War, Poetry, & Ethics
A Symposium

Kali Tal: A good way to open is to allow each poet, in John Pratt's case, novelist, to talk about how he came to poetry or to writing fiction through the experience of war. Let's start with John Pratt.

John Clark Pratt: I'll begin by quoting Bill Ehrhart, who at a conference 13 years ago said he was writing about Vietnam because it was the single most important experience of his life. I think we all feel very much the same way. I started writing about Vietnam with a novel which contains poetry. And, Kali, I try to write poetry, but the best way I could get mine published was to invent a character in a novel who writes bad poems, then write them for him. But I started by writing a novel [*The Laotian Fragments*] in the form of fragments for artistic reasons, for political reasons, and for personal reasons, because I thought that there was a part of the story that just had to be told. In fiction and in much poetry we can hear people think—we can identify with the persona of a poem or with a character in fiction. We can't do this in a memoir, no matter how good, no matter how true it is, because we know that somebody else is writing and experiencing that experience. But in poetry and in fiction we can identify—we can *become*—and we can think along with the character whose words we're reading. That's why I started writing about Vietnam. I had planned to do only one book—that was to be it. I would get back to Ernest Hemingway and other literary pursuits. Now many books later, I'm still writing about Vietnam. It is something I feel qualified to do. I do it from the head

and from the heart, but I'm not going to do it any more, I promise. That's what I said last year and the year before and the year before that. I think I share that promise with all of the people here who keep doing it over and over again. I am honored to be back at the Air Force Academy, and thank you for coming.

John Balaban: I went to Vietnam from graduate school at Harvard, as a volunteer, a civilian conscientious objector who did alternative service in Vietnam in lieu of military service. I was the field representative for a group which treated Vietnamese war-injured children. We used US Air Force Hospital planes to bring severe civilian casualties, and specifically children, to the United States, so my tour of duty was 2 years of that. When I went to Vietnam, I thought that the interest that I had in writing poetry would sort of be over, that I was giving up something very important to me. As a college student, as an undergraduate at Penn State, I had started publishing poetry. It was something that meant a great deal to me, and I had gone to Harvard because the poet Robert Lowell was there. So the war was a kind of overwhelming power for people that age, college-age. Before Vietnam, before going there, in fact before going to college, I was a candidate for the Air Force Academy. I had a nomination from my senator in Pennsylvania, but I washed out at Fort Dix in the eye exam and that was the end of that. I can't imagine what would have happened to me if I had ended up in the Air Force, flying over Vietnam. It is a hard thing to imagine, but then who knows. As far as the ethics of it goes, I didn't think I could write about Vietnam because the kinds of things I saw seemed to be beyond the means of poetry. And part of the task, part of the ethics I suppose of writing about it was to find a way in poetry to talk about things that usually didn't make their way into poetry.

Dale Ritterbusch: I suppose I've always been interested in writing poetry. The first Vietnam war poem I wrote actually comes out of a strange experience at the Infantry School at Fort Benning. I was sitting in a class on machine-gun emplacement, and there had been a Vietnam War experience that had been recounted by an instructor in a previous class. I thought it would be a remarkable thing to try to put that war story into a poem, and I actually did so in that class on machine-gun emplacement. These stories are important and provide essential insights into a problematic area of human behavior; they make sense out of our experiences and validate our history, and so it is important to write them. But there has always been this enormous difficulty of writing a poem, and that difficulty is compounded when you're trying to write a war poem. None of the previous models that were out there, the poetry by World War I trench poets like Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen or the World War II poets like Randall Jarrell seemed to have much to say to me, especially when I came back from Southeast Asia. So I was always looking for another mechanism to employ, one that would allow me to create art that would be related to the war. And it is still an enormous difficulty, a virtual impossibility, and it is extraordinary that this panel demonstrates as much success in this endeavor as it does.

W. D. Ehrhart: I actually started writing poetry when I was 15. I wrote continuously through my last two years of high school. Although I was only a high school graduate when I went to Vietnam, the war did not make me a writer and even in the immediate aftermath of my experiences in Vietnam I was writing poems about geese in the autumn and broken hearted love poems and all that stuff. But it is certainly true that from the time I got back from Vietnam and started college, the war has been

a consistent thread through my writing. I can't really explain why, except that I had things I needed to try to say. I had things that I needed to understand and writing was a way for me to do that. I feel that one of the strengths and one of the great weaknesses of my writing is that it is all entirely autobiographical. I have a very pedestrian brain, and so I write about my life, but of course the Vietnam War was a huge part of my life. It changed the way I see myself, my country, the world in which I live, and so it keeps circling in and out of my writing in all sorts of ways, direct and indirect. Some of the poems I have written which people think are about the Vietnam War had nothing to do with the war, and other poems that no one would ever recognize as a Vietnam War poem in fact have everything to do with the war. In fact, one of the things I've always been grateful to Kali Tal for is that although there are not a lot of critics who have written about my writing, of those who have she is the only one who ever figured out that all of my writing is politics, *is* the war. Because for better or worse that is the filter through which I now judge the world.

D. F. Brown: I believe I probably always thought of myself as a writer. I know I'm grateful to my first-grade teacher. And I know that when my mother went to college after my stepfather died, she took courses to become an elementary school teacher, and I cribbed her romantic poetry books. I was about 12 and this was about 1960. Where I grew up though, there wasn't much of a venue for poetry writing. Still, I liked poetry, Millay and Frost of course, and I felt like I had discovered something special when I got to Theodore Roethke. I was a sports reporter for a number of years, and I headed to the University of Missouri to study journalism. About 30 years ago a series of events occurred: Tet and a little later in April, the assassination of Dr. King, and then I joined the army.

That was a mistake. I got out and ten years after that Jimmy Carter began a process that I can only look at as a kind of sanitizing of Vietnam veterans. He issued a postage stamp. The postage stamp was beige and it had a service ribbon on it—remember that? I was so pissed off that it was beige.

W. D. Ehrhart: That's what it looks like [holding up a postage stamp]. I have one in my wallet.

D. F. Brown: I wrote a poem about it. It needs more red, it needs more green, it needs more of what the war was. I actually sort of forbade myself to write about Vietnam when it was over, but the war started a process that brought me here. And I think it is a way that I initially stayed alive, writing about it. And then writing became a way of warning people that our government is capable of asking us to do wrong things. So we have to try and spread the word about that and in some way honor the experience of some people who are no longer here.

