

THOMAS G. MCGUIRE

Feet of the Messenger
a Conversation with H.C. Palmer

H.C. Palmer grew up in Chanute, Kansas and finished high school in Atchison. He was an all-state athlete in both football and basketball. He went on to play football at the University of Kansas, where he was a starter during his junior and senior year. He attended medical school at the University of Kansas Medical School. Following his first year of residency in internal medicine, he was drafted, along with 1500 other American doctors and eventually served in Vietnam as a battalion surgeon. During his medical career, H.C. was team physician for Harding College, a member of the NAIA Medical Aspects of Sports Committee, Team Physician for the 1973 USA All-Star Basketball team touring the People's Republic of China, Chief Medical Officer for the USA team at the 1979 World University Games in Mexico City, and Team physician for the San Diego Clippers from 1982-85 when the Clippers moved their franchise to Los Angeles. A person of many interests, H.C. raised registered Polled Hereford Cattle for 12 years. In 1981 the ranch's pen of three yearling bulls won First Place at the National Western Stock Show in Denver. He also held a private pilot's license and logged over 550 hours before he left Liberal, Kansas to return, as he says, to civilization. Retired from medicine now for five years, he has worked with veterans in the Kansas City area, helping them write to tell their stories. H.C.'s poems have appeared in many literary journals and the national on-line journal, *Poetry Daily*. He is an assistant poetry editor for *Narrative Magazine*. His first collection, *Feet of the Messenger*, was recently published by BkMk Press and the University of Missouri, Kansas City. H.C. and his wife Valerie live in the suburbs of Kansas City.

Interviewer: Thanks for sitting down with WLA. I'd like to begin by asking how you got your start as a war poet. You've been writing poetry for about a decade I understand, but you came back from the Vietnam War in 1966. What inspired you to start writing verse about that conflict after all those years?

H.C. Palmer: As I say in my book's *Acknowledgements*, the appearance of a Vietnam veteran in a fly fishing story I was writing in the late 1990's surprised me. I'd put the war away, from the day my flight landed at Travis Air Force Base outside San Francisco. The only time I talked about it, or listened to another veteran talk about it was when I was on a trip to spend time with my friend who was in-country when I was. He was a couple hundred miles away, a doctor at a C-team in the 5th Special Forces. When we were together, I listened more than talked. He is the most decorated physician from the war. The stories he told were unbelievable. He was close to death many times. In my book of poems, he is "My friend, Captain Lanny Hunter," I was back at Division headquarters, just 13 miles from Saigon the last part of my tour. At the time, we could move around in country once a month or so. We were able to spend some time together—you could say, on short R and R's in Saigon and Pleiku. My friend is a terrific writer, and six or seven years after coming home, he had a novel published, *Living Dogs* and *Dead Lions* simultaneously, by very prestigious presses, one in New York and the other in Great Britain. Later, he wrote and published a wonderful memoir, *My Soul to Keep*. When I told my friend about the fly fishing story, he challenged me to continue writing. That was thirty-five years after coming home. If it weren't for him, I doubt that I would have ever attempted writing a poem.

Before you turned to poetry, you wrote a good number of short stories, many of them about vets and fly fishing. Can you tell us a bit about those stories and how writing them has informed your poetry?

There are three or four stories about the Kansas plains and life there and just as many fly fishing or hunting stories that include a Vietnam veteran character who is pissed-off and expresses that emotion by attacking what, in his childhood environment, was his place, but while he was away, there was destruction of at least a part of that place by what plutocrats and corporations consider "progress."

Are you still writing fiction?

I still dabble at fiction, but mostly I've gone back through my stories to steal scenes and narrative as the backbone for many of my poems. So the fiction has more than informed my poems. Stolen and condensed, my fiction has become my poems.

Given your experience as a fiction writer, it's not surprising that you have terrific command of the narrative poem and prose poem form, but you're no slouch when it comes to a number of other verse forms. Your collection has impressive formal range; for example, it contains several remarkable lyric poems. "Bird-Hunting The Tall Grass" comes quickly to mind in this regard. What kinds of imaginative opportunities or challenges did you discover as you began venturing beyond the pale of narrative?

