

## Book Review

***Smart Fish Don't Bite*. W.D. Ehrhart. Moonstone Press, 2025.**

**\$22.00, 89 pp.**

Reviewed by John Balaban

In many ways, *Smart Fish Don't Bite* is W.D. Ehrhart's most welcoming book of poetry. Ranging around in topic and tone, the book talks to us like an old friend bringing us up to date. And while the Vietnam War hovers like a ghost in this new book, Ehrhart—now nearing eighty—looks more at himself and the wider world as he addresses lifelong friendships, past adventures, and our current political scene. As he says in his book's introduction, "I have been increasingly able . . . to see humor in what Herman Melville calls 'this vast practical joke' we call life."

Just out of high school, Ehrhart became a US Marine sent to Vietnam where he was wounded in the fighting to take back the city of Huế during the 1968 Tết Offensive. He is probably our most prolific writer from that war, publishing eleven books of his own poetry, another seven books of his war-related prose, while editing or co-editing four poetry anthologies, including the highly regarded *Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldier Poets of the Vietnam War* and *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War*, books that defined poetry from that war.

From this new book's cover photo, you would expect poems about trout fishing, but that isn't Bill Ehrhart standing in the river and holding up a trout but rather the photo of a veteran friend. Keeping and remembering friends is a frequent topic in the book where poem after poem recalls friends like "Fat Pat, Smitty, and the Big Swede" on leave from the fighting and

"bar-hopping in Hiroshima." A recent poem, "Eating Oysters in Easton," is about getting together with other old friends from the war, Ron Ferrizzi and Scott Moore:

So here we are together once again,  
old friends for over fifty years:  
an army infantry platoon commander,  
an aerial scout with a Silver Star,  
a Marine with a Purple Heart,  
Vietnam Veterans Against the War  
in the days when we were hailed by some  
as heroes, and as traitors by the rest.  
We've brought our wives today,  
a hundred and fifty years of marriage  
between us, and still just one apiece;  
patient women, durable. Lucky boys.  
The waitress just keeps bringing oysters;  
we keep saying, "Just bring more!"  
The check is going to break the bank  
at Monte Carlo, but who cares? We're  
happy. Who knows how much longer  
we've got left, and we can't take it  
with us. "Oysters! Bring more oysters!"

Friends show up in poem after poem in rhythmic free verse that often slips into the past, along with poems about his preacher father, his kindly mother who taught disadvantaged children, his own difficulties at adjusting after Vietnam, including a drinking problem that he describes with wry wisdom in "On the Road to Damascus":

I had my first blackout drunk  
when I was sixteen. Drank half  
a gallon of Ernest & Julio Gallo's  
port wine on Snake Hill Road  
in Buckingham Township, PA,  
woke up next morning on the lawn  
in front of my house in Perkasio.

Since then, I've graduated with honors  
from high school; earned a Good Conduct  
Medal, sergeant's stripes, Honorable  
Discharge from the U.S. Marines;  
bachelor's, master's, doctoral degrees.  
I'm a much-published poet and author,  
high school teacher, husband and father.

I've never missed a day of work  
because of alcohol, never went to work  
under the influence, never had a DUI  
or got arrested for alcohol abuse  
or abusing someone while drunk.  
All in all, I thought I managed alcohol  
about as well as anybody should.

So here I am in the Radnor Township  
Police Department Drunk Tank  
in a white paper jumpsuit, shoelaces  
removed to be sure I don't hang myself,

sixty-six years old, found passed out  
behind the wheel at the intersection  
of Lancaster Avenue and Ithan Road.  
Handcuffs, mug shots, fingerprints,  
A one-piece stainless steel toilet,  
Not even a cell with bars, just a door  
with see-through full glass window.

Maybe I should reconsider  
my approach to alcohol.

In 1985, I traveled back to Vietnam with Ehrhart and Bruce Weigl who, like Bill Ehrhart, enlisted at eighteen and was sent to Vietnam. We were among the first Americans to travel to Vietnam after the war, the guests of General Trần Kinh Chi, then Director of Military Security, who had served as a colonel at Dien Bien Phu, fighting the French.



Left to right: Balaban, Weigl and Ehrhart (shaking hands) meet with General Chi in 1985

Hanoi, at the time had very few foreigners, few hotels, and few restaurants. The two-week visit, which took us south to Saigon, was at times a bit traumatic. Sometimes people exploded when they learned we were Americans. Once an elderly woman, who had lost her four sons in the war, railed at us until our hosts intervened. I could still speak some Vietnamese and had lived as a civilian on my own during the war, but Ehrhart had an especially hard time with this and with other encounters. The General was aware of Bill's distress, and I remember one hot afternoon at an outpost near Tây Ninh, when he called over to Bill to join him on his hammock strung on a porch, until they both went to sleep, heads to toes.

"Strange Little Reveries," the last poem in the new book, has an epigraph from Naomi Wallace asking, "do you still dream about your time in Vietnam?" Ehrhart replies with some recent dreams:

In a third one, Captain Bacheller,  
Father Lyon (the battalion chaplain)  
and Gunny Koch are standing together  
on top of a hill near the DMZ  
reading a map. And they call me over  
and ask me what I think about digging  
in for the night at this location.

I've no idea where they come from,  
why, or what they mean. Ghostly  
remnants of a long ago life. Fragments  
of memory, real and imagined. All  
that's left when the war's finally over.

**John Balaban's** books of poetry have twice been finalists for the National Book Award as well as winners of the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, and the National Poetry Series. He is the author of *Passing Through a Gate: Poems, Essays, and Translations* (Copper Canyon Press, 2024) and a former David L. Jannetta Distinguished Lecturer at the US Air Force Academy.