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Soldier-Poets of the Korean War

I

On June 24, 1950, North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel, the demarcation line between Kim Il Sung's communist North Korea and the noncommunist south (Republic of Korea, or ROK) established by the Allied victors at the end of World War II. It was a full-scale assault, the object of which was the reunification of the Korean peninsula by force of arms.[1] Whether the attack was provoked or not is a matter of debate; certainly US-backed autocrat Syngman Rhee had made no secret of his desire to conquer the north by military force. In any case, the attack caught both South Koreans and Americans completely off-guard and disastrously unprepared. The North Korean army reached and took Seoul, Rhee's capital, in just a few days, and by September, subjected to defeat after defeat, US/ROK forces held on by their fingernails to a tiny perimeter around the southernmost port city of Pusan.

But the North Koreans had exhausted themselves and could not penetrate what came to be known as the Pusan Perimeter, and soon the sheer weight and volume of American industrial might, combined with the rapid mobilization of draftees and reservists (many of the reservists veterans of World War II) allowed US/ROK forces to drive the North Koreans out of South Korea.

But they did not stop at that. By November, US/ROK forces held most of North Korea as well, and were approaching the Yalu River, the boundary between North Korea and newly communist China, in spite of Chinese warnings to keep away.

The warnings were not heeded, however, and as the harsh Korean winter was just beginning to settle in, tens and scores of thousands of Chinese "volunteers" smashed into the approaching US/ROK forces, sending them for a second time in six months into headlong retreat that did not stop until Seoul had been lost again. But by then communist supply lines were once more stretched thin and US/ROK forces, with shorter supply lines and vast amounts of material, were able to push the communist armies out of Seoul and back to the 38th parallel where the fighting had begun almost a year earlier. Along this line, for another two years and more while truce negotiations dragged on and on and on, a war of attrition was waged, rivaling in ferocity and futility if not in size the trench warfare along the Western Front during the Great War.

By the time the truce was finally signed in the summer of 1953, somewhere over a million Americans had fought in Korea, with peak strength reaching 440,000 in the spring of 1953. Fifty-four thousand Americans died there, and twice that many were wounded.[2] By way of comparison, the Korean War lasted twice as long as American engagement in World War I and only seven months less than American engagement in World War II. Almost as many soldiers died in Korea as would die later in Viet Nam, though the Korean War lasted only one-third as long. To call what happened in Korea a "police action" or a "conflict" was and is to play semantic games at the expense of reality. It was a war.

II

One fact of war is that wars produce literature. From *The Iliad* to Walt Whitman's Civil War poems to *The Things They Carried,* war and literature are each a subset of the other. And as soldiers have increasingly become more literate, the 20th century has seen a marked increase in the body of literature written by soldiers and veterans themselves. No longer does war await a Homer or a Tennyson or a Kipling to be translated into literature, but rather the Siegfried Sassoons and James Joneses and Robert Butlers speak for themselves, making use of creative imagination to be sure, but fueling it with the raw stuff of experience.

Since my own encounter with war as a young Marine in Viet Nam thirty years ago, I have invested a good deal of time and energy writing my own war poems and editing and publishing the poetry of other Viet Nam War veterans. My knowledge of war poetry in general, however, has expanded only slowly over the years, much like the ripples on a pond when a stone is thrown into it. Early on in my life as poet and veteran, I discovered the vast body of poetry to have come out of the British trenches of the Western Front, but as recently as a decade ago, I wrote in an essay called "Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War" that little poetry had come from American veterans of World War II and almost none at all from Korean War veterans.[3]

With respect to World War II, the assertion is, alas, both ill-informed and embarrassing. Though there is no American poet whose reputation is significantly bound up in his experiences in that war—as are a Sassoon, a Wilfred Owen, or an Isaac Rosenberg from World War I, or to a lesser extent a John Balaban, a Yusef Komunyakaa, or a Dale Ritterbusch from the Viet Nam War—a

significant number of accomplished poets of the World War II generation served in the war and wrote good poetry based on their experiences. A short list of the most prominent includes John Ciardi, James Dickey, Alan Dugan, Richard Eberhart, Anthony Hecht, Richard Hugo, Randall Jarrell, Thomas McGrath, William Meredith, Howard Nemerov, Louis Simpson, and W. D. Snodgrass.[4]

III

About the Korean War, however, I had not hitherto come upon any particular reason to revise my observation that it did not produce any significant body of poetry. There are, it turns out, a number of novels and memoirs to come out of the Korean War, some of them quite good, though none has earned the readership or durability of books like Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* or Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*. Army Colonel and US Military Academy English professor Rick Kerin, in a 1994 unpublished doctoral dissertation called "The Korean War and American Memory," asserts that at least 25 combatants later wrote novels about their experiences.[5] But he concludes that there "is apparently but one collection of Korean War verse, Rolando Hinojosa's 1978 *Korean Love Songs: From Klail City Death Trip.*" For the most part, he writes, "verse inspired by the Korean War experience seems to be limited to the doggerel of contemporaneous figures writing for service journals or sincere but unpolished tributes written by veterans."[6]

Implicitly bolstering Kerin's conclusion are Paul Fussell's 1991 *The Norton Book of Modern War*, which includes no Korean War poets, and Carolyn Forche's *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (also from Norton, 1993), which includes only one Ko-

rean War veteran, Etheridge Knight, and none of his four poems deals with the war.

Over the years, I have often wondered why so very little poetry came out of the Korean War. Surely some small few of those 1 to 1.2 million soldiers must have become poets of some minimal skill. Indeed, when Jan Barry and I were editing *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam* in the mid-Seventies, the poet and Korean War veteran Reg Saner sent us a sharp, hard-edged poem called "They Said," which we included because it applied as well to our war as to his. Was that really it?

I found that hard to believe, but never had much opportunity to pursue the question until Dr. Jon Roper, Department Chairman of the American Studies Department, University of Wales, Swansea, U.K., offered me the chance to investigate further. Roper's colleague, Dr. Phil Melling, immediately sent me a copy of *Korean Love Songs*, about which I shall have more to say shortly, but in the early going of my research, it looked as if Kerin's assessment would remain the final word.

Letters and Internet queries to scholars of literature, American Studies, and history produced not a single lead. Additional queries to veterans groups and repositories of military documents unearthed the kinds of eminently forgettable soldiers' doggerel and nursery rhyme veterans' drivel that Kerin graciously characterizes as "tributes." Title and subject searches of such vast holdings as the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library, as well as computer database searches, turned up next to nothing.[7]

Even looking through Etheridge Knight's entire body of poetry turned up only one poem that even mentioned Korea, "At a VA Hospital in the Middle of the United States of America: An Act in a Play," but the reference is generic and comes in the midst of stock references to World War I, World War II, and Viet Nam.[8]

Similarly, Korean War veteran William Meredith, who won the 1944 Yale Younger Poets Series while on active duty as a Navy carrier pilot during World War II for a collection of poems heavily based on his wartime experiences, wrote only two poems over the course of his long career that make any reference at all to his later Korean War service, "The Old Ones" and "A Korean Woman Seated by a Wall," and in each case by inference only.

I did, however, eventually come upon a book called *The Hermit Kingdom: Poems of the Korean War* that offered the first suggestion that there might be somewhat more than anyone had thus far been aware of. Edited by Paul M. Edwards of the Center for the Study of the Korean War, and published in 1995 by Kendall/Hunt, it was out of print and dropped by the publisher in less than two years, and for the most part not surprisingly. Edwards' intentions are noble—to bring some attention to a much neglected war and the much neglected people who fought it—but with a few exceptions, the best poetry in the book is written by people who have only tenuous connections to the Korean War (a Viet Nam War veteran, for instance; an Iowa Writers Workshop MFA graduate with no military service; a former intelligence analyst who won't say for whom he analyzed intelligence, but will say that it was long after the Korean War era), and the rest of the poetry, by veterans and non-veterans alike, is amateur stuff that ranges from not very good to painfully bad.

In his introduction, Edwards himself acknowledges the anthology's weaknesses, but as I said, there are exceptions—James Magner, Jr., William Wantling and Keith Wilson—and for these I am very grateful to Edwards and his anthology. Finally, to the list of Hinojosa, Saner, and these three, all serious poets who are Korean War veterans, I added William Childress after I came upon his poem "Korea Bound, 1952" in *America Forever*

New (Crowell, 1968, though it turns out to have first appeared in *Harper's* in 1965).

