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**"The Place Where Curses are Manufactured":
Four Poets of the Vietnam War**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Ph.D at the University of Kent, Canterbury

**Katherine R. Miller
Candidate for the
Degree of Ph.D, 1990**

Abstract

The Vietnam War was unique among American wars. To pinpoint its uniqueness, it was necessary to look for a non-American voice that would enable me to articulate its distinctiveness and explore the American character as observed by an Asian. Takeshi Kaiko proved to be most helpful. From his novel, Into a Black Sun, I was able to establish a working pair of 'bookends' from which to approach the poetry of Walter McDonald, Bruce Weigl, Basil T. Paquet and Steve Mason. Chapter One is devoted to those seemingly mismatched 'bookends,' Walt Whitman and General William C. Westmoreland, and their respective anthropocentric and technocentric visions of progress and the peculiarly American concept of the "open road" as they manifest themselves in Vietnam.

In Chapter, Two, I analyze the war poems of Walter McDonald. As a pilot, writing primarily about flying, his poetry manifests General Westmoreland's technocentric vision of the 'road' as determined by and manifest through technology.

Chapter Three focuses on the poems of Bruce Weigl. The poems analyzed portray the literal and metaphorical descent from the technocentric, 'numbed' distance of aerial warfare to the world of ground warfare, and the initiation of a 'fucking new guy,' who discovers the contours of the self's interior through a set of experiences that lead from from aerial insertion into the jungle to the degradation of burning human feces.

Chapter Four, devoted to the thirteen poems of Basil T. Paquet, focuses on the continuation of the descent begun in Chapter Two. In his capacity as a medic, Paquet's entire body of poems details his quotidian tasks which entail tending the maimed, the mortally wounded and the dead.

The final chapter deals with Steve Mason's Johnny's Song, and his depiction of the plight of Vietnam veterans back in "The World" who are still trapped inside the interior landscape of their individual "ghettoes" of the soul created by their war-time experiences.

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My special sympathy and thanks go to Chieko Irawan for listening and supporting my endeavor. Karen Cagle, at Colorado State University, deserves a medal for her contributions. John Clark Pratt, Takeshi Kaiko, Bill Ehrhart, Malcolm Browne, Dr. William Watson, and Marc Leepson all helped at critical moments. Last but certainly not least, I wish to thank Graham Clarke, my supervisor, for keeping me on course.

Special Comment

I draw special attention to the fact that I have used the Third Edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers by Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert, and that I have used American spelling in this thesis. I did so for several reasons. The large majority of my sources are American, the poets themselves are Americans, and the war in Vietnam was an American undertaking.

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Introduction

In one respect this study of Vietnam War poetry is the product of my fascination with war poetry that began in 1975 at Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English where I took a course from A. Walton Litz in Modern British Poetry. It was in that course that I first encountered the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Ivor Gurney, Isaac Rosenberg, Robert Graves and Rupert Brooke. The following summer I did an Independent Study in World War I poetry, again with Walt Litz. Soon after, a close friend and major in the Marine Corps gave me a copy of Brian Alec Floyd's The Long War Dead: An Epiphany. With that slim volume my interest in Vietnam War poetry began and continued to grow as I found an ever-increasing amount of poetry being written by veterans of the war in Vietnam.

I used Floyd's poems and an assortment of other war poems from World Wars I and II in my high school poetry class. My students surprised me by responding to these poems as they did few others. Invariably they were silently awed after I'd read aloud a poem by Owen, Douglas, Floyd or Paquet, and invariably one of them would ask to borrow my copy of The Long War Dead. Perhaps their interest was peaked because the fathers of some of my students had served in Vietnam (as the kids were quick to tell me), perhaps it was because I was a teenager in the '60's and was able to make the war and the decade more 'accessible' for them than a textbook account. The reasons for their interest are unimportant. What is important, however, is that unquestionably there was something about these poems coming out of a war these kids had never experienced that 'spoke' to them, touched them in a manner and in a 'place' that was seldom reached. I, on the other hand, had lived through the war and had seen a number of my high school classmates drafted and sent to Vietnam immediately after graduation, and the poems of

Vietnam veterans affected me in much the same manner as they affected my students. Perhaps my own reaction to those poems might best be articulated by part of a poem called "I Am a Veteran of Vietnam" from Winning Hearts and Minds written by Sue Halpern who is listed in the anthology as a high school student:

I
am a veteran
of Vietnam.
I've been from
Hamburger Hill to the DMZ
and back again
with a mere flick
of my wrist.
Through my own eyes
I've seen people
Tortured.
Bombed.
Burned.
Destroyed.

And even now, writing about Vietnam and analyzing the poems that the war generated is the same as seeing those images that came into our livingrooms nightly. There was something horrifyingly immediate, yet terribly distant about that war, something about it that haunted us and continues to haunt us. Devoting this study to it is my attempt to put my own ghosts to rest without forgetting what those years did to the nation and so many young Americans, veterans and non-veterans alike.

The Vietnam War was unique among American wars. To pinpoint its uniqueness, it was necessary to look for a non-American voice, and preferably an Asian voice, that would enable me to articulate the war's distinctiveness. Takeshi Kaiko proved to be most helpful both in terms of his novel, Into a Black Sun, and his granting me an interview at Tokyo's Imperial Hotel in April of 1986. From his novel, I was able to establish a working pair of 'bookends' from which to approach the poetry of Walter McDonald, Bruce Weigl, Basil T. Paquet

and Steve Mason. Chapter One of this analysis is devoted to those seemingly mismatched 'bookends,' Walt Whitman and General William C. Westmoreland, and their respective anthropocentric and technocentric visions of progress and the peculiarly American concept of the "open road" as they manifest themselves in Vietnam. The war poems of these four veteran poets are 'located' between these two visions. But this 'location' - like the war and the American character - itself is mobile, in a constant state of motion as it journeys along a new kind of 'road' beginning in the skies over Vietnam, descending through layers of the war and the self, and ending inside the "ghettoes" of the self's interior.

In Chapter Two I have approached jet pilot Walter McDonald's war poems from the standpoint of technocentrism through a discussion of the desensitizing isolation of flight. Chapter Three is devoted to the war poems of Bruce Weigl, an infantryman. His poems manifest the literal and metaphorical descent from the technocentric, numbed altitude of aerial warfare to the anthropocentric world of ground warfare, and the initiation of a 'fucking new guy' who discovers the contours of the self's interior through a set of experiences that lead him from aerial insertion into the jungle to the degradation of cleaning a latrine. Chapter Four focuses on the thirteen poems of Basil T. Paquet. In his capacity as a medic, his entire body of poems continues the horrifying course of the descent since his quotidian tasks entail tending the maimed, the mortally wounded and the dead. The final chapter centers on the poems of Steve Mason which depict the plight of Vietnam veterans back in "The World" who are still trapped inside the interior landscape of their individual "tenements" of the soul created by their wartime experience.

Through the act of writing poetry, each of the four poets

digs a new 'road' within himself to find meaning in and give utterance to his tour of duty in Vietnam, an act that imbues the notion of the "open road" with new meaning.

Chapter One

The 'Road' to Vietnam: From Whitman's Traveller to Westmoreland's White Whale

THE 'ROAD' TO VIETNAM: FROM WHITMAN'S TRAVELLER TO WESTMORELAND'S "WHITE WHALE"

Introduction

After a period of national amnesia, there now exists in American society the need to analyze and study, remember and reconstruct the memory and experience of the Vietnam War. In addition to amassing special collections of materials in their libraries, colleges and universities are now offering history and literature courses centered on the war; television producers, taking their cue from the film industry's interest in the war, have created the prime time television series, "Tour of Duty" and "China Beach"; and new histories, biographies, memoirs, novels and poems are published frequently. From the range of interests in the Vietnam War, it is evident that as a people, Americans are still close to the war, even though it ended over a decade ago. Because of this psychical and experiential proximity, it is difficult to gain an objective outlook on the war. It is for this very reason that I looked to Takeshi Kaiko's novel, Into a Black Sun (Kagayakeru Yami), for the perspective I needed to examine the war poems of Walter McDonald, Bruce Weigl, Basil T. Paquet and Steve Mason.

Being neither Vietnamese nor American, Kaiko, a Japanese, a gifted writer and a young survivor of the American destruction of Osaka during World War II, provides a unique perspective on the Vietnam War which Americans lack. As an outsider-"voyeur", his observations, insights and assessments of the American character, as it manifests itself in literature and in the Vietnam War, are extremely useful. By using Into a Black Sun as a 'compass' it is possible to navigate an approach to the four poets of this study. Kaiko directly and indirectly isolates in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court and Moby Dick the

prevailing element of the American character - the national obsession with "it," "hell- or heaven-bent" movement, "purpose and action" and technology. As a lodestar, Kaiko's observations of the national character point the way to Walt Whitman's anthropocentric vision of progress and the open road and General William C. Westmoreland's technocentric vision. A discussion of these two men of vision provides a context in which it is possible to demonstrate the workings of "it" as it leads Whitman's traveller along the nation's "open roads," urges Ahab across the Pacific, and develops the country technologically as it tries to keep abreast of the need for movement. However, once America found itself in South Vietnam, the national mania for movement and the machine manifests itself in a manner curiously unique to the poets who were veterans of this unpopular war. For them, the obsession with movement, and the concomitant technological developments which were ultimately responsible for their presence in Vietnam reduced Whitman's "open roads" to confining tunnels within the interior of the self, restricted motion to that of inching one's way up and out of the internal 'prisons' and gauged progress by how or if one dealt with "the place curses are manufactured."

First, it should be noted that Kaiko himself is not happy with the English translation of his Vietnam novel's title, Into a Black Sun. The Japanese title, Kagayakeru Yami, is more effectively translated as "brilliant" or "shining" [kagayakeru] "darkness" [yami], a rendition in keeping with the dark years of American involvement in Vietnam, and certainly well within the parameters of his vision of America's presence there. I should also add that Kaiko, regrettably little known to Western readers, is sensitive to war in ways far different from those of his American

journalist or novelist counterparts. This sensitivity may in part stem from his place among the "Showa Hitoketa," the name given to the generation of Japanese writers who were teenagers during the denouement of World War II and who experienced not only American bombings and the decimation of Imperial Japan, but also experienced life "in the belly of the whale,"¹ the string of camps and instant slums of leveled Osaka, American occupation forces, and the ever-present threat of starvation and the life-long effects of such experiences. Twenty years after the end of that war he followed the vicissitudes of another war, this time as a journalist. Though he stated in a personal interview his belief that America "rode a bad horse" by supporting the South Vietnamese government, Kaiko, like his journalist-protagonist, refused to side with either America or Vietnam, for "any commitment now involved a readiness to kill."² Because he could not become involved, because he could not kill, and because he was simply an observer, neither American nor Vietnamese, his role became that of "a voyeur lurking in the narrow ribbon of a twilight zone" separating him from both worlds.³

I hadn't fought, hadn't killed, hadn't helped or plowed, or carried; I hadn't instigated or planned or taken anybody's side. I watched... If by seeing something one becomes that thing, then wasn't I already partly dead? [Into a Black Sun, 188]

As a "voyeur" he watches his colleagues almost as closely as he watches the war. Tucking himself away near windows of cafes and sipping Pernod in Hemingway-like brown study, he makes it a habit to listen to and observe newcomer and veteran reporters from all over the world holding forth on the war, "appending chapters of their own experiences to Giap's book on the 'people's war' [which] no outsider could hope to

understand...or have it well conveyed to him'⁴ no matter how ardently one strove. As outsiders, these journalists are like the historians Steve Mason rails against. Though for different reasons, Kaiko's protagonist and Mason concur that outsiders cannot hope to capture the war in words because they did not experience it, that is, they did not "FEEL" and "LIVE"⁵ the war as servicemen did. But this did not deter the diehards, novices or old hands from their endeavor:

they'd rummage in their little bags of words and strain to give some tangible meaning to their experiences though they knew it couldn't be done. And in the end, invariably, they'd draw a snap conclusion, and when the verdict was out, their look said somehow they'd betrayed themselves; lost face; but they couldn't resist the urge. [Into a Black Sun, 155]

Thus stood the war, defined in "snap conclusions" framed in the stale language of "their little bag of words," but rendering no "tangible meaning to their experiences." It was simply easy and convenient to reduce the war to a series of phrases, conveniently adopt any prevailing analyses of the war and pass judgment on such analyses. Their "verdict" does not involve the war, however - it involves instead the human necessity of comprehension. The irresistible temptation to define the war is an attempt to understand the war, for by understanding it, they can perhaps find meaning in it and therefore discover meaning in their war-coverage experience and craft. But they know the illusive character of this war, they know that no instantly conclusive analysis will reveal the meaning much less the 'tangibility' they seek. Rehashing the war's character in terms of cliched utterances of rhetorical binary opposites ranging from

a struggle between the have and have-nots, a battle between human beings and machinery, a war between yellow and white...a contest between an elephant and a mouse...a conflict between primitive force and atomic

power...a struggle between men seeking change and others clinging to the status quo...a war between virtue and evil...a crusade against crusades
[Into a Black Sun, 155-156]

attests not only to their indirect admission that they do not understand the conflict, but also bespeaks a global inability to provide genuine, insightful, ameliorative and analytical discussion of the war, and that as a result, "tangible meaning" is impossible for outsiders. "Their look says as much," for their "manazashi," the expression of their eyes, betrays to the "voyeur" their self-disdain, "yashimeru," for so quickly paying obeisance to the "odorless muck" of their daily "pot of topics," topics which through discussion or even print, were gradually legitimized and normalized, as sanitized semiological 'essences.'

Kaiko's journalist likens his colleagues' discussions to the act of naming which not only gives the namer a sense of control over that which is named, but also diminishes, even tames, that which is named. Once called "lion," a lion is robbed of its substantive, ferocious reality and is shrunk to an essence, "another quadruped." The same can be said of Vietnam, for

when people defined war as 'a struggle between have and have-nots'...the war stopped, wounded in its tracks, in full view for a moment; but new heads formed from gaping wounds, and it snaked out through the window, spread and sprawled across the fields and mountains, and not a trace of blood or a whiff of death remained behind.
[Into a Black Sun, 156]

Meaningless discussions such as these end up robbing the war of its reality by absorbing the blood, minimizing the suffering and hiding the casualties under heaps of innocuous statistics ("Oh, two hundred isn't anything," says the journalist of accountant ledger fame in Dispatches, "we lost more than that

in an hour on Guadalcanal." ⁶ Thus theorized, objectified, analyzed and printed into a manipulatable travesty of itself, the war exists merely as an organism capable of forming Hydra-like "new heads," new variations on topics already in the "pot," with each one wandering deeper into the transfiguring distance of myth.

Journalists' phrases, analyses, and "snap conclusions" are so many powerless words, says the narrator, "words [that] dropped out of people's mouths like legless ants that wriggled and twitched and soon curled up." ⁷ The words of these journalists are like plentiful mutants, small, feeble and impotently capable of nothing more than existing for a short time, to be replaced by more of their kind. This simile juxtaposed to an image of termites laboring to destroy a house in order to "build their own" reveals even more and serves to distinguish the narrator-voyeur from his colleagues. We can at least admire the termites for their energy, creativity and industry, albeit their efforts are obviously double-edged. Even if we cannot admire the narrator's lack of industry, when he "nibbled time the way termites nibbled wood" by sitting alone drinking and watching his colleagues, we can at least admire his refusal to join their discussion. He is sedentary without even the metaphorical ant-like movements of his fellow journalists' words because "inside [him] was an empty warehouse full of faded words collecting dust." ⁸ He can claim a superabundance of words, but they are disused, packed away because somehow they cannot be applied to the war without becoming impotent, ant-like utterances lacking "tangible meaning." As it stands, he prefers to keep them in their dusty confines, say nothing and therefore "betray" nothing.

The written word suffers a similar fate for this narrator. "Words glittered and turned to ash the minute they were

written,"⁹ in comparison to the "pure" and literally "vigorous" power to be found in "the gentleness of things."¹⁰ In recalling fragments of his past war life as a manual laborer "stoking ovens," making bread or working a lathe, he says he held in his hands "an absolute value," even though his mind was "blocked and rusty, doubting everything."¹¹ Tangible, shapeable, moveable, creative "value" and meaningfulness took precedence over the intangible, formless inertness of ash-like words. Also, during that period he says he "knew no doctrine [he] could kneel before, but worshipped things." Looking back on these experiences, he wonders "why [he] ever broke the trance " which enabled him to work in a manner that focused on value, on the formulation and creation of tangible things given form by his hands rather than "doctrine" given form by language. But regardless of whether he broke the "trance" himself or whether it was a fragmentary casualty of national post-war reconstruction, he cannot seem to regain the vitality, value and meaningfulness of tangible creativity, at least not with words and not with the Vietnam War for a topic.

For him, a means of covering the war is silent observation and internalization born of his response to the World War II desert-like landscape of Osaka. He saw in this desert, created by intensive American bombing strikes, positive, generative, almost Edenic potential, but "before we realized that it might have been a land of orange orchards, we'd lost it" to ever-encroaching asphalt, shanty towns and smog.¹² Instead of mourning losses from the bombing raids, he mourns the loss of the desert, likening it to an animal fleeing from the hunt. There, as in Vietnam, he "watched," and "found a hollowness in [himself] that deepened day by day" as the desert gradually disappeared. He states that "nothing will ever replace the vast, harsh clarity of that expanse" nor will

anything else substitute for the things there "that gave [his] solitude and aimlessness external form." 13

I lost an outer world that corresponded to the spreading void within, the growing alienation that I felt. One sees an object and becomes the thing oneself. I am a desert. I look at myself, and when self-definition blurs, a desert appears amid some hotel's chandeliers and brandy glasses and suits of shiny cloth; and with it comes a flood of scorched-red forms, the utter dryness of an inorganic world, a premonition of starvation and advancing like a tide...One fine day if there is a flash in the sky, a mushroom cloud, nothing will happen to me, because I've already been there. [Into a Black Sun, 176-177]

Accepting his feat of internalization in becoming a "desert," a parallel becomes evident between this and his earlier statement that inside of him was an "empty warehouse full of faded words collecting dust." As he watched the "outer world" of the desert disappear, there spread within him a corresponding "void." Language, for this 'hollow man' is useless in comparison with the value of things to be moved, shaped, and created. The desert-wasteland, empty of all save the purity and vigor of things, scorches words to "ash," just as the moral wasteland of the Vietnam War silences him and makes of his language a "warehouse" of dust-covered words. Although he has internalized the desert, he can find meaning for his existence through the creativity of labor in the midst of barrenness.

If twenty years later as a journalist, "self-definition," and *raison d'être* can be found in the creativity of writing, then when "snap conclusions" and the war's metalanguage replace the vitality of words, the desert returns devoid of both its "harsh clarity" and the value of things on which to focus for meaningfulness. The "shiny suits" and brandy glasses of his colleagues, who "grope together" in Saigon hotels, are meaningless objects, and like Eliot's "hollow men," their "dried

voices" "are quiet and meaningless/As wind in dry grass"; the aridity of their discussions becomes "shape without form, shade without colour, /Paralyzed force, gesture without motion. As far as they are concerned, their "only hope" of recovering any potency of language is the compulsive process of stirring the daily stew of topics which invariably works against them and leaves them wondering, yet knowing why it happens this way. Only the narrator "avoid[s] speech," knowing that despite the fullness of his "warehouse" containing words, they are empty of currency. Thus, the more language is carelessly or mechanically bandied about, and the more it is invaded, inflated and removed from reality to the realm of metalanguage, the less creativity and meaning it can contain. That is, the more it is effectively, rigorously and vitally linked to the Barthesian "thing-ness" ¹⁴ of its objects, the more power it possesses, and the more "inner peace and joy" and "self-definition" one can gain from it.

Obviously, unlike Kaiko and his narrator, the Vietnam veteran poets are 'insiders' in this war. Moreover, by "living" and "feeling" (and "dying") the war, they are transitively connected to the "thing-ness" of their war. But they too "lost an outer world," not only that of their lives prior to Vietnam, but also that of their lives while "in country" in South Vietnam. Like Kaiko, who "watched the desert being hunted down and driven out of sight" and "found a hollowness in [himself] that deepened day by day," these poets, over the plodding course of their tour of duty, experienced a similar erosive, implosive effect. Instead of a "desert being hunted down and driven out of sight," they experienced the 'hunting down' and 'driving out of sight' of many human values - dignity, self-worth, compassion, to say nothing of values instilled in them by family, church and school. The consequence, the

corresponding "void within, the growing alienation" occurs when, like Kaiko, they gradually internalize the war, by becoming that which they see - "One sees an object and becomes the thing oneself." The resultant interior of the self is as unfamiliar and uncharted as tracts of triple canopy jungle. There are no clearings, no Whitmanian "open roads" to follow back to the "outer world" the war took from them. Left to their own devices, they must make sense of their experience by tunneling and making within the interior of their selves a way 'up, out and back', a tunnel or crawl space to "The World," or rather what is left of it after the war.

The American Character

If Kaiko's narrator is a "voyeur" of the war, he is also a "voyeur" of the American character as it displays itself in American literature. Here again, Kaiko the cultural outsider provides perspective on America in South Vietnam. Drawing from Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court and Herman Melville's Moby Dick, he observes the workings of the American character. In both works Kaiko's protagonist notices the nature of this "strange, obsessive species driven to fill their tormented souls with purpose and action." He discovers that the "elderly American" Quaker who "volunteered to serve as a civilian at the military hospital in Quang Ngai," and Captain Wain portray the dual nature of the American character. Where the Quaker "embodied conflict: between innocence and desolation, between the unprotected and the armored, between torn flesh and brute strength," Wain

was like a flood that swept everything before it, hiding all trace of the futile labor and stupidity it had overrun. Yet, spiritually, they were brothers. Their goals lay in opposite directions - one said, smash them; the other, withdraw - but the spirit that moved them was the same. Whether the foe was a "Commie" or the crime of war itself, they both responded to the same impulse.

Ahab wandered the oceans in search of a white whale." "The Boss" backtracked for thirteen centuries to appear at King Arthur's court; Henderson the Rain King progressed through Africa saying, "I want, I want"; Wain flew ten thousand miles to fight; and this old man had journeyed just as far to do penance. They were all descendants of Captain Ahab, a strange, obsessive species driven to fill their tormented souls with purpose and action. If Ahab had never found a whale, he would have borne one of his own and continued his pursuit, and if he'd lacked an ocean, he'd have invented one. [Into a Black Sun, 164-165]

Segawa's translation falls short of the mark in the last few lines of this passage. The following rendition of the same passage is more accurately revealing of the American character.

They were all descendants of Captain Ahab. A vortex spins endlessly in the depths of their dimly lit hearts calling for action itself, desiring power itself. If this power aims to fill the space [of the vortex] what will happen to this strange people? If Ahab had never found a whale, he would have borne one from himself and pursued it, and if he'd lacked an ocean, he'd have invented one. [Kagayakeru Yami: Zen Sakuhin Shosetsu Hachi, trans. Chieko Irawan (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1974) 231]

Whether the American character is represented by the Quaker who "embodied conflict," or Captain Wain, who was "like a flood [sweeping] everything before it," it is motivated by "the same pulse," the vortex.

The image of the vortex spinning "endlessly" somewhere at the bottom-most recesses of the collective American heart provides Kaiko with a metaphor for the "obsessive" nature of the American character. Kaiko observes, through Ahab, "The Boss" and his own experiences of America at war, the driving power of the American vortex and the energy compelling these characters and their contemporary "descendants" to action. He also notes that:

There was some raw, insatiate energy in Wain that drove him on, the sort that greedy, rootless water plants might have; [and like them, too, he seemed untethered, released at last from a hateful, sedentary life by the force of his resentment.]¹⁵ It made me think of men in covered wagons, those ancestors of his who rode into the great plains and

[drove the Indians out.]¹⁶ Moving, [plowing,] ¹⁷ praying after killing, repenting and moving on, arriving at a goal and, [once established,] ¹⁸ drinking hard and sometimes ending their own lives in violent ways. [Men of excess, both heaven- and hell-bent.]¹⁹ [Wasn't it their strange, restless blood that flowed in him] ²⁰ [I think perhaps it was this karma that trickled down his body along with the gray, oily smell of his sweat.] ²¹ [Kagayakeru Yami: Zen Sakuhin Shosetsu Hachi, trans. Chieko Irawan (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1974) 258-259]

Americans are descendants of Ahab who respond to the "strange, powerful echo of [their] ancestors' boiling blood." They are heirs to the frontiersmen's "wandering rootlessness" which urged them across the Great Plains in prairie schooners killing or driving out Indians as they moved, "developed," and moved again ever westward. Urged onward by the spinning vortex, they are obsessive wanderers driven and alternating between brutality and repentance; they are "both heaven- and hell-bent" without having or knowing the control needed to guide them along either course.

In reading A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court Kaiko's protagonist admits being "overwhelmed" by the similarities between Arthurian England and South Vietnam.

Americans, French, English, Japanese, the Left, the unaligned, and Right: from almost every conceivable angle, people had written on the United States, its foreign policy in Asia, its military policy, and I had read many of them and been impressed. Yet none of them had the devastating reach of Twain's fantasy. [Into a Black Sun, 46]

The sudden burst of insight into the American character excites and saddens him, and makes the war in Vietnam seem anticlimactically analogous to the Marine aphorism about the 'grunt' who was "dead but too dumb to fall down." ²²

I found all my answers in his amazing book. The Americans were spending astronomical amounts of money here...yet we'd known the outcome all along, from a novel written seventy-five years ago. The war - its beginning and its end, its details and essentials, its accidents and its inevitable course - was all there, encompassed in this

tale that American thoroughbred - had given me irrefutable evidence, and notions that had once been vague had now taken firm shape. I was fascinated by the fact that this funny, lively story, which was almost the reverse of Utopia, ended in devastation. I don't know what unhappy events in his own time had fired Twain's imagination. In all probability, absorbed in the pleasure of creation, he was unaware of the prophetic truth of his vision. The fact that he did not give any specific name to the hero of his tale, thereby representing all Americans through him, also moved me. One should avoid matching a literary work against reality, but in the reality of that tropical evening, where sudden M-16 shots thundered and faded in the forest beyond our trenches, I couldn't help being impressed by Twain. Good will, he showed us, couldn't forestall *it*. The Caucasian fraternity couldn't prevent *it*. Anglo-Saxon kinship couldn't stop *it*. The absence of communism couldn't hinder *it*. And King Arthur died, Sir Launcelot died, the Knights of the Round Table died, Merlin died. And the American died. The war died seventy-five years ago. [Into a Black Sun, 46-48]

It is through Twain, "that American thoroughbred," that Kaiko's protagonist discovers the "inevitable course" of the war in Vietnam. The nation's literature provides him with a "devastating" synopsis of the American character that dwarfs the impact of multinational analyses of "the United States, its foreign policy in Asia, [and] its military policy." Kaiko, through his unnamed journalist-protagonist, is especially sensitive to the fact that Twain "did not give any specific name to the hero of his tale, thereby representing all Americans." Though he is aware of the pitfalls of "matching a literary work against reality," the nature of the American character is undeniably evident.

At the root, "*it*," the phenomenon which Kaiko isolates in the national character, as represented through Ahab, is the American obsession with action and movement, the "vortex" at the bottom of Americans' hearts. Though Kaiko confines himself to Melville and Twain in his observations of the American character, Jack Kerouac's Dean Moriarty is the obvious twentieth-century counterpart to Ahab and "The Boss", since he too is obsessed with action and movement which he calls "IT." In

his quest for "IT," he drives the continent like a "mad Ahab at the wheel" ²³ "Man, this will finally take us to IT," he tells Sal Paradise when "[they] saw a vision of the entire Western Hemisphere" and themselves "flying down the curve of the world into other tropics and other worlds." ²⁴

Whether in Dean, Ahab or "The Boss," the roiling whirlpool motion of the American character, "*it*" cannot be 'forestalled,' 'prevented,' 'stopped' or 'hindered' by "good will," "Caucasian fraternity," Anglo-Saxon kinship" or "the absence of Communism." "*It*" is central to the American character, and is, as Sal Paradise says, "performing [the] one and noble function, MOVE." ²⁵ The capitalized (almost continental) largeness and emphatic urgency of the verb "MOVE" (not the noun form, 'movement' which the syntax of the phrase requires), suggests a purpose and goal, a means and an end created and fulfilled in and of itself. "MOVE" is a governing concept, a "function," a "natural or proper action for which a person...is fitted," an "assigned activity," a "specific role." ²⁶ Whether "heaven- or hell-bent," the tumultuously powerful compulsion to "MOVE" and to "fill their tormented souls with purpose and action" shapes the American character.

**Whitman and Westmoreland:
The Anthropocentric Vision Versus The Technocentric Vision**

Gaining a deeper and broader understanding of the national obsession with motion and purpose, and thus of the four poets of this study, requires turning to the "open road" and the notion of progress as envisioned by Walt Whitman and the November 21, 1967 and October 14, 1969 speeches made by General William C. Westmoreland. From Whitman we will be able to see that it is within keeping with the national character that Americans found themselves in Vietnam. Moreover, it will also

become evident, through examining General Westmoreland's November 21, 1967 speech before the Press Club in Washington, D.C., that there are unmistakable connections between the national mania for action and motion, and American involvement in Vietnam. It will also become evident that it is precisely this national passion for 'motion' that led the four poets in this study of the war poetry of Vietnam to "the place curses are manufactured." Together, Whitman and Westmoreland offer a framework from which to examine the war poems of Walter McDonald, Bruce Weigl, Basil T. Paquet and Steve Mason. From them we uncover in the national character the need for movement, and the passion for technology and progress as an extension of the need for movement.

Pairing Westmoreland and Whitman may seem initially to produce a peculiar pair of 'bookends,' but both were men with visions they made public. Thematically similar, their visions concern the future, progress marking the passage along the roads to the future and the places of man and nature in their visions. Stylistically, they share recurring rhythms, accents, emphases, and at times, even diction, to convey their visionary zeal. Such thematic and stylistic similarities may be demonstrated by comparing the General's November 21, 1967 televised speech covering Phases III and IV of the war in Vietnam and his "Automated Battlefield" speech on October 14, 1969 with Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," "A Passage to India," "Vocalism," and "Facing West From California's Shores."

Whitman's melioristic vision of progress is fundamentally anthropocentric. Man's innate goodness and potential would lead him on the road to a world community of warm human relationships where progress in understanding himself and nature would guarantee a future of spiritual prosperity, hope and opportunity

for the individual and the community alike. A century later Whitman's prophecy goes awry, having evolved into General Westmoreland's machine-dominated vision of progress. Though no closer to reaching Whitman's human-centered goals, man had however, made tremendous strides in grasping and using the arena of science and the allied fields of industry - so much so that his scientific ingenuity could potentially eliminate much of the need for understanding the workings of human nature and Mother Nature since both would be controlled, to a frightening degree, by machines operating automatically or with the aid of technicians.

For the Vietnam veteran poets, this evolutionary progress from an anthropocentric to a machine-dominated vision marks the beginning and the end of an American journey into the future that starts with the traveller-poet light-heartedly stepping out on the road and ends when he stumbles home alone on a path of his own making cleared through the debris of his Vietnam experience. The vast distance - emotional, moral, ethical, temporal, spatial and historical - stretching between these visions creates a charged tension with which the poets seek to come to terms. Those terms entail, to varying degrees, distrust, alienation and rejection, if not outright condemnation of both visions since neither provided for the poets a balanced, realistic foundation for what Robert Jay Lifton calls:

...immortalizing visions of enduring meaning and ethical substance - visions that all lasting civilizations must maintain and draw upon for their nurturing imagery of social integration, of a collective sense of honor and integrity, of general intactness and cohesion, relative harmony, ethical behavior of the government toward its own and other people and emanations of decency, hope and community. [Home From the War, 362-364]

Though Whitman's poetic for a national, anthropocentric

vision of the future offered "ethical substance," "decency," "community" and "hope" and was desirable if innocently idealistic, the Vietnam war poets experienced the very opposite as these human qualities were, as Kaiko says of his desert, "hunted down and driven out of sight." As travellers on the road to increasing 'technicism', they rapidly learned that man and nature were objects of destruction, ethics and morals were reduced to drawing room niceties in the "ethical... geographical wilderness" ²⁷ of Vietnam, and "decency" and the sense of "community" were found in the devotion and tenderness soldiers felt for each other. ²⁸ "Hope" was emptied of everything save the desire to survive the ordeal. Moreover, the very country and people inspiring Whitman's vision a century earlier had now turned their backs on the Vietnam veterans and war dead. As Caputo wrote eleven years after the death of his friend killed in Vietnam:

...plaques and wreaths and memorials are reminders and they would make it harder for your country to sink into the amnesia for which it longs. It wishes to forget and it has forgotten. [A Rumor of War, 213]

For the poets, Whitman's vision of all-embracing humanitarianism in which man continuously improved himself proves to be as much of an invention as any war machine, one they understandably distrust.

General Westmoreland's technocentric vision comes disconcertingly closer to realization than Whitman's. Flagrantly violating and denying the need for "ethical behavior of the government toward its own and other people," his vision entails supplanting the uniquely human requirements of intactness, decency and hope with destructiveness, disintegration and hopelessness. Instead of a future offering the harmony of brotherhood and the prospect of melioristic

changes, he foresees an all-encompassing system of computer circuitry, a detached and self-enclosed system virtually impervious to human issues of ethics, guilt, conscience and morality.

In essence the poems of Walter McDonald, Bruce Weigl, Basil T. Paquet and Steve Mason are examined from within and 'beneath' the parameters provided by the visions of Whitman and Westmoreland - 'beneath' because in effect, they tunnel below these conventional visions to create a body of poems in keeping with the concept of internalization of which Kaiko speaks in reference to his "desert," and the notion of descent found in Melville's Moby Dick and Tim O'Brien's Going After Cacciato. Beginning with Walter McDonald, a jet pilot, the poetry of these four men follows a descending course as they are led beyond "California's shores", across the same ocean Ahab sailed with the Pequod, and into the Vietnamese skies from where General Westmoreland, in his C-130, the "White Whale", periodically observed the war. Then, descending by stages from the altitude of jet fighters to that of helicopter gunships and finally down to the daylight, relative safety of the few "open roads and canals" outside Saigon, or far more likely to the frenzy of helicopter 'insertion' of infantrymen into landing zones, the poets pick up the "road" once again, but it is not "open."

This Asian 'road', barely a trail hacked out of dense jungle, does not invite leisurely Whitmanesque exploration, nor does it promise opportunity, self-improvement or inspire harmonious feelings toward man and nature. On these 'Westmorelandian roads', Whitman's pleasurable anticipation of the future transforms into anxiety and fear, and here his hope for the flowering of man's growth and experience condenses and speeds up during the one year tour of duty like crazed time-

lapse photography producing prematurely aged nineteen and twenty year-old GIs. Particularly for Weigl, Paquet and Mason, the "open road" descends through the various layers of the air war and disappears beneath the cover of triple canopy jungles into the darkness below. And once on the ground, they discover that the "open road" either leads to Louis Simpson's "used car lot," Steve Mason's "ghettoes" of the self's interior, or at best, is reduced to Cacciato's mad trail to Paris marked by his litter of chocolate bar wrappers.

Whether the trail drifts into the wilderness or plunges downward into a confusion of tunnels beneath the ground of a "man's upper earth," ²⁹ Weigl, Paquet and Mason are obliged to 'open' up roads within themselves if they are to be permitted a means of ordering and sense-making, a way of charting the erratic course of memory and experience to 're-make' themselves in a manner Whitman could not have anticipated or understood. They come to realize, like Paul Berlin and his companions, the truth of the Heraclitean dictum that the way down and the way up are the same. For Weigl, Paquet and Mason, the "open road" burgeoning ever outward is wrenched downward and inward along a rocky path winding through themselves; that is, they must metaphorically dig their own individual 'passage', create their own 'roads' and "nurturing imagery," and in doing so, generate their own set of "immortalizing visions of enduring meaning and ethical substance."

Before examining General Westmoreland's technocentric vision and Whitman's anthropocentric vision, it should be noted that the tunnel is an extension of the "open road," that the confining nature of the tunnel works as a metaphor for the war's ability to make psychical prisoners of combatants-veterans, and as such, presages the psychical descent to the interior of the self, Weigl's "place where curses are

manufactured." Moreover, in both the General's November 21, 1967 speech and the "Automated Battlefield" address delivered on October, 14, 1969, Westmoreland employs what Whitman terms "vocalism." For this reason, a brief explanation of "vocalism" is appropriate at this juncture.

In the 1850's Whitman made notes for a new style of American oratory. As heir to the evangelical tones of the current public rhetoric on slavery, manifest destiny, moral reform and imminent civil war, and as an experienced newspaperman who had found in the Bible his model for moral amplitude, prophetic scope and prose-poetic style, Whitman was a secular evangelist. His fascination for public speaking, prompted by his love for theater and the dramatic lyricism of opera, included the panoply of effects gained through the precise coordination of voice, tone and gesture as speaker and text melded. The orator-poet's relationship with the spoken text became "Vocalism," "the divine power to speak words."

His is not a practice to be taken lightly since "All waits for the right voices," especially when "the right voice" has "the quality to strike and uncloset...to bring forth what lies slumbering forever ready" in both speaker and listener. No gesturing word smithy, no purveyor of thoughts or received ideas or governmental edicts, this man became, as he spoke and merged with his text, a god-like creature "inspired as one divinely possessed," his speech a form of self-making.

Whitman passionately believed poetry could change people's lives and took the nineteenth-century American ideal of the self-made man and individualism seriously by making it central to his work. If the orator-poet could remold himself during his utterances, then the listener's life too could be changed by sharing in the poet's remaking of his own being. Thus, by

merging with and renewing himself in his text, the orator-poet's "right voice" could awaken and evoke the "slumbering forever ready" qualities and potentials within his listeners, enabling them to change their lives. ³⁰

General Westmoreland also engages in a type of "vocalism." But where Whitman's orator-poet's 'self-made' "right voice" fairly bursts with the vitality he "brings forth" in the dynamism of human development, Westmoreland is the 'government-made' spokesman for a detached and remote government. Though devoid of the personalism of Whitman's orator-poet, Westmoreland is, in a sense, a more god-like figure than Whitman's orator-poet of creation and change. As a high ranking official, he is part of the 'governmental god voice' with which he tries to "strike" his listeners; as a general, he has merged with his 'text', becoming synonymous with the Vietnam War in the collective mind of the American public while he controls the fate of thousands of troops under his command. The embodiment of government power and authority, he is a large and imposing figure looming over the people he addresses, unlike the homespun orator-poet living and working among the throngs. Military technology exacerbates this difference in attitudinal and altitudinal perspective of 'over versus among' by creating, widening and reinforcing the gap through geographical, spatial, emotional and moral detachment and insensitivity. Because Americans are usually receptive to scientific advancements and powerful, labor-saving devices, the General easily finds in technology, its might and especially the progress it could achieve in Vietnam, the "right voice" with which to 'strike' his audience with his vision of progress. However, what he unintentionally "uncovers" and discloses, to the horror of many Americans, is not man's "slumbering" capacity to better himself by bringing

democracy to South Vietnam, but his dormant readiness to commit mechanized savagery against another people.

By engaging in "vocalism" both Whitman and Westmoreland attempt to effect changes in their listeners and both merge with their respective texts of self-making and war-making. But where the orator-poet's selfless devotion to mankind has the evocative power to publicly, privately and personally touch the individual and invite him to participate in his own transformation, Westmoreland offers no such positive act of oratorical creation because he feels no sense of binding kinship, moral obligation or humanitarian concern for those men he commands or those he attempts to convince. And though he seeks, at the very least, to stem the rising tide of opposition to the war, at the most, to gain its popular support, he can effect ironically destructive and hurtful "personal changes" in his troops through trauma, mutilation or death, and by an extension, change the lives of their families.

A century earlier, in Drum Taps, Whitman's "right voice" appealed to and evoked the magnetizing power of human affection and brotherhood to join nineteenth-century Americans against the internal foes, hatred, cruelty, injustice and strife, to create a nation of self-made men forged from the rubble and divisiveness of civil war. Again the country is divided, this time over America's involvement in Vietnam's civil war. And General Westmoreland, using Whitman as a proven rallying 'formula,' attempts pulling Americans together against an external enemy, communism, with the "right voice" of technology and progress, a voice doomed to failure because his text of war-making scissors the meshed fabric of Whitman's harmonious unity and self-amelioration.

In his speech on November 21, 1967 the clarity of General Westmoreland's "vision" (in which he "permitted [himself] the

most optimistic appraisal of the way the war was going that [he] had made yet" ³¹) was aided by a summons from President Lyndon Johnson to return to the United States to deliver a televised address of reassurance to the nation in the turbulent wake of the 50,000-strong march on the Pentagon on October 21st. From this speech, the press corps and television viewers learned that, by some act of prestidigitation the war had not only miraculously and invisibly passed through two phases already, but that the third phase, to be implemented in the approaching new year of 1968, would mark the stage in which "the end begins to come into view," a phrase reminiscent of Whitman's "prospect." As the lead for his speech, this view of an "end" to the war is analogous to the more notorious "light at the end of the tunnel" slogan. Both elliptical phrases offer a 'sighting' of peace; both present the war's termination through a kind of telescope whose lens cap once removed, at first reveals light that illuminates nothing save the end of the instrument itself, but with manipulation prompted by the president, suddenly locates a remote and ill-defined object on the horizon that only "begins" to focus. This 'telescopic sighting' of the war's end is tantamount to seeing the emperor's new clothes, a phenomenon Michael Herr witnessed frequently and labelled "cheerleading."

By the time Westmoreland came home that fall to cheerlead and request-beg another quarter of a million men with his light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel collateral, there were people leaning so far out to hear good news that a lot of them slipped over the edge and said they could see it too. [Dispatches, 47]

But it was the increasingly skeptical and critical American public, including the media corps, who had to be convinced of the vision, that the murky tunnel down which thousands of American servicemen had passed and billions of dollars had been poured was really Whitman's "open road" which had simply

detoured and had gone underground in Vietnam.

To Whitman, the "open road" was a figure of change, experience, growth and learning, a symbol of virtually unlimited opportunity, the threads weaving together his vision of America, indeed the world, as a vast and figured landscape for the traveller on foot.³² In Vietnam, the network of Viet Cong tunnels honeycombing areas like Cu Chi, became a surrealistic inversion of this American image of openness full of promise, freedom and exhilaration. For the GIs known as 'tunnel rats' whose job it was to crawl through these tunnels to search them, Whitman's figure of "change" could mean mutilation or death, learning through experience the pain of such work when a man had to pull a friend out of a tunnel feet first because a Viet Cong pistol round had made a smaller tunnel through the man's face or throat. Herr relates that:

Outside of Tay Ninh City a man whose work kept him "up to fucking here" in tunnels, lobbing grenades into them, shooting his gun into them, popping CS smoke into them, crawling down into them himself to bring the bad guys out dead or alive, ...almost smiled when he heard that one and said, "what does that asshole know about tunnels?" [Dispatches, 47]

Obviously the "asshole" in question is Westmoreland, and by taking his words literally, the only sense the war's reality permitted to this GI, we can see that the open road has literally turned into a tunnel, a factor Tim O'Brien develops in Going After Cacciato. There, the 'road' to Paris gapes open, hurtling Paul Berlin, his four comrades and the mysterious young refugee, Sarkin Aung Wan, down through a fissure connected to a matrix of Viet Cong tunnels. Far from being Whitman's "open road" of opportunity and freedom, these chambered, labyrinthine tunnels symbolize the quagmire of the American war. Major Li Van Hgoc, the Viet Cong condemned to ten years of imprisonment in these tunnels, explains to Paul Berlin,

that like him, they are now prisoners in the tunnels. He goes on to say that despite their circumstances, there are certain unexpected benefits to their plight, one of which is watching the war through a periscope. No ordinary periscope, this apparatus reveals to Berlin a brief excerpt of the war's past, not as General Westmoreland would expect, a view to light and success at the end of the tunnel. As Berlin peers through the lens, he discovers he is watching himself and his squad clustered around the mouth of a tunnel in which both Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn had died.

"So you see," said Li Van Hgoc as he brought down the periscope and locked it with a silver key, "things may be viewed from many angles. From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings." [Going After Cacciato, 114]

Not simply a web of connecting passages, this "underground" defies conventional, rational modes of "understanding" and demands only "acceptance" (as from Major Hgoc) of its power to imprison those who rationally seek to know its "mysteries." Obviously, the overriding mystery for Berlin and his companions and for Weigl, Paquet and Mason, is how to get out of the maze-like subterranean prison. The Major, having repeatedly tried and failed to find an exit, cannot help them. But Sarkin Aung Wan, like Cacciato, is possessed of an intuitive "understanding" of the absurd, surreal nature of the war and their plight, and offers the solution:

The way in is the way out. To flee Xa one must join it. To go home one must be a refugee... We have fallen into a hole. Now we must fall out... As easily as we fell in. [Going After Cacciato, 122]

Despite Hgoc's protestations that there are "no exits, no light," she leads Berlin and his "refugee" comrades through the web of tunnels "with the sureness that comes of

knowledge," as unerringly as Cacciato guides them all toward Paris.

As the major had explained, with some prompting from Sarkin, "Xa" is a word of "many implications" meaning "community and soil, and home...earth and sky and even sacredness...But at the heart, it means that a man's spirit is in the land." ³³ Just as Cacciato had fled the war by going 'underground' to periodically 'surface' on the westward trek, Sarkin's riddle-solution to their predicament is literally to go underground, "joining" with Xa, blending in "community" with the land. Hgoc can only define and "accept" Xa and only partially grasps the meaning of his own smug pronouncement - "From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings." But Sarkin Aung Wan and Cacciato truly understand and act on the riddle, "The way in is the way out" by approaching the 'outside' by going deep 'inside.' So, "from inside out," she guides them unfalteringly through the blackness of the tunnels until Chapter 17, titled "Light At the End of the Tunnel to Paris," when she pushes aside a manhole cover and they emerge in the streets of Mandalay.

By writing poetry, Weigl, Paquet and Mason, in effect, achieve the same result as Sarkin Aung Wan. By descending into themselves to "the place curses are manufactured," where the war holds them captive in Mason's "ghettoes," "tenements," "prisons" and "closets", they dig their individual tunnels, 'open' narrow roadways within themselves. Thus, "from down below, or from inside out," they are able to "discover entirely new understandings" of their experience.

Hgoc and Westmoreland somewhat resemble each other in that both see the war as a type of confinement as it tunnels into the Vietnamese land and as it bores into the fabric of the American national consciousness; both men possess an

'apparatus' with which to "see" the war; both mistake what they "see" for reality. And despite differences in their cultural and geographical perspectives - whether from the technological advantage of height granted Westmoreland by aerial observations from his personal aircraft, or from the relative safety of the 'open' roads he travelled in and around Saigon, or from "inside out," from an 'angle' beneath the ground, yet at eye level, as with Hgoc and his periscope - both men fail to "discover entirely new understandings" of the war. Hgoc gives up hope and, by refusing to leave the tunnels with Sarkin, Berlin and the others, he misses the opportunity to "discover" the chance of success the General thinks the tunnels offer. Westmoreland, on the contrary, sees nothing but hope and opportunity where he should see and "accept" Xa as it manifests itself with the tunnels. As a result, both officers fail - Hgoc, because he stays behind and is 'blind' without his periscope, Westmoreland, because he blunders on toward a 'light' that does not exist.³⁴

General Westmoreland must 'focus' his "vision" as clearly as possible so that television viewers may see what he sees - progress, the beginning of the end of the war. He does so by listing fourteen points which "we intend" to implement in Phase III in 1968. Collectively these points (indeed, the entire speech) center on a "vision" guaranteed to draw Americans closer to their television screens - progress through the reduction of their nation's participation in the war, an achievement to be gained by "Vietnamization," that is, turning over more of the war's burden to South Vietnamese forces. America could thus relegate itself to the position of a benevolently strong and generous elder brother, one skillful and protective in counseling and whose example invites emulation. Though "Armies, ships...machines/cities, hate, despair...theft,

murder, /aspiration, form in close ranks" beneath his text of war, the General relies on his vision of Vietnamizing the war as part of his "vocalism" because Americans "surely" "will follow" "whoever speaks...in the right voice."

The fourteen items of the General's speech operate simultaneously on two levels of meaning. First, Westmoreland presents them as an 'honest' endeavor to inform the American public about "intended" plans in 1968 (six weeks away) to reduce the American presence in Vietnam. From this, one assumes these plans are not yet in effect. But later in the same speech the General says, "You may ask how long phase three will take, before we reach the final phase. We have already entered part of phase three." This more than strongly suggests that circumstances in Vietnam are so well-controlled that plans are running ahead of schedule. Herein lies the dishonesty of the second level of meaning.

In reality, the end of the war is not within sight, there is "no light at the end of the tunnel," America has no genuine and lasting command over events in Vietnam and because of this, there is no distinction between these plans for 1968 and what was currently happening, indeed had been happening in the country since 1965. But for the purpose of appearing to have a set of concrete and productive plans, past and present 'policy' is meticulously edited, sanitized and oversimplified to put a cosmetically acceptable demeanor on the war for public consumption. What the General announces, albeit indirectly, is that the government "intends" to pursue the same desperate and ill-conceived course in Vietnam that it has always followed.

Stylistically Westmoreland's list of plans resembles Whitman's catalogues. But where Whitman, reluctant to omit any aspect of everyday life experienced by the common man and woman, piled up images of their lives and their country to

remake himself, his people and his country as they jointly progressed toward his vision, Westmoreland gathers abstractions that conveniently omit and purposely withhold information and images that do not contribute to his vision, thereby enabling him to remake his vision of policy plans to reflect current circumstances.

By beginning each of his fourteen points with a verb ("help" is used four times, "decrease" once, "continue" thrice, "turn" once, "open" once), he establishes a hammering, Whitmanesque swell of urgent immediacy and vitality which simultaneously contrasts ironically with the topic of war, yet reinforces the power of the actions the U.S. command "intends" to take, and endows them with a sense of decreed inevitability, so that having uttered the 'intentions,' they are as good as accomplished.

Something else happens when these points are listed verb first: the listener tends to forget that the subject of each of the promising verbs is "we," America. He has been coyly ushered away from the subject in a rhetorical act of purposeful and legitimizing detachment aurally buttressing the anticipation of inevitable success. But closer inspection reveals that the true nature of this detachment consists of the exculpating obfuscation typical of most Pentagon releases to the media. In addition, Phase III's clipped note-like format, with each point consisting of five to twenty-one words, not only facilitates listeners' grasp of Westmoreland's vision, but also provides the sense of ease, simplicity and forthrightness necessary to carry the conviction of the vision.

Throughout Phase III, Westmoreland's usage of predominantly present tense verbs suggests the future tense and the imperative mood: "destroy" North Vietnamese forces, "assist" the Vietnamese, "prevent" rebuilding in North

Vietnam, "isolate" the guerillas, "respond" to popular aspiration, "reduce and eliminate" corruption, "enhance" law and order. As with Whitman, such verbs perform the act of miming the vision of progress by pretending and trying to be the action 'beheld.' But where Whitman's present tense belongs to nature unfolding in a continuous 'now,' and captures the spirit of man's personal progress in bettering himself by merging with nature, Westmoreland's present tense implies progress achieved 'unnaturally' and impersonally imposed by the military and the government.

As part of Westmoreland's "speech [that] is the twin of [his] vision," ³⁵ verbs are the vehicles of his array of "god terms" comprising his rhetoric of progress. Phase III displays several "god terms" which Richard Weaver in The Ethics of Rhetoric defines as a

rhetorical absolute...to which the highest respect is paid. [A god term is] that expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers...Its force imparts to others their lesser degree of force and fixes the scale by which degrees of comparison are understood. [212]

Improvement, effectiveness, professionalism and competence, qualities that command Americans' obedient respect, are integral to the nation's self-image and are vital to the image America attempted to forge for itself in Indochina as the champion of democracy. So when the General claims that, under American supervision, South Vietnamese Armed Forces are "improving their effectiveness" (point #1), and gaining "professional competence" (point #2), he is bearing witness with precisely the "right voice" that the nation's vision of itself is intact. By applying these honorific terms to South Vietnamese forces, he is tapping into and trying to capitalize on the value Americans attach to such terms, to mitigate the war's contentiousness.

Though Americans respect and prize the terms discussed above, the General saves some of America's most revered "god terms" for the conclusion of Phase III:

#11 Help the Vietnamese government to respond to popular aspiration and to reduce and eliminate corruption.

#12 Help the Vietnamese strengthen their policy forces to enhance law and order.

#13 Open more roads and canals.

#14 Continue to improve the Vietnamese economy and standard of living.

"Popular aspiration," "law and order," a better "economy and standard of living," and Whitman's "open roads" - these are America's cornerstones for issuance and preservation of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Safe-guarded by laws, democracy improves the quality of life on the "open road," and the freedom it guarantees encourages the mobility necessary to 'pursue' this life. Westmoreland's reliance on these godly terms of democracy reveals the dangerously misguided assumption that the Vietnamese regard these precepts with the same degree of sanctity as their American benefactors. Equally arrogant and presumptuously dangerous is the deeper-seated notion that developing countries like Vietnam, indeed all countries and people, either wish to emulate America or become Americans. In following this delusion to its inevitable conclusion, America sees itself giving Vietnam what it 'knows' the Vietnamese want - an opportunity to build their country in America's image. ³⁶

General Westmoreland also assumes the South Vietnamese share with Americans the same set of "devil terms." ³⁷ Every country develops its own image of the 'enemy' and thinks and speaks of him in "devil terms": 'Hun,' 'Kraut,' 'Nip,' 'Gook,' 'Slope,' and 'Red' are only a few such epithets in

America's arsenal of villainous terms. The "devil terms" used throughout the years of American involvement in Vietnam grew out of the 1954 mandate at Geneva dividing the country into North and South Vietnam. For the next twenty years North Vietnam became synonymous with America's ultimate devil term, communism. In assigning the South Vietnamese an anti-communist ideology, America presumed the South wanted and needed protection from their countrymen in the North. Thus, General Westmoreland could confidently announce with points 4, 6, 9 and 10 that America understood South Vietnam's desire for security and democratic freedom by -

#4 [Using] U.S. and free-world forces to destroy North Vietnamese forays while we assist the Vietnamese to reorganize for territorial security.

#6 [Continuing] pressure on the North to prevent rebuilding and to make infiltration more costly.

#9 [Helping] the Government of Vietnam single out and destroy the communist shadow government.

#10 [Continuing] to isolate the guerilla from the people.

"North Vietnamese forays" and "infiltration" of the South, the "communist shadow government" aided by marauding, ubiquitous "guerillas" in the South are devil terms indicative of encroaching communism, and because they are abhorrent to America, so must they be to the South Vietnamese populace, otherwise South Vietnam would not need America's support and military might.

In Phase IV, "The Final Phase," General Westmoreland presents his vision of the

period [that] will see the conclusion of our plans to weaken the enemy and strengthen our friends until we become progressively superfluous. The object will be to show the world that guerilla warfare and invasion do not pay as new means of Communist aggression.

This brief preamble puts a bold and truculent face on Phase

IV. Although this phase is nothing more than a precis of Phase III with the future tense substituted for the present tense, General Westmoreland thought highly of it and proudly says of it in A Soldier Reports, "I called it my withdrawl strategy." ³⁸

Despite the pugnacious warning against future communist aggression, his cheery confidence that communism would be scotched and that the South Vietnamese forces could be propped up, primed and professionalized to replace their American counterparts, Phase IV is vague and thin on substance because it is a reshuffled and sifted version of Phase III's fourteen 'intentions,' and it is more concerned with the "object" it demonstrates to the world than with an organized, coherent and viable means of implementation. Even with systems analysts and think tanks at his disposal he omits a timetable for both Phase III and this "withdrawl strategy," as well as the number of troops to be withdrawn. Apparently when confronting the nation on television his vision is hazy on this point, or like Whitman, he expects his audience "to conceive no time." ³⁹ In A Soldier Reports, he smugly congratulates himself on his perspicacity in estimating the time required to be "two years or less" when pressed by the House and Senate Armed Services Committees for a schedule:

Only once during my period of command in Vietnam did I make a public prediction on how long American involvement might last and that only because two legislators...had revealed to the press confidential testimony I had delivered before the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, which included an estimate of when withdrawl of American troops might begin. Even so, I never made a prediction as to when withdrawl might be completed...I am, in retrospect, impressed by the accuracy of the estimate, however much chance may have been involved. 'Two years or less.' Two years would have been November, 1969. American withdrawls actually began three months earlier in August. However, the rate of withdrawl as it occurred was a far cry from what I had visualized. Instead of being related to progress on the ground, the rate was arbitrarily set by political

authority. [308]

He is very aware that the television-viewing public wants a timetable - "You may ask how long Phase III will take, before we reach the final phase" - but he responds to the question with a non-answer, a Barthesian 'statement of fact' - "We have already entered part of Phase III" - which refuses explanation because in Barthes' words:

the statement is no longer directed toward a world to be made; it must overlay one which is already made, bury the traces of this production under a self-evident appearance of eternity: it is a counter-explanation. [Mythologies, 154]

Before listeners can ponder this segment of his vision for long, he whips them around with a verbal about face which substitutes the hindsight of progress as one is "Looking back" in place of Phase IV's foresighted future tense. "Looking back" - from the distance of an unspecified amount of elapsed time, from the moral distance that the declaration of progress validates, from the perspective granted through superior power and the ability to control - diminishes and flattens the reality of past and present events of the war, and paves the way for the Whitmanesque 'conclusion' that "we have come a long way," a pronouncement of substantial progress based on a set of criteria hovering above the war in clouds of moral detachment and unanchored rhetoric.

It should be noted at this point that progress is Westmoreland's ultimate "god term," the gateway through which America will continue its journey on the "open road," the pylon around which Phases I through IV revolve. In discussing what he calls "rhetorical absolutes" in The Ethics of Rhetoric, Robert Weaver says progress is

...the one term which in our day carries the greatest

blessing, and - to apply a useful test - whose antonym carries the greatest rebuke, one will not go far wrong in naming 'progress'...it will validate almost anything.
[214]

Indeed, the General needs to "validate" to an agitated nation and a very worried president the mounting losses in lives and materiel and the apparently endless strife in Vietnam. He attempts the feat by evoking the potency of

probably the only term which gives to the average American or Western European of today a concept of something bigger than himself, which he is socially impelled to accept and even to sacrifice for. This capacity to demand sacrifice is probably the surest indication of the 'god term,' for when a term is so sacrosanct that the material goods of this life must be mysteriously rendered up for it, then we feel justified in saying that it is in some sense ultimate... 'progress' is the coordinator of all socially respectable effort.
[The Ethics of Rhetoric, 214]

Progress then is a rhetorical titan towering over us in its immensity and exacting stature, awesome in its strength to make us its willing servants by subjugating us to its imperial decrees. Its ascendancy over us is the rhetorical equivalent of the supremacy America lorded over Vietnam, and its physical, geographical ascendancy achieved through aeronautics. Progress dwarfs us by its scope and its socially compelling magnitude, both of which are increased by our sacrifices.

However, achieving the same type of social respectability and legitimacy surrounding the Allied effort in World War II for a war that pitted the world's most technologically sophisticated military giant against an undeveloped, technologically backward midget was virtually impossible. Nevertheless, Westmoreland's rhetoric of progress following Phase IV is certainly compelling, the more so since it draws directly upon the genuine "social responsibility" and legitimacy of Whitman's vision of progress in "Song of the

Open Road" and "A Passage to India." For there, the vision of progress soars beyond and above new machines, new politics, and scientific discoveries to embrace not only the vast humanitarian reforms in everything from education and health to feminism and racial relations, but also the faith in the malleability of human affairs, and the belief that actions of prudent visionaries, standing on the shoulders of titan progress could "play the hand for America" in "the greatest moral convulsions of the earth." ⁴⁰

When the General says "I see progress as I travel all over Vietnam," he lays claim to the behemoth prowess of progress, and asks Americans to make further sacrifices to sustain its prominence. As a general and the commander of MACV, Westmoreland is the larger than life figure standing atop the military hierarchy. From that lofty perspective he can "see" progress all around him as he looks down at Vietnam spreading itself before him as he maps out the course of progress in the landscape. He relates in A Soldier Reports:

I spent as much time as possible during my early months travelling in South Vietnam in order to get to know the country, the people, the military forces and the nature of the fighting. Except in Saigon and its immediate environs, where I moved by car, I usually travelled by helicopter or in a C-130, the White Whale, a name that carried no special connotation except that the plane had a big belly and was painted white. [60]

From the relative safety afforded by altitude he travels "all over Vietnam" in a flying Moby Dick. Despite the General's disclaimer that the plane's name "carried no special connotation," it is apparent that he realized the name bore at least some substance for interpretation. ⁴¹ From his repudiation one might think that he was superstitiously fearful that a Viet Cong versed in Melville and impassioned like Ahab might seek the "Whale's" destruction. One also might think that he means to discourage any association of the C-130

with the wildly destructive, untamable character of a leviathan nation; or that he seeks to stifle any disturbing comparison of the plane with a metamorphosed great whale, its body 'harpooned' by wings, domesticated and made biddable by the "will to overwhelm nature that lies at the bottom of [Americans] as individuals and a people." ⁴² This mechanized leviathan airborne over Vietnam is controlled from its belly by the Jonah General and his crew who are "descendants of Ahab," members of the "strange obsessive species driven to fill their tormented souls with purpose and action."

Technologically, Westmoreland's converted cargo plane is an extension of the prairie schooners that crossed America and the whaling ships like the Pequod that spanned the Pacific, the ocean Americans deemed "part of [their] geography... prefigured in the Plains" ⁴³ before "Facing West From California's Shores." Like Whitman claiming the Pacific as "my western sea," Melville and twentieth-century Americans have a "Roman feeling about the world. It is [theirs], to dispose of." ⁴⁴

As part of the General's squinting attempt to "see [progress] all over Vietnam," he met monthly with "some members of [his] staff... hopefully objective," who briefed him and his colleagues on the "measurement of progress." These briefings

of necessity depended in large measure on statistics: enemy killed, weapons captured, miles of waterways and roads opened, villages pacified, percentage of population under government control, logistical installations completed, proficiency ratings of ARVN units. [A Soldier Reports, 358]

Though he defensively allows that "statistics were... an imperfect gauge of progress, yet in the absence of conventional front lines, how else to measure it?" ⁴⁵ he ignores their known 'imperfections' and blatantly adopts the

words of Whitman as a concrete indication of progress when he tells the nation:

"I see it [progress] in the open roads and canals."

It is these ostensibly "open roads" and the more than "3,500 miles of navigable canals and rivers...which constitute the primary mode of transportation," ⁴⁶ which are to be celebrated, cherished and labelled as 'progress.'

In theory, this means they are immediately and safely accessible, freely unobstructed to all who seek to travel along these "anywhere roads for anybody anyhow," ⁴⁷ that the vision is intact, no matter that even in pacified areas, roads and canals were only marginally safe during daylight hours and dangerous after dark.

On an ironic note, the General's claim evokes the first three lines of "Song of the Open Road" -

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

By adopting Whitman's tone, stance and diction, Westmoreland is paying homage to the time-honored 'institution' of the 'road credo' as it presents itself in Vietnam. Even if one accepts his denial of any significance to the name of his C-130, the "White Whale," one cannot overlook the emphasis he places on Whitman's beloved "open roads" and the unfettered "Roman feeling about the world," that the world, indeed "the universe itself [is] as a road, as many roads...for travelling souls" who are free to select any road. What Westmoreland cannot "see" is that America's "long brown path" led to the overgrown trails of Vietnam. Aloft over this spurious openness, in his flying "White Whale," he cannot "see" how his vision of progress "all over Vietnam" and along its "open roads and canals" affects the

troopers-cum-poets, those under his command who were "afoot" but far from "light-hearted" as they slogged and groped their way through the days of their tours of duty. Participating in his vision of "progress" gauged by tracts of defoliated jungles, numbers of refugees, captured enemy supplies and armaments, and body counts, they did not share the conviction of Westmoreland's vision of the ultimate success of the country's mission for which:

All parts away for the progress of souls,
All religion, all solid things, arts, governments -
all that was or is apparent upon this globe, fall
...before the progress of souls along
the grand road of the universe.
["Song of the Open Road," Part 13, ll. Leaves of Grass,
181-185]

Westmoreland's "Automated Battlefield" Speech

The literary 'tire tracks' on the road leading to Vietnam overlap those "open roads and canals" in which General Westmoreland sees progress were a century in the making. During that time technology had been an integral aspect of what might be called the 'road credo.' Technology, literally the transporting agent, be it prairie schooner, whaling ship, automobile, helicopter, jet or Westmoreland's "White Whale," has propelled America along a road of its own making, a road that led across the continent and the Pacific to Indochina. As a true believer in the prowess of technology, General Westmoreland presents to the Annual Luncheon Association of the U.S. Army at the Sheraton-Park Hotel in Washington, D.C. on October 14, 1969, his vision of an newly conceived advancement, one that combines "mobility, firepower, and command and control," in the form of "an entirely new battlefield concept," that of the "Automated Battlefield." In this speech the General again uses Whitman's notion of progress, the "right voice," and diction to

be "the twin of his vision" in order to help realize this new battlefield. His description of this 'vision' is, on the surface, as fantastic in technological development as "The Boss"'s 'know-how' is to King Arthur's court. This vast "machine" will supersede in its nightmarish capabilities Herr's "devastating," "versatile" machine that "could do everything but stop." 48

Because not even the Association of the U.S. Army archives seem to include the full text of the "Automated Battlefield" speech, I've had to compile the thrust of the General's speech by piecing together excerpts from Robert Jay Lifton's Home From the War, and an article on the speech titled "Gen. Westmoreland Foresees New Concept of Combat: Automated Battlefield in Less Than a Decade" in the November, 1969 edition of Army, the organ of the U.S. Army archives.

