

COMMENTARY BY W. D. EHRHART

Samuel Exler: The Poet as Historian

WORLD WAR TWO VETERAN SAMUEL EXLER died in April 2008 at the age of 85. After a career in New York City as an advertising copywriter, he had moved from Woodstock to Philadelphia in 1998 to be close to a woman to whom he'd become very attached. In those last ten years, he'd lived only about ten blocks from me.

I can't remember the exact circumstances under which I first became aware of Exler. I think he read something of mine that he liked, and either called or wrote to me. Subsequently, I recall that he introduced himself to me at a talk I gave with Paul Fussell at Friends Center here in Philly. Somewhere along the way, he mentioned that he, too, wrote poetry.

People often send me poetry. Unsolicited. Most of it is—well, the kindest thing I can usually say is—sincere. Why they send it to me, I don't know. It is generally an unwanted burden. So when Exler said he wrote poetry, I didn't bite. To my great relief, he was too gracious or too shy to press the issue.

Then in the early spring of 2008, I got a phone message from Exler's close friend Regina Holmes, who said that Exler had recently read my poem "Mostly Nothing Happens" and wanted me to know how much he liked it. When I returned the call, Holmes initially answered, but then Exler himself got on. His breathing was very labored and we only talked for a few moments before he was too exhausted to continue.

A few weeks later, Holmes called to say that Exler had died. She mentioned again his poetry. Wishing to respect her grief and to be polite, I asked if I could see some of it. Only after I'd read the poems did I realize what a mistake I'd made not to have taken more interest in Exler while he was alive. Notwithstanding his slim list of publishing credits, Exler was not some rank amateur but a genuinely accomplished poet.

Between 1970 and his death, Exler published several dozen poems in journals such as *Plainsong*, *New York Quarterly*, *Poetry East*, and *American Poetry Review*, and in a dozen or so anthologies. (Indeed, we share space in two of those anthologies, *We Speak for Peace* and *Who Are the Rich and Where Do They Live?*, though I didn't notice until after he'd died.) In 1957, he published a children's book called *Growing and Changing*, illustrated by his first wife and published by Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, and in 1982 he published a collection of poems called *Ambition, Fertility, Loneliness* from an outfit called Lintel. One of his children's poems appears in the 1995 Random House anthology *Ghosts and Goose Bumps*.

But it is the poems based on his experiences as an infantryman in World War Two that most caught my attention. Exler served in the US Army from December 1942 to December 1945, and fought in Belgium, Holland, and Germany with the 104th "Timberwolf" Infantry Division from October 1944 until the end of the war in Europe, earning the Combat Infantry Badge and a Bronze Star.

In a 1999 op-ed piece in the *Mt. Airy Times Express*, Exler said of the film *Saving Private Ryan*: "Instead of truth, we get the same old uplifting story about young men winning a battle against great odds to defeat an evil enemy. Instead of feeling horrified, we come out feeling somehow ennobled. Perhaps, for a little more reality, we should revive Stanley Kubrik's *Paths of Glory*."

On a scrap of paper Holmes gave me along with Exler's poems, he had written: "My belief that our history should not be forgotten lies behind these poems." I wish I had paid more attention to Exler when I'd had the chance to get to know him. Exler understood the relationship between poetry and history. I am grateful to have his poems, and grateful for the opportunity to share some of them with others.

SAMUEL EXLER

Be All That You Can Be

I barely remember what it was
drilled into my bones. Barely remember
the boring words of abuse
harrowing my mind. Barely

remember how the boots
of close order drill
stomped across my thoughts—
pride skinned off, training's blunt knife
carving me into a dogface—an animal
taught
to suppress its whimper
at death's approach.

Taught cursing, taught fear, taught
not to speak, not to have thoughts;
taught to have no will, to make
no decisions, taught
ass kissing for small favors,
taught to pick spittle-soaked
cigarette butts from the ground
every morning.
Taught to kill.

First Casualties

The mortar shell bursts in the forest.
Pieces of shrapnel go flying, edges slicing
like scissors cutting fabric
for a boy's shirt.

The surgeon bends over the arm, ready to amputate,
but the arm resists. Smashed, bent, fingers curled,
it returns to the squad,
holds a baton, leads a hundred voices
in the "Ode to Joy."

The young soldiers lie on the ground
like scattered sacks of grain.

Someone is shouting, "Medic! Medic!"

Solomon Grundy

Solomon Grundy
Inducted on Monday,
Drilling on Tuesday,
Rifle range on Wednesday,
Shipped out on Thursday,
Shot up on Friday,
Last breath was Saturday,
Statistic on Sunday,
This is the end
Of Solomon Grundy.

One, Two, Three, Four

One, two, three, four,
Mother, we are off to war.
How many coming home, my son?
Four, three, two, one.

When I was Young

When I was young I put on another life
with my olive drab uniform, and I slept
under Government Issue blankets.
On the bare rifle range, barren
As a parking lot, I learned to *squeeze*
The trigger, a study precise
As a formal table setting.

Beyond the rifle range, the ocean.
Beyond the ocean, another continent
where cannon fire grumbled
like an advancing giant striding
the mountains. Sunrise tugged
at young men who slept with rifles
and dreamed of home; at night the moon
searched the rubble of cities.

I arrived on an ocean liner, free passage,
as though I had won a prize,
like the prize in the Cracker Jack box
when I was a boy. I'd lost
the girl I loved. And the sun paused
over the concentration camps
and the dead bodies behind
the barbed wire fence, like chess pieces
toppled, swept from the board.

Shipped back from the Elbe River, I slept again
under Government Issue blankets.
My sleep was blank, like a movie screen
before the show comes on,
and dreams did not return
till much later.

Backpacking Ammunition

Squeezed
against the building's red brick wall,
back
bent,
bearing a box of caliber .30 cartridges,
box heavy
as
my
own
skinny body, pressing myself
flat as a notebook page
into red brick,
I see a medic stooped
over one of our wounded boys.
Then
a vast silence, like a spot of blood
spreading on a white bandage,
overtakes the world.

It's sixty years later. No
body's
there.

Our boys were wounded.
They were lying in the street.

Bad Dreams

I keep dreaming that I'm back
in combat; the dead are like black rocks
small boulders, they lie
strewn all around me, all over
the countryside, in the fields, in the Normandy
orchards; I've been called back
to war, to the cold that walks through the bones,
to my consciousness narrowed to a pinpoint
in a universe that is nothing but death;
I've returned to marches, to mess halls, to my
young life shrunken like a fallen crabapple,
and I see my friends receding,
crying out to me, their voices
thinning, growing transparent, crying
that they don't understand—their arms
outstretched, vanishing back in time,
calling out that our lives
exist like a war, like black rocks;
that our lives are stones, that there is no peace,
that we died with the dead whom we loved
a long time ago.



A frequent contributor, ex-Marine **W. D. EHRHART** fought in Vietnam in 1967-68. The author or editor of 18 books of prose and poetry, he lives in Philadelphia and teaches English and history at the Haverford School. His most recent publication is a chapbook from Adastra Press, *Sleeping with the Dead*.