

“Every day I’m always on patrol” Bill Ehrhart’s Journey Home

In his magnificent “Mostly Nothing Happens,” Bill Ehrhart, widely considered the dean of Vietnam War poets, describes a routine encounter with a black youth in his Philadelphia neighborhood as he walks home one evening. Beyond “Walking home on Upsal Street,” beyond the shame memories his soldier-friend John Lee Harris provoke, beyond memories of boot camp, Vietnam, and encountering Harris’ name on “panel 26E, Line 105” on a “stupid granite wall,” beyond the narrative pull of this particular poem toward a home in an integrated neighborhood near Upsal Street where “something isn’t working right: / the neighborhood’s got crack cocaine / and dirty needles lying in the gutter, / muggings, robberies, burglaries, / guns more prevalent than basketballs / and people willing to use them,” beyond all the complex, swirling emotions still tied to his nightmare experiences in Vietnam, Ehrhart’s best work to date (both in prose and poetry) enacts the most challenging journey of his adult life—a journey that, at long last, permits him to come home.

But his journey has been long and arduous, and even when he finally arrives, “every day is like a day at war: mostly nothing happens.” For a long time, it seems, Ehrhart dreamed, hoped, prayed, raged, despaired to find meaning in his wartime experiences that have haunted him for almost 30 years. Now, however, as he slowly walks toward home in the 1990’s, still acutely aware of the memories of “[t]he first black friend I ever had / [who] died one day when something happened,” still carrying the burdens—and the darkness—as “[e]very day I’m always on patrol,” he has ceased seeking meaning in his tortured past and has begun to create it.

Such wayfarings are always fraught with difficulty. Like so many other war-veteran writers, the search for meaning for Ehrhart has been as compelling as it has been elusive. His early

and frequently anthologized poems about the war often speak with frustration and rage about his inability to find sense in so much of what he did in Vietnam. In "Guerrilla War," for example, the troubling recognition that "It's practically impossible / to tell civilians / from the Vietcong" eventually yields to the confession that "after a while / you quit trying." Echoing the chorus of so many veterans that "it don't mean nothing," Ehrhart seems resigned in these early poems to accepting a world where nothing means what it should mean, where harassment and interdiction artillery fire destroys the lives of the civilians it's intended to save:

We used to get intelligence reports
from the Vietnamese district offices.
Every night, I'd make a list
of targets for artillery to hit.

It used to give me quite a kick
to know that I, a corporal,
could command an entire battery
to fire anywhere I said.

One day, while on patrol,
we passed the ruins of a house;
beside it sat a woman
with her left hand torn away;
beside her lay a child, dead.

When I got back to base,
I told the fellows in the COC;
it gave us all a lift to know
all those shells we fired every night
were hitting something. ("Time on Target")

With an irony as savage as that of the Great War poet Siegfried Sassoon, Ehrhart lays bare the random and often unimaginable violence of war through this poem. The lift he and his colleagues get haunts Ehrhart, provoking nightmares that resonate in a powerful way in each of the volumes of his prose memoirs as well.

What do such nightmares mean? Ehrhart wants—even desperately needs—to know. Whether the charge for political conscience in “A Relative Thing,” where the poet reminds us that “We are your sons, America, / and you cannot change that. / When you awake, / we will still be here,” or the demons conjured in “Making the Children Behave,” where the key question becomes “When they tell stories to their children / of the evil / that awaits misbehavior, / is it me they conjure?”, Ehrhart has consistently searched for a story to contain his experiences, a story to explain adequately what it means to “still be here.” At times pleading, as in “Letter,” “Remember Ho Chi Minh / was a poet: please, / do not let it all come down / to nothing,” at times incriminating, as in the closing lines of “To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired,” where he urgently asks: “What answers will you find / What armor will protect you / when your children ask you / Why?”, these and other poems always focus on Ehrhart’s search for the armor that can protect him. Whenever overwhelmed by the question why, Ehrhart’s writing staggers under the dark and meaningless events of his past that don’t seem to fit properly into any story that can give meaning to them. In search of a reason for all he has seen and done, Bill Ehrhart can only conclude “I came home with permanent chills, / the yellow nameless dead of Asia / crammed into my seabag, and all of us / looking for a reason,” but, tellingly, “We never found one.” (“Blizzard of Sixty-Six”).

