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Wilson's poetry has appeared in such journals as *College English*, *Evergreen Review*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Poetry* and *TriQuarterly*, and has been anthologized in *From the Belly of the Shark*, *The United States of Poetry* and other collections. Wilson, who also writes stories, has received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a D. H. Lawrence fellowship, and a Governor's Award from the State of New Mexico for Excellence in the Arts. His books and chapbooks include:

*Sketches for a New Mexico Hill Town*, Orono, ME:

Wine Press, 1967.

*II Sequences*, Portland, OR: Wine Press, 1967.

*The Old Car*, La Grande, OR: Grande Ronde Press, 1967.

*Graves Registry & Other Poems*, New York:

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# I

## Echoes, Seafalls for Heloise

1

graceful birds, tall yet distant ships  
with lateen sails blazing white, sailing  
outward before rays of setting gunfire, far  
battles: it is they I speak of, touch here.

A woman, newborn, beckons from the waves,  
beckons, Lady, from the foam, breasts like suns,  
watergleaming emeralds in her hair: it is she  
I speak of, turning her voice towards spray,  
shining in, tideborne.

2

my darling  
no bird of the sea touches more gently  
than you; far away, the lanterns of war  
ships hulled down twinkle, sea winds crying  
my name, as you do, racing, long legs flying  
through our yard—laughing, your yellow hair  
a battle pennant before the sun, streaming . . .

victory over sea  
coming later as love, a home safe from waves; challenge,  
is a singing in the wind, a crashing

## V

### The Captain

*Und bebende Trommeln.*

the captain:

Army of the United States. About 40,  
small, lean. Colt .32 Auto  
snug under his armpit, the kind eyes  
of somebody's uncle.

His men: tall for Koreans, all  
carried M-1's (because there, big men  
have big rifles, it is the custom)

& what happened to his eyes  
the changes when he spoke of their raids  
of villages flaming, women & children  
machinegunned as they ran  
screaming from their huts:

his own sense of the stillness  
(which he told of) as the Gray  
Marine engines caught & they  
drew away, leaving the bodies  
in their white clothes  
sprawled here & there, big  
& small, blood seeping into  
white, junks slipping  
smoothly away

## VI

*. . . ganz in Waffen*

Along the coast heavy clouds of dawn  
bucked and heaved, arteries of flame pulsed  
subsided

aboard ship, signal flags  
popped in the wind

& slowly the amphibious squadron took station;  
the flagship, dead center of the formation,  
moved slowly, then faster

quiet intensified.  
no one spoke, the ship scuttled  
its 11 knots across a passive sea

Gunflashes grew vivid now  
but still they heard only the engines of the ship,  
the wind. A cruiser, lying off a small island  
rocked, fired in heavy salvos

their LST followed  
the breeze-whipped Flag  
straight for the beach  
& the guns . . .

He'd been watching his face,  
speaking to him occasionally,  
sensing the recruited strength.  
The boy rarely answered.  
The guns could be heard now. Low, distant.

Heavy 8" whooms! lighter 5's, auto 3's  
from the cruiser. A few destroyers also  
popped away when suddenly a round from the beach  
burst off the bow into a  
yellow flower

the kid broke, no real danger  
but he broke. It was in  
his eyes, in terror  
he edged for the hatch

The officer stopped him with his voice. Quick, flat.  
The boy looked about 10 standing there, the wind  
from the open bridge tugging his hair.  
Come back here, he said. The boy did.  
Stand here by me, he ordered. He did, close.  
They went through the action that way, & neither  
was afraid.

## VII

### **Guerilla Camp**

(Korea, 1952)

We arrived at Sok To  
before dawn, caught the last  
of the tide & slipped the LST's bow  
high on the beach.

he was waiting, bent  
slightly over, hiding  
his hand. he didn't  
wave.

Later, after a good breakfast  
aboard, an Army captain took  
us on a tour of the guerilla  
camp:

& he followed, tagged  
along like somebody's  
dog, a tall Korean,  
patient.