Yusef Komunyakaa: I volunteered to write my first poem. My writing was a poem dedicated to my graduating class. I had never written a poem before, and it was ridiculous. It was one hundred lines long, traditional rhyme, quatrains, properly influenced by Tennyson. Afterwards, I didn't write poetry for a long time. I took with me to Vietnam two anthologies of poetry. Hayden Carruth's anthology *Voice That Is Great Within Us* and Donald Hall's anthology *Contemporary American Poetry*. So I think of poetry as being very much connected to reading. When I finally came back from Vietnam, I ended up in a workshop in 1973 at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs. I have been writing ever since. As far as the Vietnam War goes, it took some time for me to really get through that experience. Actually my

first poems were influenced by classical surrealism, especially Breton. In 1984, I was renovating a house in New Orleans and teaching at the University of New Orleans. I began writing a poem entitled "Somewhere Near Phu Bai." It was like opening up a little door. All of the images began to tumble forth, and before I knew it I was actually working on a book-length manuscript. So the process was a complete surprise.

Kali Tal: All of our panelists are here today because they are not only poets, but they're Vietnam Veteran poets, and I think all of them have dealt with the process of being classified as a Vietnam Veteran poet and also have an interest in being looked at as poets more generally. There are political ramifications to being classified as a Vietnam Veteran poet and career ramifications, so I would like to ask each of these writers to talk about how they navigate between being Vietnam veteran writers and writers. Do you want to start with that, Bill?

W. D. Ehrhart: I have had, I think all of us here have had, a very difficult time dealing with the fact of being called a Vietnam poet, Vietnam writer. Actually, if you're going to say anything, at least say Vietnam War writer. Viet Nam is a country that exists in the world today with 70 million people. We tend to say Vietnam and mean this war that happened 30 years ago. But the fact is that it certainly was, as John Pratt said, the biggest and most important experience in my life. But it was also the most repugnant, repulsive experience I ever had, and if I had it to do again I wouldn't—period. And yet such modest public reputation as I have is entirely bound up in that experience, so it is a very uneasy relationship that I have. I also find it very irritating to be identified as such since if you go through the poems in my body of published work you will find that fewer than a third deal with war in any

way shape or form, let alone the Vietnam War. And yet for most people who've ever even heard of me, those poems that deal with such things as the trees in autumn or my wife and my daughter don't exist. It's as though I never wrote them for most people, and that is irritating, to say the least. But at the same time I have come to understand in the last 10 years that if I were not associated with the Vietnam War I would be utterly invisible as a writer. Now if people didn't think to invite me to conferences like this one on ethics, war, and poetry, I wouldn't be getting invited anywhere. So I have to kind of grudgingly acknowledge that as uncomfortable as the relationship is, it's real, and I think that probably only John Balaban and Yusef Komunyakaa have transcended the Vietnam War poet label. But most of us are stuck there in that rut and some days I hate it and some days I don't hate it as much as others. I'm never comfortable with it.

D. F. Brown: Well I think I'm grateful, as grateful as the living can be grateful, for all of the above that Bill said, although I write almost exclusively about Vietnam. I want to add to what Bill said about Vietnam being the biggest event in your lives, even though you weren't there—you weren't even born. We spent so much time and so much money and we disgraced ourselves so thoroughly that the repercussions continue. They ripple through every, every minute of your life. I spend my days in the public schools of inner city Houston, Texas. I can look at the dollars that weren't spent on public education, that were spent in maintaining a lie in Vietnam, and it persists in our lives, so I'm grateful that I can address some of the truly moral issues in my life. It's the way I stay alive. I don't want to shut up: I want to be pissy about it until I'm dead, and I want to be cranky and I don't want to forget because it's dangerous when we

start to forget things that we are capable of doing. I didn't leave the army when I left Vietnam, although I tried to. I went to a popular southern university in my dress greens, and they noticed that I had a little problem with my previous university. But I was a decorated combat veteran with a good conduct metal prominently fixed upon my left chest. They said that I should try a junior college and maybe if I proved myself to them they would let me in the next year. So I went back to Fort Benning and decided to sign up if they'd get me out of the country. They were gracious enough to get me out of the country. I went to Germany, to the town that was the spiritual heart of Nazism—Nuremberg, Germany. Every person in that goddamned town was a Nazi at one time. I was wandering around there, not knowing, wasn't very articulate, but I was looking for something. And when I left the army five years later, I realized that I was looking for how those day-to-day Germans (this was in the 70's, so 30 years after World War II) were living their daily lives. How do you put a life back together after something so colossal and so voracious and so disgraceful as Vietnam? How do you have a life? And I realized that we're not an English country—we are a German country—we do it just like they do. We don't talk about it.

Yusef Komunyakaa: If I hadn't experienced Vietnam I probably still would be writing "political" poems (put that in quotes). One reason is because of my concerns about what's happening around me. I think James Baldwin said, "We have to know what is happening around us in order to know what is happening to us, because we are a part of everything around us." And my poetry, I suppose if I think about the African American tradition, probably goes back to 1746, and that's quite a scope. The way that I work is that I work on 3 books side by side, and that's why I am able to do a number of dif-

ferent things in the context of the overall tableau. A good example is that I am working on a very long book of short poems, 16 line poems. There is one poem called "Ode to the Maggot." It is a poem that informs the other poems, for the simple reason that any and everything should get into poetry—everything that's happening around us.

Dale Ritterbusch: Being a poet who writes about the Vietnam War is a bit like being the geek in the sideshow. I have often felt that when I've been paraded out there to read some of the Vietnam poems it was like going on stage and biting the head off of a chicken. And then someone comes along with a shepherd's crook and pulls you off the stage. Probably all of us at one time or another have felt that we've been asked to perform for reasons of sensationalistic entertainment. And similarly, one of the difficulties in writing about the war has to do with how the poet is regarded by the reader. In the persona poems there is often an inability on the part of the reader to distinguish between the poet and the poem, and that causes a number of problems. If you're dealing with some difficult elements that are part of the history of the Vietnam War or anything related to sexism or racism, you'll immediately get hit with a charge of being sexist or racist because those elements are in your poem. So there are inherent personal and aesthetic problems in the writing of war literature that are not present in other types of writing. These problems require unusual creative solutions.

John Balaban: I like your geek-show metaphor. And I think I was aware that I might be asked at any moment to bite the head off of a chicken. That made me resort to the education I got before I went to Vietnam, for a sense of why writing about war is of human or societal value.

