

A CONVERSATION WITH W.D. EHRHART

Editor's note: *During a 1996 visit to the United States Air Force Academy, W.D. Ehrhart agreed to an interview. What follows are excerpts from that conversation.*

On Art

Art doesn't have *a* function; it has many functions. Art provides the world we see with meaning, with ugliness, with truth, with fantasy. Art allows us to see the world and not to see the world. And each of those things is a blessing.

I once said, "I don't give a damn about art"—and I've been quoted a lot—but I made the statement in a moment of great passion. I was at this conference at the Asian Society, and everybody was sitting around talking about Vietnam War Literature. The thing that has always driven me nuts about such discussions is that bodies got blown to pieces in Vietnam, and lives were otherwise destroyed. It was a real war that was being talked about—and I didn't see it as a discussion about art or aesthetics! What underlies such discussions is war—a *terrible war*. That's what I was responding to at that point.

I have never approached my "art" from the avenue of *art*. It's been simpler—I have these things I want to say; I have these things I understand from my war experience that I want others to understand. It's a silly obsession, really—the notion of using my writing as a tool for education.

When I finally understood just how bad the American war in Vietnam was—just how bankrupt it was—I wanted to carry something of value out of the terrible thing that had ruined my life, and had destroyed the lives of so many others, and was still ruining people. I wanted to build something useful out of *that*. And what I did was delude myself into thinking that, "Oh! I can use this experience to make sure something like this never happens again. I am going to change the world." But I couldn't, and can't. I look back over the years and think, "My God, what an inflated opinion of yourself." I've constantly had to retrench and pull in my lines to make my ambitions smaller. And only now am I beginning to reap something even resembling

reasonable proportions. But back in the '70s I believed my writing was a vehicle for educating people, not "art." Art or not art struck me as irrelevant.

On Morality

I believe in a moral center. It's a dangerous way to live, though, because those who think they have a corner on morality tend to start making judgments about other persons, and that gets tricky. Ultimately, we think like fools. But I do believe, have always believed, that there are things that are inherently right and wrong. But rather than saying I think art has a moral center, I would say that life has a moral center, and art is part of life, a large part of it.

On Writing About the Vietnam War

I wish that the writing I've done, primarily in poetry that's not about Vietnam, would receive more attention. And really the bulk of my public poetry does not deal with the Vietnam War or any war. But most people who have any knowledge of me at all don't know that. All they know is the Vietnam stuff. That bothers, even irritates, me. I feel uncomfortable about basically making what modest reputation and living I have out of an experience that I think was irredeemably repugnant. So that makes me uncomfortable. On the other hand, as I get older, I recognize that most writers never get identified with any form. They live and die in obscurity. So, if people did not identify me as a Vietnam War writer, they probably wouldn't see me as anything. So I have to be grateful for that. You can see it is hard for me to even get those words out of my mouth, but it's a reality. I don't get invited to the Pueblo Writer's Conference. I don't get invited to the North Poetry Festival which is only thirty miles from where I live. I get invited to the Vietnam War conferences. I'm beginning to realize that I shouldn't complain about that too much, because most writers don't get invited to anything. It's something I've come to terms with, but I don't like it very much.

On Vietnam

The Vietnam War changed my life forever. And in ways that are not particularly good. I can't overemphasize the degree of idealism I possessed. When I enlisted, I thought I was doing a good thing—a *cosmically* good thing. To come to terms with the truth of so many things about myself and my country and about the world in which we live at such a young age—well, the impact was immeasurable. And that's what you see in the books, my trying to come to terms with what all that meant. And I have come to terms somewhat—clumsily and awkwardly and with a great deal of damage to myself and to lots of people who care about me. I have a wife who loves me, a daughter who loves me. I am fortunate.

On The Gulf War

I played ostrich throughout the fall of 1990. I kept thinking, "This can't be happening. They're not going to do this, they're not going to do this," and then I listened to what passed for a debate in Congress—which was anything but a debate—and I realized, "They're *going* to do this; they had no intention of not doing this." I went out the next day with a sign, STOP THE WAR. I walked back and forth in front of Independence Hall (in Philadelphia). There I am with a bunch of other guys, from our veterans group, Peace Chapter in Philadelphia, some WWII guys, some Vietnam guys. Then the next day they started dropping the bombs, and I became dysfunctional for about three weeks. I hardly came out of my house; I couldn't process anything. I was depressed to the point of dictionary despair. I don't remember who called who, me or a guy I write about in *Busted*, who lives in West Virginia. In any case, he lives very near and we spend a lot of time together. I don't know if Anne called Kathy or Kathy called Anne, but these two women got on the phone and compared notes, and Ron was also beside himself. And so they decided to get us together and let us confront it for a while, get us out of our isolation, and so they did that. Kathy and Ron came over for dinner one night and the next thing we know, Kathy and Anne disappear and Ron and I