We were shown the kitchens, & the  
tent barracks, the specially built  
junks with their concealed engines

& he watched, never  
leaving us with his  
eyes



Through the hospital, saw 4  
sheetcovered bodies from the  
raid the night before, didn't  
ask whose men they were, spoke  
kindly to the wounded & gave  
them cigarettes

until he strode up,  
stuck his shattered hand  
in my face, anger & hatred  
flaming in his eyes &  
shouted & shouted & shouted

waving that hand, the  
bones crumpled by a rifle slug & pushed  
almost through the skin,  
hardened into a glistening  
knot

He was one of ours, a retired fighter,  
about my age, my height. They told me  
he wanted to know how a man  
could farm  
with a hand like that.

## VIII

### The Singer

who did sing, whose voice  
spoke out of a guitar's darkness;  
in a clear young night he  
sang midwatches away, telling  
of country lands, of growing crops  
green corn, tall in the fields  
of Kentucky; dark songs of loves,  
concerns and ancient questions  
he had not yet lived to confirm  
or deny.

17. About 6'1 ". Heavysset,  
with plowman's hands & walk.

Then there was my gun.  
In its way, it sang too. Clean machine  
oiled & perfect, the slide flashed  
back over my relaxed hand pow. pow. pow.  
& .45 wadcutter slugs crimped neat holes  
in the fluttering paper; the gun  
was a happiness to my hand.

Many nights that boy was the whole  
watch as I would lean against the flying  
bridge, coffee growing cold in my cup,  
listening to that voice singing out  
the darkness ahead.

Then came the time in port. Just before  
the invasion. The gunners mates were  
cleaning all weapons for the coming action &  
claimed mine too.

I was on the bridge  
checking the charts. An indistinct  
popping sound. Silence.  
Running feet, & shouts.

When I got back to the fantail  
he was lying there, his boy's face  
twisted & grey, big farmer's hands  
held in his guts, guitar beside him.

My gun in the destroyed mate's hand.  
Smoking faintly.  
These are the things get lost.  
Guitars. Guns. Hands to hold  
onto them.

## IX

### The Circle

—U.S.S. *Valley Forge*, 1950

Out of the stirrings of the Yellow Sea,  
20 miles off from Inchon Channel  
we came to—blue *leis*  
thrown on the water.

Sea, glassy. no wind.  
I sat atop a 5" director, the ship  
steamed on, no planes in sight:  
a pleasant gunwatch, little excitement,  
lost in quiet.

The first I knew we  
were among them, circles of men  
bound in faded blue lifejackets,  
lashed together

Most of the men leaned  
back, heads bobbing against  
kapok collars, mouths open,  
tongues swollen

—hundreds of them.  
We steamed by, group after group,  
for all my watch. I searched for  
any sign of motion, any gesture  
of any hand, but soon I just  
watched as

bobbing gently, each circle  
undulated, moved independently;

once or twice a hand did flop  
& I caught the man's face in  
my binoculars instantly,  
slowly let them drop

We sailed on. I suppose that's all  
there is to say: wartime commitments  
the necessity for being where you must  
be & when

they were dead, hundreds  
of them, a troopship gone down somewhere  
—Korean, uncoun ted.

I remember one man, remember  
him clearly. God knows why  
but his ass was up instead  
of his head; no pants left,  
his buttocks glistened  
greyish white in the clear sun.  
the only one.

& we steamed on, routine patrol,  
launched planes at 1800 for night  
CAP, leaving the last of the circles  
rocking gently in our darkening wake.

*. . . seid stolz: Ich trage die Fahne,  
seid ohne Sorge: Ich trage die Fahne,  
habt mich lieb: Ich trage die Fahne—*

\* \* \*

*. . . und die reglose Fahne hat unruhige  
Schatten. Sie träumt.*

X

High Noon

little Korean village, by the  
Yellow Sea, full of drying squid,  
kids, the people follow with  
hunger in their eyes

*three officers, spittleclean  
in pressed khakis, warm parkas  
to take the bite off the springtime  
cold, out walking, seeing the sights—*

Only one was armed. A Colt snuggled in smooth  
leather, slapping the outer thigh, loaded  
but no round in chamber, flap of the holster  
closed.

*a gun has a speaking voice, did  
you know that? a quiet  
certainty looking out of the muzzle  
& then it speaks*

A gun at the side, always a concern: a charged  
field, a potential, like the sex between a man's  
legs.