Yet without a reason, without some meaning for what has happened to him, and for what he has become, he can never return to the world he left, he can never go home. The powerful opening volume of his narrative trilogy, *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir* (1985), tries to make the journey back, insisting even in the title that the space between Vietnam and Ehrhart’s hometown of Perkasie can be bridged with a trick of writing, with a carefully positioned punctuation mark. Even while in Vietnam, news from “The World” seems to destroy connections—as it does in Ehrhart’s failed relationship with Jenny, and again when one of his fellow scouts, Calloway, kills himself when he receives notice that his wife is divorcing him (79). One paragraph later, Ehrhart must confront the news that his friend Rowe has died on a hospital ship in the Danang harbor. Desperate for meaning in such events, Ehrhart can only

conclude that his friend Bobby was right: there is no humor in fabricated news stories taking the place of the intelligence summaries that Ehrhart and his colleagues produce—something that he and the Lieutenant used to find outrageously funny—and perhaps no humor at all (80).

This pivotal scene signals a shift in Ehrhart's understanding of the war, and his tone gets progressively more frustrated and strident as *Vietnam-Perkasie* marches steadily forward. In an interview with a Vietnamese scout named Trihn, Ehrhart hopes once again to find meaning in the chaos erupting around him. But Trihn can provide none:

“You are their [the Viet Cong's] best recruiters. You Americans come with your tanks and your jets and your helicopters, and everywhere you go, the VC grow like new rice in the fields. You do not understand Vietnam. You have never bothered to understand us, and you never will bother because you think you have all the answers.” (148)

Later, Trihn restates this troublesome truth in the most direct terms possible: “My country is bleeding to death, Corporal Ehrhart. My beloved Vietnam is dying. I have fought hard. I am tired. Someday, perhaps, you will understand” (149). But rather than understanding, Ehrhart finds in his final battle in-country only an excess of impotent rage—and the terror such a rage prompts:

And I fought back passionately, in blind rage and pain, without remorse or conscience or deliberation. I fought back at the mud of Con Thien, and the burning sand of Hoi An, and the alien blank faces in the marketplace at Dien Ban; at the Pentagon generals, and the Congress of the United States, and the *New York Times*; at the Iron Butterfly, and the draft-card burners, and the Daughters of the American Revolution; at the murderer of Dorritt von Hellemond, and the son-of-a-bitch who had taken Jenny flying in his private airplane; at the teachers who had taught me that America always had God on our side and

always wore white hats and always won . . . at freedom and democracy and communism and the monumental stupidity with which I had delivered myself into the hands of the nightmare; at the small boy with the terrible grenade in his hand, cocked and ready to be delivered into my lap. Power surged through the barrel of my rifle. Raw, naked, unmitigated power. It was a pure and simple purgation of the soul. A sacred rite. A necessity. I had no idea—had not the slightest inkling—what I was fighting for or against.

I was terrified. (246-47)

And so Ehrhart leaves Vietnam, as well as the first volume of his memoirs, frantic to find meaning in his experience, desperately seeking some rite, some story, some explanation powerful enough to save him from terror, to blot out the darkness, to erase the nightmare.

But as the title of his first anthology of poetry of the Vietnam War suggests, *Carrying the Darkness* will be Bill Ehrhart's burden for some time to come. In his foreword to the text, he remarks: "[b]ut regardless of how one feels about the war—regardless of one's political perspective or personal point of view—there is little debate that Vietnam seared itself into the consciousness of virtually everyone who lived through those years, leaving no one unmarked" (xxvi). And the marks on Ehrhart's life, the scars he carries, force him continually to ask "How did it happen? Who won and who lost? What might have been done differently? What did we learn and what should we have learned?" (xxv). The lessons are terrible, the instruction harsh, but Ehrhart seems convinced that if he just asks often enough, if he just looks hard enough, meaning will emerge from this nightmare. Like so many victims of trauma, Ehrhart continues to search memory in hope of finding a narrative that can redeem him.

Throughout *In the Shadow of Vietnam: Essays, 1977-1991*, Ehrhart explores what it means to search: "For better or worse, virtually everything I see, do and think is filtered through that seminal experience. . . . My entire adult life has been lived in the shadow of Vietnam" (ix). But as Ehrhart has stumbled around in these shadows, he has inched ever closer to home. In

this issue of *WLA*, Lorrie Smith highlights “Ehrhart’s need to be heard, understood, and answered—if nothing else with thoughtful reading” in her insightful reading of his poetry. Observing that “many poems leave us dangling with questions and insist on our responsibility for living morally in the present and working actively to shape a future free of war,” Smith urges us to cherish a poet “never sanguine” yet still “a poet of hope, for he reminds us that we have choices that affect our collective future.”