The article in Army begins with the following lead:

Looking back over four years of "a quiet revolution in ground warfare" in Vietnam, Army Chief of Staff Gen. William C. Westmoreland told AUSA's annual luncheon that the automated battlefield is no more than a decade away and announced a drive to hasten its arrival.

"Comparing the past few years of progress with a forecast of the future produces one conclusion: we are on the threshold of an entirely new battlefield concept," Gen. Westmoreland said...

The Army writer goes on later in the article to quote part of the General's vision:

I see an army built into and around an integrated area control system that exploits the advanced technology of communications, sensors, fire direction and the required automatic data processing.

I see battlefields or combat areas that are under 24-hour real or near real-time surveillance of all types. [Home From the War, 356]

I see battlefields on which we can destroy anything we [can] locate, through instant communications and the almost instantaneous application of highly lethal firepower. [Home From the War, 356]

The evidence is present to visualize this battlefield of

the future - a battlefield that will dictate organization and techniques radically different from those we have now.

New agencies such as a "systems management office" at the Department of the Army are critical since

we are dealing with systems that are fundamental to the Army - its doctrine, its organization, and its equipment. We are on the threshold for the first time in achieving maximum utilization of both our firepower and our mobility.

"With cooperative effort," he predicted, "no more than 10 years should separate us from the automated battlefield."

The writer of the Army article states that:

He acknowledged that "some will say...this is an unrealistic expectation." But he reminded his audience that "hundreds of years were required to achieve the mobility of the armored division," and that "a little over two decades later we had the airmobile division."

The tactical revolution which Gen. Westmoreland foresees is founded on the new intelligence-gathering and fire-control technologies which have begun to draw out the full potential of air mobility. These include such items as sophisticated battlefield radars, continuous aerial surveillance systems, mechanical and electronic sensors, passive night vision devices, computer-based fire control systems and data links for near-instantaneous communication."

"On the battlefield of the future," the General said, "enemy forces will be located, tracked and targeted almost instantaneously through the use of data links, computer-assisted intelligence evaluation and automated fire control.

With first-round kill probabilities approaching certainty, and with surveillance devices that can continually track the enemy, the need for large forces to fix the opposition physically will be less important.

As in his November 21, 1967 speech, the General's vision and diction are Whitmanesque. He is excited and enthused by the 'prospect' of being on the "threshold of an entirely new battlefield concept." This twice mentioned "threshold" enthralles him by offering seemingly limitless potential for "replac[ing]...the man with the machine." This "threshold" is an entrance or doorway to the future of military technology. As an image, it is seductive in its

promise - simply step through the entrance and one will behold a new age of invulnerability in warfare: "enemy forces will be located, tracked and targeted" by machines. Killing, then, will be done technologically, safely, cleanly and guiltlessly from a distance with little human risk or intervention. From a military stance this is indeed "progress," and as Robert Weaver states in The Rhetoric of Ethics, "'progress' is the coordinator of all socially respectable effort." 49

As if in direct corroborative response to Weaver's analysis of the "god term," 'progress,' in which he says, "when a term is so sacrosanct that the material goods of this life must be mysteriously rendered up for it, then we feel justified in saying that it is in some sense ultimate," 50 the General voices his confidence that "the American people expect this country to take full advantage of its technology - to welcome and applaud" its "developments." In effect, he is basing his optimism on public acceptance of the 'progress' he envisions for battlefields of the future. Such public acceptance is more than partially predicated on his use of ancillary 'godly' adjectives such as "advanced," "automatic" "maximum," "sophisticated," "continuous," "computer-based," "instant" and "near-instantaneous." His 'godly' nouns and phrases are almost breathtaking in their omnipotence: "entirely new battlefield concept," "automated battlefield," "integrated area control system," "advanced technology," "required automatic data processing," "instant communications," "highly lethal firepower," "maximum utilization of both our firepower and our mobility," "data links, computer-assisted intelligence evaluation and automated fire control," and "first-round kill probabilities."

By replacing men with machines which will be more biddably at his disposal, the General will have less "need for large forces to fix the opposition physically." An added benefit to

this progress through 'technocentrism' is the "elimination of many intermediate support echelons." These "developments" which Westmoreland "expects" Americans to "welcome and applaud," because they will mean significantly less loss of American lives and materiel, represent the "civilian principle of factory economy," ⁵¹ as Lifton phrases it, a technocentric vision of progress, war and humanity. But despite the alluring, 'almighty' presence of technology and its ability to preserve GIs' lives, it takes its own unique toll on technicians operating the devices. Heavy reliance on mechanized warfare, such as that which Westmoreland 'foresees' and that which was already deployed in Laos and South Vietnam, renders the act of killing nothing more than tracking and expunging a blip on a computer screen. Lifton sums it up when he says:

The only awareness of "the enemy" comes from electronic feedback in the form of "blips" on a screen. One cannot even speak of the process of victimization...since that process requires the psychological work of turning a human enemy into an ahuman victim. [Home From the War, 253]

By...eliminating as completely as possible the human element, not only the battlefield but the psychological relationship to it - numbing itself - is "automated."
[253]

As war is increasingly automated, so too are the men who wage it. The twentieth-century military extension of Whitman's notion of "progress," as envisioned by Westmoreland, inevitably embodies numbed obliviousness to "the human element," an aspect of technology Whitman could never have imagined possible. Whitman's vision of the "work accomplish'd" by the travelling souls of "captains" and "inventors," and his delight in "singing the great achievements of the present/Singing the strong light works of engineers" ⁵² are hideously parodied in both of General Westmoreland's speeches. More expedient methods of killing, while saving American lives, is not necessarily

worth the concomitant ill-effects of a 'numbed,' technocentric attitude toward one's fellow human beings. Nonetheless, by appealing to a public accustomed to the ever-broadening boons and benefits wrought by technology, Westmoreland perceives himself as speaking with the "right voice" as he looks and advances across the "threshold" into the future of warfare.

Though both Whitman and Westmoreland are focused on progress, their visions differ greatly. Whitman's vision is 'anthropocentric.' His conception of progress and the "open road" is dynamically political in that it encompasses, in Roland Barthes words, the

whole of human relations in their real social structures, in their power of making the world [and themselves and is] operational, transitively linked to its object. [Mythologies, 143-146]

That "object" is the progress of mankind, the notion of man's perfectibility and his 'steps' he takes along the road toward achievement of his own perfection. His vision is a celebration of human qualities - strength, compassion, love and brotherly "adhesiveness" - and of the political, sociological and scientific achievements which serve to nurture and enhance the growth of his young nation.

Whitman's vision is the "meaning of reality as human action." ⁵³ As such, his language is that of "man as producer" ⁵⁴ speaking in order to remake, renew and improve his world. His vision is historical because it is inextricably fused with reality by concerning itself with human beings, retaining and cherishing the 'memory' or knowledge that within them lies the power to act and to progress, and because it enters his language "as a dialectical relationship between activities, between human actions" ⁵⁵ and cleaves to their human meaning.

By contrast Westmoreland's vision is a technocentric,

static, non-productive inversion of Whitman's vision. His vision of progress involves eradicating communism and spreading democracy without concern for the "whole of human relations" because it has at its behest unparalleled technological and scientific power. His vision of progress is intransitive in as much as it is disconnected from its object - humanity - its "relations," "structures," and its ability to make the world. ⁵⁶ His language is a metalanguage that 'speaks of or about' his vision. ⁵⁷ In drawing upon Whitman's vision, it feebly attempts to 'speak the same vision' but it has lost the memory of humanity's historicism, and is "no longer the meaning of reality as human action; it is an image-at-one's-disposal" ⁵⁸ that "empties reality by severing from it the human meanings of human action, power and history." ⁵⁹ Neither his vision nor his speech is an instrument of a man making and renewing himself to effect change, make progress; it is the instrument that acts in the name of human actions, thereby abolishing the 'contingencies and complexities of human action, relations and structures.' ⁶⁰ By adhering to technocentrism, that is by valuing the qualities of technology over the value of human beings, he abolishes the 'contingencies and complexities of human action, relations and structures.' For this reason, it is not surprising that there were veterans of the Vietnam War such as the one Lifton quotes as having destroyed electrical appliances and "every bit of technology [he] could lay [his] hands on" "equating that technology with what he and his country did in Vietnam..." ⁶¹

If 1967 was the "year of Progress," as indicated by "the name of an official year-end report," ⁶² and by General Westmoreland's theme of progress in his Press Club speech, and if Westmoreland's vision of an "Automated Battlefield" is, as Lifton calls it, "a military extension of salvation through

technology,"⁶³ Michael Herr does not share the General's certainty of his vision. Nor does Herr share Whitman's vision of the "open road." Even if one could temporarily regain one's equilibrium before the war machine's movement swirled it away, the road that beckoned to Whitman with so much promise, that "drove" Dean Moriarty, and along which Westmoreland sees progress in Vietnam is now something undefinably sinister, as Herr testifies:

The moon came up nasty and full, a fat moist piece of decadent fruit. It was soft and saffron-misted when you looked up at it, but its light over the sandbags and into the jungle was harsh and bright. We were all rubbing Army-issue nightfighter cosmetic under our eyes to cut the glare and the terrible things it made you see. (Around midnight, just for something to do, I crossed to the other perimeter and looked at the road running engineer-straight and I saw it move, the whole road. [Dispatches, 11])

The ambience created by the charged tension of arming for an expected attack beneath a full moon like an unhealthy fruit, in this unearthly place is enough to make Herr enclose this confession in the protective privacy of parenthesis. This road has two characters - one is initially dominant, mobile, rational, scientific, almost surgical in the suture-like precision of its making; the other is subordinate, only marginally imaginative and poetic with its cliched ribbon simile. Rationally he sees the road as a comforting example of progress, of twentieth-century engineering, familiar, ordinary, non-threatening. The ribbon simile, perhaps because of its triteness, is equally comforting. Of itself, this 'dual nature' does not seem unlikely or strange - roads are built scientifically and often resemble winding ribbons. But there is something terribly wrong and unnatural about this moonlit new road, even before he tells us he saw it move. "Running" yet "frozen," "straight" but ribbon-like, this is a road of contradictions that undermine the superficial layer of

reassuring familiarity and tell us nearly as much about Herr's state of mind regarding the road as they do about the road itself, since they form the fulcrum over which reason gives way to imagination.

The unnatural nature of the road is revealed to him by the moon inducing in him a reluctant vision, almost a state of supra-rational lunacy that exposes to him and forces him to see "terrible things" that neither anti-glare cosmetic nor the power of reason can diminish or explain. The overhead exoticism of the full moon's "saffron-misted" light turns "harsh" and sinister on the road. This "nasty" light possesses the strength to make one see that the road credo, like the moon, is unhealthily over-developed, "decadent" and grotesque compared with its previous robust allure of "rough new prizes." ⁶⁴ In a manner that General Westmoreland would never have believed possible, this road is too open. The moon has exposed (literally brought to light) the road's true condition and has given the lie to the road credo in Vietnam by stripping away its enterprising hope and magic to reveal the "terrible things" beneath. "I saw it move, the whole road," Herr writes, having watched the road's diseased movement now monstrously inseparable from the unstoppable motion of the war machine, boding ill for its engineer-creators and those who travel its course.

Even if we were capable of discounting this particular road experience as the product of a stress-ridden, fear-induced trick of the mind and moonlight, we cannot dismiss the vision it prefigures. In the following passage the grotesquely nightmarish illumination and any doubtful elements of hallucination are absent in the calmer, colder chill of reason:

I see a road. It is full of ruts made by truck and jeep tires, but in the passing rains they never harden, and along the road is a two-dollar piece of issue, a poncho which had just been used to cover a dead Marine, a blood-puddled, mud-wet poncho going stiff in the wind. It has reared up there by the road in a horrible, streaked ball. The wind doesn't move it, only setting the pools of water and blood in the dents shimmering. I'm walking along this road with two black grunts, and one of them gives the poncho a vicious, helpless kick. "Go easy, man," the other one says, nothing changing in his face, not even a look back. "That's the American flag you gettin' your foot into." [Dispatches, 111]

In a sense, we are simultaneously well prepared yet grossly unprepared for the impact of this paragraph. By the time we have reached this passage we do not have to squint to 'see' what he wants us to 'see' (visually, imaginatively or emotionally). From the beginning of section IV Herr prepares us visually with a catalogue of Khe Sanh images, all dominated by the 'reader-sees-it-with-Herr's' present tense, that build to a visual crescendo in this 'shunpen' ⁶⁵ of a dead Marine lying beside the road we walk with Herr. Yet we remain vulnerable, as we must if we are to retain our sensitivity to humanity, because we know that this war takes horrifying shape in unexpectedly quiet and brutal forms.

I call this third and final paragraph in Herr's "I see" Khe Sanh catalogue a 'shunpen.' I do so because I think in his attempts to gather "stories," Herr would agree that this literary form is indeed a 'story in a glimpse,' one that leaves us knowing that moonlight is not necessary for one to 'see terrible things,' much less to understand where the road credo has led. If, for America and her servicemen, all roads in Vietnam are grotesqueries of Whitman's open road, then this Khe Sanh road offers a brief glimpse of the road in the daylight aftermath of the attack awaited when Herr saw the entire road move. He begins the 'shunpen' simply and without preamble - "I see a road" - (one which Westmoreland's vision does not allow for),

and proceeds to report with detachment, allowing what he sees to carry him along and 'speak' for itself in a fashion much like Whitman saying of the road, "You express me better than I can express myself." ⁶⁶ The "frozen yellow ribbon" of road in the previous passage has thawed to a soft, muddy parody of Whitman's "long brown path" and is now churned into the mucky slashes of wheel ruts. "Along this road is a two-dollar piece of issue," a cheap poncho, beneath which is a dead Marine, a new "cadaver" that does not "block...the passage" ⁶⁷ of Herr and his two black comrades as they approach it. With cruelly inverted irony Whitman's roadside "latent with unseen existences" ⁶⁸ is this corpse 'unseen' for the "blood-puddled, mud-wet" poncho covering it. Herr notes the poncho in detail making what is withheld from sight more poignantly indicative of the waste of life involved than if he could actually see the body. The only movement (other than that of the three 'travellers') central to the road experience as we have come to know it, is again blackened with twisted irony in the "shimmering" "pools of water and blood in the dents" of the poncho "going stiff in the wind" causing the poncho to "[rear] up there by the road in a horrible streaked ball."

Whitman might have been gladdened by the fact that Herr is "walking along this road with two black grunts," since he proudly promoted the "profound lesson of reception, nor preference, nor/denial" that "the black with his woolly head" is "not denied" ⁶⁹ the opportunity to walk the open road "toward the best - toward/something great." ⁷⁰ But "the best" to be expected along this road, for black or white, is the painful and disturbing disillusionment, the hollow sense of betrayal, even cheap seduction, that comes with the recognition that everything the road represents with its ceaseless promises of "something great" is a lie. Had Whitman experienced the pervasive feelings

of disintegration, aimlessness and futility of the 'travelling-soul-as-serviceman' "afoot" on the Vietnamese road completing America's encirclement of the globe, he might not have urged with such anticipatory delight, "Allons! The road is before us!" nor would he have been so reassuringly confident that the road "is safe - I have tried it - my own feet have tried it well." ⁷¹ Had he been witness to the one grunt delivering the poncho "a vicious, helpless kick," he would have seen proof that "the gay fresh sentiment of the road" ⁷² had festered to bitterness and impotent rage. Nor would "the cheerful voice of the public road" ⁷³ have filled his ears when the other black uttered, "Go easy, man. That's the American flag you gettin' your foot into." The scathing accuracy and humorless wit of this soldier's unconscious use of metonymy in which the poncho is the Stars and Stripes is as vicious as his companion's kick in its unflinching confrontation with and indictment of American affairs in Vietnam. Sharing his companion's 'road sentiment,' this soldier verbally strikes out at the object that has come to represent them as grunts. If their fallen 'flag' lying beside this open road in a bloodied clump is an expendable poncho, so their value as human beings has been trivialized, degraded, and abused; and as GIs they serve under this 'flag' in life and, as they have just seen, in death.

In another sense, and one in keeping with Whitman's brotherly "adhesiveness," and anthropocentric vision, these are the words of a gruffly compassionate man bound to another (even if only for the duration of their walk along this part of the road) by shared knowledge and experience of purposelessness, betrayal and waste, who understands and approves of his companion's speechless fury, "as if in comradeship [they] found an affirmation of life and the means to preserve at least a

vestige of [their] humanity." ⁷⁴ Also consistent with Whitman is that this 'shunpen' ends in mid-stride, as it were. They have come full circle on the road Whitman envisioned standing on the California coast, ending as his traveller began, "afoot," still on the move along the hardest of America's roads; walking again after a long history of Americans performing their "one function," moving - on foot, by whaling ship and automobile and finally by air before the descent through Asian skies to 'hump', not walk, Vietnam's roads, trails and jungles.

Conclusion

A 'grunt' once advised Herr that to stay alive in Vietnam, the "Best way's to just keep moving. Just keep moving, stay in motion, you know what I'm saying?" ⁷⁵ Herr calls him a "moving-target-survivor-subscriber, a true child of the war." But more than that, he is heir to the road credo generated, as Kaiko observes of the American character, in the spinning vortex at the bottom of the American heart and manifest in Herr's "cone" ⁷⁶ sucking one deeper and deeper into the war by the "stunt" of mobility. Sal Paradise's capitalized verb "MOVE" possesses its own 'purpose and action' that is not always advantageous, healthy or desirable. Whitman intuits this to be so when he speaks of "That sad incessant refrain, Wherefore unsatisfied soul?" in "A Passage to India." He echoes it in "Facing West from California's Shores" when the traveller in Asia "[faces] home again" yet experiences a befuddled sense of loss and failure, "(But where is what I started for so long ago?/And why is it yet unfound?)" Along Herr's road that moves beneath the illumination of an eerie moon, and the road which he walks with the two black 'grunts' there are no answers to Whitman's traveller's question, there

are "no bearing and none in sight." ⁷⁷ The veteran poets of the Vietnam War, however, charge themselves with the task of acquiring their bearing, of finding their way through the moras of "Asian time, American space." ⁷⁸

If the veteran-poets are to fit themselves to Whitman's mold, they would be the "true son(s) of God," ⁷⁹ a function they would be loath to assume. It would be their responsibility to minister to man - to "justify these restless explorations" ⁸⁰ that had led them and their fellows to Vietnam, to "speak the secret of impassive earth" ⁸¹ and "bind us" so that "all these separations and gaps" caused by the war should be "taken up and hook'd/and link'd together." ⁸² Taking the diffuse strands of their nation's actions and their personal experiences as their raw material, it would be their task to knit them together into a smooth, seamless fabric spanning the "gaps" and joining the "separations" with such dexterity that

Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more
[because] the true son(s) of God shall absolutely fuse
them. ⁸³

The poets' duties would be truly onerous indeed, since they would be required to be Christ-like: they would not only work among men to "soothe" them when troubled, to "justify" men's actions, but they would also somehow have to rise above their own humanity to glimpse the "inscrutable purpose," the "hidden prophetic intention" ⁸⁴ of God in order to continuously assess and adjust and mend man's condition when he strays from His plan for the 'absolute fusion' of Man and Nature and the perfection of Man. From this lofty position the poet would see any rents in the triple-textured relationship between man, nature and self and could take 'absolute' action to rectify the error or problem. In his ministerial capacity, the Christ-like poet is an organic agent working among his fellow human beings who

inspire, and in turn are inspired by him in a continuous process of creation and renewal.

This is heady stuff for any poet to contemplate, let alone one returning from a tour of duty in Vietnam. Whitman's elevated idealism - his notion of the poet as the "true son of God" and his vision of man marching on a progress toward perfection - is grossly, even arrogantly, inappropriate for the Vietnam poets whose experience utterly contradicts these concepts. While Whitman's godly poet shares humanity and simultaneously sets himself apart from humanity in order to perform his duties, the Vietnam poets are set apart from others by their shared war-time experiences. They seek to rediscover and re-establish their sense of shared humanity not as "true son(s) of God," not as "justifiers," but as those who "speak the secrets" of their "earth." ⁸⁵ They do so not by 'rising above' themselves and their fellow human beings, but by 'sinking down,' descending to explore the Melvillian interior geography of the self. There they must probe among the roots of their responses to the war to re-configure themselves according to their inner landscapes of memory and experience.

Melville conceived of this kind of descent as the search for primacy, a thing of and from depth, troglodytically organic, spiritual, solitary, a dimension of both geography and person. The Pacific provided him the instrument for symbolic exploration of primacy; similarly Vietnam became the instrument of exploration for the veteran-poets. Like Melville's Ishmael, Ahab and Pip, these poets are navigator-explorers of Olson's "buried continent" ⁸⁶ of the dark, interior expanses of man's soul. The poets, like Ishmael and Tim O'Brien's Sarkin Aung Wan, know the truthful appropriateness and necessity of the Heraclitean dictum that the way down is the way up, that if one is to uncover, find

and come to terms with that part of the self or another, one must journey downward to that inner region far below one's "upper earth," ⁸⁷ as Olson puts it.

Logic and classification had led civilization toward man, away from space. Melville went to space to probe and find man. [Call Me Ishmael, 18]

Having made the 'passage to Vietnam', poets must make the passage through the strata of the descent to their own 'spaces' to discover a personal prime. The descent consumes Ahab and robs Pip of his sanity, but it gives Melville, Ishmael and the Vietnam poets the voices of their crafts. As men who survive the descent to witness for their experiences, these poets are, in a sense, the literary descendants of Ishmael, sole survivor of the Pequod. After tunneling into the space within themselves, they are able to ascend, to push aside a figurative manhole cover, like Paul Berlin, Sarkin Aung Wan and the others, and emerge from the confines of their self-made' tunnel-like roads.'

At the end of Dispatches Herr notes that there were

no more moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there. [260]

For the veteran poets too there was no physical, outward motion left after their experiences. All remaining motion is that contained within the individual as he embarks on the movement inward along roads of his own making generated after the nation's road credo collapses, its promises broken, its progress toward "something great" mired in the ruts of Asian roads. The resultant manner in which the "open road" is inverted in Vietnam manifests itself in the poetry of the four poets of this study as one of descent and internalization in the sense of the grandeur and power afforded by movement and technological

progress that is readily discernible through examination of Melville, Whitman, Westmoreland and the poetry of Walter McDonald. By extending Olson's notion of America's "Roman feeling about the world," we can see that the passion for movement led the nation to Vietnam, the end of the open road, and it is there that an inversion occurs. With the driving power of the 'vortex' still churning at the bottom-most recesses of the American heart, it should come as no surprise that the arrival at "the place where curses are manufactured" forces poets like Weigl and Paquet to continue the movement by tunneling into themselves, to open a 'road' within themselves, as it were. Perhaps Steve Hasset in his untitled poem in DMZ, puts it best when he says:

We stalk ourselves for poetry
and prey
dragging by their ankles
the shadows of our wasted days
and tasting in our mouths
the ashes of our nights.
Not that we do not ask for life
or that we're bent
on heedless explorations
of channels never touched by sun
but that we are reminded
by the still startling beauty of each day
and each new love
of all the time we've spent
their niggers and their guns.
[Demilitarined Zones: Veterans After the Vietnam War, 151

In 'stalking themselves for poetry,' it is these "channels never touched by sun" which Weigl and Paquet in particular dig within themselves that become the Vietnam War's inversion of the Whitmanian conception of the "open road." In effect, these dark "channels" become Kaiko's belly of the whale, or as Paquet phrases it, the "dark belly all wound," a nightmarish collage of images from which the poet must, phoenix-like, generate and construct a set of healing, regenerate devices around which he

can build his postwar life. It is this rebuilding which Steve Mason addresses in Johnny's Song.

Chapter One: Notes

- ¹ Takeshi Kaiko, Into a Black Sun, trans. Cecilia Segawa Seigle (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1983) 185.
- ² Kaiko, 71.
- ³ Kaiko, 71.
- ⁴ Kaiko, 155.
- ⁵ Steve Mason, Johnny's Song (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) 49.
- ⁶ Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York: Avon Books, 1978) 223
- ⁷ Kaiko, 156.
- ⁸ Kaiko, 156.
- ⁹ Kaiko, 176.
- ¹⁰ Kaiko, 176.
- ¹¹ Kaiko, 176.
- ¹² Kaiko, 176.
- ¹³ Kaiko, 176.
- ¹⁴ Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers. (London: Paladin Books, 1973), 146.
- ¹⁵ A more literal and accurate translation reads as follows: "...Wain chose to take his nutrients from wandering rootlessness." Takeshi Kaiko, Kagayakeru Yami, trans. Chieko K. Irawan. (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1974) 258.
- ¹⁶ A more literal and accurate translation reads as follows: "...hunted Indians." Kaiko, Kagayakeru Yami, 258.
- ¹⁷ A more literal and accurate translation reads as follows: "...developing." Kaiko, Kagayakeru Yami, 258.
- ¹⁸ A more literal and accurate translation reads as follows: "...barely settled and stupefied." Kaiko, Kagayakeru Yami, 258.
- ¹⁹ A more literal and accurate translation reads as follows: "Their ancestors had never had or known control over their course." Kaiko, Kagayakeru Yami, 259.
- ²⁰ A more literal and accurate translation reads as follows: "Perhaps Wain is an 'interceptor' excited by the strange, powerful echo of his ancestors' boiling blood." Kaiko, Kagayakeru Yami, 259.
- ²¹ Cecilia Segawa Seigle omits this sentence entirely from her translation of Into a Black Sun.
- ²² Herr, 71.
- ²³ Jack Kerouac, On the Road (Harmondsworth, Middlesex:

Penguin Books, 1972) 221.

²⁴ Kerouac, 250.

²⁵ Kerouac, 127.

²⁶ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston: American Heritage Publishing, 1971) 858.

These definitions of "move" are particularly appropriate in the examination of a peculiarly American phenomenon.

²⁷ Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977) xx.

²⁸ Caputo states in A Rumor of War, xvii, that: "The sentiment of belonging to each other, was one of the decent things we found in a conflict otherwise notable for its monstrosities... It was as if in comradeship we found an affirmation of life and the means to preserve at least a vestige of our humanity."

²⁹ Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 80.

³⁰ Paul Zweig, Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986) 12.

³¹ General William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (New York: Dell Books, 1980) 307.

³² Zweig, 242.

³³ Tim O'Brien, Going After Cacciato (New York: Dell Books, 1979) 107.

³⁴ For interesting, extensive information on tunnels, see The Tunnels of Cu Chi (London: Pan Books, 1985) by Tom Mangold and John Penycate.

³⁵ Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, "Song of Myself," Part 25, line 566. eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. Norton Critical ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).

³⁶ Loren Baritz treats the American 'invention' of South Vietnam in Chapter One, "God's Country and American Know-How" in Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us Into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

³⁷ For a discussion of "devil terms" see Richard Weaver's The Ethics of Rhetoric (South Bend: Gateway Editions, 1953).

³⁸ Westmoreland, 307.

³⁹ Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, "Song of the Open Road," Part 13, line 171. eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. Norton Critical ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).

⁴⁰ Zweig, 226.

⁴¹ In light of General Westmoreland's admission to travelling in Vietnam primarily by air, one must question his next vision of progress: "I see it [progress] in the attitudes of the Vietnamese." One wonders how it was possible to gain sufficient

contact with the Vietnamese people to know their attitudes unless, like physical features of the earth, he could "see" their attitudes from the distance of his "White Whale." For his condescending appraisals of the Vietnamese, see pages 60-66 of A Soldier Reports (New York: Dell Books, 1980).

⁴² Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 15.

⁴³ Olson, 16.

⁴⁴ Olson, 71.

⁴⁵ Westmoreland, 358.

⁴⁶ General William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (New York: Dell Books, 1980) 62-63.

⁴⁷ Jack Kerouac, On the Road (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972) 237.

⁴⁸ Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York: Avon Books, 1978) 71.

⁴⁹ Richard Weaver, The Ethics of Rhetoric (South Bend: Gateway Editions, 1953) 214.

⁵⁰ Weaver, 214.

⁵¹ Robert Jay Lifton, Home From the War - Vietnam Veterans; Neither Victim Nor Executioners (London: Wildwood House, 1974) 359.

⁵² Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, "A Passage to India," Part I, lines 2-3. eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. Norton Critical ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).

⁵³ Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers. (London: Paladin Books, 1973) 146.

⁵⁴ Barthes, 146.

⁵⁵ Barthes, 142.

⁵⁶ Barthes, 145.

⁵⁷ Barthes, 144.

⁵⁸ Barthes, 146.

⁵⁹ Barthes, 146.

⁶⁰ Barthes, 143.

⁶¹ Lifton, 181.

⁶² Herr, 215.

⁶³ Lifton, 360.

⁶⁴ Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, "Song of the Open Road," Part 11, line 141. eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. Norton Critical ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).

⁶⁵ Shunpen: a brief Japanese form of short story, often only

a paragraph in length, used extensively by Yasunari Kawabata. "Shun" means a momentary glimpse; "pen" means paragraph.

- ⁶⁶ Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, "Song of the Open Road," Part 4, line 47. eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. Norton Critical ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).
- ⁶⁷ Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," Part 10, line 131.
- ⁶⁸ Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," Part 3, line 29.
- ⁶⁹ Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," Part 2, lines 17-18.
- ⁷⁰ Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," Part 13, line 187.
- ⁷¹ Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," Part 15, lines 1-2.
- ⁷² Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," Part 4, line 42.
- ⁷³ Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," Part 4, line 42.
- ⁷⁴ Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Ballantine Books 1977), xvii.
- ⁷⁵ Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York: Avon Books, 1978) 8.
- ⁷⁶ Herr, 8.
- ⁷⁷ Herr, 43.
- ⁷⁸ Herr, 250.
- ⁷⁹ Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, "A Passage to India," Part 5, lines 105-111. eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. Norton Critical ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).
- ⁸⁰ Walt Whitman, "A Passage to India," Part 5, lines 90, 93.
- ⁸¹ Walt Whitman, "A Passage to India," Part 5, line 95.
- ⁸² Walt Whitman, "A Passage to India," Part 5, line 109.
- ⁸³ Walt Whitman, "A Passage to India," Part 5, lines 114-115
- ⁸⁴ Walt Whitman, "A Passage to India," Part 5, line 86.
- ⁸⁵ Walt Whitman, "A Passage to India," Part 5, line 95.
- ⁸⁶ Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 18.
- ⁸⁷ Olson, 80.

Chapter Two

"Air Power is Peace Power": Technology in the Poetry of Walter McDonald

**"Air Power is Peace Power":
Technocentrism and Numbed Warfare in the Poetry
of Walter McDonald**

Introduction

Walter McDonald, a native of Lubbock, Texas, was born in 1934. He was a pilot in the U.S. Air Force from 1957 to 1971. During those years he also instructed at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado and served in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970. For three years he studied at the writer's workshop at the University of Iowa where he received his Ph.D. He served as president of the Texas Association of Creative Writing Teachers from 1974 to 1976. He was also a second reader for the 1976 AWP national poetry contest, and has been poetry editor at Texas Tech Press since 1976.

Director of Creative Writing and Professor of English at Texas Tech University, he is the recipient of several awards. In 1976 he received Voertman's Poetry Award from the Texas Institute of Letters which named Caliban in Blue, his first volume of poetry, the best volume of poems written by a Texan that year. That same year, one of his short stories was also cited by the Institute as the best short story by a Texan, making McDonald the first person since 1955 to be awarded both prizes in the same year. He received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts to write After the Noise of Saigon which became the thirteenth recipient of the Juniper Prize, an award for original poetry presented annually by the University of Massachusetts Press. He lives in Lubbock, Texas with this family.

His volumes of poetry include: Caliban in Blue and Other Poems (1976), One Thing Leads to Another (1978), Anything Anything (1980), Burning the Fence (1981), Working Against Time (1981) and After the Noise of Saigon (1988). In addition,

he is co-editor of A 'Catch-22 Casebook and Texas Stories and Poems. Though McDonald is quite prolific, I have confined my analysis to his small group of war poems, nine poems in particular - five from Caliban in Blue and Other Poems, and four from After the Noise of Saigon - simply because they best characterize and illustrate the emotional, psychological and geographical detachment of warfare conducted from the standpoint of technocentricism.

The reasons for this detachment are quite simple. He was a pilot, unlike Weigl who was a foot soldier and Paquet who served as a medic. A pilot, enclosed within his plane flying thousands of feet above the ground reacts to the war beneath him in a radically different manner from a 'grunt' or a medic who participates in the war on the ground. The differences between McDonald's technocentric stance and Weigl's and Paquet's anthropocentric stance toward the war constitute the fundamental differences in their poetic responses to their respective wartime experiences.

Shapiro and Jarrell: The World War II Inception of Aerial Technocentricism

Before further characterizing McDonald's poetry, the nature of this technocentric stance, as it manifests itself in poetry, must be explored. To do that I have drawn from relevant poems by Randall Jarrell and Karl Shapiro to provide an historical, poetic context from World War II, and from Robert Jay Lifton's Home From the War, Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims Nor Executioners and Malcolm Browne's The New Face of War.

World War II was the first large scale conflict in which air power played a major role. Though aeronautical technology was in its infancy, the outbreak of war rapidly developed its versatility and destructive capabilities. Airmen were

confronted with both the newness of flying from aircraft carriers and long-range bombing missions, and the unprecedented magnitude of the destruction they caused.

Also new to the World War II airman was the sense of Antean alienation, of being lifted out of his natural element. Like the mythological wrestler Antaeus, whose strength increased the more he made bodily contact with the earth, both Melville and Whitman gather spiritual energy from contiguity with the Pacific and open roads. Whether sailing the Pacific or walking dirt roads, these men are in physical touch with the medium in which their primal source of creative energy is located. But the airman in his aircraft is displaced, severed from his gravitational, organic link with the primal sources of sea and land. In holding himself aloft, man holds in abeyance - 'kills' as it were - the primal, spiritual nature of that part of himself which is symbolically located, 'rooted' in the expanses of Whitman's continent and Melville's ocean. From the air, earth and sea become two dimensional. The absence of the vital third dimension deprives man of depth by creating a flat map of earth and sea, and by reducing the stature and status of man on this map. Airborne altitude also impairs, by literally eliminating all tactile connection with the earth, and by deadening psychological and emotional attachment to all that lies beneath.

In the words of Karl Shapiro's, being airborne is like being "a choked child dangling from a cord," ¹ a "Walker under Water," a "Deepsea diver, aware of the silvery fins...gloved and chuted, wired into [the] bones." ² He was accustomed to neither "Cities below [him] without sound," ³ nor the land appearing below like "An ant's plan underfoot." ⁴ Psychically and psychologically 'earth-bound' like Antaeus, Jarrell empathizes with the victims of American bombing sorties in

"Come to the Stone..." and "Losses," and sees crew members as "murderers" and "wolves to man" in "Eighth Air Force," and in "Second Air Force" he notices that "the crews climb to [their planes] clumsily as bears."

Jarrell bitterly addresses the growing numbness of both the operators of avionic weaponry and the governments that spend millions of dollars training and equipping these flyers. "Siegfried" is a particularly acerbic indictment of the emotional detachment of a turret gunner, "the apparition, death," and of the State that has numbed him:

Under the leather and fur and wire, in the gunner's skull,

It is a dream: and he, the watcher, guiltily
Watches the him, the actor, who is innocent.
It happens as it does because it does.
It is unnecessary to understand; if you are still
In this year of our warfare, indispensable
In general, and in particular dispensable
As a cartridge, a life - it is only to enter
So many knots in a window, so many feet;
To switch on for an instant the steel that understands.
Do as they said, as they said, there is always a reason -
Though neither for you nor for the fatal
Knower of wind, speed, pressure: the unvalued facts.
(In Nature there is neither right, nor left nor wrong.)

Jarrell's gunner is a cross between an animal of "leather" and "fur," and a robot that is 'wired' into the mechanics of his gun and 'programmed' "To switch on for an instant the steel that understands" without questioning whether "in Nature there is neither right, nor left nor wrong." Aerial warfare "is a dream: and he, the watcher guiltily/Watches the him, the actor, who is innocent." Watching himself acting the part of a gunner absolves him of responsibility and guilt ("It happens as it does because it does"), but the 'dreamer-watcher' is not absolved as he learns at the end of the poem - "You have understood/Your world at last: you have tasted your own blood." Jarrell condemns the notion that life is as "dispensable/As a cartridge," that a human being can be

manipulated or lost for "reasons" that are purposely withheld from the individual by the 'State.' Among other poems by Jarrell, "Siegfried" marks the beginning of the poetic response to the late twentieth-century military expediency of 'robotizing' troops, especially airmen, through training in and use of highly sophisticated technological equipment.

Karl Shapiro, in "The Gunner," makes an observation very similar to Jarrell's in "Siegfried," the main difference being that Shapiro omits the vituperation against the 'State,' concentrating instead on the gunner's unemotional, task-oriented absorption in killing from a distance.

No violence rode in the glistening chamber
For the gunner the world was unhinged.
Abstract as a drinker and single
He hunched to his task, the dumb show
Of surgical fighters, while flak, impersonal,
Beat the floor that he stood on.

The diamond in his eye was fear;
It barely flickered.
From target to target he rode.
The images froze, the flak hardly mattered.
Europe rolled to its murderous knees
Under the sex of guns and of cannon.

In an absence of pain he continued,
The oxygen misting his veins like summer
The bomber's long sleep and the cry of the gunner,
Who knows that the unseen mime in his blood
Will startle to terror
Years later, when love matters.

Unlike Jarrell's gunner-watcher-actor, for whom aerial combat is part guilty dream and part numbed, mechanized skill, Shapiro's gunner is "abstract as a drinker" anaesthetized to his job. "Hunched to his task," he is totally absorbed in riding "from target to target." "For the gunner [,] the world was unhinged," detached from the ground, from other people, from all emotion save for a "barely flicker[ing]" "diamond" of fear in his eye. Insulated and desensitized to violent feelings, like McDonald's Caliban whose "arms like radar/point

the spot," he performs his task "in the glistening chamber" and clinically perceives the "surgical" precision of the fighters' "dumb show," the frozen "images" of "Europe roll[ing] to its murderous knees/Under the sex of guns and of cannon." Even "the flak hardly mattered" because "the oxygen misting his veins like summer" immunizes him, and proves to him with "an absence of pain" that not only permits but encourages him to "continue" performing in the "unhinged world" of air warfare.

Jarrell and Shapiro witnessed with trepidation the inception of the 'aerial vision' of 'technocentrism.' They understood and warned against the dehumanizing impact of aerial warfare that made men bestial occupants of "glistening chambers" in an "unhinged world" far above the earth. Appalled by the notion that "it is unnecessary to understand" that pushing a button 'up there' meant destruction 'down there', they anticipate the conclusions and observations Lifton and Browne make about what Lifton terms "numbed warfare" ⁵ waged by the "technicist-perfectionist" ⁶ in a state of "cockpit isolation." ⁷ Both Jarrell and Shapiro question the merits of aeronautical technology and ponder the literal and moral impact of air warfare on the aircraft crews, cities and civilians alike.

McDonald, on the contrary, does not concern himself with the issues mentioned above because air power was an integral part of the war in Vietnam. Pilots like his Caliban were inured to the speed, distance, sensation and sophistication of flight; moreover, they were accustomed to what Shapiro calls air power's "sex of guns and of cannon," and the emotional, moral detachment from the ground. To a far greater degree than their World War II predecessors, they participated in "numbed warfare" - "killing with a near-total separation of act from idea," ⁸ a phenomenon inevitably produced by highly

sophisticated aeronautical technology. The deployment of bombers and fighter-bombers requires the use of high skilled pilots, the

technicist-perfectionist, the man...who can be depended upon to perform consistently and with precision the required task, confine himself completely to the self-enclosed electronic world around him, and embrace his electronic technology to the exclusion of any potentially disrupting ethical question. [Home From the War, 355]

As a journalist, Malcolm Browne offers corroboration of "the self-enclosed electronic world" of aerial warfare. He recounts his experience of being the back seat passenger in a jet fighter F100F sent out with four other jets from the 481st Tactical Squadron to destroy a hamlet.

Once the helmet is on with the earphones in place, outside sound is blotted out, especially once the canopy is lowered and locked.

A few feet outside, the air may be rent by the shattering hypersonic blast of an after-burning jet engine; bombs may be exploding underneath the plane; 20-millimeter cannon inside the plane may be roaring out shells. But the pilot hears none of this. In the earphones there is almost constant technical chatter between planes, ground control and forward air observers. Besides that, there is an eerie moaning sound in the earphones, produced by the complicated electric gear in the plane.

To hear only that moaning sound, like the sighing of wind around the corner of a house, when bomb blasts are erupting and huts disintegrating just below, or when napalm splashes so close below as to scorch the plane's paint, is a phenomenon pilots call "cockpit isolation." Outside there is the din and horror of jet-age war; inside there is the calm and quiet of a computer room. The pilots are glad to be spared the sounds they create. I have sometimes wondered whether it might not be better for some Air Force officers to be better acquainted with the ugly cacophony of warfare. [The New Face of War, 121]

When he sums up the impersonal malignancy of "cockpit isolation" by saying he "wondered whether it might not be better for some Air Force officers to be better acquainted with the ugly cacophony of warfare," he voices the same concern Jarrell and Shapiro express in "Siegfried" and "The Gunner,"

and concurs with Lifton's emphasis on the necessity of re-connecting the act and the idea of killing.

Nine Poems by McDonald

The nature of the technocentric stance characterizing McDonald's poems finds its parameters within the composite features of Jarrell's and Shapiro's fears expressed in "Siegfried" and "The Gunner" respectively, in Lifton's definitions of the "technicist-perfectionist" and "numbed warfare," and there in the F100F with Malcolm Browne as he describes his own experience of "cockpit isolation." McDonald's "Caliban on Spinning," "Jet Flight, the Early Years," and "Caliban in Blue" display the frightening extent of "numbed warfare" and the "technicist-perfectionist's" "cockpit isolation." "The Food Pickers of Saigon" demonstrates that the impersonalism and desensitization of "cockpit isolation" does not miraculously disappear once the pilot leaves his aircraft, while "On Planting My First Tree Since Vietnam" reveals the persona's nascent awareness that something had happened to him as a pilot in Vietnam, that he had lost something of himself that perhaps the regenerative, 're-connective' act of planting a tree would help restore.

Perhaps the most evident and unsettling characteristic of McDonald's war poems is that they are, for the most part, 'unpeopled' (by Americans or Vietnamese), a peculiar characteristic when war involves one people fighting against another people (and oftentimes oneself), but a characteristic to be expected when one is fighting alone from isolated high altitudes without seeing, hearing or directly experiencing the war from a 'grounded' perspective. In the highly technological 'other world' of air warfare, compassion for people (friend or foe) is superseded by passion for

technology. Technology seems to be responsible for McDonald's trouble with 'peopling' his poems and presenting convincing descriptions in the few poems in which people do appear. Either he cannot climb out of himself enough to do more than superficially allude to others, or he projects enough of himself into his personae and 'characters' so that they too appear to be confined not so much in "cockpit isolation," but in its post-war equivalent, an emotional, psychical 'vacuum' as vapid as McDonald's. He cannot, of course, be expected to put experience he never had into his poems. For this reason his poems must be approached as presenting one aspect of the Vietnam War, the 'technocentric stance.'

"Caliban on Spinning," the first poem in the volume Caliban in Blue and Other Poems, displays the pilot as "technicist-perfectionist" functioning within the antiseptic, almost amnion enclosure of the cockpit. ⁹ The fact that McDonald was a flight instructor accounts for the didacticism of the poem which reads as though he were talking to a student pilot while demonstrating a spin.

The process of spinning an aircraft, of safely learning how to put a plane into a spin and how to recover from one, is essential in pilot training and is one of the most frightening yet thrilling aspects of flight for a student pilot. In leading into a spin, the pilot first pulls the stick toward him, thus raising the plane into a steep climb losing airspeed the while. He then holds the plane in this 'nose high attitude' until the plane 'stalls,' a condition in which the plane's engine continues to run though the plane can no longer fly because there is no lift beneath the wings. In such an unstable state, pressure on either the left or right rudder (the lateral foot control) will cause the plane to 'fall off on the right wing' if the right rudder is pressed, or 'fall

off on the left wing' if the left rudder is used. The amount of pressure exerted on the rudder will determine the 'tightness' of the spin. 'Falling off' on either side will increase the airspeed, and if the right rudder is still depressed, the plane will corkscrew downward in a clockwise direction.

During a spin both pilot and aircraft are subjected to the tremendous stress of gravity. In addition to the protesting "shudders" of the plane, the pilot feels physically squashed by the force of gravity and, if he is not carefully trained, he will suffer dizzying disorientation caused by "the vast earth spinning before" him. Recovering from a spin is usually just a matter of easing the rudder and the stick into 'neutral' positions and allowing the aircraft to 'right' itself by lifting its nose. (Some small planes will recover from a spin themselves, if the pilot removes his hands and feet from the controls.)

"Caliban on Spinning" opens as follows:

Spinning an airplane right
is like a little death.
Raise the stick back tighter, tighter
to your groin, work the plane
rigid, nose high, your toes arching the rudders
ready to kick down into the spin.

The first line immediately establishes the theme of the poem - the correctness, precision and the importance of "spinning an airplane right," while the simile in the second line, the pure thrill of perfecting a death-defying skill, sets forth the sexual nature of polishing the maneuver. The lines, "Raise the stick back tighter, tighter/to your groin, work the plane/rigid," mimick the act of masturbation in preparation for the "kick down into the spin" that concludes the first stanza. The possessive pronoun, "your," is the first of many uses of "you" and "your" in this poem, which strongly

suggests that this pilot is in the process of instructing.

In the second stanza the pilot watches the airspeed "fall like a swing, thrilling, coming back" as the plane climbs into a stall when the "engine shudders like a lover bound."

Throttled, the engine shudders
like a lover bound.
Airspeed will fall like a swing, thrilling,
coming back.
When the frame comes alive beneath you,
hold rigid, ready -
the wings will buffet, beginning to go.
Thrust with your right leg faster,
ram home and hold the rudder there.
Arch the curved stick hard as you must
to keep it on the stops.

"When the frame comes alive beneath you" the student pilot understands that the plane is rapidly approaching the 'orgasmic' point when it will no longer be able to fly, and that "the wings will buffet, beginning to go," and prepares to "thrust" his "right leg faster, ram home and hold the rudder" "to keep it on the stops."

Stanza three describes the actual stall.

The nose will drop off
like the earth falling beneath you into space.
After the first quarter turn
the plane will shudder
desperately. You will wonder,
will it come apart? Do not let go.
Ride high with all your might upon the rudder
surging under you -
you must master it to spin well.

When he says "the nose will fall off" he does not mean, of course, that the airplane comes apart. Instead, he means that the "nose" of the aircraft will suddenly sink from a 'nose-pointed-skyward' position to a 'nose-pointed-earthward' position. This 'dropping off' occurs so rapidly that it looks and feels "like the earth [is] falling beneath you into space." Once the plane enters the spin, "after the first quarter turn," the airframe "shudder[s] desperately" enough,

due to the effects of gravity and the flow of air around it, to make the unpracticed student "wonder, will it come apart?"

After admonishing the student with "Do not let go," the instructor stresses in the last three lines that he must "Ride high with all your might upon the rudder/surging under you -/you must master it to spin well." Though he lapses into sexual imagery with "Ride high with all your might," the instructor impresses upon the student the vital importance of 'mastering' the rudder while instilling in him the "technicist-perfectionist's" pride in executing the maneuver "well."

Stanza four not only maintains but builds upon the sexual imagery with a description of the spin as though the pilot were withholding his own 'climax' ("Forcing control") while bringing his plane-partner to orgasm.

Forcing control, follow the oscillations
down through the first swing,
the vast earth spinning before you
like a dream.
If you entered well-timed at the top
with long enough to fall,
you can lead your plane
deeper and ease out, deeper and ease out
through several convulsions, each spin
richer than the last.

Capitalizing on both the sexual imagery and the desirability of meticulousness, he tells his student, "If you entered well-timed at the top/with long enough to fall" (that is, with enough altitude), "you can lead your plane" through multiple twisting orgasmic "convulsions" with "each...richer than the last."

"Leveling out," recovering from the spin to return to 'straight and level' flight, is the last and easiest aspect of the exercise as shown in the final stanza.

Leveling out is easy in a stable plane
(you should know the plane is steady -
a few preliminary stalls would tell):

hold the rudder even,
neutralize the stick.
The wings will shudder and right themselves,
the nose will start to come up.
Lead it with gentle pressure.
Ease in with throttle, faster as the nose comes high.
Trim ailerons and rudder. Set throttle
for a gentle climb. Fine-trim everything again.
Check all gauges, notice the wings
smooth, spanning the horizon.
Enjoy the feel of steady flight,
after the spin.

With check-list accuracy he stipulates the precise order of details to be followed for the maneuver. But oddly, for such a stickler on proper procedure, he neglects to tell his student at the very beginning of the lesson, how to determine, with "a few preliminary stalls," if the aircraft is "stable."

Nevertheless he continues to set forth how to 'level out': "hold the rudder even/neutralize the stick" to permit the aircraft to "right" itself and the "nose will start to come up." After 'leading' the plane and 'easing' the throttle to give power as the nose ascends, the pilot must then "trim ailerons and rudder" to 'fix' them in the desired 'nose-up' recovery attitude for "a gentle climb." These procedures are then followed by a more delicate set of adjustments and a general observation of gauges. Once everything is 'fine-trimmed' the pilot can relax and take the time to "notice the wings/smooth, spanning the horizon," bask in the after-glow of a job well done, and "Enjoy the feel of steady flight,/after the spin."

The pilot's necessary absorption in the maneuver is obvious. Faltering could end in disaster. There remains, however, the pilot's evident pleasure, depicted in sexual imagery, in practicing and refining his skill and technique. Enclosed within the plane's cockpit high above the earth, he is involved in a purely solipsistic male activity, one which rewards and gratifies him. Handling the plane demands his

attention and confines it to the plane's dials, gauges and mechanisms, thus preventing his attention from focusing on the ground. In fact, of the three references to the ground (stanza III, lines 1-2 "The nose will drop off/like the earth falling beneath you into space"; stanza IV, lines 3-4 "the vast earth spinning before you/like a dream"; stanza V, lines 12-13 "notice the wings/smooth, spanning the horizon"), the focus of the first reference is the nose of the airplane, not the earth, the second reference terms the earth a "dream," and the third reference centers on the wings of the plane, not the horizon. This physical, geographical and emotional detachment from the earth is reinforced by the obvious consequences of mishandling the aircraft, and the enormous pride and pleasure the pilot takes in flying. But there is an unseen set of consequences present here. The pilot does not see his absorption in his plane or himself, nor does he see the ramifications of his absorptions - that his technological perfectionism numbs his response, even prevents him from reacting to the ground as anything more than terrain over which he roars.

Less cautious after logging many hours of such exacting maneuvers as those described in "Caliban on Spinning," the pilot in "Jet Flight, the Early Years" recounts the exuberance of high speed flight when "each flight (was) a mission, a quest/for distance" and perfection. In nine stanzas, each composed of four unrhymed lines, we follow a group of pilots from the time they "ease into cockpits" and take off to "cutting the power" after landing. We observe their deepening relationship with a commitment to their machines of which they become part.

We'd ease down into cockpits
wired to explode, hook up
and pressure-test pure oxygen

of our other planet. From then on

talk was crisp as sparks,
keyed by gloved thumbs and only
for survival: taxi and takeoff,
climb and maintain two-niner thousand.

"Wired to explode" seems to modify both the cockpits and the pilots 'easing' themselves into the confines of the cockpits. This phrase also foreshadows the danger and exhilaration of jet flight. The "other planet" is at once the cramped interior of the cockpit and the world high above the earth. Inside the planes the pilots are cut off from earth and are "hooked up" and 'wired into' the "other planet." The atmosphere of this "planet" is totally separate and 'other.' It is a heady mixture of "pure oxygen" and the 'drug' of speed and enormous power over which the 'wired' pilot holds sole command. Even the nature of communication changes once they enter the aircraft: "From then on/talk was crisp as sparks, / keyed by gloved thumbs." 'Gloved' like bizarre surgeons prepared for 'other planetary' operations in which communication is kept at a minimum, these men speak in "sparks" as though their "talk" was generated by their machines.¹⁰ That the thumb is used to communicate is further evidence of the 'otherness' of this "planet" in which the pilot is the sole inhabitant.

Once airborne at 29,000 feet with the

...wheels up and locked,
we swung our eyes like incense on a chain
blessing our dials and tip tanks,
our wings, in skies that high, bright as armor.

With landing gear "up and locked" into the planes' bellies, the terrestrial and now superfluous appendages are added manifestations of dissociation from the earth. Serving as self-ordained 'priests' of their private planets, the pilots 'swing' their thurible-eyes across their instrument panels,

fuel tanks and wings in "blessing" of the mechanized 'miracle' that keeps them aloft. "In skies that high" above terra firma their proximity to God guards and endows them with added "armor"-like protection.

At the proper altitude, with gear retracted, the pilots commence their maneuvers, as we see in stanzas four through six.

Free of the thrum of propeller blades,
jet loops were smooth implosions,
rolls were clean swirls of earth
before our eyes. Hardly a flight

went by without hot spots
in our crash helmets, hardly a week
without a jet exploding in midair,
each flight a mission, a quest

for distance, for smooth insertion through mach,
climbs into space delicate as frost
and record dives, wings melting on contrails,
altimeter spinning like a clock gone mad.

The persona prefers jets to propeller-driven planes because they do not "thrum" and they perform better allowing him to make "loops [that] were smooth implosions, rolls [that] were clean swirls of the earth." Where propeller-driven planes freed man from earth's restraints, jets 'free' pilots from the limitations of their precursors. "Free," "smooth" and "clean," the critical adjectival distinctions between the two modes of flight, also suggest the nearly antiseptic nature of the way pilots regard themselves, their performance and their planes within what Lifton calls "a self-enclosed system." ¹¹ On this singularly remote "other planet" of pilot and plane symbiotically 'wired' together, another type of 'freedom' also exists, as Lifton (quoting from Fred Branfman's article, "Airwar: The New Totalitarianism,") states:

Men are freed from the hatred, doubts, greed or rationalization that killing usually entails. The issue of guilt becomes meaningless. Conscience and morality are irrelevant. One does not set out to kill and

therefore, psychologically, one does not. [Home From the War, 347]

The geographical 'freedom' and remoteness of this "other planet," afforded by the technological superiority of their jets, is matched by the pilots' psychologically disconnected 'freedom' from earth. Dominated by pride in themselves and their planes and the desire to excel, pilots yield to their preoccupied emphasis on "professional skill and performance" ¹² to the degree that the earth becomes no more than a series of "clean swirls" "before [their] eyes," thus signaling the severance of their Antean connections.

Despite the 'explosive' exhilaration of being 'wired' - 'high' geographically and psychologically - these pilots know the dangerous price some of their ranks must pay for this 'freedom.' The phrase "wired to explode" in the first stanza, and the word "implosions" in stanza four, foreshadow the almost weekly 'midair explosions' of some jet and its hapless pilot. Even though these potentially dangerous jaunts may be training flights, their character bears a marked resemblance to the conception of flying actual missions as articulated by Jon Floyd, a Marine Corps pilot who testified in 1971 at the Winter Soldier Investigation. Lifton quotes Floyd as saying:

You fly. You see flak at night. That's about as close to war as we get. Sometimes you get shot down, but you don't see any of the explosions. You can look back and see 'em, but you don't see any of the blood or any of the flesh. It's a very clean and impersonal war... You're not in contact with it. [Home From the War, 348]

In both McDonald's and Floyd's accounts two points are very clear. First, there is a detached, "clean" impersonalism - a glaring absence of concern for the lives of colleagues (or civilian lives,) and second, the physical and psychological distance from each other and the earth which accounts in part

for the impersonalism.

This blatant impersonalism of the pilots is also caused by their obsession with flying, with making "each flight a mission, a quest" for peak performance, expanding the boundaries of their skills. Undeterred by the deaths of fellow-pilots, their driving ambition urges them on repetitive "quest[s] for distance, for smooth insertion through mach, /climbs into space delicate as frost and/record dives." A vague threat underlies these "record dives" that set the "altimeter spinning like a clock gone mad."

The phrase "wings melting" alludes to Icarus whose power of flight goes to his head. He flies too close to the sun, despite his father's admonitions, and the heat melts the wax affixing the wings to his body. A second, though somewhat less definite allusion to Icarus's fall is found in the eighth stanza.

Their "mad," "spinning" passion for flying drowns out the

roar [they] made
sweeping down over canals and bridges
approaching the airfield swift as night,
slicing the silent throttle back

and pitching steep above the runway,
feeling the spirit of wheels
whir down and lock.

Sound is overwhelmed by the intensity of the pilots' motor-tactile sensations of "sweeping," "slicing" and "pitching" transmitted to them through the 'physicality' of their jets. Only when they extend the landing gear does part of what Lifton calls "technologically induced obliviousness" ¹³ fall away to be replaced by the "spirit of wheels" that re-connects them with earth and humanity, as does the return of their hearing as they lose altitude.

...And turning final,
falling, advancing the throttle

and only then hearing the chorus of rotors
flames that caught and sustained us
down to the runway, holding off,
at last cutting the power, the thunder of fire.

When they are descending through the airfield's traffic pattern to 'turn on final approach,' "only then" can they "[hear] the chorus of rotors" keeping them aloft, "sustain[ing] [them]/down to the runway." The word "falling," describing the abrupt loss of altitude on the last leg of the pattern, suggests the 'fall' of Icarus when he plummets into the sea after flying too near the sun. But unlike the searing solar heat that brought Icarus down, the 'thunderous fire' of the jet engines 'catches' and 'sustains' these aviators who control the "flames" and "at last [cut their] power" on touch down.

"Caliban on Spinning" is easily read as a poem about training, but "Jet Flight, the Early Years" is less definite. Certainly tremendous technical finesse is evident in the pilots' handling of their planes. But the purpose and location of these "missions" are unrevealed. The fact that McDonald withholds or simply omits this information attests to the pilots' self-encapsulation, Lifton's "technologically induced obliviousness" resulting from such close contact with their equipment that they become part of their planes. ¹⁴

"Caliban in Blue" demonstrates the practical, wartime implementation of long-perfected skills. This blatantly sexual three stanza poem leaves nothing to the imagination: the pilot-persona overtly calls masturbation the "solitary masculine delight" and clearly links the act of firing the aircraft's weaponry with the "savage release" of "pulsing orgasm." Two factors set this poem apart from both "Caliban on Spinning" and "Jet Flight, the Early Years." First, there is no mention of the earth, just that the pilot is

"target-diving," which suggests that geographical distance between the pilot and his "targets," achieved through aeronautical technology, makes him not only an Antean figure displaced from his natural, earthly element, but a figure who is as morally and emotionally detached from his fellow human beings as he is from the earth. Secondly, with the acquisition of aviatational skills, he has also acquired a 'blood lust.'

In the first stanza it is evident that the persona has now completed many missions.

Off again,
thrusting up at scald
of copper in orient west
I climb into such blue skies.
Skies even here
belong to Setobos:
calls it air power.
Air power is peace power,
his motto catechizes
as we, diving, spout
flame from under,
off in one hell
of a roar.

But what is more interesting and more important is the reference to Setobos in line six because it gives a clue to not just the title of the two Caliban poems, but the entire volume entitled Caliban in Blue.

Shakespeare's Caliban is the offspring of the witch, Sycorax, and her demon-lover, Setebos. Caliban's deformity is the result of this unnatural union. A savage who is educated and civilized by Prospero, Caliban is an example of Montaigne's savage as put forth in his essay, "Of Cannibals." Montaigne states in part:

They [the Indians] are even savage, as we call those fruits wilde, which nature of her selfe...hath produced: whereas indeed...those which our selves have altered by our artificiall devices, and diverted from their common order, we should rather terme savage. ¹⁵

The two Caliban poems, particularly "Caliban in Blue,"

(punning on the color of the sky and that of Air Force uniforms) demonstrates how a technological war could alter the nature-versus-nurture dichotomy exemplified by Montaigne and Shakespeare. McDonald, like Shakespeare, does not share Montaigne's notion that the New World was a place uncorrupted by civilization where indigenous inhabitants pursued virtuous lives. Caliban, the pilot-persona, has been corrupted by "our artificial devices" of technology. In turn, he takes the stance toward the Vietnamese that they, not himself, are less than human (as colonists usually regard natives), that they are defective and must be 'ameliorated' by making them 'subjects' of America's military, authoritative, technological power.

The pilot-persona, once the tractable Caliban who utters, "I must obey," (Act, I, sc. 2, lines 374-76, The Tempest) and adapts to flight education readily and willingly as part of the military's 'nurturing' techniques, becomes in "Caliban in Blue" the inhuman savage, "a devil, a born devil" (Act IV, sc. 1, lines 188-189), a Setebos whose "motto" 'catechizes' that "Air power is peace power." If he does not become Setebos, he is, at the very least, manipulated by a military version of a Setebos "as we, diving, spout/flames from under, /off in one hell of a roar." Ironically, in the sense that nature (innate character and gracelessness representative of the Fall) versus nurture (the broad sense of 'education,' learning as a means of compensating for the Fall and repairing the flaws of nature) the pilot's 'nature' is corrupted by his military training so that, in effect, the innate character becomes "the brutish state" to which Caputo refers when discussing the effects of the ground war on combatants. ¹⁶

In the second stanza Setebos (technology), a lower order demon at the command of Sycorax (the American military command) behaves "like radar/point[ing] the spot" at which to

"spout flames."

For this, I trained to salivate
and tingle, target-diving,
hand enfolding hard throttle
in solitary masculine delight.

"Salivate and tingle," an obvious allusion to Pavlov, clearly indicates the instantaneous conditioned response instilled in him by his military 'nurturers' and underscores the depth and breadth of the pilot's training at the exclusion of all other contingencies. Observation of, and regard for anything or anyone on the ground beneath his "flame" and "roar" are not issues with which he need concern himself in his masturbatory, "solitary masculine delight."

The last stanza recounts the savagery and brutal sexuality produced by 'Setobosian' technology.

Focused on cross hairs.
eyes glazing, hand triggers switches in
pulsing orgasm,
savage release;
pull out
and off we go again
thrusting deep
into the martial lascivious blue
of uncle's sky.

With 'glazed' eyes narrowly confined to the interior of his plane and fixed on the "cross hairs" of the sighting mechanism on his weaponry, the pilot gives vent in "savage release" 'ejaculating' his payload. The emission of this 'seed,' however, fathers harm, death and loss of which he is never personally aware. Neither sexually content nor professionally finished with the task, he "pull[s] out" combining a re-enactment of the sex act of the demon-lover who spawned him with the technical maneuver of recovering from "target-diving," to "again thrust deep into the martial lascivious blue/of uncle's sky." The juxtapositioning of the two adjectives, "martial lascivious," reveals the emotional,

psychological alliance of war and sex. When linked to "uncle's sky," with "uncle" referring to Ho Chi Minh whom his supporters affectionately called "uncle," the air space violated by 'thrusts' is that over North Vietnam. Framed in the color blue in line 4 ("I climb into such blue skies") and in line 27 ("martial lascivious blue"), we can see that for this pilot, the war is fought exclusively from the expanses of the sky with the ground war and the consequences of his participation in the air war well beneath him.

Blue, generally regarded in optics and experimental psychology as a "cold, 'retreating' colour corresponding to processes of dissimulation, passivity and debilitation,"¹⁷ appropriately surrounds the poem and provides further insight. Having become 'part of his plane,' the persona is dissimilar to ground troops; he is not just passive but in the "cockpit isolation" of this "other planet," he is oblivious to the ground and what happens there, and he is emotionally desensitized and psychically detached by his obedience to the spurious motto, "Air power is peace power."

Perhaps the best evidence of the extent to which "cockpit isolation" desensitizes the pilot-"technicist-perfectionist" to the ground and the world outside the plane is the fact that in six volumes of poetry McDonald includes only one poem whose title and content concerns the Vietnamese as people; that poem is "The Food Pickers of Saigon" from After the Noise of Saigon. Though this poem does not deal with flying, it does present a sighting, as it were, of the ground as something far more than "the vast earth spinning before you/like a dream." Watching a group of Vietnamese from the detached, insulated vantage point of his barracks, the persona 'sights' and regards them as scavenging foils for his recollections of a camping trip. He cannot bring himself to 'connect' with them

until well after the war when the hungry faces of two Vietnamese children return to influence the way he treats his own children.

"The Food Pickers of Saigon" is a poem of nine stanzas with only three stanzas devoted solely to the Vietnamese people. The remaining six stanzas recount an incident when marauding bears in Yellowstone National Park scavenge food from the persona's campsite. The poem demonstrates the poet-persona's ambivalence toward the Vietnamese people he has occasion to observe. On the one hand, he seems to disregard them as so much refuse; on the other hand, he is touched by them only because the memory of two Vietnamese children 'translates' to his own children.

Rubbish like compost heaps burned every hour
of my days and nights at Tan Son Nhut.
Ragpickers scoured the edges of our junk
risking the flames, bent over,
searching for food. A ton of tin cans

piled up each month, sharp edged, unlabeled.
Those tiny anonymous people could stick
their hands inside and claw out whatever
remained, scooping it into jars, into their
mouths. No one went hungry. At a distance,

the dump was like a coal mine fire burning
out of control, or Moses' holy bush
which was not consumed. Watching them labor
in the field north of my barracks, trying
to think of something good to write my wife.