just talk and talk, long into the night. And that was useful, and then I guess it was the next day I write this furious essay. I ended up composing two separate newspaper Op-Ed pieces, two short pieces, 800-word things. I sent one off to the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, the other off to the *Philadelphia Daily News*, and both got picked up and run on successive days. In any case, I had my voice back, and I could operate. Those essays didn't change anything that was happening in the Middle East, and they didn't change anything that was happening in America any more than *The Assault of the Yellow Ribbons*. But the printed essays changed something in me, because for once I didn't have to put up with a serious event in silence. It was sort of like Yossarian in the nose of that bomber, banging on the Plexiglas. *You can make me do it, but you can't make me accept it!* Once I got my voice back again, I could function again. And I was able to begin to restore my own life to something that resembles normal, as normal as life ever gets in my house. And it wasn't just the war. It was the final recognition that what I had set out to do, as early as 1971, had failed completely. Nothing I have ever written has changed the world. I'm embarrassed to say that I had thought it would be otherwise. I had such grandiose notions of what I might accomplish.

More on the Gulf War, et al

I watched how readily Americans send their sons and daughters off to die without much questioning. And I think there were many questions in that whole business. History didn't start on August 2, 1990. But it didn't seem like anybody in America except me and a few of my pals noted that. What bothered me wasn't the fact of the war itself, but how willingly the American people gave themselves up to their government. How effectively and efficiently the government learned the wrong lessons from the boys in Vietnam! *We lost the war in Vietnam because the meddling politicians wouldn't let us fight to win! The liberal media turned the people against the war and the traitorous anti-war movement destroyed the morale of the troops!* You can just see these notions playing themselves out in the Gulf War. Schwarzkopf and Powell and all these

guys, who were just grinding their teeth for twenty-five years, finally had the chance to do a war right. To hell with whether they ought to be doing it, they were going to do it right or not do it at all. But it wasn't even all that that was really angering me. I expect armies to want to fight, generals to want to fight—that's what they do. Peace is our profession—O.K.—but it's not what people join the military for, and I expect the government to be duplicitous. I expect my government to say what it needs to say, day in and day out. Whether I should or should not believe the government, I'm not sure. I think I can actually demonstrate with some fairly good reasons that anything the government says is a lie, except by accident. But mostly it was that the American people seemed so willing to buy into whatever, as though the Vietnam War had never occurred. That's what was so depressing. Then there's Bosnia. On that one, I just hold my breath and hope that those kids get out of there again because there's the potential for a real disaster.

Literary Influences

The first writer that truly captured my imagination, who could really talk to me in a real way, was Stephen Crane—his poetry. His poetry may not be taken very seriously by very many people, but I love it. I especially loved it when I was a fifteen-year-old kid—this Crane had an attitude about a lot of things that I had an attitude about. And there are always these large questions, like, "What is the nature of God?" I did read a lot of Crane and I became very much enamored of it. Actually, well, I have his collected poems which is a very short, tiny little book—the first book of poems I owned that was *mine*, a book of poetry. And I wrote a lot of very derivative stuff, virtually to the point of plagiarism. For years I felt quite guilty that I'd done that. In my high school literary magazine there are poems that are virtual paraphrases of Crane's poems. There's my name at the bottom of the page. I have since come to learn that that was mostly okay. That's how I learned, by imitation. I really got that driven home to me when my daughter was born. I watched her develop by imitating. I think it's why I don't write fiction, because I don't read much fiction. Most of what I read is non-fiction, biography, history, so I don't know how to write fiction.

Anyway, Crane was the first guy who really got me excited about literature, about poetry. I was also very lucky my last two years of high school to have two wonderful English teachers, who provided a very good foundation in the English traditions. Of course, it was all dead white guys back in the '60s, but they were good dead white guys. Good writers. So I read Whitman; I read the English Romantics, Blake, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth. Of all these poets, I liked Whitman the most. I liked Robinson Jeffers, but Crane's the guy I keep coming back to, because he's the guy who really got me excited in the first place. I also began to understand that all these guys I was reading were all dead. But they weren't, there they were on the printed page. They had cheated the Reaper. I liked that idea. On the other hand, the older I get, the more I begin to realize my limitations as a writer, and I realize that my talents do not rise to the level of my ambition and I'll be damned lucky if anybody reads anything I've written twenty-five years after I'm dead. But, you never know.

On Voice

The main thing that happened in the early writing, when I was trying to figure out how to write about the Vietnam War, was the influence of other writers I read—some of Sassoon, but everything of Owen when I was in high school. I knew his work very well. Obviously I didn't get the point or I wouldn't have gone off and joined the Marine Corps. But I knew the poetry, so when I began to try to write about my war, that was my reference point, that was what war poetry was for me. British WWI poetry, in particular Owen. Owen captivated me because his story was so romantic. I mean, here's this guy who dies six or seven days before the end of the war. You can't get any more romantic than that! So, early on, you find me completely missing all the rich imagery from my own war and, instead, inserting images about blood dripping like tears from the blade of a bayonet. I never used a bayonet except to bash open a can of C-rations. I never engaged in war at close quarters—that's an image straight out of WWI, straight out of Wilfred Owen. I didn't have a voice, didn't know what I was doing, but over a period of two years (1970-72), while I was in college, I began to

develop a voice and I believe the eight poems in *Winning Hearts and Minds* demonstrate that voice emerging. By 1973 or 1974, I'd found my voice. And what has changed in my writing since then? I don't think it's my voice, but rather how I see the world, my *understanding*. Of course, I carry along the accumulated trappings of age. I know more, have more experience. I would like to think I have a bit more wisdom. I'm more tired. But there are good things that come with age and bad things that come with age, and all that shows up in my writing. But I really don't think the essential voice is any different from the poems in 1975 to the poems in 1995. I hope I'm getting better, but the voice is the same. I found my voice. Now, and ever since then, what I am working on is not voice, but me—*Bill*. If I'm not getting better, I'm in big trouble.