"Bird-Hunting The Tall Grass" was my first published poem. It came to me from a day of hunting quail when, on a covey rise, I shot a bird that was very close, and she was so blown apart I didn't keep her because there was no breast meat left. My dog found the two other birds down, and after I took them from her, I couldn't get the sticky feathers and blood of the first little bird from my hands. I vividly remember, when I washed those body juices and feathers away and my hands came out of the spring creek shining clean, I thought of the war and the times we couldn't wash the fabric and debris and body fluids from our hands. That bird hunt was in 2007 and appeared in *The Flint Hills Review*, a wonderful college press at Emporia State University, at the eastern gateway to the Flint Hills. I never considered if it was a lyric poem or not, but it seemed the best way to construct it. I'm pretty much an uneducated poet when it comes to credentials. I'd been reading poetry several years before that, and I had been trying to imitate, as best I could, several poets. Among them: B.H. Fairchild, Gary Snyder, Jim Harrison, Mary Oliver, and Ted Kooser. I was trying to get a feel for their work—especially rhythm—and then sound. I don't care much for poems that, when read aloud, don't dance and sing. I like poetry that means something, that might lead the reader to consider something she or he has never considered before.

Over the past decade, I've taught a few writing warrior workshops for veterans and creative writing seminars for active duty personnel. In these encounters, I've always been struck by what health care professionals (combat nurses, medics, docs, psychologists) who've served in theater bring to the table. Very often military health care personnel are incredibly resilient even as they carry deep

wounds from repeated exposure to trauma. These folks are frequently some of the best writers in the workshop. I have deep respect for combat medical personnel and what they do, but it seems their experience and stories of war are not told enough or if they get told, they're underappreciated. What's your sense of this?

The resilience of doctors and nurses and psychologists and psychiatrists (Bill Nash comes to mind) is something I'm thinking about myself. How could I have possibly tried to reconstruct the face of my southern California medic (in "Five Notes From War") if I hadn't prepared, perhaps 50 corpses, for autopsy, in my job as a "diener" (morgue attendant) that I undertook to make some extra bucks while I was a medical student? My job as a diener required, among other skills, the ability to remove an intact brain from the skull of the dead patient without making it impossible for an undertaker to restore some version of normality. In fact, with my medic, the process started rather nonchalantly, and when I realized I was singing Beach Boy songs, a terrible wave of guilt came over me. At that moment, I hated me, the war of course, and especially our government and generals, who I knew damn well had been lying to us. So, I'd say, if we have resilience, it's because we've all done this kind of thing before...we all know when people are dead, there really is no one "in there." But, the horrors of war, right there in your own hands, kids dying and looking in your eyes as you work on them, is not something I (we) can ever forget. It's haunting. *Forever.*

I can't think of many standout voices in war literature who speak from the healer's or medical professional's perspective. Vera Brittain and Joan Furey quickly come to my mind as exceptional voices, but what other writers' voices from the military medical world should we become familiar with?

Well, although he was never a soldier, I'd have to start with Jonathan Shay. I read *Achilles in Vietnam* when it came out in 1994, and it changed my life. My copy of that wonderful book is dog-eared, underlined, and worn. His book and Victor Frankl's work have been very important to me. Rightly so, the medical emphasis lately has been on moral injury and veteran suicide, and before that, PTSD. Dr. Bill Nash is an expert on moral injury. Dr. Shay coined the term. Bryan Doerries' work with the classic Greek war literature is exponentially healing. Of course Shay and Doerries are not veterans, but a book that comes to mind right off, is by a Special Forces Lieutenant Colonel who worked in Iraq as an interrogator. He was the only American in a cadre of several Iraqis and Kurds and his job was to make certain there was no physical "torture." The author is LTC Bill Edmonds. His book is *god is not here*, from Pegasus.

How do you account for the privileging of the “hunter’s” voice in war literature over the “healer’s” voice?

The 99%ers don't want to know anything that's really disturbing, but they are used to TV-portrayed violence, which of course, has no personal meaning. And, beyond the KIA casualties, unless the dead are family members or friends, they have no interest in the psychological damage of war. The DoD has some interest, but to help our guys and gals heal, or at least, as one of my Muslim friends once told me, “Learn to negotiate their brokenness,” would be a difficult task. It would also be so expensive and labor intensive, it will probably never happen. Once a soldier goes through boot camp, his psyche has changed. Boot camp begins by sucking out a recruit's soul and replacing it with a discipline to do the unthinkable, to dehumanize and kill quickly and efficiently and at the same time be completely loyal to his/her squad or platoon. (If we did not teach this, we could not possibly compete in combat or win a war.) Here's the problem, and you know as well as I. Our combat soldiers are never prepared to return to civilian life. Usually a couple of days after serving in a war zone they are shipped home, and if they're not in a regular/active unit, returned to civilian life, home life, etc. There is no debriefing, no de-boot-camping and just as egregiously, their families are expected to make adjustments necessary to accommodate. This just doesn't work.