Three officers out walking the sun,  
easy, safe as only Americans (or Romans,  
long ago) can be safe, untouched by hunger,  
eyes seeing sights, quaint brushes with  
unreal picturepostcard suffering, out  
walking

*& suddenly. the street.  
lined with thin watchful men.  
silent. eyes upon them, the  
hatred, passive*

The young officer, hand drawn halfway down to the living gun, stopped. The motion was enough. Men stirred, then froze—a new possibility intruded; they watched the hand, cocked, ready—in fear—to strike.

*slowly they walked, no  
retreat, down every footstep  
of the street, eyes upon  
them, the bright yellow openings  
in the buildings ahead drew  
them, hungering*

That they made it is no concern, that they turned into sunlight, free, muscles of shoulders relaxing, sudden laughs

Nor is it any more important what the Army major said:

they were lucky, two sailors had been cut down on that very street the week before. "Kill-or-Capture" teams operating from North Korea, they'd even gotten two officers on the steps of headquarters in Seoul, he said.

Somehow all that was known, understood. The gun, it knew, the cocked hand knew

What remained was the gun, the  
walk, cold Spring sun, gleaming  
eyes, the test, again, those  
things get lost, drive on out of  
the blood when least expected: bright

*bright flashes, sense of  
the cocked hand, expectant  
in the swirling world  
of combat, a surety of steel.  
calm hands.*



XI

**The Girl**

*"Bist Du die Nacht?"*

the girl,

in an Inchon officers club,  
small breasts, thin indirect face  
but with a silk gown, marks of rank  
about her

& how easily she came  
later, in the dark, the lips parted  
Korean words in passion in light  
not understood

the crinkle of paper,  
passing hands

## XII

### Guns

chattering guns, bright flames  
about their mouths, talking an old  
tongue through

their beauty gets forgotten

the quick rush of a kind of singing  
moving toward to gunfire to death which  
asks nothing but fearlessness  
crazy shouts

dying men, in their breathing,  
to leave curious legends  
terror  
pieces of rusted metal

## XIV

### Waterfront Bars

& how they look—from the sea  
the neon glitter softens, grows  
warm

—a man can almost smell  
beer, women

From Beppu, on the Inland Sea,  
the giant "Asahi" beersign stood  
steady as any navigational light

drew, caught  
attention: we, sailing by  
returned to seadamp bunks  
strong coffee

3 months on service duty ahead  
north of the bomblines &  
then back we came, wondering

—lights of Yokusuka, Sasebo  
Yokohama. We sailed to them  
each in turn. Worlds brushed,  
passed

each in turn.

—leaving the darkness of  
watches, silver turning of screws,  
wake piled high behind  
the blackened ship: little pieces  
of a man, left here, there.

## XVI

### The Mistress

and there was Akiko.  
her child's face, her hatred  
of all Americans, save one:

whom he held in his arms,  
Akiko. vision of a dead brother  
blown to pieces in front of her  
his brains on her dress.

he, four. she, ten.

Akiko, who was ashamed  
not of loving but of  
forgetting

while his own dead  
floated the Yellow Sea  
burned slowly in planes  
died gasping, jagged holes  
in their chests

they held each other  
through horrors higher  
than language, built

a brightness to curtain  
the blue, newly made cannon  
nightmare bombs stamped "U.S.A."

*Und da schämt er sich für sein weisses Kleid.  
Und möchte weit und allein und in Waffen sein.  
Ganz in Waffen.*

## XVII

December, 1952

Back to the combat zone.

Ships, exactly stationed, at darkness  
their wakes catch white fire, long graceful lines  
blue stacksmoke, fading to night

red battle lamps, men walking  
ghosts in the chain lockers  
old chanties sung in the small watches  
of morning

*Nelson, battle signals snapping,  
coming about, broadside ready*

*Farragut, headed in . . .  
the shores blazing with light  
exploding shells a terror,  
the calm voice on the bridge*

*Skeleton crews, prize ships,  
returning to Ur of the Chaldees, swords raised  
gleaming before the dying sun*

A blue United Nations patch on the arm, a new  
dream. One World. One  
Nation.