There are lots of things in the Western tradition that make it sound more noble than a geek show, and one of them is Dante who says in *De vulgari eloquentia* that "the proper subjects of poetry are love, virtue, and war." I picked that quote up as a comfort after coming back from Vietnam and finding that the term Vietnam poet is kind of a subcategory of poetry and being annoyed by it and finding even critics like Paul Fussell thinking that nothing that ever came out of the Vietnam War was worth bothering about in terms of poetry, and just not believing that to be true. What does that mean—love, virtue, and war? Why are they the proper subjects for poetry? And I realized looking back through the poems that I had written and looking back at poems that some of the people here have written about Vietnam, that they're the same topic. That under the huge text of war, we learn an immense amount about ourselves, we learn an immense amount about our friends, we learn what friendship is. The comradeship of war, whatever society it occurs in, is like no other comradeship, no other friendship. All sorts of questions of loyalty, questions of deceit, questions of just walking off and not doing the thing that's demanded of you. There is so much power, so much stress. There are so many angels and demons born in warfare that it naturally is an important topic. How could any culture believe that not writing about warfare in some way was an acceptable thing? It seems to me it would be a disservice. You discover love, you discover virtue when you write about warfare.

John Clark Pratt: I'd like to address this from a slightly different point of view, in two quick topics. First the Vietnam War veteran in academe, and second, the Vietnam War veteran as a committed teacher. A recent survey showed that of the people who are teaching the Vietnam War in civilian colleges, 40% were in the antiwar

movement, and 30% are veterans of the Vietnam War. So 70% of the people teaching the war are connected with the war in some way or another. Of that 70%, there are almost none who fit my particular category, that of having been a career military officer who served in Vietnam. When I arrived at Colorado State from the Air Force Academy, I was treated with suspicion. I took over as chair of the English department. Half of them thought that because of my military background I would be harmless; the other half thought I'd shoot the first half. Since I have been writing about Vietnam in varying genres, my mission, if I have one, is to inform students about Vietnam and make sure they know what happened. I teach a course in the fiction of the Vietnam War. It's a chronological course. All the students are sons and daughters of Vietnam War era parents. Twenty to twenty-five years later, that's the crop of students we're getting now, and the majority of them know absolutely nothing about the war. I do a little questionnaire in the beginning of the course. Only about 20% of the students can answer basic questions such as when did the war end? where were the peace talks? who was Ho Chi Minh? President Diem? And so if I have a job to do for the rest of these people on the panel, it is to make sure that their poems and their work gets read by students, one way or the other. I don't care if my students take one side or the other when they finish the course, but I want them to have the experience. And I think it can be done best, as I said earlier, in a class using fiction and poetry where you can hear people think, where you can become emotionally involved with the human beings who are at work.

Kali Tal: I think it would be interesting to move to some questions about the connections between poetry and politics and poetry and activism, because that has cer-

tainly been a heated subject in the poetry world. There are arguments that poetry is simply art, and then there are arguments that unless poetry is political it's not a good thing. So I would like to ask panel members how they deal with their politics and poetry together, and I know that at least a couple of people have been involved with putting out books of Vietnam veterans poetry as activist texts.

W. D. Ehrhart: I understand soundbite history and the way things can get quoted out of context because I have been chastised at least five times in print in the last 13 years for having said something to the effect of "I don't give a goddamn about art, my writing is a tool of education." Well there was some context to that statement which isn't taken into account by the people who scolded me and said "yes you really do care about art." For me, I run into trouble with my own writing because it is constantly accused of being polemical or of being too political. If it's political, some people feel, it's not poetry. I don't think in those terms. As I said, I write about my life. People talk about my political poetry and my personal poetry. Oh no, no, no, no, no—it's all my life. It's all what goes on in the world around me, and if I tend to be more aware of the political as personal it's because I'm kind of a wise guy and because I see my life in those terms. I mean I took Richard Nixon very personally. That's not political, it's part of my life.

D. F. Brown: Well I wasn't glad when Nixon died. I wanted him to suffer for a long, long time with phlebitis and throw little clots off to his brain. I think we get into our most trouble as a culture, as a uniformed service when we start dividing our politics, our art, and our experiences. There is a kind of unity in these things, and if you start to separate them out then everything, even art

which declares itself soundly not to be addressing political issues, is one way or another supporting one side or the other of a political issue. So I don't try to pull those apart anymore. It used to be kind of important I thought, but it's really trying (I think more and more) to keep them all together in one house, which is kind of a national proposition too of keeping all of us together in a reasonable fashion.

Yusef Komunyakaa: Somewhere I've said that even silence is political. The personal is also political. I think that for the artist there has to be a need for him or her to do what he or she does. And consequently, everything we do, our whole lives . . . are social and political. For me, a poem has to work in many ways. The politics isn't on the surface of the poem. It's buried underneath images within a context of possibilities. I want the reader or the listener to come into the poem and to be a co-creator of meaning. That's why at the end of the poem I like to think of leaving a little door open where the listeners or the readers can actually enter the poem and not be told what necessarily to think, but actually go through the process of thinking and arriving at their own conclusions.

Dale Ritterbusch: There is of course a very great cultural prejudice that says poetry and politics don't mix. You can see this even if you are looking at the recent poems that were written and read for the inaugurations of Bill Clinton. There was an obvious attempt by the poets to create something that was innocuous, that was devoid of any real political content. It was an attempt to pull people together and not deal with any divisive issues. So as much as those poems were in some measure devoid of politics, you can see that there was a very strong political impulse behind them. It is evident as well that there is a

way of turning political material into art, and not just within the realm of poetry. If you look at Picasso's painting *Massacre in Korea,* based on Goya's disturbing series of war paintings, you see the terrible beauty of art conjoined with war. It is a strikingly fine work of art although not nearly as well known nor as highly regarded as his war painting *Guernica.* And no one, to my knowledge, castigated Picasso for creating a painting on the theme of war. There is something else that has to be mentioned. Pablo Neruda says in one of his poems that there are people who are going to ask him why he doesn't write about the sunlight on the sea or the flowers that are growing outside of his window. And the reason he doesn't deal with these things in his poetry is because of the refrain in the poem where he says, "Come and see the blood in the streets." And he repeats that a couple of times. "Come and see the blood in the streets." What he is getting at, then, is that it is very disingenuous to create poetry that is not in any way mindful of the political realities in which one lives. It would be very disingenuous, I suppose, too, to think that the prescriptions for a poet are so constrained that one is only to deal with leaves changing color in the fall or dew on the grass. Again, in American culture, poetry about nature, poetry about love, those are acceptable themes. Once you deal with something stronger than that, once you take on Neruda's perspective you're on some dangerous ground. There are a lot of people who are going to be very much offended by the political line that you take, as evenhanded as it might be. Let me give another example of this. There is a very fine poem by Larry Rottman entitled "APO 96225" in which a soldier writes home about things that are really quite innocent—the sunsets, the monkeys in the trees in Vietnam, and that sort of thing. The father writes back and says, "Please tell us what it is really like." And then when he does, the father sends

