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The War in Words

Violent 30-second clips exploded across screens throughout the United States every night, bringing Vietnam into livingrooms where arguments raged, pro and con, over the rights and wrongs of American involvement. So confusing was the combat that newspapers devoted more space to war protesters than the men in the jungles. Denied their traditional outlets of expression—the press—and feeling abandoned by the American public, many combatants turned to a different medium of expression to describe their feelings in this secret war: poetry.

For many of them writing poetry was something that emerged "out of necessity," a Vietnam vet explained to those attending a poetry workshop that I conducted for a community education project in the late 1970s. He scribbled his first poem "because I was trying to write a letter to my wife and I couldn't put what I wanted into words, I was frustrated, I wanted to tell her, you know, feelings, what I was going through, it was like a knife in my chest."

Several in the workshop asked him to read the poem and he shrugged and said he didn't know if he still had a copy of it or not, that he'd only come to the workshop to find out if what he'd written in Vietnam were, in fact, poems. But the following week he returned with a small folder of frayed typewritten sheets, from which he read these lines:

In my dreams I pull
the knife out of my chest
and there you are
and the kids

and we're happy and kissing
and all that
and I tell you stories
about a war
that happened to someone else

Because I included those lines in workshop notes that somehow survived a series of cross-country moves, house sales, storage lockers, robberies and emigration I can reproduce them as they were written, although I have only that fragment. I do remember that the veteran expressed doubts that what he'd written were "real poems," which evoked from other workshop members the response, "What is a real poem?" and an ongoing give-and-take about defining "What is poetry?"

Most of those participating did not have literary backgrounds. (Over half were college students majoring in other disciplines; the others included a couple of public school teachers, a family and marriage counselor, a carpenter and an organic gardener.) But they agreed that poetry could be any writing that expressed feelings in a more or less succinct and readable form (or that, as in classical writings like Milton and Wordsworth, had rhythm or musical qualities that distinguished them from prose). Given these definitions the workshop members decided that what the ex-G.I. had written definitely were poems.

Some who served in Vietnam (R. L. Barth, Larry Rottman, Elliott Richman, among many others) continued to write and publish poetry about their experiences for years after the conflict ended. Others simply put the poems they'd written in a box or desk drawer, never intending that they be read.

"They were like sophomoric love verses or yearbook blurbs," another veteran, a newspaper reporter, laughed, then admitted, "but they were a way for me to show what I went through over there, how I felt, both how scared I was and how I felt like an experienced old man in a teenager's body." Although memories that they evoked were disturbing "enough to cause nightmares" they were important to him because he didn't want to treat that part of his life as though it never had existed.

His poems, like those of the veteran who attended the workshop and like many other poems not written for publication, described both ordinary and singular events: the sunlight coming through the jungle at dawn, the tumult of rushing to a Medivac helicopter as it bounced to a landing, embracing strangers who'd just emerged from a firefight as though they were long lost brothers. In the *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War* John Clark Pratt affirms, "These poets wrote about immediate wartime experiences: firefights, the death of a friend, smells of the jungle, rocket

attacks, being wounded, seeing Vietnamese women and children killed, corpses in body bags, rape…"

Many young Americans who were thrust into combat had had relatively brief military training—sometimes at little as twelve weeks—and considered themselves "draftees" rather than soldiers. A great many were from non-urban backgrounds and had little or no concept of war or of Asia, much less Vietnam. The struggle to deal with their loss of innocence, their anger at what they were experiencing, their alternately feeling exposed and immature but at the same time a hardened killer surges through the words they put onto paper. A Purple Heart recipient discharged two months before his twenty-first birthday read this excerpt to an encounter group session in Austin, Texas:

> Fuck you Marines!
> You'll go back home
> like jigsaw puzzles
> with most of the important pieces
> in somebody else's body bag

A journalist I worked with in the late '80s showed me a snippet from a letter that reflects similar estrangement and struggling to deal with a suddenly forced maturity. (His first wife had framed it beside a high school snapshot of the two of them):

> I wish I had a picture
> of the Sugar Bowl Queen
> or one of those silly coins
> they throw at the Mardi Gras parades.
> They would give me a kind of identity.
> Remind me that I was a someone
> back when I was alive.

Many returning G.I.s whose writings I saw or heard read in workshops or therapy groups hesitated to call what they'd written "poems." Some chose to frame them as song lyrics along the lines of Ochs or Dylan records popular at the time. For others the poems were "sort of like sketches" or "little word photos, kind of," to quote some of the evasions I remember. Some of those on duty in Vietnam sent satirical and comical limericks back and forth, or wrote saccharine love verses and/or epigrams filled with racial slurs or demeaning references to Asians, African-Americans and

women, just as undergraduates today play with—and often mangle—words and thoughts and forms, sometimes humorously, sometimes scatological.

"To a lot of G.I.s, see, 'poetry' was high brow, esoteric, like classical music, Renaissance paintings, all rimes and five-syllable words, not the shit we were scribbling on the back of S.O.P.s. (Standard Operating Procedure forms)," another journalist friend, a combat veteran named Greg, struggled to define differences between poetry he'd been required to read as a college freshman (Wordsworth, Whitman, Tennyson) and the impulsive and often crude and ungrammatical outpourings that he and other G.I.s had written in Vietnam.

Many of those who showed me their work admitted that the poetry they'd written—or as many phrased it, "tried to write"—was their first contact with that literary form other than childhood verses they'd memorized or read in primary or Bible school. I remember an ex-G.I. undergraduate friend of mine telling me during a campus conversation, "Hell, even in high school the only thing close to literature that I read was the Classic Comics version of *Moby Dick!*"

Some draftees had labored through Byron and Shelley and perhaps read Emily Dickinson or Gerard Manley Hopkins in high school or introduction to literature classes in college and by 1970 some had read *On the Road* and other contemporary novels but the majority had little experience with writing or reading poetry.