All in all, these six poets cannot be called a hidden wellspring of poetic response to the Korean War, and at this late date they are not likely to represent the tip of a poetic iceberg that awaits discovery. Kerin's general observation about the amount and quality of Korean War poetry remains more true than false. But the Korean War poems of these poets are worth considering, and together they constitute a small but important body of work that has thus far been almost entirely neglected.

IV

How to consider them, how to organize and structure such a discussion, is a bit problematic however. In "Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War," I took a chronological approach, discussing books and poets as they appeared, year by year. But in this instance, only Hinojosa and Wilson have book-length works dealing wholly or largely with the Korean War. At the other extreme, Saner and Magner have only a handful of Korean War poems scattered over three decades of writing and publishing. I have chosen, therefore, simply to deal with these poets in alphabetical order.

William Childress grew up in a family of sharecroppers and migrant cotton pickers. He joined the army in 1951 at age 18 and was sent to Korea the following year, where he served as a demolitions expert and secret courier. After the war, he became a paratrooper and remained in the army until 1959. He subsequently earned a BA from Fresno State and an MFA from the University of Iowa. Over the years, Childress has worked as a college teacher, juvenile counselor, writer-editor for the National Geographic Society, speechwriter for Phillips Petroleum, and freelance writer and photojournalist. Re-

cently retired, from 1983 until 1997 he wrote a column called "Out of the Ozarks" for the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch.*

Childress' two books of poetry appeared within a year of each other—*Burning the Years* in 1971, *Lobo* in 1972—and his most active years as a poet came between 1960 and 1970. A 1986 reprint combining both books, *Burning the Years and Lobo: Poems 1962-1975,* includes fewer than half a dozen poems not in either of the earlier two.

Childress takes his subject matter from a wide variety of sources: the natural world and its inhabitants, the agricultural west and southwest of his childhood, the unnatural worlds of urban poverty and button-down America, and the whimsy of his own imagination. But war occupies a significant percentage of the total body of his published work, and his Korean War poems are wedged in between World War II (in the form of his long eight-part poem "Hiroshima") and the Viet Nam War (in poems such as "The War Lesson" and "Washington Peace March, 1969").

Indeed, while those who fought the Korean War were closer in age and temperament to the veterans of World War II, the Viet Nam War seems to have been a catalyst for most of these poets, releasing pent-up feelings that had perhaps been held in check by the personal and cultural stoicism bequeathed to them by their generational older brothers. While Childress, for example, did write several of his best Korean War poems prior to the vast American air and ground commitment in Viet Nam ("The Soldiers" in 1961 and "Shellshock" in 1962), his poems become more pointed, more cynical, and more bitter as the Sixties—and the Viet Nam War—advance. And while Childress can say, with what sounds very much like pride, resentment, and envy all at once, "Korean veterans did not come home and start throwing tantrums like many Viet vets did. We simply faded back

into civilian life—no monuments, and not even a doughnut wagon to meet the [troop ship] I came home on,"[9] his poems suggest that the price of simply fading back into civilian life was very dear indeed.

It is difficult to consider Childress' poems in any particular sequence because Childress himself seems ambivalent about how he wants to present them. In the original *Burning the Years,* for instance, he places "For My First Son" directly after "Death of a General," but in the original *Lobo* he reverses their order and puts four other poems between them. Moreover, some poems, like these two, appear in both books, while others appear in only one or the other. He adopts yet another configuration in the Essai Seay reissue 15 years later. I have taken the liberty, therefore, of attempting to arrange and discuss them in a sort of thematic progression.

I begin with "Soldier's Leave," a sweet and melancholy poem written in ballad stanzas in which a soldier reflects upon the onset of autumn and the approach of winter. Nothing in the poem overtly suggests war except the title, but Childress interjects an ominous tone with the image of "a surgeon's knife on bone," and the ambiguity of the final two lines is unresolvable: will the soldier soon be gone only from the riverbank and this place where he is now, or will he be dead? Neither the soldier nor the reader knows.

In one of his finest poems, "Korea Bound, 1952," another 12-line poem but this time without stanza breaks and with a different rhyme scheme, Childress emphasizes the unwillingness of those who are being sent to fight. The soldiers on the troop ship are "braced" against the railing as they listen to the "shrill complaining of the waves." Ostensibly free men in a democracy, they are likened to Pharaoh's slaves, and the ship itself to Pharaoh's burial tomb. And in the poem's final irony, they

sail past Alcatraz Island, then a federal prison, where the prisoners' "lack of freedom guarantees their lives."

As often as not, Childress uses both rhyme and meter, sometimes altering the pattern of the rhyme scheme within a given poem, or rhyming in some places but not in others, an admixture of free verse and fixed form that is oddly pleasing and reminds me of Gwendolyn Brooks. Occasionally he gets into trouble or forces a rhyme, but for the most part he handles form skillfully and is (excepting one poem by Wantling) the only one of these poets to work in anything other than free verse.

"Letter Home," however, is free verse, and in it he assumes the persona of a young American soldier, newly arrived and still able to see beyond himself and his own misery to the misery of "children with bellies swollen, / and O, the flowers / of their faces, petals all torn." Such empathy will not survive what is to come, however. In "The Soldiers," Childress reminds us that "lives narrow / around living's uncertain center" and "soldiers can't be soldiers and be / human." A well-constructed poem of six rhymed sestets, each line with nine syllables, it offers a cold, hard world where only the dead are resolute.

In "Shellshock," Childress moves from generic soldiers to a soldier with a name: MacFatridge. A poem about the cost of war on those who survive, it immediately suggests those men in John Huston's 1946 documentary *Let There Be Light*, which was filmed in the psychiatric ward of a military hospital—though that film was withheld from public release by the US government until 1979, 17 years after Childress' poem first appeared in *Poetry*.

Childress' empathy for his fellow soldiers is matched and more than matched by his contempt for the generals who commanded them. Both "Combat Iambic" and "Death of a General" are scathingly unrelenting,

reminiscent of Siegfried Sassoon at his angry best. And in "The Long March," a soldier pulls from a puddle

> the arm of someone's child.
>
> Not far away, the General
> camps with his press corps.
> Any victory will be his.
> For us there is only
> the long march to Viet Nam.

Here, suddenly, in the last line of a poem beginning "North from Pusan," Childress makes explicit what must have been a steadily rising horror among many Korean War veterans as the Fifties became the Sixties and the Sixties became the Viet Nam War. The "we" in the third line of the poem, and the "us" above, are not just the soldiers themselves, but the American people "dumbly follow[ing] / leaders whose careers / [hang] on victory."

"The War Lesson" deals entirely with Viet Nam, but I include it here because Childress includes it in the midst of his Korean War poems in both *Burning the Years* and *Lobo,* because one doesn't realize it's not a Korean War poem until the second of the poem's two stanzas, and because if you replace "Khe Sanh" with "Chosin" and "Cong" with "Chink," it would be a Korean War poem, which I think is something more than mere coincidence.

"For My First Son," a bitter poem over which hangs an air of resigned helplessness, appears in several variants. In the poetry section, I have used the version Childress includes in his 1972 and 1986 publications, but I much prefer the earliest 1971 version which, in the penultimate stanza, after enumerating the "future of steel" toward which his son's "tiny fingers grope"—a flame-

thrower's blast, trenchfoot, worms, gangrene, shrapnel, empty eyes—Childress concludes:

> . . . these are
> the gifts of male birthdays,
> the power and glory, and
> the lies of leaders send them.

"Trying to Remember People I Never Really Knew" also deals with the wreckage of war and the future that awaits male children, but this time, after detailing the fates of three men he had once known, Childress refuses to say if they have left sons behind or not. It is as if, if he does not acknowledge that they had sons, he might somehow protect their sons from those who would train them "as hunters of men" and the "dark forests / where leaden rains fall." It is only a gesture—this trying to shield sons from the fate of their fathers—and Childress leaves little doubt that it is a useless gesture. For whatever he might have thought when he was still a boy with "fists full of detonators and TNT" smiling "murderously / for the folks back home," as he writes in "Burning the Years," war and the years have taught him that "duty changes with each job, / and honor turns ashes soon enough."