Notice his position in relation to the dump and the "pickers": he is "at a distance," "watching them labor/in the field north of [his] barracks." It is precisely this distance that protects him from the ground war and from such experiences as those which GIs related to Lifton:

...veterans brought forth imagery of garbage directly associated with Vietnam, often as their image of ultimate horror - garbage piles and dumps, or garbage loaded on trucks or other vehicles. In these images, the Vietnamese are recalled as immersing themselves in the garbage, scrounging for something to eat or use in

their struggle for survival. One account described how they would clamor up on the garbage truck just before it was to be emptied in the dump - "The Vietnamese won't wait until we get the garbage off because they, you know, they want to get first choice at it because they're living on this " - and how GIs would throw them off the truck and strike them with rifle butts, because they weren't supposed to be on it. The memories embody a special form of death guilt having to do with degradation and abuse of other human beings. Inevitably, the veterans come to feel THEMSELVES to be inseparable from garbage. They too feel inundated by it. Or worse, they feel themselves to BE that garbage. [Home From the War, 183]

The persona does use garbage imagery in direct association with Vietnam when he equates his time at Tan Son Nhut with burning rubbish: "Rubbish like compost heaps burned every hour/ of my days and nights at Tan Son Nhut." Yet he is merely making a statement; he is unaffected by the dump because he is apart from it so that he feels neither inundated nor degraded by refuse. Certainly too, he does not define himself as garbage, nor does garbage represent to him an "ultimate horror." Instead, it seems to be a kind of fertilizer that sustains and breeds scavenging "ragpickers." That refuse had to be burned day and night for days on end at the sprawling Tan Son Nhut airbase on the northwest side of Saigon, indicates Americans' extravagance through their perpetual production of waste.

Curiously, he calls the Vietnamese "ragpickers" in line three and then in line five says they were "searching for food." He cannot see exactly what they are doing so that may account for his supposition that, in addition to grubbing for food, they are also hunting for whatever bits of cloth they could use. From the barracks he can observe, however, that they are "bent over" in their 'scouring' search and that the flames, which hunger forces them to brave, keep them to the "edges" of the "ton of tin cans [that] piled up each month."

The population of a huge airbase produces more refuse than just "a ton of tin cans...each month," though cans seem to be

the only items visible to the persona. He does not mention (because he is not close enough to see) vegetable parings, bones, boxes and jars all smeared with the flyblown muck of ashes mixed with plate scrapings and kitchen slop; he can neither see nor hear the flies swarming and settling on the disgusting heap anymore than he can smell the acrid smoke of the fires or the stench of putrifying garbage. Indeed, from where the persona stands, this mountain of tin cans seems almost sanitary and he can marvel at the "food pickers'" dextrous ability to "stick their hands inside and claw out whatever remained" in the cans. Eating from these "sharp-edged" cans poses to the Vietnamese more than just the threat of cuts, infection and disease. The harm done to them is the degradation of being reduced to eating garbage. That the "unlabeled" tin cans are as unidentifiable as the "tiny anonymous people" rummaging through them suggests the added injury of being perceived as throw-away people with no more worth than the rubbish that draws them. The persona betrays his perception of them when he describes their animal-like ability to "claw out whatever remained" directly "into their mouths," or in a more human gesture, "scoop it into jars" for consumption later.

"No one went hungry" is an appalling statement that reveals more about the persona (and perhaps even out the poet himself) than it does about the Vietnamese. Even if the implication is that Americans prodigiously wasted food, such an unfeeling presumption about these poor people could be conceived only by one possessed of the arrogance of the well-fed, and the complacent superiority of one who has never experienced deprivation much less degradation. It would seem that the phenomenon of "cockpit isolation" is not necessarily confined to the "other planet" inside an airplane.

Though he is already speaking from an emotional and experiential distance, we are told, in the last three words of stanza two and the first three lines of the third stanza that

...At a distance,

the dump was like a coal mine fire burning
out of control, or Moses' holy bush
which was not consumed...

No Vietnamese figures are present in these lines, which suggests that the persona has had occasion to observe the constantly burning dump from a greater distance than that afforded from his barracks. Burning twenty-four hours a day, the dump fire takes on the proportion of either "a coal mine fire burning/out of control," or "Moses' holy bush/which was not consumed." Hopefully, on some level deep as a coal mine, he senses that something is desperately, cruelly wrong and "out of control" when people have no other recourse than to feed themselves from a garbage dump that burns without depleting the muck these "pickers" consume.

Half way through stanza three, as he is "watching them labor/in the field north of [his] barracks," the Vietnamese suddenly become foils, springboards for his associative recollection as he "tries to think of something good to write [his] wife." Because the Vietnamese remind him of scavenging "bears in Yellowstone/[their] first good summer in a tent," and because he apparently cannot write to her about the plight of these people, he writes "about the bears, helping [them] both to focus" on a pleasant, distant memory instead of on the immediacy of visibly hungry, dirty and ragged human beings. When he chooses to write to her about scavenging bears rather than about scavenging human beings, one must question whether he is sheltering his wife from knowledge of human degradation, or whether he is conveniently dodging the issue to protect

himself from openly confronting the Vietnamese as people instead of "tiny anonymous" creatures who "claw" their subsistence from a dump. My guess is that he is accomplishing both feats simultaneously since the rest of stanza four and the following two and a half stanzas "focus" the same intensity of concentration on bears as the persona in "Caliban in Blue" "focus[es] on cross hairs."

The bears

...waddled to the road and begged,
and came some nights into the campground
so long ago and took all the food they found.
We sat helplessly naive outside our tent
and watched them, and one night rolled
inside laughing when one great bear
turned and shoulder-swayed his way toward us.

The bear that "shoulder-swayed...toward" them is a titillating object of momentary danger and gales of laughter, unlike the Vietnamese who considerately stay at an undistressing (and unamusing) distance on the edges of the dump.

Through the zipped mosquito netting
we watched him watching us. Slack-jawed,
he seemed to grin, to thank us for all
he was about to receive from our table.
We thought how lovely, how much fun
to be this close to danger. No campers
had died in that Disneyland national park
for years...

Though this "slack-jawed" bear is an animal and is bigger and far more powerful than his Vietnamese counterparts, he has better manners and a sense of Christian decorum as he 'grins' his 'thanks' "for all/he was about to receive from [their] table." He does not mention whether the bears sate themselves like the Vietnamese, none of whom "went hungry." The bears, unlike the Vietnamese, provide a tantalizing element of fear occasioned by their wildness and unpredictability even though "no campers/had died in that Disneyland national park/for

years." Ironically, their tent's "zipped mosquito netting" offers more protection from the bears than the barrack's walls and distance give the persona from the Vietnamese.

The third line of stanza seven marks a shift to the present to relate how the persona has integrated the memory of the "food pickers" and the Yellowstone bears, and how they have affected him and his family.

...Now, when my children
eat their meat and bread and leave
good broccoli or green beans

on their plates, I call them back
and growl, I can't help it. It's like hearing
my father's voice again. I never tell them
why they have to eat it. I never say
they're like two beautiful children

I found staring at me one night
through the screen of my window,
at Tan Son Nhut, bone-faced. Or that
when I crawled out of my stifling monsoon
dream to feed them, they were gone.

His bear-like "growls" at his children's wastefulness remind him of his own father. He cannot tolerate recalling the "two beautiful," "bone-faced" Vietnamese children who stared at him "through the screen of [his] window" in the barracks, much as the bear had stared at him through the mosquito net of the tent. By "calling them back/to the table" (to insure they finish their food, thus preventing it from ending up in a dump reminiscent of the one at Tan Son Nhut), he is trying to erase, or at least compensate for, his lethargic indifference to the Vietnamese children who peered at him while he was recollecting the camping trip.

That he belatedly "crawled out of [his] stifling monsoon/dream to feed" these children is indicative of both the power his memory held over him and a recognition that he was unfeelingly wrong for not responding to their humanness and their need sooner, and that his treatment of his own children is

an attempt to atone for the fact that these "bone-faced" children had disappeared by the time he had roused himself to their plight. In this respect, "The Food Pickers of Saigon" may be regarded as a poem of regeneration instigated through his own children, that he is learning to recover from the numbness drummed into him by his technological training just as he learned to recover from a spin.

"On Planting My First Tree Since Vietnam," like "The Food Pickers of Saigon," is an ambivalent poem of memory. Where "The Food Pickers of Saigon" initiated memories of Yellowstone, "On Planting My First Tree Since Vietnam" evokes memories of bombing missions. In this poem McDonald attempts to use the act of planting a tree as a double metaphor for regeneration and for bombing. It works relatively well for two stanzas but fails miserably when a dog is introduced in the last stanza. As with the bears in "The Food Pickers of Saigon," he uses his dog as perhaps an unconscious means of dodging the issue of connecting himself and his past missions with the people and the country he bombed. Nevertheless, that McDonald elects to write a poem about the first tree he plants after returning from Vietnam indicates that he deems the event significant and suggests that he intends to plant other trees. Symbolically, the planting of a tree is an act of regeneration and surely, on some level "balled in burlap" like the tree's roots, he seems to understand this.

In the first stanza the initial evidence of his tenacious memories of flying missions in Vietnam is the "dirt packed/runway hard."

Winter tough grass, and dirt packed
runway hard. Nagging shovel
scraping memory down through crust.
A twig of roots, balled up in burlap
like a wound.

The "winter tough grass" covering the dirt is the top-most layer over both the earth and what Olson might call the poet's "upper earth." Bleached and dried out, but tough enough to survive the hardship of winter, its roots penetrate the ground. Winter itself seems to function as a metaphor for war, when regeneration is held in abeyance, in a state of psychical suspended animation.

Breaking ground to plant this first tree is difficult - the grass is tough and the earth is so compact that it resists his "nagging shovel/scraping memory down through crust." The shovel 'nags' the earth suggesting that persistent effort is required to 'scrape' through the ground. Breaking through the "upper earth" of one's being to reach the memories buried there is equally difficult, but somehow he feels 'nagged,' annoyingly compelled to attempt it. Remembering Vietnam is like 'scraping' through the 'crust' of his being. By planting the tree, he is 'implanting' the first of perhaps many new, regenerative memories. Yet the "twig of roots, balled up in burlap/like a wound" seems to embody both the hope and the pain caused by memory. The simile comparing the mass of tightly wadded roots with "a wound" may refer to the 'wound' he might feel when dredging down through his memory; it may refer to the green, young vulnerability of this new 'memory' he is about to plant.

In the second stanza he connects the process of shoveling and making a hole for the tree with "diving" at the earth when bombing. ¹⁸

Diving,
I have dug craters
wider than sequoias -
squeeze of faith upon the button,
and wood splintering.

He compares the size of the hole for the tree with the

"craters/wider than" the girth of sequoias. From the altitude at which such huge bombs are dropped, the pilot can see nothing more detailed on the ground than the contours of the terrain and the disfiguring pock-like holes made by his bombs. Whether he feels pride, satisfaction, remorse or guilt for his part in altering the tracts of land is unclear. Though the "hand [that] triggers switches" in "Caliban in Blue" is now bent upon the shovel making a small hole for the tree, he retains the memory of the "squeeze of faith upon the button" that released his bombs. Whether the "faith" he expresses is "faith" in technology and the efficacy of bombing, or "faith" in the 'catechized motto,' "Air power is peace power," the only form of annihilation to which he can relate is "wood splintering" with the impact of his ordnance, a connection he makes only when he is planting his tree.

Had there been sequoias in his bomb sights he could have destroyed them easily. But now, by planting the fragile, wound-like "twig of roots," he wants to atone for the "wood splintering" destruction he caused by nurturing, not destroying trees. He does not connect the act of bombing with the idea of killing people and livestock or with destroying farm lands, crops or water supplies. Malcolm Browne notices that pilots "rarely think or talk much about the results of their work, except in terms of military targets hit." ¹⁹ Lifton addresses the same phenomenon when he alludes to Fred Branfman's discovery of a

striking correlation between altitude and the potential for guilt: B-52 pilots and crews bombing at high altitudes saw nothing of their victims and spoke exclusively of professional skill and performance; those on fighter-bomber missions had glimpses of people below and tended to have an inclination to explain or rationalize what they did; those who flew helicopter gunships saw everything and experienced the kinds of emotions...[found] in ground personnel, along with added passions and conflicts having to do with their special kind of work. [Home From the War, 349]

Pilots do not talk or think about the effects of their bombing missions because technology affords them, as "technicist-perfectionists," the sensory, experiential 'armor' of altitude and the obliviousness of "cockpit isolation." Certainly there is nothing in this poem beyond "wood splintering" to indicate that he has seen his victims so there is no reason to consider himself a killer or to feel guilty. Perhaps this is why the only animate being, other than himself, on the patch of "scorched earth" is his dog in stanza three.

My steel inches through layers of such
scorched earth,
hoping my dog, an incessant digger,
will give this parched land time to say
trees
as well as grass.

He 'hopes' the dog, an "incessant digger," will not do any 'diving' of his own and uproot the tree. But in fact his 'hope' and his own continued digging are a metaphorical re-enactment of a bombing raid, though now "[his] steel" is the blade of a shovel as it "inches through layers of such/scorched earth," rather than the impact of thousands of steel slivers penetrating the earth and burning it bare. The dog, like the bears in "The Food Pickers of Saigon," is an all too convenient foil for avoiding direct confrontation with the destruction and death he has caused. Only through the intervening agency of an animal can he begin to 'animate his guilt,' as Lifton puts it.²⁰ In a way, the dog is a better 'agent' for animation and regeneration than the bears because he 'hopes' the dog "will give this parched land time to say/trees/as well as grass" which is considerably more than he did in Vietnam, and is more positive than the thieving bears

in Yellowstone. Interestingly, it is the dog that will determine whether "this parched land" will "say" "trees" and "grass." This marks an improvement over the bear that only seems to 'grin' his 'thanks' for the food he steals. Unfortunately there are no poems to show that the poet himself 'says' words that connect him directly and responsibly to the act and the idea of killing and annihilation.

The poet can, in a restrained and distant way, identify with fellow pilots who were killed, or are listed as missing in action. For this reason, it seems logical that he places "On Planting My First Tree Since Vietnam" immediately before the Tribute Poems in Caliban in Blue and Other Poems. Of the ten Tribute Poems, only two pertain to former colleagues. "For Kelly, *Missing in Action*" and "For Harper, *Killed in Action*" frame this section of poems.

Drawing heavily from James Joyce, "For Kelly, *Missing in Action*" is the first Tribute Poem and is a thoughtful work in which the poet tries to imagine how his friend Kelly felt on his first bombing mission over North Vietnam.

The opening stanza relates how the poet reacted to Kelly's disappearance and his assumption that he was shot down on a bombing run.

When you disappeared
over the North
I pulled down Dubliners.

The combination of the name Kelly and "the North" (an obvious reference to North Vietnam, though it is evocative of Northern Ireland) suggests that "pull[ing] down [The] Dubliners" is an appropriate, symbolic gesture of tribute paralleling Kelly's plane being "pulled down" by anti-aircraft fire.

The reference to Joyce is broadened and defined in the second stanza:

What strange counterparts,
you and the Cong.
You, who said no one would make
General
reading Joyce,
named your F-4 "The Dead,"
and dropped out of the sun
like some death angel
playing mumbledy peg
with bombs.

The comparison of Kelly and "the Cong" as "strange counterparts" may suggest that Kelly's political sympathies with regard to Northern Ireland resembled those of the Viet Cong with respect to the government of South Vietnam and the United States. One might also interpret this to mean that both Kelly and the Viet Cong had broken ideological ranks with their respective governments. Clearly a thinking, literate man with a sardonic sense of irony, Kelly apparently had once told the poet that "no one would make/General/reading Joyce," that achievement of the rank of general certainly was not contingent on one's taste in literature.

Kelly called his F-4 Phantom jet "The Dead," an unwitting triple pun on the death it dealt out, the vehicle in which he may have lost his life, and the title of Joyce's short story. A "death angel" indeed, the F-4 Phantom, as Malcolm Browne notes, "is probably the most deadly combat plane in the history of aviation." ²¹ He goes on to say that the Phantom was "the basic fighter the United States was using in Vietnam" and that it

was armed with radar-guided Sparrow missiles and heat-seeking Sidewinder missiles. The designers of the Phantom had assumed the dogfighting air wars of the past would not recur, and accordingly, the Phantom carried no guns. [The New Face of War, 133]

They were, however, modified later to include cannons. ²² An F-4 was a formidable machine in which to "[drop] out of the sun" like a plummeting modern-day Icarus "playing mumbledy

peg/with bombs." "Mumbledy peg" is a children's game in which a knife is thrown from different positions in an attempt to make the blade stick firmly in the ground. The loser must use his teeth to pull out a peg that is driven into the ground, hence the name "mumbledy peg" - mumble the peg. Kelly's bombs contain many thousands of small 'knives' loosed toward the ground, and his penalty is "dropping out of the sun" with himself and his plane becoming an enormous 'knife' plunging toward the earth.

Knowing that Kelly loved Joyce and possessed an ironic wit is not enough for the poet, and in the last half of the poem he wishes he had known his missing friend better.

I never knew what launched
the search for Araby in you,
that wholly secular search
for thrills.

I wonder how you felt
when they strapped on the bombs
that first flight North.
Did it seem at all like
bearing a chalice through a throng of
foes, or finally,
as you let them go
did you see yourself in the plexiglass
a creature masked
derided by vanity
dead as Dublin,
far from home?

Kelly's "search for Araby" was more than a boy's excited outing inspired by first love and his subsequent stinging, disappointed "anguish and anger" like that experienced by the boy in Joyce's story "Araby." But perhaps the name North Vietnam was a "magical name" of "syllables...[that] called to [him] through the silence in which [his] soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over [him]." ²³ If so, the 'enchanted' magic is "wholly secular," the twentieth-century military product of Whitman's traveller traversing back to the cradle of civilization, or of Melville's Pacific voyages in

quest of his spiritual paternity, and it "launched" Kelly skyward where he "dropped out of the sun."

The poet continues, in the last stanza, to "wonder" about Kelly, 'casting' him the while as the adult counterpart of the boy in "Araby." On his maiden flight, did he anticipate, as does Whitman's persona in "Facing West from California's Shores," an uneasiness, a sense of loss, or a gnawing lack of fulfillment; did Kelly see himself an airborne bearer of bomb-chalices "through a throng of/foes" in "the North"; did he, after dropping his "chalices" on the "throng of foes," regard himself as something less heroic? Perhaps, glimpsing his plexiglass reflection, he saw "a creature masked/derided by vanity," mocked by his own sense of the value of the mission. "Dead as Dublin" inside, and spiritually and geographically "far from home," Kelly perhaps "[gazed] into the darkness" and "saw [himself] as a creature driven and derided by" more than "vanity." Indeed, he may have been 'driven' by "the quest for thrills" or the end of the quest Olson speaks of when describing Americans' westward expansion ending on the shores of Asia. Perhaps he was 'derided' by the deliberate irony of his plane's name, by his "confused adoration" of the power and sex of air warfare, by "remembering with difficulty why [he] had come" to this "splendid bazaar" ²⁴ of a war just as Whitman's traveller wondered on the shores of California. What "image accompanied" Kelly (surely not the equivalent of Mangan's sister); what, if anything, on the flight North "converged in a single sensation of life?" ²⁵

These speculations reveal something of the poet. He approaches Kelly's disappearance academically, almost clinically. He seems to miss Kelly, but regards him more as a literary curiosity than as a fellow pilot and friend, an indication of the 'numbed' distance that can intrude even



between colleagues when the war they are waging is "conducted within a self-enclosed system." ²⁶ It is as though by re-reading The Dubliners after Kelly was shot down, he could learn more about the man from "The Dead" and "Araby" than he could have by actually talking with Kelly. Apparently they never 'talked shop' (or discussed literature), though the poet now seems to wish they had. When "one's only psychological contacts are with military cohorts and one's equipment," ²⁷ it inevitably affects one's ability to respond to and interact with those one claims as friends, a phenomenon that also exists in "For Harper, *Killed in Action*," the last half of the 'frame' surrounding the Tribute Poems in Caliban in Blue and Other Poems.

Unlike Kelly who was listed as missing in action, Harper was killed in action. Instead of bombing like Kelly, Harper elected to fly photo reconnaissance missions over Laos. The difference in their missions elicits a different reaction from the poet. Where he read Joyce to discover about Kelly that which he never knew, he recalls what Harper had once told him in "For Harper, *Killed in Action*":

When they brought you down
over the Plain of Jars
I thought of when you
volunteered for photo runs
from Udorn into Laos.
Better to take pictures
than to bomb, you said,
I do not blame. My taxes
paid your fares.

Harper was shot down "over the Plain of Jars" in Laos. In The Laotian Fragments, John Clark Pratt includes Major William Blake's underlined passages in Roger Hilsman's book, To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy. In the section labelled "The Terrain," Hilsman explains how the Plain of Jars acquired its name:

The Jars on the Plain of Jars, are literally, jars. Two sites on the plain are littered with several hundred each. The jars themselves stand about four feet tall and are carved from solid rock, many with well-fitted lids. Their origin is a prehistoric mystery, but the most likely explanation is that they were the burial urns of some ancient people. Souphanouvong, the Communist leader, told me that legend relates that the jars were already there when the Lao people first arrived. [The Laotian Fragments, 35]

The Plain of Jars was one location of the Automated Battlefield utilizing acoustic and seismic sensors and other signal-relaying devices ostensibly capable of distinguishing between friendly and enemy troops, as well as determining whether animals or equipment were in a given area. Air strikes were summoned when the signals examined by highly "skilled target analysts" ²⁸ suggested enemy activity. McDonald says that Harper did not participate in such bombings. Rather, he had "volunteered for photo runs/from Udorn into Laos." Udorn, Thailand was the site of a major American Air Force installation from which most bombing sorties were launched before it was deemed more efficient to operate such attacks out of the installation on Guam.

It is worth noting that there probably was an ethical or moral reason behind Harper's decision that it was "better to take pictures" on reconnaissance missions over Laos "than to bomb." His decision is particularly understandable if one considers that during the bombing campaigns over Laos -

over two million tons of bombs (by conservative estimate) were dropped on the one million people of the Pathet Lao zones - as much tonnage as was absorbed by several hundred million people throughout both Europe and the entire Pacific theater during all of World War II...Concerning the bombing in Laos, most senators and congressmen remained in ignorance while the Plain of Jars, where fifty thousand people formerly thrived, was destroyed... [Home From the War, 351]

The poet makes no judgment on Harper's choice and openly states, "I do not blame." His unjudgmental stance may reflect

his understanding that the air war, like the ground war, was comprised of as many wars as there were pilots and their responses to their jobs, or it may signify that he personally held no such convictions, and therefore took no moral stance. By saying, "My taxes paid your fares," he gives Harper the 'tax-paid' right to his decision, yet there seems to be an underlying element of resentment on the poet's part. The word "fares" hints at public transportation 'fares,' as though Harper were merely taking a taxi back and forth to work.

The last stanza of this poem is reminiscent of Caputo's words concerning the disintegration of his "illusion that there were good ways to die in war." ²⁹

I hope it was a lucky shot,
sudden,
not some gunner blinded to your loss
cheering as your solid
flesh impacted
in the common ground.

"Noble sacrifices" and "soldiers offering up their bodies for a cause or to save a comrade's life" ³⁰ certainly were not aspects of the Vietnam war for Harper. Nor was there anything "sacrificial or ceremonial" about his death. ³¹ If it was Harper's destiny to be killed, the poet hopes it was a "lucky shot" that brought him down rather than the skillfully aimed fire of "some gunner blinded to [Harper's] loss." The thought that some anonymous "gunner" might have "cheered as [Harper's] solid flesh impacted/in the common ground" is a distinct possibility, but one the poet would rather not contemplate.

With the passage of over a decade, the poet still thinks of his fellow fliers, but the distinction between "missing in action" and "killed in action" gradually disappears, leaving him to believe that even the MIAs are now dead. "For Friends Missing in Action," from After the Noise of Saigon, might be

called a twelve year retrospective on his former colleagues. Where "For Kelly, *Missing in Action*" and "For Harper, *Killed in Action*" are poems of tribute for two specific friends, this poem is a composite tribute to all the friends the poet lost in the war. In five stanzas of four lines each he rather sentimentally comes to articulate his losses.

In the first stanza he conceives of memory as a surrealistic bank:

Into this tunnel of dirt
deposit quick thoughts
of a corpse
like savings.

The memory-bank is "this tunnel of dirt" and the 'currency' is "quick thoughts/of a corpse" hastily "deposited" there. These "thoughts," like savings are kept safely locked away but they may be 'withdrawn' anytime the 'depositor' wishes. 'Interest' in and on these "savings" is accrued when the 'depositor' is in his cups and 'withdraws' these valuables. In a beery haze of remembrance, the depositor-poet examines his "thoughts" about the corpse that represents all of his friends missing in action. Though "pitiful beer/can't dig him up from seventy shovels of earth," it extracts the poet's thoughts so that he may "toast...over and over" his lost fellow pilots. The following nine lines capture the essence of the unknown fate of pilots shot down in Southeast Asia.

Here lies a flier

missing since Saigon
fell in the seventies,
sixes or sevens
if he cratered deep in a swamp,

brought down in flames
from twenty thousand feet
by a rocket, or languished,
chained to a bamboo cesspool.

"Missing since Saigon/fell in the seventies" and formally

listed as 'missing in action' until the body can be recovered, the passage of time since 1975 almost certainly guarantees that this pilot and others like him are dead. The questions that gnaw at the poet are where did this representative flier crash and what became of him in the event that he survived the crash? Did "he crater deep in a swamp?" Did he "languish/chained to a bamboo cesspool" as a prisoner of war? There is no way of answering these questions. The only recourse is to:

Lift up your savage mugs
and let the truth ring
like a gong: he's gone.

"Lift up your savage mugs" is a rather interesting line. A "mug" can mean a beer glass, as indicated by the earlier references to beer and multiple toasts, but "mug" is also the American slang word for a person's face. The image of a "savage" beer mug, unless the poet means that the beer digs up 'savage' memories from "the tunnel of dirt" through which he and his drinking companions are crawling, undercuts the seriousness of the poem. It would seem more in keeping with the tenor of the poem that "mug" might mean 'face.' The likeliest possibility, however, is a blend of meanings: lift your steins and your faces that have turned "savage" with the recollection of lost friends and pay tribute to them, wherever they are, whether they are alive or dead. The unalterable "truth" that "rings/like a gong" is that "he's gone" like so many others.

In "After the Noise of Saigon," the title poem of the volume of the same name, we get a better, more honest and human picture of the poet than in any of the poems about the war previously analyzed. Alone in the quiet of the wilderness he is trying to confront himself to regain a sense of identity. The effects of "cockpit isolation" have sloughed

off leaving him 'exposed' as it were, with no technological buffer, no way of evading a confrontation with himself. He has, as a matter of fact, 'hunted' a very long time for this opportunity to rid himself of "the simple bitter sap that rises in [him]/like bad blood [he] needs to spill." Certain broad parallels exist between flying missions in Vietnam and traversing the wilderness. In both instances he is alone and armed as he hunts the adversary. Now, however, he is 'grounded' as he pits his skills against a cougar and himself.

Stalking the cougar parallels the years he has spent 'floundering' through his dreams in an effort to make sense of his war experience, trying to find animal trail-like direction through the labyrinthine network of his dreams to either hunt down and kill the last vestiges of his part in the war, or "fathom" the "signs" his experience has left behind for him to interpret as he would the "spoor" of the animal he stalks in the wilderness.

If where we hunt defines us,
then stalking this steep hillside
dark with spruce makes sense,

more than the dreams I've floundered in
for years, trying to fathom signs
all night and wading ashore

disgusted.

His attempt to define himself reveals in the first line the implication that "we," Americans, are hunters, and that "we" can perhaps "define" ourselves by "where we [choose to] hunt." If this is true, it strongly suggests that America elected to 'hunt' in Vietnam, and that Charles Olson is correct in stating of Melville's fascination for the Pacific:

I am interested in a Melville who was long-eyed enough to understand the Pacific as part of our geography, another West, prefigured in the Plains, antithetical. [Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville, 16]

In "backtrailing to Asia," ³² Americans, the perpetual 'hunters' of their ever-expanding West, found themselves washed up on the shores of Vietnam, just as the poet "wades ashore disgusted" from back-tracking through his dreams in quest of "signs," of "sense."

Neither he nor his country can find the needed sense-making definitions for the experience in Southeast Asia. Whether they look back at the past or ahead to the future, there seem to be no signs to indicate whether they are on a 'warm' or 'cold' trail, as the third and fourth stanzas demonstrate.

...Switches dripping sap
keep flipping me when I glance
over my shoulder for spoor

I might have missed. Evergreen
needles sting when I swing my head
face-forward for clues.

These "switches" are not those that control aircraft mechanisms, but are branches "dripping sap," scourges that slap him when he looks back over his shoulder "for spoor/[he] might have missed." They, like the evergreen needles, are painful reminders of where he and his country have been, how disturbing the experience proved to be, and how desperate the need for order and direction.

Though he is speaking about his bow-hunting skills, he metaphorically articulates (perhaps without realizing it) the personal and national definition of events in Vietnam.

...Isn't this
the strangest nightmare of all,
knowing my aim with a bow
is no better at twenty yards

than forty?

During the thirty years of American involvement in Vietnam, "the strangest nightmare of all," nothing improved there,

nothing was learned or gained by being there. But knowledge is no deterrent on a personal or national level. Knowing his aim has not improved does not stop him from stalking through the forest in pursuit of quarry, anymore than it prevents America from interfering elsewhere in the world.

Years of experience and added maturity lend no perspective, no expertise in dealing with the past, as Kaiko would agree. He, like America, is unable to 'read' signs and use them as guides. Even when he stumbles on a 'sense-making' trail in stanzas six and seven he does not recognize it for what it is.

...But here I am, alone
with a cougar I've stalked for hours,
climbing until I'm dizzy.

These blue trees have nothing
and all to do with what I'm here for
after the noise of Saigon.

The high terrain, the blue spruce trees and the cougar paradoxically pertain and do not pertain to why he is there in the wilderness. As he is "stalk[ing] for hours, /climbing until [he's] dizzy," there is an element of frenetic frustration in his presence there on the "steep hillside." He seeks to dominate nature while looking to it for "sense," guidance. As an American he is subject to what Charles Olson calls "the will to overwhelm nature that lies at the bottom of us as individuals and a people." ³³ He cannot see that Americans' "lordship over nature" takes different guises, that it may represent itself as stalking a cougar in the high country, or it may manifest itself in "the Roman feeling about the world," ³⁴ or that he is acting out the destructive aspects of the American character which Kaiko discusses. Whether he is a hunter in pursuit of a cougar with a bow, or a pilot dominating "uncle's sky" with his jet as he hunted his targets,

he is exercising his 'lordship.' Nature and the world are "his, to dispose of...Has he not conquered [them] with his machines?... Who else is lord?" as Olson puts it. ³⁵ But the "Roman feeling" he gained through the technological superiority of aviation, a 'feeling' that now "rises in [him]/like bad blood [he] need[s] to spill/...alone in the silence/of deep woods" goes awry. The 'lordly thrill of flight', as Olson accurately points out:

does not turn out to be the conquest Daedalus and DaVinci imagined it to be. We are (inevitably?), as humans, Antean: only in touch with the land and water of earth do we keep our WEIGHT, retain POTENTIAL. [Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville. 106]

'Grounded,' so to speak, he turns to the forest for reassurance of his own "weight" of self-worth and "potential" for sense-making and definition because he wants to feel better, to regain some of the same orderly 'sense' he experienced as a pilot. But the control of a jet and conquest of the air provided its own form of non-Antean sense which cannot be applied when one is on the ground. He seems to sense the paradox of the situation and that is why he leaves the society of others who perceive him as a friend and not the "damned/madman stumbling for his life" that he knows himself to be.

Conclusion

In summing up, it must be said that it was difficult to find a pilot-poet to include in this study. The reasons for this are adeptly outlined by Robert Jay Lifton in his analysis of the relationship between geographical distance (or proximity) and a combatant's ability to connect his actions with their consequences. Obviously, the closer one is to the ground war, the more one experiences of the war's horrors. But technology,

aircraft in McDonald's case, seriously impairs or 'numbs' one's ability to react to the devastation, or to identify with the casualties through its capacity to wrap one in a geographical, emotional and psychical cocoon of isolation. Those poems of McDonald's discussed in this chapter reflect exactly the correlation Lifton describes.

Malcolm Browne provides additional evidence of the correlation between one's 'distance' from the war and one's ability to relate to one's participation in it. He witnessed the computer room-like quiet and the technical terseness of pilot argot within an F100F while "bomb blasts are erupting and huts [are] disintegrating below, or when napalm splashes [are] so close below as to scorch the plane's paint." ³⁶ Stating that "...pilots are glad to be spared the sounds they create," and that he "...sometimes wondered whether it might not be better for some Air Force officers" ³⁷ to hear their destructive sounds, Browne provides further evidence for my contention that the nature of war poetry written from a technocentric stance is radically different than that written from an anthropocentric basis since it focuses on machines, not on human beings.

When one is consciously or unconsciously writing poetry from a technocentric basis, the poems are inevitably affected: McDonald's technocentrism and his "technicist-perfectionist"³⁸ training generate poems that are divorced from the human elements of the war he waged in Vietnam. As a result, his war poems are not only 'unpeopled' for the most part, but they are flat like land observed from the altitude of an airplane. Though technically 'correct' and reasonably well-crafted, even the tribute poems, "For Harper, *Killed in Action*," "For Kelly, *Killed in Action*" and "For Friends Missing in Action" seem remote and mechanically calculated. "Caliban on Spinning," "Caliban in Blue" and "Jet Flight, the Early Years"

in particular demonstrate the phenomenon pilots themselves call "cockpit isolation" caused by the pilot's geographical and emotional distance and concerned quest for the perfection of his skills.

As a pilot seeing little of what actually happens on the ground beneath him, and concentrating on the technicism of his flying and his colleagues, McDonald understandably writes very little about the ground war or the South Vietnamese. "The Food Pickers of Saigon" and "On Planting My First Tree Since Vietnam" only tangentially refer to the destruction on the ground and the plight of the Vietnamese. "After the Noise of Saigon," by far the best poem analyzed in this chapter, is a human and 'humane' poem because it is 'grounded' literally and metaphorically. Being 'grounded,' with Antean connection replacing the enclosure of technocentrism, the persona tries to grope his way toward an understanding of himself and his role in the war in Vietnam. But this is a long process punctuated by painful bouts in which a feeling "rises in [him]/like bad blood [he] need[s] to spill/...alone in the silence/of deep woods." Both the poem and the plight of the persona remain unresolved, however. "If [indeed] where we hunt defines us" as individuals and as a nation, it would appear, though, that he would continue to retreat to the woods to be by himself, and to paradoxically re-enact both his own and his country's course.

Chapter Two: Notes

- ¹ Karl Shapiro, "Battle Report," 3. "Elegy", The Eye (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1953) 43.
- ² Shapiro, "Battle Report," 4. "Walker under Water," The Eye (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1953) 44.
- ³ Shapiro, "Battle Report," 3. "Elegy," The Eye. (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1963) 43.
- ⁴ Shapiro, "Battle Report," 4. "Walker under Water," The Eye (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1953) 44.
- ⁵ Robert Jay Lifton, Home From the War - Vietnam Veterans; Neither Victims nor Executioners (London: Wildwood House, 1974) 346.
- ⁶ Lifton, 355.
- ⁷ Malcolm Browne, The New Face of War (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) 121.
- ⁸ Lifton, 347.
- ⁹ The same exacting standard of performance is found in "Every Pilot Knows" and "First Solo" from Anything Anything (Berkeley: L'Eperview P, 1980), and "Crosswind Landing" from After the Noise of Saigon (Amherst: U Massachusetts P, 1988).
- ¹⁰ Malcolm Browne, in The New Face of War, 10, notes that "Simple declarative sentences are used for communication [when diving or strafing] partly for brevity and partly because the G pressures on pilots are too great for them to say much."
- ¹¹ Lifton, 351.
- ¹² Lifton, 349.
- ¹³ Lifton, 349.
- ¹⁴ Lifton, 349-50.
- ¹⁵ William Shakespeare, The Tempest, Arden ed. The Works of Shakespeare. ed. Frank Kermode, (London: Methuen, 1969) xxxv.
- ¹⁶ Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978) xx.
- ¹⁷ J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962) 17.
- ¹⁸ Malcolm Browne notes in The New Face of War, 124, that: "The pressure of the pull-out was, as usual, absolutely crushing. In fact, a human being is strained close to his physical limits by dive bombing. First, the speed is so great that everything happens in the space of a few seconds. Timing must be perfect. Second, a dive from 15,000 feet almost to sea level in the space of a few seconds produces excruciating pain in the eardrums as the result of the terrific air pressure change. This pain persists throughout the rest of the mission. Third, the downward crush of the pull-out almost paralyzes the lungs, pulls the

flesh on the face downward, and makes arms and legs weigh six or seven times what they normally would. Hands on sticks and throttles and feet on rudder pedals become monstrous weights, and it is all a pilot can do to hold them in place, much less keep them under control in the delicate movements required in a pull-out."

¹⁹ Browne, 125.

²⁰ Robert Jay Lifton, Home From the War - Vietnam Veterans; Neither Victims Nor Executioners (London: Wildwood House, 1974) 127.

²¹ Browne, 132.

²² Browne, 132-134.

²³ James Joyce, "Araby," The Dubliners, Facsimile of Proofs of 1914 Edition, The James Joyce Archive ed. Michael Groden (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977) 37.

²⁴ Joyce, "Araby," 40.

²⁵ Joyce, "Araby," 35.

²⁶ Lifton, 350.

²⁷ Lifton, 350.

²⁸ Lifton, 351.

²⁹ Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978) 153.

³⁰ Caputo, 153.

³¹ Caputo, 153.

³² Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 18.

³³ Olson, 15.

³⁴ Olson, 71.

³⁵ Olson, 71.

³⁶ Browne, 121.

³⁷ Browne, 121.

³⁸ Lifton, 355.

Chapter Three

**"Surrounding Blues on the Way Down":
Descent in the Poetry of Bruce Weigl**

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Descent in the Poetry of Bruce Weigl**

Introduction

Bruce Weigl was born in Lorain, Ohio in 1949. He served with the First Air Cavalry from 1967 to 1968. After returning from Vietnam he attended Oberlin College and later earned an M.A. at the University of New Hampshire. He has taught at the University of Arkansas and Old Dominion University. Currently he teaches at Pennsylvania State University in the Writing Program. He has written five volumes of poetry: Executioner (1976), A Sack Full of Old Quarrels (1976); A Romance (1979), The Monkey Wars (1985) and Song of Napalm (1988). In addition, he is the associate editor of Intervention Magazine, founder and co-editor of the Pocket Pal Press, and editor of The Imagination as Glory: The Poetry of James Dickey and The Giver of Morning: The Poetry of Dave Smith. His poetry, articles, essays and reviews have been published in numerous magazines and journals such as The American Poetry Review, Mother Jones, The Nation, The Ohio Review, and TriQuarterly. Weigl's poetry has been widely anthologized, most recently in The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets. He is the recipient of the Pushcart Prize, The Academy of American Poets Prize, a research grant from Old Dominion University, a Pennsylvania Arts Council Grant, the "Breadloaf Fellowship in Poetry," a YADDO Foundation Fellowship, an award for "Contributions to American Culture" from the Vietnam Veterans of America in 1987, and a grant from the NEA for Creative Writing. ¹

Bruce Weigl is without question one of the finest veteran poets to emerge from the debris of the Vietnam War. Characteristically his poems are hushed and introspective,

displaying a lyrical solitude of shadow and light whether his subject is the war or its aftermath. Amid the body of Vietnam War poetry, in which sweaty invective, red-faced contumacy, strident bitterness, betrayal, sentimentality and nostalgia are all too frequently obligatory ingredients, Weigl's poems are quietly free of explosive emotional charge, unpretentiously remarkable in their steadiness and control. Surely a central quality of his poetry is the balanced restraint manifest in his reliance on the elemental strength of simple diction, lean lines, a powerful sense of an ending, and above all his talent for selecting potent images.

Balanced and restrained, his work is 'haunted' by a handful of recurring, innocuous yet apparitional images (birds, clouds, flowers) that slide in and out of unexpected shadows and recesses at unexpected moments. Weigl's imaginary, poetic response to Vietnam is characterized by this disturbing set of images appropriate for "a world more disturbing " than any we (or he) could conceive. These images present a duality which Caputo calls "mental bisection," ² a phenomenon familiar to many veterans - that being the element of unpredictability inherent in the war, the difference between seeming and being (appearance and reality) caused by the inability to distinguish friend from foe in an essentially civil war, or the inability to tell a coke can from a crude grenade. Survival was predicated on developing an ability to read the war and its danger signs and the alien environment, if not the people (of whom Herr says, "[reading] the faces of the Vietnamese...was like trying to read the wind." ³) Ultimately one either learned to observe and read the 'after image' of threat lingering behind even the most trivial, natural or beautiful aspects of the war, or one was 'taken under' by it. ⁴ In this 'after image' of the war Herr found:

in the back of every column of print you read about Vietnam...was a dripping, laughing death-face; it hid there in the newspapers and magazines and held to your television screens for hours after the set was turned off for the night, an after image that simply wanted to tell you at last what somehow had not been told. [Dispatches, 218]

Weigl's post-war introspective recollection, like carnival mirrors, produces a blurred intensity in which the 'after image' becomes more 'real' than reality: clouds look like orchids that can "swallow you whole"; throwing baseball-fashion is an act of physical aggression; sparrows' wings assume kanji shapes; the squawks of monkeys sound like human language; green is the color of rot and putrescence; shit is another name for oneself; waking and sleeping merge in feverish, ghostly images of Vietnam that glide on birds' wings through the "war-fouled" topographical strata of the self's interior. The James Wright epigram he selected for the version of "Monkey" found in A Romance - "from the horror there rises a musical ache that is beautiful" - is a most apt description of both his poetry and his imagery. Lifting phoenix-like from the war's "horror" these images capture some of the "ache" and act as literary building materials which he uncovers in the ashes of his war experience. The elemental nature of these images is a ghostly reminder of the war in postwar settings.

The defused 'neutrality' of Weigl's images, that is, their uniqueness to neither America nor Vietnam, in particular the bird imagery and associated images of wings, flight and altitude, is an effective vehicle for conveying the rise and fall of the "musical ache" peculiar to his imaginative response to Vietnam. An equally prevalent and appropriate convention is the use of utterances - of trees, birds, monkeys, relatives, Vietnamese, fellow servicemen and his own. The presence of these utterances and his 'interpretive

reading' of them is indicative of his abiding struggle and concern for coherent, exact expression in an effort to 'name,' simplify-translate, order and make sense of the shards of memories cutting through the texture of experience. In a war in which language became a cosmetic on a corpse, Weigl's language is the verbal bones sifted from the ashes of his war. Bleached, examined and wired together like the sea gull's skull and jaw in "Debris," his poems translate the verbal web of the war's rhetoric into manageable, 'digestable bites' in the form of images.

The poems examined in this chapter trace the persona's descending progression through the layers of the self as he experiences the war. In this sense, Weigl's poetry picks up, so to speak, where McDonald's poetry leaves off. McDonald the pilot, and Weigl, of the 1st Air Cavalry, fought radically different wars and this is reflected most graphically in their poems about the war. McDonald's persona never fully addresses or acknowledges the ground war, and because of this, his poems about the war 'hover' above the bitter strife. Weigl's persona, on the contrary, is in the midst of the ground warfare. The descent begins literally and metaphorically with his arrival in Vietnam and his introduction to jungle warfare. Once his helicopter descends for his first taste of combat in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," we can easily track his ever-downward movement through not only the orchid-like clouds, but through the jungle, the physical equivalent of Olson's "upper earth," and then inward to the Melvillian interior of the self.

In effect then, two broad factors may be brought to bear on Weigl's poetry. First is his use of the helicopter and the notion of descent, both the actual process of approaching the ground and landing (as in a helicopter assault), and more

important, the metaphorical descent involving the emotional, psychical plunge to the depth of a Melvillian interior landscape of the self, a descent parallel to aerial descent. It is my contention that the helicopter is literally and figuratively a 'jumping off point' forming the first phase of a long and tumultuous descent from the air above the war down to the ground war and finally, downward and inward to the landscape within the self. Second is the aspect of language, the elemental, 'grounded' language of a deep, interior terrain resembling "a photographic negative, all grays, whites and blacks" which Caputo glimpsed through the crachin of post-war recollection, hovering on the outer fringe of utterance.

The Influence of Helicopters and the Notion of Descent

Helicopters, Herr's "taxis" to the war, were a vital component of the American war effort, betraying the "tacit admission that we [did not] control the ground." ⁵ In The New Face of War Malcolm W. Browne states that

The biggest innovation in helicopter warfare...was the introduction into Viet Nam of an entire helicopter-borne infantry division. This was the U.S. Army's First Cavalry Division (Air Mobile), which began moving into its permanent base near An Khe in the central highlands in late 1965.

The division still was called the "First Cav," and its men still wore the huge yellow and black horsehead shoulder patch used as the unit's emblem since frontier days a century ago. But the horsehead was all that remained of the unit's historic tradition. This was an entirely new concept in warfare, built around the helicopter.

Unlike conventional infantry divisions, the First Cav was issued very few trucks or other heavy equipment. Mobility was to depend on helicopters, not roads. The entire division could be lifted in its own huge fleet of helicopters, most of them Hueys. [84]

For the first time in the history of warfare, mobility, Americans' "one and noble function," was not confined to "roads" across land or water. Through technology, the realm of this

vital "function" was expanded to encompass the skies, using the air as a massive 'corridor' through which war could be waged.

Herr speaks highly of the Air Cav noting that it "was blooded in the Ia Drang" during the autumn of 1965, and calls it "the very best of our divisions," ⁶ its members "the pro's...the elite," whose shoulder patches were "the most comforting military insignia in all of Vietnam." ⁷

In the time required to reach a landing zone, usually fifteen to thirty minutes, helicopter-transported infantrymen like Weigl experienced a "range of extreme, conflicting emotions," as Caputo describes. ⁸ Tremendous control is required to keep one's churning, warring emotions in check. Though this control cannot be maintained for very long, it is, however, reinforced by the soldier's exclusive focus on escape - "All a soldier can think about is the moment when he can escape his impotent confinement and release this tension." ⁹ This is compounded by the fact that he is in a peculiar limbo fidgeting on the brink "between a world of relative stability and one that was wholly unstable; the world where anything could happen at any moment." ¹⁰ In this airborne world of intensities "all other considerations" - ideological or moral- "became so absurd as to be less than irrelevant" ¹¹ and were jettisoned, leaving only the fundamental elements required by the survival instinct - control, resolve and a quest for stability. Similarly, the intensity of Weigl's poetry is controlled, contained in the hush of the ambience he creates. Present also is the desire for escape, or more accurately, release from that which Herr calls the:

memory print, voices and faces, stories like filament through a piece of time, so attached to the experience that nothing moved and nothing went away. [Dispatches, 28]

Weigl's poetry works against this tense stasis. His poems

probe the "filament," as it were, by following it back through the "memory print, voices and faces," thus providing himself with a means of achieving stability and order.

During the literal descent of the helicopter, the infantryman's emotions become inextricably mixed with a set of physical responses to what is happening to him and beneath him. Caputo notices that when the

helicopters started to make a tight circling descent... the mountains on the south side of the valley came into view, then the mountains on the north, flashing in the square frame of the open hatch like photographs on a screen... The force of the turn pressed us against the webbed jump seats. [A Rumor of War, 276]

This rapid descent, usually from a generally safe altitude of 3,000 feet, is when the gravitational force is greatest, a sensation Caputo describes as "a squeezing in [his] guts." ¹² When the landscape is "circling" around one in "flashing" fragments "like photographs on a screen," a type of visual compression occurs in which the 'outside' is reduced to a set of distinct, kaleidoscopic photograph images which one locks onto (as "information printed on the eye" ¹³) in an attempt to regain and maintain one's equilibrium, one's visual balance and orientation. The soldier's reliance on visual images is heightened since engine noise, returned fire, and wind or rain sharply reduce the sounds of ground fire and mortar shells. They also muffle rifle fire to the "Snap. Crackle, Pop" ¹⁴ of breakfast cereal, and create "gray blossoming flowers" ¹⁵ of exploding mortar shells. Since the altitude at which a helicopter begins its most vulnerable period of exposure to enemy fire is seven hundred feet, it seems likely that the extraordinary conflict of emotions and the swirl of visual images punctuating the "uprushing green" would culminate at this level to produce, as Caputo articulates it, the feeling

that "nothing matters except the final, critical instant when he leaps into the violent catharsis he both seeks and dreads."¹⁶

Thus, focused fully on "leaping into" this catharsis to purge himself of the war of emotions within, he plunges into an equally violent war without, 'grounding' himself, as it were, on his much desired but dreaded land. Indeed this sudden release from the claustal confinement of the helicopter and from this barely tolerable, impacted mixture of feelings is a kind of catharsis, but one in which the soldier lunges to the ground emotionally disoriented with the sensation of having undergone a "mental bisection,"¹⁷ visually clotted with the "double exposure"¹⁸ effect of perceiving the frenetic activity around him through a filter of residual images, from moments prior to landing or accumulated from other assaults. The sharp and rapidly coiling compression, followed by the sudden release of the leap-descent, accompanied the while by this phenomenon of "double exposure," creates an amnesia-like lapse, as Caputo testifies: "I couldn't remember how we had gotten to where we were, only jumping out of the helicopter into the muddy water up to our waists."¹⁹ Pumping adrenalin and the flooding "catharsis" causes this 'lapse' in recall. But the infantryman's ground is no haven. "Making history" was an unpleasant element for

...the first American soldiers to fight an enemy whose principal weapons were the mine and the booby trap. That kind of warfare has its own peculiar terrors. It turns an infantryman's world upside down. The foot soldier has a special feeling for the ground. He walks on it, fights on it, sleeps and eats on it; the ground shelters him under fire; he digs his home in it. But mines and booby traps transform that friendly, familiar earth into a thing of menace, a thing to be feared as much as machine guns or mortar shells. The infantryman knows that any moment the ground he is walking on can erupt and kill him...

[A Rumor of War, 272-273]

In this war of booby traps and mines, the Antean security of the ground is destroyed. Even though the foot soldier is

'grounded,' unlike the pilot of an aircraft like McDonald's persona, he is still at a distinct disadvantage because he cannot engage a mine or booby trap in combat, cannot take cover from them or even anticipate their explosion. The soldier becomes a victim, a hostage to the physical necessities of walking, sleeping, eating, his soldierly mandate to find cover and fight a war on two fronts, against the assigned enemy and the prized 'friend' turned maiming, if not lethal, enemy.

This upheaval in ground warfare, inverting the expected 'natural' order of an infantryman's existence, is reinforced by another phenomenon. Seen from a helicopter, objects on the ground increase or decrease in size and detail according to one's altitude. On the ground, aerial breadth of vision is exchanged for enlargement, depth and clarity rendered by detail and proximity. The darkness beneath Vietnam's triple canopy jungles (especially in the central highlands and the Annamese Cordillera) inverted, even eliminated, this 'terrestrial' visibility. Caputo explains that "that claustal effect created by dense forests...dimmed the brightest noon and turned midnight into the absolute blackness known by the blind..."²⁰

Contributing also to the tension and uneasiness the foot soldier experienced at the end of this physical descent into the waking nightmare of Vietnam, "One of the last of the dark regions on earth,"²¹ were the jungle's sounds (or the absence of them), the ghostliness of the jungle, and its claustal power creating the sensation that one is being consumed, a sensation exacerbated by the physical restriction imposed by the dense undergrowth, aspects which Weigl includes in "Monkey," "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map," "Amnesia," and "Burning Shit at An Khe."

If the introduction of the 1st Air Cavalry was a "tacit admission that [America] didn't control the ground," ²² and if the helicopter assault-descent ignited a "inner emotional war"²³ pacified only by the soldier's Antaeus-like contact with the ground, the corresponding metaphorical assault-descent was an 'underground war' taking place in the depths of both the jungle wilderness and the interior wilderness of the individual for whom the jungle becomes the metaphor for both wars.

Just as the helicopter-transported infantryman approaching the ground notices when he "[crosses] that line between a world of relative stability and one that was wholly unstable,"²⁴ he also observes, even though there was "no front in this war," when he had "crossed an undefined line between the secure zone and what the troops [called] 'Indian country.'" ²⁵ The infantryman's physical, literal helicopter descent prefigures the descent to the inner, jungled wilderness of the self; the claustrophobia within the helicopter and the gravitational force and pull of mechanized descent becomes the physical restriction of the jungle, the struggle to contain and bear the airborne war of emotions becomes the struggle against the confining nature of the jungle.

During the helicopter descent, the reduction to less than absurd irrelevancies of all emotional, ideological and moral contingencies to the cathartic necessity for release and escape from the chopper corresponds to the sole focus on escaping, surviving the ground war, while the swirl of freeze frame "photographs" perceived from the air correlate with the recollection of only isolated, unrelated images strung together like film negative separated by the "clicks" of selective memory. ²⁶

Weigl's poems about the war may be construed as a series

of "clicks," each one marking a step of the Melvillian notion of a descent inward to what Kaiko would consider "the belly of the whale," that cavernous space which Olson tells us was imploded within Americans once the Great Plain were crossed leaving the Pacific as the next frontier to be confronted.

Moreover, if "Out There" and "Beyond,"²⁷ the terms the Vietnamese use to refer to the Annamese Cordillera (the location of Vietnam's thickest, most formidably hostile jungles), are inverted, as we have discovered the ground was inverted for the infantryman, and if, as Eliade notes, "The beyond is also the place of knowledge and of wisdom,"²⁸ 'In Here' and 'Within' become fitting labels for the interior, Melvillian landscape of the foot soldier. His interior landscape shares many characteristics with its external counterpart, as indicated by Caputo in the Prologue to A Rumor of War when he states:

It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush, an ethical as well as a geographical wilderness. Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state. The descent could be checked only by the net of a man's inner moral values, the attribute that is called character. [xx]

The safety net of "character" braked one's descent through this interior and exterior wilderness. Without such a net one could 'hump' through too many "of those levels" leading to "the place where an inversion of the expected order happened, a fabulous warp where you took the journey first and then you made your departure,"²⁹ as with the third tour 'Lurp' Herr nicknames "Ocean Eyes" after having timidly stolen a quick glance into the man's eyes, likening what he saw in them to "looking at the floor of the ocean."³⁰ This pair of eyes had seen the Melvillian "wondrous depths" in "the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush."

Weigl, like most infantrymen, was able to reach within and probe his "inner moral values" to reach the "place the war made for you that was all yours," discovering that "finding it was like listening to esoteric music," ³¹ music he makes intelligible for readers through the mediative transposition into poetry. This "place" is the saturating jungle correlative of Melville's "ocean's utmost bones" ³² ; it is 'In Here,' submerged in the "unbearably spooky" ³³ underworld of the jungle where the "strange shapes of the unwarped primal world" ³⁴ took the fleeting form of 'phantom' enemies; where darkness not only blinds, but becomes a Conradian 'heart of darkness,' "a void... the sun's opposite, the source and center of all the darkness in the world," ³⁵ the "Kagayakeru Yami," the 'brilliant, shining darkness' of Kaiko's Vietnam vortex swirling at the bottom of Americans' hearts.

The combination of Caputo's "clicks" and the safety net of character provide Weigl with a type of 'map' with which to navigate a psychical path through his war-time experience. With the elemental simplicity and trueness of a compass, these two integral components can be depended upon to give true 'readings'; both are necessities in this "dawn of creation" in both the interior and exterior wilderness in a country where there was "no country...but the war." ³⁶ In a country that "doesn't exit," ³⁷ as 'grunt' argot put it, any tactical, geographical map was useless and irrelevant, as Caputo and Herr both repeatedly testify.

Herr's French map, though it was not "real anymore" by U.S. military standards, "buckled in its frame...laying a kind of veil over the countries it depicted," ³⁸ could just as easily, accurately and relevantly have been considered "CURRENT" ³⁹ as were those maps used by MACV, since

even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind. [Dispatches, 3]

This inability to 'read' maps stems from the fact that "it had been a military expediency to impose a new set of references over Vietnam's older, truer being," ⁴⁰ because this set of references not only divided the country in half and created "four clearly defined tactical corps," but

effectively obliterated even some of the most obvious geographical distinctions [as] it made for more effective communication, at least among members of the Mission and the many components of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, the fabulous MACV. [Dispatches, 92]

It is to counter such fictional maps, totally devoid of reality, that Herr carefully notes the actual location and character of I Corps and the Highlands, stressing that his "insistence on placing Khe Sanh there is much more than some recondite footnote to a history of that sad place"; it was his attempt to restore reality and integrity, to render Khe Sanh's "special evocations" with the veracity, accuracy and dignity it deserves.

In essence, Caputo's A Rumor of War serves the same purpose detailing the breach between the reality of a GI's experience and MACV's Barthesian 'naturalization' where the ground war's "tangled jungle was merely a smear of green ink and all the hills were flat." ⁴¹ The Vietnam to which military administrators referred with their 'fabulous' maps 'didn't exist,' ⁴² but for most GI's, another Vietnam did indeed exist in retrospect in the individual's idiosyncratic maps which were infinitely more accurate and reliable as a means of navigating their experiences.

Like Herr's National Geographic map, personalized with "real places," made real by "the complex of faces, voices and

movements that gathered around" each "dot" and "cross," Weigl's poems form a composite map of Vietnam through the nocturnal, interior terrain of 'In Here' in response to the war's events 'Out There.' Each of Weigl's poems serves as a 'blow up,' as it were, of particular 'faces,' or 'movements' where 'voices' are translated and transposed, much as a composer rewrites a musical composition into a different key, from the interior night (his 'truest medium,') into the shadowy half light of memory.

Unlike Caputo, who peppers A Rumor of War with literary references from a large body of war literature from Beowulf to the trench poets of World War I in an attempt to navigate a course through his experiences by demonstrating how miserably these literary reference points fail to provide a useable, relevant map from which to read his experiences, Weigl abandons such conventions. He deems it more appropriate to operate within a personal, private, 'truer' interior, and previously uncharted landscape (like that of "Temple near Quang Tri, Not on the Map") devoid of all such 'landmarks,' and prefers to orient himself within this setting to navigate and 'map' it for himself. It might be said that his poems chronicle his charting of the "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" as he journeys downward and inward through the layers of his war. In a sense, this jettisoning of previous wars' literary conventions is in keeping with another act of abandonment due to obsolescence with which Weigl would have been familiar. As Malcolm Browne notes, all that remained of the 1st Cavalry's "historic tradition" was the "huge yellow and black horsehead shoulder patch used as the unit's emblem since frontier days a century" earlier. Just as the "Cav" eschewed horses and roads for helicopters and the skies, Weigl abandons the American literary tradition of the "open road"

for the 'inroads' of his interior landscape of his war and his memory of it. Just as the helicopter gave rise to an entirely new concept of warfare, the Vietnam War opened up an entirely new 'underground frontier' of poetry that was as emblematic (in even an etymological sense) of the war as the Air Cav's shoulder patch is of the unit's former equine tradition. His poems are guideposts marking with accuracy, veracity and dignity, his progress along a passageway of his own making, a 'road' he 'opens' as he proceeds along the inverted Vietnam version of Whitman's "open road."

The Poetry of Descent

Perhaps the best poem to analyze first is "Amnesia," from The Monkey Wars, since it demonstrates the operation of descent and the attendant 'compression,' and its effects on the poem resulting in Weigl's usage of particular images, utterances, economic style of simple diction and line sense.

"Amnesia" is not a surprising title for a poem about the Vietnam War. Herr remarks about his "mind slip and memory play," ⁴³ and Caputo makes repeated mention of the fact that he cannot remember a sequence of given events or what happened during particular periods of his tour. In Meditations in Green, Stephen Wright's protagonist, Griffin, notes advancing amnesia during a night attack as he, Claypool, Noll and Trips sit atop a bunker watching the distant display of a firefight:

...even these ghosts [after images hanging like movie ghosts] possessed more form, solidity, and permanence than the rapidly vanishing real objects and beings of Griffin's prewar existence. And each time he witnessed another raw incident like tonight's (the bodies by the road, the ragged line of blindfolded wounded prisoners shuffling from truck to cell) his past took on more and more of the insubstantial characteristics of fantasy. The war was real; he was not. It was like memory, and therefore his most profound sense of self was a tub of tepid water into which chunks of rock (the war) fell almost daily now in wide splashes, spilling his past and his life onto a cold black-and-white linoleum floor.

Griffin couldn't help but wonder what the displacement would be equal to finally. [180-181]

In "Amnesia," however, it is not his Vietnam experiences that the persona cannot remember, so much as his inability to remember anything comparable with Vietnam: "If there was a world more disturbing than this...You don't remember." In the first of the two brief stanzas, we do not know, initially, whether the persona is located in Vietnam or America.

If there was a world more disturbing than this
Where black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole
And overgrown tropical plants
Rotted, effervescent in the muggy twilight and monkeys
Screamed something
That came to sound like words to each other
Across the triple-canopy jungle you shared,
You don't remember it.

It is as though he is simultaneously recalling the "disturbing" "world" of Vietnam in the war's aftermath, while trying (when he was in Vietnam) to remember any experiences or characteristics of "The World" ⁴⁴ that were "more disturbing than" those of Vietnam. If we take the first half of this double location, that he is recollecting the war from its aftermath in America, stanza one demonstrates the power of compression present in his amnesia. War, the cause of this amnesia, erases any memory of people, combat, death, suffering or destruction; amnesia has reduced all to this synthesized jungle vignette, an alien environment that consumes everything including one's memory of anything as "disturbing," dwarfing, if not obliterating, any bad experiences prior to Vietnam. Stanza two, then, revolves around the ease with which the amnesia itself is recalled, how vividly the sinking, swallowed-up feeling returns, so much so that he must command himself to reject it - "You tell yourself no and cry a thousand days." But even this command is less successful than the regenerative power of his imagination, the best instrument

to deal with the amnesia and the cause of it.

If we approach the poem using the second half of the double location, that he is in Vietnam, stanza one concerns his inability to dredge up anything as devastating as Vietnam. Being swallowed whole by Vietnam erases all memory of any other "world"; he cannot project himself out of the jungle, cannot rise, leap or flee from its decaying, humid darkness. He is enveloped by the blackness of the clouds and the black blankness of amnesia. Stanza two becomes a denial of his presence in this alien locale. With will power, tears and an act of imagination he attempts to transform the jungle's rotting, perpetual summer into the dying of autumn, the "screams" of monkeys to "calling" crows, despair to 'usefulness,' comradeship, a sense of belonging and orderliness, leaving the reader with the sense that, given time, he will find the "strength and will" enabling him to make himself a "useful," organic part of a world ordered by his imagination.

The most appropriate 'precis' of the poem, however, overlaps both of the above views, producing a variant of Caputo's "mental bisection," a poetic flicker alternating between an amnesic response to America while the poet is in Vietnam, and an amnesic response to Vietnam after returning to America. Examined from this vantage point, the movement of the poem becomes visible in that the reader may 'watch' the poet's descent into the amnesia he describes.

A quick glance at the poem's format on the page shows it to be top heavy, with eight lines in stanza one and six lines in stanza two. Also, the overall line length gradually shortens as one moves from the long breath of the sparsely punctuated first stanza into the second stanza with its progressively shorter lines. This format contributes significantly to the funneling effect of the descent into both

amnesia and the jungle. The mass of the first stanza pulls the reader down into the "muggy twilight" of the jungle where predatory "black clouds" descend and "swallow you whole," where "over-grown tropical plants" monstrous to Western, alien eyes, 'rot' and 'effervesce' in an atmosphere of putrefaction that envelops one in an unnatural feeling of stagnation and stasis beneath the cover of "the triple canopy jungle."

Caputo notes that "Everything rotted and corroded quickly over there: bodies, boots, leather, canvas, metal, morals." ⁴⁵ I would add memory to this list of items sustaining damage by rot, effervescence and corrosion; memory is contained within and insulted by the utter otherness of the environment, and is sealed off from everything that is familiar. The oppressive and threatening atmosphere is contained by three imposing layers of canopy foliage. Serving as a massive lid, this canopy cages the persona, as it does the monkeys with whom he 'shares' the jungle. He shares more than common ground with these monkeys, even though he is an alien in their natural habitat. Like him, they are primates. They rely on instinct for survival and they possess a language in which they "scream something/That came to sound like words." He recognizes that their "screams" mean "something" as they shout "to each other/Across" the jungle, but he is unable to understand or translate their utterances that "came to sound like words" to him. Reduced to sharing the wilderness with fellow primates, he feels that he is either approaching their animal state, since monkey utterances have become so unnervingly word-like, or that he has sunk below the primate level of language utterance and comprehension, thus increasing not only his alienation, but driving him deep within an internal wilderness similar to what Herr describes as "a remote but accessible space where there were no ideas, no emotions, no facts, no proper language," ⁴⁶ prayerful because

the meaning was "impossible to convey because it got translated outside of language, into chaos." 47

The terse power of stanza two is generated from the "mental bisection" of the Vietnamese and the American experience.

You tell yourself no and cry a thousand days.
You imagine the crows calling autumn into place
Are your brothers and you could
If only the strength and will were there
Fly up to them to be black
And useful to the wind.

Whether we regard it as his desire to part the canopy and lift himself out from beneath its lid-like containment and escape the jungle and his amnesia, or whether it is construed as an episodic experience in the war's aftermath, this stanza is the fulcrum of the poem. It offers a modicum of release and relief, if not hope, represented by Weigl's reliance on his personal set of conventions, namely the importance of language as a 'compass' with which to navigate a course through the morass of both the internal and external jungles.

