



My War, My Art by Ovidio Garcia.

Hutto, TX: MCM Books, 2019. Pp. 60. ISBN 978-0-9967473-3-2.

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Ovidio Garcia tells us in his introduction that, during his two tours as an airborne infantryman in Vietnam (1966–67, 1971–72), he saw only one army photographer “and he was killed on his second day of insertion into his unit” and that personal cameras were not allowed because of “intelligence factors” (x). He learned only many years later that there were soldiers whose military occupational specialty was “artist.” He himself never saw one.

Garcia suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Over many years now, he has tried to paint or draw reassuringly simple and honest scenes and impressions of his memories. These images in mixed media, ink, and water colors are presented in *My War, My Art*, accompanied each by a few paragraphs with titles like “Recollection of a Premonition,” “Three Stooges Skit,” “Alas, Poor Yorick,” “Dak To,” “Tree of Life,” and “War Dogs.” Captions in red font gloss his artwork. We are told that, for instance, though the “Tree of Life” was “Not the Disney World Tree,” it did give him and his fellow soldiers some protection from big, black elephant leeches that overnight attached themselves to the roof of his mouth causing him to awake choking on his own blood. The leeches attacked a fellow infantryman in the worst possible place for men in battle (or not)—his penis. Garcia and his buddies climbed the tree to escape the booby traps and guerrillas of the natural world itself.

When we pick up a new book about war, many questions come to mind: was the author a soldier, a doctor or a nurse, a war correspondent or photographer, a combat artist, or a civilian survivor who witnessed other civilians becoming statistical members of that morally grotesque and euphemistic category known as “collateral damage”? Why did any of them write? What (if anything) are they trying to tell us? Or are they writing only for an inner circle of brothers (and now sisters) in arms, who know all too well the realities of war and hold its truths sacred?

Robert Graves stated flatly that his poems about World War I were meant for men “bound to one another by [the] suicidal sacrament”¹ of trench warfare. For others, he wrote prettified tales full of untruths they could read and believe. Journalist and screenwriter William Broyles, a Vietnam veteran, has written that the point of a soldier’s or veteran’s war stories “is not to enlighten but to exclude [those who have not been to war]; its message is not its content, but putting the listener in his place.”²

Do authors who suffered or witnessed the violence of war write primarily for themselves, to capture what they once saw and still see in their minds? Or “just to get the sight out of their heads”?³ In World War I, an Australian officer who witnessed his men being slaughtered like cat-

1. *Collected Writings on Poetry*, ed. Paul O’Prey (Manchester: Carcanet Pr, 1995) 467.

2. “Why Men Love War,” *Esquire* 102.5 (1984) 61.

3. Tobias Wolff, *In Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War* (NY: Vintage, 1995) frontispiece.

tle in a stockyard during the battle of the Somme called it “murder” plain and simple, in “a place so terrible a raving lunatic could never imagine the horror”⁴

It often takes a long time for survivors of war to decide to tell their stories and to figure out how exactly to do so in words, melodies, or pictures. Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) appeared sixteen years after World War II; Kurt Vonnegut Jr.’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) twenty-four years afterward. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith in his *Korean Love Songs*⁵ conveyed plainly and simply the surreally cold-blooded savagery of his war twenty-five years after the fact: “there it is,” his poems say.

Khe Sanh veteran Charles Patterson needed fifteen years to complete a poem he began after a friend in his unit was killed in combat.⁶ Only then had the residue of war and the passage of time produced a kind of understanding and the deep human feeling he had to put into words. For some “war writers” that feeling reflects a need for closure. For others, it involves an opening up at long last to themselves or others.

The US National Archives makes available online thousands of photographs, paintings, drawings, and films depicting wars in which Americans have fought and died, from the Civil War to what we call the Iraq War. Eyewitnesses have, of course, always produced written accounts, published or not, of warfare. For example, the (Univ. of Texas) Harry Ransom Center houses some of Tom Lea’s World War II collected images and notebooks. But rarely are visual images and written narratives produced by the same hands.

We have now received from the heart and soul of Ovidio Garcia a gift he has wrapped for us a half century after he fought in Vietnam. He was inspired by the simple watercolor images that Samuel Chamberlain drew from memories and imaginings of his time as a mounted rifleman with the forces of Gen. Zachary Taylor in 1846–47. Unlike the highly romanticized stories Chamberlain wrote (separately from his paintings),⁷ Garcia’s forthright accounts of his time in Vietnam convey the same anguish and matter-of-fact resignation that Charles Patterson felt in the years just before his recent death. Explaining to students in one of my classes why he wrote his poems, Patterson described motives like those of Garcia:

I just wrote my image of my memories and hoped that they would help someone else understand a little of how war “felt.” For the first time I think that I have begun to understand what I have written about. Every war is a tragedy for everyone. There are no winners or losers; there is no good, no evil. There is just sudden death or injury on both sides. One moment a man is alive the next he’s a corpse regardless of whose army he is fighting in or even if he is fighting, or if a civilian steps on a forgotten mine ten years later. We fought for no better reason than we were there and had to do it.⁸

Garcia’s stories and images of his experience in Vietnam are prose equivalents of Hinojosa-Smith’s unvarnished poetry about Korea. Both men just want to tell us how it was. As Garcia sums it up: “Dere it is” (x).

4. See further Thomas Palaima, “When War Is Performed, What Do Soldiers and Veterans Want to Hear and See and Why?” in Peter Meineck and David Konstan, eds., *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 265–66.

5. Subtitle: *From Klail City Death Trip* (Berkeley: Ed. Justa Pubs., 1978).

6. The poem has two sections, one indicating place and date as “Ca Lu, March 1968,” the other as, “The World, 1983.” See “Marion Henry Norman Khe Sanh, 1968,” in *The Petrified Heart* (Livermore, ME: Signal Tree, 2002) 24–25, 81–83.

7. *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* (Austin: Texas State Hist. Assoc., 1997).

8. Email communications with the reviewer (20 Feb. 2014, 25 Jan. 2016).

Garcia's pictures and words vividly evoke the true premonition of death that kept him from boarding a Chinook helicopter that crashed shortly afterward; a mother's constant love for her two sons fighting an unfathomable war on the far side of the planet, even though they rarely wrote to her; relentless leeches in streams and trees; seriocomic encounters with the enemy that could have brought death; friendly fire transforming wounded soldiers into corpses; a foot, complete with sandal, detached from a Viet Cong guerrilla who escaped into the jungle; and the pitiful tale of the hapless North Vietnamese nineteen-year-old who knew less about surviving in a jungle than even the rawest American teenage recruit in Garcia's unit.

All these images were seared into Garcia's psyche by post-traumatic stress. *My War, My Art* is, therefore, a tribute to his endurance and devotion to the men he served beside and to the veterans and non-veterans who have not and will not look away from the truths he has courageously put on display in this book.

Ovidio Garcia, like many who steadfastly put others ahead of themselves, is too modest about what he has created here. His drawing "Bad Dreams" and related story "B52 Bomb Blast" (20–21) called to my mind Francisco Goya's etching *Esto es peor* (this is worse), an emblem of the repulsive trials of war that have haunted our collective memories for two hundred years.⁹

9. On the relevance of Goya's image to descriptions of warfare in other times and places, see James Tatum, *The Mourner's Song: War and Remembrance from the Iliad to Vietnam* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 2003) 132–34, and fig. 29.