

W . D . E H R H A R T

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## Praying at the Altar

I like pagodas.  
There's something—I don't know—  
secretive about them,  
soul-soothing, mind-easing.  
Inside, if only for a moment,  
life's clutter disappears.

Once, long ago, we destroyed one:  
collapsed the walls  
'til the roof caved in.  
Just a small one, all by itself  
in the middle of nowhere,  
and we were young. And bored.  
Armed to the teeth.  
And too much time on our hands.

Now whenever I see a pagoda,  
I always go in.  
I'm not a religious man,  
but I light three joss sticks,  
bow three times to the Buddha,

pray for my wife and daughter.  
I place the burning sticks  
in the vase before the altar.

In Vung Tau, I was praying  
at the Temple of the Sleeping Buddha  
when an old monk appeared.  
He struck a large bronze bell  
with a wooden mallet.  
He was waking up the spirits  
to receive my prayers.

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**W. D. EHRHART**, a Marine Corps veteran of the Vietnam War, teaches history and English at the Haverford School in Pennsylvania. He is the subject of *The Last Time I Dreamed About the War: Essays on the Life and Writing of W. D. Ehrhart*, Jean-Jacques Malo, ed., McFarland & co., Inc., 2014.