"Brutally frank, much of the language of these poems represents the actuality of the discourse that prevailed, filled with the soldiers' jargon and profanity," Pratt asserts, noting that recurrent references to the loss of individuality, feelings of guilt at having participated in a war that couldn't be won and the realization of having been betrayed by higher authority highlight many poems written by participants in the war in Vietnam.

Not all of these poems dealt with the horrors of war or the guilt and betrayals that Pratt describes. One ex-G.I. described how much his platoon resembled the Class D minor league baseball team he'd played with, where athletes came together and formed tight bonds only to have them suddenly severed by promotions, demotions or injuries. Many described the compassion they felt for Vietnamese civilians, especially women and children, and how they shared what some Vietnamese non-combatants felt and experienced. I quote from memory Chase Valentine, my ex-G.I. college friend:

"If one tried to put things in logical sentences, paragraphs, traditional forms, one got strangled. We weren't writers, hell, many of us weren't even sure we were soldiers. With poems one could put down what one felt, maybe in just a few minutes, maybe

after lots of tussling, but not have to deal with all the restrictions that an educated writer would find normal."

Particularly in the encounter sessions, where returnees from Vietnam got together to talk out what they felt they couldn't talk about to parents, wives or high school friends who hadn't served in the military, the intensity of the emotions that had pushed the words and thoughts into being was very evident. Tears would slide down cheeks as a gangly ex-artillery spotter recited

> all bloody from scratching lice
> rot eating the flesh between your toes
> your eyes going blind from squinting
> at shadows
> that might hide something
> out there
> that wants to kill you

and more than one non-veteran participant in the poetry workshops quietly would tuck the pages they'd written in a binder or purse after hearing a veteran describe trying to pick up the bloody pieces of a blown apart child or the slaying of a buddy by a Viet Cong disguised as an old woman.

"Seeing and hearing them read them [poems written by combat veterans] embarrasses me, makes what I've tried to write seem so unimportant, so superficial and trite," I remember a workshop participant named Ruth apologizing before reading some of her own poetry.

For many draftees, writing poems both was a way to express what they felt and couldn't describe in letters or other forms of writing and a way to discharge emotions smoldering inside them. This was evident in the encounter groups when a veteran abruptly would stop reading what he'd written and gasp or wipe his eyes and not be able to continue because the memories evoked were so overwhelming. Therapists and psychiatrists often have victims of abuse write down what happened to them because the act of composing forces them to confront and describe the actual circumstances of their trauma.

"It was that or heroin," I remember one workshop participant describing his need to express what otherwise was overwhelming emotion. He then admitted, "Okay, that's an exaggeration—but not that great a one."

"It was like an addiction," my journalist friend Greg agreed as we shared a pitcher of beer one night after we'd gotten off work. "One got to the point that one couldn't

wait to write things down after a night attack or seeing a burned down village or hearing about something from home."

Almost fifteen years had passed since he'd left Vietnam and he'd opted for a journalistic rather than literary career but he still related to his war experiences. And he cautioned, "It's important to remember that we really weren't totally isolated, although we felt that way at times." Throughout the war a constant flux of personnel arriving and leaving, plus the presence of television and print newspeople, informed those going back and forth into combat what else was happening in the world, specifically the antiwar protests in the United States.

"[The antiwar protests] pissed us off but we shared some of those feelings," he insisted. In his opinion the lack of support and criticism of U.S. participation made a majority of G.I.s say and think that they didn't give a fuck about Vietnam, that unlike those who'd fought in World War II they didn't consider themselves heroes or martyrs who were putting their lives on the line to save the world. "Nobody back home gave a damn," numerous veterans expressed a feeling common to many who served in Vietnam (and that is a recurrent theme in their writings), "why the hell should we?"

Why one survived and others died is another recurrent theme among poems written in Vietnam. Some participants described killing farmers mistaken for combatants, or napalming villages where only women and children lived, or the importance of body counts to those in command. "There's no glorified language for those kinds of things," a returning veteran told Austin encounter group members. The only way for some war participants was to cease to think of the Vietnamese as people "or as anything except numbers, statistics" and "ourselves as robots" doing what was necessary in order to stay alive.

"We only could handle so much hurt," I quoted Chris Joost, a former member of the First Marine Reconnaissance Battalion, in a journalistic piece I did for *Vietnam* magazine in 1993, "so we stood back and looked at ourselves as one might watch a movie." The process he described was similar to that of creating "little mirrors" that enabled the participant to step outside himself and see—or see again—what he had experienced through a detached observer's eyes. One of the psychologists involved with the Austin encounter groups called these recreations "conscious dreams," a way of revisiting traumatic events without stirring up the overwhelming feelings they encompassed.

"We were old minds in young bodies," I remember the veteran who wrote the "Knife in My Chest" poem telling the workshop. "And the young bodies held many scars."

In the *Vietnam* magazine piece mentioned above I included a poem written by a young Marine describing a Vietnamese girl he carried to a field hospital near An Trang. (I no longer have the original document or the notes in which I'd recorded it, only the published version). To me it seems to sum up both war experiences and reasons to write poems about them:

Once when I was ten
I found a fawn—a little one—
and it was hurt. I can't remember how.
I carried it, I don't know how far
just that it and the girl seemed like one load
that I've been carrying ever since.

What happened to the fawn I'll never know.
And to her I'll never know
except inside I'll keep carrying both.

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