back a letter saying "please don't write such disturbing letters, you're upsetting your mother." So again the soldier writes back about the sunsets and the monkeys playing in the trees. That poem has almost no political content in it whatsoever, and yet when I gave that to a group of high school teachers as an example of a Vietnam War poem that could be taught at the high school level, one of the teachers, without missing a beat after I read the last line, said, "I could be fired for teaching that poem." And she probably could be. Again this is reflective of the fact that we really don't want to know what is happening, and we really don't want to engage literature or art that deals with stronger and more difficult subjects.

John Balaban: It's a question that has a lot of complication to it and one about what is socially acceptable. A lot of newspapers in the United States used to publish poetry. I think one reason they stopped is they just got tired of all of the whining poets who wanted to get into the paper. But another reason is that they found themselves in sort of heated, even legal, contests with people who read the newspaper and were offended by the poetry. So there is a social aspect of politics in poetry, but a more interesting aspect for me is an aesthetic aspect. To what degree are the two separate, and to what degree do the two merge happily? This seems to me to have to do with the obviousness of the politics when it's in the poetry. How much the reader is conscious, not just of wandering around in a poem, but of being preached to? After I spent some years in Viet Nam, I returned on my own with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to collect on tape the oral folk poetry of Viet Nam. This was 1971 and '72, so the war was still going on. I still had my little Harvard book bag and this time I had a tape recorder in it. I was traveling alone out in the countryside, walking up to people and saying "would

you sing me your favorite poem." And in Viet Nam, which is a culture 4,000 years old, this is a perfect possibility. It is not unreasonable to assume that if a Vietnamese my age had walked up to a farm house on the plains out in Colorado and knocked on the door and asked the same question there would have been a different response, a bewildered response at the least. Sometimes I would take what I played in one part of Viet Nam, mainly in the Mekong Delta, with me to get other people, in this case Hue up in the center of the country, interested in what I was doing or just to explain what it was I was trying to do because no one had ever taped this folk poetry before. I remember playing a poem that I recorded on an island on the Mekong river for some elderly men. (One of them actually had been a palanquin bearer in the last imperial court.) They were displeased with it and I said, "What's wrong with it?" I asked, "Is it the politics?" because it was a political poem and I was trying to get some sense of what they thought was good in poetry. And they said, "Oh no, no, no, no, it's not the politics. We have no problems with politics in poetry. It's just so *obvious*, the politics." So they thought the poem just wasn't sophisticated enough, that there wasn't enough play, enough amusement, enough invitation for a perfect stranger to come into the poem and absorb the politics unconsciously.

John Clark Pratt: Maybe I could sum something up, but I want to start by thanking John Balaban for many things, primarily for his translations of Vietnamese poetry. Something that none of us realized when we first went to Viet Nam was that the literary tradition of Viet Nam in particular, and Asia in general, emphasizes poetry, not fiction. And so by making the Vietnamese views more available, John Balaban and Bruce Weigl and others who are translating are doing us all a very great service. I

have always had difficulty with the word "political" when it applies to art. I am fortunate to have been criticized by both the left and the right for some of the stuff that I have done, so I feel that I have succeeded. I have been called an extreme liberal for attacking the conduct of the war in my novel, and I have been called an absolute redneck conservative for showing that people can do heroic things in war, so I'm forced into the middle in many cases. With respect to the word "political" in art, I would ask everyone to try and make a distinction between whether the artist, the poet, is trying to advance or attack a specific political agenda, or whether the poet is trying to show the truth as he or she sees it about a political subject. I think that all of these poets here have varying kinds of poems, some of which may seem to fit the first definition—going after a particular agenda—but the majority, I think, fit the second definition. If you're writing about a war conducted by one country against another, you have a political agenda. There is no question about it. It is not like writing about trees and flowers and shrubs and so on and so forth, but it is the way the poet handles the subject which should enter your consciousness when you try to decide whether the poem is political or not.

Kali Tal: I've been curious about what each of you feels about being a poet in the contemporary United States, where poetry is not accorded great respect and where it is not generally thought of as a particularly masculine occupation or one with high occupational status. All of you write from the perspective of veterans, and it is a particularly masculine position. How you feel about the profession and your place in it?

Yusef Komunyakaa: Well I mentioned the word "need," that need has to be there. In 1984 I was toying with the

question of becoming a carpenter, like my father, primarily because I wanted to have more time to actually do my own work. What I considered my own work was writing. I wanted to have control of my time. I was in the process of thinking about pulling back from the university academic situation. I think that as poetry in the United States goes, there are so many poets and so many readings, every night, every day. I think that in the history of San Francisco for the last 70 years there hasn't been a night without a poetry reading somewhere. That's pretty amazing when you think about it. So there is all of this talk about the death of poetry. I think poetry is very much alive in the United States. Recently I traveled to Saint Petersburg, primarily to establish a dialogue with the poets in Saint Petersburg. I wanted to know what these young poets were actually doing. As it turns out, what they were interested in was not really writing poetry but translating American best sellers, through piracy of all things. So, relatively speaking, poetry is doing quite well in the United States.

D. F. Brown: I went to graduate school in San Francisco, so there was never a real issue for me. It's true that some nights there are 10 poetry readings in San Francisco, but I come from a place in the Missouri Ozarks where there isn't much besides a kind of flint and scrub and trees. I had a grandmother who wrote poetry, so I think there was a time when you could go to some rural place and recite your favorite poem and you would get a response. I don't know if that whole life is disappearing, but poetry books were available in my house, so it didn't seem weird. And then the first place the army sent me was San Francisco. I was telling Kali last night that I went to the City Lights Book Store, looking for a particular book, and this woman was standing there forcing this other book of poetry on people who would come by. The

author was a guy I had never heard of, but she was insistent so I bought the book. Many years later I met her and discovered she was the author's wife. But that was a very routine kind of thing in San Francisco in the City Lights Book Store. There was a vibrant and often heated but always come-back-for-more kind of exchange of poetry. Texas is almost the same way, but Texas is really South Missouri, so there are a bunch of hillbilly people who have a kind of begrudging respect for the literate and who want to do the best by them because they might write down something about us, you know.