V

Writing mostly in Spanish, Rolando Hinojosa is not well known among English-speaking readers, but in the Spanish-speaking community in the US, throughout Latin America, and even in Europe, he has been widely published and widely read ever since winning the Premio Casa de las Americas in 1976 with his second novel, *Klail City y sus alrededores.* Although primarily a novelist and story writer, he is the author of *Korean Love*

Songs, the largest group of poems about the Korean War by a single author. He is also the only one of the writers I've included in this discussion about whom there is a significant body of secondary literature, including the English-language *The Rolando Hinojosa Reader.*[10]

Hinojosa was born in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas to a Mexican-American father and an Anglo-American mother. His Hispanic ancestors settled on the north bank of the Rio Grande in the 1740s; his Anglo grandfather arrived from Illinois in the 1880s when Hinojosa's mother was a young child. The tension and conflict between Hispanic and Anglo cultures, and the struggle of the valley's Mexican-Americans to preserve and perpetuate their Chicano identity, lies at the heart of almost all of Hinojosa's writing. Like William Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha County, Hinojosa has created a fictional world—Klail City, Belken County, Texas—and peopled it with a cast of characters who appear and reappear throughout his work (including *Korean Love Songs).*

Hinojosa enlisted in the army out of high school in 1946, serving two years. He then began college, but his studies were interrupted by his recall into the army upon the outbreak of the Korean War. He served in Korea as a tank crewman with a reconnaissance unit, sustaining two minor wounds. After his release from the army, he went on to earn a BA from the University of Texas, an MA from New Mexico Highland University, and a PhD from the University of Illinois. In addition to his prolific writing, he has had a successful career as a university professor and administrator, and currently teaches at the University of Texas at Austin.

Published in 1978, *Korean Love Songs* differs from Hinojosa's other work in two significant ways: it is written in verse, and it is written in English. Hinojosa explains: "I had originally tried to write about Korea in

Spanish, but that experience wasn't lived in Spanish. Army life isn't conducted in Spanish, as you know. So, when I began writing *Korean Love Songs* in narrative prose and in English, it was easier. But it wasn't what I wanted either. Eventually, after reading many of the British World War I poets, I got the idea that maybe I should use poetry to render something as brutal as war."[11]

As poetry, one has to point out, these poems leave much to be desired, and one wonders why Hinojosa didn't stick with narrative prose. Indeed, all that differentiates these poems from prose is the fact of their layout on the page. The rhythms of the language are flat and prose-like. The delivery is expository and factual. Aside from death personified in one poem, there are no images, no metaphors, almost no poetic devices or techniques of any kind. Even the line breaks present no logic I can divine. If any body of poetry ever deserved to be called chopped-up prose masquerading as verse, this is it.

And yet, taken as a whole, *Korean Love Songs* works, and rather well at that. Whatever deficiencies Hinojosa may manifest as a poet he more than makes up for as a storyteller. Though almost none of these poems could stand on the page by itself without the others clustered around to support it, together they become what amounts to a brief but rich novel-in-verse with the individual poems serving as little chapters.

The narrator of the sequence is Rafa Buenrostro—Rafe—a young artilleryman who figures prominently in many of Hinojosa's books, and as the sequence begins, his unit, the 219th Field Artillery Battalion, is still comfortably in Japan. But things turn deadly quickly. By the third poem, the battalion is inside the Pusan Perimeter, and the first casualties we encounter come not at the hands of the North Koreans, but from "Friendly Fire." In the poem by that name, the horror of "an abandoned arm

. . . looking for its partner" set against the matter-of-fact instructions to "raise those sights, Sergeant Kell, / The forward ob. says you're still short" is a warning of what's to come.

What comes, as the Americans slowly push northward, is death. In "A Sheaf of Percussion Fire," Rafe says, ". . .there was Death, / Out of breath, / Trying to keep count." And when the Chinese attack, the scale of death becomes almost incomprehensible. In "Rear Guard Action III," Rafe says, "My God, what a fire. . . Three thousand rounds./ The breeches were black; the paint peeled . . . . Jesus, what a fire. . ." In "Possession for All Time," he adds:

> It's ugly.
> The division's out for blood . . .
> . . . It doesn't matter when Seoul is retaken:
> Now the mission is to kill;. . .
> It's people we're after,
> Not land."

And kill they do. In "The January-May 1951 Slaughter," as the tide of battle turns yet another time, Rafe tells us:

> "I'm sick. They didn't stop coming,
> And we wouldn't stop firing.
> . . . . . .
> . . . They died in the city,
> They died in the fields and in the hillsides.
> They died everywhere.

In one of the most striking poems of the sequence, "Night Burial Details," Rafe watches as "the regimental dregs, / The deserters, the cut-and-runners, the awolers" are forced to retrieve the dead. All day long they work—and

Rafe watches, enthralled. "Give it a rest," Frank Hatalski tells him, "You've been at the binocs all day." But Rafe only waves him off and goes on watching, unable to put down the binoculars. "From here they look like so many mail sacks," he says of the body bags loaded in the trucks. As the body detail labors on, Rafe cracks jokes. He's an old hand by now, a veteran, detached, not like the "rookies" who are "still shaken" by the carnage in front of their position.

But the cool detachment seems more like a mask than a true face. Only a few poems later, "Incoming" begins:

> The radio guys are in pieces . . . in pieces of meat
> and bone.
> They've been blown up and down
> Into small pieces . . . Christ,
> What am I doing here?

And as the sequence progresses, it becomes clear that no one is inured to the terrible stress of battle. In "Above All, the Waste," Lt. Phil Brodkey, "resourceful and kind, calm, precise," shoots himself to death. His replacement, in "Brodkey's Replacement," jumps into the latrine and refuses to come out. The company clerk, who in "Rear Guard Action I" watched as Chinese soldiers "walked right by. They waved. / Some of them waved at me," later in the sequence finds "a loaded carbine" and kills himself with it. And in "Jacob Mosqueda Wrestles with the Angels," when pieces of two of his companions end up on his sleeve, Mosqueda "scream[s] and faint[s] and soil[s] his fatigues." Five times in the poem, Rafe tells us that "Mosqueda will forget," but it seems just as likely—to us, if not to Rafe—that Mosqueda will end up as "a bore, a bother, and a public nuisance."

It is not, of course, only the stress of battle that takes its toll, but the battle itself. The incoming round that so unnerves Mosqueda kills Hook Frazier and Joey Vielma, mortally wounds Hatalski, and wounds Rafe as well. "I read what driven steel could do to a body," Rafe says in "Fit for Duty":

> But there was no account of the screaming fear,
> And of the crying, or of the swearing, and the
> sniveling begging
> For mercy and redemption and salvation and
> Jesus Christ Almighty Himself.

On medical leave in Japan, in "Nagoya Station," Rafe visits his hometown friend and army buddy Sonny Ruiz, who has earlier deserted and is "now a hundred and ten per cent Japanese." While Anglo-Chicano conflict is not the main focus of these poems—being, as they are, first and foremost about the Korean War—Hinojosa reminds us early on that Anglo prejudice and insensitivity are as real in Korea and the army as they are in South Texas. In "The Eighth Army at the Chongchon," trying to rally his troops to repel the Chinese onslaught, General Walton H. Walker tells them [and apparently he really said this]:

> "We should not assume that (the)
> Chinese Communists are committed in force.
> After all, a lot of Mexicans live in Texas."

Later, when Walton is killed, in "Rest Due and Taken" Rafe says, "No grudges about the Mexican crack; / We don't have to prove anything to anyone here." But that doesn't ring entirely true, and toward the end of the sequence especially, it becomes clear that in the army,

Mexican-Americans are often on no more equal terms than they are in the civilian world.

In Japan, however, this can have its advantages, among them the fact that to the Anglo-American military police, Sonny, dressed in a suit and tie, "looks Japanese" and so goes unsuspected and undetected even while the MPs demand to see the uniformed Rafe's leave papers. When Rafe asks Sonny about home, Sonny replies, "*This* is home, Rafe. Why should I go back?" To which Rafe has no reply: "He has me there. Why, indeed?"

