

LYRICS FROM THE LEFT

Voices of Vietnam veterans

DE-MILITARIZED ZONES: VETERANS AFTER VIETNAM

Edited by Jan Barry and W.D. Ehrhart
East River Anthology, 114 N. 6th St., Perkasio, PA 18944
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THIS IS A POWERFUL collection of poems about coming home and finding your house haunted, only to realize that no one else can see the ghost. It is a book about demons and bad dreams, and a colossal so-

cial deception. In short, this is about the last prisoners of the war in Vietnam:

America's veterans.

The final hundreds were airlifted unceremoniously from Tan Son Nhut airbase in 1973. They had fought or advised in Indochina for 15 years, most of them originally sharing an engrained belief in the political and moral legitimacy of the American cause. The Reds were wrong, and the Pentagon was right; many had enlisted to fight.

But something happened on the way through the rice fields. The American soldier saw the horrors of this war close up—enough pillaging to make him sick, enough to de-militarize him. But like the demilitarized zones in Southeast Asia, he has remained ever since the true center of conflict. He has seen too much war to forget.

Back in the states, Manhattan Kansas never seemed so hollow, so de-frauded. No one else here shared his recurrent nightmares. No one else wanted to turn off the football game. No one else minded hunting small game.

So America, the apple pie of young men's memories, went stale on the shelf. And the American tonic for injury, forgetfulness, became too sweet for the veteran's tastes. Imagine yourself a Viet-vet. You go to restaurants and watch your friends order hamburgers. You order a seat in a protected corner. Your mouth tastes like ash.

At night you put your head down to sleep, and there they are again: *Dark shapless things/Moving/Through the twilight pools/Beneath the surface* (W.D. Ehrhart). It makes you fear sleeping alone.

Other American wars have created fond memories, a camaraderie, drinking stories, slaps on the back. Vietnam created instead a ghost that lingers in the public plaza, shuffling its feet. The ghost lingers in crippling wounds and joblessness; it lingers in bad discharges and damaged reputations; it lingers in alcoholism, drug abuse and despair. As a vet, you recognize the ghost. He is yours.

You have a remembrance of blood and muddy boots. You can still see the limpid eyes of the orphans, still conjure their beckoning mothers. The smell of gunpowder and defoliants remains fresh: *The War still follows me/Never in anything have I found/A way to throw off the dead* (Gerald McCarthy).

Your life has been transformed. You pace the streets trying to walk off your conscience: *As I pass/Someone yells/"Hey muvva/fukka"/I stop/Wondering who knows my name* (Charles Purcell).

These are some of the themes of *De-Militarized Zones*; these are the remnants of peace and honor. And yet, on another level, *DMZ* is much more than this simple canticle of woe, more than a veteran's complaint. It is as well a book about struggling growth and an advance from illusion. The poetry proposes a salve for the nation's wounds better than collective amnesia: to exorcise the ghost of the war, end the haunting by confrontation, self-knowledge and action.

And so contributor Peter P. Mahoney can write: *I am a prophet by pain/I have the wisdom of the afflicted*.

The selections of *DMZ* constitute a special poetry of survival. Having lived through the fire and the muck, the veteran conceives of his life and society as something potentially richer than what it has been. The meaning of survival has changed for him: from making it to tomorrow to making tomorrow something better.

The authors of *DMZ* ask, "What has become of us since the war?" "What have we learned?" In so doing they grapple with both our past and the political choices to be made in the future. Their poetry is stark, it is direct, and it is as passionate as the fighting which spawned it. There are no poems in this collection for the tea-in-the-garden set. These are the voices of the combat-weary.

These veterans have put away their rifles and picked up pens. They have stopped the killing, and are killing the ghost. They now know that civilization should be cherished, that barbarism should be resisted, and that the political mainstream has been all too willing to forget that.

—Donald Venes

Donald Venes is a free-lance writer in Chicago.

To the Asian Victors

The great miscalculation
Refuses to be covered over.
I have tried every solution,
Yet the paint always begins to peel
Even before it is dry,
And the bare room comes back
Again.

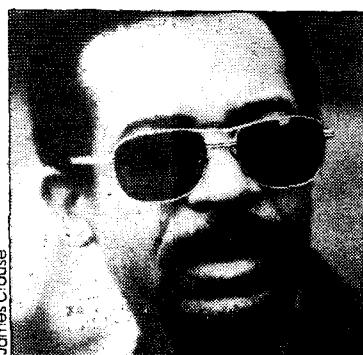
This last time,
It returned as yellow frightened faces
Spilling from the bellies of birds,
Like splinters from old wounds
That will not heal.

In school, as a child,
I learned about the Redcoats —
I studied myself,
Though I did not know it at the time.
The lesson remains;
Only the teacher has changed.

Looking back
At the pale shadow forever
Calling at dusk from the forest,
I remember the dead, I
Remember the dying.

But I cannot ever quite remember
What I went looking for,
Or what it was I lost
In that alien land
That became
More I
Than my own can ever be again.

W.D. Ehrhart



James Crouse

A Black Soldier Remembers

My Saigon daughter I saw only once
standing in the dusty square
across from the Brink's BOQ/PX
in back of the National Assembly
next to the ugly statue of
the crouching marines facing
the fish pond the VC blew up
during Tet.