Contrast to Doerries' and the Greeks' “Citizen Soldiers,” I think those epic plays he's re-written are all about healing. You remember he says the Greek theaters were in close proximity to the hospitals so the injured “warriors,” if you will, could come watch and participate. I really like the idea of citizen soldiers. Right now, Israel has its citizen soldiers and their incidence of psychological problems following combat are much less than ours.

Also, I'm a big believer in the notion that “betrayal” is the primary cause for psychological war injuries, especially, moral injury. That betrayal can come from a government, or a general or field grade officer or even oneself when, for example, he or she takes on the responsibility, guilt, and especially shame, that comes from losing a buddy in combat—*survivor guilt*.

In your *Acknowledgements* you mention one of your medical school professors, Dr. Delp, had seen action at the Battle of the Bulge. Upon your return from Vietnam, he reached out to ask how you were doing. Can I ask you to share your response to Dr. Delp's question? I'm also curious how that encounter has informed your approach to writing and how you interact with veterans.

My response to Dr. Delp's question was just as I said in the book: "I'm just fine." I'd made an unconscious choice to never think about the war again. Now that you ask, I think my thoughts were focused on returning to the residency and I certainly was tired of the war. Sometimes I would watch the news to see what was going on around Da Nang, because Billy (who appears on page 17 in the collection) was still there, and we were very close as kids growing up. Dr. Delp never asked me again, although I'm certain he was prompting me. When I was on his service, we had morning talks in his office, before he came to the ward to make rounds, talks to update him on the night reports. Occasionally, he would ask something like, "Good to be home?" or "Everything going satisfactorily?" But he never asked me direct questions about the war. He was a stoic guy, my idol, the best, smartest, most 'artful' doctor I ever met. I sometimes wonder now, if he needed to talk as much as I did. I may have let him down.

Can war poetry help our species wise up about what it means to go to war? Full disclosure here: This is a thorny question for me because, on one hand, I've invested much of my adult life writing about the problem of violence and the literature of war, but I also realize that very little has changed since the *Iliad* was composed nearly three millennia ago—since Homer's time, we as a species seem to have learned little from the "lessons" of the true war poems. How do you see these matters?

Was it Auden who said, "Poetry makes nothing happen"? My great concern now is that many of my friends are not watching the Burns/Novick Vietnam series. And that it's not being taught in our schools. Lynn Novick told me in a Q & A session a week ago that they will have a curriculum for "middle school and up." My neighbor girl, who is a senior in a very prestigious high school in western Kansas City, Kansas, answered, when I asked her the dates of the American War in Vietnam, "Somewhere, either right before or after World War I."

I've long advocated for war literature being required reading for high schoolers. How can a democracy function without its citizens knowing something about the cost and consequences of war? A good dose of war lit would no doubt give your neighbor something to consider—a subject that she's probably not considered much. But your neighbor is not unusual. Young cadets in my classes are often unaware of how long our nation has continuously been at war or how insidiously the aftermath of war spiders through our lives and society.

I told the neighbor girl to check out the dates of the Vietnam War, then, a couple of days ago, I asked her again and she said, “After World War I, right?” “That is correct,” I said.

I appreciate your collection because it’s keenly aware how war ripples and bleeds into our culture and individual lives, in so many and often intangible ways. It’s possible perhaps to argue that every poem in your new book is somehow haunted by war, and yet there are several poems—very fine poems—that on the surface seem to have nothing to do with war. The way you toggle back and forth so deftly between the experience of war and quotidian experiences that may seem to have nothing to do with the realm of armed conflict reminds me of one the greatest war stories of all time, “Big Two-Hearted River.” Hemingway described that tale this way: “It was a story that was all about coming back from the war, but there was no mention of war in it.” Were you aiming for a similar effect as you crafted your collection and included the non-war poems?

I never considered Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River” as I was writing the poems that refer to fish or fishing, but I won’t deny, I’ve read that story many times. I know of its origin and, subconsciously, its presence is there. When I started writing poems, I never considered they might work as an integrated collection. What I suppose came out then, is a kind of connection by contrast, or inference, that of finding beauty in most things, even war, and then, what I must have done, unconsciously, to offset the horrors of war with the beauty of place and maybe, one might say, a kind of healing that comes from that. I was not—in these years that I’ve hammered these poems into something I hope resembles “craft”—motivated to have some semblance of unity, or interwovenness. If that has happened, it came from inside my head and heart without forethought. I guess I could say that I was surprised at what came out of me, but the war, and my contempt for war, is never far from my mind.