Yet even if he can't explain why, for Rafe, as we learn in "Vale":

> It's back to Klail,
> And home. Home to Texas, our Texas,
> That slice of hell, heaven,
> Purgatory and land of our fathers.

It is significant that the sequence ends with these words. It is Hinojosa's way of tying *Korean Love Songs* into the larger universe of his work. That not withstanding, however, these are finally poems about war, not about culture or ethnicity. One of the most bitter poems in the book, "A Matter of Supplies," begins:

> It comes down to this: we're pieces of equipment
> To be counted and signed for.
> On the occasion some of us break down,
> And the parts which can't be salvaged
> Are replaced with other GI parts, that's all.

War is an equal opportunity destroyer. "Gun barrels don't talk, and they won't listen," begins the penultimate poem, "This Is Where We Came In." And in "Vale," the final poem, when Rafe tallies up all he has lost in Korea, though he mentions his Chicano friends first, he includes

Hatalski and Frazier, "Boston John McCreedy from Quincy, Mass.," Phil Brodkey, Louis Dodge, and "others: Not friends, no, but just as dead." In "Up Before the Board," Rafe says:

> As for every man's death lessening me,
> John the Good was right on the button on that one:
> Not counting the hundreds of unseen enemy
> in the plains, vales, glens, hills, and mountain
> sides of this garden spot called Korea,
> The violent deaths of Hatalski and Frazier,
> Brodkey and Joey Vielma and Charlie
> Villalón,
> Have diminished not only me,
> But my own sure to come death as well.

It seems beyond argument that Rafe is speaking not only for himself, but for Hinojosa too.

VI

James Magner, Jr., is a much more reluctant Korean War poet than either Childress or Hinojosa. In the course of ten books and chapbooks over a span of 31 years, he has written fewer than a dozen poems that seem in any way related to the war. The chronological distribution of the poems, however, is interesting: three appear in his first book in 1965, one in 1968, two in 1973. Three subsequent books in 1976, 1978 and 1981 contain none, but another appears in a 1985 book. A 1992 book contains none, but his latest book, published in 1996, contains four. It is almost as if, throughout his life, he cannot make up his mind to confront the war or not. That ambivalence is inadvertently made apparent in a 1997 letter of Magner's.[12] At one point he writes, "How much shall you write about the horrific Knives of War that froze, wounded and killed

so many of my brothers?" But on the next page he mentions his desire to publish "an elegy for *all* who have died in war, that they will not be lost but remembered in our hearts and souls."

After growing up in New York City, Long Island, and New Rochelle, Magner joined the army in 1948. He ended up in Korea during the first year of the war, that terrible year that saw the front move violently and swiftly from the 38th Parallel south to Pusan, then north to the Yalu River, then south again to below Seoul, then north once more to where it all started. Magner, however, was not around to see the line stabilized again at the 38th Parallel. While fighting as an infantry sergeant with Headquarters Company, lst Battalion, 7th Regiment, 3rd Division, he was badly wounded by machinegun fire in North Suwon in February 1951 and evacuated to a hospital in Japan.

His wounds were severe enough to preclude ever returning to duty. Discharged from the army, he entered a Catholic monastery of the Passionist Order in Dunkirk, New York, where he remained for five years. Thereafter, Magner earned a BA in philosophy from Duquesne University, and MA and PhD degrees in English from the University of Pittsburgh. In 1962, he began teaching in the English Department at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio, where he has been ever since.

Though Magner never took the vows of a monk, and eventually left monastic life to return to the secular world, the body of his poetry overtly reflects his deeply religious concerns and his lifelong quest to bridge the gulf between human imperfection and divine perfection and to understand the mysteries and contradictions of creation. Even his language often has a Biblical feel to it—the tone, the diction, the choice of words—almost a kind of grandeur. And though his most recent two books reveal a marked change in certain elements of his style—

he has moved, for instance, toward a more minimalist use of language—the air of questing, of straining to understand God's meaning and design, seems as strong as ever.

Magner's poems are not always completely successful. The language can sound pompous and stilted at times; the frequent references to God, Christ-God, Human-God and the like can be off-putting, especially for anyone who doesn't share Magner's religious bent. Indeed, I confess (an appropriate choice of words, under the circumstances) that I almost did not include Magner here, feeling that his work just didn't come up to the level of the other Korean War poets I've chosen to discuss. Yet I kept coming back to it, I kept hearing it in my head, and finally I could not *not* include him. Whatever his weaknesses, there is a sweetness to these poems, a love for his fellow sufferers, a sense of innocent bewilderment, that touches the heart.

It is clear that Magner cannot bear the madness of the war, the unspeakable misery, the destruction of bodies and minds and hearts, without the hope and reality of divine grace and human redemption. Thus, in "Elegy for the Valiant Dead," Magner pleads "that those who've gone before / may be wrapped in the quilt of Thy arms of night." And in "Christ of Battle," he prays, "Christ-God carry me! / give hope in storm-mud and grave-bed."

Magner powerfully conveys the lonely anonymity of the battlefield. "The Man Without a Face" is "gutted, tangled—sprawled like a broken crab" on barbed wire, "dead and alone in his body." We don't know if the dead man is Chinese or Korean or American, nor does Magner seem to care. That he is "one of those who fought" is all that matters. And the cold, bleak, unforgiving moonscape of Korea in winter could not be better rendered than in "Zero Minus One Minute":

The dawn has come
to sleepless night
again
and it is time for us to answer
from the gray, crystal holes
that seem to womb
just northern night and nothingness[.]

It was this poem, more than any other, that I kept coming back to, and this image in particular: "our bodies splinters / in bundled rags." The cold, the pain, the fear, the loneliness are palpable, as is a dogged perseverance in the face of every reason to give up and give in. And if, as Magner says, "the world doubts / that we exist," nevertheless, he insists:

we are there
and we shall creak
our frozen bones
upon that crystal mount
that looms in silence
and amaze the world.

Magner's need for God's mercy to give meaning and comfort to the "soldier-sinners" ("Christ of Battle") is matched by his insistence that those who fought and died be remembered. For Magner, to forget is to render utterly meaningless the suffering, the sorrow, the irreplaceable losses. "The Man Without a Face" may have no name nor even a nationality, but he is nevertheless "entombed in the heart of our mind." And in "Repository," Magner writes:

Impossible to mind, impossible to heart
that one so quick,
who stepped so quick

in pocket
and rifled passes forty yards
for alma mater and the infantry
could die and be forgotten[.]

Magner struggles through four stanzas to remember the dead man's name, and when he finally succeeds, in the fifth and final stanza, he shouts it over and over again "so someone will remember." Of the four poems in Magner's most recent 1996 book, I have included only two among the poetry selections to illustrate Magner's changing style; the sparse language, the matter-of-fact diction, the short often one-word lines are in marked contrast to earlier poems such as "Christ of Battle." But however different they may be, the later poems, by their mere being, quietly testify to the fact that if the Korean War has never been overtly a major subject in Magner's poetry, it is never farther away than the near-distance of his thoughts, and 45 years after he left Korea on a stretcher, he remains a "Soldier of the Night" wherein there is "no house, no lamp, no chimneyed curl / but only life outstepping night."

VII

If Magner is a reluctant Korean War poet, Reg Saner doesn't appear to be a Korean War poet at all. Most of his poetry reflects a man most at home when out of doors and fully engaged with the natural world around him: hiking, mountain climbing, skiing, camping under the stars. Much of his writing is inspired by the American West with its mountains and deserts and high plains stretching away to horizons distant enough to make a man reflect humbly upon the universe and his place in it.

Not one of the poems in his four books even uses the word "Korea," and if you didn't already know Saner

fought in Korea, you would not likely ever suspect it from reading his books. "I have not really tried to write about Korea," Saner has said. "I wanted to forget."[13] To look at the body of his work, one might readily conclude that he's succeeded in forgetting. One *might* conclude that. And one might be wrong.