W. D. Ehrhart: Kali, you mentioned that being a poet isn't really a masculine thing. Wasn't that the word you used? Masculine or macho?

Kali Tal: In lots of circles, writing poetry is not considered a masculine occupation.

W. D. Ehrhart: Well how many of you here are 19 and a half or younger? How many of you are under 21? By the time I was your age, I was an ex-Marine sergeant with three rows of battle ribbons. I did the masculine thing and I didn't really like it very much. I am much happier being a poet. As all of the people at this table can tell you, I spend a great deal of time whining about the hard life of a writer. And unlike most of the people here, I don't have an actual profession. I am not a college professor or anything, so I whine a lot. I'm very good at that, but the fact is I'm in fat city. I'm doing this because this is what I want to do. I often said to people when I was a classroom teacher that teaching is what I do but writing is what I am. I write because I can't avoid doing it. I don't know why. I can't even begin to explain to you why. I just need to do this. It is what I am, even though it is tough to make a living as a poet (that's why

all of these guys have university jobs). For me it obviously beats the hell out of going to work every day, because if I had wanted a career, I had plenty of opportunities to have one. I wish that I could fill Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia with 70,000 screaming people, but I could never make the guitar strings do what I wanted them to, and I'm stuck with poetry—this is what I've got. But I do actually get people to come and listen to what I have to say. I don't have much to complain about. It's taken me 25 years, but a few years ago I began to be able to say to people when they ask, "What do you do?", I'd say, "I'm a poet," with a straight face. And that's what I am.

Dale Ritterbusch: In America poetry is largely considered to be a private, harmless hobby, and we have moved a long way from Shelley who suggested that poets should be the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." Now there is probably something a little bit suspect in Shelley's statement, but in the tradition of poetry (I mean as far as war poetry is concerned) poets were once considered too valuable to be going to the rice paddies. They were placed on the hillside and were supposed to record the battles they observed below; so there was obviously a different role for poets in the past than there is now. And it is difficult to admit that one is a poet because there are so many jokes that are made of this profession. It's not considered, as Kali suggested, a very manly occupation. W. H. Auden, for example, when he was on an airplane, avoided the question. You know how it is in America—if you're sitting next to someone the inevitable question is, "What do you do for a living?" Auden would never admit that he was a poet. He would say instead that he was a medieval scholar; that would close down the conversation even faster than saying he was a poet. But essentially there is something extraordinary about creating a poem. It is a very difficult

art form, and you get an enormous sense of satisfaction out of meeting that challenge. It doesn't always work. I mean you have a good feeling when you write something, and of course the next day you find out that it needs to be relegated to the trash heap. But when you write something that does have some impact, it is a very rewarding experience, and you don't have to live for anything beyond that really to continue writing. You don't need any accolades. It is nice when this happens—there is always a bit of joy when somebody looks at your work and says that it is strong and compelling and memorable. But you don't have to live for that. It's enough just to write.

John Balaban: Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift* is based on the poet Delmore Schwartz' life. Bellow was a friend of Schwartz, and Schwartz was a very difficult person, alcoholic, drug-ridden, a biter-of-the-hands-that-fed-him, treacherous, and then finally crazy. Wife beater. I mean, one could go on and on. He wasn't a charmer in any way at all. He was a fine poet and then finally was simply a speed freak living in a hotel in New York, talking to shadows. Bellow's novel is a beautiful study of what went wrong there. You suspect that a lot of it was there at birth, but you also suspect that some of it had to do with the society that Delmore Schwartz lived in—where he was a great success by the age of 24 and the burden of that success. He refers to poetry as being a school thing, a "skirt" thing he says, to echo what you were saying. And he asks "what good is a poet today?" A poet can't perform a hysterectomy or launch a vehicle out of the solar system. These are the things that measure importantly for us in American society, Western society. And while there is a huge amount of activity of the kind you all are talking about (a lot of poetry readings), I don't know what it adds up to in the way I'd want it to

add up. In the way if you go, say, to Viet Nam where people who do not read or write nonetheless know hours of poetry by heart or where if you were in the former Soviet Union—not the situation today—[Yevgeny] Yevtushenko and [Andrei] Voznesenky could have an audience of thousands and thousands of people in a stadium that they would fill. That has never happened here for all sorts of reasons, but it has reached a state I think in America where maybe it will take the academies to address the situation. I don't know. It's a serious problem. I had a book come out this year and I was whining as poets tend to do that it wasn't getting reviewed, and Daniel Hoffman wrote back to me and said, "John, I don't think you realize that *The New York Times* has more or less stopped reviewing poetry." We were in June, and he said, "So far this year they have reviewed six books of poetry and one was Dante's and the other Homer's." So one worries certainly, and it strikes me that there is something lost in the country, that there is something poetry can bring to us that other art forms can't.

John Clark Pratt: My answer to Kali's question will be very short. I have written poetry, but I am not primarily a poet. I don't know what I am. My fiction has been looked at as history; my history has been looked at as fiction. The only thing I know for certain, Kali, is that I was born male and I have no desire to change it.

Kali Tal: That is a good thing; I understand it is a real process. The last question that I want to ask, since this is a symposium on ethics, war and poetry, is for each of the panelists to think about a moment in which ethics, war and poetry all came together for you as a question, as something that you wrestled with.

John Clark Pratt: Let me do a quick one on that. In [the book] *Vietnam Voices* there is an audio tape, a transcription (and I also do a video presentation of it) of a forward air controller, F-105 pilots, and others, bombing in Cambodia at the moment when President Nixon was announcing that the war was over in Viet Nam. The forward air controller and the ABCCC controllers are listening to that particular speech as they're conducting the bombing mission, and they talk about it. The FAC says, "Put your bombs 100 meters left," and then adds, "Ahhh, there's a lot of irony today, gentlemen." And you can hear Nixon's speech fading in and out, saying that peace has been agreed to. That the war is over in Viet Nam. It was at that moment, more than any other time, when I first heard the tape that I realized that the politics and the secrecy and the ethics and the war were combined in one piece of found poetry in a way that I had never seen done before.

