time
filled with the red rambutan,
all of an afternoon
the sweet heart of the fruit
separated from the bloody husk
loving the many heads of separation

the goodness that flows
from dissembling

II

Rambutan in the U.S. is tasteless,
cordy, and the blade as
recognizable symbol, seems in poor taste
as well, and taste is everything.
I've brought back a lotus lamp,
red glass, gold base, almost garish and
certainly out of place, unlike
incense-breathing shrines in Viet Nam, dark
as a chamber of horrors where the red lotus
glows appropriately beneath statues
of monks and saints who placidly
oversee the inseparable

In this land of Dzao, kouprey, Cao Dai
and temple ponds clogged with lotus,
there are symbols of return,
of reconnection, the last joined up
with the long ago, rice wine
swirled with snake blood,
heaven burned to ash, a fine dust
layering the earth where vengeance
conjoins with love for a bitter enemy,
for the enemies of our fathers,
enemies ourselves:
Still, the sun burns hard outside
the walls and my guide says, as a
millipede thick as a snake escapes
across our path, *Be careful,*
they sting, you sicken, maybe die.
He gives chase, cuts it in two with his shoe.

Viet Nam 2000

For John McCrae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row

Grow or blow? Even you couldn't decide
from one hand-written version to the next,
but then it doesn't really matter
given all the times I've dismissed your poem,
along with Rupert Brooke's—one word
would hardly change a thing.

A friend, another Canadian poet,
says I've got it wrong—says
I have to look at your strong poem once again
consider it in context—The Second Battle
of Ypres, first use of chlorine gas,
the death of your good friend, Alexis Helmer,
blown to fodder and you left in the shell hole
to pick up the few remaining bloody bits.

And so I spend an afternoon
in Guelph, your family home,
note your references to going mad, how
easy it would be. And in the notes
upon the wall the mention of your descent,
how you withdrew, spent more time with
your horse, Bonfire, once wounded by a shell,
than fellow soldiers: and not one
poem from the sea-change in your
soldier's heart—not one—your voice
more silent than the wind
blowing through that sea of red.
But then, what was there
left to say and so the better to say nothing
than write another foolish lie.

When I was young my mother brought home a poppy
fastened to her purse; I asked what it was for and

she replied *Remembrance Day* and told me more than I could understand. It's hard to find those poppies anymore, but it's the same with all our wars; our books say less than nothing the heart does not already know.

After your war it's said
one could walk down the streets
of any city in the western world
and see pock-marked faces
of soldiers bearing scars
of mustard gas, of chlorine burns—
they still teach the trick
of pissing in a handkerchief,
holding that urine soaked cloth
over nose and mouth if not equipped
with a protective mask. In the museum
at Edgewood Arsenal, one can still see
gas masks designed for horses—
grow or *blow* it doesn't matter,
our history willfully buried, as it must.

Still, I love the wind
blowing through a bed
of poppies I grow in the backyard,
their color like blood coursing
through the summer sun, your lines,
like trenches, carved across the fields
of Europe, still visible from the air
after all these years,
the earth unwilling to relinquish
line after line we fall back on
when we have so little else that holds.

Dale Ritterbusch is author of the poetry collection *Lessons Learned*. The poems that appear here are from his forthcoming collection, *Far from the Temple of Heaven* (Black Moss Press). Professor Ritterbusch is Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Department of English & Fine Arts at the United States Air Force Academy for 2004-05. He is a frequent contributor to **WLA**.