Peace.

The old bangles, dangled  
once more, always working,  
buying allegiances

stabbing  
tracers hit a village,  
the screams of women, children  
men die

It is when the bodies are counted  
man sees the cost of lies, tricks  
that blind the eyes of the young. *Freedom.*  
Death. *A life safe for.* The Dead.

Casualties are statistics  
for a rising New York Stock Market—  
its ticker tapes hail the darkeyed  
survivors, and cash registers  
click, all over the nation, these men  
deceive themselves. War is for. The Dead.



## XVII

### The Flag

barred with blood,  
blue of virgins, all  
of them, Aztec Corn Mother,  
ancient Lady of the Earth,  
Holy Woman

White, with the color  
of purity

a piece of cloth  
tottering in the Eastern wind

## XIX

### Combat Mission

In the Korean night they drank  
12-year-old Scotch, talked warm  
around the oilcan stove, their holstered  
.45's dragging the earthen floor as  
they squatted, glow of liquor creeping  
home inside the parkas, old stove  
sucking at the night's cold air

—in a ruined merchant's house  
pocked with rounds from invasion  
they rebuilt against the night:  
2 Navy officers, 1 Marine from the line,  
10 miles away, lifted their cups against  
the darkness, the rumbles rolling forward.

While fires flickered on the hills  
they went, confident, out into a night  
where heavy weapons grumbled  
& a Korean boy played "China Night"  
on a squeaky phonograph, dreaming,  
as they were, of brown women,  
of any warm bed before gunfire,  
the greater dream of battle.

XX

## Cargo

Sailing on, orders for Sok To, north  
of the bomblines. Our LST loaded gunnel  
to gunnel with high-octane gas, ammo

“A gook with a .45  
could sink us,” a boatswain  
mate says, glancing down  
at the darkening water

Headed in, through the slim channels  
islands blackening to either side,  
the shore batteries unseen but sensed  
nothing to shoot back with

a bomb,  
a torpedo—Long Slow Target, with  
orders.

About midnight, reading a chart  
by masked flashlight, speaking in whispers,  
though the engines are loud in our ears,  
steaming through the tightest passage,  
communist shore to starboard, our island  
to port when

heavy shore rifles cut loose  
shells whirl overhead, the young  
helmsman ducks, is straightened  
by a snapped order

& the island explodes  
blazing gasoline  
bursting munitions

then U.S. jet engines swoosh & napalm douses  
the shore batteries in standing waves of fire—

somehow the screams, the dying got lost

the chart is brilliant in light  
we sail on, walls of red  
to either side the dying  
fight back

we, steaming on,  
carrying our own deaths  
deep in our bellies.

## XXII

### Commentary

After the raid, the bodies  
are lined on the beach. We can  
see them across the way, the living,  
standing beside them in their white  
robes, the wind hitting in gusts  
across the separating bay

that these men died  
that our guerillas shot them  
down in a darkness  
is perhaps not so important.

God kills, they say  
justifying man's ways  
to those patterns they  
see surround them

deaths. lists of victims  
in a language the uncle  
back home couldn't read  
if he saw it, whose enemies  
are always faceless, numbers  
in a paper blowing in the  
Stateside wind.

How many bodies would  
fill a room  
living room with TV, soft  
chairs & the hiss  
of opened beer?

We have killed more.  
The children's bodies alone  
would suffice.

The women, their admittedly  
brown faces frozen in the agony  
of steel buried in their stomachs,  
they too would be enough

but aren't, are  
finally not piled high enough  
the cost of war must be paid, bullets  
made for firing, fired. O,  
do not dream of peace while such bodies  
line the beaches & dead men float  
the seas, waving, their hands  
beckoning

rot, white bones  
settle on yellow bottom mud.

## XXII

### Truce

Now the pace changes.  
Ships come home, cruisers  
their stacks still, blow  
no more blue trails over the sea . . .

Truce.

& no more green  
wakes, swirling white  
bubbles shining  
blades, turning

Uniforms in mothballs,  
gold braid tarnishing,  
ribbons stuck with stars,  
faded emblems.

The Flag, dreams.