John Balaban: Early on in my career in Viet Nam, I was barreling along a highway in the Mekong Delta in an old Land Rover, and I was trying to get to a US Air Force Base in Binh Thuy because if you got there between 5 and 6 in the morning you could get to a MARS station and phone home. I wanted to phone home because I had been in Viet Nam for some months. And as I said before, in the earlier session, I had sort of kissed off writing poetry. I didn't think that the business of writing poetry and the business of being in Viet Nam were associated concepts or activities. And I was barreling along because the roads are mined every evening and the theory that we volunteers had developed was that if you drove real, real fast, by the time your front wheels had hit something your back wheels would be already over it and you would be down the road and on your way. It was no problem—you just had to go very, very fast. They would

sweep the mines each morning, but I couldn't wait for that because if I waited until the roads were swept then the MARS station would be shut down and I couldn't make my phone call. So I was barreling along and I came to a river crossing, the Binh Thuy river, and I stopped because there was a man pointing a gun at something in the water. And it was a beautiful, beautiful morning, full of fog and the green vegetation of Viet Nam that dazzled so many of us. And I stopped and looked down into the water because bridges like that were always being bombed at night. There was a woman kneeling on the deck of a little boat, and she was just washing her face. She had just gotten up for the day. It was dawn and she was washing her face in the river water and he was sort of pointing his gun down on her then pointing it off. I don't think he ever really intended to shoot her, but that image struck me and I went and made my phone call and went home. And some phrase about the fog came to me that morning, and I realized that I could write about this. This is a place that I can write about just like it were Pennsylvania, just a different landscape. And there is this beauty to it as well as this frightening aspect that I wrote about too.

Dale Ritterbusch: There is an old adage that poetry should not inculcate a moral, and it probably shouldn't, but that does not mean that poetry should be excluded from any kind of concern with ethics. One of the extraordinary things about the literature of the Vietnam War is that it serves as moral discourse when the other avenues that would normally be used to apprehend the Vietnam War have been closed off for various political reasons. If you look at the first-person accounts, the autobiographies and so forth, of people like General Westmoreland or Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, or Robert McNamara's recent *In Retrospect*, they are all

rather disingenuous. They're all self-serving. Any attempt at providing some kind of ethical dimension is often compromised, again because they are so self-serving. So it has become in some measure the province of poetry (and often fiction as well) to deal with these ethical concerns, this moral dimension, and it is done surprisingly well. The literature contradicts a lot of the things that you find in the sanitized histories. In fact, one of the things we find in the recent histories is that there is a great attempt at sanitizing the story. The Vietnam War has become compromised and marginalized over time, and yet the literature is quite insistent in exploring the moral dimension.

W. D. Ehrhart: Well there really has never been a time when in some crystallized moment all three of those things came together for me. If you read any of my work, you don't have to read much of it before you discover that war and ethics and poetry are all wrapped up in it together, but I unfortunately don't have a really vivid anecdote to give you about that. I could keep you here for about an hour and a half just trying to explain my sense of the relationship between those three things.

D. F. Brown: Maybe the closest I got to ethics was when I enlisted in the army. This was May 4, 1968. The war was stinky, even in the Ozarks. There wasn't much resistance or questions—active kind of stuff—but it smelled bad. So I thought that I would be okay if I enlisted as a medic, since I would be helping people and putting patches on and giving morphine and easing pain. But I was wrong about that; it doesn't make a bit of difference. I shouldn't have gone; I shouldn't have enlisted. There would have been no way to look at my six uncles and my aunt who were all veterans of World War II and say, "You know, I don't care how the experience played out for you. This is

another time." But something can smell bad, and you're sitting there in a Republican living room and you're not going to say, "Hey that's elephant shit on the floor." So I thought being a medic would be my ethical choice. They immediately sent me to San Francisco, and this is post-Tet. It was a thousand-bed US Army hospital. There are nowhere near enough arms and legs in the place to fit 1,000 guys and then suddenly I realized there *is* another dimension and nothing I heard in high school and nothing I heard from my aunts and uncles about service in the Good War had prepared me to deal with it. And then they sent me to Vietnam. Even Richard Nixon, supreme killer of Cambodia that he is, was running as a peace candidate. So this was the ethical dimension that we were existing in, that we were trying to make choices about. What is the right thing to do and how do you survive when all of those shameful people—Westmoreland, McNamara—were lying to us? And then you get to the ground in Viet Nam where you are supposed to be with 122 guys, and usually there are about 80 guys. They're sloppy and they're silly, just American kids a little bit younger than most of the people in this room. And where is their ethical dimension when their general is saying there is just a half a regiment of NVA out there, when there are all kinds of stuff and you're surrounded? The arena is forged in lies and ideological stuff that is hung over from I don't know what—Cold War ideology? So it's hard to figure out. I do know maybe the little anecdote about the postage stamp was when it all came together. I didn't think "Gee there is a poem in this stamp," but I knew that something had to start coming out about some of the things I had seen.

Yusef Komunyakaa: I keep thinking about the poem as a composite, and I'm especially thinking of the Vietnam memorial. When I wrote that particular poem ["Facing

It"], it sort of took me to a place where I could at least embrace a certain kind of severe loneliness, and consequently a kind of confrontation because the individual I mentioned in the poem, Andrew Johnson, was my closest friend. As a result, it led me to a certain kind of truth within the context of my own psyche. So ethics has to do with severe questions more than anything else, the ability to pose questions, to trouble the waters.

W. D. Ehrhart: I didn't mean to dodge the question entirely. I'll raise a little hell here by just saying that finally for me I came to conclude that ethics and war are mutually exclusive. You can have one or you can have the other, but you can't have both. I know a great many honorable men and women who will take umbrage at that statement. But I think that finally what happens out there on the battlefield is simply insupportable in any human dimension. And my poetry is an ongoing attempt to atone for the unethical, for my loss of a moral compass when I was a young man.

Audience: You said that war and ethics are mutually exclusive. But who applies ethics, the society or an individual? Our society accepts the fact that we have a death penalty. So by that standard, wouldn't killing and war be considered ethical?