Ehrhart himself begins actively making these choices as he slowly moves toward home. The final volume of his memoirs, *Busted* (1995), charts this course home through the trajectory of these choices—choices that boil down to creating meaning out of his past memories rather than searching among them for it. The death of Bobby Rowe marked a turning point in Ehrhart’s *Vietnam-Perkasie*, and to Bobby Rowe he returns in *Busted*. This time, though, Bobby is a ghost, one who Ehrhart allows to speak for himself. Early in the text, the voices from the past—the ghosts of three comrades who died in Vietnam—begin the long process of educating the character of Ehrhart as well as his readers:

“It’s our parents’ fault,” said Bobby. “They let us go. They bought the whole stupid spiel: hook, line, and sinker. They coulda asked a few questions. They coulda said no.”

“We bought it, too,” I said. “Who was gonna tell us anything? Would you have listened to ‘em? If my parents wouldn’t have signed the papers, I’d have waited three months and enlisted on my eighteenth birthday, that’s all.”

“I don’t mean us,” said Bobby. “They coulda said no to the government. They coulda stood up to those jackasses in Washington. They coulda said, ‘You can’t have our kids. Send your own kids. Go fight ‘em yourselves.’ But they didn’t.” (44)

Clearly, the issue for Ehrhart and his ghosts is one of choice—only this debate has little to do with the actual memories of Vietnam and is about the choices parents of the 1990’s face

about Somalia and Bosnia and anyplace else “jackasses in Washington” try to send the youth of our nation. It’s about the choices Ehrhart will make during his trial for possession of a small amount of marijuana at the same time our nation chooses not to prosecute the crimes of President Nixon. The choices are political, ethical, moral—inspired by the quagmire of Vietnam, but no longer dependent upon it for meaning.

And it is precisely the imaginative power of the memories Ehrhart still has of Vietnam that make this final volume of his “non-fictional memoir” so powerful. As Ski, one of the other ghosts, explains to Ehrhart:

“Everybody that was there can see us . . . or guys like us. But they don’t see the same thing. Most of ‘em don’t know what they’re seeing. Some guys cry in their sleep. Some guys get all choked up when they hear the Star Spangled Banana. Some guys hear voices, but they turn around and nobody’s there. Everybody’s different.” (106)

Understanding these differences, insisting on the ghosts that each vet carries but recognizing that each vet must tell his own story, Ehrhart moves through this final narrative imagining better—relying upon imagination and the meaning it creates through memory to redeem past events. As his lawyer reminds both Ehrhart and us, “You see the way things are and imagine better. I see the way things are and imagine worse” (138). As he moves toward reconciliation with the events of his and his country’s past, Ehrhart imagines both.

Through Bobby’s voice, we hear the worst:

“They’re gonna turn the whole thing upside down and inside out and every which way but Sunday, and before you can say ‘It don’t mean nothin,’ they’re gonna have all those folks down there cryin’ in their beers and shoveling their kids off to some other goddammed war in some other godforsaken backwater that never did the good people of Perkasio a lick of harm. You know it’s true. What are you going to do about it?”

“What do you expect me to do about it?”
“Say what they won’t say,” said Bobby. “Say what
is.” (145)

This charge defines what Ehrhart’s journey home has been all about from the start—a quest to say what is. For a long time the shadows of darkness clouded the way and he worked to find meaning in the devastating events of his past. But in this final volume of his memoirs, the ghosts of that past have liberated him from that task, exhorting him instead to “say what is.” “I’m not going to say you owe us anything,” said Bobby, “You took the same chance we did. But we don’t have a voice anymore. We’re dead. You’re not. You do.” Obtuse to the very end, Ehrhart’s character asks “So?” And then Bobby—the last voice of the memoir—shouts, “So use it” (146).

And that’s precisely what Ehrhart has done as he walks home on Upsal Street. The voice celebrates the generative power of imagination, the need to “think we’ll be okay / if only we can touch the best / in others and ourselves.” The poet of “Mostly Nothing Happens” still taps the passion, rage, and fear of the early poems—and more than ever he needs the answers they seek. For Ehrhart, still, “Every day is like a day at war: / mostly nothing happens, / but you never know what’s waiting / when or where or how.” And in the shadows of his past, in the darkness still carried, meaning must be made out of “Panel 26E, Line 105. / John Lee Harris, Jr., born 12 September 1947, / killed in Viet Nam September 21st, 1967.” The ghosts of our pasts, individual and national, will always be part of “wounds that never heal”—and that is as it should be. But for Bill Ehrhart, to ignore the lessons such ghosts can teach us, to fail to use the voices we have to create meaning out of such wounds, to forget that “Every day [we are] always on patrol,” is to doom ourselves and our children. □

Thomas G. Bowie Jr. has been an associate editor of *WLA* since 1994. He has published widely on the literature of war, especially that of the Vietnam War and the Great War.