Interestingly, the second stanza's effect is rooted in stanza one. The immutable, unnatural summer of the tropical world is contrasted against seasonal change, incomprehensible monkey screams are transmuted to "crows calling autumn into place." Autumn, a transitional season, is a time of change and death, ordering itself as a quarter of the seasonal cycle in the temperate world. As such, it may signify a transition in the persona's own 'seasonal' adaptation to the fact Herr points out, that "This [was] already a long time ago, I can remember the feelings but I can't still have them." 48

A significant aspect of this seasonal-personal ordering process is that the monkeys become crows in the second stanza. The monkeys, with whom he shares not only the jungle, but the evolutionary scale, and to whom he should feel

'closer' than the crows, contribute nothing, except screeches bearing uncanny resemblance to human speech, to help him cope with his experience. Their language teeters on the edge of intelligibility suggesting his descent on the evolutionary scale. The crows, unlike the monkeys, are not only evolutionarily distant from him, but they affect both the season and the persona. They do not emit shrill, piercing cries of pain, fright, anger or alarm matching the high-pitched tension the jungle generates in the intruder; instead the crows "call" in a language both he and autumn understand to be appropriate, natural and harmonious as their utterances bring the autumn and him "into place," within an organically ordered world. Perhaps it is because he understands exactly what the crows are 'calling' that induces him, through this welcome and direly needed intelligibility, to "imagine" them as his "brothers." The pivotal word is "imagine." He can safely and securely imagine the crows as his brothers, but he realizes that more than imagination is required to make the leap to the freedom he imagines they embody: "If only the strength and will were there" he could "Fly up to them to be black/And useful to the wind."

With this closing line Weigl again uses the color black to form the last half of a 'bookend' or 'framing' effect begun in the second line of the first stanza. In the first stanza the "black clouds" are towering threats that reduce him to the level of small, impotently passive quarry, but in the next to the last line of the second stanza the clouds' baleful blackness is imaginatively transmuted to the benevolently familiar black of a flock of crows. This blackness is more than an absence of color on an ordinary bird with a gregarious nature; it is "useful to the wind," and he imagines its healing, releasing usefulness to him. "To be black/And

useful to the wind" vaguely suggests on one level the desire to surrender to the blackness as though he were ashes caught up and swirled away by the wind. But there is too much energy and vitality symbolized by the companionable crows to allow this credibility. "To be black" simultaneously indicates his desire to lose himself in the darkness of amnesia and to be like the crows, to be able to lift himself off the earth he came to know too well as a place of unnatural confinement in Vietnam. If he could "Fly up to them," he could merge with them and be as "useful" as they are in "calling autumn into place"; he could then truly call himself their "brother" because he would enjoy the organically healing integration, purposefulness and order of simple, elemental nature, and find freedom from the memory and amnesia that weigh heavily upon him.

Regenerative flight is indeed accomplished and poetic imagination is the vehicle. "Amnesia" seeks to reach and establish a "useful" balance or equilibrium between amnesia and memory, descent and ascent, compression and liberation, chaos and order. Though the persona claims the lack of requisite "strength and will," this does not connote bleakness or despair, since the existence of the poem is a tribute to the dynamism of the imagination. Despite the fact that the first stanza gives the poem a top-heaviness that presses us downward into the jungle and beneath what Charles Olson terms a man's "upper earth," the strength of the second stanza withstands the compressive weight, pushing upward, as it were, against experiences in the 'disturbing world' of Vietnam. The descent into the primordial wilderness of Vietnam and the self may 'rot' and 'corrode' many things, as Caputo reminds us, but that which remains is pared down, hardened, honed and burnished.

"Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," republished in The Monkey Wars, contrasts with "Amnesia" first because it depicts a specific incident in film-clip fashion that occurred shortly after the persona reached Vietnam, rather than a synthesized, composite of experience symbolized by the jungle in the war's aftermath. Second, there are three 'portraits' set forth in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" where there are no people in "Amnesia" who have not been consumed by the jungle-war. But as in "Amnesia," Weigl uses a more clearly defined literal and figurative notion of descent and some of the same versatile imagery, in addition to the fundamental (and painful) advantage of line manipulation to achieve the maximum effect. The poem is presented here in its entirety:

I was barely in country.
We slipped under rain black clouds
Opening around us like orchids.
He'd come to take me into the jungle
So I felt the loneliness
Though I did not yet hate the beautiful war.
Eighteen years old and a man
Was telling me how to stay alive
In the tropics he said would rot me -

Brothers of the heart he said and smiled
Until we came upon a mama san
Bent over from her stuffed sack of flowers.
We flew past her but he hit the brakes hard,
He spun the tires backwards in the mud.
He did not hate the war either,
Other reasons made him cry out to her
So she stopped,
She smiled her beetle black teeth at us.
In the air she raised her arms.

I have no excuse for myself.
I sat in that man's jeep in the rain
And watched him slam her to her knees,
The plastic butt of his M-16
Crashing down on her.
I was barely in country, the clouds
Hung like huge flowers, black
Like her teeth.

The first line of the poem, "I was barely in country," prepares us for an initiatory experience with "barely" meaning not only 'scarcely' or 'only just,' but emotionally and

psychically bare, unprotected, unprepared, uncalloused, plainly and simply empty of prejudgments (as we discover in the line, "Though I did not yet hate the beautiful war.") The second and third lines, "We slipped under rain black clouds/Opening around us like orchids," richly echo with reverberations from "Amnesia" ("Black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole") and "Burning Shit at An Khe" ("black smoke curdled" and "I slipped and climbed/Out of that hole and ran.") These two lines reveal that he is in an aircraft, probably a helicopter, that is descending through thick cloud cover that "[opens] around us," dilating to receive them. Here, however, because he is newly "in country," these clouds possess an exotic beauty to his inexperienced eye.

That he compares the clouds to orchids is highly significant in light of line 7, "Eighteen years old and a man." Orchid comes from the Greek word 'orchis' meaning testicle, suggested by the shape of the flower's root. In this sense the eighteen year old "man," who has come to collect him and serve as his initiator, will make a man of him. Also, there exists a species of purplish-black orchid which resembles the bruised color of tropical rain clouds. This, together with the etymological derivation of the word orchid, creates a potent impression of the punishing process of initiation he is about to undergo in which manhood, machismo, strength and virility are measured by one's capacity to brutalize the defenseless.

Lines 4 through 6, "He's come to take me into the jungle/So I felt the loneliness/Though I did not yet hate this beautiful war," render two slightly different meanings, depending on whether one pauses at the natural but unpunctuated break at the end of line 4. If one pauses here, line 5 indicates that the initiator, who has come to get him,

wants to impart to the 'new guy' the "loneliness" and isolation one experiences in this war, that it would be easier for the persona to have a companion with whom he could make the necessary adjustments to the war environment. If, however, we read through line 5, and proceed directly through line 6 to the period, a slightly different meaning and feeling emerges from line 5, "So I felt the loneliness." The prospect of being "taken into the jungle" is a fear-inspiring, culturally-laden experience, one that replaces everything familiar with the wild, living energy of a totally alien environment. Hence, in fearful anticipation of encountering a host of unknown factors, he experiences the lonely, solitary feeling of knowing neither his initiator-guide nor the 'world' into which he will be 'taken.' "Though," in line 6, hints at his inkling, even before he learns it, that this "loneliness" is an integral part of the war, and with "yet," he tells us that he will hate the war and continue to hate it long afterward. "Beautiful war" is perhaps based on the exoticism of the orchid-cloud simile, perhaps even on a culturally charged notion, like that of Caputo's, that fighting a war in a remote, tropical country was somehow romantic.

As with lines 4 through 6, these last three lines offer two meanings, both being equally valid. First, we can infer that the persona is an eighteen year old boy who is told "how to stay alive" by "a man," his 'guide.' If this is the case, the persona, in retrospect, seems to believe that eighteen was far too young for such an initiatory ritual. Or, second, we may assume, as mentioned above, that the guide-initiator is "eighteen years old and a man." The meaning here is much more caustic: the old salt, the voice of experience in the jungle, the war, its weaponry and its senseless brutality, is "telling [him] how to stay alive" by giving him the special skills and knowledge of survival in the "tropics he said would rot me." The

evidence of this comes in the third and final stanza where we discover the extent to which the tropics have rotted the character of the 'old hand.' "Rot" also embodies a double entendre here: the tropics can decompose the persona's misguided and naive notion of the war's beauty, as well as disabuse him of the notion that this "man" speaking to him is an authority, that in fact the "man's" morals have succumbed to the jungle rot he warns his charge about, a condition the persona will strive to avoid.

The dash at the end of the first stanza is significant since it presents an unknown element dangling, as it were, inducing the newly arrived GI (and the reader) to wonder what the effects of this mysterious 'rot' might be. It also suggests that the guide will show the persona, by example, the meaning of his sagacious comment and just what it is that constitutes survival in the tropics.

In the first three lines of stanza two - "Brothers of the heart he said and smiled/Until we came upon a mama san/Bent over from her stuffed sack of flowers" - the guide seems to be reassuring him against any encroaching fears, misgivings or apprehensions. "Brothers of the heart" implies that they would become closely linked through his fraternal benevolence, that through his protective guidance, the persona could hope to stave off the "rot." With this heartening cheer he "smiled/Until [they] came upon a mama san." The critical word here is "Until," cleverly and effectively placed at the beginning of the line, lulling both the persona and the reader into thinking that this was a "man" on whom one could rely for his wisdom and expertise. But "Until" rapidly changes this impression of steadfast brotherhood and good-natured helpfulness. When he sees "a mama san" these qualities evaporate during the time it takes to "hit the

brakes hard" and "[spin] the tires backwards in the mud."

"Mama san," a pejorative term used to describe a woman, is a carry-over from World War II when it was used by American servicemen as a term for a madam or a barmaid. This pseudo-Japanese word for mother is indicative of a racially prejudiced view which holds that any (abusive) term in any Asian language is a suitable appellation for any Asian. Though "mama" has been adopted by the Japanese, "Okaasan" is the most commonly used word for mother. Ironically, "san" is a Japanese suffix of respect for the person to whose name or position it is attached. The use of "san" here creates a cruelly twisted counterpoint to the scene that is about to unfold.

She is "Bent over from her stuffed sack of flowers." Seeing her weighed down by heavy flowers, part of "the beautiful war," the persona seems to marvel at the fact that she can sell flowers to others who appreciate and seek the beauty of flowers in the midst of war. Her "stuffed sack" is proof of the bounty of the tropics, intimating the fertility of the land and the woman, and harks back to the orchids in stanza one. But this subtle suggestion of growth and procreation refers to the sinister, burgeoning recurrence of animosity in the "man" driving the jeep. "We flew past her but he hit the brakes hard, /He spun the tires backwards in the mud" as though stopping to harass her was an afterthought on the part of the driver. The roughness of his driving - the speed and the hard braking - foreshadows his treatment of the "mama san," (and resonates with the speeding rumble of the convoy and the impulsive action of the "guy" in "The Last Lie" who lobs a C-ration can at a child.)

"He did not hate the war either, /Other reasons made him cry out to her" are troublesome lines. Perhaps they reflect the persona's belief in the guide's statement that they are

"brothers of the heart," that later he came to understand what those "other reasons" were that motivated the driver: the same seething rage within the C-ration pitcher in "The Last Lie," the sudden urge to demonstrate his eighteen-year old manliness to the newcomer, sadistic, bullying malevolence. Whatever the "reasons" were, hating the war apparently is not one of them, but he hates her for evoking this action - perhaps in response to the beauty and abundance of her flowers. Perhaps his action is prompted by the desire to savage beauty, prevent its proliferation. Perhaps he did not even know what he was about to do until he did it. His "cry" seems to indicate uncertainty, as though something unintended escaped from him, something he would rather not have displayed and feels weakened and shamed by its sudden, involuntary exposure. Perhaps he even resents the innocence of the new arrival and wants to besmirch it by immediately brutalizing him by pistol whipping the woman. Regardless of the complexity of motivations that "made him cry out to her/So she stopped," the reader, like the new GI, still has no idea of what to expect once the jeep and the woman have stopped: is the driver going to buy flowers from her, warn her of danger, search her, rape her, kill her? The woman does not know what to expect either: "She smiled her beetle black teeth at us."

The phenomenon of the oriental smile is an automatic response to strangers, especially foreigners, and frequently evoked irritation, if not abuse. (As Herr states about the dying ARVN who smiled at the photographers and TV cameraman, "the Vietnamese did that when they were embarrassed by the nearness of foreigners." 49) "Beetle black teeth" creates a macabre image for Americans obsessed with white, straight teeth. The pun on beetle/betel is significant. Betel (which may be spelled 'beetle') is a climbing pepper plant of Asia.

Its leaf, along with the fruit (the betel nut) of the betel palm is chewed by some Asians. Doing so badly discolors the teeth and makes them appear grossly decayed.

"In the air she raised her arms" concludes the second stanza and seems to be a deliberate manipulation to keep the reader as unprepared as the persona for what follows, since a more conventional phrase such as 'she raised her hands in the air' would immediately alert the reader that the driver was pointing his rifle at her. Even the first line of the last stanza, "I have no excuse for myself," keeps the actual incident veiled with the simple, flat statement of fact regarding the persona's culpability. It also raises the question of whether the driver could or should be excused for his act of brutality.

"I sat in that man's jeep in the rain/And watched him slam her to her knees,/The plastic butt of his M-16/Crashing down on her," finally discloses the incident only three lines from the end of the poem. The persona has found himself guilty of collusion through his own inaction ("I sat in that man's jeep"), voyeurism ("And watched him"), and lack of protest ("I was barely in country"). The initiator "[slams] her" (in the same way he "hit the brakes hard") "to her knees" to assume an attitude of supplication, obedience, even prayer so that he may demonstrate his 'manly' power to control, discipline and dominate the woman, to command her kneeling, respectful submission. The M-16 rifle becomes the phallic symbol of his potency. "The plastic butt" of the weapon, however, undermines his eighteen year old manhood. The M-16 automatic rifle's plastic butt made it not only very light weight (compared with its forerunners, the M-14 and M-1), but toy-like. It was sometimes called a "Matty Mattel (gee, it's swell!)" after a toy of the same name. The image of an older

woman carrying a "stuffed sack of flowers" being bludgeoned with a plastic-butted toy-like rifle wielded by this "man" is charged with explosive sexual frenzy, and were it not shocking, it would be pathetically humorous.

The repetition of the first line - "I was barely in country" - displays not only the persona's lack of protest, as mentioned above, but his stunned amazement at the speed with which the event unfolded. Two additional words - "the clouds" - combined with the repeated line suggest confusion, that things are happening too fast for him to be able to absorb their full impact. In a sense this is similar to Caputo's description of the spiraling descent of a 'chopper' and the photographic compression and speed of up-rushing images of the landscape. Interestingly, these clouds (unlike the "rain black clouds/ Opening around us/like orchids" in stanza one) "Hung like huge flowers, black/Like her teeth." Now that he is on the ground, the rain clouds are "hung" over him, looming ominously (and thus foreshadowing their predatoriness in "Amnesia") instead of "opening...like orchids." Furthermore, these clouds, "hung" as they are, like orchid-testicles signify 'maturity,' completion of the ritual initiation, or pure repugnance at the realization that manhood in the tropics, as defined by the "man," means senseless, unprovoked violence. Though the orchids of the first stanza have now been transmuted to simply 'black flowers' in general, the presence of the woman predominates, leaving the reader not only ignorant of the woman's fate, but with the sense that the persona has indeed been taken "into the jungle" without leaving the jeep.

"Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" is a powerful poem. The title indicates the phenomenon of descent, both the aerial descent to the ground (in stanza one) and, in the initiation process, the first stage of the spiritual-psychical

descent taking the persona downward as he watches the attack on the woman. "Surrounding" would then refer to the consuming nature of these two types of descent through "rain black clouds/Opening around us," thus bringing him closer to the "net of a man's inner moral values" to convey the sense of being unavoidably 'taken in' and 'surrounded' by the 'clouds' that upset, confuse and even obfuscate the normal equilibrium of values and morals, and the general terms of one's existence. "Blues" connotes the slow tempo of the "musical ache" (like that of the Wright epigram for the poem, "Monkey") of sadness and depression caused by his descent into this "beautiful war," into an uncharted part of himself that was as unfamiliar as the jungle.

"The Last Lie," from The Monkey Wars, serves as a companion piece to "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down." As part of a wartime bildungsroman, this poem may be viewed as the next phase of the descending journey into the jungle of emotional conflicts created by the war since both poems concern sudden, unexplained, unprovoked attacks on civilians, the inaction of the voyeuristic persona who remembers the episodes with despairing self-recrimination, and the division of his empathy for both the American assailant and the female victim. Structurally similar to "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," "The Last Lie" is also composed of three stanzas. But where the first stanza of "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" focuses on both the persona and his fellow soldier-initiator, the first stanza of "The Last Lie" concerns the nameless "guy" and his cruel behavior, the second stanzas deals with the initiator ("Surrounding Blues on the Way Down") and the child ("The Last Lie"), and the third stanzas center on the persona's reaction to what he has witnessed.

Some guy in the miserable convoy

Raised up in the back of our open truck
And threw a can of c-rations at a child
Who called into the rumble for food.

In the first line, the anonymity of "some guy" is reinforced by the equally anonymous "miserable convoy," the group of trucks carrying troops. Presumably the persona is saying that the GIs in the convoy are "miserable." But as it stands, the phrase suggests that these are vehicles of misery bearing those who are miserable. As with the suddenness of the initiator's unpremeditated outburst of cruelty, apparently triggered by the appearance of the "mama san" in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," this "guy" "raised up" to a standing position "in the back of our truck" when he spotted "the child." We do not know whether he had prepared a supply of cans to lob at any children "Who called into the rumble for food," or whether he was suddenly gripped by the urge once he saw and heard her. The third stanza, however, strongly suggests the latter in relatively neutral terms, though the word "at" instead of "to" prepares us for the intentional viciousness detailed in the last three lines of the stanza:

He didn't toss the can, he wound up and hung it
On the child's forehead and she was stunned
Backwards into the dust of our trucks.

That this particular child "called" into "the rumble" of the "miserable convoy" of dispirited, spitefully embittered soldiers is also a significant selection in diction. She "called," she did not 'beg,' 'shout' or 'plead.' This suggests that she and the group of children she was with were not begging, but had, perhaps, been alerted by the noise, and out of curiosity, had gathered to watch the large group of passing trucks full of foreigners, and were hopeful of acquiring a handout, once they realized that the deep, continuous rolling sound of the "rumble" was produced by troop carriers and not

by other heavy equipment.

"Rumble," an American slang term for a fight between rival teen-aged gangs, also contributes to the violent tension of the scene, and is suggested again in the second stanza when the girl is "mobbed" by the other children.

The graphic description of the manner in which the child gets the C-ration relies on baseball terminology for part of its 'impact.' Instead of 'tossing' the can, the "guy" "wound up," like a baseball pitcher cocking a leg to put as much power as possible behind his 'overhand' pitch, then "hung it" forcefully and accurately (in the practiced fashion that comes from hours spent on a pitcher's mound) "On the child's forehead." Not surprisingly, "she was stunned" by the concussive blow of the metal can and fell "backwards." But according to the popular image of the GI in previous wars, the entire incident is 'backward': news reels, photographs and the printed media were once enamored of the child-loving troopers who tousled hair and handed out chocolate and chewing gum, but this image is toppled "into the dust of [their] trucks" in Vietnam. To this soldier, the child is like the dust stirred up by the passing trucks, and like the dust, she falls in the wake of the convoy.

In the second stanza the persona continues to watch the child:

Across the sudden angle of the road's curving
I could still see her when she rose
Waving one hand across her swollen, bleeding head,
Wildly swinging her other hand
At the children who mobbed her,
Who tried to take her food.

A residue of subtle baseball imagery, the result of the persona being "stunned" by the event, filters through his shock in these lines. As though he had watched "across" the

expanse of a baseball diamond, he sees "the road's" "sudden angle...curving" away from the scene like the path a curve ball takes when pitched to the batter.

Baseball imagery is as typically American as the "road" these soldiers are travelling. Though evocative of Whitman's "open road" of harmony, progress, brotherly 'adhesiveness,' adventure and opportunity leading across continental America and the Pacific to Asia, this Vietnamese road, like the sudden and unexpected swerve of the curve ball, takes an equally unexpected turn though the persona "could still see" the child "when she rose" from the "dust." The girl "rose/Waving one hand" (in a pathetic and inadvertantly imitative parody of her assailant who had "raised up" from the truck and had "wound up" his pitching arm) "across her swollen, bleeding head" while "wildly swinging" (like a frenzied batter) "her other hand/At the children who mobbed her,/Who tried to take her food." Despite being 'mobbed' and gashed on the head, she is successful in holding onto the can, just as the pitcher had been successful in his aim.

In the final stanza the persona reveals the lingering pain, frustration and anger this memory gives him:

I grit my teeth to myself to remember that girl
Smiling as she fought off her brothers and sisters.

Used in a single line, the triad of pronouns, "I," "my," "myself," expresses the depth of the persona's reaction to this incident. "I grit my teeth" reveals his containment of emotional outrage, with "to myself" indicating that he is unable to express this outrage in any other manner save through the private vent of poetry. As he "[remembers] that girl," he is struck anew by the startling incongruity of her reaction to the event - "Smiling as she fought off her brothers and sisters./She laughed/As if she thought it were a

joke." Here, as in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," is the Asian smile and laugh that seem so bafflingly out of place and so easily misconstrued as to confound most Westerners. At the risk of seeming callous, I suggest that the child's smile and laugh are quite normal under the circumstances. Most of us have been embarrassed, if not humiliated in front of others, and we automatically smile to counter our discomfort. Being knocked down, even by a flying C-ration can, amidst one's peers is no different, hence her smile. Furthermore, if one has ever seen a group of children in a Third World country good-naturedly jabbing and teasing each other as they jockey for a prime position at a market place, train station or simply beside a road where they expect people (especially foreigners) or equipment to pass by, one will notice that these children are extraordinarily street wise. They tend to gather at such places for the entertainment value, with only a vague expectation of receiving any handouts. Those few, such as the girl in this poem, who are fortunate enough to get something are delighted with their booty. Regardless of how the child receives it, irrespective of the grabbing, tussling attempts of others to wrest it from her hands, she clutches the prize and smiles and laughs her success "At the children who [mob] her, /Who [try] to take her food," "as if she thought it were a joke" on them for their loss.

But whether the persona is misreading the meaning of the girl's reaction is secondary since he is shocked and outraged by his compatriot's behavior and by the child's apparent lack of 'appropriate' response to the intentional cruelty of it. The two words, "She laughed," form a line calculated to impart the absurd reality of the situation's horror, as interpreted by the persona.

The lines

And the guy with me laughed
And fingered the edge of another can
Like it was the seam of a baseball

bring the 'pitcher' back into focus as one malicious child persecuting a younger, smaller child in a ghastly baseball burlesque. "Fingering the edge of another can," as though it were a baseball seam, is almost an unconscious gesture for anyone accustomed to handling a baseball, especially for a pitcher deciding what type of ball to pitch (curve, knuckle, fast, etc.) because the placement of the seam helps determine how the ball is held and the path of the ball's flight.

Until his rage ripped
Again into the faces of children
Who called to us for food.

These three lines conclude the poem with the same sense of a pending change in the personality of this "guy" as that found in the initiator in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" when faced with Vietnamese civilians. In both poems the change revolves around the word "until" placed at the beginning of the line to serve as an ominous indicator: "Until his rage ripped/Again" and "Until we came upon a mama san." Here the inevitability of similar recurrences of such violence literally 'aimed' at children is flatly stated in terms of rage-propelled tin cans ripping open "the faces of children" just as a frayed seam of a baseball bursts upon impact with a bat.

Considerable restraint is exercised by the poet here. One example is indeed enough for readers to grasp the sadistic inversion of a game and an inversion of the myth that GIs love to give kids treats of food. The poet simply and economically paints a haunting image of repetitions of this act. We do not know, and do not really want to know, how many more cans are

hurled into the faces of Vietnamese children, or how many of them are cut or bruised by the metal missile.

Just as black flowers 'frame' "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," the "guy" 'frames' "The Last Lie" pinning the children (and the persona) in the middle, as it were. Though we cannot effectively clarify the motivation of the child's smile, we are clearly aware of the persona's position of being deeply disturbed by the memory of the incident and of his inaction because his teeth gritting is an expression of disgust with himself and his compatriot.

Finally there is the issue of the title, "The Last Lie." What is the "lie," to whom is it made, and why is it the "last" one? I suggest that the "lie" is two-sided. To the persona, the "lie" involves children, for the children it involves GIs. Each group regards the other through a blur of mythification. It was shocking to many American soldiers to find that children (and women) could be effective warriors, snipers and sappers in contrast to the strong Western taboo on involving them in warfare. Similarly, the same children who may have been well-treated by some soldiers learned that others were unpredictably volatile. It would seem, then, that the title refers to both sides of this "lie," in addition to the persona's own realization that gives the lie to the notion that Americans were fighting for these people, and that he was lying to himself by repressing his own anger at the deception. This is the last time he will lie to himself or rationalize the brutal nature of the war or his fellow GIs. No longer will he make excuses for himself, his paralyzed voyeurism, or for his fellow soldiers' actions. Self-absolution predicated on inexperience and shock, such as that found in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" is somehow more understandable, but in this poem the initial phase of the persona's 'indoctrination' is

over. He cannot claim inexperience or even the same degree of shock, for to do so would be tantamount to a purposeful self-deception, a flagrant lie and one that he refuses to make to himself.

Like "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" and "The Last Lie," "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map," also from The Monkey Wars, is a poem of initiatory descent, and like them, the action is left unresolved as though by recounting the incident, the persona strives to come to terms with the baffling new knowledge he gains with each stratum of the descent.

Having made the helicopter descent through the clouds to the ground and been told by a "tutelary spirit" ⁵⁰ that he would be initiated into the jungle in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," and having voyeuristically participated in the sadistic "secret doctrine" ⁵¹ of assaulting Vietnamese civilians in both "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" and "The Last Lie," the poet-persona continues the downward and inward movement through another stratum of his initiation in "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map." Of the poems treated in this chapter, this poem acts as a 'threshold' for it is here that we witness the persona's most significant action thus far - that of literally and symbolically passing through a door leading from the upper world (before entering the jungle) to the lower world of the jungle and the self, or put into a variant of Caputo's words, the boundary between a secure zone and "Indian country." That the soldiers' map lacks this temple is indicative of a deep, unsettling and pervasive absence of reference points by which one may orient oneself within "The Other World," ⁵² the "Somewhere Out There" ⁵³ that is "Not on the Map."

One could reasonably expect that had military cartographers known the temple existed, it would have appeared

as a landmark on the maps of the region. As it was, the temple remained to be stumbled upon and explored rather like "The Perilous Chapel" in the Grail romances.⁵⁴ What is more, existing literary 'maps' provided by other writers from other wars proved to be at best, incomplete and nondirective, at worst, as unusable and inapplicable as Herr's French map of Indochina in a war in which the 'otherness' of this "world," its landscape and the experiences they held for combatants, mirrored the 'spooky' 'otherness' of the 'world' and the interior geography of the self one had to confront and explore as the result of the nature of the external otherness.

Before analyzing the poem, a word must be said about Quang Tri, South Vietnam's northernmost province. Quang Tri City, the old provincial capital with a moated citadel, was only thirty-five miles from Khe Sanh and was a vital "transshipment point for Marine and Army supplies."⁵⁵ Controlled by the United States Marine Corps, as was all of I Corps, the province came under General Westmoreland's scrutiny during January of 1968 when Khe Sanh was severely embattled. Convinced the Marines were unable to cope with the enemy strength and pressure, Westmoreland placed the Army in control of I Corps (a transition beginning January 25th) and initiated Operation Pegasus, a plan designed to relieve the Marines at Khe Sanh. This Army operation involved the flying horses of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, which he ordered to move from Phu Bai to Quang Tri City. In addition, as Pisor relates:

two of the 1st Air Division's most aggressive battalions had already moved west from Quang Tri City, and were hacking out fire bases on the way to Khe Sanh. One whole brigade of the 1st Cavalry was thrashing through the woods south and west of Quang Tri City, acclimating itself to new terrain and preparing for the push to Khe Sanh. [The End of the Line, 141]

In effect, the persona's patrol could be "thrashing through

the woods " anywhere "south and west of Quang Tri City" since the precise location is unknown. It is dusk, the time of day when light fades, night approaches and vision diminishes forcing one to rely more on movement, instinct and one's hearing to interpret one's surroundings. Interestingly, Eliade notes that initiatory descent "is often symbolized...by darkness, by cosmic night." ⁵⁶ Correct interpretation, the accurate use of one's new knowledge of this "disturbing world," is critical because it can mean the difference between life and death. Even if this were not so, the poetic imagination would still most likely intercede to assume the role of interpreter in an attempt to 'read' the 'signs' (images) of this environment which no map, even if it had included this temple, could adequately depict. Consequently, the persona must interpret and translate what he sees and hears in terms of what Eliade calls the "secret lore" to which one becomes privy in this type of initiation rite - that which he has experienced and learned to be reliable, accurate and useful in assessing the circumstances he faces in this "Underworld," "the place of knowledge and wisdom." ⁵⁷

Thus, in the first stanza we find the persona noting that the "sparrows/Squawking for more room/Is all we hear."

Dusk, the ivy thick with sparrows
Squawking for more room
Is all we hear; we see
Birds move on the walls of the temple
Shaping their calligraphy of wings.
Ivy is thick in the grottos,
On the moon-watching platform
And keeps the door from fully closing.

These small, loquaciously gregarious birds are familiar, yet out of context despite the fact that he knows experientially the meaning of their sounds in this otherwise quiet locale, that their activity and chatter indicate a modicum of safety in

that it signifies no movement within the temple. They "squawk for more room," he says, perhaps attributing to them the same sense of enclosed confinement he feels within the jungle. If this is so, it is not unreasonable to venture that he identifies their desire for "more room" with his envy of their wings as vehicles of escape, since Jessie Weston notes that bird symbolism "is always connected with an ascension." ⁵⁸ He can "see/Birds move on the walls of the temple/Shaping their calligraphy of wings," however, he cannot read the meaning of their beautiful, cryptic ideogram-like script. Here we find the first of two crucial references to language. Cirlot's Dictionary of Symbols states that birds are "bearers of messages," ⁵⁹ but the persona is an illiterate as ignorant of their message-language as he is of Vietnamese or Chinese script. Their language is mysterious and elusive, providing him with nothing more than a set of images and configurations that are beyond his comprehension, much like the map offers only a broad outline of general terrain contours. Beyond this, he must chart his own course as he proceeds through this catachthonic landscape.

Riotously thick ivy, which he observes more closely than the sparrows, also hampers his assessment of the temple save for the fact that it "keeps" the temple door from "fully closing" as though awaiting his entry. "Grottos," the key word in this stanza, are natural 'caves' created by rampant growths of ivy and suggest a passageway that must be negotiated before actually entering the temple. Etymologically potent, "grotto" comes from the Latin word 'crypta' meaning crypt or vault. It is on this subterranean level of the meaning of "grotto" that the significance of the poem and its setting begin to reveal themselves as the repository "where all the images are stored like ancient

kings" ⁶⁰ in an underworld holding sway over and burying language. For if indeed, Stephen Wright's protagonist, Griffin, is right in deeming the jungle "an estate of measureless dimension," "who could be certain what was bubbling and fizzing down in that crypt?" ⁶¹ until one made the descent to discover for oneself the morass of images in which language and meaning are trapped not on intelligence aerial photographs (as with Griffin, the image reader-interpreter), but in the "estate" of the self's interior landscape.

This temple, which qualifies as a Vietnamese example of Weston's "Perilous Chapel," is so overrun with ivy that the door remains partly open and accessible like the mouth of a 'cave,' a room with walls, ceiling and shadow. This "active door," to which Eliade refers in Rites and Symbols of Initiation, is an image "used in myths and sagas to suggest the insurmountable difficulties of passage to the Other World." ⁶² Entry represents one's cooperation and willingness, if not commitment to testing one's mettle against the "difficulties" of such passage.

In the second stanza it is "the point man," the first man in line, who 'points' the way and "leads" them "inside" to search and examine the temple and its contents, thus bringing them across the threshold from one world to the other. Inside the temple these GI 'initiands' behave as 'archeologists' examining the ascetic possessions of the temple attendant as they begin

...lifting

The white washbowl, the smaller bowl
For rice, the stone lanterns
And carved stone heads that open
Above the carved faces for incense.

"Lifting," poised at the end of the line, momentarily suggests that these men are stealing these things, but even after this

immediate suspicion evaporates, there still remains an unsettled feeling in which the notion of theft yields to a sense of violation, of trespass, of profanity at the hands of these 'archeologists.' Their 'excavation' reveals that "even the bamboo sleeping mat/Rolled in the corner,/Even the place of prayer is clean," clean in that there is no evidence that the enemy has been using the temple for any purpose.

We discover in stanza three that the walls of such places are likely hiding places used by the Viet Cong for storing rice, which is in keeping with the definition of 'vault,' a "room with arched walls and ceiling, especially when underground as a "storeroom," ⁶³ and is faithful to the definition of 'crypt' as "an underground chamber...especially a burial place." ⁶⁴ Thus, this grotto temple assumes the aspect of a coffin for the temple attendant and any inquisitive GI 'initiands-cum-archeologists' probing the interior.

In fact the sole oddity they discover is not a "Dead Body laid on the altar," not a "Black Hand" that snuffs out candles, ⁶⁵ but "a small man" who "sits legs askew in the shadow/The farthest wall casts/Halfway across the room." His awkward, uncomfortable posture with legs twisted, his body "bent over" with his head "resting on the floor," does not at first arouse alarm, nor does the fact that "he is speaking something,/As though to us and not to us," making it as difficult for the reader as it is for the soldiers to pinpoint exactly when they realize that something is wrong. Their commanding officer, apparently content in his incomprehension, "wants to ignore him" and resumes the search-excavation by firing "a clip into the walls/Which are not packed with rice this time." But perhaps he senses that the curiosity of his men could prove dangerous; hence his order "to move out."

"But one of us moves towards the man," in stanza four, not in defiance of the "CO's" order to leave, but because he is "curious about what he is saying." I suggest that more than mere "curoosity" sends the "one" soldier over to this man. First, his action is motivated by speech sounds and the fundamental human need to attempt to understand the utterances of another person; second, though it is not stated, there must have been something in the man's voice, a sense of urgency or fear, some clue sufficient in itself as a means of communication beyond language to alert the GI that something was amiss. Third, Jessie Weston reminds us that in "a strange and terrifying adventure in a mysterious chapel, which we are given to understand [by the messenger birds' "calligraphy"] is fraught with peril to life," one of the characteristics of entering such a place involves "strange and threatening voices, and the general impression that this is an adventure in which supernatural, and evil, forces are engaged." ⁶⁶ Lastly, this man's speech, directed "As though to us and not to us," is the human equivalent of the birds' ideogrammatic message, part of Eliade's "instruction in a special language," ⁶⁷ but one which the persona and his comrades have yet to decipher because they have not reached the proper stage of their descent, hence the nagging familiarity of this language hovering on the edge of intelligibility.

Once the soldier "moves towards the man," the 'spell' rooting the soldiers in place breaks and together they

...bend him to sit straight
And when he's nearly peaked
At the top of his slow uncurling
His face becomes visible, his eyes
Roll down to the charge
Wired between his teeth and the floor.

The slow deliberation of the action in these lines is reinforced by the line breaks which delay the motion with the

same physical caution the Vietnamese man exercises in his movements. The reason for this painful slowness only gradually becomes evident with each line break that travels upward with the straightening of his posture as the GIs 'lift' him upright until "He's nearly peaked." At this point, when "his face becomes visible," he communicates to them with the body language of "his eyes" that "roll down to the charge/Wired between his teeth and the floor."

The element of surprise in the discovery of the booby-trapped man acts to 'freeze' the final stanza in a photographic tableau holding them (and the reader) forever on the brink of an explosion with eyes riveted on the charge. The detonation they (and we) expect comes with the "burst" of sparrows fleeing the walls for the safety of the jungle. Theirs is the only movement outward from the temple. The Vietnamese man and the soldiers are 'trapped' (the Vietnamese by the wired charge, the GIs by their ignorant unmindfulness of the birds' message) inside the temple in what may be conceived as the fourth and innermost box in a nest of Chinese boxes. The "grotto" somewhere "near Quang Tri" forms the next bigger box, the jungle serves as the third box, and the war itself acts as the outermost and largest box. Construed in this manner, the 'crypt,' evoked by the etymology of "grotto" as cited above, becomes a realistic, tenable metaphor for the temple since not only could it become a burial vault for all of them at any moment, but also because the poet leaves them there allowing only the birds to escape.

If birds are generally "symbols of thought, of imagination and of the swiftness of spiritual processes" and "are very frequently used to symbolize human souls,"⁶⁸ Weigl has good reason to conclude the poem with their departure: the poem itself is the product of 'imagination' and 'thought'; the

'spiritual process' he and the other soldiers undergo commences the moment they step over the threshold, and they are 'souls' that will wander through this underworld.

The question remains, however, why the sparrows were not frightened off by the CO's rifle fire into the walls. As "intelligent collaborators with man," ⁶⁹ it is conceivable that they had heard and understood the attendant's words (those the poet says are spoken "to us and NOT TO US") before the patrol arrived and had formed in "their calligraphy of wings" a message of the man's distress and the imminent danger to all the men. It would seem then, that language and the ability to communicate intelligibly provide a vehicle of protection and 'warning,' as Wilfred Owen put it. Thus, with the patrol's discovery of the booby trap, the birds' task is complete and they are free to leave.

These ornithological 'collaborators' of man and their alar script correspond to the contorted man "askew in the shadows" and together, they manifest the difficulties these soldiers face with language in this underworld. Within the vault-like structure of this "buried place" ⁷⁰ human utterance has gone "askew," language is odd and unfamiliar. It is the poet's job to "mine into the pyramid" and "by horrible gropings...come to the central room" ⁷¹ of this subterranean world "where all the images are stored" ⁷² to learn this new language necessary to portray the descent. In the three stages of his 'mining'-tunneling technique, Weigl, with the help of the birds and the murmuring, almost mummy-like figure, excavated and emerged from the experience with this poem. It is "something that has weathered the crisis" ⁷³ like the "stone lanterns" and the "carved stone heads." In Griffin's words, the poem is "the substance of walls, of fortification," ⁷⁴ albeit damaged walls representing both the restriction language imposes on him and

the desire to escape plunging further into the underworld of the war.

"Burning Shit at An Khe," from The Monkey Wars, marks a deeper and far more disturbing stage of the descent. The poet-persona is unquestionably alone at the center of the poem with ancillary figures taking no active part as in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," "The Last Lie," and "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map." Here, the temple in the jungled grottos becomes an outdoor latrine which he must enter and attempt to purge. Disposal of fecal matter is a loathsome, degrading task which causes the persona's inability to distinguish self from experience: the self, the stench, the overpowering sense of "worthlessness." and the "word" shit merge in this scatological quagmire.

An Khe, a small town along vital Highway 19, is located roughly half way between Pleiku and the coastal city of Qui Nhon in Binh Dinh province, one of II Corps' twelve central provinces. An Khe became the 1st Air Cavalry's first base in Vietnam. In August of 1965 Colonel James S. Timothy and his 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division commenced Operation Highland ⁷⁵ clearing Highway 19 from An Khe to Qui Nhon in preparation for the 1st Air Cav's arrival scheduled for September. It was the Air Cav's divisional assistant commander, Brig. Gen. John M. Wright who 'put An Khe on the map':

He was told the division was going to safeguard the rugged central heartland of the country, the western badlands of Pleiku and Kontum provinces. He decided to locate it [the base] outside a small town along key Highway 19 near the Mang Yang Pass where excellent flying weather usually prevailed. The town was called An Khe, presently occupied by a Special Forces camp that had seen hard fighting that February. [The Rise and Fall of an American Army, 53]

The first stage of the base's construction was completed by the division's thousand-strong advance group in a pick and shovel

mad scramble to beat the September arrival of the full division. With a full complement and a borrowed engineer battalion, the Air Cav claimed as home a heavily fortified base camp with a heliport for its four hundred fifty aircraft, "everything from showers to mess halls" and "five wire barriers and two cattle fences...strung around the new base."⁷⁶ The installation was later named Camp Radcliffe, after Major Don G. Radcliffe, the division's first Vietnam casualty. The first day of October, 1965 saw the 1st Air Cav formally assuming their base and responsibility for Highway 19. Less than three weeks later the Air Cav would be 'blooded' in Operation Silver Bayonet, the horrific Ia Drang Valley campaign, with the 7th Cavalry of Little Big Horn fame taking the brunt of the action in early November. ⁷⁷

By the time the persona of "Burning Shit at An Khe" arrived at the installation the base would have been about two years old. The 1st Air Cav, now known as the First Team and the Sky Cav, had already demonstrated its fearless aggressiveness and spirit, and had earned a stellar reputation for its panache, its successes in battle, its staging of surprise assaults unachievable without air mobility, and for daring rescue, evacuation and reinforcement missions. The persona in "Burning Shit at An Khe," however, is severed from any sense of dignity or pride in being part of this prestigious organization. Instead, he finds himself at the filthy bottom of the division's 'hierarchy.'

"Burning Shit at An Khe," taken from The Monkey Wars, is written without stanza breaks and easily lends itself to division into six parts which I have titled for ease of reference: Part I, lines 1-15 - 'The Eta's Duty'; Part II, lines 16-22 - 'The Flashback'; Part III, lines 23-33 - 'Resignation'; Part IV, lines 34-44 - 'The Descent'; Part V,

lines 45-52 - 'Burial, Resurrection and Flight'; Part VI, lines 53-58 - 'Immersion'. The entire poem, but particularly the last three sections, pick up where "Temple at Quang Tri, Not on the Map" leaves off by continuing the persona's journey downward and inward to Olson's "buried place" by "explorations/of channels never touched by sun" ⁷⁸ "away into the gray-bone and /bleached silence" ⁷⁹ where fecal, finger-painted smears obliterate even the word-like chatter of monkeys and the "calligraphy" of birds.

Part I, 'The Eta's Duty,' is so labelled because of the obvious resemblance of the persona and his task to that of the Eta, the lowest class of Tokugawa's feudal Japanese society. In The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, Ruth Benedict says the Eta were the "most numerous and famous outcasts," and were "uncountable," a more damning appellation than "untouchable," "for even the mileage of roads through their villages went uncounted as if the land and the inhabitants of the area did not exist at all..[they] were outside the formal structure [of society]." ⁸⁰ Specifically the Eta were "workers in tabooed trades...scavengers, buriers of the executed, skimmers of dead animals and tanners of hides." ⁸¹ Lifton, in Home From the War, notes that the Eta's occupations involved not only "blood, death and dirt," but the "cleaning of excrement," all of which produced "images of pollution and defilement," ⁸² images poignantly defined in Weigl's poem. With this in mind, it remains to examine the first fifteen lines.

Into that pit
I had to climb down
With a rake and matches; eventually,
You had to do something
Because it just kept piling up
And it wasn't our country, it wasn't
Our air thick with the sick smoke
So another soldier and I
Lifted the shelter off its blocks
To expose the home-made toilets:

Fifty-five gallon drums cut in half
With crude wood seats that splintered.
We soaked the piles in fuel oil
And lit the stuff
And tried to keep the fire burning.

The first two lines establish "that pit" as the dominant image looming over the persona, pressing down on him and foreshadowing what is to come in the last half of the poem. "Eventually," hanging poised for descent at the end of line three, demonstrates the inevitability of the Eta's task: "You had to do something/Because it just kept piling up." The next two lines - "And it wasn't our country, it wasn't /Our air thick with the sick smoke" - are a double-edged commentary on the job confronting him. On the one hand, they demonstrate a brash callousness to and rationalization for American pollution of Vietnam's air and land; on the other hand, they convey sympathy and concern for the country and its environment. But he must squelch any concern and, with "another soldier," begin the job.

Together they remove the "shelter" "to expose the home-made toilets." The "shelter" gives users privacy, protection from the elements and covers the barrels of corruption beneath; the "crude wooden seats" preclude the mishap of falling into the filth even if they are unsophisticated and uncomfortable. The removal of the structure 'exposes' not just the excreta beneath, but as a symbolic act, it uncovers the dehumanization and spiritual degradation wrought by this war, and, in a sense, provides a ghastly answer to Griffin's musing in Meditations in Green about "what was bubbling and fizzing down in that crypt." ⁸³ Furthermore, it also reveals to the persona that "burning shit" is unquestionably the ultimate humiliation, that he is a contemptible, debased inferior, an Eta. To paraphrase Lifton, because he is an outcast, he is forced to accept his feculent

hardship. But without dawdling or allowing themselves the luxury of self-pity, they ignite "the stuff" and attempt "to keep the fire burning," thus concluding Part I.

Part II, 'The Flashback', (lines 16-22) recounts how the persona evaded his "first turn" at fecal disposal by bribing "some kid" with "A care package of booze from home."

To take my first turn
I paid some kid
A care package of booze from home.
I'd walked past the burning once
And gagged the whole heart of myself -
It smelled like the world
Was on fire.

But the relief of having successfully avoided the task is contravened by his reaction to passing by the burning ordure: "[I] gagged the whole heart of myself - /It smelled like the world/Was on fire." It is no surprise that the stench made him retch, but what is surprising is that he had "walked past" the latrine area while it was burning after having shirked the duty.

His nausea is also the result of a 'gag,' a practical joke perpetrated against the unsuspecting "kid," but one that backfires because he cannot anticipate this bit of poetic justice: inhaling the effluvium teaches him that 'exposure' to the war's hideousness is unavoidable after all, that in the words of D. F. Brown, a fellow Vietnam war poet, "nobody comes away in one piece."⁸⁴ The meaning of 'gag' in noun form can also be significantly brought to bear on line 20: these malodorous fumes act as an object forced into or covering his mouth to prevent utterance later in the poem. Weigl concerns himself with speech and his persona's ever-waning power of utterance in a number of poems, the most graphic illustrations of this being "Monkey" and especially "The Ghost Inside." But it is here in "Burning Shit at An Khe" where the onset of the

stifling deterioration of the persona's faculty of speech and language occurs. "The whole heart," the symbolic center of his spiritual being, is choked off and subsumed by the stinking conflagration making it appear "like the world/was on fire." Overwhelmed, he compares the latrine fire to "the whole world...on fire," a global conflagration leaving nothing unscathed. The world (as he thought he knew it) is charred and seared into a foul smelling cesspool from which there is no escape.

Time passes, the stench dissipates to memory, and a period of 'Resignation' (Part III, lines 23-33) to the inevitability of another "turn" at rotational latrine duty follows.

But when my turn came again
There was no one
So I stuffed cotton up my nose
And marched up that hill. We poured
And poured until it burned and black
Smoke curdled
But the fire went out.
Heavy artillery
Hammered the evening away in the distance,
Vietnamese laundry women watched
From a safe place, laughing.

This time, however, "there was no one" he could bribe to take his place. Thus, he comes to experience first hand the isolation and degradation of the Eta. In preparation for the 'assault' he "stuff[s] cotton up [his] nose" then resolutely "march[es] up that hill" to "that pit." He and his fellow Eta saturate the "piles" of "stuff" with gallons of "fuel oil" "until it burned and black/Smoke curdled" in billows evocative of "Amnesia's" "black clouds [that] bowed down and swallowed you whole." Unlike the 'kid's' previous fire, theirs ironically goes out, an unanticipated complication that pummels his resolution with agitated frustration and a growing sense of futility just as the "Heavy artillery/Hammered the evening away in the distance." An additional humiliating irony is the

laughter (which the persona assumes to be derisive) of the "Vietnamese laundry women [who] watched/From a safe place," an irony made potent by the fact that they are not only "safe" from the impending stench, but as washerwomen, they 'out rank' these soldiers as 'productive workers', since their job starkly contrasts with that of their occupational inferiors.

Within another ten lines (34-44) Part IV, 'The Descent' we watch the persona as he loses his "grip on things" when he makes the ultimate descent. The confidence and security he has gained in having "grunted out eight months/Of jungle" are quickly nullified by chance:

But we flipped the coin and I lost
And climbed down into my fellow soldiers'
Shit and began to sink and didn't stop
Until I was deep to my knees.

These four lines hark back to the first three lines of the poem:

Into that pit
I had to climb down
With a rake and matches

The poem is brought full circle in an eddy effect like that of Kaiko's swirling vortex or the spiraling images Caputo sees outside the helicopter door. The motion is increased by the speed of the "ands" and Weigl's usual, finely crafted enjambment that sucks and pulls the Eta-persona down "deep to [his] knees" in his "fellow soldiers' shit."

The helicopters 'lifted' above him mock him by "[ripping] dust in swirls" that extinguish each match with the "hacking/Blast of their blades." 'Rip,' 'hack,' 'blast,' and 'blade' are all forceful, violent words levelled at him, making him synonymous with the enemy and the 'lowly' Vietnamese civilians, for having "accepted his degraded condition, [he] may be brutalized...at will," as Lifton is

quick to remind us. ⁸⁵

...every time
I tried to light a match
It died.

To be sure, his matches all "die" in the blasting wake of the helicopters, but something else 'dies' with each match he strikes: his self-esteem, his dignity, his self-worth, his pride, his confidence, his value as a human being are all snuffed out until finally in Part V (lines 45-52), 'Burial, Resurrection and Flight':

it all came down on me, the stink
And the heat and the worthlessness
Until I slipped and climbed
Out of that hole and ran
Past the olive drab
Tents and trucks and clothes and everything
Green as far from the shit
As the fading light allowed.

Physically staggered by and spiritually mired in his scatological plight, he is 'buried' under a steamy avalanche of "stink," "heat" and "worthlessness." The oozing collapse of shit and the rapidly 'slipping' framework of his ego push him over the precipice of control into the panic of headlong flight. Even though he 'resurrects' himself by "[climbing]/Out of that hole," nothing inside him or around him is untainted. Worse still, his frenzied dash through the camp, past the army issue olive drab "tents," "trucks," and "clothes" brings not the desperately sought deliverance, but the crushing reality of entrapment in a cesspool of green putrescence the size of Vietnam.

Green dominates Part V, 'Burial, Resurrection and Flight,' and as the lines continue their unpunctuated rush imitative of the persona's headlong plunge begun in line 36, green is transmogrified. Normally representative of the naivete,

inexperience, strength, prosperity and potential of youth, and of the fecundity and regenerative power of nature, green becomes the presence of the U.S. military, Vietnam itself and the six shades of its vegetation, and the 'green' unprocessed, inignitable latrine pits - an ubiquitous maw sucking him in and 'swallowing' him in much the same way the "black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole" in "Amnesia." ⁸⁶ The evening "hammered" away by distant heavy artillery, reminiscent of "dusk" in "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map," acts in concert with the green miasma permitting him to run only "as far from the shit/As the fading light allowed" before he succumbs to the final transmogrification in the last six lines of the poem.

In Part VI, 'Immersion', (lines 53-58) the past tense used throughout the poem becomes the present tense indicating the spiritual state of the persona.

Only now I can't fly.
I lay down in it
And finger paint the words of who I am
Across my chest
Until I'm covered and there's only one smell,
One word.

Perhaps he could have escaped at some point (prior to his last latrine duty) but he cannot "fly" "now," after having ceased running, or "now" that he is back in America recollecting the incident, and cannot escape even the memory since it, like other war memories, is a "ghost inside" haunting him.

The present tense verb "fly" is also significant. Aside from the obvious meaning of escape, it is reminiscent of the lines about crows in "Amnesia": "If only the strength and will were there/Fly up to them to be black/And useful to the wind." Here "fly" means to take wing, to become airborne, to symbolically transcend the experience by spiritually elevating himself. Actual escape or spiritual transcendence is

impossible, however, in "Burning Shit at An Khe." The darkness of despair, desolation, "worthlessness" and "all [that] came down on [him]" encroaches, surrounding him in his tracks, as it were, leaving him no recourse but to "lay down in it," to surrender himself to immersion in the absolute and utter debasement of the latrine duty and the war this filthy experience represents. All that remains for him to do is "finger paint the words of who [he] is/Across [his] chest/Until [he's] covered and there's only one smell,/One word."

Finger painting with excrement, though distressing to parents, is common among young toddlers who delight in their own feces; the child produces it, it is his and he sees nothing unusual or unsanitary about it or about playing with it. Here, however, this quite normal childhood act is grossly perverted: he repeatedly smears on his chest words 'painted' with shit and defines himself by the "one smell" and the "one word" with which he has "covered" himself. Such self-definition is an extraordinarily powerful indictment of the tremendous reductive power of this war.

Relevant to "Burning Shit at An Khe" is a story a Vietnam veteran told Lifton which he quotes in Home From the War:

I heard of one helicopter pilot in Nam who was carrying a shit-house (portable toilet) on his helicopter. He crashed and was killed, and was buried under the whole shit-house and all the shit. I thought that if I was going to die in Vietnam, that's the way I would like to die. I didn't want to die a heroic death. That was the way to die in Vietnam. [222-223]

The veteran recounting this story, the buried pilot and the immersed persona of the poem all bear witness to the forceful weight of the "portable" symbol of the war in Vietnam. Physically flattened against the earth, covered in filth, emotionally and psychically 'levelled,' the persona undergoes

a symbolic death and burial in preparation for the final stage of wandering through the underworld of "an interior made exterior/And the poet's search for the same exterior made/Interior" that Wallace Stevens speaks of in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." The 'free-fall' through the self's topography begun in the helicopter descent through the clouds in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" ends in "Burning Shit at An Khe" with what Yukio Mishima might have termed "soft, indolent earth['s]" lesson: "That to fall, not to fly, is in the order of things," and so it is that Weigl's persona plummets to the very bottom of his interior landscape in "Monkey."

A poem of 121 lines divided into five parts, "Monkey," taken from Song of Napalm, is a difficult poem and is the most ambitious of Weigl's poems that I shall analyze. Unfortunately, space does not allow line by line treatment. This poem may be regarded as a five act drama from which an ambivalent, tentative affirmation slowly emerges, as the James Wright epigram accompanying the poem in A Romance, suggests. In a poem of what Arden in Meditations in Green might call "the objectification of interiority,"⁸⁷ the persona explores the interior, underworld topography of the self represented by a maze of images as solid, ideogrammatic and irreducible in their composition as Griffin's rocks. And like Griffin's rock collection, these images provide on the one hand, something solid to hang onto - "Mass. Density. Permanence. Finality. Termination...heft, a certain assurance"⁸⁸ - when the only 'motto' available or applicable was, "If you can't trans-cend, you might as well des-cend...[to] scoping out the bottom."⁸⁹ On the other hand, image and rock alike, though "survivors" that have "weathered the crises,"⁹⁰ are "the substance of walls, of fortification"⁹¹ that imprison both the persona of "Monkey" and

Griffin who ultimately must break through these "walls" of their interior topography if they are to 'survive' the descent.

Among Weigl's war poems, "Monkey" marks a turning point, albeit one that is marred by "mistakes," "greed," and the 'sameness' of a seemingly recurring past burdened with fatigue and confusion. Though the oppressive weight of the journey through the landscape of images dominates the poem, the persona does, with the help of the "spirit" newly given by the "Vietnamese monkey," unearth and name the need for direction and he attempts to order his experience perhaps intuitively arriving at the same questions Yukio Mishima poses in Sun and Steel:

Yet why must it be that men always seek out the depths?
Why must thought, like a plumb line, concern itself
exclusively with vertical descent? Why was it not
feasible for thought to change direction and climb
vertically up, ever up, towards the surface? [22]

The ascension-affirmation is long, slow and uncertain, and it is riddled with parting glimpses of violation, danger and death. Yet these images fade and diminish in size, proportion and perspective just as the ground recedes with the ascent of a helicopter, just as the monkey lifts him above the war's 'upper' terrain.

By approaching the poem as a drama, 'act one' becomes an exposition in which tone and setting are only amorphously sketched in medias res through a delirium of images jammed together in a surrealist collage of physical discomforts ranging from jungle exposure and thirst, to confinement and the unsettling proximity of Vietnamese soldiers.

I am you are he she it is
we are you are they are.
I am you are he she it is
we are you are they are.
When they ask for your number
pretend to be breathing.
Forget the stinking jungle,
force your fingers between the lines.
Learn to get out of the dew.

The snakes are thirsty.
Bladders, water, boil it, drink it.
Get out of your clothes.
You can't move in your green clothes.
Your O.D. in color issues clothes.
Get out the plates and those who ate,
those who spent the night.
Those small Vietnamese soldiers.
They love to hold your hand.
Back away from their dark cheeks.
Small Vietnamese soldiers.
They love to love you.
I have no idea how it happened.
I remember nothing but light.

The setting is the nightmarish underworld terrain of the persona's self where he, like Melville's Pip, watches the "strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glide to and fro."⁹² The tone is a paradoxical mixture of passive exhaustion and feverish restlessness which creates tension that continues to build through the end of 'act three.' In addition, the tone reflects the persona's paradoxical attempt to keep the images at bay ("I remember nothing but light"), while using this clot of fragmented images as shifting landmarks within his interior topography by which he can order his experiences of descent to navigate a course and gouge out a path back toward the "light" of the 'upper world.'

Before he can attempt such an act, however, he must establish his identity; hence in the first four lines his 'being' is defined by his litany of the verb 'to be.' By confirming that "he is," he can continue his preparation, gird his loins, so to speak, with a self-taught refresher course in survival techniques before attempting the 'tunneling' journey upward. Prefaced by the imperatives "pretend," "forget," "force," "learn," "get out," and "back away," the items of his 'survival manual' consist of the same splinters of experiences sutured together that brought him to these depths: the "stinking jungle," the "dew," the "snakes," the GI identity of a serial number and constricting olive drab

clothing, the unanticipated otherness of Vietnam's culture represented by the unfamiliar customs of Vietnamese men.

The most revealing of these imperatives and images is that of clothing :

Get out of your clothes:
You can't move in your green clothes.
Your O.D. in color issue clothes.

During the time he spent in uniform, these images (indeed, all the images found throughout the poem) became internalized and embedded in his memory to create this surreal terrain in which he now finds himself. If he can shed his army issue clothing, he can put aside his military identity and "move," thus ending his paralysis-like physical constriction and psychical confinement which would then enable him to wend his way among these landmark-images and put them behind him to discover a way to "get out" of this 'under world' topography. Like a snake shedding its skin, "[getting] out of [his] clothes" indicates the need for growth, renewal and detachment from the past. Moreover, nakedness, symbolic of purity and innocence, suggests preparation for the future by bearing and submitting himself to whatever may lie ahead in the hope of glimpsing (perhaps even attaining) the resolving 'purity' of a peace made immutable for having experienced the Wrightian "horror" of war and the descent into this topography. But the discovery of the "musical ache" is a harsh reminder that the olive drab fatigues represent an experiential straight-jacket, an 'overdose' administered to him by the war, and that he must ride out its 'effects.' The notion of an 'overdose' is relevant since the whole poem resembles a 'bad trip' in which images fade, blur and focus repeatedly.

'Act two,' the rising action, continues the thrashing nightmare journey set forth in 'act one.'

I don't remember the hard

swallow of the lover.
I don't remember the burial of ears.
I don't remember
the time of the explosion.
This is the place where curses are manufactured,
delivered like white tablets.
The survivor is spilling his bedpan.
He slips a curse into your pocket,
you're finally satisfied.
I don't remember the heat
in the hands,
the heat around the neck.

Good times bad times sleep
get up work. Sleep get up
good times bad times.
Work eat sleep good bad work times.
I like a certain cartoon of wounds.
The water which refused to dry.
I like a little unaccustomed mercy.
Pulling the trigger is all we have.
I hear a child.

Stanza one develops the paradox of affirmation by denial ("I don't remember..." is repeated four times) and advances the descent with imagery of swallowing, burial and explosions. It is in this stanza that the persona 'names' this 'underworld' topography by saying, "This is the place where curses are manufactured, /delivered like white tablets," thus reinforcing, with the image of "white tablets," the notion of an overdose of experience. Just as the "O.D." olive drab overdose in 'act one' harks back to "Burning Shit at An Khe" and the persona's flight "Past the olive drab/Tents, trucks and clothes and everything/Green," so too does the "survivor" who "[spills] his bedpan" and "slips a curse into your pocket," as though it were a turd from the An Khe latrine.

Like the conjugation of "to be" beginning 'act one' and the first five lines ("I don't remember...") opening 'act two,' the first four lines of stanza two are a kind of litany as well:

Good times bad times sleep
get up work. Sleep get up
good times bad times.
Work eat sleep good bad work times.

These lines offer a developmental 'variation on the theme' of repetitious litany, however, because they temporarily slip out of the immediacy of the overdosed delirium of wandering through this landscape of seemingly non sequitur images into a time-lapsed condensation of 'normality' between bouts of nightmarish journeying. But this glimpse of the 'upper world's' normality is remote and is rapidly displaced by the surrealism of "a certain cartoon of wounds" in which "mercy" is "unaccustomed," and killing is customary because "Pulling the trigger is all we have" once humane acts have been ingested and buried in "the place where curses are manufactured."

'Act three' marks the turning point in this drama of descent and focuses on the persona's violent confrontation with his monkey, the symbol of his personal conflict.

I dropped to the bottom of a well.
I have a knife.
I cut someone with it.
Oh, I have the petrified eyebrows
of my Vietnam monkey.
My monkey from Vietnam.
My monkey.
Put your hand here.
It makes no sense.
I beat the monkey.
I didn't know him.
He was bloody.
He lowered his intestines
to my shoes. My shoes
spit-shined the moment
I learned to tie the bow.
I'm not on speaking terms
with anyone. In the wrong climate
a person can spoil,
the way a pair of boots slows you...

I don't know when I'm sleeping.
I don't know if what I'm saying
is anything at all.
I'll lie on my monkey bones.

Like O'Brien's Paul Berlin, his fellow soldiers and Sarkin Aung Wan who plummet through a fissure connected to a matrix of Viet Cong tunnels deep beneath the earth, the persona abruptly

"[drops] to the bottom of a well." Cirlot claims the well may symbolize the soul, purification and salvation, ⁹³ but the persona's well is devoid of water. Instead, the 'purifying' agent is the blood of the monkey.

The monkey's prominence in the life of man reaches back to ancient Indian mythology in which monkeys were the servants of the gods. In the Ramayana stories the white monkey signifies goodness and cleverness, while the black monkey represents cunning and evil. In general, monkeys are associated with the unconscious, darkness and base forces on the one hand, and with benevolent powers such as bestowal of good health, protection and success on the other hand. ⁹⁴ Both sides of the monkey's dual nature are evident in this poem. In the struggle within the well the persona cuts, bloodies and beats the creature he recognizes as his "monkey from Vietnam" but says, "I didn't know him," acknowledging his initial failure to connect the monkey with that part of himself that is dark, base and animalistic and his failure to realize that he is engaged in a conflict with himself. This 'strange meeting' ⁹⁵ with the monkey "makes no sense" to the persona because he has never had to explore the Melvillian "unspeakable foundation," the "innermost leaf" of his personal topography, but now that he is at "the bottom of a well" he must begin to make sense, impose order and meaning on the experience.

We must assume that the persona 'wins' the upper hand in the conflict because he tells us that the monkey "lowered his intestines/to my shoes." The Japanese regard the lower abdomen and the intestines as 'hara,' the spiritual center of the body, the locus of courage, fortitude and perseverance. That the disemboweled monkey places his intestines on the persona's shoes may indicate an act of supplication, or more likely, a yielding or transference of 'hara' in a kind of crude

spiritual 'infusion' that eventually will help the persona.

The statement, "I'm not on speaking terms/with anyone," abruptly shifts the focus away from the monkey and back to the persona who feels alienated, cut off from other people perhaps because he does not "know" them either, because his experiences somehow set him apart; or it might be the case that there is no available oral language visceral enough to penetrate the depth and density of Melville's "unspeakable foundation." The "wrong climate" of this topography and the well 'spoil' him in much the same way that "Everything rotted and corroded quickly over there." ⁹⁶ The slow, plodding, spiritual 'spoilage' the persona feels and expresses reflects the accuracy of the initiator's warning that the jungle would "rot" his charge in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down."

The effects of this 'rot' in the second stanza leave him shattered, disoriented and unable to tell "when [he's] sleeping," ⁹⁷ lacking confidence in his ability to communicate - "I don't know if what I'm saying/is anything at all" - and resigned - "I'll lie on my monkey bones" - to the fate that awaits him, whether this means that he will recognize and rely on the restorative, healing powers of the monkey to help him tunnel through this landscape, or succumb to drifting through the hellish darkness of his internal underworld.

Despite the continued flow of images, the orderliness of 'act four', (the falling action), indicates the direction of the persona's path.

I'm tired of the rice
falling in slow motion
like eggs from the smallest animal.
I'm twenty-five years old,
quiet, tired of the same mistakes,
the same greed, the same past.
The same past with its bleat
and pound of the dead,
with its hand grenade
tossed into a hooch on a dull Sunday

because when a man dies like that
his eyes sparkle,
his nose fills with witless nuance
because a farmer in Bong Son
has dead cows lolling
in a field of claymores
because the VC tie hooks to their comrades
because a spot of blood is a number
because a woman is lifting
her dress across the big pond.

If we're soldiers we should smoke them
if we have them. Someone's bound
to point us in the right direction
sooner or later.

I'm tired and I'm glad you asked.

Though he seems unaware of it in the wake of his exhaustion, he is slowly on his way upward toward the "light," having learned from the monkey the same lesson Paul Berlin learns from Sarkin Aung Wan in Going After Cacciato:

The way in is the way out. To flee Xa one must join it.
To go home one must be a refugee...We have fallen into a
hole. Now we must fall out. [122]

Just as Cacciato has fled the war by going 'underground' to periodically 'surface' on the westward trek, Sarkin Aung Wan's riddle-like solution to their predicament is to go literally underground, acting on the Heraclitean dictum that "The way in is the way out," going down below the surface of the expected, rational order of existence, approaching the 'outside' by going deep 'inside.' From 'inside out' she guides them through the blackness of the tunnels until Chapter 17, titled "Light At the End of the Tunnel to Paris," when she pushes aside a manhole cover and they emerge in the streets of Mandalay.