Factories, burning  
with orange smoke, cut  
steel plates with blue  
arcs, welders patch up  
the weapons  
of war

dream.

*. . .und die sechzehn runden Säbel,  
die auf ihn zuspringen, Strahl um  
Strahl,*

*sind ein Fest.  
Eine lachende Wasserkunst.*



XXV

The Ex-Officer, Navy

the man, in whose eyes gunfire  
is a memory, a restless dream  
of stuttering mouths, bright flame

a man, who no matter how long the days  
faces still the combat, the long night's terror—

beyond the shoreline, grey muzzles train,  
the destroyer's bow breaks cleanly, all mounts  
at ready, general quarters: racing feet  
grunting rasping horn. tight stomach.  
knotted muscles in the shoulder, neck.

on white bare feet, with flaring eyes he greets  
the morning, peace—advancing age. the dead faces once  
again firm, smiling, ready for battle fade  
grey smoke against a city's sun.

## XLVIII

### The Poem Politic 4

We must open ourselves here in America.  
We must strain our eyes to see  
the colors of a land we are filling  
with hatreds. A man who will casually  
kill a tree, will as easily kill his  
own kind. The tree is as important  
as any brigade, any old man looking  
out from under his white eyebrows.

“We executed an old man like that  
in Korea. A village elder, he never  
knew why, I don’t think. We shot him  
at the base of the skull, though he  
refused to take his funny hat off.  
There was almost no blood until we  
rolled him over. Then we saw the  
front of his face was gone. The  
bullet shouldn’t have done that.  
Ballistically, it should have continued  
its downward path, but it probably hit  
the backbone, was deflected up. It can  
be explained, of course. But I don’t know  
why we did it either.”

Major J. E. K., U.S.A.

*The horrors that fill us, atrocities  
under another man’s hand, cram our own  
dreams and memories*

A bomb I loaded on a plane was dropped by a killcrazy kid pilot on a courtyard full of refugees. He spoke excitedly of bodies, arms, legs that rose several hundred feet in the air. The walls of the courtyard contained the explosion, forcing it upward, a fountain of flesh.

Though I, personally, did not touch the button—my own handiwork.

## LXVIII

### Memory of a Victory

Off the Korean Coast, beyond Wonsan  
waiting for invasion soft winds blew  
the scent of squid drying in the sun,  
homely smells of rice paddies, cooking fires.

It was a picture world with low hills  
much like New Mexico, except for water,  
the strange smells. Little plumes of smoke.  
Here & there, the glint of steel.

Under the waiting guns lay peachblossoms.  
I could see them with my binoculars.  
The planes still had not come, all eternity  
waited beneath the sweep second hand.

Then the crackling radio commanded  
"Fire!" and a distant world I could have loved  
went up in shattering bursts, in greyblack explosions,  
the strange trees that suddenly grew on the hillside.

They fired their rifles, light howitzers  
back. After a while we sent boats into the silence.

LXXIV

Corsair

—*to D.S.*

It was of course Don  
who died.

—Blue, with white letters  
inverted gull  
P & W engine

At full roar, one by  
one they returned.

Minus him.

It was of course of course  
my friend

in the twisted aluminum  
the shining spars  
crumpled wheels

rudder torn off  
white letter "V"

splattered with  
ricepaddy mud  
It was of course he  
who refused, who would not  
kill, would not obey, would  
not return—refused

to machinegun civilians  
on the Korean hillside  
to bomb a courtyard  
full of refugees

It was I on the bridge  
of the carrier, waiting  
counting the planes—marked  
the return of the squadron leader,  
he who taught him that

low, slow turn  
just above stalling speed  
the fighter's controls mush  
there, aces away from a spin

He spun. He lay  
there and I of course  
wait, wait for whatever  
second coming there can be  
for a splattered flyer  
my friend, lying there

who would not kill idly  
who did not have the dangerous look  
who should've should've fired

—Arjuna, it is not your friends  
you kill but only the shadows  
hiding their selves, Arjuna  
whose spear also rusted in the  
sun

jagged metal  
the blue, Navy  
blue and a crashed corsair fighter

over 40 years old and most probably  
no longer there

a white "V"

to mark another strange victory