After graduating from St. Norbert College in 1950, Saner entered the army as an officer and served in Korea in 1952 and 1953, spending six months as an infantry platoon leader with the 25th Infantry Division and earning a Bronze Star. After the war, he earned MA and PhD degrees from the University of Illinois before taking a position in 1962 with the English Department at the University of Colorado in Boulder, where he still teaches. His first book of poems, *Climbing into the Roots,* was chosen by William Meredith to receive the first Walt Whitman Award in 1975, and his second book, *So This Is the Map,* was selected by Derek Walcott for the 1981 National Poetry Series. His third and fourth books of poems were published in 1984 and 1989.

From the first book, only "One War Is All Wars" deals with war at all, and Saner's description of the white crosses on soldiers' graves as "line after line after / line regular as / domino theory" suggests the Viet Nam War at least as much as it does the Korean War (which, I imagine, is Saner's point, as the title implies).

From his second book, Saner himself says that "From Chief Joseph I Turn the Page" and "Doc Holliday's Grave" may be related to residual anger about Korea, and that "Talking Back: A Dream" is perhaps prompted "at least partly by survivor guilt,"[14] but the connections, such as they may be, exist only for Saner, not for the reader. Only "Leaving These Woods to the Hunters" makes anything like an identifiable reference to his Korean War service with its closing lines: "having

never myself / killed anything / more beautiful than a man."

The poems in Saner's third book travel from Colorado to Egypt to Italy, but they don't go anywhere near Korea, and one of the two poems that touch on war in his fourth book, "Little Rituals," with its "men wearing guns, belted jackets," is, like "One War Is All Wars," entirely nonspecific.

"Re-Runs," however, the second war poem in *Red Letters*, is a bit different. It seems to suggest that Saner has not forgotten his war experiences, but only repressed them, and not entirely successfully. It may be presumptuous of me, but I think not, to assume that the "he" in the poem is Saner himself, "alone inside a nameless grief" where "what's buried won't cry / and won't go away." What troubles Saner, however, he will not say beyond "flying iron," "a torn head," "crossfire tracers." He tells us only that sometimes there are "odd nights."

I find it curious indeed that his two most personal and particular poems about the Korean War do not appear in any of his four books. The explanation for "Flag Memoir" may be as simple as the fact that it was possibly not written until after his most recent book was published (it appeared in a 1991 issue of *Ontario Review*), but "They Said" has been around since at least 1976 when it appeared in *Demilitarized Zones*, predating the publication of three of his four books. Both are quite unlike anything else in Saner's repertoire.

"They Said" is bitter and cynical and angry. When it comes down to it, the poem could well be about some other war than Korea—certainly Jan Barry and I thought it applied to the Viet Nam War quite readily—but the vehemence of the sarcasm bespeaks something very personal here: an old grudge, a raw nerve, an unhealed wound. The repetition of the unnamed "they"; the Big Brother authoritarianism masquerading as benign pater-

nalism; the smiling insistence upon conformity; the use of modifiers like "nicely," "suitable" and "quite," taken altogether, powerfully convey the poet's disapproval of, even revulsion at, what he describes. Most striking, perhaps, is Saner's implication that the wholesale destruction in the last stanza, where under the guise of supporting democracy "there is no need to vote," is made possible by the years of conditioning that preceded it. And if there's any doubt that Saner rejects the end result, if only in retrospect and too late, there is that fascinating use of the word "almost" in the final line. Like Siegfried Sassoon before him and the Viet Nam veterans of Dewey Canyon III after him, Saner rejects the decorations given for actions in which he can take no pride.

In "Re-Run," Saner mentions "a torn head" among the things he revisits on "odd nights." In his stunning prose poem "Flag Memoir," we learn that the torn head belongs to the first man killed in action from Lieutenant Saner's infantry platoon: "the country boy," Barnett. Saner must identify the body, and he can "face the remains of his face [only] by saying inwardly, again and again, 'This isn't him, he's not here. He's elsewhere.' " The poem offers a series of tight, hard vignettes, very specific, very particular: this is Korea; this is Saner's war. He describes learning to fire single shots from a .50 caliber machinegun, "suck[ing] lather-warm [beer] from cans, talking Red Sox and Yankees under summer shreds of something once like an orchard," seeing a skull hanging "from commo wire looped between tent poles," preparing for a Chinese assault in which the "third and fourth waves may carry scythes, hooks, farm tools, sticks" instead of rifles.

And all of this is "memoir," memory, called back by 4th of July municipal fireworks that "report to the eye as muzzle flash and sheared jaw, red teeth, clay dirt on the brains. Or maybe with one long zipper-pull some

corporal exactly my age throws open a dark rubber bag, there yet, in any such zipper I hear . . . . A stadium anthem can do it, or flag at a ballpark. . . . The flag slowly dipping, lifting, over nobody there. Explaining. Trying to explain."

If Saner has not really tried to write about Korea, "Flag Memoir" suggests that he's forgotten nothing, and likely never will. "But to be completely honest," he says, "writing about it would make me cry, and I was raised to *know* that men don't cry. Therapeutic grief can go to hell."[15]

VIII

Len Fulton, who published William Wantling's 1966 *The Source*, describes Wantling as "a superbly unruly poet (and person)."[16] If anything, that's an understatement. "When I was in Korea," Wantling himself is quoted in the foreword to *The Source*, "they gave me my first shot of morphine. It killed the pain. It was beautiful. Five years later I was in San Quentin on narcotics." By 1974, not yet 41, he was dead.

Soon after graduating from East Peoria High School in Illinois, Wantling enlisted in the Marines, arriving in Korea in November 1952. In the winter of 1953, he was seriously wounded, including burns on the leg, spending ten days in a coma and another eight weeks in the hospital before eventually recovering. Discharged with the rank of sergeant in 1955, he spent the next three years in southern California living mostly as a street hustler and petty criminal until he was convicted in 1958 of forgery and narcotics.

It was in prison that Wantling discovered poetry and the poet in himself, and as early as 1959, he began publishing poems in *Wormwood Review*. After five and a half years, Wantling was released from San Quentin and

returned to Illinois, eventually earning BA and MA degrees from Illinois State University. Wantling's poetry, meanwhile, had come to the attention of Fulton and others in the small press world, and by the mid-Sixties the anthologist Walter Lowenfels was calling him "the best poet of his age."[17]

But Wantling was, finally, an unruly person. He never escaped his dependency on drugs and alcohol, in spite of repeated visits to Veterans Administration hospitals and psychiatric clinics. He lived at fever pitch, consuming prodigious amounts of morphine, heroin, codeine, alcohol, marijuana, LSD, barbiturates, and whatever prescription drugs he could get his hands on. "I want to try it all before I go," he wrote in his prose poem "The Great American Novel," and he did. In the spring of 1974, near the end of a one-year nonrenewable instructor's appointment at Illinois State, he was found unconscious in a pool of his own urine and feces. Every window of his apartment had been broken out. He died a few days later. The official cause of death was heart failure, but in truth he had burned the candle from both ends until there was nothing left to burn.[18]

Wantling's poetry conveys a strong sense of the poet—at least this poet—as outsider and rebel, which he mostly was. Except for his inclusion in several of Lowenfels' anthologies such as *Where Is Vietnam?* (Anchor Doubleday, 1967) and *Open Poetry* (Simon & Schuster, 1973), even in his heyday he published almost entirely in the smallest of the small presses and journals. Most of his books and chapbooks appeared in editions of fewer than 500 copies, some as small as 100. After 1966, though he published in Britain and New Zealand, no collection of his was published in the US until after his death, and he has largely disappeared from the landscape of poetry.

Which is a shame because his best work is worth preserving. Interestingly, like Childress and Wilson, he has poems that deal with both Hiroshima ("It's Cold for August") and the Viet Nam War ("Your Children's Dead Eyes"). Beyond that and the fact of his being a Korean War veteran, however, his poems bear little resemblance in style or subject to any of the other poets included here. They are frenetic and boisterous, full of restless energy. Much of his writing is drawn from his experiences with drugs, street life, crime and prison. As the Sixties wore on, he also became increasingly aware of and responsive to the social and political issues that galvanized so many college campuses (remember, Wantling was an undergraduate and graduate student from 1966 through 1973, though he was well into his thirties).