The forces opposing the persona - his fatigue ("I'm tired...of the same mistakes,/the same greed, the same past./The same past with its bleat/and pound of the dead"), the unrelenting sameness and persistence of images that "[fall] in slow motion/like eggs from the smallest animal," unravel in a catalogue of ordered memories resembling Caputo's

snapshot-like "clicks." Centered around the loss of Vietnamese life, property and dignity, these images coalesce to form in the second stanza the faith that "Someone's bound/to point us in the right direction/sooner or later." Lost in the underworld, searching for a way up and out, it never occurs to him that he is capable of pathfinding, of blazing his own trail to the "upper earth"; instead, he contents himself by acknowledging his fatigue once again and expresses his gratitude that someone cares.

"Someone" does indeed "point" him "in the right direction" and we discover in 'act five' that it is his "little brown monkey" who teaches him Sarkin Aung Wan's lesson.

There is a hill.
Men run top hill.
Men take hill.
Give hill to man.

Me and my monkey
and me and my monkey
my Vietnamese monkey
my little brown monkey
came with me
to Guam and Hawaii
in Ohio he saw
all my people he
jumped on my daddy
he slipped into mother
he baptized my sister
he's my little brown monkey
he came here from heaven
to give me his spirit
imagine my monkey my beautiful
monkey he saved me lifted
me above the punji
sticks above the mines
above the ground burning
above the dead above
the living above the
wounded dying the wounded
dying.

This concluding section is a tentative, painfully ambivalent affirmation after the confrontation with the monkey in 'act three' and the exhausting hail of recollected images that continue through 'act four.' Though the monkey dominates this

'act,' his exploits are 'framed' by the distance and perspective of the first and third stanzas, if one consults the poem as it appears in A Romance. This 'containment,' a necessary part of the ordering and controlling process, works to clarify and separate the monkey from the persona much as a drug addict separates himself from his drugs and his addiction. 'Ridden' by the monkey of war experience, just as an addict is ridden by the burden of his addiction, the persona is now very conscious of the monkey's unshakable presence in Guam, Hawaii and his home state of Ohio, and is aware of the violating effect he and his monkey have on his father, mother and sister. But once the monkey 'jumps on,' 'slips into,' and 'baptizes' the family members, a sudden reversal occurs in the persona's attitude toward the assessment of the monkey. Previously the senseless, unknown, beaten and bloody presence in the well, the psychological burden he acquired in Vietnam and the profaner of the family, the monkey now becomes:

...my little brown monkey
he came here from heaven
to give me his spirit
imagine my monkey my beautiful
monkey he saved me lifted
me above the punji
sticks above the mines
above the ground burning
above the dead above
the living above the
wounded dying the wounded
dying.

(My emphasis.)

This heaven-sent savior protected the persona in Vietnam from punji sticks, mines and burning ground and now, at home, he will protect him by helping him confront the recurring images of "the wounded dying the wounded/dying." By giving the persona "his spirit," the monkey enables him to 'lift' himself 'above' the fatigue, "the same mistakes, /the same greed, the same past. /The same past with its bleat/and pound of the dead"

so that he may gain perspective couched here in terms of physical ascension over the past. The ability to place the past at a manageable distance is critical if he is to attempt making his way upward out of his interior terrain. And with this bird-like ascension will come the language with which to find his voice and put him "on speaking terms" with others, and to scrape away the dirt and debris to unearth words in poetry to fit the experience.

The first and third stanzas of 'act five' (remember there is a third stanza of the poem in A Romance) display language stripped down, reduced and flattened, as though the poet were testing the reliability and solidity of the language's fundamental subject-verb-object structure. In both stanzas the language is repetitive, harking back to conjugating the verb "to be" in 'act one' and expanding upon the first four lines of stanza two in 'act two' ("Good times bad times sleep/get up work. Sleep get up/good times bad times./Work eat sleep good bad work times.") That the concluding section begins with the bedrock simplicity of alternating three and four word lines is testimony to the notion that language in more 'elevated' states cannot be trusted and is unsuitable because it does not reflect the reductiveness of the Vietnam experience in which everything non-essential to physical and psychical survival is stripped away and jettisoned.

In A Romance, the third and final stanza exhibits a slight development over the opening stanza only in the tentative lengthening of the lines. Still very evident is the compressive repetition and futility or inability to attempt saying more. Reinforcing this is the diminutive scale of the hill, the men and their actions. It is as if they were observed from the aerial distance of being 'lifted' by the monkey and by the slow detachment afforded by the passage of time, which flattens and

squeezes out the dross just as Herr's "mind slip and memory play" tint and warp experience.⁹⁸ Thus, language can regain its vaildity and strength, after the fundamentals have been tested like a man's character. Tested too is that aspect of the self represented by the monkey who, through his power to grant protection, success and good health, offers a glimpse of restored order by synthesizing, reducing and flattening the size, detail and intensity of experience.

"The Ghost Inside," found in The Monkey Wars, is a two stanza poem about the inextricability of recollected experience and language. The poem is placed below in its entirety.

1
Like Ezekiel
Unless the ghost is inside you
Your tongue is tied
And your hands with which you otherwise gesture,
Twisting in the air before you will not move,
Nor your arms, your legs,
And in your eyes you look a hundred years old.

2
It is so long now
The bodies have grown back into the earth,
Into the green places, the shadowy
Plantations abandoned by white egrets
Who will not return
To the war-fouled groves of bamboo,
But the cocaine is even whiter,
Spread out on the mirror
Into which you make your grotesque faces,

Whiter than this sky full of holes
Opening like flowers into the humorless oblivion beyond.
Unless the ghost is upon you
You can't speak a word
And tonight a razor of ice slides through your brain.
You lie back on the stoop and hear the evening
Of birdsong rise and fall
And only a few black wings roll past.

Ezekiel, the Old Testament prophet, could not speak unless the Holy Ghost filled him with expression (3:26 "I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them..." 3:27 "But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.'") Weigl's persona

recounts a similar muteness when he says, "Like Ezekiel/Unless the ghost is inside you/Your tongue is tied." Where the Lord warns Ezekiel that the House of Israel will react to his divine messages saying "...they will tie [you] with ropes; you will be bound so that you cannot go out among people," Weigl's persona undergoes not so much a physical restraint as a kind of paralysis⁹⁹ caused by the war:

And your hands with which you otherwise gesture,
Twisting in the air before you will not move,
Nor your arms, your legs,
And in your eyes you look a hundred years old.

He, like Ezekiel, has ingested a "scroll" on which "were written words of lament and mourning and woe" (Ezekiel 2:10), but unlike Ezekiel's "scroll" "that tasted as sweet as honey" (Ezekiel 3:3), his "scroll" is seared with images, fragments of experience harsh and bitter to the palate. Only when the "ghost inside" him stirs does he speak and move, otherwise he is like "the war-fouled groves of bamboo," "the shadowy/Plantations abandoned by white egrets."

A casual reading of this poem could lead one to think that the "ghost inside" is cocaine, that using it gives the persona 'divine' inspiration to craft his words and stave off unpleasant memories. But therein lies the paradoxical contradiction: if cocaine endows him with language, but temporarily numbs him to his war recollections, there is no point in trying to write war poems. Instead of such a reading, I suggest that memory, the 're-collection' of images and action, itself is the "ghost" that he is trying to put to rest - "It is so long now/The bodies have grown back into the earth" - that the "ghost" is the 'monkey' in altered form. The monkey has stopped 'riding' him, and has granted him respite from the barrage of Vietnam images found in the poem "Monkey" by helping

him 'bury' the images, if not with ceremony, with at least the natural processes of time and decomposition. Paradoxically, it is this decomposition of bodies in this poem, and by an extension, the 'decomposition' of memory, that enables him to untie his tongue and regain the use of his arms and legs. The sense of loss inherent in the decomposition of bodies and memory, of "letting it all go" as Herr puts it, ¹⁰⁰ is akin to the sorrow he feels for the white egrets who were forced by the war to abandon their natural habitat.

"But the cocaine is even whiter" than the egrets, suggests a deeper sense of loss, one which permits him to see, in the mirror on which the cocaine is spread, that "in [his] eyes [he] look[s] a hundred years old" and to observe that he makes "grotesque faces" when snorting the cocaine. His premature age and facial distortions, perhaps indicative of a loss of innocence and purity, are "fouled" by the war as are the "shadowy plantation," "groves of bamboo," and the persona himself, as demonstrated in "Burning Shit at An Khe."

The cocaine is "Whiter than this sky full of holes/Opening like flowers into the humorless oblivion beyond." In "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," the 'new guy' sees clouds as orchids opening around him as he descends to the initiator who awaits him on the ground. In "The Ghost Inside", however, there are no clouds, just the whiteness of "holes" punctured through the sky "into the humorless oblivion beyond." Though the flower image remains, it has no specificity as with the orchid image in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," nor does it connote fertility like the "mama san's" "stuffed sack of flowers." Instead, the simile is sterile, promising nothing except a realm "beyond," "oblivion," 'decomposition,' temporary death that renders language superfluous which is an unacceptable condition for a poet. After taking the cocaine, the persona

states that though the "razor of ice" allows him the pleasure of relaxing "on the stoop" to listen to "the evening/Of birdsong rise and fall," it cannot bury the apparitional "few black wings [that] roll past," with "black wings" resurrecting a macabre inversion of the war-routed white egrets.

Conclusion

It does not seem presumptuous to say of Weigl that the war was, in Caputo's words, "the most significant thing that had happened to [him]," that "it held [his] thoughts, senses, and feelings in an unbreakable embrace," that "it had been an experience as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it was sad, as tender as it was cruel."¹⁰¹

The seven poems analyzed in this chapter portray the 'significance' of a descending journey through the layers of the self and the war in Vietnam, a metaphorical-psychical descent to the bottom of a type of spinning vortex different from the one Kaiko describes in Into a Black Sun. The interior topography of the vortex within Weigl's persona is "the bottom of a well" in which he is confined with his "monkey" of war-created, roiling images depicting his tour in Vietnam. Clouds, birds, flowers and ghosts, and an ancillary set of images pertaining to confinement, burial and engulfment, prevail in his poems. Together, these images become a nightmarish inner landscape in which the persona finds himself and the things he learned there - the truth, usefulness and reliability, when all else was removed or rotted away by the war, of the Heraclitean dictum, "the way in is the way out." He learns that by descending he ascends; that by losing or abandoning language he gains it, that the language with which to articulate the descent and the ascent, the departure and return, the inversion and the reversion to an organically

integrated and balanced interior and exterior being, is the private, personal utterance he learns and develops from having been in Vietnam beneath the jungle covering, at the mucky bottom of a latrine pit. Moreover, he discovers that by submitting in the struggle there "at the bottom of the well," he must confront that interior part of himself and articulate the experience that brought him to such depths in order to put his 'ghosts' to rest.

Unlike McDonald's poems that fundamentally remain aloft over and untouched by the ground war, Weigl's poems go beneath the cloud cover, as in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," beneath the triple canopy jungle, as in "Amnesia," and plunge downward and inward into the uncharted regions of "the place where curses are manufactured." Starting with a helicopter descent through the lowering tropical clouds, he is taken literally and metaphorically into the jungle where his initiation begins. Where McDonald's technocentrism insulates the persona by intervening between him and the ground war, thus 'numbing' his response to the South Vietnamese people and all that occurs on the ground beneath his aircraft, Weigl's persona is anthropocentrically sensitive to the war's destructive power. He witnesses the brutalization of South Vietnamese civilians, childhood innocence and natural beauty, as in "The Last Lie" and "Surrounding Blues on the Way down," and he learns in "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map," of the Viet Congs' willingness to harm their own countrymen. He observes silently, but not without indignation, contempt or self-recrimination, the "rotted effervescent" nature of the war encroaching around him until finally, "it all [comes] down on [him]," and he learns the ultimate humiliation of "burning shit." This experience permanently loosens his eight

month-long "grip on things" and leaves him literally and psychically covered with the fecal "worthlessness" of the war, and worse still, of himself.

Making a journey is a multi-dimensional phenomenon with regard to Vietnam War poetry. Historically and literarily it involves the voyage beyond the shores of California across the Pacific to Asia where America completed the circle of the globe that Whitman envisioned. Weigl's poetry explains in detail what Michael Herr means by observing that in Vietnam, one sometimes "reached the place where an inversion of the expected order happened, a fabulous warp where you took the journey first and then you made your departure." ¹⁰² Weigl writes a superlative account of both the 'journey' and the 'departure.'

Chapter Three: Notes

- ¹ Bruce Weigl, Song of Napalm (New York: Atlantic Monthly P, 1988), biographical note.
- ² Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978) 190.
- ³ Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York: Avon Books, 1978), 3.
- ⁴ Herr, 10
- ⁵ Malcolm W. Browne, The New Face of War (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) 85.
- ⁶ Herr, 95.
- ⁷ Herr, 156.
- ⁸ Caputo, 278.
- ⁹ Caputo, 278.
- ¹⁰ Caputo, 277.
- ¹¹ Caputo, 278.
- ¹² Caputo, 276.
- ¹³ Herr, 251.
- ¹⁴ Caputo, 277
- ¹⁵ Caputo, 277.
- ¹⁶ Caputo, 278.
- ¹⁷ Caputo, 190.
- ¹⁸ Caputo, 190.
- ¹⁹ Caputo, 278.
- ²⁰ Caputo, 80.
- ²¹ Caputo, 105.
- ²² Browne, 85.
- ²³ Caputo, 278.
- ²⁴ Caputo, 277.
- ²⁵ Caputo, 102.
- ²⁶ Caputo, 295-96.
- ²⁷ Herr, 96.
- ²⁸ Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 64.

- 29 Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York: Avon Books, 1978) 65.
- 30 Herr, 6.
- 31 Herr, 64.
- 32 Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville
(London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 107.
- 33 Herr, 93.
- 34 Olson, 107.
- 35 Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Ballantine
Books, 1978) 225.
- 36 Herr, 3.
- 37 Herr, 125.
- 38 Herr, 3.
- 39 Herr, 3.
- 40 Herr, 92.
- 41 Caputo, 69.
- 42 Herr, 125.
- 43 Herr, 255.
- 44 "The World" is GI parlance for any place other than
Vietnam, but usually refers to America.
- 45 Caputo, 217.
- 46 Herr, 31.
- 47 Herr, 58.
- 48 Herr, 28.
- 49 Herr, 235.
- 50 Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The
Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth, trans. Willard R. Trask.
(New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 67.
- 51 Eliade, 75.
- 52 Eliade, 65.
- 53 Herr, 96.
- 54 Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (New York: Anchor
Books, 1957) 182.
- 55 Robert Pisor, The End of the Line: The Siege of Khe Sanh
(New York: Ballantine Books, 1982) 176.
- 56 Eliade, XIV.

- 57 Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth, trans. Willard R. Trask. (New York: Harper Torchbook/Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), p. 64.
- 58 Jesse L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor Books, 1957) 70.
- 59 J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962) 26.
- 60 Stephen Wright, Meditations in Green (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) 257.
- 61 Wright, 261.
- 62 Eliade, 65.
- 63 American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (New York: American Heritage Publishing, 1971) 1418.
- 64 American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 319.
- 65 Weston, 175.
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- 67 Eliade, 75.
- 68 Cirlot, 26-27.
- 69 Cirlot, 26.
- 70 Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 106.
- 71 Olson, 96.
- 72 Wright, 257.
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- 77 Stanton, 53.
- 78 Steve Hasset, "We stalk ourselves for poetry," Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After the War, eds. Jan Barry, and W. D. Ehrhart (Perkasie, PA: East River Anthology, 1976) 151.
- 79 D. C. Berry, "A poem ought to be a salt lick," Saigon Cemetery (Athens, U of Georgia P, 1972) 50.
- 80 Ruth Benedict, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1946) 61.

⁸¹ Benedict, 61.

⁸² Robert Jay Lifton, Home From the War: Vietnam Veterans Neither Victims nor Executioners (London: Wildwood House, 1974) 199.

⁸³ Stephen Wright, Meditations in Green (New York: Bantam Books, 1983) 216.

⁸⁴ D. F. Brown, "Still Later There Are War Stories," Carrying the Darkness: American Indochina - The Poetry of the Vietnam War ed. W. D. Ehrhart (New York: Avon Books, 1985) 57.

⁸⁵ Lifton, 199.

⁸⁶ Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977) 92. "It is interesting how the color green, which poets and songwriters always associate with youth and hope, can be so depressing when there is no other color to contrast with it. Green. It is embedded in my consciousness. My vision is filled with green rice paddies, green hills, green mountains, green uniforms; light green, medium green, dark green, olive green."

⁸⁷ Wright, 227.

⁸⁸ Wright, 248.

⁸⁹ Wright, 248.

⁹⁰ Wright, 248.

⁹¹ Wright, 248.

⁹² Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 107.

⁹³ C.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962) 350.

⁹⁴ Cirlot, 202.

⁹⁵ This meeting at "the bottom of a well" is reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's poem "Strange Meeting" which is also conducted "Down some profound dull tunnel." The personae of both poems encounter in the murkiness of the underworld a stranger who helps them, and who ultimately is not so strange, since the monkey and the shade represent a part of the personae hence unrecognized or unacknowledged. "I didn't know him," states Weigl's persona, yet he calls him "My monkey from Vietnam"; Owen's persona recognizes only by the shade's "dead smile [that] we stood in Hell." It is the smiling, former adversary, 'The Man He Killed', who recognizes his slayer - "I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned/Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed." Weigl's persona similarly 'cuts someone' with his knife. Though the monkey is beaten and bloody (unlike Owen's spirit buried too deep for blood to "reach there from the upper ground"), the monkey in 'act four', like Owen's shade, is a healing mitigator who "[lifts] distressful hands as if to bless," and who comes to Weigl's persona "from heaven to give... his spirit," and bestows upon him the mixed blessing of being a survivor. Both the monkey and the shade help the personae better acknowledge and understand that dark part of themselves which combat experience elicited in them.

⁹⁶ Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977) 217.

⁹⁷ The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. C. Day Lewis, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974) 36.

In his notes on "Strange Meeting" C. Day Lewis says that the British Museum's manuscript of the poem reveals that the line "Let us sleep new..." "appears to have been written in later and tentatively," perhaps indicating an uncertainty of the seam between waking and sleeping similar to Weigl's persona's statement, "I don't know when I'm sleeping," because both states come to resemble one another in war experience and memory.

⁹⁸ The concepts of "flattening" and distance are addressed by Steve Mason, a former Army captain and Vietnam veteran, in his long poem, "The Casualty" from Johnny's Song in which he writes:

The world of the combat soldier
is a flat one
whose highest peak is mean survival
and whose lowest value
is the killing of his enemy.
It is a private world
of height without depth
from which can be viewed
the separate, fractured worlds
of comrades dying
(as from a galactic distance.)

⁹⁹ This is a paralysis akin to being saddled with the presence of the monkey in "Monkey," and is closely linked to the thought Caputo expresses about the war being "the most significant thing that had happened to me. It held my thoughts, senses, and feelings in an unbreakable embrace... it had been an experience as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it was sad, as tender as it was cruel." A Rumor of War, XVI.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York: Avon Books, 1978), 42.

¹⁰¹ Caputo, XVI.

¹⁰² Herr, 65.

Chapter Four

Bottoming Out in "The Dark Belly All Wound":
Thirteen Poems by Basil T. Paquet

**Bottoming Out in "The Dark Belly All Wound":
Thirteen Poems by Basil T. Paquet**

Introduction

Basil T. Paquet was born in 1944 and served in the United States Army from 1966 to 1968. In Vietnam he served as a Sp 4 in the 24th Evacuation Hospital and received the Army Commendation medal. He co-edited Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans and currently he is a management consultant for a company based in Philadelphia. Sadly, he apparently has published no poems other than the thirteen that appear in WHAM.

Paquet's persona takes the war deeper than either McDonald's persona in "After the Noise of Saigon" or Weigl's persona in "Burning Shit at An Khe." There are literal differences of course: Paquet's persona is not a 'technocentricist', a pilot waging impersonal aerial war, nor is he plunging through the forests of Colorado's high country or nightmares like McDonald's persona; neither is he tramping through jungles or wading in a latrine pit like Weigl's persona. As a medic, Paquet's persona is dealing daily with the war as it comes to him on the ground in the form of "moans," "wet screaming riven limbs," "the half-dead comatose," and "the dark belly all wound."

Paquet is the spiritual heir of Walt Whitman's wound dresser moving among and ministering to casualties, compassionately observing the minute details of the death and dying that become routine without being callous, ordinary without being cliched, poignant without being sentimental. The pervasive fatigue, frustration and pain so profoundly palpable in the poetry of Owen and Sassoon are also present in Paquet's poetry, as is the simplification of death to which Keith Douglas refers. The obvious influence of Dylan Thomas in "They Do Not Go Gentle" and "Mourning the Death, By

Hemorrhage, Of a Child from Honai" also places Paquet in a class superior to the large majority of Vietnam veteran poets. But more than this, Paquet's poetry marks the nadir, as it were, in the descent through the layers of the self's interior, Olson's "buried continent" and Melville's "wondrous depths," and Weigl's "place where curses are manufactured."

Paquet's poetry is meticulously crafted. The unobtrusive use of rhyme and the tightly knit interior of each line and stanza are integral to the careful organization of his poems. Like Weigl, whose poetry his most closely resembles in its skill and evocative strength, he selects broad images associated with the sky and flight, mouths, breath and redness to depict his experience as a medic. Like Weigl, he transforms them, separating and lifting them up for our attention, to present a series of clear-eyed, unflinching "visual fragments" ¹ of his war. These thirteen poems are thoroughly grounded in the double sense that their strength is Antean, drawing their power from the repetitive events at ground level - the ebbing of youth, innocence and finally, life - and, as part of the broader context of Vietnam War poetry, they mark the nadir of descent through the multiple levels of war experience as the poet unfalteringly walks the narrow line between the commonplace and the extraordinary to grope "into the dark belly...feeling into wounds, /the dark belly all wound." ²

"The dark belly all wound" represents the bottom-most level of the descent through the war begun with Weigl's persona in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" descending through the clouds to the jungle and the war below, and then inward along the passages of the self's interior. From the very bottom of this tremendous depth, Paquet's persona "reaches" "touches," and "feels" his way through the agony of the war he fights with the technology of medical skill rather than that of weaponry. At

this level of the war, however, medical skill and technology are no match for the superior technology of killing because there is "no rearticulation of nucleics, no phoenix, /No novae, just an arbitrary of one-way bangs/Flowing out to interstitial calms" of dying and death.

As a group, the thirteen poems assume what may be construed as a sonata form. The 'exposition' is composed of five poems - "In a Plantation," "The Last Time," "Basket Case," "Christmas '67" and "Easter '68"; "Night Dust-Off," "It Is Monsoon At Last" and "Graves Registration" constitute the 'development'; the 'recapitulation' is comprised of "They Do Not Go Gentle," "Morning - A Death" and "Mourning the Death, By Hemorrhage, Of a Child from Honai," while "Group Shot" and "A Visit" form the 'coda.' Broadly speaking, the poems in the 'exposition' deal with being 'out there,' as Herr would have it, anywhere that fighting occurs and men are wounded and die. Where the 'development' brings the action of the expositional poems 'in here' to the evacuation hospital, and to the bottom-most recesses of the persona's self, the 'recapitulation' blends and fuses the 'out there-in here' elements of the 'exposition' and 'development' inside the poet-persona's thoughts, feelings and reactions to the death around him. The two poems of the 'coda' bring the sonata to an end by presenting the aftermath of the war told from a soldier's point of view, and the bitter memories evoked by a photograph in "A Visit" and "Group Shot" respectively.

The Sonata

With five poems, the 'exposition' is the largest section of the sonata. All of the poems are brief, ranging in length from seven to sixteen lines, and all concern the 'out there' nature of death in combat. The intensity of the action and

the poet-persona's observations build throughout the poems in this section.

Beginning with "In a Plantation," the shortest and simplest poem of the 'exposition' (indeed of the thirteen poems), Paquet presents a view to a death, the first of many in the sonata.

The bullet passed
Through his right temple,
His left side
Could not hold
Against the metal,
His last "I am" exploded
Red and grey on a rubber tree.

A dispassionate description of death, this poem introduces the deep-throated chords of mortality underpinning the entire sonata. It is a detached statement of fact uttered in one exhalation interrupted twice by commas at the end of lines two and five. The first 'break' comes at the moment of impact when "The bullet passed/Through his right temple." Paquet's choice of the word "temple" reveals not only the location of the fatal wound, but simultaneously suggests that the head, the center of thought and reason, is a holy place. The second pause occurs as the round exits the left side of the unidentified person's head - "His left side/Could not hold/Against the metal." These three lines are interesting because they present the head and the bullet in an unusual manner. The temple-head is unarmored and fragile and "could not hold," it could not contain, deflect, comprehend or provide any protection "against" the object crashing its way through. "Metal," a non-military, non-ballistic word seems an appropriate choice of a synonym for bullet. It is indeed a chunk of metal whose ore was mined from the earth and now it has brought its 'bearer' down to be buried in the earth.

The poem concludes philosophically if grotesquely: "His last 'I am' exploded/Red and grey on a rubber tree."

Descartes' statement, "Cogito, ergo sum," 'I think, therefore I am,' is used effectively as a counterpoint to the bloody mess. The 'temple' of reason, logic and being is shattered and sprayed onto a rubber tree whose milky, coagulated latex the brain matter resembles. The utter simplicity and directness of the final two lines demonstrate the sudden, inexplicably horrifying transformation, one that eliminates the need for any philosophy beyond the GI aphorism, "There it is."

Had the casualty in "In a Plantation" been a Vietnamese man, "This Last Time" might detail the last things he saw before dying. Divided into three stanzas, this fifteen line poem sets forth a series of images that dominate the remainder of the sonata: areas of the body, namely lips and mouths, the sky, flight-associated imagery, and more generally, images depicting that which one is doing or is conscious of at the moment of death.

In contrast to "In a Plantation" in which we are graphically informed of the fatal wound, "This Last Time," the second poem of the 'exposition,' subtly withholds information regarding the casualty's wound, concentrating instead on visual phenomena. Yet "This Last Time" could almost be a continuation of "In a Plantation." Where "In a Plantation" focuses on the physical wound, "This Last Time" details the last things a dying man sees. In neither poem is it clear whether the casualty is American or Vietnamese. This absence of differentiation is significant since it suggests the universality of death in war, that all men die in similar ways. "This Last Time" reads almost as though it were written for camera angles with the dying man's eyes 'directing' the angles and 'selecting' the images. The poem is physical, like "In a Plantation," but it is not clinical. Instead, it moves imaginatively inward by concentrating on the physicality of

sensation and vision as the poet projects himself into the dying man to 'see' and 'feel' the last moments of ebbing life.

Stanza one, eight lines in length and the longest of the poem, is top heavy and saturated with physical sensation and the slow and intensely vivid recording of the last images that present themselves in the last moments of life.

This last time
the sun dries his lips
and bakes dry his earth,
he sees green rice rows
wander toward a white temple,
tin roofs shake their heat at the sun,
water buffalo wander
near a temple.

With the almost leisurely slowness of the dying, the camera-like pan of his eyes takes in rows of rice, the temple, water buffalo, and the shimmering waves of heat radiated by the "tin roofs" of huts. But the "green rice rows/WANDER toward a white temple" and "tin roofs shake their heat at the sun" in his death-distorted, "last time" observation. The searing sun "dries his lips/and bakes dry his earth," lending a clue to the man's identity as a Vietnamese, but whether he is an innocent farmer or a Viet Cong is as indeterminable to the reader as it often was for American servicemen. The two references to the temple - "a white temple" in line five, and less distinctly, "a temple" in the last line of the stanza - further suggest that we are seeing through the eyes of a Vietnamese, as does the fact that rice is the first thing his eyes locate. The rows "wander" like the buffalo in the surrealistic intensity of his dying gaze. Even the hot roofs assume a skewed animation as they "shake their heat at the sun," as if the heat were a fist he was shaking at the sun for drying his lips and parching "his earth."

The middle stanza continues and broadens, in only four

lines, the strength of the sun as it "fevers his head," which is an added distortion of perception that renders the "black mynas cry a warning" of imminent death.

This last time sun fevers his head
black mynas cry a warning,
fire breaks from shadows
of a tree line.

"Fire breaks from shadows/of a tree line" with the same luminosity and suddenness as the sun that "bursts his eyes" in the last stanza. The heat from the sun overhead, the roofs and the tree-line fire envelop him and gradually will render him as dry and lifeless as his sun-baked land.

The deadly desiccation is all but complete in the third stanza:

This last time sun bursts his eyes
he sees darkly the fall of sparrows
against a shaken sky.

With sun-dazzled eyes, "he sees darkly the/fall of sparrows/against a shaken sky," signaling the 'fall' from the last brilliant vestiges of life to the darkness of death. These final three lines of the poem seem to be squashed by the weight of the first two stanzas in accordance with the overpowering heaviness of heat and death pressing down upon him. The 'falling sparrows' depict the swiftly descending course of his life. That they fall "against a shaken sky" seems to indicate that their milieu, like that of the dying man, is profoundly disrupted by the presence of the war. Unlike Weigl's sparrows in "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map," that act as benign, helpful agents to the GIs, Paquet's sparrows are harbingers of death. Indeed, Paquet's use of bird imagery here contrasts starkly with Weigl's use of birds to indicate freedom and flight, and the longing to somehow rise above the ravages of war.

In contrast to "This Last Time," "Basket Case," the third poem of the 'exposition,' is told from the first person narrative stance of an injured GI. Appropriately titled "Basket Case," a slang term denoting mental, physical or spiritual wreckage, this poem of fourteen lines captures in cameo-like fashion the 'case history' of an eighteen year old soldier:

I waited eighteen years to become a man.
My first woman was a whore off Tu Do street.
But I wish I never felt the first wild
Gliding lust, because the rage and thrust
Of a mine caught me hip high.
I felt the rip at the walls of my thighs,
A thousand metal scythes cut me open,
My little fish shot twenty yards
Into a swamp canal.
I fathered only this - the genderless bitterness
Of two stumps, and an unwanted pity
That births the faces of all
Who will see me till I die deliriously
From the spreading sepsis that was once my balls.

This GI and the persona in Weigl's "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" share the notion that manhood is achieved at the age of eighteen. But the anticipation and attainment of the age of majority is no comfort when he is emasculated soon after his first sexual experience with "a whore off Tu Do street." Manhood is quite literally undercut by a mine. Had he "never felt the first wild/Gliding lust" of the sexual act he would never truly know the sensations which his emasculation denies him. That the nature of his wound is described in sexual terms is certainly not surprising:

...because the rage and thrust
Of a mine caught me hip high.
I felt the rip at the walls of my thighs,
A thousand metal scythes cut me open
My little fish shot twenty yards
Into a swamp canal.

Beneath these lines, however, lingers the subtle suggestion that just as the mine's "thousand" fragments "cut [him] open"

in mutilating violation and dismemberment, so too has the presence of American forces in Vietnam violated the country by making whores of Tu Do's women.

A more detailed reading of these five lines reveals that the mine and its flying fragments that 'catch' him "hip high" in perverse mockery of a lover's grasp, act as "a thousand metal" penises that 'rape' his flesh. Whether his "little fish" is his severed penis or a spurt of semen "shot...Into a swamp canal" is unclear. Clarification is unnecessary however, because the message is unmistakable: he can sire nothing in the polluted "swamp canal"-womb of Vietnam, except "the genderless bitterness" of twin "stumps, and an unwanted pity/That births the faces of all/Who see [him] till [he] die[s] deliriously/From the spreading sepsis that was once [his] balls." Emasculation, double amputation, bitterness and "unwanted pity" are the products of this 'union' of flesh and metal. Poised at the end of line thirteen, the phrase "I die deliriously" underlines yet again that the twisted sexual parody in this 'delirious death' is not that of orgasm, but that caused by "spreading sepsis."

Structurally, the form of "Basket Case" loosely anticipates the sonnet, "Christmas '67," that follows in the 'exposition.' The fourteen lines of "Basket Case" may easily be broken into three segments marked by 'thematic' coherence in which lines one through five introduce the coming of age and sexual maturity, lines six through nine present the mutilating parody of this maturity, and lines ten through fourteen summarize the dire physical and emotional results of the eighteen year old's maturity and dismemberment. The first two 'divisions' bear a functional similarity to that of the Petrarchan sonnet's octave in that they carry the narrative burden of the young man's plight, while the last section, acting

in the place of the sestet, reinforces the narrative by moving from the physical and sexual aspects of the wound to the emotional and psychical 'sterility' incurred.

Though "Basket Case" lacks the genuine stanzaic characteristics of the sonnet, it does possess all the nascent characteristics of Paquet's artistry, technical skill, exacting economy of words and concentrated expression of passion found in the last two poems of the 'exposition' and the groups of poems in the 'development.' In this sense, "Basket Case" marks a threshold or point of transition in Paquet's poetic development.

"Christmas '67" is a mature Shakespearean sonnet and displays the first full example of Paquet's craftsmanship replete with variations of the six dominant images of mouths/breath, sky/flight, redness and resurrection. Here, the 1967 anniversary of Christ's birth is no occasion for ceremony, celebration or joy. In the deluge of agonizing images, sounds and movements "Bethlehem stars," "thudding hosannas," and "red ribbons" are the very antithesis of Christmas.

Together with the title, the first quatrain presents Christmas as half of the theme and setting of the poem:

Flares lit the night like a sky
Full of Bethlehem stars.
Dark wings against a darker sky
Laid down red ribbons and bars

The simile comparing flares with "Bethlehem stars" is probably inevitable in a war zone at Christmas, but instead of guiding the Magi to Bethlehem to pay homage to the infant Jesus, these 'stars' enable American troops to spot enemy movements. The silhouetted "dark wings against a darker sky" are likely those of a converted C-47, "Spooky." Though "a standard prop flareship," Michael Herr says:

many of them carried .20-and .762 mm guns on their doors, Mike-Mikes that could fire out 300 rounds per second, Gatling style, "a round in every square inch of a football field in less than a minute," as the handouts said. They used to call it Puff the Magic Dragon, but the Marines knew better: they named it Spooky. Every fifth round fired was a tracer, and when Spooky was working, everything stopped while that solid stream of violent red poured down out of the black sky... It was awesome, worse than anything the Lord had ever put down on Egypt...
[Dispatches, 132-133]

Borne on "dark wings," this 'angel' streams "red ribbons and bars" of tracers in a lethal pyrotechnic display that heralds the tumult that follows in the remainder of the poem, and presents war as the other half of the theme, and any of numerous war zones in Vietnam as the other half of the setting. The strength of this stanza is two-fold. First, it depicts war as a demented 'angel' that takes no notice of the Savior's birth but lights up this plot of earth with the horrifying inversion of Christmas as an occasion for frenzied battle. "Spooky," the mechanical angel, may comfort and defend Americans from the rapidly encroaching enemy assault, but it is the demon of death for anyone caught beneath its bright vengeance. Second, with only the tools of simple diction and an abundance of vowel sounds, Paquet ironically underscores the savagery of warfare at Christmas. The underlying dramatic statement he makes in this quatrain seems to be that if fighting can occur on Christmas day, its barbarism can surely take place on any other day.

The second quatrain carries the 'warning' of the 'angel' in the first quatrain:

Of bright crashing metal
To warn of the on-coming
Assault of men, the long battle
Filled with cries of "in-coming,"

Any momentary illusions regarding the real nature of the "red

ribbons and bars" are dispelled in line five when we learn they are streaks "of bright crashing metal" portending an assault. Here too, vowel sounds are important because they imitate the rising fears of Americans on the ground as they undergo attack. The rise in pitch from the sonorous 'bass register' of "on-coming assault" to the higher 'tenor' and 'alto register' of i's in "filled with cries of 'in-coming,'" graphically portray the growing tension and alarm once "in-coming" rockets and mortars begin to fall in the third stanza:

...send[ing] them crawling about
Into the pocked earth, waiting for the promise
Of thudding hosannas, like a gathering of devout
Moths, aching for the flames, but frozen by the hiss...

The alarm shouted by a few men is enough to send others diving for cover. The range in vowel sounds - from the frightened height of i's in line eight, to the resonating depth of 'aw' sounds ("crawling," "pocked," "promise" and "moths") and long o's ("hosannas" and "frozen") alternate sporadically with the 'alto register' long a's ("waiting," "gathering," and "aching") - reflect the surging emotions these men experience while under attack.

Men "crawling about/Into the pocked earth" is reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's "sad land" in "The Show" which is

Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues.
[The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, 50-51.]

Though Paquet compares these men squirming into the earth for cover with "devout moths," one is also reminded of Owen's caterpillars that "vanished out of dawn down hidden holes." Like moths "aching for the flames," these men cringe into the ground in a terrorized parody of self-immolation and burial to escape the barrage.

"Promise," "hosannas" and 'devotion' derisively sustain the ecclesiastical tenor of the poem. The absence of religion is most clearly and ironically revealed by the use of "hosannas." "The promise/Of thudding hosannas" is no interjection of worshipful praise or adoration of God or the Messiah, unless one takes the concussive impact of artillery as the "promise" of death's deliverance for the 'devotion' these men have shown, or unless the etymological meaning of 'hosanna' is consulted. ³ "Thudding hosannas," however, is best read simply as the sounds of rockets and mortars delivered to their targets.

Men grouped like "devout/Moths, aching for the flames," are "frozen by the hiss/And whistle of mortars and rockets gliding/Down their air pews in a choiring of dying." Paquet's lines, like those of Owen's sonnet "Anthem for Doomed Youth" -

No mockeries now for them; no prayer, nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells
[The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, 44]

address the 'hymn-like' tones produced by falling artillery shells by treating the mournful sounds as part of the crazed nature of warfare.

Reactions to the attack's first frenetically 'heated' activity followed by the paralyzing stasis of fear, are represented in the words "flames" and "frozen." "Hiss/And whistle," (the phrase enjambling the final quatrain and the couplet), though hardly an original onomatopoeic description of 'in-coming' rounds, contributes to the vocal 'physicality' of the poem begun with "cries" in the second quatrain, continued in the third quatrain with "thudding hosannas," and concluded with "a/choiring of dying" in the couplet. Before "sliding/Down their air pews," the low menace of the o's

carried in "mortars and rockets" lifts with their trajectory and intersects with the arcing crescendo of i's in "choiring of dying." By cleverly crossing sound and sense, Paquet appropriately lays the foundation for the 'physicalization' present in his best and strongest poems, for as John Fredrick Nims states in Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry:

When sound goes along with sense, the meaning of a poem becomes physicalized. It resists the authoritarianism of the intellect, which claims the right to force a meaning on any combination of sounds, regardless of their nature. Appropriate sound invites the body to participate in the being of a poem, just as the poet's body participated in its creation. [204].

As a medic, Paquet witnessed and participated in warfare from a medical-physical vantage point, one which imbues his poetry with a profound sensitivity and responsiveness to physical detail that heightens and improves as we approach the final poem of the 'exposition.'

"Easter '68" could easily be called Paquet's first 'medic poem' since it is told from the perspective of one treating the wounded and dying. In addition, he liberally employs images of mouths/breaths, resurrection, redness and the sky. Like "Christmas '67," "Easter '68" points out the discrepancies between the significance of the Christian holiday and the poet's observation of the occasion. Where Christmas 'celebrated' the "promise" of artillery "hosannas" and men 'prayed' by diving for cover, Easter observes the deaths of combatants "long past rising to a passion." In only sixteen lines this poem graphically illustrates that there is no 'resurrection' for those who are horribly wounded despite the valiant attempts of the medic.

I have seen the pascal men today.
Long past rising to a passion
they sucked their last sun
through blued lips,
buttressed their intestines in handfuls,

lifting their wounds to the sky
they fell silent as the sun,
as words not spoken,
broken Easters of flesh
girdled in fatigue strips,
red arching rainbows of dead men
rising like a promise
to give Jesus the big kiss
and sinking down -
only my breath on their lips,
only my words on their mouths.

The first line, "I have seen the pascal men today," is a simple declarative sentence acting like the topic sentence of a paragraph to prepare the reader for what is to follow. Given the gist of the poem, "pascal," which pertains to 'new life' in the Christian sense, is a variant of the adjective 'paschal', meaning of or pertaining to Easter. The "pascal men" then, are the wounded GIs the medic treats on Easter Sunday who are denied 'new life.' But "Long past rising to a passion," "the casualties are too severely hurt to 'rise' from the medic's ministrations. For some, the "passion," the depth of their suffering, ends when they "suck their last sun/Through blued lips." As in "This Last Time," human life in this poem is measured in sunlight. 'Sucking' the last essence of life "through blued lips" suggests that for these men, the sun is drying up and they are suffocating. Other casualties who have been gut-wounded "buttress their intestines in handfuls,/Lifting their wounds to the sky," as if in an act of supplication to show the Almighty that they, like Christ, have suffered the agonies of a form of crucifixion.

The medic's attempts to save them prove fruitless:

They fell silent as the sun,
as words not spoken.

The 'fall' from life to death is soundless. If the sun is the measurement of life, perhaps this celestial entity represents God. If this is so, then His silence in the face of their

suffering mirrors the silence of the dying and their "words not spoken." They 'fall' quietly, without uttering as Christ did, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" The only 'savior' present is the medic, who like Whitman's wound-dresser, does what little he can for these

broken Easters of flesh
girdled in fatigue strips.

Crude and hasty field dressings, strips of cloth torn from fatigues, 'girdle' the ghastly wounds of still other casualties. These "broken Easters of flesh" have sustained injuries comparable to those men who earlier tried to support their gaping intestines with their own hands.

The ghastliness of mutilations forms in the medic's mind

red arching rainbows of dead men
rising like a promise
to give Jesus the big kiss.

The image of a vast number of "dead men" "rising" to form "red arching rainbows" suggests not so much the release of the spirit as it connotes gory 'rainbows' left in the wake of sprayed blood. "Rising like a promise/to give Jesus the big kiss" is reminiscent of "The promise/Of thudding hosannas" in "Christmas '67." In both instances the "promise" of salvation offered by Christianity is hollow and meaningless: in warfare the medic is the 'savior,' and the blood is the spirit that 'rises' in "rainbows." The notion of "dead men/rising...to give Jesus the big kiss" indicates an inversion with its irreligious tone. It seems that "the big kiss" is akin to Judas's kiss of betrayal, that these dead men have been abandoned and betrayed by Jesus. Such a reading is borne out by the fact that they are nothing more than evanescent rainbows, spiritless entities that Jesus does not acknowledge or welcome, and subsequently they "[sink] down" from their

"arching" heights with

only my breath on their lips,
only my words on their mouths.

There is no hope of an afterlife for these men, and the only 'promise' on earth is that of the medic who strives, very literally, to 'in-spire' them with his own breath and words. These last two lines of this poem display with quiet finality the losing battle the medic faces.

"Easter '68" is a strong, evocative poem in which the full bloom of Paquet's talent is evident. The poem's strength is partly contingent on the medic-persona's presence - he bears witness to the suffering of the casualties and we bear witness to his ministrations. Yet it is Paquet's meticulous selection of images, harnessed by 'supportive' verbs that make the poem particularly good: the bloody redness of "broken Easters of flesh" and "red arching rainbows"; the "silent" impassivity of the sun and sky beneath which the suffering and death occur; the medic's struggles to 'resurrect' the shattered bodies in which the magnitude of injuries is pitted against his pitifully inadequate breaths and words; the verbs that reinforce and supportively mimic the medic's aid - "rising," "buttressed," "lifting," "arching," "girdled," and the verbs that portend the failure of his efforts - "sucked," "fell," and "sinking down."

From an analytical standpoint, the most compelling images are those associated with mouths, lips, breath, utterance and silence since they perform the double duty of serving both medic and poet. Paquet uses seven such images (lines 3, 4, 7, 8, 13, 15, 16) in only sixteen lines and all are linked with images of 'resurrection.' Notice, for example, how the placement of "rising" (line 2) and "buttressed" (line 5)

provide an almost protective shelter around the first lot of "pascal men," those slowly suffocating as "they sucked their last sun/through blued lips." "Lifting" (line 6) and "girdled" (line 10) try to offset the 'falling silence' of death in lines seven through nine. Similarly "arching" (line 11) and "rising" (line 12) strive to stave off the "sinking down" motion in line fourteen that follows "the big kiss" of death while the medic supplies the 'kiss' of artificial respiration. The silence trapped between their "blued lips," in their "words not spoken," and in the "big kiss" of acquiescence they give Jesus, is matched by the silence of the medic who continues trying to revive them with "[his] breath on their lips." Paquet breaks the silence by giving voice to their unspoken words. He accomplishes in this poem that which neither he as a medic, nor his medic-persona could always do. By putting words into "Easter '68" he is placing vitalizing words on the lips of the dead, breathing life-giving air into their lungs, 'resurrecting' them as it were. Air and utterance, "breath" and "words" are the sole 'restoratives' available to poet and medic alike.

The five poems of the 'exposition' move from 'hovering,' clinical detachment to thoroughly 'grounded' humane involvement and they slowly unfold Paquet's growing confidence in his craft, and the strength of his imagery. From the first tentative step in "In a Plantation," in which we are given an impersonal glimpse of an unidentified man with a fatal head wound, to the compassionate 'embrace' of the medic as he struggles to pump breath into the dying in "Easter '68," we can trace the development of a poet who descends and delves unflinchingly to the bottom of his experience as a medic to make a path for himself through it and find the voice necessary to articulate the impartiality of pain, mutilation and death.

The descending path of the "settling slickship" in "Night Dust-off" establishes the tenor of the 'development.' The first three poems of this section - "Night Dust-off," "It Is Monsoon at Last," and "Morning - A Death" - might best be characterized as probing and "feeling into wounds, /the dark belly all wound" of memory, while the final poem, "Graves Registration," stands back, as it were, and acts as a transition leading into the 'recapitulation.' Unlike the poems of the 'exposition,' however, "Night Dust-off" contains both a literal and a metaphorical descent, each with its own stanza.

Set in darkness, "Night Dust-off" begins with a surrealistic version of the opening credit scenes of the "M.A.S.H." television series. Where the two tiny, mosquito-like helicopters in "M.A.S.H." descend through sunny skies to set down their two casualties each, the poem's "slickship" (a helicopter troopship) razors the night as it settles with its load of wounded. We 'hear' this helicopter before we 'see' it. Indeed, the seven lines of the first stanza are devoted to first an aural and then a visual description of its approach and descent. The stanza is a complete unit easily capable of standing alone as a discrete poem, and as such, it functions as an ominous prelude to the remainder of the poem.

A sound like hundreds of barbers
stropping furiously, increases;
suddenly the night lights,
flashing blades thin bodies
into red strips
hunched against the wind
of a settling slickship.

The combination of "sound like hundreds of barbers/stropping furiously," and the sudden illumination of the helicopter's landing light creates an aural and visual strobe-like effect making it sound and appear that the four main "flashing

blades" of the helicopter are giant 'razors' that "thin [the] bodies" of the medical crew "into red strips" as they "[hunch] against the wind" of the slashing rotors before they can unload and treat the casualties.

But even this ominous prelude of the escalating "stopping" sound, and the ghastliness of the optical illusion involving the men on the ground being 'barbered' into "red strips," is inadequate preparation for the appalling condition of the casualties ferried by the "dust-off" helicopter. Perhaps it is because of their frightful state that Paquet refrains from using a persona in this poem, preferring instead the more effective use of metonymy, thus letting the medics' 'disembodied' hands represent the futility of their aid in the presence of the human wreckage described in the second stanza.

Litters clatter open,
hands reaching
into the dark belly of the ship
touch toward moans,
they are thrust into a privy,
feeling into wounds,
the dark belly all wound,
all wet screams riven limbs
moving in the beaten night.

We know the medics open the litters bearing the casualties, but it is almost as if the "litters clatter open" by themselves. "Clatter[ing] open" suggests both the dry, rattling sound of death and 'open' wounds. In just three words we can discern with a sense of horror, what lies within, just as the medics do as they grope into the darkness. "Litters," of course, are the stretchers bearing the wounded, but another meaning of the word insinuates itself there inside the helicopter: litter as carelessly discarded objects or waste. As such, these litters bear the 'litter' of war, the waste left in the wake of combat, a reading justified by line two in which the medics' hands are "thrust into a privy."

"Hands reaching," like "touch toward moans" and "feeling into wounds," sustains the metonymic 'substitution' of hands for the whole person. Throughout the poem, but particularly in this stanza, a whole human form is indiscernible. There may be two reasons for this: the darkness and the need, on the part of the medics, to protectively 'detach' themselves from their grisly task. The darkness itself is indicative of more than just the night. It is the multi-leveled metaphoric medium for literal and psychic, experiential descent. The "dust-off" helicopter makes its descent through darkness, its interior is described as "the dark belly of the ship," its cargo is the universal "dark belly all wound" into which the medics grope with their 'disembodied' hands, their own bodies 'elsewhere' within the murky confines of the "ship's belly." Drawn down through the night and into the recesses of the chopper, the medics and their wounded charges 'bottom out,' as it were, there in the "all wound." This "dark belly all wound" is a vision of hell where "all [is] wet screams riven limbs/moving in the beaten night."

That this hell of "wet screams" and "riven limbs" is found in the "belly" of a "ship" is symbolically and referentially significant. These casualties are Jonahs caught and mangled in the maw of leviathan-like war. They and the medics share with Kaiko's protagonist an overpowering sense of confined isolation and helplessness.

I'd been living in the belly of a whale for the last twenty years; and it made no difference whether it heaved itself into the air or sank toward the ocean floor, whether there were storms or days of calm, for I never moved from a wall-less cell, imprisoned, talking to myself alone. [Into a Black Sun, 185]

"Imprisoned" in the helicopter's "belly," surrounded by the "wall-less cell" of suffering, they have descended (like

Melville's Pip) to the "ocean floor," and it is the Ishmael-like poem that 'survives' to tell their story. The 'whale' that 'consumed' them (including Kaiko's journalist) is the war represented by the helicopter, the technological extension of the whaling ship. At this juncture an examination of the symbolism of the ship is relevant to Paquet's use of it in "Night Dust-off."

As a symbol, the ship represents the urge to push beyond boundaries and gain victory over the destructive powers of the ocean's natural forces. Moreover, as Cirlot indicates:

Another meaning...derives not so much from the idea of the ship as such but rather from the notion of sailing; this is the symbolism of the Ship-of-Death [in which] always the implication is the desire to transcend existence - to travel through space to other worlds. All these forms, then, represent the axis valley-mountain, or the symbolism of verticality and the idea of height. [A Dictionary of Symbols, 281-282]

If the medics are successful with their life-saving endeavors, this helicopter will narrowly escape being a 'Ship-of-Death.' More important, however, is the impact of the ship on the American experience dating from Columbus' voyage of discovery in the New World, the journey of the Mayflower, the whaling ships of New England and the Pequod's venture across the Pacific. Also relevant to the symbolism of the ship is Charles Olson's analysis of Melville's passionate fascination with the Pacific.

Melville's Pacific voyages aboard a whaling ship provided him with a means of 'recovering' the space of the American continent, "the fundamental prime" ⁴ as Olson labels it, that was lost when the Great Plains were crossed. The importance of space in his voyages bears a similarity to Cirlot's statement regarding the symbolism of sailing involving the desire "to transcend existence - to travel through space to other worlds," to strive like Ahab to triumph over the forces of nature, to

give vent to America's "Roman feeling about the world." ⁵ Olson also reminds us of two other aspects of Melville's Pacific voyages: they offered him a way of "comprehending the past," and a "confirmation of the future." ⁶ These two concepts bear directly on Paquet's "ship" in "Night Dust-off" and merit attention.

By sailing the Pacific Melville hoped to gain "comprehension of the past," of his paternity. Beneath the Pacific's surface were the "ocean's utmost bones" ⁷ and he who probed there had his "hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing." ⁸ In experiencing the Pacific, Melville felt the trepidation and awe of one descending through the depths to reach the earth's heart and grope its sarcophagal recesses for his past, his paternity.

In "Night Dust-off" the "clatter" of opening litters is the twentieth-century "clatter" of Melville's "ocean's utmost bones." Paquet's medics actually have their "hands among the unspeakable foundations" of eviscerated compatriots, and "Night Dust-off" is testimony to this "fearful thing." Unlike Melville, however, neither Paquet nor his medic-persona has any thought of trying to understand the past, for the dire condition of the casualties locks the medic's attention on the urgent immediacy of the present, and if questioned about paternity, he would likely cite his father's name. Furthermore, where Melville voluntarily makes the symbolic descent through the depths of the Pacific to comprehend his past, the literal and symbolic descent described in "Night Dust-off" is neither voluntary, nor is it made in an effort to come to grips with the past, though the past is, in a sense, responsible for the presence of these young men in Vietnam. Again, Olson's insights on Melville are helpful in determining

why this is so.

The "confirmation of the future" represented by Melville's Pacific ventures and those of his compatriots marked the beginnings of the third and final phase of the historical and economic movement from the Mediterranean Sea of the Old World, to the Atlantic shores of the New World. Melville "understood that America completes her west only on the coast of Asia,"⁹ requiring that American voyages push her frontiers, as Whitman phrased it in "Facing West From California's Shores:"

Over waves, toward the house of
maternity, the land of migration.

America's "Roman feeling about the world" culminated in Vietnam where she "completed her west." Melville's notion of 'Asian completion' shares much with Whitman's vision of America's and "God's purpose from the first,"¹⁰ of this new country's "purpose vast, man's long probation fill'd, /Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish'd."¹¹ Circling the globe, Whitman thought, would bring "Passage to more than India."¹² The tragic truth of that vision is foreshadowed in the penultimate stanza of "Passage to India":

Sail forth - steer for the deep water only,
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

Whitman and his 'reckless, exploring soul' are willing to "risk the ship, ourselves and all." This American compulsion for purpose, action and motion is the phenomenon discussed in relation to Takeshi Kaiko's observations of the American character in Into a Black Sun in Chapter One. The literature of this "strange, obsessive species" boldly reflects the national character and the disastrous results that it can precipitate.

The above analysis of the symbols "belly" and "ship"

traces the 'symbolic heritage' of the events that came to shape "Night Dust-off." In the broadest terms, "belly" and "ship" represent natural power and mechanized force respectively. Used together in this poem they create a 'mutant' symbol of descent possessing twice the destructive energy of either alone, energy that turns inward upon itself, so to speak, thus lending credence to Kaiko's claim that Ahab's descendants possess at the bottom of their hearts a churning vortex which they must strive to "fill...with purpose and action." In "Night Dust-off," indeed in all of Paquet's poems, the "purpose and action" of the Vietnam War is more than suspect.

"It Is Monsoon at Last," the second poem of the 'development,' anticipates cleansing respite from death and suffering. It, like "This Last Time," uses shifting 'camera angles' to take in not only what the medic-persona sees, but also what he hears and does. From this we come to know something of what he feels.

Set at dawn near Xuan Loc, the province capital of Xuan Khanh in III Corps where heavy fighting occurred at the beginning of February in 1968, the poem begins ominously:

The black peak at Xuan Loc
pulls a red apron of light
up from the east.
105's and 155's are walking shells
toward us from Bear Cat
down some trail
washing a trail in fire.

In this first stanza the persona is looking upward and outward toward the east and the "black peak" as he listens to the sound of shells "walking" closer and closer to his position. He personifies the peak depicting it "pull[ing] a red apron of light up from the east" as though the dawn were a bloodied butcher's apron donned for a new day of bloodletting.

Personified too are the 105 mm and 155 mm artillery shells "walking...toward" him and his fellows. Like the incendiary footsteps of a giant, they proceed "down some trail/washing a trail in fire."

"Some trail" and "a trail" indicate that he is unable to tell exactly where the shells are falling. The indefiniteness suggests weariness on the persona's part. It makes no difference where the shells hit because the results are always the same: men are hurt and brought in for medical attention. In line seven the repeated uncertainty of the bombarded trail's location - "washing a trail in fire" - calls to mind two phrases: 'trial by fire' and 'blazing a trail.' Both are relevant to the stanza since the former is indeed part of combatants' rites of initiation, while the latter suggests the American frontier spirit of forging new paths into the wilderness, a phenomenon Caputo, among others, acknowledges in describing "an undefined line between the secure zone and what the troops call[ed] 'Indian country.'" ¹³ Fire, like water, is an agent of destruction and regeneration. Here, it is the destroyer of life, but teamed with the verb "washing" it suggests the purgation the persona hopes the monsoon rains will permit him.

In the second stanza the persona shifts his attention from "the black peak at Xuan Loc" westward to watch an "eagle flight." As with the first stanza, he pairs sound with what he sees before again directing his attention outward.

An eagle flight snakes west toward Lai Khe,
a demonstration of lights
flashing green and red across a sky still black above.
Our boots rattle off the boardwalk
Cha-Chat-Cha-Chat
The sound spills across the helipad
out towards the forest
out towards the dawn;
it chases devil dusters
out to the jungle.

In A Soldier Reports General Westmoreland defines "Eagle Flights" as:

...companies of Vietnamese or Americans in Huey helicopters [that] swooped down swiftly upon a site where intelligence indicated an enemy presence or where accompanying helicopter gunships drew fire. These were, in effect, airborne raids on targets of opportunity. Every unit became proficient in air assaults by helicopter. [371]

Malcolm Browne adds that "Eagle Flights" were deployed between 1966 and 1968 and that these assaults usually were launched with ten helicopters which "went out to raise hell for a few hours with no expectation of holding any ground." ¹⁴ Paquet's "eagle flight snakes west toward Lai Khe" just northwest of Saigon, its gunships "flashing green and red" bursts of rounds in "a demonstration of lights" (and American superiority) that mimicks the incipient redness of dawn in the first stanza.

The "Cha-Chat-Cha-Chat" sound of the medics' boots on the boardwalk leading to the helipad where casualties are unloaded parallels the sound of "walking" artillery shells in stanza one. In much the same way fire 'washes' the trail, the sound of their boots "spills" across the helipad and resonates outward while the persona follows its path with his eyes "out towards the forest/out towards the dawn" and "chases devil dusters" stirred by the wind "out to the jungle." Again, as in "Night Dust-off," Paquet uses the device of metonymy to replace complete human figures with 'disembodied' rattling boots. It is as if by following the travelling sound "out," "out," and "out" from the helipad, the persona can momentarily walk away from the litters that await him in the following stanza.

The boardwalk bends
with our ungainly walk
litter handles creak
with the heavy weight of the dead,
the dull whoosh and thud of B-40's

sounds south along the berm
the quick flat answer of 16's follows.

There is no avenue of escape for the medics or for those soldiers caught in the dawn attack. The 'fire-washed' trail is metaphorically extended to this boardwalk that "bends" beneath the "ungainly walk" of the litter bearers. With the "creak" of "litter handles," sound once again asserts itself and comes to dominate the stanza. "The dull whoosh and thud of B-40's," standard, shoulder-fired rockets used by the enemy, and "the quick flat answer of 16's" burden the medic's consciousness. Because he cannot look at the litters he and the others carry, he concentrates on the sounds "along the berm," the perimeter fortification, to 'fortify' himself, to find an aural 'answer' that will temporarily blot out the visual and physical heft of the wounded and dead soldiers on the litters.

But the persona only defers the inevitable. In the fourth stanza the wounded demand attention and the dead must be placed in the morgue.

Gunships are going up
sucking devil dusters into the air
we can see them through the morgue door
against the red froth clouds
hanging over Xuan Loc.
We lift the boy into a death bag.
We lift the boy into the racks.
We are building a bunker of dead.
We are stacking the dead for protection.
This dead boy is on my hands
my thighs are wet with the vomit of death
His blood is on my mouth
My mouth My mouth tastes his blood.

"Through the morgue door" he and the others watch the gunships, which are either part of the earlier "eagle flight" or a new assault, "sucking devil dusters into the air" as they rise "against the red froth clouds" of broadening dawn. "Sucking devil dusters" suggests a sucking chest wound.

Moreover, "sucking" is a verb related to mouth imagery. "Red froth" reinforces the notion of a bubbling chest wound, while "clouds/hanging over Xuan Loc" mimicks the "red apron of light" in the first stanza. Together the "red apron" and the 'hanging clouds' become shroud-like coverings portending the "death bag" in line thirty.

In lines thirty through thirty-seven the gruesome task at hand forces the persona's attention back inside the morgue. The mechanical repetition in lines thirty through thirty-four, accentuated by periods at the end of each line, imitate the stiffness of rigor mortis and the stiffening tension the medics experience as they brace themselves against the painful repugnance of their work.

We lift the boy into a death bag.
We lift the boy into the racks.
We are building a bunker of dead.
We are stacking the dead for protection.

The same "heavy weight of the dead" they bore when carrying the litters is present in the twice stated "we lift the boy." Yet this burden is an individual, a specific "boy" whose inglorious 'resurrection' is when they "lift" him into a body bag and then again "lift" him onto a rack in the morgue.

It occurs to the persona, with the flat, matter-of-fact simplicity and clarity brought on by fatigue and the nature of his work, that "we are building a bunker of dead," and with the even more brutal recognition that "we are stacking the dead for protection." This morgue crew is "building a bunker" of corpses, "stacking" them as they would sandbags for "protection" against death.¹⁵ The morgue itself becomes a 'haven' for the dead, where they are protected against further 'harm' before being shipped home, and a death-reinforced "bunker" for those alive inside. The intensity of his recognition deepens into a horrifying nadir of awareness in

the last four lines of the stanza:

This dead boy is on my hands
My thighs are wet with the vomit of death
His blood is on my mouth
My mouth My mouth tastes his blood.

In the line "This dead boy is on my hands," the persona simultaneously seems to feel responsible for the boy's death while realizing that the boy is quite literally "on [his] hands," legs and mouth. Just as the trail in the first stanza is 'washed' in fire, and the sound of boots "spills" outward from the helipad in the second stanza, the persona is "wet" with the body fluids of the boy he tried to save. Taking stock of his own body - "my hands," "My thighs," "my mouth/My mouth My mouth" - he is deluged by a sensation akin to what Michael Herr calls:

Pure essence of Vietnam, not even stepped on once, you could spin it out into visions of laughing lucent skulls or call it just another body bag...nothing ever made the taste less strong; the moment of initiation where you get down and bite off the tongue of a corpse.
[Dispatches, 254]

For this medic the "pure essence of Vietnam" is in this morgue where he discovers his "thighs are wet with the vomit of death," where he tastes the dead boy's blood, and where he experiences a temporary kind of 'paralysis': his hands become helpless, his legs are immobilized (as in "The Ghost Inside") and he stutters "my mouth/My mouth My mouth." The thrice repeated phrase betrays the shock he experiences at the discovery, yet we instinctively know this is neither the first nor will it be the last time he finds body fluids of the dead on himself. "My," capitalized twice, emphasizes the medic's distress and the certainty that "nothing ever made the taste less strong," that one never becomes inured to the dual nature of the medic's task: if one succeeds in saving a life, the vomit

and blood do not matter, but if one fails, they become glaring, ghoulish reminders of mortality and one's failure.

The mouth, of course, is one of Paquet's dominant images and not surprisingly so since a medic often must give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to casualties. The mouth is the center for speech and the creative word, but symbolically it resembles fire in that it is creative, as is speech, and destructive, as in the act of devouring. In inadvertently 'tasting' the dead boy's blood, his mouth is 'wounded.' It is as if the muteness of death is transferred to him, that his attempt at mouth-to-mouth resuscitation has consumed his power of speech. (Again, a similar phenomenon is found in "The Ghost Inside.") The mouth then becomes the passageway between speech and muteness, life and death, the external and internal worlds, earth and hell. The implication of this symbolism is that with blood on his mouth, the medic 'tastes' death and experiences the horror of being stranded in the hellish confines of speechlessness. Being surrounded by the dead inside the morgue, and trapped within the profound interior recesses of muteness is unbearable. There, inside "the great belly all wound," like Kaiko in "the belly of the whale," he must either surrender his feelings and power of speech and remain inside the silence of death, or fight his way out.

In the final stanza he 'returns,' fighting his way out, as it were, from his descent into silence by directing his attention outward, outside the morgue to the monsoon rain and the cleansing effect he hopes it will bring.

The gunships are firing over the Dong Nai
throwing fire into the river
clouds are coming in from the sea
I can smell the rain, see it
over Xuan Loc, over me
it is monsoon at last.

With this stanza the poem comes full circle, beginning and ending with Xuan Loc, "fire," and monsoon/water imagery of purgation. Gunships are still "throwing" down a rain of destructive "fire" into the Dong Nai river but "clouds are coming in from the sea" bearing with them a modicum of relief for the persona. The sight and "smell" of the rain promise a much needed respite. Monsoon rain will wash away the blood and vomit, but more important, it will cleanse his spirit, alleviate his anguish and affirm life. It will wash "over" him providing "at last," the healing solace and regenerative courage he needs to carry on, for there are always more casualties such as the one in "Morning - A Death" awaiting him.

"Morning - A Death" is the third poem in the 'development.' It is unquestionably one of Paquet's best poems, indeed it is one of the very finest in the body of Vietnam War poetry. In it he finds what Whitman might term "the right voice" through the medic, who in addressing a dead nineteen year old GI, reveals his deeply frustrated helplessness and his quiet rage at the tragic squander of youthful life.

Had Paquet needed an epigram for "Morning - A Death" he would have done well to use the last stanza in Part Three of Whitman's "The Wound Dresser:"

I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet
deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.)