When I get something written that I like and I believe is good—there's nothing quite like that feeling. Some things never get there; some things you kind of get finished, but every now and then you'll write one and you just go, "I like that, that's a good one." That's a great feeling—creating something that's worth being printed.

On Family & Friends

I take a great deal of pleasure in family; I wish I were better at showing that to my wife and daughter. More often than not, they have to deal with my garbage, but in fact, I think the worth and value of family shows up in my new work. It was years after Vietnam before I ever began to develop a self-image of being, and possessed the thought of being a nurturing person, a family person.

The older I get, the healthier I get. I find that I really like that, which I suppose is not that unusual. It was fun yesterday to go jogging with you guys. It's fun to be able to do that, and I didn't really begin to take pleasure in that sort of thing until I was almost thirty. That's fun. I like to get on the bike and go for a ride. I take a lot of pleasure from the friends that I have and I have been very fortunate in that I spend a lot of time with friends. I don't go to the movies. I am basically culturally deprived. I seldom go to art museums and such. My first notion of fun is to sit down with Anne and trade foot rubs while we

watch reruns of "The Rockford Files." That's my idea of a hot Friday night! I like that. What am I glad for? I've got what I need. I spent seventeen years looking for Anne. And there are my friends. A lot of the people I write about in *Passing Time* and *Busted* are still around. We hang out, have dinner, enjoy each other's company.

On Success

I'm beginning to develop a sense of real discouragement. I am forty-eight. I have no job. I seem not to be able to get a job. Nothing I have accomplished at this point in my life seems to have any real value out there in the world that matters, and I'm discouraged by that. I feel like I have written some very good books. How is it that *Born on the 4th of July* becomes a bestseller and *Vietnam-Perkasie* has sold a few thousand copies? Not that I begrudge Ron Kovic, nor what he has achieved. It's not that, but at a level below the conscious, even though I know that I haven't been a failure, I feel like one a lot of the time. Now, when I go to tackle a big project, like trying to write a book about these three ghosts, there's something back there that keeps going, "what for, what for?" Am I supposed to spend another three years driving, wrenching another book out of myself? For what? And I am finding it hard. I've been struggling with that the last few years, it's not been an easy time for me. I have been discouraged a lot of the time, and it's getting in the way of the writing. I shouldn't be talking this way, though, because it is embarrassing. Let's put it this way: *The hard lot of a writer. Big deal!* It's what happens to writers. Melville spends the last thirty years of his life as a clerk in a customs house. You can just go right down the list. Hey, you don't like it, go do something else with your life! This is the life I've chosen and when it comes down to it, I don't have much to complain about, maybe nothing.

Advice to Young Writers

Get a job. Make a career for yourself in something so that you don't find yourself at forty-eight with a shelf of books that nobody's read and no one is interested in, and you can't pay

your bills. And most of my peers have done that, in fact. I look at Bruce Weigl, John Balaban, Bob Butler—they're all tenured university professors. And now, when I'm at this point in my life where I feel so constrained by the lack of financial security, their lives are just opening up. So, that's what I'd say to a young writer; if you can somehow force yourself to do it, try and think about where you want to be twenty years from now. What if your writing doesn't make you a living? What are you going to do? Think about that now and don't wait until you're too old. But, too, as writers of any age know, you push the pen across the paper, you do what you have to do.

On His Own Legacy

I don't know where I fit in the overall scheme of Vietnam War writers. I suspect that my work is good enough that in an anthology of the dozen or so poets from the Vietnam War, I belong. I probably should be represented, but I think there are better poets than me.

On America

What is in the interest of stock holders of Texaco may not necessarily be what is in the best interest of the people. But, of course, the people who sent these kids off to the Persian Gulf, say, "Look, we want to make sure that our stock keeps returning big dividends, so could you please give us your children to die?" I think there are legitimate wars. I'm not a pacifist. For awhile in the mid '70s I actually thought I was a pacifist until I began to think about things like, how do you tell a black South African to get out in the streets and chant, "We shall overcome." How do you tell a Salvadorian peasant, who has no hope of any kind of future at all, that peace-loving brotherhood is the answer? If I were a Salvadorian, I know which side I would be on. So I am not really a pacifist. It is just that the next time—and I don't imagine there will be a next time—if I'm ordered to kill anybody, I'm going to kill my enemies for my reasons and not because someone in Washington, D.C. says kill them. □

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