

FAR FROM
THE TEMPLE
OF HEAVEN



Dale Ritterbusch

Commentary by Thomas McGuire

The Flow of War and Time Measured in the River-Run of Dale Ritterbusch's Lyric Poetry

Norman Maclean closes *A River Runs Through It*, his classic tale of family, love, fishing and devastating violence, with one of the most unforgettable lines in recent literature: "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it." Maclean's figure of the river might have served as an apt epigraph for Dale Ritterbusch's *Far From the Temple of Heaven* (Black Moss Press, 2006). But the current running through Ritterbusch's impressive second collection, and indeed the bulk of his oeuvre, is the river of war. In the latest instantiation of Ritterbusch's magnanimous and still-expanding lyric vision, this Wisconsin poet and war vet has extended the figure of a mythopoeic river running through the gapping wound of a world scarred by and always and everywhere somehow suffering from war.

Though Ritterbusch has earned a reputation as a masterful narrative poet, many of his poems also share affinities with the lyric tradition. What I am thinking of here is the lyric's affinity for turning away, not merely from ordinary space and time, but also from the language and syntax we use to cope with the quotidian. With Ritterbusch the lyric tendency produces a kind of language and grammar of transcendence that is at once buoyant, yet somehow still rooted in the actual mess and violence of the here-and-now. What often emerges from Ritterbusch's verse, then, is a kind of hard-charging story-telling that is also often replete with lyric density, affect, and uplift. Much like Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, Ritterbusch's poetry thus bestows a sense of poetic intimacy and four-square, hard-won wisdom, two qualities which course through the verbal euphoria and mouth music present in all the richly varied confluences, placid pools, riffles, and tributaries of Ritterbusch's river-run of verse, a stream of exquisite, often intoxicating reflections on kayaking, fatherhood, spousal intimacy, fishing, and baseball.

Make no mistake about it, however; Ritterbusch's latest collection stands as far more than a well-wrought urn populated by precious reflections on domesticity

and sport. Wide learning and a profound philosophical turn imbue many of Ritterbusch's deeply contemplative pieces with the kind of heft and specific gravity one often encounters in the poetry of Szymborska or Zbigniew Herbert. Ritterbusch frequently strives to parse some truth about the human condition, but the striving seems natural, effortless; one of the central observations about our common lot that Ritterbusch continually finds inventive ways of expressing is how wars have a way of enduring, running on and on like a timeless river, and continuing long after the cessation of hostilities. Ritterbusch expressed this insight in one his early poems ("war is not something you come back from / whether you were killed or not ... / the resurrection is only a story for the gods"). At several junctures in *Lessons Learned*, his first collection, Ritterbusch variously explored this difficult truth. In *Far From the Temple of Heaven* this theme once again permeates and sets the tone for much of the collection, but it is a theme that has ripened and mellowed with time.

The most obvious war that channels through both of Ritterbusch's collections is the tragedy of Vietnam and its aftermath. During that conflict, Ritterbusch served as an army lieutenant and liaison officer in Thailand where he coordinated aerial mining of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In *Lessons Learned*, Ritterbusch distilled that wartime experience via a poetic shot through with extreme violence and lamentation, a poetic filled with what W.D. Ehrhart has called "outrage, decency, and a sadness deeper than dreams." In his reading of Ritterbusch's first collection, Ehrhart rightly celebrates Ritterbusch's capacity for lambasting American politicians and society alike—first, for so gravely miscalculating and then forgetting the cost of sending young men and women off to war. But that earlier collection is notable for other qualities as well—an indebtedness to a venerable tradition of war poetry, a penchant for exploring a novel kind of postmodern documentary realism, and deft formal control—qualities which continue to inform the poetry of *Far From the Temple of Heaven*.

In *Lessons Learned*, Ritterbusch made it his mission, it seems, to work in the tradition of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon by writing not only a poetry of warning, but also a vatic kind of verse that dared to speak the unspeakable. Thus, in early poems such as "To A Poet Who Disdains the Themes of War" and "Geography Lesson," Ritterbusch fine-tuned his self-proclaimed commitment to breaking "the silence of the world / in response to inarticulate horrors." The result was a startling corpus of hard-driving, wide-eyed, and disturbingly graphic representation of warfare's devastating effects on the human body and psyche: "In the sun their bodies started / to swell – parts of bodies hung / in the trees, one arm swinging / like a Mexican piñata." In numerous such passages, Ritterbusch announced a moral commitment to showing things at their worst. The ancient

Greeks referred to this type of unflinching realistic depiction as *Deinosis*. Homer practices precisely such a poetic of violence in *The Iliad*. Likewise in this regard, one often feels as though one is reading a kind of postmodern Homer with early Ritterbusch. For these two poets separated by millennia, war inevitably exacts an astounding psychological and bodily toll. The overpowering effect of this in Ritterbusch is that he cuts down any illusions readers may have about the neatness or sweetness of modern warfare (notwithstanding overly optimistic official rhetoric about “precision warfare,” “smart bombs” and “surgical strikes”).