Both Whitman's "wound-dresser" and Paquet's medic are unstintingly devoted to their casualties, both show a saddened tenderness toward their wounded and grieve for their youthfulness with almost a fatherly concern: the "wound-dresser" "sit[s] by the restless all the dark night, some are so young, Some suffer so much..." and the medic glumly

remarks, "I'd so much rather be making children, /Than tucking so many in."

Both men also have an audience. The now old "wound-dresser" answers young men and women curious about his war experiences who ask "...what saw you tell us?/What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics, /Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest/remains?" The medic has an 'audience' of one, the dead boy to whom he describes, in parodied medical language, how hard he worked to save his life, and how, despite his tenacious efforts, "You are dead just as finally/As your mucosity dries on my lips/In this morning sun." "Wound-dresser" and medic alike bear in their hearts "a fire, a burning flame" of sorrow and smouldering resentment over the loss of lives that were beyond their power to save. "I have thumped and blown into your kind too often," the medic wearily states, and the old "wound-dresser" seems to concur when he says, "the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable" in the presence of suffering and death.

But where the "wound-dresser" seems to possess an inexhaustible reservoir of strength and energy - "On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)" - Paquet's medic repeatedly speaks of his bone-grinding fatigue - "I grow tired of kissing the dead," "I grow so tired of jostled litters/Filling the racks, and taking off/Your tags and rings, pulling out/Your metal throats and washing/Your spittle down with warm beer at night, /So tired of tucking you all in, /And smelling you all on me for hours." Also, where the "wound-dresser" moves from "the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital, /To the long rows of cots up and down each side...To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss...", Paquet's medic concentrates his energy on one casualty, describing in the first section the feverishness of his efforts.

"Morning - A Death" is divided into three sections labelled 'Turn - Character 1,' 'Counterturn - Character 2,' and 'Stand - Character 1' respectively. By assigning a 'character' and a 'direction' in the title of each section, Paquet heightens the inherent drama of the poem. Briefly, in the first section, the medic, 'Character 1,' 'turns' toward the newly dead boy and addresses him in the form of an interior monologue, or perhaps a soliloquy, describing to the boy the lost battle to resuscitate him. In the second section, 'Character 2,' the dead boy, 'turns away' and relates how he was wounded and what he thought when he realized the gravity of his injury. Section three returns to the medic as he stands up reflecting on the terrible routine of death and his longing for the release of a normal life.

Set in the morning, as is "It Is Monsoon at Last," this poem also seeks the restorative powers of a new day. Here, however, there are no purging monsoon rains. This morning promises only more death and the fleeting fantasy of New England in winter and "women's warm mouths."

With its twenty-eight lines 'Turn - Character 1' is the largest section of the poem. Without preamble, the medic immediately begins describing to the dead boy the measures he took in the battle he lost to save his life.

I've blown up your chest for thirty minutes
And crushed it down an equal time
And still you won't warm to my kisses.
I've sucked and puffed on your
Metal No. 8 throat for so long,
And twice you've moaned under my thrusts
On your breastbone...

A half hour of mouth-to-mouth respiration and 'sucking and puffing' through the standard size tracheostomy tube produces no response from the boy. Even cardiac massage elicits only two reluctant moans. The nature of this physical contact is

obviously anything but sexual. Yet Paquet's adept use of sexual imagery in these seven lines contributes significantly to the vigor of the medic's efforts and the poignant drama of the scene by transposing a lover's passionate foreplay into the medic's compassionate patience and devotion, even though his "kisses" of life-giving air and his heart-thumping, massaging "thrusts" fail to 'arouse' the boy's vital signs.

In the following nine lines sexual imagery is exchanged for poetry terms to elaborate on the medic's endeavors.

...I've worn off
Those sparse hairs you counted noble on your chest,
And twice you defibrillated,
And twice blew back my breath.
I've scanned the rhythms of your living,
Forced half-rhymes in your silent pulse,
Sprung brief spondees in your lungs,
And the cesura's called mid-line, half-time,
Incomplete, but with a certain finality.

The friction of thirty minutes of constant cardiac massage not only denudes the boy's chest of the few hairs he could claim, but also sparks two defibrillations ¹⁶ and two breaths, enough to give the unrelenting medic a momentary glimmer of hope. He anxiously "scan[s] the rhythms of [his] living" to find blood pressure, heart and respiration readings, but there are none save the hesitant "half-rhymes" that the medic has "forced" from him, and the two "brief spondees" of breath which are imitative of the two spondees - "Spring brief" and "your lungs" - in line thirteen. By drawing parallels between the rhythmic vicissitudes of human vital signs and the vital elements of poetry, Paquet (through his persona) suggests that monitoring the boy for signs of life and attempting to generate them when none exist, is very like composing a poem, and that body and poem alike require tremendous care and attention. Natural rhythms must be maintained but not "forced." Any interruption, "cesura" or 'incompletion'

results in "certain finality."

The last thirteen lines of the medic's soliloquy deal with the utter "finality" of death and resurrection, one of Paquet's dominant images.

The bullet barks apocalyptic
And you don't unzip your sepulchral
Canvas bag in three days.
No rearticulation of nucleics, no phoenix.
No novae, just an arbitrary of one-way bangs
Flowing out to interstitial calms,
The required canonical wait for demotion
To lower order, and you wash out pure chemical.
You are dead just as finally
As your mucosity dries on my lips
In this morning sun.
I have thumped and blown into your kind too often,
I grow tired of kissing the dead.

The bullet that hit this boy is a wartime prophet of death and "barks apoclayptic" prophesying no resurrection. In three days he will not rise like Christ from his "sepulchral canvas bag," his body will not suddenly 'rearticulate' its nucleic acids which have flowed from the living cells into the "interstitial calms," the spaces between cells. He will not rise phoenix-like from ashes, nor will he become a nova burning brighter than ever before. Instead, there is "just an arbitrary of one way bangs" bringing the nothingness of death. Nevertheless, it is almost as if the medic hopes, by piling up images of resurrection and renewal, that their sheer magnitude and weight will infuse the corpse with a vestige of life. But nothing happens: "You are dead, just as finally/As your mucosity dries on my lips/In this morning sun," the medic declares, after "the required canonical wait for demotion/To lower order" when he is positive the boy is now nothing more than "pure chemical."

Again the medic refers to his lips with the boy's "mucosity" still lingering and drying on them. This remnant of life seems to remind him that he is the last person with

whom the boy had contact before dying. It also painfully evokes the countless others whom he has "thumped and blown into" and reveals how very wearied he is of "kissing the dead."

'Counterturn - Character 2,' the second and shortest section, is the dead boy's 'soliloquy.' In nine lines he expresses how he was hit and his reaction to imminent death:

I'd sooner be a fallen pine cone this winter
In a cradle of cold New England rock,
Less hurt in it than nineteen years.
What an exit! Stage left, fronds waving,
Cut down running my ass off at a tree line.
I'm thinking, as I hear my chest
Sucking air through its brand new nipple,
I bought the ticket, I hope I drown fast,
The pain is all in the living.

Being a "fallen pine cone" seems preferable to being "cut down" at the age of nineteen while scrambling "at a tree line" for cover. There is "less hurt" in finding oneself 'cradled' in "cold New England rock." The cradle is important because it indicates the winter cold of the grave while conveying the comforting, secure resting place for the very young, an aspect the medic will take up in the final section of the poem.

Calling his fatal wound an "exit" made "stage left" with "fronds waving" imparts a play-like quality to his demise, but his self-mocking tone saps the scene of any pretensions of dramatizing the glory of death in war. Being "cut down running [his] ass off at a tree line" lacks the panache, the refined, elevated 'style' of a proper stage death. Furthermore, his dying thoughts hardly qualify as testimony to the nobility of patriotism and self-sacrifice:

I'm thinking, as I hear my chest,
Sucking air through its brand new nipple,
I bought the ticket, I hope I drown fast,
The pain is all in the living.

Shot in the lung, he has a "sucking" chest wound. With every

breath, air passes in and out of the "brand new nipple." Blood flows through the opening and fills the lung, causing him to "[buy] the ticket" and drown.

A collector of memorable "helmet graffiti that seemed to say everything," Michael Herr quotes one sample that is particularly relevant to the nineteen year old in the poem: "A sucking chest wound is Nature's way of telling you that you've been in a firefight." ¹⁷ Firefights, however, were only one way in which a soldier could sustain any of an appalling variety of wounds. Herr catalogues some of the wounds that GIs feared most, one being that "you could take one neat round in the lung and go out hearing only the bubble of the last few breaths." ¹⁸ So critical is the elemental simplicity of breathing that he titles the first and last chapters of Dispatches "Breathing In" and "Breathing Out" respectively, and remarks early on that "breathing in and breathing out [was] some kind of choice all by itself." ¹⁹ He chooses breathing as a metaphor for his experiences in Vietnam and for his surviving the war, a 'choice' denied the boy in Paquet's poem. "I hope I drown fast," he says, knowing full well he has no choice or control over what happens to him, since "the pain is all in the living." One does not need to be a medic to know that breath is life. It, therefore, is no surprise that Paquet places such emphasis on breathing, mouths, lips and related imagery.

In the final section, 'Stand - Character 1,' it is as though this particular morning and this particular boy's death somehow trigger an avalanche of physical and psychological fatigue against which the medic is compelled to 'stand' in subdued protest.

I grow so tired of jostled litters
Filling the racks, and taking off

Your tags and rings, pulling out
Your metal throats and washing
Your spittle down with warm beer at night,
So tired of tucking you all in,
And smelling you all on me for hours.

He is a 'father' who is exhausted, depressed and fed up with the relentlessly demanding grind of caring for seemingly countless dead or dying young 'sons.' He collects their dog tags and valuables and extracts their tracheostomy tubes as though he were undressing them before putting them into their "racks" and "tucking [them] all in" for their long night. When the day of tending them is done, he seeks the benefit of "warm beer at night" to purge himself by 'washing down' their "spittle" lingering on his mouth. Their smell remains on his clothes, hair, and skin and he must 'wash' it away just as the medic in "It Is Monsoon at Last" anticipates the purging rains that will wash away the death and dying. Also like the monsoon medic, he latches onto a comfortable, soothing image the thread of which is given to him by the dead GI, winter in New England:

I'd sooner be in New England this winter
with pine pitch on my hands than your blood,
lightly fondling breasts and kissing
women's warm mouths than thumping
your shattered chests and huffing
In your broken lips or aluminum windpipes,
sooner lifting a straying hair from her wet mouth
than a tear of elephant grass from your slack lips
I'd so much rather be making children,
than tucking so many in.

Like the nineteen year old, he imagines himself in New England during the winter, far away from the heat, blood and death in Vietnam. But rather than being a "fallen pine cone" in a cradle-grave, he is very much alive. He envisions himself as a lover with pine pitch staining his hands instead of blood, and continues to spin out images of inverted parallels between caressing a woman and tending the wounded -

"lightly fondling breasts" instead of "thumping shattered chests," kissing "women's wet mouths" instead of "huffing/In...broken lips or aluminum windpipes," "making children [rather]/Than tucking so many in." The similarities are startlingly, poignantly evident and accurate, and Paquet masterfully points them out without once teetering on the brink of the unseemly or bizarre. His ability to juxtapose images of brutality, violence and death with images of tenderness, love and procreation is unwaveringly sound.

Throughout this poem Paquet experiments successfully with blending unlikely images to show how very young and vulnerable these soldiers are, how little 'resurrection' means when one is dealing with the severely wounded, how wearing constant exposure to death and dying is, and how dire is the need to find a means of alleviating, if not purging oneself of, the smell, taste and touch of dead children.

In the section of A Rumor of War called "Officer in Charge of the Dead," Philip Caputo remarks, "If I had been an agent of death as a platoon leader, as a staff officer I was death's bookkeeper." ²⁰ The crew sent out in "Graves Registration" to dispose of and collect corpses might justifiably be called death's 'housekeepers' who 'tidy' the area after a pre-dawn attack. Driving out in trucks with the other members of the crew, the persona notices that:

From the truck we see
the black shark fin of Xuan Loc
break from the swelling green sea jungle,
cutting the thick red air of dust.

In these lines old and new imagery blend easily and naturally. "The black peak at Xuan Loc" in "It Is Monsoon at Last" here takes on the sinister aspect of a "black shark fin" rising from the ocean-like expanses of the jungle. As the fin-like crest of the mountain "[cuts] the thick red air of dust," the

redness of the sky at dusk indicates that this could be the end of the day begun in "It Is Monsoon at Last." But here, instead of boot sounds "[spilling] across the helipad" outward:

The sound of the engines washes
into the gullies of heaped wire
strung with bodies spilling toward the village
like a trail of crushed sea forms.

Water imagery dominates this stanza with its verbs "swelling," "cutting," "washes," and "spilling" carrying the brunt of the action. But where the monsoon in "It Is Monsoon at Last" offered purgation and a degree of solace, the sea imagery here presents a definite threat. "The black shark fin," "swelling green sea," "crushed sea forms," and the lines

Great fish-mountain
did you show your grin here?
Did your face break surface,
mouth of magnificent death?
Carapace, claws, antennae

all merge to create an atmosphere of sea-borne danger, violence and death. The grinning "mouth of magnificent death" is the maw of the devouring leviathan, Ahab's whale at large in "the swelling green sea jungle[s]" of Vietnam. After feeding, it leaves "a trail of crushed sea forms." Its natural, destructive power makes no distinction between Americans and Vietnamese; all are "crushed" with equal violence, giving them and the "tank shells" the appearance of the "carapace, claws, antennae" of small sea creatures caught and killed by its tremendous force. This behemoth creature is the leviathan of war, Westmoreland's 'white whale' gone beserk, an indication, if not proof, that this war is, in essence, America heaving herself in 'completion' on the shores of Asia.

Gazing at all the bodies, the persona wonders, "What are we to do with you?" His question is double-edged: how will we take care of all the many corpses, and how, in their present condition, can these 'crushed forms' be called human beings? Like Caputo, one is reminded of Sassoon's lines from "The Effect" written in 1917:

"He'd never seen so many dead before."

"How many dead? As many as ever you wish.
Don't count 'em; they're too many.
Who'll buy my nice fresh corpses, two a penny?"
[The War Poems, 87]

The question of what to do with the quantity of corpses is answered by the persona's fellow crew members from Graves Registration:

"Too many. We'll get another truck."

"Fuck the gooks. We'll use lime."

"Kipper, stay with the bodies!"

But the persona knows that the decomposing effect of lime is inadequate because "the land cannot hold you all." Like a landfill, the earth "is filling with debris." Other measures of "debris" disposal must be taken - "We will have to ship some home for recycling." Americans will not be buried or limed but "when the truck comes back" they will be "[wrapped]...in plastic - zip! zip!" body bags preserving the corpses as though they were perishable foods sealed in 'zip lock' bags. The Vietnamese, whether civilian, NVA, Viet Cong or ARVN, are not so 'lucky.'

You brown-yellow guys
are going to get some whiteness,
you're going home to Xuan Loc "passing."

Lime-covered and transported "home to Xuan Loc," where he facetiously says they could "pass" as Caucasian, these men

also will 'pass' through the various stages of decomposition
by:

rotting into the earth in dusted rows,
seeping into the earth in chemicals,
your moisture already lifting into the air
to rub the dark fin in night mists,
to cover us with your breath
while we lay drunken in our camps.

With American GIs being "re-cycled" and Vietnamese bodies decomposing and releasing "chemicals" that "[seep] into the earth" and "moisture" that "lift[s] into the air," the implication is that Americans and Vietnamese are being 're-cycled' to continue the war. The very implausibility of such a notion is as good an account as any for the steady supply of corpses and continuing madness of war. The persona, moreover, finds something insidiously inexorable about the decaying Vietnamese corpses. Permeating the earth and the air, they seem to form an enveloping miasmatic "breath" of "moisture" and "night mists" that 'cover' and trap American troops "while [they] lay drunken in [their] camps."

The lines, "This morning you all/must have been violent!" mark a change in the tenor of the persona's thoughts. He temporarily abandons metaphoric references to "fish" in favor of pondering the early morning attackers.

Strung out along this road
like tatters on the wire
you seem a strange attack.
I heard your noise in the early darkness
from my hootch,
I toasted your anarchy with gin.
Did you all think death?
Did you speak in whispers
or shout at war
in quick metal breath?
Did you shout at death,
or did he glide into your mouths
while you sucked some J's?

Presumably as one of those who "lay drunken in...camp," he "toasted [their] anarchy with gin" in his "hootch." His toast

was a grim acknowledgement of the raw, 'anarchic' power inherent in war. Now, as he looks at the bodies "strung out along this road" like so many 'tattered' and crumpled clothes flung on a line, he cannot help wondering what these Vietnamese and Americans thought and did at the moment of death. "Did you all think death?" - were you bent on destruction, did you realize that this attack would be your last? "Did you speak in whispers?", hushed prayers and entreaties, or in last minute instruction or encouragement; or did you "shout at war," the leviathan of "anarchy" and strife, in anger, hatred or fear, in the "quick metal breath" of weaponry. "Did you shout at death" in mortal surprise or maddened defiance, "or did he [death] glide into your mouths/while you sucked some J's?" Presumably this last question is directed to those Americans who were smoking marijuana when the attack began. Along with marijuana smoke, they inhaled vaporized rot, death's breath, the 'gliding' presence of the giant sea creature. These images of "breath" and "suck[ing] some J's" are synonymous with death, indicating a radical departure from Paquet's use of life-saving, mouth-related images in "It Is Monsoon at Last."

In the last half of the poem, Vietnamese and Americans alike throw off the anarthria of death and answer the persona's questions in a chorus-like response. Of the nine voices, the fifth voice is probably American while the sixth is that of a group of Vietnamese. The remaining seven voices could belong to either side.

In the first group voice two sets of old images, redness ("sun," "morning" and "red") and mouths ("faces," "licked," "wetness" and "drying") merge effectively with new, violently predatory images ("fist," "smashed" and "reeled on").

"The brightness of sun
caught this morning
in his red fist
that smashed flowers
of our faces,
licked the wetness
the drying surprise
from our petal-eyes
and reeled on,"

Yet the behemoth, whale-like war does not possess a "fist" or a tongue to 'lick' the "wetness" of wounds, nor is it capable of 'reeling on.' These images suggest the presence of a different creature, one that is identified later in the poem. This creature is stealthy and extraordinarily strong. In a surprise attack "his red fist" makes "smashed flowers" of the "faces" it hits. After making its kills it 'licks' the blood, "the wetness/the drying surprise/from [its victims'] petal-eyes." Though their faces are destroyed, "petal-eyes" may indicate that these are Vietnamese corpses since the shapes of flower petals and oriental eyes are somewhat similar. On the other hand, the eyes are petal-like parts of the faces regardless of whether they belong to Vietnamese or Americans.

The second voice is that of an individual who, judging perhaps unfairly by his dying thoughts of "freedom and hunger," is a Vietnamese, though the case can be made that in war, troops from both sides think about freedom from danger, fear and death.

"Something crushed my face.
I was thinking about freedom
and hunger.

Like the others earlier, his face is destroyed, "crushed" so quickly that he has no conception of what hit him. His "hunger" is taken up and altered by the owner of the third voice who speaks of his sexual appetite:

"I used to salty dog
and tongue with laughter
soft brown breast heads."

The fourth voice speaks in images gleaned from the
previous three voices.

"The sky trod us in walking shells,
our eyes shallow pools
for the tongues of flies
and a thirsty sun."

"Trod" beneath "walking shells," the lethal 'footsteps' of the
creature that "reeled on" earlier, these troops also
mention their blindness. Like the "wetness" the creature
'licks' from the "petal-eyes" of the others, these people's
eyes are "shallow pools" of fluid 'tongued' by flies and dried
by "a thirsty sun."

An American who was stoned during the attack says the last
thing he saw was "a cloud" that "looked like a fish."

"I remember a cloud
against the flares.
I was high as a mother,
it looked like a fish."

The "cloud" passing before the illumination of the flares is
the "night mists," the evaporating "moisture" of decomposing
bodies the persona mentions in lines thirty-one
through thirty-five. It is also the shadowy fish-like form that
'glided into his mouth' with the marijuana smoke when he was
"high as a mother."

Certainly the sixth voice is Vietnamese:

"We are the ripped forest,
men who became the jungle,
limed limbs whitening,
silent as the mountain,
as the last seal of lips."

The broken corpses of these men are the ripped forest," so
closely have they lived with it and used its protective

concealment, so thoroughly did their "chemicals" leach into the earth that their "limed limbs" "became the jungle," the "swelling green sea," as the persona perceives it. Their silence, like the silence of "the mountain" (Xuan Loc's "black shark fin") and "the last seal of lips" is eternal, forever recreating itself, endlessly protracting the sinisterism of the conflict.

The mouth-associated imagery sustained through the first six voices continues in the seventh voice, and intimates more about the devouring nature of war.

"Laughter shredded in my mouth.
I felt my throat rip in a choke,
the earth heaved flame."

Stoned laughter becomes a deadly "choke" 'shredding' his mouth and 'ripping' his throat as the 'gliding' form of death enters him. The colossal being that consumes him ignites the earth which 'heaves with flame' like a leviathan in search of the "chemicals" it needs to survive.

The conflagrant thrashings subside with "the paleness of moon" light on the "stilled limbs" of everyone who was caught in the maw of war.

"Tonight the paleness of moon will
light on our stilled limbs,
flutter with clouds,
and fly to deeper night
with carrion of our dreams."

Those speaking together here in the eighth voice testify to the protean nature of this strange being that has taken their lives. In the aftermath it takes to the air and "flutter[s] with clouds" and "[flies] to deeper night" bearing in its talon-'fists' "carrion of [their] dreams," the dead and decaying substance of human hopes and aspirations.

The ninth and final voice identifies the creature that

"moved among us," the newly dead.

"The beast moved among us,
our violence hurled back
by the fire,
we fell silent, unhurried
as the whorl
on stiff red fingertips."

It is "the beast," death, the familiar of leviathan war, who "hurled back" and killed with "heaving flames" the "noise" and 'shouting voices' of these combatants. The "violence" they created is thrown back in their midst silencing them as they fall slowly, looping down as 'unhurriedly' to their deaths "as the whorl/on stiff red fingertips." The "red fingertips" belong to the "red fist." The implication here is that "the beast" is man, the blood-thirsty agent of death who 'reels' about on land, sails the sea and flies through night skies, who causes the earth to heave with flame and then is driven back by his own fire. The persona seems to confirm this in lines ninety-four through one hundred and eight.

Why do I move among you
like a berserk ballerina,
tippy-toeing over you
filling out your tags
and powdering the rest?
I cannot believe anymore
that names count.
I fear some day
the beast will come for me,
but that we will rush
to each other like lovers,
secret sharers in the memory of your passing.
Even more I fear that
some day
I will be the only one remembering.

Like the "beast" that "move[s] among" combatants on both sides, the persona "move[s] among" the corpses left in the wake of the attack. He compares his movements with the "tippy-toeing" motions of a "berserk ballerina" stepping "over" the dead. His choice of "berserk" to modify the normally elegant grace

and precision of a ballerina suggests man's dual nature: though man may display civilized behavior as represented by ballet, he is also capable of destructively and frenetically violent action. Even as he "fill[s] out [their] tags" he does not believe their "names count." Countless names, like the fingerprint "whorls" on "stiff red fingertips," are a person's identity which 'counts' for nothing when one is dead.

With the comprehension of man's dual nature, he fearfully suspects that "the beast will come for [him]" one day, that either his own bestiality will "break surface" like the fin of a shark cresting the water, or that he will fall victim to the "berserk" violence of another man's dual nature. Whatever the case, he also senses that he and the beast "will rush/to each other like lovers" embracing in welcoming union. If not "lovers," they will be "secret sharers in the memory of...the passing" of so many lives. As "secret sharers," Doppelganger beast and man are jointly the cause of and the remembering witness to all these deaths. But stronger than this is his "fear that/some day/[he] will be the only one" left alive and capable of "remembering" the men, their deaths, their corpses and the dark side of mankind.

His fears are so unsettling that he quickly changes the subject: "I wish you could share this/joint with me." There is more here than simply a desire to share a "joint." The collective "you" and the line break indicate the persona's need somehow to unburden himself - to the reader, the corpses, anyone with whom he can "share this" deeply troubling experience and monstrous knowledge. Sharing in this sense is not an option that is open to him, but the notion of sharing the pleasant, temporary diversion of a "joint" is an option. He smokes it alone, however, standing amid the body bags and powdered corpses while waiting for another truck. The poem is

the 'sharing.'

"They Do No Go Gentle," the first poem of the 'recapitulation,' seems to resume where "Graves Registration" leaves off. It is as though after listening to the dead recount their dying thoughts and the manner of their deaths that confirmed his own conclusions about the savage side of man, the persona's commitment to caring for the wounded and dying is somehow paradoxically strengthened. The title of this poem, an obvious reference to "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas, appears to be an open acknowledgement of reaffirmed devotion and dedication. Watching the 'tasteless' way the dying "tirelessly" "rage" and "flail" "against the dying of the light" imbues him with added resolve to "rage" himself.

A free verse poem of sixteen lines, instead of a villanelle, "They Do Not Go Gentle" is a tribute to the energy with which "the half-dead comatose" struggle for life. The persona does not need to exhort them to fight as Thomas did his dying father, nor does he resort to Thomas's prayerful plea, "Do No Go Gentle," because he has observed the strength of their resistance, hence the simple declarative title, "They Do Not Go Gentle."

The first five lines register the persona's amazement at the stamina these men possess.

The half-dead comatose
Paw the air like cats do when they dream,
They perform isometrics tirelessly.
They flail the air with a vengeance
You know they cannot have.

Their energy and strength belie their unconscious state. Their activity is undirected motion rather than purposeful movement. Even without the cat simile in the second line, the verb "paw" suggests the animal-like state to which their

wounds have reduced them. Yet we assign meaning to the rhythmically twitching front paws of a dreaming cat by saying that it must be dreaming of running. The persona imputes no such meaning to the erratic pawing motions of the "half-dead." Even when "they perform isometrics tirelessly" or "flail the air with a vengeance," it is impossible to invest their energy with significance because "you know they cannot" possibly know what they are doing. Neither do they register fatigue from the rigor of their "isometrics," nor do they act out of "vengeance."

The persona graphically explains, in lines six through nine, what has happened to these men to make them "paw" and "flail."

After all, their multiplication tables,
Memories of momma, and half their id
Lies in some shell hole
Or plop! splatter! on your jungle boots.

He describes their head wounds with "M.A.S.H."-like black-humored callousness and flippancy. "Multiplication tables, /Memories of momma" and the id - knowledge, memory and instinct - are destroyed. Their brain damage is gruesomely extensive. Some GIs lost gray matter in "some shell hole" when they were hit, while the brains of others were 'splattered' onto the boots of medical personnel.

The persona's tone in the last seven lines contrasts boldly with the seemingly impertinent tone of the previous four lines. Concluding the poem with searching speculations about what makes "their bodies rage on tastelessly/Without their shattered brains" leaves the reader wondering not only how these men survived such wounds, but also how long they can possibly live.

It must be some atavistic angst
Of their muscles and bones,
Some ancient ritual of their sea water self,
Some blood stream monsoon,

Some sinew storm that makes
Their bodies rage on tastelessly
Without their shattered brains.

He thinks "it must be" something perhaps beyond the ken of medical science that keeps the "comatose" in motion. It might be that trauma triggers in their bones "some atavistic angst," the reappearance of some primitive anxiousness, or a re-enactment of "some ancient ritual" based in marine origins, or even fetal memory of an aqueous environment that initiates their swimming-pawing gestures. It could be "some blood stream monsoon," a feverish, tropical tempest blustering through their veins, or it could be "some sinew storm" of vigorously strong muscles and tendons "that makes/Their bodies rage on tastelessly." Or, in another sense, it could be that which Kaiko calls the "strange, powerful echo of his ancestors' boiling blood."

"Rage," of course, is taken from Dylan Thomas, but to "rage on tastelessly" evokes the last stanza of Siegfried Sassoon's poem "How to Die" written at Craiglockhart in 1917.

You'd think, to hear some people talk,
That lads go west with sobs and curses,
And sullen faces white as chalk,
Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses.
But they've been taught the way to do it
Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
And shuddering groans; but passing through it
With due regard for decent taste.
[The War Poems, 92]

Sassoon's scathing attack on 'some people's' notion about how a soldier should die satirically subverts the reality of "sobs and curses" and "shuddering groans" replacing it with "Christian soldiers'" lessons in tidy, unobtrusive death which hold "due regard for decent taste." "Christian soldiers'" brains are intact because they have had the good sense to learn that head wounds are indecent and utterly devoid of "taste." Paquet's "half-dead" have not learned these valuable

lessons, but they are only partially dead, after all, and cannot be held accountable for their ignorant breaches of decency and taste, anymore than the little girl in the second and last poem of the 'recapitulation,' "Mourning the Death By Hemorrhage, Of a Child From Honai."

Again in "Mourning the death, By Hemorrhage, Of a Child From Honai" Paquet takes his cue from Dylan Thomas in titling his poem. Both "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, Of a Child in London" and "Mourning the Death, By Hemorrhage, Of a Child From Honai" are elegies, both concern the death of a small girl in wartime, both have the same rhyme scheme, the same number of stanzas and lines, and both conclude with the phrase, "after the first death..."

Because the titles are so very similar, they merit attention first. Where Thomas's indicates "A Refusal to Mourn," Paquet's declares an acceptance of mourning. The manner of each child's death is revealed as being "By Fire" and "By Hemorrhage." Wartime violence is responsible for both deaths and we are reminded that too often children become innocent and helpless victims of war. Also, the identity of the child in each poem is unknown. Place names are also significant in the titles of the two poems. "In London" indicates where the child lived and died, but "From Honai" reveals only where this child had once lived. Beneath the poem, as it appears in WHAM, Paquet adds a footnote that reads as follows:

The village of Honai lies between Bien Hoa and the Post of Long Binh. It is a village of North Vietnamese refugees and was known as "Sniper's Village." After the Tet Offensive of 1968 it was known as "Widow's Village."

Presumably the child in his poem is a North Vietnamese refugee who has seen much of sniping, death and father-less families.

"Mourning the Death, By Hemorrhage, Of A Child From Honai"

is a gripping poem that is at once bitterly scathing and self-accusatory, yet tenderly compassionate and remorseful. The first stanza is a mixture of anger at the war and its blind destructiveness, and sympathy for its hapless victims like this child.

Always the children are included
In these battles for the body politic.
Prefaced by mortars and rockets
The Year of the Monkey was preluded
By the mephitic
Stench of blasted bodies sullenly drifting from the pocket
(Of refugee hootches at Honai.)

The first two lines suggest that there are two types of battles in this war - physical and ideological. Children, 'little bodies,' are part of the larger "body politic" over which the two kinds of battles are fought. "Mortars and rockets," the wartime version of New Year's fireworks, usher in "The Year of the Monkey," 1968. "These battles" reduce the "body politic" to stinking "blasted bodies." Any ostensible ideological or military purpose to the fighting vaporizes in the "mephitic stench...sullenly drifting...from the refugee hootches at Honai."

Putrified ideology permeates the second stanza. "Enemy patriots" and "allies" alike believe they know the ideological desires or preferences of the Vietnamese people.

The enemy patriots knew the young
Would be glad to die for the revolution.
The allies were certain the vox populi
Called a mandate for flag-strung
Counter attack and awful retribution.

The simplicity of this analysis of the war is both startlingly accurate and cleanly stripped of meaningless rhetoric. "Enemy patriots" see the conflict as a "revolution," while the "allies" "call a mandate for counter attack and awful retribution." The "vox populi," the tremulous voice of the

people caught between the "patriots" and the "flag-strung" "allies" is drowned out by the cacophony of the war.

On both sides of the conflict the war is appraised and measured out in the intangible, hollow words and phrases of "ideology" - "body politic," "patriots," "revolution," "allies," "vox populi," "mandate" - to which Paquet refers in the third stanza.

The majesty of the annihilation of the city
Could be heard clearly in the background,
I could only wonder what ideology
The child carried in her left arm - necessity
Must have dictated an M-16 round
Should cut it off, and her gaining the roll of martyrology

The persona hears "in the background" the "majesty" of warring ideologies as they destroy the city. He "wonders what ideology/The child carried in her left arm" that either "enemy patriots" or "the allies" are compelled to destroy. Neither side of the war is advanced by the violent amputation of her arm. Her loss is synonymous with his loss of any rational explanation for the war and its effect on this child. Though he wants to believe she lost her arm for a reason, he cannot find one. "Necessity," for the lack of any better, more rational 'reason,' "Must have dictated an M-16 round/Should cut it off." But "necessity" is a feeble explanation and he knows it. Nothing should 'necessitate' the death of a child, yet she bled to death because an American round severed her arm. Her suffering and "Her gaining the roll of martyrology" is purposeless. She, like the others on the "roll" died upholding no principles, causes or beliefs and her death does not further any ideology. To emphasize this, Paquet coins the word "martyrology" which acknowledges her suffering while denying it the status of true martyrdom.

The final stanza contains a scathing combination of

Sassoon-like angry bitterness (such as that found in "Does It Matter" and "Base Details") with self-reproach.

Her dying in my arms, this daughter
Weaned on war, was for the greater
Glory of all concerned.
There was no time to mourn your slaughter
Small, denuded, one-armed thing, I too was violator,
After the first death, the many must go unmourned.

Their physical closeness, her smallness, her innocence, and her bleeding to death in his arms evoke in him not only paternal feelings for "this daughter/Weaned on war," but also ignite in him a despairing rage. Her death is in no way "for the greater/Glory of all concerned" and the seething irony of his statement to the contrary demonstrates this.

In the final three lines of the poem his rage abates somewhat as he draws himself into this war that has taken the child's life and limb. He speaks to her as though from two points of time - moments after her death and at some later time, perhaps months or even years afterward. Calling her "small, denuded, one-armed thing" intensifies the senselessness of her death. In death she appears even smaller, more defenselessly innocent and mutilated than she did in life. He remorsefully and sorrowfully explains to her that "There was no time to mourn your slaughter," perhaps because there were other casualties (other children?) to treat; perhaps because to do his job, he could not emotionally afford to mourn for her then, as he would have wished. Perhaps it is due to the latter reason that "after the first death, the many must go unmourned." Lamenting her "slaughter" by an "M-16 round" he confesses to her, "I too was violator." He may mean that he feels implicated in her death because he is an American, or he may even be referring to something he does not divulge. It seems far more likely, however, that he considers his failure or inability to mourn for her

and "the many" at the times of their deaths a violation, one just as wrong as the "slaughter" of the innocent, one for which the elegy is meant to atone.

The last line, "and after the first death, the many must go unmourned," is obviously modeled on Thomas's line, "After the first death, there is no other." Paquet's line suggests that this girl's death may have been the first war-related death the persona experienced. It also seems to suggest that, in some way, he did mourn for her, but could not permit himself to mourn "the many." Thomas, on the other hand, does not allude to anyone other than the child. "After the first death, there is no other" may be interpreted to mean that death is the absolute end, that after one dies nothing remains. However, an equally viable meaning is that physical death is followed by the eternal life of the spirit.

Though Paquet omits Thomas's paradoxical ambiguity in the last line, he does, however, select two words from "A Refusal to Mourn..." and places them in exactly the positions Thomas puts them. In both poems "majesty" appears as the second word of the third stanza, and "daughter" concludes the first line of the last stanza. In choosing and positioning these two words in his poem, Paquet gleans from Thomas the two pivotal words around which his poem revolves.

Without launching into an exhaustive examination of "A Refusal to Mourn...", it must be noted that Thomas builds such a strong case against mourning the child's death that it turns upon him in mid-poem. Beginning with line two, it is his list of remonstrances and protestations that assume 'majestic' proportions rather than the death of the child.

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour

Is come of the sea tumbling in harness
And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead
And the synagogue of the ear of corn
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or sow my salt seed
In the last valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.
I shall not murder
The mankind of her going with a grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
With any further
Elegy of innocence and youth.

"Never until" an extraordinary list of equally extraordinary events come to pass will Thomas "mourn/The majesty and burning of the child's death." Discontent to leave it there, he continues to give more reasons why he need not mourn. He refuses to "murder/The mankind of her going" and refuses to "blaspheme down the stations of the breath." He protests too much about his refusal, thus creating a paradoxical reversal, an inversion that makes the poem a convoluted elegy. The "majesty" of the child's death is buried somewhere beneath the lavishness of his denials. Moreover, it seems as if Thomas must drown his mourning in "the unmourning water" of refusal in order to write his poem. Paquet's feelings, on the contrary, are painfully close to the surface. He takes the "majesty" and makes it the tremendous 'annihilative' force of war that holds sovereign-like sway over all in its path. Paquet's barbed irony paradoxically 'refuses' to grant an iota of "majesty" to either the war or the child's death.

Thomas and Paquet refer to the unknown girls as "daughter," but the difference in their usage of the word is one of 'proximity.' Thomas's persona is distant from the child. There is no evidence that he has ever even seen her. She is "London's child," and as such, she is almost an allegorical figure which imposes between her and the persona a form of intellectual distance that precludes any emotional

engagement on the part of the persona. Certainly too there is the gulf between life and death - she "lies" "deep with the first dead" and he is alive. Furthermore, he holds himself apart from her by carefully erecting a dense barrier of philosophical detachment. Because he refers to her as the city's child, the reader cannot sense any involvement with her, at least not to the degree Paquet's persona involves himself.

In contrast, Paquet's persona is in physical contact with the child and refers to her as "this daughter." Seeing her alive, holding her and helplessly watching her die in his arms deeply moves him. The reader senses, feels and knows he is palpably and profoundly affected by the death of "this daughter" of strangers for whom he feels paternal compassion. Unidentified, "small, denuded [and] one-armed," she touches him psychically, physically and emotionally.

"Mourning the Death, By Hemorrhage, Of a Child From Honai" is the last poem in the group of poems which I have labelled the 'recapitulation.' The cleansing, open mourning present in this poem is an attestation of the persona's gradual ascent and psychic healing. The bitterness, resentment, anger and great sorrow are slow to dissipate, however, as the two poems of the 'coda,' "A Visit" and "Group Shot," reveal.

Outwardly, the two 'coda' poems present the aftermath of wartime experience in an envelope of silence and quietus inside of which voices resonate "in humming tires" or the noise of a storm, and "camera-caught" images parade through the memory or are hung "on the parlor wall." Together "A Visit" and "Group Shot" bring Paquet's thirteen poem cycle to a close, but not to an end. Thin threads of imagery, dominant in the 'development' and 'recapitulation,' wind through these two poems. For, unlike a musical coda which formally concludes a sonata, this 'coda' merely dims the intensity of interior sounds and images.

"A Visit" takes place Stateside when a veteran, presumably the medic-persona, is visited by a woman he knows. Though there is no evidence in the poem that it is she who visits him rather than vice versa, it does not seem logical that he seeks her out, regardless of their past or present relationship. She appears to be an intruder whose words, uttered across the experiential gulf separating them, "scrape" him "like a slow knife."

"You don't look bitter,"
she said.
He thought,
"Bitter is a taste,"
feeling her words
scrape across
memory's slow healing
like a slow knife.
Did she think she could see
how he felt?
"It don't matter,"
he said, and heard
outside - voices
in the wind
in the humming tires
voices running against
the window in a heavy rain.

The innocent stupidity of her comment, "You don't look bitter," irritates and hurts him. He does not answer immediately but testily retorts internally that "Bitter is a taste." Though she uses the word "bitter" first, his reference to taste conjurs up other, more disagreeable tastes, those of blood, spit and vomit, found in poems of the 'development' and 'recapitulation.' He also wonders if she is really silly enough to think "she could see/How he felt."

His censorious reaction to her calls to mind Sassoon's acerbic words in "Glory of Women."

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations, you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.

You drown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.
[The War Poems, 100]

In both poems women are perceived as shallow creatures who "make shells of us," the combat veterans. There is no 'slack,' no allowances made for inadvertent verbal blunders or misguided conceptions. But certainly she cannot see his feelings anymore than she can hear the voices he hears. The unreasonableness of his reaction matches the inanity of her remark, and the anger he withholds from her draws attention to the chasm between them by dulling his response, "It don't matter," when he eventually speaks to her.

His "slow healing" is 'scraped' by the "slow knife" of "her words" that rake the 'tissue' forming over the rawness of his memory. Again mouth-related images appear when "her words" trigger "voices" "outside." The exposed voices of the wound beneath seep outward manifesting themselves "outside" in "the wind/in humming tires...in the heavy rains." In counterpoint to the slowness of her verbal "knife" and his "healing," the voices he hears quickly surround him in 'stereophonic' immediacy. Though they originate from within his memory, the voices are audible to him in outside sounds, so strong is the evocative, associative process of his memory.

She cannot hear these voices of course, and is totally unaware of the fact that he is listening to more than wind, tires and rain. She is shut out and he, for the moment anyway, is closed within the reverie these sounds produce. Readers are shut out as well, but we, better than this woman, are in a position to suspect that perhaps "the wind" and "heavy rain" dredge up memories of Asian wind and monsoon rains. We know something of the nature of these "running" voices, and understand why he tells her, "It don't matter." It really doesn't matter that he explains to her nothing of

what he hears, feels or thinks. Too much is required of him to attempt to bridge the gap between them. It is better to allow the voices room to move, to 'run against the window' of associative recollections, let her think what she may, and get on with "memory's slow healing."

Where the envelope of memory is opened by the knife-like sounds of words and voices in "A Visit," it is the silence of captured images in photos that prick the memory of the persona in "Group Shot." The post-war "slow healing" continues in this poem, and though the immediate presence of voices has faded, images are still very evocative. The gradual movement of departure from sound to image forms a significant stage in the persona's 'passage' toward post-war healing.

In the first stanza recollections of war and the passage of time during and after the war are depicted as a collection of yellowed pictures, "daguerrotypes" as "anachronistic" as Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs.

So they passed,
Days of hollow cadence
When each passing day
Seemed an album of daguerrotypes,
Camera-caught, anachronistic.
Puffed-up, pigeon-breasted,
As in Brady's day
We strutted to a distant
Very insistent drum.

"So they passed" refers not only to the "days of hollow cadence," the actual time these young soldiers in the "Group Shot" spent in military training, but to the men themselves who made the passage from civilian to military life. During that time before going to war, "when each passing day/Seemed an album of daguerrotypes,/Camera-caught, anachronistic," they were impressed by military glamor, their uniforms and their warrior images. Before they were shipped to Vietnam "each passing day" imprinted itself on these youthful soldiers who,

whether in imagination or reality, envisioned themselves "camera-caught" and emblazoned in martial glory as though they were mid-twentieth-century counterparts of the fighting men they had seen in "daguerrotypes." Though they were unaware of it at the time, in retrospect, the persona realizes just how "anachronistic" their self-images were. With their youthful innocence, patriotic zeal and proud bearing, they did resemble the Civil War soldiers Matthew Brady photographed. The "distant/Very insistent drum" to which they "strutted" and swaggered was indeed "anachronistic" and belonged to bygone days of another "distant" war bearing no resemblance to the war they would soon fight. Their "puffed-up, pigeon-chested" notions of war drawn from aged pictures were outdated, though they had no way of knowing it until it was too late.

The last stanza 'updates' the "album of daguerrotypes" of the first stanza by continuing the 'passage' of the persona and his friends.

I have photos of all of us together,
Polished boots and brass
In front of whitewashed barracks.
There, hanging on the parlor wall,
We are as once we were,
The wholeness of our limbs,
Two eyes blinking at the sun,
When all had all needed
To woo the world.

In his photographs "of all of [them] together" their "polished boots and brass" replace the nineteenth-century "puffed up, pigeon-breasted" images, but they are still 'anachronisms.' Standing posed "in front of whitewashed barracks," they "are as once [they] were," whole, able-bodied, squinting into a sun that set long ago, and possessed of self-assurance, youthful high spirits and everything they "needed/To woo the world." They are no longer 'as they once were,' however. War and time have killed some and changed others, while memory

'photographically' documents the transformations.

Sassoon makes a very similar set of observations in "To One Who was With Me in the War" in which he states:

It was too long ago - that Company which we served with.
We call it back in visual fragments, you and I,
Who seem, ourselves, like relics casually preserved with
Our mindfulness... [The War Poems, 151]

"Relics," or "anachronisms," veterans, as Sassoon says, "must play this game of ghosts" as part of the healing process. Their "after-thoughts" "call back visual fragments" and photos "hanging on the parlor wall," requiring that, like Sassoon, they "share again/All but the actual wetness...All but the living presences who haunt [them] yet." Though removed geographically, chronologically and experientially, the repetition and "hollow cadence" of passing time marches these Vietnam veterans, like their World War I forefathers, "back beyond Peace, exploring sunken ruinous roads," rifling their brains, "files of flitting forms," until "slow healing" 'stills' the "flitting" images to a single "Group Shot" on the last page of a much-loved, well-thumbed 'photo album.'

Conclusion

Like Weigl, Paquet adopts a refined and highly personal set of images - mouths, breath, redness, sky and flight - using them to convey with unfaltering adeptness, the 'pictures' he carries with him of his war experience. His thirteen poems take us beyond the phase of a young man's 'initiation' into the war, past the senseless brutalization of noncombatants, and 'beneath' the degradation of latrine duty to the bottom-most interior of the self to "the dark belly all wound." His persona is weighed down, and at times overwhelmed by fatigue, frustration, the steady drone of choppers bearing their cargoes

of human wreckage, the endless repetitions of CPR, the hopelessness of trying to breathe new life into the dying and piling the dead in body bags. His poems make his burden palpable for they read as though they were composed in the still presence of the dead, as though the persona had spent a life-time ministering to the wounded, dying and the dead.

To read these thirteen poems is to experience them, and the experience is like listening to "the ghosts inside" the poet/persona. As a result of having spent so much time in the presence of death and the dying, Paquet projects himself into the casualty to depict what the individual sees, hears and thinks in "This Last Time," "Basket Case," "Graves Registration," and "Morning - A Death." More important, in "Graves Registration" and "Morning - A Death" he gives the power of utterance to these 'ghosts.' It is as though with "only [his] breath on their lips, /only [his] words on their mouths," he, as a medic, had projected himself into them and had literally 'inspired' these men with the power to utter from beyond the grave their last thoughts.

The real power of Paquet's poems does not, however, stem only from endowing the dead with voices. Paquet is the Wilfred Owen and the Walt Whitman of the Vietnam War. Without sensationalism or sentimentality he takes us beyond and beneath "the place where curses are manufactured" to "the dark belly all wound." Through his persona we hear helicopters with their "sound like hundreds of barbers/stropping furiously" and the creak of litter handles in the darkness; we see the "broken Easters of flesh/girdled in fatigue strips," and "the half-dead comatose/paw[ing] the air"; we feel his tired, helpless disgust at the loss of so many lives, whether American, teenaged servicemen or Vietnamese children; and we hear the "wet screams" belonging to those "limbs/moving in the beaten night." All of

this is the Vietnam version of Melville's "buried place" where the "whole awful essence" ²¹ of man is found in a sarcophagal body bag in graves registration, or seen and heard in "...the depths where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glide to and fro..." ²² in waking, nightmare images.

Chapter Four: Notes

- ¹ Siegfried Sassoon, "To One Who Was With Me in the War," The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) 151.
- ² Basil T. Paquet, "Night Dust-off," Winning Heart and Minds: War Poemss by Vietnam Veterans eds. Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet. (Brooklyn: 1st Casualty Press, 1972) 18.
- ³ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston: American Heritage Publishing, 1971) 636. Hosanna comes from the Hebrew word, hosha na, "save us!"
- ⁴ Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 16, 18-19.
- ⁵ Olson, 71.
- ⁶ Olson, 108.
- ⁷ Olson, 107.
- ⁸ Olson, 107.
- ⁹ Olson, 107.
- ¹⁰ Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, "Passage to India," Part 2, line 31. ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. Norton Critical ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973) 412.
- ¹¹ Whitman, "Passage to India," Part 4, lines 79-80.
- ¹² Whitman, "Passage to India," Part 9, line 1.
- ¹³ Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978) 102.
- ¹⁴ Personal interview with Malcomn W. Browne, winter, 1988.
- ¹⁵ Michael Herr notes, "... how often and how badly you needed protection from what you were seeing." From Dispatches, (New York: Avon Books, 1978) 19.
- ¹⁶ Defibrillation is the act of stopping, with CPR or electric shock, the fibrillation - the abnormal, erratic 'fluttering' - of the heart muscle.
- ¹⁷ Herr, 26.
- ¹⁸ Herr, 134.
- ¹⁹ Herr, 16.
- ²⁰ Caputo, 160.
- ²¹ Olson, 80.
- ²² Olson, 107.

Chapter Five

"The Wall Within": The Quest for Ascent and Return
in Steve Mason's Johnny's Song

**"The Wall Within": The Quest for Ascent and Return
in Steve Mason's Johnny's Song.**

Introduction

At the time of this writing, Steve Mason had produced one volume of poetry about the Vietnam War entitled Johnny's Song. He recorded several of these poems for Bantam Audio Publishing and prefaces his readings with the following remarks:

...I became a poet to explain my war ¹ to me in terms I could understand, and more importantly could live with. In the end, the only terms which worked were human ones, because when I groped inside myself to find me and my war, what I found was you and our truth. In sharing Johnny's Song I offer what I sense is a whisper of that truth, a single syllable uttered from the voice of our collective conscience. I offer it with profound respect for each veteran's sacrifice and for each veteran's family who also knows the true cost of war and has paid the price.

Mason's explanation of why he became a poet is succinct and is, I suspect, shared by many Vietnam veteran poets. Thinking the comprehensible, liveable terms he sought were peculiar to him and 'his war,' he discovered in the process of writing that these necessary terms were "human ones."

Significantly, Mason calls his collection of poems a "Song." As such, it could be characterized as a Whitmanesque utterance of the Vietnam War cataloguing its "true cost" - its effects on veterans, their families and friends, and their nation. For like Whitman, speaking on behalf of his fellow Americans, Mason speaks for his fellow veterans as he indicates in the narration prior to his reading of "Closure: A Much Needed War":

I wrote Johnny's Song as I promised I would one night in the rain to a gathering of Vietnam vets at The Wall, promised them and myself that I'd write it with my pen, but it would be their voice I listened for when I put it down. I tried to do that without letting my perspective walk all over anyone else's war. If I was successful in part, it was when I heard that voice clearly, that collective voice of conscience...

Though Mason charges himself with the task of exploring the inner turmoil of veterans, he employs the song to help put them and their countrymen (even if only in the imagination) "hand in hand, in one unbroken circle in a chant," as Whitman phrases it in the 1872 Preface, "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free," lines 132-133. Johnny's Song then, may be construed as a post-Vietnam "Song of Ourselves," or as Mason puts it in "The Last Patrol":

And Johnny's Song begins...

Johnny's Song (I call it)
the song of each man's soul
who has come from a boyhood
such as ours
and gone to a war
such as we have known
and as yet has no DEROS.

I would gladly put it to words
and play it for you
(if only I could) on a flute,
but what the hell,
you know it by heart anyway...
I heard it once
somewhere between the finite
mathematics of harmony
and the infinitely inescapable
possibilities of loneliness.
Heard it, in the sad music
of solitary whales
in the North Atlantic
and recognized the voice
of my own soul
swimming also
in the dark
in the cold
under the implacable pull of the moon. (lines 113-139)

Mason, Whitman and Simpson

In the 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass Whitman states, "Whatever satisfies the soul is truth." ² Indeed, Johnny's Song is Mason's attempt to 'satisfy his soul' and those of other veterans by formulating the truth, as they know it, about their individual wars.

Truth then, is the subject of this volume of poetry for

three reasons. First, the war was swathed in purposeful misrepresentation, deception, secrecy and lies perpetrated by military and governmental sources and promulgated, to an extent, by the media. Second, historians and political and military analysts fall short of capturing combatants' view of the war, as Kaiko aptly demonstrates through his journalist-protagonist. Third, Americans have engaged in the self-deception of the American Dream, the fulfillment of the seemingly 'inherent' promise of a new nation. Mason's voice is the third in a trio of American poetic voices addressing truth and the necessity of listening to others and looking inside one's self to find the "human terms" to articulate that "truth." Walt Whitman and Louis Simpson, the first and second voices respectively, provide a valuable stance from which we may 'listen' to Johnny's Song.

Mason's promise to listen to fellow veterans' "collective voice of conscience" in order to write Johnny's Song resembles Whitman's 1872 Preface to "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free" in which he says:

Leaves of Grass, already published, is, in its intentions, a song of a great composite Democratic Individual, male and female. And following on and amplifying the same purpose, I suppose I have, (if ever completed,) the thread-voice, more or less audible, of an aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented, vast composite, electric Democratic Nationality.
[lines 140-145]

Though composing for others with 'their own pens,' the scope of their intentions differs greatly. Where Mason writes to keep the promise he made "to a gathering of Vietnam vets," Whitman writes of the promise of a "Democratic Individual." Both Mason and Whitman listen to, absorb and then 'transcribe' the voices of others, but it is the quiet, inner voice of "conscience" belonging to this "gathering" of

veterans rather than the outer, "electric" voice of a "Democratic Nationality" that Mason respectfully attempts to let speak through him without presumptuously imposing his own "perspective...over anyone else's war." Mason's deference to and respect for the differences in the highly individual nature of each veteran's war stands in stark relief against Whitman's "intentions" of a "great composite Democratic Individual" to be 'amplified' eventually to an "aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented, vast, composite, electric Democratic Nationality." Like reverse sides of an historical tapestry, Whitman 'intends' to chronicle the weaving of the "thread-voice" of the "Democratic Individual" into the "Democratic Nationality," where Mason 'gathers' the single threads snipped by the war in Vietnam and arranges them according to his 'newly-heard' pattern of conscience. Though hardly a "vast" "Democratic Nationality," the veterans for whom Mason writes Johnny's Song are most certainly an "aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented...composite" of the most disenfranchised and disillusioned men and women this nation has ever witnessed returning from war. Mason offers his poems as their muted "whisper," "a single syllable uttered from the voice of our collective conscience."

Louis Simpson's volume, At the End of the Open Road, provides a 'bridge' spanning the gap between Whitman's 'amplifications' and Mason's "single syllable." Whitman listened expectantly to the "more or less audible" "thread-voice" of the "Democratic Nationality," but have Americans listened to Whitman, and if so, what have they heard? Simpson believes they listened but exercised a type of selective hearing. In "Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain" he depicts Americans "turn[ing] a deaf ear" to Whitman's self-confessed "moods." Whitman's statue at Bear Mountain

State Park, New York comes alive and speaks to the poet who
"pauses to read the inscription."

Were my words not sufficiently plain?
I gave no prescriptions,
And those who have taken my moods for prophecies
Mistake the matter.

It would seem that Americans have consistently and wrongly misinterpreted his "moods" of high exuberance and hope for "prophecies" of promise, opportunity, superiority and progress. Consequently Americans have been deafened by the disease of what they construed as "official scenarios" "for they had contracted/American dreams." Simpson points out that in the absence of such "prescriptions," America one day will be forced to realize that it has not heard itself correctly and that Americans will be forced to hear the hollow reverberations of their "dreams," and understand that "The Open Road goes to the used-car lot."

All that grave weight of America
Cancelled! Like Greece and Rome.
The future in ruins!
The castles, the prisons, the cathedrals
Unbuilding, and roses
Blossoming from the stones that are not there...

This penultimate stanza of "Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain" is America's exclamation of horror at the realization that hope and promise on which it had built itself were "the stones that are not there." This America collapsing under the "grave weight" of its aspirations, its "future in ruins" among the structures "unbuilding" themselves, is the post-Vietnam America of Johnny's Song.

If America dreamed of itself in Whitman's "Facing West from California's Shores," "Song of the Open Road," and "Passage to India," Simpson's "Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain", along with "In California," "Lines Written near San Francisco"

and "Pacific Ideas - a Letter to Walt Whitman," awaken the nation from its self-deceiving, 'diseased' dreams. With Johnny's Song, Mason rummages through the rubble of America 'unbuilt' in the wake of the Vietnam War and picks up, as it were, "that grave weight" of "the stones that are not there" to construct a wall "in the tear-down ghetto of [his] soul," as he puts it in "The Wall Within." This wall inside the "ghetto" of the soul represents America's turning inward after two hundred years of continuous movement and expansion in its search for "purpose and action." Mason and those veterans for whom he writes would agree that "the open road goes to the used-car lot," and that "at the end of the open road we come to ourselves" before taking a painfully sharp detour inward along the untraversed side streets and alleys of the self.

Galway Kinnel, in his essay "Whitman's Indicative Words," anthologized in Whitman: The Measure of His Song, says of Whitman's "mystic music,"

This voice, so unmistakably personal, is also universal. While it is outgoing and attaches itself to the things and creatures of the world, it speaks at the same time of a life far within. In this double character, of intimacy and commonality, it resembles prayer. ³

Mason's poetry displays this prayer-like "double character" in several respects. The "Song" he intones reflects both the personal, inner intimacy of his own responses to 'his war' and post-war experience, as well as the intimacy shared among Vietnam veterans bonded by common experience - an intimacy Mason terms the "inner war" that must be "agonized," "shared," and "understood." Veterans' war and post-war experiences often reached beyond the veterans themselves to include their families, involving them in the losses incurred by separation, divorce, alcoholism, drug abuse and post traumatic stress disorders. Additionally, the nation's reaction to its Vietnam

veterans, whether indifferent, dismissive or openly hostile, created large scale resentment of veterans. It was just such an attitude which served to reinforce the veterans' intimacy and Mason's resolve that the nation must learn to 'understand' and 'share' the agony of its returned veterans, and learn the vital importance of saying to veterans 'welcome home.' ⁴ For without the nation's involvement, the war will always be an "outer war," unresolved and incapable of having a "justifiable history/to be recorded in reasonable terms," as Mason puts it in "A History Lesson."

Mason believes it is necessary to bring the "outer war" (that is, the war as depicted, taught and quantified by "bloodless" historians, for example) inside, within the reluctant, if not forbidding, heart of the nation. His "Song" becomes a hymn for the nation and its veterans, a prayer for healing restoration, reunification and the liberation of veterans from their prison-like individual wars so that they may be drawn 'inside' to build their rightful places as honorable veterans of a foreign war, to be respected for their service and sacrifice.

Analysis of Poems

Out of the eleven poems comprising Johnny's Song, seven were composed and delivered for various city, state and national memorial services honoring veterans of the Vietnam War. Mason read "The Wall Within," the first poem in the volume, on November 12, 1984 as part of the ceremonies preceding the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The fourth poem, "A History Lesson," he wrote in reaction to a Los Angeles convention of historians gathered to discuss the Vietnam War, and "Closure: A Much Needed War," the seventh poem, was delivered on May 7, 1985 aboard the

Aircraft Carrier Intrepid as part of the dedication ceremony for the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The untitled eighth poem, the original of which is in Hanoi's war museum, was read December 18, 1981 at the national prayer-in at San Diego's St. Paul Church honoring the first group of Vietnam veterans to return from Vietnam. On November 7, 1983 he presented the "Founding Convention Poem," placed ninth in the volume, at the First National Convention of Vietnam Veterans of America held at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D. C. Mason notes that this poem appears "Reprinted here exactly as it was scribbled on the hotel placemats.")⁵ The tenth poem, "The Children of the Sun," "was delivered as the keynote address in Spokane, Washington on November 10, 1985, at the unveiling of the Inland Northwest Vietnam Veterans Memorial." Finally, "After the Reading of the Names" was read Memorial Day 1984 at the Peace Memorial in San Diego.

The four remaining poems, "DEROS: My Soul," "The Last Patrol," "Angry Little Poem of Spring," and "The Casualty," might be called 'private' poems that are addressed to veterans, their families and friends, their hopes, fears, problems and concerns. All eleven poems speak to, and on behalf of Vietnam veterans in an attempt to restore their self-esteem, to salve their bruised pride, salvage shattered egos and mitigate their sense of loss and betrayal.

The eleven poems of Johnny's Song alternate between chattiness and cajolery, introspection and confession, harrangue and plea, and all state in effect, 'welcome home,' acknowledging the while that neither home nor these veterans are the same for their experiences and never will be the same again. Collectively these poems are meant to be morale-boosting pep talks encouraging veterans to persevere and garner from each other the same strength and Whitmanesque 'cohesiveness'

they drew from each other in Vietnam. Moreover, they are underscored statements of compassionate understanding, empathy and commitment to his fellow veterans, and the necessity of rebuilding lives and finding "more believable dreams" than those that led them to Vietnam, dreams of "NO MORE WAR."

In the poetry of McDonald, Weigl and Paquet, we follow the descent of the American combatant in Vietnam through the layers of his war-time experience until he metaphorically and literally plummets to the bottom of an emotional and psychical 'shitpit.' Mason's Johnny's Song 'brings it home,' so to speak, by describing returned veterans' sense of still being at the bottom of the morass created by the war, and by confronting and elaborating on that fact that once 'down,' it is damnably difficult to climb "back on top" again, difficult to rebuild and find anything left to believe anymore. It therefore is logical that the controlling images of Johnny's Song center around prisons, tenements and ghettos, proven survival techniques and the notion of elevation similar in effect to Weigl's use of bird imagery.

Though it is the last poem in Johnny's Song, Mason begins his taped reading with "After the Reading of the Names" and that is where this analysis of the volume will start.

After the Reading of the Names

I just call him Johnny;
like in Johnny went off to war
and Johnny didn't come home.
And remember him,
like Johnny was a helluva ballplayer
and Johnny's girl believed in dreams.
And I can find him,
like in Johnny's folks
moved away that year -
some say, Minnesota;
but his name's still here
not two miles from his old high school
on a Peace Memorial
(which is a funny name for it).
Sometimes, like today,
we read All the names
some call it "the reading of the names."

Me, I just call it Johnny's Song.
And as much as I love the words,
I've come to really hate the music...

Johnny is the "generic veteran" to whom Mason refers in "Closure: A Much Needed War." He might also be considered the Vietnam War's version of the Whitman's "Democratic Individual." Neither Henry Fleming nor Audie Murphy, he is the Everyman of the Vietnam War, the boy next door who became a soldier, died in Vietnam and "for whom no national border, /nor ethnic pride is grand enough/to color his humanity." His name could be anything but "I just call him Johnny... And remember him" not just on Memorial Day of 1984 when Mason read this poem at the Peace Memorial in San Diego, but remember him, with his boyish nickname and his youth, playing ball and remember his "girl believed in dreams."

Mason finds cruel irony in the peace memorial's "funny name" because it lists the names of those from the area who were killed in the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, he recognizes within the quiet praise of his poem the honor paid to the war's dead. Memorial Day services held throughout America collectively provide the occasion to "read All the names." With either a partial, localized reading such as this one in San Diego's Old Town, or with a complete litany of the more than 57,000 names, villages, towns, cities and the nation as a whole catalogue their losses one name at a time.

Vietnam veteran Jim O'Meara says of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the national catalogue of names:

There isn't anything else like it. It's a black polished granite cliff, formed into a shallow V that has the names of the missing and dead from the Vietnam War inscribed on it in white letters. 57,939 of them. It's technically a "memorial," but that doesn't begin to cover what it means. "Monument" isn't right either. Most of the veterans who went there for the dedication called it, simply, "the wall." ["The Wall," Petroleum Independent, 47-49]

Made of black, reflective granite, it is literally America's darkest catalogue. Rather than images of a new nation's bright hope, expectation and opportunity envisioned by Whitman, it mirrors our own faces as we read the names of those lost to what Kaiko calls the "Brilliant, shining darkness" of Vietnam. Robert Dana's poem, "At the Vietnam War Memorial, Washington, D. C." captures some of the starkness, loss and ghostliness of 'the wall' as seen from the excerpt below:

All words are obscene
beside these names. In the
morning the polished stone
gives back, we see ourselves -
two men, a woman, a boy,
reflected in grey light,
a dying world among the dead,
the dead among the living.
[Carrying the Darkness, 84]

'The wall' is, in a sense, what America discovered at the end of the "open road," along its "passage" in Asia. Having "fac[ed] west from California's shores," then "having wander'd since, round the earth having wnader'd" to complete the "circle," Americans, whether they are veterans or not, are forced to 'face' themselves as they face 'the wall.' Simpson sums it up in "Lines Written Near San Francisco" when he writes, "At the end of the open road we come to ourselves." The confrontation of the self as one stands facing 'the wall' is the subject of Mason's poem, "The Wall Within," for as 'the wall' lists names with our reflected faces superimposed over them, so Mason's "wall within" reflects and catalogues his personal losses and those of his fellow veterans.

Very unlike the poem itself, the explanatory note preceding "The Wall Within," the first poem in Johnny's Song, is a dry and dispassionate statement regarding the occasion of

the poem, the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Far more revealing and evocative, however, is Mason's narrated preface on the Bantam recording. Both are placed below for comparison.

Delivered at the commencement of the National Salute II in Washington, D. C., on November 10, 1984, as part of the official activities prior to the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial ("The Wall") as a national monument. It honors the personal list of love and loss that each American has marked in his/her heart. Poem entered into the Congressional Record, January 30, 1985. [Johnny's Song, 1]

Bantam Recording:

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C. states in the most identifiable and personal way possible the true measure of America's commitment in Vietnam. It names the more than 58,000 Americans who died there. "The Wall", as we call it, translates national sacrifice into personal loss one day at a time, one name at a time. It is a chronology of tragedy encased in sharp, black granite lines which plumb straight to the depths of our souls. It has an impact beyond language, but not beyond comprehension.