Wantling's "Poetry," from *San Quentin's Stranger*, has to be one of the greatest prison poems ever written:

I've got to be honest. I can
make good word music and rhyme

at the right times and fit words
together to give people pleasure

and even sometimes take their
breath away—but it always

somehow turns out kind of phoney.
Consonance and assonance and inner

rhyme won't make up for the fact
that I can't figure out how to get

down on paper the real or the true
which we call life. Like the other

day. The other day I was walking
on the lower exercise yard here

at San Quentin and this cat called
Turk came up to a friend of mine

and said Ernie, I hear you're
shooting on my kid. And Ernie

told him So what, punk? And Turk
pulled out his stuff and shanked

Ernie in the gut only Ernie had a
metal tray in his shirt. Turk's

shank bounced right off him and
Ernie pulled his stuff out and of

course Turk didn't have a tray and
caught it dead in the chest, a bad

one, and the blood that came to his
lips was a bright pink, lung blood,

and he just laid down in the grass
and said Shit. Fuck it. Sheeit.

Fuck it. And he laughed a long
time, softly, until he died. Now

what could consonance or assonance or
even rhyme do with something like that?

Wantling wrote only a handful of poems about the Korean War, but they suggest that what he saw and did in Korea when he was still only a teenager changed his

life forever, and not for the better. Because these poems appeared one or two or three at a time in multiple publications in various configurations and usually interspersed with many other poems as well, it's impossible to know how Wantling himself would have wished them to be arranged, so again I have done the best I could to arrange them thematically. In any event, all of them were apparently written in fewer than five years in the early Sixties.

"Korea 1953" begins with "endless weeks of zero" and a "lurking bunker on a barren hill" where murder is "sanctioned" and Wantling and his comrades find "a certain inner logic to / our violence." Though they dream of returning to a "time of childhood / Grace," what men become in "that strange war that was not / a war" is "a pack of maddened dogs" tearing each other to pieces for "one small piece of rancid meat." It's as ugly an image of war as you will find, made especially haunting by Wantling's unusual use of rhyme.

As if to confirm the cold-blooded savagery of war, "The Korean" is summarily executed for "stealing from Americans." It happens quickly, without hesitation, the Korean with "arms folded / staring," accepting his fate as inevitable, knowing that no appeal will save him from men bent on killing.

But it's not as simple as that. War brutalizes but cannot fully exterminate conscience. In "Without Laying Claim," even as "we calmly" hurl grenades into a crowd, the men who do this have "a lump in our throats" and do not really believe their own self-justifications.

The tension between the rough, hard soldiers' exterior necessary to survive the ordeal of war and the innate inclination toward a broader range of human emotions is particularly evident in "I Remember," in which a tough lieutenant, finding the frozen body of a soldier who's been missing all winter, kicks the corpse, swears,

and spits—but then stares directly into the sun to give himself an excuse in front of his men for the tears in his eyes.

By the time "the 6x6 [truck] bounces me down the / washboard roads" toward "Pusan Liberty," Wantling himself has dropped any pretense of toughness. He's had it with the "sun-eaten walls of Korea" where, while men die horribly and senselessly at the front, in the rear everything from jeeps to people is for sale. He buys heroin from an ex-soldier who "sits on his roller-skate cart / minus arms & legs," then resells some of it to "2 Chinese agents" and they get high together, "three angry boys lost in the immense / absurdity of War & State."

Though Wantling survived the Korean War, he couldn't escape it. Feelings of guilt and remorse dominate "Sure," while rage is the controlling emotion in "The Day the Dam Burst," in which he imagines himself running "headlong, frothing, haphazardly / hurling shrapnel grenades / into high-noon crowds." Tired of the "dead ugly ache of it / all"—by which I think he means the burden of the terrible knowledge he has acquired in war while those in whose name he fought willfully demand from him only silence—he wants to rub their faces in what they refuse to acknowledge:

> O My, wouldn't I
> shine? wouldn't
> I shine then?

But instead of directing his rage outward, he turned it in upon himself, and eventually it killed him. For all his beatnik, hipster, hippy, ex-con, ex-Marine bravado—and his poems are full of all that—he could not reconcile his own gentle nature to the world around him, and I personally believe that his experiences in Korea were crucial to his undoing. In his most tender poem,

"The Awakening," he describes a hopelessly mangled bee still struggling to fly. Holding the bee in his hand, he remembers "the agony on the face of wounded friends / and the same dumb drive to continue." Angered by 'the unfair conflict suffered / by will and organism," he shouts at the bee:

STOP THAT!
Then it ceased to struggle, and somehow suddenly
became marvelously whole, and it arose
and flew away[.]

In the end, perhaps it's as simple as this: Wantling wanted the bee to fly, and he could not accept that it wouldn't.

IX

I was a regular Navy officer," writes Annapolis graduate Keith Wilson. "I came from warrior stock, right out of the Highlands of Scotland, and the Welsh Marches."[19] He went to Korea the first time as a 22-year-old ensign in 1950, and returned from his third tour in Korean waters in 1953. "I expected nothing from war. I was a professional. I didn't, however, expect to be lied to and betrayed. I was very proud of the UN flag at our mast head when we went in to launch attacks. I thought, and still do think, that the only way I can see for the planet to survive is to have an effective world-wide government. When I found out that Korea was all a very dirty and murderous joke, I was silenced for many years."

Wilson got out of the navy and returned to his native New Mexico, earning an MA degree from the University of New Mexico before commencing a career in academia. Now Professor Emeritus at New Mexico State University, where he taught for many years, he has also

held visiting professorships and residencies at universities and arts centers in Kansas, New York, Ohio and Utah, as well as Canada and Romania.

He has also had a prolific career as a poet and writer, publishing over two dozen books and chapbooks since 1967. Among his many awards are a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts from the State of New Mexico. A great deal of his work is rooted deeply in the American Southwest, especially New Mexico, and he has a particular interest in and affinity for Native American and Spanish-American cultures.

But Wilson's experiences in the Korean War provide the foundation for one of his most important books—arguably his most important: *Graves Registry*. "I started writing *Graves Registry* in the winter of 1966 in anger that our government was again fighting an undeclared war in a situation that I, from my experiences in Korea, knew we could never win. I was one of the first combat veteran officers to protest Viet Nam because I knew it to be unlawful, and could only lead to another disgraceful stalemate. I led protest marches and read at them, [but] I had no poems about war at all—I had buried it inside . . . . It took the pressure of rage and fear for the young men like you that made me write it and it poured out, page after page."

First published by Grove Press in 1969 as *Graves Registry & Other Poems,* it contained the Korean War poems along with poems about the Southwest. In 1992, Clark City Press published an updated edition called simply *Graves Registry* and containing the original Korean War poems; additional poems from his 1972 *Midwatch,* including a number that deal explicitly with the Viet Nam War; and some fifty newer poems. Taken altogether, they weave the literary and the political into a single tableau that moves across time and geography, but

my attention here, of course, must necessarily be limited to the poems dealing with Korea, most of which are grouped together at the beginning of the book.[20]

The sequence begins with what amounts to a love poem to his wife, "Echoes, Seafalls for Heloise," followed by three poems that deal more with the remnants and reminders of World War II than they do with the Korean War (scattered throughout the Korean War sequence are a number of other poems that are related by locality, experience and circumstance, but that do not deal directly with the war in Korea—including a poem titled "Hiroshima").

The first Korean War poem is "The Captain," in which Wilson encounters a US Army officer with "the kind eyes / of somebody's uncle." But as the captain describes the raids he and his Korean commando team conduct, Wilson records "what happened to his eyes":

> the changes when he spoke of their raids
> of villages flaming, women & children
> machinegunned as they ran
> screaming from their huts[.]

It isn't all blood and guts. One of the virtues of Wilson's poems is the way they traverse a wide range of experiences, all of them belonging to war. In ". . . *ganz in Waffen*,"[21] a deck officer, firmly but without humiliating, bolsters the courage of a young sailor on the verge of breaking as their ship comes under fire from enemy shore batteries. "The Singer" recounts an incidence of accidental gunshot (in any war, though for obvious reasons it is seldom given much attention, large numbers of soldiers are killed not by the enemy but by their own and their comrades' mistakes). "Waterfront Bars" in Japan offer temporary relief to sailors between 90-day battle cruises "north of the bombline." And in "The Mistress,"

an American sailor and a Japanese woman, each with his or her own sorrows and griefs, hold "each other / through horrors higher than language." The relationship is even more tenuous for "the girl / in an Inchon officers club" in "The Girl," whose "passion" is followed by "the crinkle of paper, / passing hands." And in "Combat Mission," three officers "in a ruined merchant's house" ten miles behind the lines drink Scotch while squatting around an oilcan stove, lifting "their cups against / the darkness, the rumbles rolling forward."