W. D. Ehrhart: Well there is of course the whole elaborate development of the just war theory. Was it Augustine who worked that whole thing out? One of the early fathers of the church had to figure out a way to explain, well "Jesus said thou shalt not kill" and "turn the other cheek." He even rebuked one of his disciples for whacking off the Roman soldier's ear, and He put the ear back and made it better. Meanwhile we've got government, Christian governments, saying you should go out

and hack the other Christian governments apart. How do you explain that? So Augustine worked out this whole theory of the just war, which to a very large extent the Western world has followed for 1,600 years. Finally, what it really comes down to, for me, is that I am willing to stay within society's definition of the rules as long as I can live with those rules. But when the cost of living with them becomes greater than the cost of ignoring society's rules, then I choose to follow my own conscience. All of you I'm sure are familiar with the Nuremberg principles, which are part and parcel of our constitution and the laws of our land because treaties ratified by the Senate become part of the law of the United States of America. We are all obligated finally to, in the end, disobey orders which we personally believe to be immoral, unethical, not legal. Finally you have to follow your own conscience, but you also have to be willing to bear the price of refusing to do what your society says is OK. It might mean being thrown into prison. It might mean being killed, although generally that doesn't happen in this country, but occasionally it does. It's between you and your conscience. I mean, I hate to dump it all on you, but that's finally what it comes down to.

D. F. Brown: I live in Texas and we kill people on a regular basis. For me, it's a political embarrassment because they are usually very poor people and underrepresented in legal terms. We killed a woman two weeks ago [Carla Faye Tucker], but it is not a settled issue. There are some states that don't act like that, and there are places where the possibility of it changing sooner are greater. But when it comes down finally to whether you're going to kill somebody or not, then the state will not shelter you. It will be up to you and it will be on your pillow for the rest of your life, so it is not a moral conundrum at that, or a political problem. It's a choice

that you make and the only thing, probably the message that we all learned was the choices you make last forever. You think it's a little tiny thing today you're deciding and then there's the inertia and the stuff that gathers around it and suddenly it is your entire life.

Audience: I was a Marine Corps infantry officer in Vietnam. I agree and I disagree with your statement. Let me ask you to reflect on this because I think I may understand what you're getting at when you talk about the exclusiveness of war and ethics. What are the experiences that would lead you to say that, because it seems to me that there are experiences that are beyond any human behavior, instances of savagery? But perhaps not.

W. D. Ehrhart: Oh boy. I'm feeling the press of time very heavily here, and that is why I prefaced my remarks by saying that there are honorable people here who will disagree with me, and I understand that. But I think that for instance one can certainly recognize that what took place in a village that Americans remember as My Lai in March of 1968 went beyond what anyone would consider ethical in war. To take unarmed men, women and children and throw them into ditches and shoot them is not okay by anyone's code of ethics. But at the same time I witnessed repeatedly, and I'm sure you did too, massive aerial bombardment and artillery bombardment of targets that were heavily populated where civilian damage vastly exceeded anything that was done in My Lai and no one ever tried those pilots for murder. No one ever said that they had stepped beyond the bounds of what is acceptable in war, and that's why I say that finally ethics and war are exclusive, because once the shit hits the fan . . . your question about who determines ethics is a pretty good question. Finally it all gets real fudgy and sticky out there on the battlefield and once the first trigger is

pulled what's okay and what's not okay basically vanishes into the fog, though I know most people who went to Vietnam didn't cut off ears and didn't throw people into ditches and shoot them. Most of us did the best we could under really difficult circumstances.

D. F. Brown: I am an army veteran, but I know that the Marine Corps had a better civic action plan, did a much better job operating in populated areas than the Army did. That is acknowledged and reported but probably not talked about much. When I think about your kind of question, the question of what would it have been like if we had not thought that we were the good guys comes to mind. What is the grade for burning someone out of their house, for killing their buffalo, and then how many of them do you have to waste before it's not just a mopping-up or collateral damage or whatever euphemism comes out? All of the standard kind of moral and ethical precepts pale in those moments. I was in Berkley and it must have been '85 or '86 when Oliver Stone's *Platoon* came out. I was sitting there at the U.C. Berkley theater, two blocks from campus, surrounded by 18-, 19-, 20-year-old kids and a couple other veterans and the woman I was with then. There is a moment in the movie when the guy is threatening the wife of the farmer, saying "We know you know where the VC are. Now tell us right now or I'm going to blow her away." And then the Tom Berringer character steps up and blows her away. Almost to a person this young audience in there goes "Yeah, right on!" I'm sitting there in what I think is the capital of progressive politics in the United States. There's got to be something liberal in Berkley, right? I mean, these kids are cheering the murder of an innocent noncombatant—or maybe she was this incredible VC colonel, right? So I mean where do the ethics go? Who talked to these kids, or who didn't?

John Clark Pratt: One of my jobs when I was in Vietnam was doing research on the historical evaluation of combat operations. I ran across a story which sums up for me the problem of war and ethics. It was about the army captain who was assigned a job in the middle of the country to clean out some caves. He knew that there were women and children in the caves as well as VC so he used tear gas, and he used some CS gas as well. And he got them all out alive. The VC were taken prisoner, but he was reprimanded and relieved of his command and his successor was ordered to, and did, call in napalm on the next caves because napalm was authorized, but gas, according to the Geneva Convention, even tear gas, was not. As a result, there were numerous civilian casualties.

Audience: In trying to write good poetry, to create art that deals with an ugly subject, how do you create a beautiful poem?

Dale Ritterbusch: Actually it's not that difficult to do, considering the history. We have had the benefit of about 80 years, I suppose, of examples before us. In the First World War, after the Battle of the Somme in July of 1916, the poets changed radically. Before that, even if they were in the trenches, they were still the Georgian poets. After the Somme it was no longer possible to write pretty lines about war. You could no longer do something like what Tennyson did in "The Charge of the Light Brigade." That was absurd. We know that a colossal military blunder took place on the plains of Balaklava in the Crimean War and Tennyson ignored that because he was consumed by an ethos that said what those men did on that plain was noble, heroic, adventurous, and chivalric. We recognize this now as being colossally stu-

pid. When Owen and Sassoon turn their attentions to what actually is taking place on the battlefield, they change the course of poetry forever. The language of poetry changes, the sounds of poetry change. There are very harsh and ugly sounds in the poetry which imitate or mimic the sounds of the battlefield, and the graphic imagery is striking. It is anti-poetry. Great art came out of the First World War, and poets have benefited enormously from that heritage. What we see in the works of Rosenberg and Owen, Sassoon and the others, is of considerable artistic import, and they were dealing with such grotesqueries, such horrors, that their experiences are unimaginable. In a Sassoon poem like "Counter-Attack," for example, he has the lines "naked sodden buttocks" and "bulged, clotted heads." These are very disturbing images, and they conflict with what people thought war was actually like. Interestingly, now we might have to pull back from that a little bit because we know that things are even more horrific than were described in those poems. It is difficult to write a good strong war poem that deals with some of these horrific war images and yet still has some artistry to it, but we have been doing this for pretty much the entire century now, and there is a whole long and extraordinary tradition of creating art from the experience of war.