'The wall,' a complete "chronology of tragedy encased in sharp black granite lines," is a national catalogue intoned in the clipped cadence of names and dates with each name and day a paradoxically whole yet truncated catalogue of memories, images, places and events. A comparison of this black list of losses with Whitman's list of accomplishments set forth in "Passage to India," namely the opening of the Suez Canal, the junction of the Union and Pacific transcontinental railroads and the laying of the Atlantic and Pacific cables, uncovers an inverted parody of a nation whose vision has been wrenched inward. When "facing west," Whitman's gaze, that is, his visionary anticipation of the benefits to be gained from these technological achievements in communication, is directed outward toward the future with the lines of transoceanic cable and the parallel lines of the transcontinental railroad fulfilling "God's purpose from the first" by wedding "races," bringing "the distant...near," by joining continents. Such joyous

'technicism' in the form of communication is the very antithesis of the message conveyed along the very human "sharp black lines" of 'the wall.'

The four hundred fourteen lines of "The Wall Within" urge America to unstop its ears and turn its gaze inward away from the twentieth-century road to confront the static, final frontier of itself, to examine its values, purposes and its vision of itself as a result of the war in Vietnam, to realize that in Jim O'Meara's words:

...In the last analysis this is what Vietnam was all about: 57,939 people listed on the wall and millions of veterans who, in their minds somewhere, sat on the grass abandoned and alone, betrayed by the nation they'd fought for. ["The Wall," Petroleum Independent, 48]

The Edenic "afoot and light-hearted" mood of westward expansion of which Whitman sings, the spirit and anticipation of Huck and Jim as they "light out for the territories," the motion of the "swirling vortex" at the bottom of Americans' hearts (which Kaiko says brought America to Vietnam), all bespeak of the fact that this national phenomenon of movement must eventually come to a halt. Whitman subtly warned us of this in the last two lines of "Facing West from California's Shores" and again in "Passage to India" (Part V, lines 90-93). In Moby Dick Melville also understood the necessity of delving down to the "ocean's utmost bones" in order to find and explore what Charles Olson refers to as the space of the continent internalized by Americans. ⁷ Simpson reiterated, with unmistakable clarity and vehemence, the nature of the nation's course and warned Americans that the restless motion had led them to a "used-car lot" facing Alcatraz, "the Rock" ("In California"), the stone edifice designed by the architect of all American institutions - "the same old city-planner,

death." Mason's poem brings the reader face to face with two structures, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the "brick wall" within the soul, both of which were crafted by the "same...city-planner."

In the first nine lines Mason sets forth debunking the American Dream and the machismo embodied in the pioneer attitude that lingers in men of his age. He addresses Vietnam veterans as men "hanging tough/in their early forties" who, despite their war experiences, still "would like the rest of us to think/they could really handle one more war/and two more women." This superficial bravado does not fool Mason - "I know better./You have no more lies to tell./I have no more dreams to believe." Having said that, he proceeds to tell them, in lines ten through seventeen, how it is that he sees through their veneer:

I have seen it in your face
I am sure you have noticed it
in mine;
that thousand-yard stare
that does not look out -
it looks in -
at the unutterable,
unalterable truth of our war. [lines 10-17]

The "thousand-yard stare" is the term used among combatants in Vietnam to describe the glassy, concentrated, far off expression in the eyes of men exposed to prolonged periods of time in outposts, on LURP patrols (long range reconnaissance patrols) or any other mission requiring acute observations of terrain for enemy presence. Mason recognizes that the "stare" has turned inward to survey the terrain of the self, and the "unutterable,/unalterable truth of our war." During his visits to parks across the country he observed veterans who "each in his own way looks out to the park/that he might 'see' in to the truth," veterans who

...cock one eye
to the center of the park
toward the rearing bronze horsemen
of other wars
who would lead us backwards to glory. [lines 72-76]

"And with the other eye,/[they]...read the poetry of America the Beautiful." Those veterans "who look there [at the nation's parks] for validation/...find only confusion and sadness."

These lines demonstrate veterans' 'binocular vision,' that is, the dual nature of their perceptions of American attitudes toward war and war veterans. From the 'negative' side, these veterans spurn the "glory" of war symbolized by the "rearing bronze horsemen." Glory, like cavalrymen, is a thing of the past. Mason also seems to suggest here that glory was superseded by guilt, distrust and examination of the values and purposes of the nation that took him and his colleagues to Vietnam. Vietnam veterans contemptuously "cock one eye" at such statues as if taking aim at them with a weapon. Even the ubiquitous park pigeons side with the veterans by forming themselves into "disgruntled" "platoons" to 'frag' ⁸ the statues. These fecal forays are an ironic way of "saying it best for all of us."

Providing the balance to the 'monocular' image of the cavalryman is the image of America as a woman whom the veterans see "with the other eye." Without the passionately bellicose energy of the horsemen, she is demurely collected "as she combs her midday hair." In the prime of her life, she sits calmly, beautifully and poetically, and without leaving "a single crumb," she picnics in the park on delicacies - "precise shrimp sandwiches/and salad Nicoise catered by Tupperware." She is tidy, correct, orderly, attractive and has a taste for good food, but something is amiss here. She wants her meal fresh and clean so it is "catered by Tupperware," yet she combs her hair while she eats. The implication is that there have been "horsemen" who fought and

died in the service of this beautiful woman with indelicate manners, and that veterans of the Vietnam War are no exception, save that they are not blind to the 'food' their country 'eats' under the misguided notion that its 'manners' are impeccable.

As each Vietnam veteran "in his own way looks out to the park/that he might 'see' in to the truth," he tries to 'see' through the filth covering the horsemen and the superficial refinement of this 'woman' in search of any vestige of hope or lingering belief that both represent qualities to "validate" being a veteran of Vietnam. But they "find only confusion and sadness"; they must use their "thousand-yard stare" to look elsewhere for the "validation" they cannot gain from parks, statues or the nation as it represents itself to them through these memorials.

For Mason, looking elsewhere initially involves a stealthy journey that ultimately brings him to 'the wall' in Washington, D. C. ⁹ Within the boundaries of the continental United States he symbolically re-enacts the nineteenth-century quest for movement that led pioneers across the Great Divide and goaded Ahab to cross the Pacific. But Ronald Moran says in Louis Simpson regarding "Simpson's concern for America in the tradition of Walt Whitman:"

At least in the middle of the 19th Century, there were frontiers - economic, social, political all of which were made possible by a physical frontier that still had somewhere to go. Now, however, America has to turn on an inward spotlight to find a frontier; and introspection, especially when the poet made and suggested many promises, inevitably lights up and focuses brightly on disappointments. [107] ¹⁰

Mason makes a "break from cover" and [runs] a zigzag course/across the open fields of America/taking refuge in the inner cities" in an effort to find an entrance to the frontier which Simpson realized Americans would one day be forced to

confront, as disappointing and confusing as it would indeed prove to be for Vietnam veterans.

Unlike Simpson, who makes a single journey to Bear Mountain State Park to visit the statue of Whitman, Mason treks "From MacArthur Park/to Washington Square/from Centennial Park/to Dupont Circle" to visit the memorials, plaques and statues dedicated to war veterans. "Breaking from cover," crouched and zigzagging "across open fields," he observes "an army of combat veterans/hidden among the trees." "Always at the edges of the clearing," these veterans, "patrolling like perimeter guards," are forced to revert to combat techniques in their own country because of their apparent "aloneness" in their belief that "the values of our society/seem to be distributed in our parks," and "reflected in the eyes of veterans." His fluctuating resentment of and reverence for "those one-line truths...tattooed/on the clenched granite fists of America" symbolized by "these open-air/above ground time capsules/of our national culture," add further evidence to the dual nature of his own reaction to the various war memorials he visits.

Words like:
peace and sacrifice, war and young
supreme and duty, service and honor
country, nation, men and men and men again,
sometimes God and don't forget women!
Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines and freedom. [lines 152-57]

These words are both "Spill and Spell words" that we toss "out at the feet of our heroes/like some crone spreading her hands/over the runes prior to a mystic reading," and "good words, noble words, solemn/& sincere." These words are "the language of Death," as Simpson reminds us in "Lines Written Near San Francisco":

we are the colonists of death -
Not, as some think, of the English,
And we are preparing thrones for him to sit, poems

to read, and beds
In which it may please him to rest.

Mason and his fellow veterans are like the pioneers who looked to this land for a "murmur of serious life," and they are like Simpson who reads the inscription on the statue of "the poet of death and lilacs" and wonders, "Where is the nation you promised?" Neither Mason nor Simpson have seen monuments, obelisks, "Nowhere, yet, a wall for the living," the survivors, which leads Mason to believe that this country does not

celebrate life after combat
because our concept of glory
lives neither in victory nor in peace
but in Death. [lines 206-209]

It occurs to Mason one lonely evening while visiting Centennial Park that:

From the moon
only one manmade object
can be viewed by the naked eye:
The Great Wall of China
(a tribute to man's functional paranoia.) [lines 236-240]

This "peculiar perspective," triggered in part by the inscription on a small World War I statue located "to one side of the Parthenon/built to scale and to the glory/which was Greece," makes him reflect. The inscription, "*I gave my best to make a better world 1917-1918,*" contrasts with the "scale" and "glory" of Greece since it was the accumulation of such personal sacrifices that once made Greece great. Yet its national "scale" and "glory" are reduced to nothing more than an honorific replica, just as Verdun and Passchendaele are reduced to "mud-clouded wars on the ocean floor./So all that oceanography, after all,/Was only a pawnshop" in Simpson's "Moving the Walls"; and a lunar perspective of China's Great Wall reduces its magnitude to that of the only "manmade object" visible to "the naked eye." Like the Great Wall,

built as a protective barrier to keep invaders out, America's parks and monuments are barriers which protectively prevent us from examining our national values, identity and spiritual resources. By looking at these physical constructs that diminish sacrifice and "[reduce]," as Simpson says, "the universe to human dimensions," we do not have to look within ourselves, nor do we ever need to question why these memorials were built. But Vietnam veterans, with "the confidence of their own perspective," their "quiet dignity of their aloneness," and their combat training, storm and 'assault' the barriers because "the only manmade object We can see/is THE WALL in Washington, D. C. / (the veterans' solemn pledge to remember,)" because they indeed "know what is human," as Simpson puts it.

'The wall' in Washington, D. C. is not a barrier, however, at least not to veterans like Mason who "pledge to remember," to probe and examine their own hearts and that of the nation rather than be party to America's 'functional amnesia' which serves as a 'Great Wall' around the nation's innermost frontier. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial serves as an 'entrance' to that frontier, "the land within," that Simpson warned us we must eventually confront and explore. "The Wall Within" is that final frontier toward which the 'open road' led us.

Mason learns of the existence of 'the wall within' "that night in the rain when [he] spoke at the Memorial in Washington. "

There is one other wall, of course.
One we never speak of.
One we never see,
One which separates memory from madness.
In a place no one offers flowers.
THE WALL WITHIN.
We permit no visitors. [lines 246-252]

Everyone at the ceremony "noticed how the wall ran like tears/and every man's name we found on the polished, black granite face/seemed to have our eyes staring back at us; crying." The "haunting" experience of "[catching his] first glimpse/of the Wall Within" leaves him shaken but strengthened so that he can explore the Simpsonian "land within."

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, is no "clenched, granite fist" like the monuments of other wars; it is the "polished, black granite face" of America and those who died in Vietnam are reflected in the faces of those who survived to look into themselves and discover their 'walls within.' Never seen, spoken of, visited or offered flowers, Mason's interior wall "looks like any of a million/nameless, brick walls." "Do you know the wall I mean?" Mason asks and then describes his own:

It stands in the tear-down ghetto of my soul;
that part of me which reason avoids
for fear of dirtying its clothes
and from atop which my sorrow and my rage
hurl bottles and invectives
at the rolled-up windows
of my passing youth. [lines 253-261]

This "land within" is "the tear-down ghetto" of the veterans' souls. Avoided by reason because of its sordidness, but inhabited by the recalcitrant vagrants, "sorrow" and "rage," this inner wasteland is an inversion of Simpson's ascerbic statement in "Moving the Walls" that "...you, my country, /These days your walls are moving, /These nights we are branching among the stars." Instead of "branching" outward toward the heavens, the nation's walls and its newest veterans' walls have imploded. The only thing capable of attaining the reaches of the stars is Mason's notion that if each veteran's "list" of "other casualties of the Vietnam War/(our loved ones)" could be projected onto "the right flat cloud/on a perfect, black

night," as though "upon a god-sized drive-in theater" screen, it would require a space "wide enough to race Ben Hur across/for a thousand years..."

"The Wall Within" is a highly personalized version of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Each veteran's wall is different because it bears "the names of all the other casualties/of the Vietnam War," and collectively all of these walls "add up the true cost of war." As for dedications of the walls, Mason says:

As for me
they could all read:
This wall is dedicated
to mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers,
wives, husbands,
sons, daughters,
lovers, friends
and most of all dreams
of the men and women
who risked it all in Vietnam
while you continued to lose them
during and after the war
with less a chance than they for a parade
and no chance at all for an explanation. [lines 390-403]

Collectively a massive Whitmanesque catalogue of "the ones the Pentagon didn't put in uniform/but died anyway," each individual "wall within" lists a different set of names though they were all inscribed in the same manner by "legless," 'immobile,' 'self-pitying,' "ugly Humpty Dumpties" who "lean over the ledge to write/upside down with chalk, bleached white/with [their] truth."

There are many names that belong on somebody's wall, like the children of soldiers killed in action who may not have "[gotten] nice step-dads," but "Whose wall do they go on?" Moreover,

...what about you vets
who came home to your wife and kids
only to divorce her because

there wasn't anybody else to be angry at?
How many dimes
have you long-distance fathers
dropped into the slot
to hear how another man
was raising your children?
Yeah, Yeah, I can hear you hollerin'
"Put it on the wall! Put it on the wall!"
Damn right, it's on the wall... [lines 329-340]

"Damn right" the names of wives and children are on these walls, along with those of parents including Mason's mother who died unexpectedly while he was in Vietnam.

Mason caustically satirizes the notion of "American Grieving Parenthood" by dismissing as caricatured "Baloney" any "Rockwellian" "portrait" of lemonade sipping, "handholding" paragons of "wisdom and forbearance/and oh yes, pride."

Because every time you can't find Mom,
you damned well better call Doc Smith
'cause she's up on the second floor again
sitting on the floor in Johnny's closet
smelling his Varsity sweater
with the sleeves around her shoulders
sobbing something maybe only Johnny ever
understood.

But don't worry about dad,
who never fished again,
or watched a ballgame on TV again
and won't talk to anyone this year
between the ages of thirty and forty.
He's doing fine. [lines 367-380]

"PUT IT ON THE WALL!!" Indeed, putting these names on the "wall within" is as important and as necessary for these veterans as the national recognition afforded them by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

The symbolism in Mason's images - inverted names chalked like graffiti on an anonymous brick wall in a ghetto populated by bottle and invective hurling men who patrol the "Wall Within [not] like Hamlet on the battlements," but like the combat veterans they are - demonstrates the degree to which America's selective listening to Whitman has given the lie to the promise

of the "open road" and the American Dream. When the seemingly endless frontier washed out on the shores of California, Louis Simpson caught its significance in the first and last stanzas of "The Inner Part":

When they had won the war
And for the first time in history
Americans were the most important people -

Priests, examining the entrails of birds
Found the heart misplaced, and seeds
As black as death, emitting a strange odor.

That odor became the stench of jungle-rotted dreams, napalmed-charred promise, the garbage of the spiritual ghetto in which Vietnam veterans find themselves after their wars. But "the truth/which is now being shared," that is, the confessional 'airing' of the stench, the unveiling and dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the "Wall Within," is an act of "moral courage" on the part of the nation and Vietnam veterans. "Amen to that, brother."

With one hundred eighty-one lines, "DEROS: My Soul," the second poem in Johnny's Song, is a much shorter poem than "The Wall Within." However, "DEROS: My Soul," like "The Casualty," and "A History Lesson," which are covered later in this chapter, is too long to analyze line by line. For that reason I will concentrate on those lines, sections and stanzas which contribute to the focus of this study.

The preface to this poem explains that "DEROS" is a military acronym for "date of expected return from overseas." Mason states:

This poem speaks to the many men and women who have experienced the anxiety of still being in Vietnam - of not having completely returned to the world of which they no longer feel an integral part. [Johnny's Song, 20]

It is "the anxiety of still being in Vietnam," of having

returned physically but of having left the spirit imprisoned somewhere in Vietnam that controls this poem. The alienation, ostracism, and exile imposed by experience, the double sense of being 'home' yet still overseas, of being 'free' yet 'imprisoned,' is a continuous problem for many veterans. The first three stanzas of this poem introduce the fact that there seems to be "no DEROS/for the soul."

At times when I am calm
I remember
that even if you waited for it
nothing came as suddenly
as gunfire
and nothing (not even the Lieutenant)
seemed as stupid
as the silence that followed -

At such times I know also
that each of us
who fought in Vietnam
was spiritually captured by it
and that each remains
a prisoner
of his own war -

It is, therefore, not surprising
that for some (like for me)
the AfterNam emptiness
published no DEROS
for the soul... [lines 1-20]

The suddenness of gunfire and the silence and stupidity afterward resembles the States-side quiet of "AfterNam emptiness," leaving "each of [those]/who fought in Vietnam" with the predicament of being "spiritually captured by it/and that each remains/a prisoner."

Perhaps Louis Simpson spoke better than he knew when he said:

Lie back, Walt Whitman,
There, on the fabulous raft with the King and the
Duke!
For the white row of the Marina
Faces the Rock. Turn around the wagons here.

"The Rock" is, of course, Alcatraz, the small island just off the coast of California in San Francisco Bay. Once used as an

isolated federal prison, Simpson's use of it in his poem, "In California" rebuts Whitman's vision of America's unlimited expansionism in "Facing West from California's Shores," and firmly foreshadows Mason's 'imprisonment' by the Vietnam War.

As the heir to Whitman's traveller and Twain's 'royalty' on "the fabulous raft," Mason makes the "zigzag course" between the 'rock' monuments and memorials across America. Scattered like points in a continent-size connect-the-dots puzzle, these marble and granite structures form a kind of 'prison' with one 'wall' visible in Washington, D. C., the others visible only to 'inmate'-veterans who look inside themselves to discover the 'wall within', "the tear-down ghetto of [their] soul[s]." Even these private "ghettos," like derelict Alcatraz Prison, are empty shells that echo with the evoked nightmare images of darkness, despair, bitterness, discrimination and alienation found in "DEROS: My Soul." "Geez, it gets scary in here sometimes, do it not, Brutha," when "madness invades" this place of "lunar projections" where "a muster of lost souls," who have lost their souls to the prison of Vietnam, mill about "like mute somnambulists." As 'spiritual POWs' abandoned by their nation, sentenced by their experience, surrounded and confined by the silence of their country's 'amnesia,' these veterans are indeed prisoners in the lonely "ghetto" of "the land within."

In moments of reverie (or what Simpson calls "dark preoccupation")

when reason drifts
and whole worlds are illuminated
with Platonic images
dancing against the cave-walls
of my mind
lit by
a single candle
borrowed from a twilight wish, [lines 22-28]

Mason cannot help but await 'reunification' with his soul. But he suspects that in the unlikely event that this should happen, his soul would not have aged and he would "recognize the soul/ of a much younger man" eating a chocolate bar, humming "If You're Going to San Francisco," and "hefting a duffle bag/filled with new and more believable myths/that I might live by." He wonders how he would react to his long lost soul, whether he would "throw flowers" or "beat Hell out of him," and satirizes the fact that

there never was any great debate
(between my soul and me)
ending in a mutually agreed upon
existential parting of the ways. [lines 49-52]

Indeed, there was nothing so spectacularly philosophical.
Instead, his soul

just did
what most souls did.
Just disappeared one afternoon
when [he] was in a firefight.
Just "walked away" in the scuffle
like a Dunhill lighter
off the deck of a redneck bar... [lines 75-81]

Part II of "DEROS: My Soul" is a combination of strength and weakness. Lines eighty-two through one hundred thirty-eight surrealistically and graphically illustrate what it means to lose one's soul, and how it feels to be a 'prisoner' of this condition. The remainder of the poem could easily be omitted to make a stronger, and far more focused poem.

In lines eighty-two through one hundred thirty-eight Mason relates that a man can recover from the loss of "his money/his woman/(even his mind)" but that "it is over" if he loses his pride or his courage. But what becomes of a man who has lost his soul? Mason poses this question to himself

when madness invades
scattering today's headlines

like March Hares
leaving nothing at the table
of [his] reason beyond one crumb of truth
on the white cloth of [his] youth. [lines 93-100]

Reality, the 'here and now' of being back in the United States symbolized by "today's headlines," suddenly flees "like March Hares" 'scattered' during the recurring bouts of 'invading madness.' Madness, the feeling that part of him "walked away" during a firefight, assaults the surrealistic 'tea party' of his reason, bloodies the white table cloth of his youth and innocence, and leaves a single "crumb of truth" - that "Bloody Nam" is responsible for the loss of his soul and these nightmarishly bizarre bouts of lunacy.

The 'enormous bloodstain' on the "cloth of [his] youth" takes on the shape of a "distorted lunar projection/of Vietnam." Bump the table of reason with a careless knee and the mad "projection" of Vietnam mapped in blood "jumps alive" as the stain becomes the personification of a Rorschach test dashing pellmell "out the window of [his] sanity/to run naked down the street." Vietnam veterans, the zombie-like "mute somnambulists," "follow the blood trail" down a street located in the walled prison "ghetto" of "the land within." These veterans are condemned to wander through the terrain of "their shared nightmare," this grizzly "projection" resembling "a black and white foreign film" "with Vietnamese subtitles." As a soulless "prisoner of his own war" that is waged in this surreal interior of the self, it is not surprising that he 'gets scared in there sometimes.'¹¹

Contrasting with the power of the waking nightmare images of soullessness in lines eighty-two through one hundred thirty-eight, the final two stanzas offer sugary images of veterans' reunification with their souls. Mason fantasizes that God would "mint a medal" for Vietnam nurses. "No words"

would be printed on these medals, but anyone who saw one would be so struck by its beauty that he or she would retire to a "thoughtful place...for a week." Following this period of quiet contemplation "God would let us have a picnic." Children of soldiers whose lives had been saved by armed services nurses would put a daisy chain around the sun's neck while their parents made "God a prayer-promise/never, never to do anything like Nam/again." Then, "faster even than gunfire, /everybody's lost soul/would just come floating down/like a bright balloon/on a string."

One must not demean Mason's hope for a 'reunion' of souls and veterans, but the birthday party imagery, replete with melting ice cream and children singing "Happy Birthday," seriously undermines his purpose of bringing the poem full circle by balancing the loss of the soul against reunion with the soul. The gunfire reference (which harks back to lines one through five of Part I and describes the speed of both events) is simply too weak to compensate for, much less overcome, the medal-picnic-birthday party imagery and save the poem from a disastrous conclusion.

"The Casualty" is a poem of three hundred seventy-two lines divided into two parts. Mason's preface to the poem states that the

poem was written as a definition of war and as a description of the men who fought in Vietnam. It is a statement of courage and continued commitment. [Johnny's Song, 71]

These three broad themes are woven together through both parts of the poem. The title does not refer to any single casualty of the Vietnam War; rather, it refers to all the wounded spirits and lost souls, the destruction or irreparable damage done to the myths and dreams these veterans once believed. This poem is, to some extent, a recapitulation of "The Wall

Within" and "DEROS: My Soul," while it develops the imagery of descent/ascent, survival techniques and dreams betrayed.

If any sections of this poem can be isolated as a definition of war it would be stanzas seven and eight:

War is a surrealistic penal colony
for young patriots of the real world
who, as sons of poor men,
must pay the price
for the believable myths
of national furors and private enterprise.

War as a social statement
has the depth of a slit trench at Argonne.
And echoes about as long
as it took the blood to dry at Hue. [lines 86-95]

War is "a surrealistic penal colony" of men "condemned" to wander within its dark confines protecting, fighting and dying for "private enterprise" and "national furor," "myths" 'believed' only by those for whom "it remains the truest illusion of our war/that it is over;/the grandest delusion of our peace/that is begun." Veterans of Vietnam, on the contrary are "expert in disbelief." Their "God-like detachment" enables them to detect lies, see that "neither the president,/nor the emperor,/wear clothes," and realize that "war as a social statement" is a bloody, shallow endeavor that achieves little if any meaningful, enduring effect, as Argonne and Hue proved. By referring to the war in Vietnam as a "penal colony," Mason implies that soldiers are guilty of a crime for which they are banished to the remote institution of war for punishment. They are Simpson's "colonists of Death" and as such, they are at once inmates of the war-prison while acting under the control of a distant power, and they are a distinct group sharing the same culture in a foreign country. In Vietnam, however, the country and the war became synonymous. It is this unique merging, even interchangeability of the war and the country, which creates some of the surrealism.

Even after returning home and even after the war had ended, surrealism is still very much in evidence, for veterans had internalized it and proceeded, like Mason, to discover it and rediscover it repeatedly over the years. For Mason, a significant aspect of this surrealism is the continuing sense of imprisonment within the terrible, inner 'penal colony' of the self, the interior expanses of a desolate, crumbling "ghetto" of dark "tenements" echoing with despondence and psychic destitution. And like forsaken ghetto dwellers or prison inmates, these veterans find it extraordinarily difficult to 'escape' and 'elevate' themselves enough to find their way 'upward' and out of this region of the self.

Mason describes in considerable detail this "world of the combat soldier" that lingers even in civilian life. In its simplest terms this 'world'

is a flat one
whose highest peak is mean survival
and whose lowest value
is the killing of his enemy.
It is a private world
of height without depth
from which can be viewed
the separate, fractured worlds
of comrades dying
(as from a galactic distance.)
Strange, how close is a dead buddy;
how far is recalling his laughter.

It is a world
of unaccountable and indefinite season
where time is measured
by the Xing of the days
like the labored wall-scratchings
of condemned men.
It is a stereophonic world
of unspecified dimension
bordered on all sides by fear
and weathered by the tiny cloud puffs
of hope and prayer and dream
and a letter from home
which does not speak
of bills
or broken bones
or the unspeakable Death
of faithfulness. [lines 57-85]

This "flat" world is one in which all 'peaks' and 'values' of

normal life have been levelled to the terrible sameness of a one dimensional ethos of "mean survival" and "the killing of [the] enemy." The 'privacy' of this unnatural place is the painful and sometimes shocking result of the discovery that survival and killing demand that "a man must turn/from the teachings of other men/and come face to face with himself; mano a mano," and that he is alone. This depthless 'privacy' creates a disturbing "height," a psychic distance from which the GI can see, with the clarity and detachment of looking through a telescope, "the separate, fractured worlds of comrades dying/(as from a galactic distance.)"

The "unaccountable" otherness of Vietnam's climate with its "indefinite season" of unrelieved sameness flattens time to "the Xing of the days/like the labored wall-scratchings/of condemned men." The simile comparing the "Xing" of the passage of days on Short-Timer calendars with the "wall-scratchings of condemned men" suggests that GIs, like "condemned" inmates, are on death row awaiting execution, that the best they can hope for is a stay of execution. "Unaccountable," "indefinite," and "unspecified" all convey the endless, unalleviated uncertainty of this limbo-like world of confinement.

Perhaps the most interesting choice of adjective used to describe the combatants' world is "stereophonic" which adds extra weight to the surrealistic nature of the war world. The illusion of the presence of a natural distribution of sound sources completes the pair of senses most important for the fighting man; but like sight, which plays "galactic" tricks on the beholder, hearing cannot be depended upon for reliable information. The 'borders' of one's senses and the borders of this "unspecified dimension" are no surer, no more ascertainable than a date of the war's inception, or the safety

of the land on which one stood in Vietnam. "All sides" are "stereophonic" sources of fear and all "are weathered by tiny cloud puffs/of hope and prayer and dream/and a letter from home" bearing anything but bad news from "The World."

Equally surrealistic was the fact that:

The combat veteran of Vietnam
lived in a world
where medals occasionally pinned themselves
on donkeys
and the green disappeared from the trees -
attacked by the one word in his language
which refused to rhyme;
Orange. [lines 123-130]

The notion of medals pinning themselves on donkeys (an absurdly parodied perversion of the game "Pin the Tail on the Donkey" in which a blindfolded and dizzied child attempts to tack a tail onto an outlined form of a donkey) fits the process known among bomber pilots as 'ticket punching' for dubious promotions, and the awarding of spurious combat medals to officers who never saw combat. Green disappearing from the trees is a reference to the widely used defoliant, Agent Orange, which serves as a poetic anomaly - trees being "attacked by the one word in his language/which refused to rhyme." The poetic anomaly became a genetic anomaly when babies of fathers exposed to Agent Orange were born with birth defects:

Years later,
it would bleach the rainbows
from his children's eyes
and then, nothing rhymed.
(not even God)
and least of all, DOW. [lines 131-136]

Called Agent Orange because containers for chemicals used in Vietnam were color-coded for easy identification, this herbicide was manufactured mainly by Dow Chemical Company. During the seven years between 1962 and 1969, 6,250 square miles of South Vietnam (an area comparable to the combined

size of Connecticut and Rhode Island) was treated in an attempt, in General Westmoreland's words, to:

deny the enemy hiding places, particularly ambush sites along roads and waterways. Early in the war defoliants were also used to deny the enemy rice in remote areas that were VC-controlled, although as government control spread and areas of VC influence were less clearly delineated, the practice was less often employed... The defoliants were a major factor in reducing the number of ambushes that were long so costly in American and South Vietnamese lives, and in clearing fields of fire around defensive positions. [A Soldier Reports, 368]

Though the General does not identify these chemicals by name, Agent Orange was the most commonly applied defoliant, but Agent White and Agent Purple were also used. Agent Blue, used to 'deny rice to the enemy' (and anyone else who depended on any crops) was an arsenic-based substance. Agent Orange, the most controversial spray, was a combination of herbicidal 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D.

The controversy arose in 1969 when Bionetics Research Laboratories of Bethesda, Maryland announced the result of a three year study of 2,4,5-T, research contracted for the National Cancer Institute. Bionetics discovered that 2,4,5-T was a teratogenic which caused severe birth defects in test animals. Dow Chemical countered by stating that the samples Bionetics tested were tainted by a manufacturing by-product 2,3,7,8 - tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD). In further analysis of samples taken from the Agent Orange left over when the Department of Defense banned its use in Vietnam on April 15, 1970, it was discovered that quantities of dioxin ranged from under

0.5 parts per million to 47 parts per million found in only one sample. The average concentration found in the 200 samples was 1.9 ppm. (One ppm is the equivalent of one inch in 16 miles, one ounce in 82,500 pounds.) [New Hampshire Times, Sept. 10, 1980: 12]

The use of 44,000 tons of Agent Orange in Vietnam contained one hundred pounds of dioxin if figured at 2 ppm.

Air Force pilots, whose job it was to spray tracts of jungle with this substance, coined the cleverly sardonic phrase, "Only you can prevent forests," parodying Smokey the Bear's motto, "Remember, only you can prevent forest fires." Indeed, the moonscapes they created were testimony to the motto's accuracy despite General Westmoreland's disclaimer that:

Some ecological damage may have resulted from the defoliants; how much and how permanent remains to be seen. Flying over much of the country as recently as 1972, I found Vietnam still a verdant land, which left me to question the truth of some of the more pessimistic allegations of permanent damage. [A Soldier Reports, 368]

One wonders whether the General understood or cared that "some of the more pessimistic allegations of permanent damage" included birth defects, miscarriages, cancer and chlorace, among other equally hideous maladies.

As States-side veterans, these former combat troopers learned that their interior 'worlds' differed little from those they discovered and explored in Vietnam:

The combat trooper searched to destroy.
In the end,
as a veteran,
he searched only to understand.
In Vietnam he looked for a reason.
And found none.
At home he looked for approval
and found none.
From the million, separate ledges
of his lonely worlds,
he jumped.
One
at
a
time
like lemmings into the sea. [lines 137-152]

Lemmings, known for their mass migrations when population

increases, are heedless of the potential dangers of their movement. By comparing veterans with these rodent-like creatures, Mason implies that these men are driven by an inner, instinctive, self-immolative urge. "The million, separate ledges/of his lonely worlds" form a long series of steps descending "into the sea" of depression, a continuing sense of alienation, and substance abuse. The slow deliberation of their suicidal leaps from one ledge to the next is reinforced by the use of one word per line - "One/at/a/time " - thus reflecting their descent.

As we discover in stanza thirteen, the veterans' lemming-like leaps are plunges deeper into the interior of a waking nightmare of a limbo-like world:

Today,
many Vietnam veterans
still hang
suspended
under
the floating shelves of their former worlds -
each by a single strand of sanity
more narrow than a window-washer's rope,
oscillating slowly into middle-age
as from a madman's drool.
His family watches
from a window
ten stories
higher than the moon
unable to reach him
unable to understand him
unable to be unable
anymore. [lines 153-170]

Those "separate ledges" provided a modicum of safe footing for veterans treading a very narrow path between solidity and nothingness, stability and instability, life and death, sanity and insanity, with each functioning as a world unto itself. But the ledges lose their moorings and become unanchored, "floating shelves" under which veterans hang "by a single strand of sanity" thinner than even "a window-washer's rope" or a "madman's drool." Helplessly frustrated families, themselves in yet a different world behind a closed window "ten

stories/higher than the moon," look on "unable to be unable/
anymore," as their incomprehensible, unreachable veterans"
[oscillate] slowly into middle-age." Like puppets with no
one controlling the strings, the veterans drift and float
through their "former worlds," - the haunting recollections of
Vietnam and the dream world,

yuk-yuk,
backslapping, Brylcreem days
of the gridiron club meetings
(What world was that?) [lines 249-252]

Even the veterans who somehow managed to avoid the
ledge-leaping descent found themselves confronting different,
smaller enclosures with all the properties of a prison:
closets and tenements.

For those who make it
to the top of the world
only to enter the closet,
fear is the fifth wall
in an ever-closing room.
Death by emotional starvation awaits.
So much for cover.

From the mangrove swamps
to the suburban closets,
the Vietnam vet survives
in the emotional tenements of his world. (lines 194-204)

Closets with an encroaching "fifth wall" of fear become
"ever-closing rooms" shutting veterans off from other people,
starving them emotionally by keeping them in spiritual
solitary confinement. Whether in the "suburban closets" of
their post-Vietnam world, the "upstairs" pre-Vietnam world of
the 'stamp club nerds' meeting in a room with a closed transom,
or "emotional tenements," veterans feel smothered and
claustrophobic as they dangle from the threads of worlds to
which they do not belong.

The "ever-closing room" may be construed as the result of
the reduction Simpson speaks of in "Moving the Walls." Man

robbed the sea of its mystery by reducing "oceanography" to a mere "pawnshop" of whale tooth "doorstops" and sharks turned to "walking sticks," "And this we call the life of reason." Modern Americans are "idiots" who "yielded themselves/to the currents that moved from within," ¹² and are "all for reducing/ The universe to human dimensions" by dispelling mystery and "branching among the stars." ¹³ But moving the walls of their domain ever outward paradoxically diminishes them because they are moving further and further from themselves, and it is themselves they seek. Americans in Vietnam were like Jason and the Argonauts who believed they "wanted the golden fleece" when "it was not the wool they wanted" but themselves. "They were the trophies that they sailed toward," just as Melville tried to find 'prime' in "the buried continent." Because of their over-inflated sense of power and purpose, they became their own nemesis discovering "a bulb of nothing" ¹⁴ as the "fifth wall" of their expanding frontier implodes toward the obscure, unknown interior of the self, the "closets," "tenements," "ghettoes" and "prisons." No amount of combat training and survival techniques are adequate protection against "fear": "So much for cover."

But even in the new interior frontier of the self, the combat veteran still needs and "trusts to his proven techniques/of cover and concealment to protect him." We have Mason's descriptions of both his own and his fellows' combat behavior in "The Wall Within" as he "breaks for cover" and "runs a zigzag course/across the open fields of America." We have his observations of others as they "hide among the trees" and are "always at the edges of the clearing" as they "patrol like perimeter guards," taking care not to expose themselves "like Hamlet on the battlements." In "The Casualty" he devotes a total of forty-eight lines to veterans'

survival techniques. Beginning with lines one hundred eighty-four through one hundred ninety-three, Mason depicts the instinctive nature of such skills by using the example of rope climbing toward the "safety of main street" and remarks that the combat veteran

does so with no thought
to the good life;
rather as a final
instinctive pull and lunge
for survival. [lines 189-193]

Again, in lines two hundred one through two hundred thirty-eight he stresses the importance of relying on one's military training, but this time he qualifies his statements by warning that there are times and situations when it is easier and more beneficial to abandon certain aspects of it, like the use of camouflage clothing in particular.

From the mangrove swamps
to the suburban closets,
the Vietnam vet survives
in the emotional tenements of his world.
But the city cousin
who wears his bush hat
to camouflage the truth
of who and what he is
(better even than in the jungle)
survives barely at all -
and brings unwanted attention
(of the wrong kind)
to the rest of us.
For in the swamps,
our camouflage offered protective coloration;
we blended with it all (in a quiet oneness).
But in the asphalt jungle
our camouflage stands out
as WARNING coloration.
Instinctively, the frightened vet
seeks to protect himself
by raising "Jolly-Roger"
and chasing the citizens away.

In nature, a species warning others
of his danger
is favorably rewarded.
In civilization (within the same group)
the warning
is a hostile statement
generating fear, anger, avoidance
and ultimately, retaliation.

Jungle fatigues are not varsity sweaters.
And if pride and group-recognition
should be our motive,
then understatement should be our wardrobe.
If the wimps of the world
wear alligators on their shirts
can't we wear jungle boots on ours? [lines 201-238]

The city-dwelling veteran does not fare as well as his former comrades now in "suburban closets" and "emotional tenements" of solitude. Perhaps he thinks his "bush hat" would not be spotted in the motley array of city costumes, or that nobody would necessarily assume he was a Vietnam veteran on the basis of his hat. But he makes an error in judgment by "bringing unwanted attention" to himself and particularly to other veterans of Vietnam. Camouflage clothing was successful in Vietnam's jungles, but the mottled greens and browns "stand out/as WARNING coloration" in "the asphalt jungles" of American cities.

Distinctive colors in nature serve the dual purpose of protecting a creature from attack while alerting other creatures to the presence of danger. Mason points out that "the frightened vet," who inadvertently or purposefully calls attention to himself, "instinctively...seeks to protect himself by raising "Jolly-Roger/and chasing the citizens away." He admonishes further that "the warning is a hostile statement/generating fear, anger avoidance/and ultimately retaliation" from non-veterans. To many Americans who preferred to remain amnesic about the war, the sight of combat clothes was an unwanted, even provocative reminder of America's presence in Vietnam. If veterans flaunt their bush hats, fatigues or boots in public in a demonstration of pride, defiance or allegiance to their fellow veterans, they might do well to reconsider their actions. "Jungle fatigues are not varsity sweaters," Mason cautions, believing that "understatement" rather than display is the best method of

impressing upon Americans their need for "group recognition" as veterans of previous wars were accorded.

Of course Mason is addressing a much broader issue than veterans wearing remnants of their combat clothing. He concerns himself with the uniqueness of Vietnam veterans, their individual wars, the nation's war and Americans' response to this uniqueness. Jungle boots and bush hats, metaphorical or literal 'trust' in survival techniques, point to the uniqueness of these men and their country's distrust or rejection of them. Mason advocates a kind of 'truce' between Vietnam veterans and their countrymen:

If the wimps of the world
wear alligators on their shirts
can't we wear jungle boots on ours? [lines 236-238]

These men are neither remnants of the war nor a national black eye. Mason stresses that they must lay claim to the same respect and social recognition enjoyed by veterans of other wars.

Concomitant with veterans' sense of confinement and the reliance on survival skills is the desire for ascension from the depths of their interior landscapes and ghetto-like prisons. Mason, like Weigl, repeatedly uses images of ascent or elevation representing the need to lift one's self out of and rise above the war-created psychological morass to regain footing in the 'upper world' of daily living. Vestiges of this imagery appear briefly in "The Wall Within." The first instance involves Mason looking up at the moon and the "night sky...wondering how much better the world/might look from up there." ¹⁵ In the second example Mason describes himself being "atop" his own "wall within" as his "sorrow and rage/hurl bottles and invectives at the rolled-up windows/of [his] passing youth." A few lines later veterans, "like ugly Humpty

Dumpties," "sit there legless" on their internal walls and "lean over the ledge to write" the names of "the other casualties/of the Vietnam War." In "DEROS: My Soul" he races up the "stairs two at a time/and wait[s] in the second-floor window/of [his] days" to get a glimpse of the soul of himself as a younger man.

"The Casualty" provides an abundance of images pertaining to elevation, ascension and suspension. The combat soldier quickly learns that "the highest peak" of his world is actually the flatness of "mean survival." Undoubtedly Mason very deliberately selected the adjective "mean." It conveys, on multiple levels, the nature of this kind of survival - it is low in quality (and some would say low in social status), it lacks elevating human qualities and is cruel and malicious. Informally, as GIs tend to use language, "mean" conveys the sense of something (or someone) that is hard to deal with and difficult to defeat. The noun form of "mean" is also implied here, for certainly the GI balances between the two extremes of life and death. As long as he maintains his position atop this peak of "height without depth" he survives, but watches, "as if from a galactic distance," the deaths of comrades. As a veteran, however, this "peak" becomes a guilty reminder that he has survived when so many others have died, a "ledge" of painful memory and experience from which he makes a suicide-like leap. After his jump, the "ledge" on which he stood is above him suggesting that the 'world' he survived, the "ledge' he leaped from, is spatially and spiritually dominant over him. Though it 'floats,' he 'hangs.' With no footing beneath him, no elevating qualities, and no Weiglian "strength or will" to lift him, he dangles as from a noose that is both "a single strand of sanity" and an aging lunatic's stringing drool." He is also like D. F. Brown's

persona in "First Person - 1981" who

remember[s] how it ended, how the end
is still caught in so many.

I get through these days
the lowest part of the jungle
a pale green snarl
roots and vines
searching for sunlight
through
this tangle. [Carrying the Darkness, 58]

He is not the only one who is helpless however. While he "swings between murder and suicide," "a pendulum's arc" he scores in the air, "His family watches/from a window/ten stories/higher than the moon/unable to reach him." Viewed from the bottom of his depressed state, this hyperbole is not altogether unwarranted. The family does not simply tower above him, they too are 'galactically' remote, their distance quantifying the depth of his depression, the lowness of his self-esteem and the physical and spiritual 'suspension' he experiences.

Hanging precariously, swinging insanely like a pendulum beneath this 'floating ledge,' separated by an enormous gulf of space from family and all that is homely, the veteran is faced with the choice of suicide or self-rescue. Survivor that he has always been, he opts once again to trust "to his proven techniques" and emulates the spider climbing "her single thread." "The rope-climbing Nam vet" does not always succeed in shinnying "to the top of the world," as we have seen, but Mason urges, cheers, wheedles and demands that veterans try to elevate themselves from their sunken state, no matter how insurmountable and laborious the climb seems. He is sure that all of them are equal to the climb, yet the question is "how to get us back up?"

So many of us
at

the
end
of
our
ropes... [lines 242-248]

The format of one word per line stresses the direness of their situation because there are too many men swinging down there and the ropes are too thin to bear their weight. Mason reveals a very plausible answer to the question of how these veterans may be rescued near the end of the poem:

You know,
I'll bet if the families of our brothers
killed-in-action
could sign a petition
charging each combat veteran of Vietnam
to live his life
as if he were living for two,
half of us would be on top of the world
by tomorrow afternoon! [lines 338-346]

By calling upon the love, devotion and compassion these former combat soldiers felt for each other in Vietnam, he challenges them to fight their way upward onto secure, safe footing just as if they were back in Vietnam. Because "When we had no other reason to fight...we fought for each other," despite the war's meaninglessness and the absence of family, country, duty, honor and glory, and the betrayal of their dreams. If each veteran is given the responsibility of living "his life/as if he were living for" himself and a dead buddy, he would have a reason to live, just as he had reason to fight when nothing except the lives of his comrades mattered in Vietnam.

Because we were together, we were strong.
And can be again!

We pulled ourselves out of the jungle mud
one buddy at a time.
And we can pull ourselves
out of this shit, too.
(if we pull for each other) [lines 331-337]

Gathering strength and courage from each other, they saved themselves "one buddy at a time" by pulling one another "out of the jungle mud," a job that in retrospect was far more difficult than inching their way up and out of "this shit." The key is living and pulling for each other, something they did in Vietnam without thinking about it. Now, they must consciously make the effort and act to help each other because

Today, in America,
it's still a good reason to keep fighting.
Where once we saved each other
from death,
now we have the chance to save each other
for life! [lines 354-360]

But Mason's exhortations and pep talks are lost, by his own admission, on half of his fellow veterans, those who have jumped and dangle at the very ends of their ropes. Even so, he refuses to abandon them:

Hey! bro,
when we're over the top?
whadya say?
We fix the place up a little
for the kids, ya know?
Tell 'em a dream
they can make come true
An' then jez hunker down
to watch 'em grow. [lines 361-369]

Mason is acutely well-acquainted with the despondency and depression that looms like an enormous weight over many veterans keeping them beneath its mass, preventing them from climbing up the frayed strands suspending them inside their individual prisons of solitude, debilitation, despair and resignation.

Mason enlists the aid of able veterans to launch this massive rescue mission to drag, pull and winch as many veterans as possible out from under the 'floating shelves' of despondency and hopelessness, and bring them up and away from

the encroaching walls of fear. He exhorts them to stage raids on the "closets", "rooms", "tenements", "ghettoes" and "prisons" where still others are held captive by their private wars, and lift them, as if by medevac choppers, to the safety and strength their numbers can impart. There is simply no alternative because the wounded are not left on the battlefield, and there is no other way to conduct this rescue operation: veterans must help veterans. Once they are "all...back on top" among their own 'ranks' and families, then there will be "time enough to figure how to live."

Mason's compassionate recognition of veterans' demoralized, 'sunken' condition, and the factors contributing to it (such as a devalued sense of self-worth, crushed aspirations and dreams, joblessness, substance abuse, post traumatic stress disorders, recurrent medical problems, denial and disinheritance by their government, deprivation of approval and recognition, and family problems), in addition to his ardent desire to alleviate their suffering, occasions his imagery of descent and suspension, and the urgent need for elevation and ascent. He articulates their afflicted state in unmistakably poignant terms and offers a hand, many hands, to hoist them out of their depths.

Despite the help and encouragement he offers, he cannot and does not try to ease their sense of betrayal or attempt to mend their borken dreams or substitute what he calls in "DEROS: My Soul," "new and more believable myths." He states very simply and eloquently in "The Wall Within" a sentiment shared by a great many Vietnam veterans, "I have no more dreams to believe."

As metaphorical "Humpty Dumpties", Vietnam veterans did indeed suffer a 'great fall.' As school boys, the high point of life was Saturday afternoon football games where the only 'enemy' was the opposing team and the only hint of disaster

was the discreet arrival of an ambulance.

God we were set up!
Women, cheers, uniforms, decorations,
parades, proud parents AND
the National Anthem!
What a life! When we were seventeen. [lines 267-271]

Then, the "belief system" was intact and these boys easily and naturally were part of it, but

When we were eighteen
in Vietnam
only the ambulance showed up.
And when we got back home
Somebody'd moved the town... ¹⁶ [lines 272-276]

From the security of the football field to the uncertainty of the battlefield, to the precarious "edge/of his private first-class world where his least backward step..."plummet[ed] him into the cosmic promise/of his belief system," these young men moved along a descending course. This descent ultimately "shattered" not only "the greatest lie/of his life;/that he is not alone," but led him to the distressing realization that he had "loved/more dreams than people." He also realizes that "most people prove false" because "Truth...is an agreement" that "functions best between enemies" rather than between "friends and lovers," governments, their people and their soldiers, and that GIs, "as sons of poor men, must pay the price/for the believable myths of national furors and private enterprise."

The "agreement" of "Truth" to which these men expected their country and compatriots to reciprocally adhere was the very one which inspired in these fighting men the qualities of trustworthiness, dependability, fidelity, strength, and courage.

Veterans kept their side of the "agreement" but America reneged, and meanwhile "somebody'd moved the towns" in which these veterans were raised. This metaphorical betrayal prompts

Mason's outburst in lines two hundred ninety-seven through three hundred twenty-one.

Didn't lose any wars WE were in.
Didn't break any dreams WE believed.
Snap out of it, bro! Hear me!
We didn't lose anybody's fuckin' war.
We kicked ass!
We didn't break anybody's mutha fuckin' dream.
WE BOUGHT IT!!
Shit.
It was THEM.
THEY pulled out on US.
The moral equivalent of desertion
under fire.
The country didn't confuse the warrior
with the war.
They knew who we were.
It's themselves they loathe
and tried to avoid.
We merely remind them
of who they really are -
of their lack of courage:
moral and physical.
It takes strength to believe
and balls to put it on the line -
we had both.
They had neither. [lines 297-321]

GIs were true to themselves and to each other. They "didn't break anybody's mutha fuckin' dream" and "didn't lose any wars [they] were in." They held fast to the "agreement" - "WE BOUGHT IT!!" - believed without qualification, reservation, doubt, question or hesitancy. "It was THEM./THEY pulled out on US," an act which amounted to "The moral equivalent of desertion/under fire" on the part of the American people.

In his desperate appeal to veterans to take heart and believe in themselves, Mason underscores the fact that "These days,/like you, I am an expert in disbelief" and that a sense of betrayal is justified. America turned its back on these men because they represent moral and physical courage, strength of conviction and belief. Vietnam veterans also had the "balls to put it on the line," to risk their lives for their beliefs and convictions, a characteristic quality "THEY," non-veterans, lack. By loathing veterans, Americans divulge their desire to

run from the recognition of their own deficiencies of courage, strength and conviction. '7

Spurred by the continued sense of betrayal, Mason urges that "the True inner-history" of Vietnam be recorded in veterans' terms, not those of

the thin bloodless men
who are the educated sons
of ribbon clerks, [lines 36-38]

the historians and academicians attending "a week-long joint convention of two national historical societies" in Los Angeles.¹⁸ Mason wrote "A History Lesson" as a response to "their treatment of the Vietnam War," treatment which he deems to be without "any hint of human direction," morality or understanding, and without an "explanation of any part of the real war;/the inner war."

In this poem Mason cautions historians, writers and academicians against chronicling the Vietnam War by the conventional methods and categories of "economics/militarism or religious crusade," or by lists of "dates and times/and petty accuracies of who-hit-Johns" because "fact is only a portion of any truth." Moreover:

...not all the red and blue arrows
sweeping from all the pages
of the Vietnam history books
will give any hint of human direction
beyond the deployment
of allied and enemy troops. [lines 56-61]

Mason takes issue with this kind of scholarly 'treatment' of the war because its cold, clinical detachment misses the essence of the war, the "inner war" that veterans fight continually.

Historians and scholars mistakenly believe that:

...it is too soon
for a history of what I call

the "outer war"
perhaps it is too soon also
for the "inner war"
but I doubt it - [lines 18-23]

According to these authorities, time must intervene to render clear-eyed perspective before an adequate history may be written. ("Color is to the eye/what perspective is to the mind;/it lends balance.") But though the war has 'ended,' at least for the scholars who await the clarity of elapsed time, the war is not over for Mason and many other veterans:

...the war is over for me
just like it's over for you.
Over.
And
over
again... [lines 7-12]

No "outer history" can bring this war to an end for these veterans. Even if historians were aware of the ongoing, "inner war," they would be incapable of documenting or stopping it because "no resolution of this war" is possible

beyond each man's obligation
to his world and his conscience
to record the True inner-history
of his Vietnam experience. [lines 14-17]

Recording the "True inner-history" involves more than scholars are willing or able to recognize because

...ours is not a justifiable history
to be recorded in reasonable terms - [lines 24-24]

...
No. Our war is a moral one.
One to be agonized, not written.
One which must be shared,
not taught.
Ours, too honest a lesson
to be memorized;
ours must be Understood. [lines 29-35]

The Vietnam War must be "shared," "agonized" and above all else, "Understood" as no other American war, and the burden of accomplishing all this rests on the shoulders of veterans, not

on historians.

'Understanding' this war does not involve historians
"view[ing] life through a narrow window/(screening out lux et
veritas)" of their ivory towers and

spin[ning] the broken-glass facts
of Vietnam into a golden yarn
to be woven, years later,
into the rich, cultural tapestry
of world history. [lines 39-43]

Historical documentation of this sort sanitizes, diminishes
and transforms the jagged and ugly "broken-glass facts" of
America's longest war. Rather than a long, complicated story
that might be embellished by historians, Mason would replace
the "golden yarn" with a more accurate and realistic work of
"pointilism," a collage of fragmented images, chips, shards
and slivers of experience, "actions and passions" of men whose
lives "since Vietnam" have been held together by "gravity,
centrifugal force/and guilt," ¹⁹ all of which refuse to be
'woven' into a large tapestry-like pattern.

Twenty years after Vietnam Mason observes that veterans
are collectively recording their "inner wars" by

...arranging
an almost instinctive,
undeniable pattern
of Vietnam veterans
An enormous, living,
connect-the-dots puzzle
that will spell out
the ultimate truth of Vietnam
(from the sequential understanding
of our combined inner wars.) (lines 98-107)

It is interesting that Mason uses the image of a child's
"connect-the-dots puzzle" to describe the manner in which
veterans formulate the pattern of their statement regarding
their "combined inner wars." Dots scattered over a page must
be connected by crayon or pencil lines to reveal a picture

once all the dots are linked. Without connecting the dots, one cannot determine what the picture will be. The simplicity of this image contrasts sharply with that of a "golden yarn" in the "rich, cultural tapestry of world history." Vietnam veterans, themselves the individual "dots" of the puzzle that stumps historians, arrange a nation-wide, "instinctive," "undeniable," "enormous," "living" pattern that is dynamically and organically cohesive, unlike the seemingly predetermined patterns in the static, woven threads in history's tapestry.

The pattern veterans

... seem
clearly to be outlining [is]
an unmistakably Reasonable statement
large enough for all the world to see
in its completed form:
NO MORE WAR. (lines 120-125)

The simple clarity of their pattern of statement could not have been made with unconnected, individual dot-like utterances, nor could it have been made without "the feeling of belonging, of how to 'keep it'," that O'Meara ponders after visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C. ²⁰ Each veteran had tried to make a statement but alone he was "lost," "unimportant," seemingly "without validity" because his

... separate inner truth
did not translate into English
(or Vietnamese)
its language voiced itself
in isolated rage;
often incomprehensible
(even to ourselves)
and always inappropriate. [lines 112-119]

As demonstrated in "The Casualty," their individual statements took the inappropriate form of attire, where in "A History Lesson," it takes the shape of the "incomprehensible" "language" of "isolated rage" that completely defeated their attempts "to

record the True inner-history/of [their] Vietnam experience."

There is nothing startlingly unexpected in the pattern of their statement of Vietnam's "ultimate truth" which they collectively formed by their "sequential understanding of [their] combined wars." Yet Mason seriously doubts whether historians and pundits will be able to recognize and "take inside" an organic, living dot-to-dot design whose elemental simplicity may well appear as "imponderable," "intricate and inexplicable/as winter snowflakes must be to migrating ducks." Like ducks obeying the dictates of instinct, historians abide by the prevailing patterns and concepts established in history. In Mason's estimation:

Certainly, the only valid text
that will ever be written
about the Vietnam War
has already been written:
The Book of Names. [lines 79-83]

Any other attempt to write about the war would "be of little meaning/and less consequence." Rather than producing 'fibers' for the "golden yarn" of the Vietnam War, one would do better to "pick one name" from "The Book of Names" "and read aloud/from his last love letter" for an assessment of the war that is more "valid" than colored arrows drawn on troop deployment maps devised by the "sons of ribbon clerks."

Certainly Mason believes that historians have little chance of writing successfully about the war and the reason is obvious:

...they do not FEEL IT
(And are loath in their accounts
to moralize it).
They TEACH the history
that men such as you have LIVED
and that fallen comrades
have DIED... [lines 69-76]

The "thin, bloodless men" who write history cannot possibly

"FEEL" the war as veterans have felt and continue to "FEEL IT," because they possess no "inner history." But does this necessarily and finally preclude them, or anyone else for that matter, from writing about the war? According to Mason, it does not, provided that one 'take the war inside,' that is, make it part of oneself and grasp the significance of its sharp edges of destruction and the rough contours of loss. By doing so one may understand the war's agony and 'moralize' it by speaking out against war

...today
(and every day)
for truth and humanity
(while there is still time), [lines 152-155]

and vow never to "write bloodlessly/of spilled blood."

It took Ulysses twenty years
to return from the wars
and put his house in order.
It's taken twenty years
to get from the Gulf of Tonkin Incident ²¹
to here and now.
And it's taken twenty years
for this country to raise its children
to be the average age
of the college students to whom
the subject of Vietnam is addressed
and to whom the next war
seems ready to be served. [lines 136-148]

Like Ulysses returning from the Trojan War, it took Vietnam veterans twenty years from the first, major event of the Vietnam War to "here and now," twenty years later, to "understand [their] responsibility" to the "kind of citizenship" that required they band together to voice the "history lesson" they learned without benefit of academicians, and to 'teach' that lesson to college students "to whom the next war/seems ready to be served." Like Ulysses, veterans of Vietnam "didn't feel at home right away." But this was because they returned from Vietnam "as human beings," and 'returned' once again when the nation formally said 'welcome

home' with the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. If "Whatever satisfies the soul is truth," as Whitman said, then by "[adding] their truth to the sum of all truth," Vietnam veterans are satisfying their souls by vowing "never again," by teaching the nation the history lesson of "NO MORE WAR," and by leaving a "legacy" of peace "worthy of [their] sacrifice and a monument fit to mark the end of [their] war..."

Conclusion

Johnny's Song is a post war Whitmanesque "Song of Ourselves," and for the veterans of the Vietnam War, it is proof of Simpson's statements that "The Open Road goes to the used-car lot," and that "...The land is within./At the end of the open road we come to ourselves." For the veterans for whom Mason wrote his poems, "the land within" consists of tenements, ghettos, prisons and closets, with the largest landmark being "the wall within," that edifice erected within the interior of the Vietnam veteran. Mason seeks to 'free' his fellow veterans from their confines, to bring them back "on top" so that they may be healed psychically and emotionally in order to regain and reclaim their rightful places in American society.

As the fourth and final poet in this study, Mason provides an important 'public' voice speaking on behalf of his comrades. Like Whitman, Mason is a scribe for the voices he hears around him. Vowing to write Johnny's Song while listening to the collective voice of fellow veterans, he sets about his task by alternating between bouts of cajolery, humor, empathy, anger and reminiscence in exhortation of those Vietnam veterans who have yet to lift themselves out of their interior 'prisons' created by the war.

Mason believes that the individual strands of each person's

war must be woven together to form the only genuine tapestry-like history of the Vietnam War so that it may be 'taken inside' and "understood." However, the exact nature of this 'understanding' and how it is to be achieved is unclear. This is one of the flaws of this volume of poetry, along with the inordinate length of the poems leading them into the nether regions of unfocused bombast. Another shortcoming is the fact that Mason's notion of 'truth' is hazy. He speaks of the "true cost of war" and a 'true history of the war' in a manner which more than suggests that veterans themselves are the only people capable or qualified to address the issues. This is not only presumptuous but arrogant - a pitfall to which all too many veterans fall victim. Their thinking seems to be that if one did not fight in Vietnam, one has no grounds, evidence, or right to voice an opinion or make a judgement or an analysis. Mason spurns historians' attempts to write about the war because they did not experience, "FEEL," "LIVE" or "DIE" the war. This line of reasoning is tantamount to believing that it is impossible to analyze the plays of Shakespeare if one did not live in Elizabethan England. More to the point, it is an example of a rhetorical form which Roland Barthes terms "the statement of fact," which is a "counter-explanation, the decorous equivalent of a tautology." ²²

This is not to say that the volume is devoid of strength because powerful, articulate passages abound. Listening to the Bantam recording of Mason reading from Johnny's Song is well worth the time it takes to follow along with the poems on one's lap. He has a rich reading voice, and unlike so many poets who are bad readers of their own material, he reads exceptionally well. This listening pleasure is verification of the song aspect of the poems - they are meant for listening, not for reading. Perhaps it 'listens well' because Mason himself has indeed

listened well to the "collective voice of conscience" of Vietnam veterans to which he refers in the introduction to the taped reading.

There is also the 'public' aspect of these poems - the fact that they were written for the purpose of dedicating a monument or being read aloud at a memorial service of one sort or another. The ear does not filter, sort or analyze like the eye. The ear enjoys the story telling, anecdotal departures, and nostalgic "mind slips and memory plays" which Herr mentions. Because of this, the ear is more patient, more appreciative of the song and does not criticize in the same 'mode' as the eye. The ear is also more tolerant of organizational flaws and unfocused maunderings. It would, however, seem that Mason relied more heavily on the ear than on the eye when it came to preparing his poems for publication.

Read aloud, Mason's poems are potent. They serve the purpose of encouraging and praising, if not 'inspiring' Vietnam veterans in much the same manner that Paquet, the medic, attempts to breathe new life into the casualties he treats. Mason hopes and believes it is possible to restore dispirited, alienated husks of former soldiers to spiritual, mental and emotional wholeness. His healing, restorative agent is his 'song' gleaned from fellow veterans.

Chapter Five: Notes

- ¹ When Mason says "my war" is he referring to more than his participation in the war as a combatant. Broadly speaking, he's addressing the fact that each veteran did indeed fight a 'different war' contingent on a number of factors such as whether he enlisted or was drafted, the branch of the armed services with which he served, the M.O.S. (Military Occupational Specialty) he held, the geographical area(s) where he served in Vietnam, and the phase of the war.
- ² Walt Whitman, "Preface to the 1855 Edition" of Leaves of Grass, lines 566-568. eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. Norton Critical ed. (W.W. Norton, 1973).
- ³ Galway Kinnell, "Whitman's Indicative Words," Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song eds. Jim Perlman, Ed Folson, and Dan Campion (Minneapolis: Holy Cow! P, 1981)
- ⁴ Jim O'Meara explains how important a proper welcome home was to him and other Vietnam veterans:
- That's all, just "welcome home," but my God, what those words meant...I was hard hit. I didn't realize how much I wanted to hear those words. I was stunned, like being splashed suddenly with cold water...I didn't know anybody was thinking like that, or that anybody knew we'd never really come home.
"The Wall," Petroleum Independent Feb. (1983) 48.
- ⁵ Steve Mason, Johnny's Song (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) 108.
- ⁶ Mason, 120.
- ⁷ Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 108.
- ⁸ "Frag" is GI argot for killing an officer, often an inexperienced or overly enthusiastic second lieutenant, who issued foolishly dangerous orders to his men. "Frag" is an abbreviation of 'fragmentation grenade,' the explosive normally used in these executions.
- ⁹ For other veterans like Jim O'Meara, the journey to 'the wall' was made with a sense of reluctant necessity:
- At first, I was skeptical. For me, Vietnam was 13 years ago, buried somewhere back in my mind. I hadn't heard much about the memorial and I was leery of bringing up old feelings of waking up at night, sweating, with the smell of the dry, red central highlands dust mixed with hot canvas in my nostrils and the beat of helicopter blades in my ears, or dealing with the deep, bitter emotions, the feeling of betrayal at the reception I'd received when I got back.
"The Wall," Petroleum Independent Feb. (1983) 48.
- ¹⁰ Ronald Moran, Louis Simpson (New York: Twayne, 1972) 107.
- ¹¹ Steven Ford Brown's poem "After the Vietnam War," anthologized in Carrying the Darkness: American-Indochina - The Poetry of the Vietnam War (New York: Avon Books, 1986)

reveals another nightmare image, one of the Vietnamese dead rising:

sometimes
on windless nights
when the moon glows
like a tv set in a dark room
the vietnam dead rise

bodyless heads arms and legs
skitter down pock marked roads
like great hordes
of mutilated rats
in the villages
small dark women kneel
on the dirt floors
of huts

they cut their black hair
rub ashes on foreheads
their cries almost human

¹² "The currents within" are synonymous with Kaiko's "swirling vortex at the bottom of Americans hearts," a drive that urged Henderson the Rain King across Africa saying, "I want, I want," and drove Ahab across the Pacific.

¹³ Space explorations, John Kennedy's "New Frontier," did in effect "reduce the universe" by bringing the heavens within human reach. Though remarking about Melville, Charles Olson could have just as easily been addressing space exploration when he said of Americans, "the will to overwhelm nature ... lies at the bottom of us as individuals and a people." Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 15.

¹⁴ The entire quote reads as follows:

Melville became unsure of the center. It had been strong, a backward and downward in him like Ahab's, like a pyramid's: 'The old mummy lies buried on cloth, it takes time to unwrap this Egyptian king!' With the coming of despair he called it a bulb of nothing. In the middle of the writing of Moby Dick he wrote to Hawthorne:

"But I feel that I am now come to the inmost leaf of the bulb; and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould."

Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 95.

¹⁵ This imaginative longing to be 'above it all' resembles Weigl's persona longing to be "brother" to the crows, to "Fly up to them to be black/And useful to the wind."

¹⁶ Christopher Howell's poem, "Liberty & Ten Years Return," anthologized in Carrying the Darkness: American Indochina - The Poetry of the Vietnam War (New York: Avon Books, 1986) echoes a similar sentiment in the third stanza:

None of us expected this
arrival, the band strewn dead
on an empty pier, the fleet crusted
and opening like a bowl of dazed peonies
to the chalk sky. Now
we see: ours is an absent life, no healing.
Sent over the great sea

a decade has returned us with no riches,
no message, and no home waiting
or wanting us here.

¹⁷ For reactions to Americans' attitudes toward veterans, the following poems are recommended and are anthologized in Carrying the Darkness: American-Indochina - The Poetry of the Vietnam War (New York: Avon Books, 1986) Gustav Hasford's "Bedtime Story," Steve Hassett's "And what would you do, ma," and Mark Osaki's "Amnesiac."