But if it isn't all blood and guts, there is plenty and more than enough of both. In "Guerilla Camp," Wilson is confronted first by the dead and wounded "from the / raid the night before," then by "a retired fighter" no older than himself whose hand has been ruined by a bullet and who demands to know "how a man / could farm / with a hand like that." In "The Circle," Wilson's ship steams for hours through hundreds of Korean bodies floating "in faded blue lifejackets," victims of a sunken troop ship, no survivors: "We sailed on. I suppose that's all / there is to say." But one body in particular remains fixed in his mind:

> . . . God knows why
> but his ass was up instead
> of his head; no pants left,
> his buttocks glistened
> greyish white in the clear sun.
> the only one.

Whatever illusions of service and nobility Wilson entered the war with are evaporating. Even the masculine bravado of "High Noon," in which Wilson and two companions cavalierly risk *"the street. / lined with thin watchful men. / silent. eyes upon them, the / hatred, passive,"* rings ever more hollow. By "December, 1952," once

again "back in the combat zone," he recalls the heroism of great naval commanders of the past—Nelson, Farragut—and the grand enterprise to which he'd thought he himself was attached:

> A blue United Nations patch on the arm, a new
> dream. One World. One
> Nation.
>
> Peace.

But now he realizes that nothing has changed since the days of Nelson and Farragut, that "the old bangles" still work, allegiances are still bought, and "tracers hit a village, / the screams of women, children / men die." And while the New York Stock Market rises and "cash registers / click," Wilson is finally forced to confront

> . . . the cost of lies, tricks
> that blind the eyes of the young. *Freedom.*
> Death. *A life safe for.* The Dead.

"Commentary" is equally scathing, a recitation of what has become, for Wilson, only the squandering of lives, especially Korean lives, in the name of Americans back home

> whose enemies
> are always faceless, numbers
> in a paper blowing in the
> Stateside wind.
>
> How many bodies would
> fill a room
> living room with TV, soft

chairs & the hiss
of opened beer?

We have killed more.
The children's bodies alone
would suffice.
. . . . . .
. . . O,
do not dream of peace while such bodies
line the beaches & dead men float
the seas, waving, their hands
beckoning[.]

After "Truce," which concludes the first section of *Graves Registry*, only a few other poems touch on the Korean War directly; I have included four of them here: "The Ex-Officer, Navy," a poem much like Saner's "Re-Runs;" "The Poem Politic 4," reminiscent of Wantling's "Sure;" "Memory of a Victory," which reads about as hollow as victory can get; and "Corsair," an elegy for a friend who "refused / to machinegun civilians / on the Korean hillside / to bomb a courtyard / full of refugees" and died for his decency.

Wilson's poems are not about the big battalions and the pitched battles, but about coastal operations and guerilla raids, shattered villages and shattered ideals. They are peopled by Americans, yes, but also by Koreans and Japanese, refugees and cripples, and by warriors, yes, but also and more so by the defenseless and the innocent who always become the wreckage of war. They are Wilson's explanation of how he began his life expecting to kill people and ended up dedicating it to teaching people instead.

X

So there is indeed a body of work that can be called Korean War poetry. But to reflect upon these poems and these poets only brings one back to the question: why so few? I have thought for many years that the Korean War must have been a hellish frustration for those who fought it, especially in those last two long years when both the front lines and the truce talks barely moved while men died miserably for nothing but barren lumps of mud with holes dug into them, and one would think the soldiers came home as bitter and disillusioned as any of the 33 veteran-poets who contributed to *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans* (1st Casualty Press, 1972), a book published even before the Viet Nam War was over. But in the days of the House Un-American Activities Committee and Senator Joe McCarthy, it would perhaps have been impossible to say or write what Rafe Buenrostro could only put into words 25 years after the end of the Korean War: "What am I doing here?" In the Fifties, the answer would have been, "Fighting Communism," and only a fool would likely have asked such a question loudly enough to be heard.

But I'm only guessing, and considering that I was not yet five years old when the truce was signed, I thought it might be useful to pose the question to others whose opinions I respect, including but not only the poets themselves.

"Korea was a 'non-war,' " says William Childress, "being alternately a 'police action' and 'Harry Ass Truman's war . . . .' Korea was no war to inspire poetry or fiction. It lacked all nobility and didn't settle a damned thing. The line is still where it began and even after losing 40,000 men we're still patrolling the damned thing—millions and millions of dollars 40 years later. No

resolution, and every good piece of writing needs a denouement."[22]

"Why," asks Reg Saner, "out of the thousands over there, shooting and getting shot at in 'the land of the morning calm,' have so few poets turned to Korean War material? I don't have the answer. Rather, my answers are questions themselves. Is it because Korea wasn't officially a war, just bloody murder on both sides, while being officially termed 'a police action'? Is it because for a long time people referred to it as 'the Phoney War'? Is it because our betters in Washington supplied us with outdated, outworn weapons deliberately, and even gave us, often, ammo that had been corroding since before World War II? Is it because we were judged, from the Pentagon's strategic outlook, to be only a 'brush fire' distraction set ablaze by Russians who would wait till enough US troops and weaponry had been committed in Korea before making their European push? Is it because as soldiers in a 'police action' or 'Phoney War,' using up old ammo, supported by reconditioned, obsolete tanks, and eating literally leftover C-rations, we were nonetheless—in terms of patriotism and duty—enough the echo of World War II morale as to be unwilling to bitch in print? Or, finally and perhaps most likely, had World War II made us small potatoes by inevitable comparison—among even ourselves?

"Despite all the ink spilt about poor public support for Vietnam veterans, I must say that we Korean veterans got neither respect nor disrespect. Except amid our immediate families, there was no reaction. Even in Korea, I recall vividly [a lieutenant] in my infantry company saying sardonically, 'We're the second team.' Everybody knew it. . . .

"Withal, however, I think the scant poetry written by Korean veterans . . . probably resulted from two main factors. First, the ruckus raised by World War II had

barely subsided when the North Koreans poured across the 38th parallel. As I've already pointed out, World War II, by being virtually global in scope, overshadowed the fighting in Korea, bloody as it was. Second, Vietnam split the US, creating in the process a vast readership for anti-war writing. The fact that major US publishers were slow to print the stuff isn't relevant to anything but fiscal caution. Furthermore, readers generally, and readers of poetry *unanimously*, were militantly against continuing in Vietnam. The poetry 'be-in' and 'poetry happening' and 'open mike poetry protest' all became features of US campus life. Nothing remotely resembling a split in US society existed during or after Korea. . . .

"Then there's that vogue word 'closure.' Once truce was signed in Korea, everybody including combat veterans turned the page. The whole thing was over . . . . When I heard Tim O'Brien read from *The Things They Carried*, I was deeply impressed by his quality, yet puzzled, unable to understand how a man well past middle age could tolerate dwelling for years on his Vietnam experience. The title chapter of that book is easily the best war piece I've ever read. How could any reader not admire such depth and power? It's just that I don't get it. How can any writer go on recycling such horrors? As for me, you can have them. All of yours, of course, but especially all of mine. I do not want them."[23]

The other poets did not hazard even a guess, but publisher Len Fulton, William Wantling's champion and himself a veteran of service in Japan from 1953 to 1955, suggests that Americans "went into that John Foster Dulles 'cold war' freeze right after Korea, the Fifties, and a 'massive-retaliation' mentality that helped shut down the sort of cultural churn that heats up the thought processes and gets books written. . . . And I think by the time that 'churn' came back to us we were ass-deep in Viet Nam, rocket science, and rock and roll. . . . Korea was

sandwiched, you might say, between our great rise and our great fall. It was transitional, hence, somewhat transitory. You could argue—and some have—that it was a nexus between what we were and what we are. It was a lesson we should have learned, but which took the much longer and more arduous experience of Viet Nam to make it sink in."[24]