In *Far From the Temple of Heaven*, Ritterbusch continues to calculate the cost of war, but absent from this collection is much of the battlefield *Deinosis*. Just as the Vietnam War continues to course through subterranean recesses of our society and our collective consciousness, the war painfully courses through the unique personal memory and consciousness from which these recent poems emerge. In these new poems, the lingering effects of war resurface vestigially in subtle but highly intriguing places and forms. What emerges in this collection, then, is a more contemplative, philosophical and stylistically mature look at political violence and its aftermath. This is not to suggest an absence of anger or outrage in this collection, but Ritterbusch’s previously white-hot ire and astonishment at mankind’s inability to learn from past folly has been tempered and worked into a more linguistically nuanced and formally rich presentation.

Ritterbusch’s plaintive anti-war jeremiads are not only necessary but also salubrious, particularly in a contemporary America in which most of my nineteen-year old students cannot identify the historical significance of names such as Ho Chi Minh or Westmoreland; nor can they tell me how many combined American and Vietnamese lives were claimed by the war. Indeed, in what is all too often the morally tepid landscape of contemporary American poetry, Ritterbusch stands as an eloquent and forceful voice crying in the wilderness. His powerful and unique voice implores us not to trivialize or obscure war’s actual cost. Consider “World Series, 1968, Southeast Asia,” a poem which points not only to wars past, but also present conflicts, by incorporating one of Ritterbusch’s most potent pet tropes: baseball. Here the great American pastime becomes a chilling metaphor for war. In the high-stakes slugfest that was, and is still is, Vietnam, the fallen are too facilely, too quickly forgotten. Ritterbusch sums up this unacceptable truth when he writes, “... the game dies like the loss of a friend / one has no time to mourn and that so easy anyway / in a game where deaths are recorded like outs / and neither the dead nor the living keep score.”

But even for soldiers lucky enough to come back from war, they will likely find, like Ritterbusch, that wholesale resurrection is only a story for the gods. Despite this insight, Ritterbusch’s vision nevertheless offers the possibility, indeed the

hope, of occasional release and transcendence, for this is precisely what many of Ritterbusch's latest poems enact and inspire: transcendence and release. In reading this collection, I am strangely reminded of what Robert Morgan has called Hemingway's "greatest poem of war": "The Big Two-Hearted River," a story in which Nick Adams partially succeeds in achieving liberation from the memory and trauma of war by slowly reintegrating himself into nature and cultivating a kind of at-one-ness with the pleasure and *terra firma* of sheer physicality and concrete existence. Similarly, the consistent speaker of *Far From the Temple of Heaven* discovers myriad ways to be at home in the world once again, even if only temporarily. He achieves a certain unburdening through the pursuit of down-to-earth pleasures: canoeing; joking about the pretensions of art even as he recognizes its absolute necessity; playing catch with his daughter; and, finally, returning to the well-rooted marriage bed.

In some of the collection's most powerful poems, Ritterbusch's speaker marvels and rejoices over the fact he exists at all and inhabits a body and soul still capable of pleasure-seeking, affect, and authentic love. "Green Tea" exemplifies the kind of exuberant celebration of the body and quiet pleasures that counterbalance the collection's more jolting ruminations about war and its grip on human experience:

There is this tea
 I have sometimes
 Pan Long Ying Hao,
 so tightly curled
 it looks like tiny roots
 gnarled, a greenish-gray.
 When it steeps, it opens
 the way you woke this morning,
 stretching, your hands behind
 your head, back arched,
 toes pointing, a smile steeped
 in ceremony, a celebration,
 the reaching of your arms.

Here and elsewhere, it is as though knowledge of the war as well as a certain distancing from it have whetted Ritterbusch's sense of perception, renewed his sense of wonder. In this regard, he is indeed like Odysseus, the exile come home who sees Ithaca afresh. In fact, the end of the poem "Odysseus" registers such an experience:

...so I went back
 retracing the steps
 I'd taken
 and found someone
 more like you
 than you yourself
 when I got home.
 How wondrous
 to relive one's journey
 and find all one set out to find
 right there
 in a place once left behind.

At such moments Ritterbusch is at his most reassuring, if not his best in terms of his distinctive lyricism. He suggests there is a possibility for some degree of normalcy after war, and that some fortunate souls do indeed grow into greater wisdom by enduring the sufferings of war and the troubled wanderings of the journey home. But just as quickly as Ritterbusch settles into a sense of stability and repose by suggesting a kind of successful homecoming, subsequent poems almost invariably undercut any notion that Ritterbusch is comfortable inhabiting an inauthentic pastoral idyll.