¹⁸ Mason, 45.

¹⁹ The combination of the opposing forces of "gravity" and "centrifugal force" act adversely upon veterans. The downward pull of the war's grave consequences have sent many veterans on the descending path to the interior wasteland-ghettoes of the self. And the outward-directed impetus to bring before the public eye the effects of the war sustained by these veterans is compounded by the emotionally crippling factor of guilt ("the sole survivor of war," line 210 of "The Wall Within") and has stymied veterans, forced them into the stasis of mute disparateness with no hope of bringing their "individual wars" to end without "recording the True inner-history/of [each man's] Vietnam experience."

²⁰ Jim O'Meara, "The Wall," Petroleum Independent, Feb. (1983) 49.

²¹ For a brief sketch of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, see Chapter 6, "February 7, 1965, and Escalation," of Malcolm W. Browne's The New Face of War (New York: Bantam, 1986).

²² Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984) 154-155.

Conclusion

Grouped together, the poems of Walter McDonald, Bruce Weigl, Basil T. Paquet and Steve Mason depict the spiraling course of an invisible 'road,' one along which the 'traveller'-veteran-poet journeys downward and inward to "the place where curses are manufactured." This 'road' begins in the skies over Vietnam with the poems of Walter McDonald's 'technocentric' persona, and ends with the returned veterans Mason finds in the "closets," "tenements," "ghettoes," and "prisons" of the veterans' interior selves. Louis Simpson would have us believe that such a journey was inevitable and Takeshi Kaiko would readily concur.

To give some sense of the nature of the journey the four poets of this study made, it was necessary, in Chapter One, to provide a scenario of the American character, which was best accomplished by examining Kaiko's observations in Into a Black Sun. The "swirling vortex" he notes at the bottom of the American heart, coupled with his observations of the national obsession with motion, led me to the examination of Whitman's anthropocentrism and his concepts of the "open road" and progress, and Westmoreland's technocentrism and his contrasting, yet Whitman-inspired conceptions of the "open road" and progress as applied to the war in Vietnam.

Neither Whitman's nor Westmoreland's 'vision' per se provides the four poets with a regenerative, balanced, realistic foundation for the

...immortalizing visions of enduring meaning and ethical substance - visions that all lasting civilizations must maintain and draw upon for their nurturing imagery of social integration, of a collective sense of honor and integrity, of general intactness and cohesion, relative harmony, ethical behavior of the government toward its own and other people and emanations of decency, hope and community. [Home from the War, 362-364]

Though Whitman must ultimately be rejected since it was, in a

sense, his vision of the "open road" that brought America to Vietnam, he comes closer to the mark than the General. Whitman celebrates mankind, life and a peaceable vision of human warmth and compassion, and man's capacity for self-making. This, along with the metaphor of the 'road,' offers the four poets a more agreeable 'blueprint' to follow than anything encompassed by Westmoreland's vision in which human beings are either destroyed by technology or are its 'numbed' operators, and progress takes the shape of technological advancements for the military. Westmoreland must be summarily rejected as a believer in what Lifton calls "salvation through technology." Obviously, such a vision is utterly useless for the poets.

The 'road' these veteran poets travel plunges them down through their individual 'vortices'. Unlike the still center of an ordinary vortex, the center of the "swirling vortex" within McDonald, Weigl, Paquet and Mason is a heaving maze of image-laden memories of incidents experienced in Vietnam. With each poem, these poets isolate an incident - 'freeing' it, as it were, from the deep confines of their respective vortices - to bring it to their Olsonian "upper earth." Once the incident is 'out in the open,' these men adeptly use it and its images for the stuff of their poetry.

In a sense, this 'road' inward is a form of progress achieved at tremendous emotional, psychical and spiritual expense, a form of progress which neither Whitman nor Westmoreland could have conceived. McDonald, Weigl, Paquet and Mason dig within themselves to 'open' their own 'roads' in order to 'find' their way toward a regenerated, normal postwar life. Their poems represent the truth and applicability of the Heraclitean notion that 'the way in is the way out,' that by delving into and exploring the uncharted regions of the self's interior with its vast repository of Vietnam

experiences it is possible to find one's way back 'on top' again.

By titling the chapters on the poets with salient fragments from their poems, I have tried to encapsulate the thrust of each chapter. In Chapter Two, "Air Power is Peace Power": Technology in the Poems of Walter McDonald, technology and technocentrism are in evidence as they breed the emotional, geographical, spatial and psychical detachment and distance that impairs the pilot-combatant's ability to relate the act with the idea of killing.

Chapter Three, "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down": Descent in the Poetry of Bruce Weigl, revolves around the poet's depiction of a persona 'unshielded' by the 'numbing' cocoon of technology which causes him to journey down through layers of the war and the self. No technological distance intervenes to 'protect' him from the ground war he fights. As a result, Weigl's is the voice of anthropocentrism that is unalterably and utterly aware of the connection between the act and idea of killing, brutalization and humiliation, and is a potent voice articulating the reductive power of the war to force one to enter "the place where curses are manufactured."

In Chapter Four, with the poems of Basil T. Paquet, the descent continues downward and inward to the bottom of "the place where curses are manufactured" to "the dark belly all wound," the final stop along the unmapped 'road' within the self. The 'journey' for the medic-persona is one of unremitting fatigue and exposure to death and dying. "The half-dead comatose," the never-ending arrival of dust-off helicopters bearing their nightmarish cargoes, and the steady supply of dead youths filling body bags mark the end of the road for the medic-persona as it ultimately came to signify for the nation.

Chapter Five, "The Wall Within": The Quest for Ascent and Return in Steve Mason's Johnny's Song, serves as a postwar, Whitmanesque "Song of Ourselves," albeit a 'song' written with a purpose and intention Whitman could have scarcely imagined. 'Imprisoned' and wandering from "tenement" to "tenement" within the "ghettoes" of the Simpsonian "land within," the Vietnam veterans for whom Mason composed Johnny's Song, are living proof of the truth of Louis Simpson's statement that "At the end of the open road we come to ourselves." By writing, Mason tried to 'free' his fellow veterans and bring them "back on top" so they may be healed psychically, emotionally and spiritually in order to regain their rightful places in American society.

Falling literally and metaphorically between the 'bookend' extremes of Whitman's anthropocentrism and Westmoreland's technocentrism, the poems treated in this account individually and collectively form a 'treatise' on the war. With each poem becoming its own 'chapter' on the nation's involvement in Vietnam, it might be said that as a group they tragically confirm Olson's statement that 'America completed her west on the coast of Asia,' that America's journey to Vietnam was achieved through the national mania for motion along Whitman's "open roads" around the globe and the accompanying, facilitating quest for continual technological advancements regardless of whether it was the prairie schooner, Ahab's whaling ship, Westmoreland's "White Whale," McDonald's jet or the 1st Air Cavalry.

For these four poets, members of a nation of people accustomed to moving across vast geographical distances with the aid of technology, the notion of making a descending 'journey' inward through the self, a trek necessarily made without benefit of any technological aid, is a daunting new

endeavor. As such, their respective 'journeys' represent not only their highly personal attempts to finally come home and understand their Vietnam experiences, but they are also indicative of the nation's attempt to come to terms with, understand and recover from the Vietnam War.

Appendix 1: Poems of Walter McDonald

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Caliban on Spinning (from Caliban in Blue and Other Poems)

Spinning an airplane right
is like a little death.
Raise the stick back tighter, tighter
to your groin, work the plane
rigid, nose high, your toes arching the rudders
ready to kick down into the spin. (5)

Throttled, the engine shudders
like a lover bound.
Airspeed will fall like a swing, thrilling,
coming back. (10)

When the frame comes alive beneath you,
hold rigid, ready -
the wings will buffet, beginning to go.
Thrust with your right leg faster,
ram home and hold the rudder there. (15)
Arch the curved stick hard as you must
to keep it on the stops.

The nose will drop off
like the earth falling beneath you into space. (20)
After the first quarter turn
the plane will shudder
desperately. You will wonder,
will it come apart? Do not let go.
Ride high with all your might upon the rudder
surging under you - (25)
you must master it to spin well.

Forcing control, follow the oscillations
down through the first swing,
the vast earth spinning before you
like a dream. (30)

If you entered well-timed at the top
with long enough to fall,
you can lead your plane
deeper and ease out, deeper and ease out
through several convulsions, each spin
richer than the last. (35)

Leveling out is easy in a stable plane
(you should know the plane is steady -
a few preliminary stalls would tell):
hold the rudder even, (40)
neutralize the stick.

The wings will shudder and right themselves,
the nose will start to come up.
Lead it with gentle pressure.

Ease in with throttle, faster as the nose comes high. (45)
Trim ailerons and rudder. Set throttle
for a gentle climb. Fine-trim everything again.

Check all gauges, notice the wings
smooth, spanning the horizon. (50)
Enjoy the feel of steady flight,
after the spin.

Jet Flight, the Early Years (from After the Noise of Saigon)

We'd ease down into cockpits
wired to explode, hook up
and pressure-test oxygen
of our other planet. From then on

talk was crisp as sparks, (5)
keyed by gloved thumbs and only
for survival: taxi and takeoff,
climb and maintain two-niner thousand.

Airborne, wheels up and locked, (10)
we swung our eyes like incense on a chain,
blessing our dials and tip tanks,
our wings, in skies that high, bright as armor.

Free of the thrum of propeller blades, (15)
jet loops were smooth implosions,
rolls were clean swirls of the earth
before your eyes. Hardly a flight

went by without hot spots (20)
in our crash helmets, hardly a week
without a jet exploding in midair,
each flight a mission, a quest

for distance, for smooth insertion through mach,
climbs into space delicate as frost
and record dives, wings melting in contrails,
altimeter spinning like a clock gone mad.

None of us could hear the roar we made (25)
sweeping down over canals and bridges,
approaching the airfield swift as night,
slicing the silent throttle back

and pitching steep above the runway, (30)
feeling the spirit of wheels
whir down and lock. And turning final,
falling, advancing the throttle

and only then hearing the chorus of rotors, (35)
flames that caught and sustained us
down to the runway, holding off,
at last cutting the power, the thunder of fire.

Caliban in Blue (from Caliban in Blue and Other Poems)

Off again,
thrusting up at scald
of copper in orient west
I climb into such blue skies.
Skies even here (5)
belong to Setobos:
calls it air power.
Air power is peace power,
his motto catechizes (10)
as we, diving, spout
flame from under,
off in one hell
of a roar.

His arms like radar
point the spot. (15)
For this, I trained to salivate
and tingle, target-diving,
hand enfolding hard throttle
in solitary masculine delight.

Focused on cross hairs, (20)
eyes glazing, hand triggers switches in
pulsing orgasm,
savage release;
pull out
and off we go again (25)
thrusting deep
into the martial lascivious blue
of uncle's sky.

The Food Pickers of Saigon (from After the Noise of Saigon)

- Rubbish like compost heaps burned every hour
of my days and nights at Tan Son Nhut.
Ragpickers scoured the edges of our junk,
risking the flames, bent over,
searching for food. A ton of tin cans (5)
- piled up each month, sharp edged, unlabeled.
Those tiny anonymous people could stick
their hands inside and claw out whatever
remained, scooping it into jars, into their
mouths. No one went hungry. At a distance, (10)
- the dump was like a coal mine fire burning
out of control, or Moses' holy bush
which was not consumed. Watching them labor
in the field north of my barracks, trying
to think of something good to write my wife, (15)
- I often thought of bears in Yellowstone
our first good summer in a tent. I wrote
about the bears, helping us both focus
on how they waddled to the road and begged,
and came some nights into the campground (20)
- so long ago and took all food they found.
We sat helplessly naive outside our tent
and watched them, and one night rolled
inside laughing when one great bear
turned and shoulder-swayed his way toward us. (25)
- Through the zipped mosquito netting
we watched him watching us. Slack-jawed,
he seemed to grin, to thank us for all
he was about to receive from our table.
We thought how lovely, how much fun (30)
- to be this close to danger. No campers
had died in that Disneyland national park
for years. Now, when my children
eat their meat and bread and leave
good broccoli or green beans (35)
- on their plates, I call them back
and growl, I can't help it. It's like hearing
my father's voice again. I never tell them
why they have to eat it. I never say
they're like two beautiful children (40)
- I found staring at me one night
through the screen on my window,
at Tan Son Nhut, bone-faced. Or that
when I crawled out of my stifling monsoon
dream to feed them, they were gone. (45)

On Planting My First Tree Since Vietnam
(from Caliban in Blue and Other Poems).

Winter tough grass, and dirt packed
runway hard. Nagging shovel
scraping memory down through crust.
A twig of roots, balled up in burlap
like a wound.

(5)

Diving,
I have dug craters
wider than sequoias -
squeeze of faith upon the button,
and wood splintering.

(10)

My steel inches through layers of such
scorched earth,
hoping my dog, an incessant digger,
will give this parched land time to say
trees
as well as grass.

(15)

For Kelly,
Missing in Action (from Caliban in Blue and Other Poems)

When you disappeared
over the North
I pulled down *Dubliners*.

What strange counterparts,
you and the Cong.
You, who said no one would make
General
reading Joyce,
named your F-4 "The Dead,"
and dropped out of the sun
like some death angel
playing mumbledy peg
with bombs.

(5)

(10)

I never knew what launched
the search for Araby in you,
that wholly secular search
for thrills.

(15)

I wonder how you felt
when they strapped on the bombs
that first flight North.
Did it seem at all like
bearing a chalice through a throng of
foes, or finally,
as you let them go
did you see yourself in the plexiglass
a creature masked
derided by vanity
dead as Dublin,
far from home?

(20)

(25)

For Harper,
Killed in Action (from Caliban in Blue and Other Poems)

When they brought you down
over the Plain of Jars
I thought of when you
volunteered for photo runs
from Udorn into Laos. (5)
Better to take pictures
than to bomb, you said.
I do not blame. My taxes
paid your fares.

I hope it was a lucky shot, (10)
sudden,
not some gunner blinded to your loss
cheering as your solid
flesh impacted
in the common ground. (15)

For Friends Missing in Action (from After the Noise of Saigon)

Into this tunnel of dirt
deposit quick thoughts
of a corpse
like savings. Pitiful beer
can't dig him up (5)
from seventy shovels of earth,
but toast him over and over.
Here lies a flier

missing since Saigon (10)
fell in the seventies,
sixes or sevens
if he cratered deep in a swamp,

brought down in flames
from twenty thousand feet
by a rocket, or languished, (15)
chained to a bamboo cesspool.

He's gone.
Lift up your savage mugs
and let the truth ring
like a gong: he's gone. (20)

After the Noise of Saigon (from After the Noise of Saigon)

If where we hunt defines us,
then stalking this steep hillside
dark with spruce makes sense,

more than the dreams I've floundered in
for years, trying to fathom signs
all night and wading ashore

(5)

disgusted. Switches dripping sap
keep flipping me when I glance
over my shoulder for spoor

I might have missed. Evergreen
needles sting when I swing my head
face-forward for clues. Isn't this

(10)

the strangest nightmare of all,
knowing my aim with a bow
is no better at twenty yards

(15)

than forty? But here I am, alone
with a cougar I've stalked for hours,
climbing until I'm dizzy.

These blue trees have nothing
and all to do with what I'm here for
after the noise of Saigon,

(20)

the simple bitter sap that rises in me
like bad blood I need to spill
out here alone in the silence

of deep woods, far from people I know
who see me as a friend, not some damned
madman stumbling for his life.

(25)

Appendix 2: Poems of Bruce Weigl

Appendix 2: Poems of Bruce Weigl

Amnesia (from The Monkey Wars)

If there was a world more disturbing than this
Where black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole
And overgrown tropical plants
Rotted, effervescent in the muggy twilight and monkeys
Screamed something (5)
That came to sound like words to each other
Across the triple-canopy jungle you shared,
You don't remember it.

You tell yourself no and cry a thousand days.
You imagine the crows calling autumn into place (10)
Are your brothers and you could
If only the strength and will were there
Fly up to them to be black
And useful to the wind.

Surrounding Blues on the Way Down (from The Monkey Wars)

I was barely in country.
We slipped under the rain black clouds
Opening around us like orchids.
He'd come to take me into the jungle
So I felt the loneliness (5)
Though I did not yet hate the beautiful war.
Eighteen years old and a man
Was telling me how to stay alive
In the tropics he said would rot me -

Brothers of the heart he said and smiled (10)
Until we came upon a mama san
Bent over from her stuffed sack of flowers.
We flew past her but he hit the brakes hard,
He spun the tires backwards in the mud.
He did not hate the war either, (15)
Other reasons made him cry out to her
So she stopped,
She smiled her beetle black teeth at us,
In the air she raised her arms.

I have no excuse for myself. (20)
I sat in that man's jeep in the rain
And watched him slam her to her knees,
The plastic butt of his M-16
Crashing down on her.
I was barely in country, the clouds (25)
Hung like huge flowers, black
Like her teeth.

The Last Lie (from The Monkey Wars)

Some guy in the miserable convoy
Raised up in the back of our open truck
And threw a can of c-rations at a child
Who called into the rumble for food.
He didn't toss the can, he wound up and hung it (5)
On the child's forehead and she was stunned
Backwards into the dust of our trucks.

Across the sudden angle of the road's curving
I could still see her when she rose
Waving one hand across her swollen, bleeding head, (10)
Wildly swinging her other hand
At the children who mobbed her,
Who tried to take her food.

I grit my teeth to myself to remember that girl (15)
Smiling as she fought off her brothers and sisters.
She laughed
As if she thought it were a joke
And the guy with me laughed
And fingered the edge of another can
Like it was the seam of a baseball (20)
Until his rage ripped
Again into the faces of children
Who called to us for food.

Temple near Quang Tri, Not on the Map (from The Monkey Wars)

Dusk, the ivy thick with sparrows
Squawking for more room
Is all we hear; we see
Birds move on the walls of the temple
Shaping their calligraphy of wings. (5)
Ivy is thick in the grottos,
On the moon-watching platform
And ivy keeps the door from fully closing.

The point man leads us and we are
Inside, lifting (10)

The white washbowl, the smaller bowl
For rice, the stone lanterns
And carved stone heads that open
Above the carved faces for incense.

But even the bamboo sleeping mat (15)
Rolled in the corner,
Even the place of prayer is clean.
And a small man

Sits legs askew in the shadow
The farthest wall casts (20)
Halfway across the room.

He is bent over, his head
Rests on the floor and he is speaking something
As though to us and not to us. (25)

The CO wants to ignore him;
He locks and loads and fires a clip into the walls
Which are not packed with rice this time
And tells us to move out.

But one of us moves towards the man,
Curious about what he is saying. (30)

We bend him to sit straight
And when he's nearly peaked
At the top of his slow uncurling
His face becomes visible, his eyes (35)
Roll down to the charge
Wired between his teeth and the floor.
The sparrows
Burst off the walls into the jungle.

Burning Shit at An Khe (from The Monkey Wars)

Into that pit
I had to climb down
With a rake and matches; eventually,
You had to do something
Because it just kept piling up (5)
And it wasn't our country, it wasn't
Our air thick with the sick smoke
So another soldier and I
Lifted the shelter off its blocks
To expose the home-made toilets: (10)
Fifty-five gallon drums cut in half
With crude wood seats that splintered.
We soaked the piles in fuel oil
And lit the stuff
And tried to keep the fire burning. (15)
To take my first turn
I paid some kid
A care package of booze from home.
I'd walked past the burning once
And gagged the whole heart of myself - (20)
It smelled like the world
Was on fire,
But when my turn came again
There was no one
So I stuffed cotton up my nose (25)
And marched up that hill. We poured
And poured until it burned and black
Smoke curdled
But the fire went out.
Heavy artillery (30)
Hammered the evening away in the distance,
Vietnamese laundry women watched
From a safe place, laughing.
I'd grunted out eight months (35)
Of jungle and thought I had a grip on things
But we flipped the coin and I lost
And climbed down into my fellow soldiers'
Shit and began to sink and didn't stop
Until I was deep to my knees. Liftships (40)
Cut the air above me, the hacking
Blast of their blades
Ripped dust in swirls so every time
I tried to light a match
It died (45)
And it all came down on me, the stink
And the heat and the worthlessness
Until I slipped and climbed
Out of that hole and ran
Past the olive drab (50)
Tents and trucks and clothes and everything
Green as far from the shit
As the fading light allowed.
Only now I can't fly.
I lay down in it (55)
And finger paint the words of who I am
Across my chest
Until I'm covered and there's only one smell,
One word.

"Monkey" from (Song of Napalm)

Out of the horror there rises a musical ache that is beautiful...

James Wright ✱

1

I am you are he she it is
we are you are they are.
I am you are he she it is
we are you are they are.
When they ask for your number (5)
pretend to be breathing.
Forget the stinking jungle,
force your fingers between the lines.
Learn to get out of the dew.
The snakes are thirsty. (10)
Bladders, water, boil it, drink it.
Get out of your clothes.
You can't move in your green clothes.
Your O. D. in color issues clothes.
Get out the plates and those who ate, (15)
those who spent the night.
Those small Vietnamese soldiers.
They love to hold your hand.
Back away from their dark cheeks.
Small Vietnamese soldiers. (20)
They love to love you.
I have no idea how it happened.
I remember nothing but light.

2

I don't remember the hard
swallow of the lover.
I don't remember the burial of ears.
I don't remember (5)
the time of the explosion.
This is the place where curses are manufactured,
delivered like white tablets.
The survivor is spilling his bedpan.
He slips a curse into your pocket, (10)
you're finally satisfied.
I don't remember the heat
in the hands,
the heat around the neck.

Good times bad times sleep (15)
get up work. Sleep get up
good times bad times.
Work eat sleep good bad work times.
I like a certain cartoon of wounds.
The water which refused to dry.
I like a little unaccustomed mercy. (20)
Pulling the trigger is all we have.
I hear a child.

3

I dropped to the bottom of a well.
I have a knife.
I cut someone with it.
Oh, I have the petrified eyebrows

of my Vietnam monkey. (5)
My monkey from Vietnam.
My monkey.
Put your hand here.
It makes no sense.
I beat the monkey. (10)
I didn't know him.
He was bloody.
He lowered his intestines
to my shoes. My shoes
spit-shined the moment (15)
I learned to tie the bow.
I'm not on speaking terms
with anyone. In the wrong climate
a person can spoil,
the way a pair of boots slows you... (20)

I don't know when I'm sleeping.
I don't know if what I'm saying
is anything at all.
I'll lie on my monkey bones.

4

I'm tired of the rice
falling in slow motion
like eggs from the smallest animal.
I'm twenty-five years old,
quiet, tired of the same mistakes, (5)
the same greed, the same past.
The same past with its bleat
and pound of the dead,
with its hand grenade
tossed into a hootch on a dull Sunday (10)
because when a man dies like that
his eyes sparkle,
his nose fills with witless nuance
because a farmer in Bong Son
has dead cows lolling (15)
in a field of claymores
because the VC tie hooks to their comrades
because a spot of blood is a number
because a woman is lifting
her dress across the big pond. (20)

If we're soldiers we should smoke them
if we have them. Someone's bound
to point us in the right direction
sooner or later.

I'm tired and I'm glad you asked. (25)

5

There is a hill.
Men run top hill.
Men take hill.
Give hill to man. (5)

Me and my monkey
and me and my monkey
my Vietnamese monkey
my little brown monkey
came with me

to Guam and Hawaii (10)
 in Ohio he saw
 all my people he
 jumped on my daddy
 he slipped into mother
 he baptized my sister (15)
 he's my little brown monkey
 he came here from heaven
 to give me his spirit
 imagine my monkey my beautiful
 monkey he saved me lifted (20)
 me above the punji
 sticks above the mines
 above the ground burning
 above the dead above
 the living above the (25)
 wounded dying the wounded
 dying.

* *

Men take hill away from smaller men.
 Men take hill and give to fatter man.
 Men take hill. Hill has number.
 Men run up hill. Run down.

(Neither these last four lines nor the epigram from James Wright, "Out of the horror there rises a musical ache that is beautiful..." is included in the version of the poem in Song of Napalm, though both are found in A Romance. I include them here for the purpose of analysis.)

The Ghost Inside (from The Monkey Wars)

1
 Like Ezekiel
 Unless the ghost is inside you
 Your tongue is tied
 And your hands with which you otherwise gesture,
 Twisting in the air before you will not move, (5)
 Nor your arms, your legs,
 And in your eyes you look a hundred years old.

2
 It is so long now
 The bodies have grown back into the earth,
 Into the green places, the shadowy (10)
 Plantations abandoned by white egrets
 Who will not return
 To the war-fouled groves of bamboo,
 But the cocaine is even whiter,
 Spread out on the mirror (15)
 Into which you make your grotesque faces,

Whiter than this sky full of holes
 Opening like flowers into the humorless oblivion beyond.
 Unless the ghost is upon you (20)
 You can't speak a word
 And tonight a razor of ice slides through your brain.
 You lie back on the stoop and hear the evening
 Of birdsong rise and fall
 And only a few black wings roll past.

Appendix 3: Poems of Basil T. Paquet

Appendix 3: Poems of Basil T. Paquet

(All thirteen poems are from Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans)

In a Plantation

The bullet passed
Through his right temple,
His left side
Could not hold
Against the metal,
His last "I am" exploded (5)
Red and grey on a rubber tree.

This Last Time

This last time
the sun dried his lips
and bakes dry his earth,
he sees green rice rows
wander toward a white temple, (5)
tin roofs shake their heat at the sun,
water buffalo wander
near a temple.

This last time sun fevers his head
black mynas cry a warning, (10)
fire breaks from shadows
of a tree line.

This last time sun bursts his eyes
he sees darkly the fall of sparrows
against a shaken sky. (15)

Basket Case

I waited eighteen years to become a man.
My first woman was a whore off Tu Do street,
But I wish I never felt the first wild
Gliding lust, because the rage and thrust (5)
Of a mine caught me hip high.
I felt the rip at the walls of my thighs,
A thousand metal scythes cut me open,
My little fish shot twenty yards
Into a swamp canal.
I fathered only this - the genderless bitterness (10)
Of two stumps, and an unwanted pity
That births the faces of all
Who will see me till I die deliriously
From the spreading sepsis that was once my balls.

Christmas '67

Flares lit the night like a sky
Full of Bethlehem stars.
Dark wings against a darker sky
Laid down red ribbons and bars
Of bright crashing metal (5)
To warn of the on-coming
Assault of men, the long battle
Filled with cries of "in-coming,"
That sent them crawling about
Into the pocked earth, waiting for the promise (10)
Of thudding hosannas, like a gathering of devout
Moths, aching for the flames, but frozen by the hiss
And whistle of mortars and rockets sliding
Down their air pews in a choring of dying.

Easter '68

I have seen the pascal men today.
Long past rising to a passion
they sucked their last sun
through blued lips,
buttressed their intestines in handfuls, (5)
lifting their wounds to the sky
they fell silent as the sun,
as words not spoken,
broken Easters of flesh
girdled in fatigue strips, (10)
red arching rainbows of dead men
rising like a promise
to give Jesus the big kiss
and sinking down-
only my breath on their lips, (15)
only my words on their mouths.

Night Dust-off

A sound like hundreds of barbers
stopping furiously, increases;
suddenly the night lights,
flashing blades thin bodies (5)
into red strips
hunched against the wind
of a settling slickship.

Litters clatter open,
hands reaching
into the dark belly of the ship (10)
touch toward moans,
they are thrust into a privy,
feeling into wounds,
the dark belly all wound,
all wet screams riven limbs (15)
moving in the beaten night.

It Is Monsoon At Last

The black peak at Xuan Loc
pulls a red apron of light
up from the east.
105's and 155's are walking shells
toward us from Bear Cat
down some trail
washing a trail in fire. (5)

An eagle flight snakes west toward Lai Khe,
a demonstration of lights
flashing green and red across a sky still black above. (10)
Our boots rattle off the boardwalk
Cha-Chat-Chat-Chat
the sound spills across the helipad
out towards the forest
out towards the dawn; (15)
it chases devil dusters
out to the jungle.

The boardwalk bends
with our ungainly walk
litter handles creak (20)
with the heavy weight of the dead,
the dull whoosh and thud of B-40's
sounds south along the berm
the quick flat answer of 16's follows.

Gunships are going up (25)
sucking devil dusters into the air
We can see them through the morgue door
against the red froth clouds
hanging over Xuan Loc.
We lift the boy into a death bag. (30)
We lift the boy into the racks.
We are building a bunker of dead.
We are stacking the dead for protection.

This dead boy is on my hands
My thighs are wet with the vomit of death (35)
His blood is on my mouth
My mouth My mouth tastes his blood.

The gunships are firing over the Dong Nai
throwing fire into the river
clouds are coming in from the sea (40)
I can smell the rain, see it
over Xuan Loc, over me
it is monsoon at last.

Graves Registration

From the trucks we see
the black shark fin of Xuan Loc
break from the swelling green sea jungle,
cutting the thick red air of dusk.
The sound of the engines washes
into the gullies of heaped wire
strung with bodies spilling toward the village
like a trail of crushed sea forms.
Great fish-mountain
did you show your grin here?
Did your face break surface,
mouth of magnificent death?
The tank shells are like popped cans,
their meat turning in the sun.
Carapace, claws, antennae-
debris all stiff with death
and swelled by the panting sun,
what are we to do with you?

"Too many. We'll get another truck."

"Fuck the gooks. We'll use lime,"

"Kipper, stay with the bodies!"

The land cannot hold you all,
it is filling with debris.
We will have to ship some home
for re-cycling.
When the truck comes back
we will wrap you in plastic - zip! zip!
You brown-yellow guys
are going to get some whiteness,
you're going home to Xuan Loc "passing,"
rotting into the earth in dusted rows,
seeping into the earth in chemicals,
your moisture already lifting into the air
to rub the dark fin in night mists,
to cover us with your breath
while we lay drunken in our camps.

This morning you all
must have been violent!
Strung out along this road
like tatters on the wire
you seem a strange attack.
I heard your noise in the early darkness
from my hootch,
I toasted your anarchy with gin.
Did you all think death?
Did you speak in whispers
or shout at war
in quick metal breath?
Did you shout at death,
or did he glide into your mouths
while you sucked some J's?

"The brightness of sun
caught this morning
in his red fist
the smashed flowers

of our faces,
licked the wetness
the drying surprise "Something crushed my face.
from our petal-eyes I was thinking of freedom
and reeled on." and hunger."

"I used to salty dog
and tongue with laughter
soft brown breast heads."

"The sky trod us in walking shells,
our eyes shallow pools
for the tongues of flies
and a thirsty sun."

"I remember a cloud
against the flares.

I was high as a mother, "We are the ripped forest,
it looked like a fish." men who became the jungle,
limed limbs whitening,
silent as the mountain,
as the last seal of lips."

"Laughter shredded in my mouth.
I felt my throat rip in a choke,
the earth heaved with flame."

"Tonight the paleness of moon will
light on our stilled limbs,
flutter with clouds,
and fly to deeper night
with carrion of our dreams."

"The beast moved among us,
our voices hurled back
by the fire,
we fell silent, unhurried
as the whorl
on stiff red fingertips."

Why do I move among you
like a berserk ballerina,
tippy-toeing over you
filling out your tags
and powdering the rest?
I cannot believe anymore
that names count.
I fear some day
the beast will come for me,
but that we will rush
to each other like lovers,
secret sharers in the memory of your passing.
Even more I fear that
some day
I will be the only one remembering.

I wish you could share this
joint with me.

The trucks will be back soon.

They Do Not Go Gentle

The half-dead comatose
Paw the air like cats do when they dream,
They perform isometrics tirelessly.
They flail the air with a vengeance
You know they cannot have. (5)
After all, their multiplication tables,
Memories of momma, and half their id
Lies in some shell hole
Or plop! splatter! on your jungle boots.
It must be some atavistic angst (10)
Of their muscle and bones,
Some ancient ritual of their sea water self,
Some blood stream monsoon,
Some sinew storm that makes
Their bodies rage on tastelessly (15)
Without their shattered brains.

Morning - A Death

Turn - Character 1

I've blown up your chest for thirty minutes
And crushed it down an equal time,
And still you won't warm to my kisses.
I've sucked and puffed on your
Metal No. 8 throat for so long, (5)
And twice you've moaned under my thrusts
On your breastbone. I've worn off
Those sparse hairs you counted noble on your chest,
And twice you defibrillated,
And twice blew back my breath. (10)
I've scanned the rhythms of your living,
Forced half-rhymes in your silent pulse,
Sprung brief spondees in your lungs,
And the cesura's called mid-line, half-time,
Incomplete, but with a certain finality. (15)
The bullet barks apocalyptic
And you don't unzip your sepulchral
Canvas bag in three days.
No rearticulation of nucleics, no phoenix,
No novae, just an arbitrary of one-way bangs (20)
Flowing out to interstitial calms.
The required canonical wait for demotion
To lower order, and you wash out pure chemical.
You are dead just as finally
As your mucosity dries on my lips (25)
In this morning sun.
I have thumped and blown into your kind too often,
I grow tired of kissing the dead.

Counterturn - Character 2

I'd sooner be a fallen pine cone this winter
In a cradle of cold New England rock,
Less hurt in it than nineteen years.
What an exit! Stage left, fronds waving,
Cut down running my ass off at a tree line. (5)
I'm thinking, as I hear my chest

Sucking air through its brand new nipple,
I bought the ticket, I hope I drown fast,
The pain is all in living.

Stand - Character 1

I grow so tired of jostled litters
Filling the racks, and taking off
Your tags and rings, pulling out
Your metal throats and washing
Your spittle down with warm beer at night, (5)
So tired of tucking you all in,
And smelling you all on me for hours.
I'd sooner be in New England this winter
With pine pitch on my hands than your blood,
Lightly fondling breasts and kissing (10)
Women's warm mouths than thumping
Your shattered chests and huffing
In your broken lips or aluminum windpipes,
Sooner lift a straying hair from her wet mouth
Than a tear of elephant grass from your slack lips (15)
I'd so much rather be making children,
Than tucking so many in.

Mourning The Death, By Hemorrhage, Of A Child From Honai

Always the children are included
In these battles for the body politic.
Prefaced with mortars and rockets
The Year of the Monkey was preluded
By a mephitic (5)
Stench of blasted bodies sullenly drifting from the pocket

Of refugee hootches at Honai.
The enemy patriots knew the young
Would be glad to die for the revolution. (10)
The allies were certain the vox populi
Called a mandate for flag-strung
Counter attack and awful retribution.

The majesty of the annihilation of the city
Could be heard clearly in the background,
I could only wonder what ideology (15)
The child carried in her left arm - necessity
Must have dictated an M-16 round
Should cut it off, and her gaining the roll of martyrology.

Her dying in my arms, this daughter (20)
Weaned on war, was for the greater
Glory of all concerned.
There was no time to mourn your slaughter
Small, denuded, one-armed thing, I too was violator,
And after the first death, the many must go unmourned.

Group Shot

So they passed,
Days of hollow cadence
When each passing day
Seemed an album of daguerrotypes,
Camera-caught, anachronistic. (5)
Puffed-up, pigeon-breasted,
As in Brady's day
We strutted to a distant
Very insistent drum.

I have photos of us all together, (10)
Polished boots and brass
In front of whitewashed barracks.
There, hanging on the parlor wall,

We are as once we were, (15)
The wholeness of our limbs,
Two eyes blinking at the sun,
When all had all needed
To woo the world.

A Visit

"You don't look bitter,"
she said.
He thought,

"Bitter is a taste," (5)
feeling her words
scrape across
memory's slow healing
like a slow knife.

Did she think she could see (10)
how he felt?

"It don't matter,"
he said, and heard
outside - voices
in the wind (15)
in humming tires
voices running against
the window in a heavy rain.

Appendix 4: Poems of Steve Mason

Appendix 4: Poems of Steve Mason

(All poems are from Johnny's Song)

After the Reading of the Names

I just call him Johnny;
like in Johnny went off to war
and Johnny didn't come home.
And remember him,
like Johnny was a helluva ballplayer (5)
and Johnny's girl believed in dreams.
And I can find him,
like in Johnny's folks
moved away that year -
some say, Minnesota; (10)
but his name's still here
not two miles from his old high school
on a Peace Memorial
(which is a funny name for it).
Sometimes, like today, (15)
we read All the names
some call it "the reading of the names."
Me, I just call it Johnny's Song.
And as much as I love the words,
I've come to really hate the music... (20)

The Wall Within

Most real men
hanging tough
in their early forties
would like the rest of us to think (5)
they could really handle one more war
and two more women.
But I know better.
You have no more lies to tell.
I have no more dreams to believe.

I have seen it in your face (10)
I am sure you have noticed it
in mine;
that thousand-yard stare
that does not look out- (15)
it looks in-
at the unutterable,
unalterable truth of our war.
The eye sees
what the mind believes. (20)
And all that I know of war,
all that I have heard of peace,
has me looking over my shoulder
for that one bullet
which still has my name on it- (25)
circling
round and round the globe
waiting and circling
circling and waiting

until I break from cover
and it takes its best, last shot. (30)
In the absence of Time,
the accuracy of guilt is assured.
It is a cosmic marksman.

Since Vietnam, (35)
I have run a zigzag course
across the open fields of America
taking refuge in the inner cities.

From MacArthur Park
to Washington Square (40)
from Centennial Park
to DuPont Circle,

on the grassy, urban knolls of America
I have seen an army of combat veterans
hidden among the trees.

Veterans of all our recent wars. (45)

Each a part of the best of his generation.

Waiting in his teeth for peace.

They do not lurk there

on the backs of park benches
drooling into their socks (50)

above the remote, turtled backs
of chessplayers playing soldiers.

They do not perch upon the gutter's lip

of midnight fountains
and noontime wishing wells (55)

like surrealistic gargoyles

guarding the coins and simple wishes
of young lovers.

No.

I have seen them in the quiet dignity
of their aloneness. (60)

Singly, in the confidence

of their own perspective.

And always at the edges of the clearing. (65)

Patrolling like perimeter guards,

or observing as primitive gods,

each in his own way looks out to the park

that he might "see" in to the truth.

Some, like me (70)
enjoy the comfortable base

of a friendly tree

that we might cock one eye

to the center of the park

toward the rearing bronze horsemen (75)

of other wars

who would lead us backwards to glory.

Daily, they are fragged

by a platoon of disgruntled pigeons

saying it best for all of us.

(80)

And with the other eye,

we read the poetry of America the Beautiful

as she combs her midday hair

and eats precise shrimp sandwiches

and salad Nicoise catered by Tupperware- (85)

and never leaves a single crumb.

No wonder America is the only country

in the world which doesn't smell like food.

...and I remember you and me

picnicking at the side
 of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the rain (90)
 eating the Limas and Ham from the can
 sitting easy in our youth and our strength
 driving hard bargains with each other
 for the C-ration goodies
 we unwrapped like Christmas presents. (95)
 Somehow it really seemed to matter
 what he got versus what you got.
 It wasn't easy trading cheese and crackers
 for chocolate-covered peanut butter cookies!
 And the pound cake - Forget about it! (100)
 I knew a guy would cut a hole in it
 and pretend it was a doughnut.
 For six months I watched that
 and refused to ask him about it.
 I did finally. And you guessed it. (105)
 He hated pound cake.
 And remember the water biscuit
 that came in its own tin?-
 I think they had the moxie to call it a cookie-
 it came with the marmalade (110)
 and was made by that outfit in Chicago
 we promised to burn to the ground someday.
 Damn, how did your buddy, the animal,
 ever eat that crap?
 Then, we'd happily wash down the whole mess (115)
 with freckly-faced strawberry Kool-Aid
 straight from the canteen
 some days there'd be goofy grape
 (anything to keep from choking
 on the taste of purified water). (120)
 Bleck.
 But somehow I sensed all the while
 that I'd never be able to forgive myself
 for enjoying your company so much
 or being so good at the game we played. (125)

We were the best - You & I.

In our parks,
 there are whole other armies of veterans
 mostly young and mostly old (130)
 but always ageless
 who are not alone.
 They share with their families
 and their friends
 these open-aired (135)
 above-ground time capsules
 of our national culture.
 They read aloud to themselves
 and their children
 from the plaques and statues (140)
 monuments and markers
 those one-line truths
 of our common experience
 as if there could be a real significance
 in words like Love and Hate tatooed (145)
 on the clenched, granite fists of America.

Sometimes, when I am angry
 it seems as if I could start my own country
 with the same twenty Spill and Spell words
 we shake out at the feet of our heroes

like some crone spreading her hands
over the runes prior to a mystic reading. (150)

Words like:

peace and sacrifice, war and young
supreme and duty, service and honor
country, nation, men and men and men again, (155)

sometimes God and don't forget women!
Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines and freedom.
Then, just as quickly, the anger passes
and reverence takes its place.

Those are good words, noble words, solemn
& sincere. (160)

It is the language of Death
which frightens me;
it is unearthly to speak life concepts
over the dead. (165)

Death is inarticulately final
refusing forever to negotiate.

That, and the awesome responsibility
we place eternally on our fallen
teenage sons, (170)
seems unbearably heavy
against the lengthening, prancing
shadows of Sunday's frisbeers.

Apparently, there is no period
which can be placed after sacrifice. (175)
All life is struggle.

An act of natural balance
and indomitable courage.
As it is with man,
so it is with mankind. (180)

If we permit Memorial Day
to come to us every day,
we ignore the concept of sacrifice
and dilute its purpose. (185)

When we do that
we incur the responsibility
to effect change.
If we are successful,
the sacrifice has renewed meaning. (190)
It seems there is no alternative to life.
But there may be to war...

The values of our society
seem to be distributed in our parks
and reflected in the eyes of veterans
who look there for validation (195)
and find only confusion and sadness.
Strange, I have observed no monuments
to survivors.

No obelisk to mark the conflict
of those who risked (200)
and lived perhaps to fight again
or perhaps to speak of peace.
Nowhere, yet, a wall for the living.

There is no wonder
guilt is the sole survivor of war. (205)
We do not celebrate life after combat
because our concept of glory
lives neither in victory nor in peace
but in Death.

There are plaques at the doorsteps
of skyscrapers; (210)
in New York on 10th and the Avenue
of the Americas it reads:

*In Memory of Those
From
Greenwich Village (215)
Who Made the Supreme Sacrifice
In the Korean Conflict*

1950-1953

In Nashville's Centennial Park (220)
in a shaded wood
to one side of the Parthenon
built to scale and to the glory
which was Greece,

a small statue stands; (225)
it is inscribed:

*I Gave My Best
To Make A Better World*

1917-1918

I stood there one fall (230)
ankle deep in leaves

and looked up at the night sky
through a hole in a ceiling of trees
wondering how much better the world
might look from up there. (235)

From the moon
only one manmade object
can be viewed by the naked eye:
The Great Wall of China (240)
(a tribute to man's functional paranoia).

It's a peculiar perspective
because we're a lot closer
and the only manmade object We can see
is THE Wall in Washington, D. C. (245)
(the veterans' solemn pledge to remember)

There is one other wall, of course.
One we never speak of.
One we never see,
One which separates memory from madness. (250)
In a place no one offers flowers.
THE WALL WITHIN.
We permit no visitors.

Mine looks like any of a million
nameless, brick walls- (255)
it stands in the tear-down ghetto of my soul;
that part of me which reason avoids
for fear of dirtying its clothes
and from atop which my sorrow and my rage
hurl bottles and invectives (260)
at the rolled-up windows
of my passing youth.

Do you know the wall I mean?

I learned of mine that night in the rain

when I spoke at the Memorial in Washington.
We all noticed how the wall ran like tears
and every man's name we found
on the polished, black granite face
seemed to have our eyes staring back at us;
crying. (265)

It was haunting. (270)
Later I would realize
I had caught my first glimpse
of the Wall Within.
And those tears were real.

You and I do not walk about the Wall Within
like Hamlet on the battlements. (275)

No one with our savvy
would expose himself like that
especially to a frightened, angry man.
Suicide loiters in our subconscious
and bears a grudge; an assassin (280)
on hashish. We must be wary.

No. We sit there legless in our immobility
rolling precariously in our self-pity
like ugly Humpty Dumpties (285)

with disdain even for the King's horses
as we lean over the ledge to write
upside down with chalk, bleached white
with our truth
the names of all the other casualties (290)
of the Vietnam War

(our loved ones)
the ones the Pentagon didn't put in uniform
but died anyway.

Some because they stopped being who
they always were (295)
just as truly as if they'd found
another way to breathe.

Others, because they did die
honest-to-God casualties of the (300)
Vietnam War
because they lost the will
to breathe at all.

My mother gave her first recital
at Carnegie Hall at age eleven. (305)

Sometimes, when I was a boy
I'd watch her play the piano
and wonder if God, after all, was not a woman.
One evening when I was in the bush
she turned on the 6:00 news (310)
and died of a heart attack.

My mother's name is on the Wall Within.

You starting to get the idea?
Our lists may be different
but shoulder to shoulder (315)

if we could find the right flat cloud
on a perfect, black night
we could project our images
upon a god-sized drive-in theatre
wide enough to race Ben Hur across (320)
for a thousand years...

Because the Wall Within
adds up the true cost of war...

We can recite 58,012 in our sleep
even the day after they update it,
but how many of those KIA had kids?
How many of them got nice step-dads?
Whose wall do they go on? (325)

And what about you vets
who came home to your wife and kids
only to divorce her because (330)
there wasn't anybody else to be angry at?
How many dimes

have you long-distance fathers
dropped into the slot (335)
to hear how another man
was raising your children?

Yeah, yeah, I can hear you hollerin',
"Put it on the wall! Put it on the wall!"
Damn right, it's on the wall... (340)

And you remember how that came down?
You told the three year old
his daddy loved him
and his mommy loved him
and nothing would ever change that. (345)
But it did anyway.

But not because you didn't love him enough,
but because you loved him too much
to be a part-time daddy. (350)

And you couldn't explain that to him
because you couldn't explain it to you. (355)

What the hell? I mean who were you,
Spinoza? You came home a twenty-two-year-old
machine gunner for chrissake,
you did the best you could. (355)

PUT IT ON THE WALL!!

And somewhere, in the art gallery, maybe,
is a portrait of American Grieving Parenthood.
Handholding, Rockwellian caricatures
of wisdom and forbearance (360)
and oh yes, pride

sitting on the front porch
of the township
waving their lemonades
at the Greyhound bus driver. (365)
Baloney. The names go UP!

Because every time you can't find Mom,
you damned well better call Doc Smith
'cause she's up on the second floor again
sitting on the floor in Johnny's closet (370)
smelling his Varsity sweater
with the sleeves around her shoulders
sobbing something maybe only Johnny ever
understood. (375)

But don't worry about dad,
who never fished again,
or watched a ballgame on TV again
and won't talk to anyone this year
between the ages of thirty and forty. (380)

He's doing fine.
He just doesn't exercise
as much as he should,

but Doc Smith assures us there's no medical
reason why the folks should have
separate bedrooms;
Dad just likes to read a lot these days.

(385)

If you and I were men of common conscience
we might agree on a collective dedication
to our Walls Within.

As for me

(390)

they could all read:

This wall is dedicated
to mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers,
wives, husbands,
sons, daughters,
lovers, friends

(395)

and most of all the dreams
of the men and women

who risked it all in Vietnam
while you continued to lose them
during and after the war

(400)

with less a chance than they for a parade
and no chance at all for an explanation.

You lost them to bullets, internment,
drugs, suicide, alcohol, jail, PTS,
Divorce, but never never did any of you
ever lose them to the truth

(405)

which is now being shared
across this great nation

in such an act of spontaneous
moral courage, its like may never
have been seen on any battlefield
in the history of mankind...

(410)

Amen to that, brother.

The Casualty

I.

In the final end
we will have loved
more dreams than people;
given Time, some dreams come true-
most people prove false. (5)
Truth, it seems, is an agreement
not long kept by friends and lovers;
it functions best between enemies
for whom the illusion of truth
is spirit for the first deceit. (10)

These days,
like you, I am an expert in disbelief.
War in Vietnam and Peace in America
have imbued in us a God-like detachment;
a perceptual handicap, (15)
which interdicts most lies.
For us,
neither the president,
nor the emperor,
wears clothes. (20)
And it remains the truest illusion of our war
that it is over;
the grandest delusion of our peace
that is begun...

It begins with simply this: (25)
that each man goes to his war
as he goes to his love; alone.
And from neither does he return as before.
For love and war exist
at the edges of the human experience (30)
and whether new-born or quick-dead,
life hangs in the balance.
Either way, man grapples with his universe
at the very limits of social restraint.
His cultural upbringing (35)
too weak to govern
in the province of the darkness
and the dawn.

To survive in combat (40)
a man must turn
from the teachings of other men
and come face to face with himself;
mano a mano.
In the dark, (45)
instinct is a more perfect mirror
than reason.
And its first image
hurls the stone
which shatters the greatest lie (50)
of his life;
that he is not alone.
For some it is a joy
to come to know such a man as he is.
For others, it is a nightmare (55)
which recurs so long as he may live.

The world of the combat soldier

is a flat one
 whose highest peak is mean survival
 and whose lowest value
 is the killing of his enemy. (60)
 It is a private world
 of height without depth
 from which can be viewed
 the separate, fractured worlds
 of comrades dying (65)
 (as from a galactic distance).
 Strange, how close is a dead buddy;
 how far is recalling his laughter.

It is a world (70)
 of unaccountable and indefinite season
 where time is measured
 by the Xing of the days
 like the labored wall-scratchings
 of condemned men.

It is a stereophonic world (75)
 of unspecified dimension
 bordered on all sides by fear
 and weathered by the tiny cloud puffs
 of hope and prayer and dream
 and a letter from home (80)
 which does not speak
 of bills
 or broken bones
 or the unspeakable Death
 of faithfulness. (85)

War is a surrealistic penal colony
 for young patriots of the real world
 who, as sons of poor men,
 must pay the price
 for the believable myths (90)
 of national furors and private enterprise.

War as a social statement
 has the depth of a slit trench at Argonne.
 And echoes about as long
 as it took the blood to dry at Hue. (95)

When he wrestles at the edge
 of his private, first-class world
 where his least backward step
 will plummet him into the cosmic promise
 of his belief system, (100)
 each man knows
 that in this, his final battle,
 he fights neither for glory nor justice,
 not for wealth (105)
 nor a cushioned seat
 in the Kingdom of Heaven.
 Not for country. Not for freedom.
 He fights for the approval of his loved ones.
 And he fights for his life.

If honor is to light the way to his Maker (110)
 it burns most brightly
 when he sacrifices his life
 for another.
 In that gesture, humanity survives war.

And Peace clings
 by a desperate finger (115)
 to a belt loop
 of the stern, and long-striding History
 of mankind
 marching inexorably (120)
 toward some never-to-be-printed,
 final date.

The combat veteran of Vietnam
 lived in a world
 where medals occasionally pinned themselves (125)
 on donkeys
 and the green disappeared from the trees-
 attacked by the one word in his language
 which refused to rhyme;
 Orange. (130)
 Years later,
 it would bleach the rainbows
 from his children's eyes
 and then, nothing rhymed.
 (not even God) (135)
 and least of all, DOW.

The combat trooper searched to destroy.
 In the end,
 as a veteran,
 he searched only to understand. (140)
 In Vietnam he looked for a reason.
 And found none.
 At home he looked for approval
 and found none.
 From the million, separate ledges (145)
 of his lonely worlds,
 he jumped.
 One
 at (150)
 a
 time
 like lemmings into the sea.

Today,
 many Vietnam vets (155)
 still hang
 suspended
 under
 the floating shelves of their former worlds-
 each by a single strand of sanity (160)
 more narrow than a window-washer's rope,
 oscillating slowly into middle-age
 as from a madman's drool.
 His family watches
 from a window (165)
 ten stories
 higher than the moon
 unable to reach him
 unable to understand him
 unable to be unable (170)
 anymore.

The veteran swings between
 murder and suicide.
 His journey is the plain geometry
 of conscience;

a pendulum's arc
tracing across the face of the sky (175)
a child's smile
which asks the unspoken question,
"Who speaks for the little ones?"

II.

When a spider climbs her single thread (180)
into the eaves of the roof
she does so to live the good life
unnoticed.

The rope-climbing Nam vet
who pulls for the safety of main street, (185)
trusts to his proven techniques
of cover and concealment
to protect him.

He does so with no thought
to the good life; (190)
rather as a final,
instinctive pull and lunge
for survival.

For those who make it
to the top of the world (195)
only to enter the closet,
fear is the fifth wall
in an ever-closing room.

Death by emotional starvation awaits. (200)
So much for cover.

From the mangrove swamps
to the suburban closets,
the Vietnam vet survives
in the emotional tenements of his world. (205)
But the city cousin

who wears his bush hat
to camouflage the truth
of who and what he is
(better even than in the jungle) (210)
survives barely at all-

and brings unwanted attention
(of the wrong kind)
to the rest of us.
For in the swamps, (215)
our camouflage offered protective coloration;
we blended with it all (in a quiet oneness).

But in the asphalt jungle
our camouflage stands out
as WARNING coloration. (220)
Instinctively, the frightened vet

seeks to protect himself
by raising "Jolly Roger"
and chasing the citizens away.

In nature, a species warning others (225)
of his danger
is favorably rewarded.

In civilization (within the same group)
the warning
is a hostile statement (230)
generating fear, anger, avoidance
and ultimately, retaliation.

Jungle fatigues are not varsity sweaters.

And if pride and group-recognition
should be our motive,
then understatement should be our wardrobe. (235)
If the wimps of the world
wear alligators on their shirts
can't we wear jungle boots on ours?

Time enough to figure how to live
when all of us are back on top. (240)
But how to get us all back up?
So many of us

at
the
end (245)
of
our
ropes...

Well, remember those yuk-yuk,
backslapping, Brylcreem days (250)
of the gridiron club meetings?
(What world was that?)

Those dreamy, green-tinted afternoons
when the giggles (255)
of the future wives of America
floated through our windows

as they practiced the cheers
which would send us against
our dreaded, hated enemies next Saturday. (260)
And the Saturday after that.
Bringing our enemies with it.

Strange, nobody seemed to notice
how after the first kickoff
the ambulance (265)
would quietly pull behind the bleachers
(maybe it was bad luck to mention it).

God were we set up!
Women, cheers, uniforms, decorations,
parades, proud parents AND (270)
the National Anthem!
What a life! When we were seventeen.

When we were eighteen
in Vietnam
only the ambulance showed up. (275)
And when we got back home
somebody'd moved the town...

Well, maybe it didn't work.
But still it was a good dream.
A good way of life. (280)
And so, we need another dream, that's all.

Hell, the one thing all suicides
have in common
is that each has lost his sense of humor. (285)
C'mon bro, would you really
rather have been upstairs

in that airless room
(with the closed transom)
discussing the amount of sodium
on the back of a 2¢ King Louis (290)
with the nerds of the stamp club?
Or been with us - fast and loose -
at street level
where the rubber meets the road?

At gut level, where a man meets a man?
 Shit. C'mon bro, it's me you're talkin' to. (295)
 Shit.
 Didn't lose any wars WE were in.
 Didn't break any dreams WE believed.
 Snap out of it, bro! Hear me!
 We didn't lose anybody's fuckin' war. (300)
 We kicked ass!
 We didn't break anybody's mutha fuckin' dream.
 WE BOUGHT IT!!
 Shit.
 It was THEM. (305)
 THEY pulled out on US.
 The moral equivalent of desertion
 under fire.
 The country didn't confuse the warrior
 with the war. (310)
 They knew who we were.
 It's themselves they loathe
 and tried to avoid.
 We merely remind them
 of who they really are- (315)
 of their lack of courage:
 moral and physical.
 It takes strength to believe
 and balls to put it on the line-
 we had both. (320)
 They had neither.
 And there's no such thing as benign envy.

But you know what?
 After all the stories are told
 and all the seas are salt, (325)
 it was you and me, bro,
 who caught the fish;
 who cut the fish.
 We, the men;
 ours, the dream. (330)
 Because we were together, we were strong.
 And can be again!

We pulled ourselves out of the jungle mud
 one buddy at a time. (335)
 And we can pull ourselves
 out of this shit, too.
 (if we pull for each other).

You know,
 I'll bet if the families of our brothers
 killed-in-action (340)
 could sign a petition
 charging each combat veteran of Vietnam
 to live his life
 as if he were living for two, (345)
 half of us would be on top of the world
 by tomorrow afternoon! [taped reading: morning]

A man may fight for his life
 on a personal level,
 but when he loves, (350)
 he does so for all mankind.
 When we had no other reason to fight
 in Vietnam
 we fought for each other.

Today, in America,
it's still a good reason (355)
to keep fighting.

Where once we saved each other
from death,
now we have the chance to save each other
for life! (360)

Hey! bro,
when we're over the top?
whadya say?
We fix the place up a little
for the kids, ya know? (365)
Tell 'em a dream
they can make come true
An' then jez hunker down
to watch 'em grow.

...and let no grim, graybeard of a god (370)
speak again to us of glory
by bodycount.

A History Lesson

Since Vietnam,
three things
hold my universe together:
gravity, centrifugal force
and guilt.

(5)

It is not so strange, therefore,
that the war is over for me
just like it's over for you.
Over.
And
over
again...

(10)

There remains no resolution of this war
beyond each man's obligation
to his world and his conscience
to record the True inner-history
of his Vietnam experience.

(15)

Scholars believe it is too soon
for a history of what I call
the "outer war"
perhaps it is too soon also
for the "inner war"
but I doubt it-
for ours is not a justifiable history
to be recorded in reasonable terms-
ours, not a conflict involved
in economics or politics
militarism or religious crusade.
No. Our war is a moral one.
One to be agonized, not written.
One which must be shared,
not taught.
Ours, too honest a lesson
to be memorized;
ours must be Understood.

(20)

(25)

(30)

(35)

Let the thin, bloodless men
who are the educated sons
of ribbon clerks
spin the broken-glass facts
of Vietnam into a golden yarn
to be woven, years later,
into the rich, cultural tapestry
of world history.

(40)

It will be of little meaning
and less consequence;
a history of dates and times
and petty accuracies of who-hit-Johns.
Fact is only a portion of any truth
and the academic disciplines of today
view life through a narrow window
(screening out both lux et veritas)
And rationale is not enough to live on.

(45)

(50)

Color is to the eye
what perspective is to the mind;
it lends balance.
But not all the red and blue arrows

(55)

sweeping from all the pages
of the Vietnam history books
will give any hint of human direction
beyond the deployment
of allied and enemy troops. (60)
There will be no explanation
of any part of the real war;
the inner war.
The actions and passions of life
are not confronted (65)
nose to nose
by historians.
Therefore, they do not FEEL IT.
(And are loath in their accounts
to moralize it). (70)
They TEACH the history
that men such as you have LIVED
and that fallen comrades
such as we have loved
have DIED... (75)
No one should write bloodlessly
of spilled blood.
Certainly, the only valid text
that will ever be written
about the Vietnam War (80)
has already been written:
The Book of Names.

Somewhere, this Memorial Day
some of us will read it aloud (85)
from cover to cover.
And it will be too big to comprehend.
It is doomed like the men it represents
to be a part of the outer war
unless we take it "inside." (90)
If we are ever to explain
the true cost of the war,
better by far
to pick one name
and read aloud (95)
from his last love letter...

From coast to coast
we seem to be arranging
an almost instinctive,
undeniable pattern (100)
of Vietnam veterans
An enormous, living,
connect-the-dots puzzle
that will spell out
the ultimate truth of Vietnam (105)
(from the sequential understanding
of our combined inner wars).
As with all pointilism
the individual dot seems lost
and unimportant. (110)
Alone, we appear without validity.
Our separate inner truths
did not translate into English
(or Vietnamese) (115)
its language voiced itself
in isolated rage;
often incomprehensible
(even to ourselves)

and always inappropriate.
 Yet, together we seem clearly to be outlining an unmistakably Reasonable statement large enough for all the world to see in its completed form:
 NO MORE WAR. (120)

It is almost as if we were part of some imponderable design as intricate and inexplicable as winter snowflakes must be to a migrating duck. (125)

It is time for our truth.
 It feels right.
 The classical Greeks knew it all along.
 (The nature of man is best known by considering nature itself). (130)

It took Ulysses twenty years to return from the wars and put his house in order.
 It's taken twenty years to get from the Gulf of Tonkin Incident to here and now. (135)

And it's taken twenty years for this country to raise its children to be the average age of the college student to whom the subject of Vietnam is addressed and to whom the next war seems ready to be served. (140)

Therefore, let you and I continue to join with our brothers and sisters and speak today (and every day) for truth and humanity (while there is still time). (145)

And if any should ask, Why Us?
 We shall give them this good reason:
 We went to Vietnam as American fighting men and came back as human beings (that's why we didn't feel at home right away). (150)

And until we found each other we didn't understand our responsibility to that kind of citizenship.
 And now that we do,
 WE HAVE IT TO DO! (155)

Ever, there are things by which men seem willing to live and things, therefore, for which they seem willing to die.
 As for me (if I have a choice) rather than lead one million boys to war I would prefer to die alone for peace. (160)

Such is the history lesson of my inner war.
 It may not be yours.
 Our task is not to agree- (165)

(170)

(175)

it is simply to add our truth
to the sum of all truth. (180)

In that will be a legacy
worthy of our sacrifice
and a monument
fit to mark
the end of our war... (185)

DEROS: My Soul

I.

At times when I am calm
I remember
that even if you waited for it
nothing came as suddenly
as gunfire (5)
and nothing (not even the Lieutenant)
seemed as stupid
as the silence that followed -

At such times I know also
that each of us (10)
who fought in Vietnam
was spiritually captured by it
and that each remains
a prisoner
of his own war - (15)

It is, therefore, not surprising
that for some (like for me)
the AfterNam emptiness
published no DEROS
for the soul... (20)

Yet, in moments better known to me
when reason drifts
and whole worlds are illuminated
with Platonic images
dancing against the cave-walls (25)
of my mind

lit by a single candle
borrowed from a twilight wish,
I take the stairs two at a time
and wait in the second-floor window (30)
of my days

hoping that Someday will come next morning
and that I'll recognize the soul
of a much younger me
come diddily-bopping up the street (35)
eating a Sky Bar

and hefting a duffle bag
filled with new and more believable myths
that I might live by (40)
(not to mention back pay)
while humming something (in a nasal sort of way)
about going to San Francisco
and something else I can't make out
about a flower in somebody's hair -

Frankly, I don't know if I'd throw flowers
or run down stairs, meet him at the curb (45)
and beat Hell out of him -
leaving me the way he did!
You know, there never was any great debate
(between my soul and me) (50)
ending in a mutually agreed upon
existential parting of the ways.

I mean it's not like my damned soul
dressed up like a teensy-weensy
Jennifer Jones in drag (55)
and waved farewell with a lace hanky
from the base of a bonsai plant
in a Tu Do Street floral shop
while I dreamt too soundly
on Ba Muy Ba beer and woke next morning (60)
to discover
I couldn't cry anymore
or laugh like before
or give a shit period -

And my soul didn't just go berserk (85)
under the too bright light
of a Government Moon
and go roaring down Highway 1
doing a wheely on a cycilo
like James Dean in a steel pot (70)
and flak jacket
laughing a Red Baron kind of laugh
and quoting Kipling's Barrack-Room Ballads -

No.

My soul just did (75)
what most souls did.
Just disappeared one afternoon
when I was in a firefight.
Just "walked away" in the scuffle
like a Dunhill lighter (80)
off the deck of a redneck bar...

II.

Peculiar,
A man can lose his money
his woman (85)
(even his mind)
and still he can come back,
but if he loses his courage
or his pride
then - (90)
it is over...

And what of a lost soul?
(I ask myself)
when madness invades
scattering today's headlines (95)
like March Hares
leaving nothing at the table
of my reason
beyond one crumb of truth
and the enormous bloodstain (100)
on the white cloth of my youth -

shaped
(if you come 'round this side
of the table & cock your head
just so)
like a distorted lunar projection
of Vietnam- (105)

And careful! Don't strike your knee
against that table leg!
'Cause then it jumps alive -
like somebody flunked
the inkblot test (110)

and knocking over the candelabra
dives out the window of my sanity
to run naked down the street
lined on both sides by
Vietnam Vets (115)

who couldn't sleep either
and just followed the blood trail
like mute somnambulists
in a black and white foreign film
because they heard that tonight (120)

their shared nightmare
(with Vietnamese subtitles)
had called a muster of lost souls
to be followed by Nam,
Bloody Nam, (125)

leading a one-man parade
and twirling a baton
that looked like nobody's penis
I ever saw (130)

and probably belonged
to the guy in back of me
(poor bastard) -
Geez, it gets scary in here sometimes,
do it not, Brutha? (135)

And oooh, Sister! Do *you* have songs to sing?!
About war without glory
and love beyond reward...

Maybe someday God will mint a medal
so beautiful, no words are printed on it
and all of our sisters
who were there with us (140)

would get one
and everyone, everywhere, who saw it
would know just what it was
and would find a "thoughtful place"
to go sit down in for a week - (145)

And then maybe God would let us have
a picnic (bigger than the moon)
and all the boys and girls
of daddies whose lives they saved
could hold hands (150)

to make a daisy chain for the sun.
And when it was all done
the big people
would make God a prayer-promise
never, never to do anything like Nam
again. (155)

And when the cheers died down
the sun would bow his head
(ever so slightly)
so the children might wish their necklace (160)

'round his head
and when it was in place,
all of a sudden - (165)
faster, even than gunfire,
everybody's lost soul
would just come floating down
like a bright balloon
on a string (170)
and mine
(the smart-assed red one)
would wink at yours
and pretend not to see me
and when everyone got his, (175)
All the children would sing
Happy Birthday! Happy Birthday!
over and over and over again
until all the ice cream melted
and all (180)
our hearts...

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