One striking example of a piece from your collection that makes no apparent mention of war is your poem “Ode to the Rio Grande Cutthroat,” a piece that at first glance seems to be simply about the tenacity of the species *Oncorhynchus clarki virginalis* and its ability to outface and outlast mankind’s kingdoms and civilizations. And yet that trout poem pulses with the drumbeat of war left over from several other nearby poems where you deftly fuse the subjects of fishing and war. Can you say something about the angler’s angle in your writing?

You know, this poem came to me, first, from having fished for this beautiful subspecies of cutthroat, and then, from some research resulting in my concern for this specific environment where the Rio Grande cutthroat has always lived. I very much like Wendell Berry's notion that destruction of our environment is driven by disrespect and therefore, desecration of place, or places...and that desecration is most successfully accomplished by what is now the humanization of capitalism and its excessive greed and, therefore, exponential profits that come from war. Now, there has been no war, with the kind of destruction we see in modern wars, in New Mexico's Rio Grande Valley, or Montana's Madison Valley. But the damaging of habitat by careless farmers and ranchers, or more especially mining and timber companies, can be equally destructive. It's just on a smaller scale and it takes longer to desecrate, but the damage is done. So, there is a war here, and it's not over.

Absolutely. But for all the damage we've done to our watersheds, we sometimes succeed in recuperating the wreckage. I'm thinking specifically of the restoration of the Arkansas River here in my backyard. At any rate, I admire your fishing poems. They remind me of that great long line of fly fishing poems written by the likes of W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, and others. For you, what is it about fly fishing that helps you figure the intricacies of creative process and craft?

Sometimes I imagine writing poetry is like fly fishing—with words and lines. I cast a line out, let it float with the current, then strip it back in. I'll cast again and again above the fish's rise to place a fly in the right crease so the current moves it to the fish. It's the ultimate presentation that is difficult for me—easier on the stream than on paper.

Can we return to Wendell Berry for a moment? If he is correct in linking desecration of place to the widespread environmental destruction plaguing our planet, how would you define the essence of a healthy or generative sense of place—a respectful sense of place that would serve to counter and eventually reverse environmental damage?

I believe if one has not found their place in childhood, they are operating at a psychological and spiritual disadvantage from which they never recover. Wendell Berry wrote that his growth and effort to become a poet had “everything to do with discovering where one is in relation to one's *place* (native or chosen), to its natural and human neighborhood, to its mystery and sanctity ...” I believe this to be true for all of

us who practice the art of our work or calling. Without relationship to *place*, we are not fully creative or connected.

How can we foster this sort of relationship—a more reverent, non-violent attitude toward place?

I'm a real believer that unless children are taught about special places, they will never be able to recover from that loss—never develop that deep connection—never even know they've lost something. Visiting the Grand Canyon, or the Flint Hills, as an adult just won't get it done. I return to the Flint Hills as often as I can, and I usually take one of my grandchildren with me. I tell them stories and teach them about the environment. I'd emphasize the importance of storytelling. My summers at Camp Wood were made richer by storytelling. I am convinced that the telling of stories is vital to place.

***Teach the children.* Your poetry is obviously grounded in a profound respect for the Flint Hills and Kansas prairies—a kind of deep ecology sense of place reminiscent of Gary Snyder. But your approach to place also reminds me of Mary Oliver's work where she explores a sense of place that is bound up with human relationships, especially familial ties (including the writers she considers family, like Whitman). I'm interested whether it was some parent or uncle who schooled you in the importance of place. Or was it on your own that you discovered the importance of cultivating one's own good place (what Hemingway called *querencia*)?**

At a workshop in Vermont in the mid-90s, Stephen Bodio taught me about *querencia*, that place in the bull ring where the bull feels as safe as he possibly could. I don't believe there were any *querencias* in Vietnam. My discovery of *place* began when my father drove me into the Flint Hills to Camp Wood near Elmdale. For two weeks in 1944, I roamed one section in the deep-rooted, tall grass prairie that knits together the top layer of a 250-million-year-old limestone deposit. At Camp Wood, I learned to identify and name plants, animals and rock formations. Things like sideoats grama grass, Jerusalem artichoke, shagbark hickory, scarlet tanagers, five-lined skinks, massasaugas, chert and that Permian limestone. I learned I was connected to all of them. I learned I could create by writing or painting or braiding a lanyard or chipping flint rock carefully, to craft a tool or forcefully make fire. I discovered my consciousness and connectivity with the natural world at Camp Wood. It was inevitable the Flint

Hills would become my *place*. These camping expeditions were during World War II, so I had a sense that where I camped was something totally different than where some of my high school athlete-idols were camping, like in the forests of France or under blasted palm trees somewhere in the Pacific. I relished those times and still have vivid memories of being there.