Like Homer, who has Odysseus listen to the story of Troy and weep at the feet of the singing bard Demodokus, the consciousness behind these poems ruefully acknowledges the uncanny intersection between extreme violence and poetic song: “[it] is the god’s work, spinning threads of death / through the lives of mortal men, and all to make a song for those who come” (collection epigraph excerpted from the *Odyssey*). Emerging from this realization, many of Ritterbusch’s lyrics in *Far From The Temple of Heaven* reveal a creative consciousness that is repeatedly struck by the symbiotic relationship between art and the lethality of war. In Ritterbusch’s verse, this sense gives rise to myriad intimations of mortality. Like the speaker of Wallace Steven’s “Sunday Morning,” Ritterbusch recognizes how often the truth that “Death is the mother of beauty” holds sway. The trick is getting such intimations into verse, and Ritterbusch very often succeeds superbly in doing just that.

Ritterbusch also realizes that the truculent waters of armed conflict course as dangerously and destructively through memory as they do through the political world of here-and-now. Working from this knowledge, Ritterbusch constantly casts a cold eye toward the long reach of war’s shadow by creating a series of startling juxtapositions in which the experience of political conflict collides with

the quotidian in the most unexpected ways. To this end, Ritterbusch subtly draws images from the world of ordinary experience and merges them with traces of battle: fireflies burst like “tiny explosions... marking time like tracers”; F-16s bound for the war in Kosovo elegantly rise “like cranes” across a television screen; and the secret pleasures of exploring a sphagnum bog tucked between tamarack and black spruce devolves into a kind of return of the repressed as thoughts of the “acid-black” bog-water and spongy sphagnum give way to images of “another war in another time,” images in which First World War surgeons or medics employ sphagnum to dress wounds because it had “three times the absorbency / of cotton, three times the speed at soaking blood.” And then there is the poem “Canoeing Down the Quetico, 20 Years After,” a piece which demonstrates how quickly a serene canoeing trip down a river two decades after the war can turn into a nightmare recollection of combat: “Dragon flies... always here / outlasting everything, perhaps / even that flight of choppers / always there, passing overhead, / one combat assault after another / scudding across the years / holding onto the sky/ and it won’t let go.” Here and elsewhere Ritterbusch helps the unseeing or unconvinced understand that, on many levels, war is indeed a river that courses and churns through our lives in often unfathomable ways.

Such is the progression of this carefully-crafted collection as it oscillates between the inescapable fact of war’s central position in human experience and the longing to find some semblance of repose, a kind of separate peace in a world blighted by extreme violence. Ultimately in this collection, there emerges a predominant sense of hard-won consolation and the appearance, if not the genuine presence, of equipoise. In spite of the “[the] outrage, decency, and sadness deeper than dreams” that continue to mark Ritterbusch’s voice and vision, several poems in *Far From The Temple of Heaven* achieve a sort of Franciscan gentleness or even Buddhist compassion and quietism. Such qualities emerge from the very satisfactory piece “Indian Summer Grasshoppers,” another poem reminiscent of “Big Two-Hearted River.” Like Hemingway, Ritterbusch has much to say that is compelling, even profound, about grasshoppers: how they swarm and blacken the tarmac where the speaker rides his bike in fall; how in tenth-grade biology class, the speaker and his buddies “hunted them unmercifully, pinned them to a cardboard mat, labeled them and got our A’s.” But like Nick Adams, who urges the medium-brown hoppers to fly away and escape death, Ritterbusch’s speaker indicates a desire to avoid unnecessary killing. He chooses to live at one with other creatures; he eschews casually, needlessly destroying them: “Now I swerve to miss them, / preferring to watch them rise / and sing, a breath of autumn / riding on their wings.” Such lines could only emanate from an imagination that has come to believe not simply in the possibility, but also the absolute necessity of fostering

release and transcendence. This is a mature, sagacious sensibility which has clearly learned invaluable lessons about love, death, fatherhood, memory, mutability, and, above all, the national pastime, baseball. A sensibility that, in the poem "Some Things," can declare with hard-earned authority and assent: "Some things stay forever, / some things last the lifespan / of a mayfly, iridescent / for a moment, even less..." It is also a sensibility that well knows how "we drift in wakes / of other boats, pass a temple / in disrepair, a monument to war / in the distance" and that, as "one war melds into the next," the best bet for outsmarting and outfacing the kind of violence that hurts us into poetry in the first place is to find a way to mimic Odysseus's homecoming—laughing, smiling, kissing one's children, making love, but never forgetting to weep for one's own fallen men and fallen Troy—yes, weeping and above all singing, singing songs that rise like hoppers in fall, singing while one still can, yet knowing full well that all things merge, meld, and are finally carried away by one great river or another.

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