"War poetry is almost always about required suffering and the wreckage of men's lives," writes Gloria Emerson, winner of the National Book Award for *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War*, "so one reason that there may be so little American work on the Korean War is the monumental shadow of what others just before them had endured in World War II. A second consideration is the possibility of being seen as 'disloyal' or subversive in an era of the witch hunt, the insistence on the most rigid patriotism, the specter of being 'un-American.' Poetry flourishes under oppression—always—but it does not thrive when people are thwarted in questioning why they were obliged to fight. Perhaps the level of political sophistication after World War II, and the fear of the Communists against whom Americans were fighting, also imposed artistic inhibitions and an uncertainty in the poets that they had the right to write. There was, because the Korean War came so soon after World War II, a general lassitude on the part of the public. The most piercing history of that war is in photographs."[25]

"Whenever I have talked about war poetry in public, the question [of why so little writing from the Korean War] has always been asked by the audience, and I confess that I don't know the answer," says Paul Fussell, a World War II veteran and author of *Doing Battle, Wartime*, and *The Great War and Modern Memory*. "I always answer it this way by saying that that war was called a police action and there was a widespread decision, a si-

lent decision, not to refer to it as a war. And a police action can't have any poetry. A thing that I think is truer is that it came so close to the Second World War that everybody imagined that the poetry emanating from that war would do for the Korean War as well. But my real, honest answer is that I don't know."[26]

"I don't really know why Korea didn't become a 'literary' war the way that World War II and the American Vietnam War did," writes Jeffrey Walsh, author of *American War Literature: 1914 to Vietnam.* "Some wars are imaginatively productive; others seem to be eerily unpopular in a creative sense. If I had to speculate about why Korea wasn't written about much by poets, I'd suggest that it was perhaps because of its poor timing: it happened just when Europe and to a lesser extent the US were exhausted by World War II. I doubt if there was much mileage in Korea as a topic for commercial publishers. The war occurred just when a flood of books and films covering World War II were coming out. Neither did Korea involve as many troops as World War II or Vietnam, or last as long. It never was as glamorous a war as Vietnam became . . . because it did not generate countercultural opposition or become 'a cause' as, say, the Spanish Civil War. . . . It has remained a complex, distant Asian conflict, fought strategically for sterile Cold War objectives. Unlike Vietnam or the 1914-18 war, Korea did not signify 'futility' nor did it have the moral resonances of World War II waged against evil genocidal powers. In retrospect, Korea seems especially dull, ideologically, bloody, a dirty, uncompromising conflict with few positive images." But, he adds, "I don't think any of this offers a persuasive explanation."[27]

Maybe there isn't one. Or, more likely, maybe it's a little bit of all these things. Trying to explain what hasn't been written is a good deal more difficult than trying to explain what has, and certainly the question

warrants more attention than anyone has yet given it. But so does the war itself, and the writing it generated. Even after nearly half a century, the Korean War largely remains "the Forgotten War," and its literature remains largely unknown, unread, and unexplored. I hope this essay and the accompanying poems will make some small contribution toward bringing an end to such inattention, lest, as James Magner, Jr. writes in "Elegy for the Valiant Dead":

> the eyes of night go out
> and are blind of men.

Notes

1. For a war that is, for many reasons, justifiably referred to as "the Forgotten War," there are a surprising number of political and military history books available. For a gripping and readable account of the human dimensions of the war, I highly recommend T.R. Fehrenbach's 1963 *This Kind of War*, reissued by Bantam in 1991.

2. Earl Tilford of the Center for Strategic Studies at Carlisle Army Barracks estimates that a million US service personnel fought in Korea between 1950 and 1953. Paul Edwards of the Center for the Study of the Korean War in Independence, Missouri, estimates 1.2 million. Edwards puts US casualties at 103,284 wounded in action; 34,600 killed in action; 11,029 non-battle deaths; and 5,178 missing in action. Harry Summers, Jr., in the *Korean War Almanac*, lists casualties as 103,284 WIA; 33,629 KIA; and 20,617 other deaths. As many as a dozen other countries sent forces to Korea, the war being in legal theory a police action under the United Nations flag, ranging from 60,000 British troops to a single platoon from Luxembourg. South Koreans bore the brunt of the

fighting, however, committing more troops to battle than all other U.N. forces combined and suffering heavy casualties both military and civilian.

3. "Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, v. 63, #2, Spring 1987.

4. One might argue that Lincoln Kirstein's poetic reputation is bound up entirely in World War II, his only book of poems being *Rhymes of a PFC*, but though the book is certainly interesting—Paul Fussell, for one, holds it in high regard—Kirstein, who co-founded the New York City Ballet with George Balanchine, is not generally remembered as a poet.

5. Colonel Rick Kerin, "The Korean War and American Memory," University of Pennsylvania, 1994, p.190. For a fascinating discussion of some of the more important novels, see Philip K. Jason's "Vietnam War Themes in Korean War Fiction" in *South Atlantic Review*, v. 61, #I, Winter 1996.

6. Kerin, pp.183-184. Examples of the verse Kerin is referring to can be found in *Faces of War: Korean Vignettes*, Arthur W. Wilson, ed., Artwork Publications, 1996, pp. 433-464.

7. Only *Hell's Music: A Verse Narrative of the Korean War* by Paal Ramberg and Jerome Miller, New London, MN: Green Spire Press, 1950, and *Korean Lullabye* by Howard Fast (author of *Spartacus* and at that time an avowed communist), New York: American Peace Crusade, undated but probably published in 1950 or 1951, certainly no later than mid-1953. None of the poets is a Korean War veteran, and the poems are of interest only as historical curiosities.

8. During a June 8, 1997, telephone conversation, Jean Anaporte-Easton (who is editing a collection of Knight's letters and correspondence) suggested that Knight, while a veteran of the Korean War era, might not ever have served in Korea. Copies of Knight's military

records, obtained by Thomas C. Johnson, a graduate student at Butler University, were subsequently made available to me on October 27, 1997. While the original records were partially destroyed by fire, and therefore incomplete and difficult to read, careful inspection gives no indication of any kind that Knight served in Korea and strongly suggests otherwise. In any case, whether he fought in the Korean War or not, he didn't write about it.

9. Letter to Ehrhart. 13 June 1997.

10. Jose David Saldivar, ed., *The Rolando Hinojosa Reader, Essays Historical and Critical,* Arte Publico, 1985.

11. Saldivar, p.181.

12. Letter to Ehrhart. 10 June 1997.

13. Letter to Ehrhart. 23 January 1997.

14. See note 13.

15. From an unpublished essay titled "Why so little Korean War poetry?" accompanying a letter to W. D. Ehrhart dated June 4, 1997.

16. Letter to Ehrhart. 7 February 1997.

17. *Prison Literature in America,* H. Bruce Franklin, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 262.

18. Biographical information about Wantling is not easy to come by. I have relied mostly on John Pyros' *William Wantling: A Biography & Selected Works,* Spoon River Poetry Press, 1981, and Kevin E. Jones' unpublished doctoral dissertation *Finding Jewels in the Awkward Mud: A Reconsideration of William Wantling and His Poetry,* Illinois State University, 1994. I might also take note here of the fact that it is difficult to know how Wantling wished to have the titles of his poems appear in print. He and his various publishers were inconsistent from book to book. "Without Laying Claim," for instance, appears, as I've written it here, as a title in the table of contents for *The Source,* but in the text itself the poem is printed with no title at all. The same title appears in the same form in the table of contents for *The Awakening,* but

this time the title also appears with the text of the poem—only the title is all in capital letters. In some of his books, his poems have titles but all in lower case letters; others, as I've said, use all upper case; still others use standard upper and lower case. I have chosen to use standard capitalization for all of his titles for no other reason than consistency.

19. This and subsequent statements by Wilson are taken from his letter to Ehrhart. 21 February 1997.

20. All references are to the 1992 Clark City edition.

21. The title means "clad wholly in weaponry." This and the German epigraphs that Wilson uses with a number of his poems come from Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke.*

22. See note 9 above.

23. See note 15 above.

24. Letter to Ehrhart. 27 February 1997.

25. Letter to Ehrhart. 10 March 1997.

26. Telephone conversation. 20 February 1997.

27. E-mail to Ehrhart. 17 March 1997.