

Commentary by W.D. Ehrhart

Carrying the Ghost of Ray Catina

C*arrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War* has had a long and successful life for an anthology of poetry. It has been in print almost continuously since 1985, first with Avon

Books and since 1989 with Texas Tech University Press. It has reached thousands of readers, and still sells several hundred copies each year.

Inevitably, the book has some glaring omissions. No female veterans are represented, though as Lynda Van Devanter said to me when she and Joan Furey were preparing *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*, “Of course they wouldn’t send you their poems. You’re a man.” David Connolly and Doug Anderson had not yet published their first books, and thus are not represented. And of course, it doesn’t contain a number of wonderful poems written since 1985 by contributors such as John Balaban, D.F. Brown, Dale Ritterbusch, and others who have continued to produce new work.

If I had the book to do again, I would therefore do a number of things differently, but the only actual errors I’ve ever come upon in all these years were some egregious proofreading mistakes in the Avon edition that I was able to correct in the Texas Tech edition. I’ve mostly been satisfied that I did the best I could do with what I had available at the time.

Not long ago, however, I stumbled upon yet another egregious error, this time not of proofreading but of fact. The discovery began with a July 2004 e-mail from a long-time friend, the poet Linda Lerner of New York City. Linda is a great supporter of Vietnam War literature and knows the field well. “I thought of you,” she wrote, “when I got a book by Alan Catlin called *Ghost Road*. On the back cover it says: ‘He has been anthologized extensively, most prominently in *Carrying the Darkness*, edited by W.D. Ehrhart,’ but I have your book and he’s not in there.”

I’d never heard of Alan Catlin, and he’s certainly not in my anthology, so I wrote to Scott Douglass at Main Street Rag, publisher of Catlin’s 2000 *Ghost Road*. Douglass replied that the jacket information was supplied by Catlin and he had taken Catlin at his word. “If it helps,” he added, Catlin “lives in upstate New York. Any two-poem contributors in the Albany/Schenectady area?”

With this information, I went through the book looking for two-poem contributors from Schenectady. Only one name fit both criteria: Ray Catina.

Readers familiar with *Carrying the Darkness* may remember Catina as the author of “Negotiations” and “Philosophy.” In the Notes on Contributors section, compiled from information provided directly by the poets, one finds that Catina was born in 1948 and served as a U.S. Army infantryman in Vietnam, 1969-70.

I checked and re-checked my paperwork. Neither the author’s biographical notes, handwritten by Catina, nor the permission form signed by Catina make any mention of an Alan Catlin, and the check for the permissions fee was made out to Ray Catina and sent to Ray Catina. But the address was Schenectady, New York. Moreover, Catina wrote in 1985 that he “occasionally tends bar in upstate New York,” while the back jacket of *Ghost Road* says that Catlin “has been working as a bartender in Albany, New York” for the last twenty years.

Armed with this information, I checked my *Poets & Writers* directory, found an address for Catlin—in Schenectady—and wrote to him, presenting the information I had found. Confronted with the evidence, Catlin readily admitted he himself is not a veteran and that he had invented “Ray Catina,” adding that “it was a strange time in my life.”

Maybe it was. I’ve had strange times in my life, too. And I’ve got no problem with pseudonyms. Consider Elia or Mark Twain or Ellis Peters. Nor have I a problem with poetic personas. Consider Bryan Alec Floyd’s *The Long War Dead* or William Childress’s “The Soldiers.” But I do have a problem with someone who invents a fictitious person with a fictitious military history, publishes under that name, receives mail under that name, cashes checks under that name, and never mentions that it’s a pseudonym, allowing me to propagate false information in two different editions of *Carrying the Darkness*, and never admitting to the falsehood until nearly two decades later when he’s found out. As I told Catlin, “Not cool.”

So, for the record, those of you with copies of *Carrying the Darkness*, please amend your Credits, Table of Contents, the author’s name on page 69, and the Notes on Contributors, striking out the name of Ray Catina and replacing it with Alan Catlin. And please accept my apology for allowing, however inadvertently, so many readers for so many years to think that Ray Catina was a real person who had fought in Vietnam.

W.D. Ehrhart teaches English and history at the Haverford School in suburban Philadelphia. His most recent book is *The Madness of It All: Essays on War, Literature and American Life*.