John Clark Pratt: We have audiences now who have seen it all on television anyway. The visual experience the audience already has makes writing that kind of stuff, I think, less challenging.

Dale Ritterbusch: That was what happened in the Second World War with Randall Jarrell. He was banking on the readers having those photographic images. The World War I poets were creating the photographic images on the page because they weren't there in the news-

papers. So Jarrell knows that people have that information at their disposal. They can bring their imagination to bear on a line like the last one of "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." The last line reads, "When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose." If you ask students what they see in that line, they will tell you that they see the Plexiglas shattered, the body destroyed inside of the turret, but those images are not there. You create those images with your imagination, and you can do that because you know what the technological effects are of modern warfare. It's there, it's evident, and it's known to everyone with a discerning intelligence.

Audience: Fifty years from now, will we still be studying the Vietnam War? If so, what will we be learning?

John Clark Pratt: Fifty years from now, it is difficult to say. The number of academic courses is holding a little bit steady now. To try and get a course in the history of the Vietnam War or the literature of the Vietnam War required for graduation is out of the question. All we can do is the best we can, and all you can do is the best you can to make sure that people at least open their minds to read about it, to hear about it, and to realize that there is an awful lot that they don't know. It's mind boggling. There have been 5,000 books written about the Vietnam War, just in English, so how do you pick which ones to read? But I think your question is a very important one. Fifty years from now, though, you guys are going to be retired, so it's up to you to make sure your kids have the materials to study. And then we get right back to the beginning since the reason we are here is that we record, in one way or another—through art, through poetry, through fiction—what happened, and what you guys do with it 50 years from now is up to you.

Kali Tal: I would like to answer that question, because it's one that concerns me often. I entered the field about 12 years ago when the questions about how the war was going to be taught were debated quite fiercely. In fact, the first conference I went to people actually stood up on tables and yelled at each other. It was that intense of a question, although it has faded a bit now. But I think part of the reason that that is so pressing now is because it is still recent enough that there are all of these people who can get up and say, "I know how it was and that wasn't how it was." But all history recedes into myth, and my concern is with the kinds of myths society chooses to use as its basis to move forward. I think that we're involved in a tremendous struggle right now over what factions are going to win the rights to wave the Vietnam War around like a flag, and that really has nothing to do with truth or what really happened. It has to with how we construct ourselves and our ethics and our histories and that's a much bigger battle than the battle over what really happened. And you don't know how that turns out until it turns out. I think that none of us here will live to see it, but I think that every writer who is up here is engaged in that struggle over the meaning of the Vietnam War and that they're all deeply engaged in that. And that is indeed exactly what we are here for and how you read that is what you'll carry into the future.

Audience: What notions do you have of the power of art to alter human behavior?

W. D. Ehrhart: The older I get, the less I have any belief that anything I have ever written or ever will write will make a tinker's damn in hell. And I find that discouraging, but I also have to write what I have to write. And whether it changes anything is not really the question for

me. What am I supposed to do? Go get a three-piece suit and sell insurance? I know what I know and I have to deal with that. There was a time when I believed passionately, I mean it embarrasses me to look back and think of who I was 25 years ago and what I thought I could do through writing. Even that outburst at The Asia Society where I'm ranting about how my writing is a tool of education as though I thought I could actually make a difference. I no longer think that. I write what I write and I put it out there and you can do with it what you like. I no longer have expectations.

Yusef Komunyakaa: As far as making a difference, we can say basically that art is that which endures. Consequently, if it endures, then questions are always posed in trying to understand it and that's the most important thing, for those questions to come from within the reader or the listener. That way it remains active, in place of it actually teaching something directly.

John Balaban: Let me add something. I don't know if individually any of us can ever hope to expect to see some measurement of any effect we've had, or even if we would know what that effect we were seeking might be. But I still believe that art has an effect on society. I don't know how you measure it, but one of the reasons I returned to Viet Nam was to collect this oral poetry that I described earlier. And my idea was that the Vietnamese were kind of nameless, faceless creatures for most Americans and one of the things that I could do by taping and transcribing into Vietnamese this poetry and then translating it into English was to render human a faceless population. Listen, this is one of those poems I taped in 1972 and I'll read you the Vietnamese. [He sings a Vietnamese poem.] It's absolutely beautiful: "Stepping into the field, sadness fills my deep heart. Bundling rice

sheaths, tears dark in two streaks. Who made me miss the ferry's leaving, who made me miss? Who made the shallow creek that parts both sides?" I think it's a woman saying the poem. It's a short lyric. She has been left behind by her boyfriend. Her lover has gone across and she imagines the river that he has crossed as if some fateful influence has placed it there between them. And she is wondering why she has been left behind. She is crying while she does her rice work. It has nothing to do with the war at all. But it seems to me, once you have heard that poem, whether you have heard it in Vietnamese or have gotten some glimpse of that Vietnamese world through the English translation, something is opened up that wasn't there before. The whole force of a culture can be felt through poetry. We can understand the people through poetry. I think that there is a great deal that art does in that way that I wouldn't want to underestimate, whereas I wouldn't want to overestimate any effect my own work would have on the culture I live in.

D. F. Brown: When I think about the things that have changed in my life, the fact that we are sitting here together comes to mind. It wasn't possible in 1948, when I was born, for that to happen. I never ever, ever thought I'd live long enough to see the Berlin wall down. I thought that it would be there forever. I never thought the Arabs and the Jews would be talking. And as sloppy as it is, they are talking. Maybe the first real sign that art has done something is now that Europe is so old they're all going to get together. And this used to be a bloody place, Europe. It was bloody 50 years ago, the whole 3,000 years before that it was bloody. And now they may all be using the same pennies. That is a very artsy place, Europe. I was stationed there for 5 years and I snuck around all of that art stuff. I think that keeping that kind

of culture (and revering some parts of it) is important. And it never falls, like John says, to an individual artist. Michelangelo was the whole Renaissance to some people, but he was a part of an incredible milieu. There was a community of discourse, there were people who supported artists in their efforts. And when there is a common notion that we won't let people forget how bad war stinks then it makes it difficult to repeat that. It is no longer possible for an American President to stand up and say "Asian mothers don't have any feelings, they don't care about life." Lyndon Johnson said that, so things have changed. Maybe we're reading John's translations. People won't stand up and say that kind of thing and that is a victory. That kind of racism is less possible. ❑

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