The amputee beggars watch us.
The same color and the same eyes.
She does not offer me one of the
silly hats she sells Americans and
I have nothing she needs but
the sad smile she already has.

Horace Coleman

LYRICS FROM THE LEFT

Madison Avenue

I wonder if all those people
on Madison Avenue
really eat and scrub and wash
spray and drink
smoke
and swallow
all that stuff they want us
to eat and scrub and wash
spray and drink
smoke
and swallow

Low Flying Airplanes

low flying airplanes
are only dangerous
to tall people
and people who live near airports
and people with ears
and people who breathe
which I'm certain leaves most of us out

The American Response

did you see what they did
to the little children
who wanted
an extra bowl of rice?
they stamped
a hammer and sickle
on each of their foreheads,
and now
they can't get into
the boys' club.

the end

Christian Eaby



Tom McGrath, a political poet

"LITTLE AS IT IS, what have we, comrades, but love and the class struggle?" asks Thomas McGrath in his 214-page long poem, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* (Swallow Press, 1970). "Love and hunger! — That is my whole story."

But it is *our* story as well. And McGrath tells it better than any other poet writing in America today. His great achievement, as Fred Stern says in the forthcoming book, *Where the West Begins*, is the ability "to integrate personal experience, the events and feelings befalling his 'personna', with his vision of class struggle and struggle for a socialist society."

At 61 McGrath, almost alone among his contemporaries, is a true "political poet," holding the reins of that volatile team with just the right tension so that neither horse runs away with the wagon. His shorter poems, most of which have been collected in *The Movie at the End of the World* (Swallow, 1973), are often brilliant. His long poem is an American masterpiece which may well find a place beside Whitman's "Song of Myself," Williams' *Paterson*, and Pound's *Cantos*.

Though he says *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* is only "pseudo-autobiographical," the poem revolves around major benchmarks in McGrath's own life: his childhood on a North Dakota farm; his wartime service in the arctic boredom of the Aleutians, his involvement in the radical labor movement; his refusal to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities committee, and his two marriages.

But one need not know the details of McGrath's life to understand and appreciate the poem, for McGrath weaves these into a broader, more generalized social — and socialist — awareness. The details he chooses are those which intersect with "something bigger" — the common experiences of all underdogs seeking the Fifth World, the Saquasohuh of Hopi prophesy.

The people we meet are at once themselves and symbols of "something bigger": Cal, "one of the bundle teamsters...read *The Industrial Worker*...last of the real Wobs"; Jenny, the "female kachina...filling the field with light"; Cassidy, "simple as a knife, with no more pretension than bread"; "Showboat" Quinn of the National Maritime Union ("What part in the fuckin' pageant of history did you play?"); Bill Dee "of the bronc-stompers from the gone days of Montana mustangs"; Genya, "innocence/beauty/valor...miner's-light...girl with a handful of debts."

All of them move in the great circle of the Round Dance, the cycle of struggle, joy, despair and struggle, shifting stars "in the permanent sky." We move with them because they are people we have known and loved; they are us. What they seek, we seek also: "the commune: of pure potential...Communitas/Circle of warmth and work."

McGrath's juxtaposition of joy and despair propels us incessantly forward. Yes, we live in "a criminal nation/Of the rich and the mighty...a compromised country/Half dead at the bottom and rotten ripe on top." Nevertheless, "that's not the point and never was the point." What matters, McGrath insists, is "the generosity, expectant hope,/The open and true desire to create the good...The beginning is right here:/ON THIS PAGE./Outside the window are all the materials."

To that end, says McGrath, "I offer as guide this total myth,/The legend of my life and time....It is only required to open your eyes — /Come:/We'll walk up out of the night together."

Letter to an Imaginary Friend is a tale of personal courage and collective energy, a monument in words to all those who have brought us that much closer to the world we want for our grandchildren, and an inspiration to those of us who must carry on.

No other contemporary American poet has offered us so much. Yet McGrath and his work command a depressingly small audience. Even well-read lovers of poetry often return blank stares at the mention of McGrath, and he is still published almost exclusively in the "little magazines."

Undoubtedly, his politics ("unaffiliated far left," he says these days) are the major cause of McGrath's relative obscurity. Mainstream America, or rather mainstream poetical America — for mainstream America doesn't pay any attention to anybody's poetry — isn't comfortable with a poet who writes passionately about *real* change in the language of Marxism and the radical left, about commitment to revolution and the uprooting of existing political and social structures.

Yet it is just those politics, and McGrath's ability to turn his political ideals into good poetry, which makes McGrath so appealing. Too many poets never force their poetry beyond the narrow confines of their own private lives. Others who do, like Robert Bly, Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich, or Galway Kinnell, seldom offer more than criticism of what is.

Thomas McGrath offers a true vision of how to change what is, and what to change it into. His tenacity in maintaining that singular vision through 40 years of writing on the margins of the world is awesome: "...my purpose," he says, again in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, "is nothing less/Than the interpositioning of a fence of ghosts (living and dead)/Between the atomic sewing machines of bourgeois ideology/(Net where we strangle) and the Naked Man of the Round Dance...In other words to change the world/—Nothing less."

—W.D. Ehrhart

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