You say there were no *querencias* in Vietnam, but in some of your writing you've discussed how your sense of the Flint Hills once converged with memories of Vietnam. Can you talk about that convergence please?

Maybe I can answer this question by referencing something you may know about from your study of Irish literature and culture, the notion of “thin place.” Presence in a *thin place* is a Celtic notion. It does not necessarily happen in our *place*, but is, for at least a time, where we are close to something more—where we touch the certainty of *Being*. I sensed momentary *thin places* when I was a Battalion Surgeon in Vietnam, then after the war and over the past 45 years at unexpected moments in various surroundings but most of the time, here in the Flint Hills.

A few years ago, I had a “thin place” experience that brought together the Flint Hills and my time in Vietnam. Jane Koger invited me to walk through a forty-acre parcel of her native grass. It was in a wide creek bottom and until twenty years before had been a soybean field. After harvesting her last crop of beans, she decided to “let it go back”—not work the soil in any fashion—to see what would happen. The first few seasons, weeds like cocklebur and yellow top covered the field. But she was patient and sure enough, native grasses re-established and eventually grew to natural heights. We walked through grass almost two feet over my head—big bluestem eight feet tall, Indian grass, little bluestem and switchgrass up to my shoulders and on slightly elevated mounds, blue and sideoats grama grass above my knees. Smaller, less watered growths of buffalo grass were so lush I felt as if I was stepping on a giant sponge.

I was surrounded by grass as tall as the elephant grass in Vietnam. The wind was bending the long stalks then letting them go, much like the wash from Huey choppers flying in and out of a landing zone. For a moment, I sensed I was back at war. But there were no rotor chops, no sounds from weapons and no men shouting orders or screaming. Without thinking to do so, I had focused on the quiet sound of wind brushing seed heads and leaves together and against my shoulders and for a time, I was in a *thin place*.

No one can coerce or conjure another into a *thin place*. But every June for the last six years, because of the talents of many “Flint Hillers,” whatever barrier may exist is made more permeable by a celebration of Art and Being called *Symphony in the Flint Hills*.

I keep hearing about Symphony in the Flint Hills. My Kansas friends tell me the Kansas City Symphony moves to a big pasture in the Flint Hills for a two-hour concert in the prairie that ends at sunset. Seven thousand folks in the long grass listening to Aaron Copland’s “An Outdoor Overture.” That’s remarkable. Can you explain how you and other organizers and volunteers manage to pull this thing off?

How do they do it? It starts with imagination and people taking charge. They write and draw the dream on pieces of paper. They enlist fellow creators—designers, architects, entrepreneurs, builders, poets, writers, landscape artists, country and classical musicians, cowhands, ranchers, prairie sages, chefs and other talented volunteers. They create an ephemeral city with streets of grass where buildings made of canvas border Main Street: classrooms, performance halls, cafes, art galleries, shops and information booths. They design a symphony hall for a special orchestra in a venue that is perhaps better than any other. Because they are like-minded and work in their natural neighborhood, they affirm the mystery and sanctity of *place*. Because they are artists, they carve holes into *thin places*.

Prairie restores, like the sod we trample that year or Jane’s 40-acre soybean field in a creek bottom. People create. We make art and do it authentically from our *place* and, if given the gift, inexplicably from a *thin place* where we may touch the finger of Being. *Symphony in the Flint Hills* draws us not only to the possibility, but also to the authenticity of *place* and *thin places*. And because art compels us to share, we invite our children, our grandchildren and friends. We pass it on.

I have the sense that you have similar designs in your poetry and work with veterans. It seems to me you understand more than most what healing the heart-land is all about and what it takes to do so. Moral injury may strike, but the soul restores.

Well, I hope we are learning. More information about how to deal with the terrible trauma of moral injury and veteran suicide is appearing in the literature every day. I believe asking veterans to write poetry and stories about trauma experienced in war

are, at the least, revealing, and at best healing. We know reading war literature is very helpful, as the work of Bryan Doerries has demonstrated. The trauma won't go away, but as my Muslim friend, Dr. Amir Hussain, so wisely said, telling our stories helps us *negotiate* the trauma, and that gives us hope. Without hope, there is nothing. And I hope all of us, the war poets and writers, are thinking about these things as we write.

THOMAS G. MCGUIRE has taught war literature and Irish literature at the United States Air Force Academy for over a decade. A poet, scholar, and translator, he is currently completing a monograph entitled *Violence and the Translator's Art: Seamus Heaney's Irish Transformations* as well as a collection of creative non-fiction essays entitled *Querencias: Places & Spaces of Refuge*. He also serves as **WLA** Poetry Editor.