



Thank You for Your Service: Collected Poems by W.D. Ehrhart.

Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019. Pp. xxxi, 278. ISBN 978-1-4766-7853-5.

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On page ii of *Thank You for Your Service*, former poet laureate of the United States Daniel Hoffman praises W.D. Ehrhart’s “strong, sure, memorable poems” and Studs Terkel calls him “*the* poet perhaps of the Vietnam War.” I prefer to strike “perhaps” from that assessment. Ehrhart’s poems express hard truths about what American soldiers endured during their deployments in Vietnam. Ehrhart himself went right from high school to a standard thirteen-month tour (1967–68) with a Marine Corps unit that saw heavy action along the northern DMZ and in the city of Hué during the Tet offensive. The poems he wrote over the next fifty years diagnose the toxic aftereffects of what the Vietnamese call the Resistance War against America (*Kháng chiến chống Mỹ*) on the hearts, minds, and souls of the soldiers who fought in it. Many thousands of Vietnam veterans have had to deal with the effects of the war in their own lives and those of millions of combatants and civilians who died or sustained physical and psychic wounds in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Ehrhart’s post-Vietnam poems cover the normal stuff of human lives: growing up in a small Pennsylvania town as the son of a Protestant minister and a schoolteacher; teenage rebellion and the perplexities of dating; relationships with parents and old and new friends. They ponder lost loves, including a “Dear Bill” letter, the meaning of friendship, and the bonds with “brothers in arms” with whom Ehrhart went through hell. Others reflect upon the search for love and life partners, sexuality and intimacy, and the struggle to find the right job. The poet wonders, too, why society in general is *always* going to hell in a handbasket; why so few people ever talk about things that really matter; what makes us tick. He describes his bewilderment that, after millennia of child rearing, no one has developed a reliable guide to being a good parent. He meditates upon getting old and eventually getting there. In every poem, at Tartarean depths or just below the surface, there lies a single question about Ehrhart’s war experience: “And for what?”

Wars, especially those as tragic as the one Americans fought in Vietnam are rarely worth the costs they exact. Ehrhart has paid the price in the currency of poems written sporadically over fifty-two years. His “war poems” begin with the sixteen-line, four-stanza “Viet Nam—February 1967,” which describes the sights, sounds, and smells of Vietnam as they struck a sensitive, rebellious, painfully immature eighteen-year-old Marine from the sleepy town of Perkasio, Pennsylvania. They conclude with a thirty-line poem—“Thank You for Your Service” (2018)—whose words erupt like molten lava after waiting half a century to “get real.”

“Thank You for Your Service”

Yes, of course; it’s what you say these days.

Like genuflecting in a Catholic Church....

“Thank you for my fucking service

in that fucking war I’ve dragged

from day to day for fifty fucking years

like a fucking corpse that won't stay dead?
 That fucking nightmare that my
 fucking country told me was my fucking
 patriotic duty to fight? For what,
 exactly, do you think you're thanking me?
 Service to my country? You empty-headed
 idiot. You think I want your thanks
 for what I did? ...
 ... You've no idea what I did, or why,
 or what it cost a people who had
 never done us any harm nor ever
 would or could...."

Such Achillean rage bursts forth only briefly in other poems, but nearly all of them induce a genuine "there it is" feeling. Over the years, Ehrhart has masterfully conveyed the truth that James Brown encapsulated as "what it is and what it is."

The tenor of Ehrhart's poems is reminiscent of the draft version of "Dulce et Decorum Est" that Wilfred Owen sent his mother with the laconic note "Here's a gas poem, done yesterday."¹ Ehrhart's unfiltered poetry conjures the *mise en scène* of a well conducted group therapy session where some of us, even civilian non-veterans like myself, can be brought to see and feel what soldiers like Ehrhart and his buddies of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and religions went through, before, during, and after their time in Vietnam.

There is no uncritical nostalgia here for any "greatest generation" or "finest men I ever knew." Ehrhart's vision of the past is clear and unflinching. Thirty-three years after arriving in Vietnam, he wrote that

As a group, the men I served with were neither superior nor inferior to the people ... I've met anywhere else.... Most of us were just a bunch of pretty ordinary young men armed to the teeth and scared to death, trying to do the best we could in miserable circumstances and secretly wishing our mothers could somehow come and get us out of this mess.²

In her introduction to the volume, poet Lorrie Goldensohn³ charts what she calls the "steeply rising developmental curve" (xx) of Ehrhart's poetry over time. Citing the editors of the "ground-breaking anthology" *Winning Hearts and Minds*,⁴ she characterizes the work of Ehrhart and other Vietnam poets as holding "to the anti-war ethos of World War I poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and many others," but breaking "decisively with the one-sided view that adopted the soldier as a passive innocent." Instead, Vietnam soldier-poets are "agents of pain and war" and "'agent-victims' of their own atrocities" (xxi). Ehrhart himself, Goldensohn points out (xxii), has never thought of himself as a "Vietnam writer" per se, but admits that almost all of his work "has been informed by my irrevocable decision as a teenager to become a Marine

1. Jon Stallworthy, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (NY: Norton, 1986) 117.

2. "The Poetry of Bullets, or How Does a War Mean?" in *The Madness of It All: Essays on War, Literature and American Life* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002) 208.

3. Author of *Dismantling Glory* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2003) and editor of *American War Poetry: An Anthology* (id., 2006).

4. Subtitle: *War Poems by Vietnam Veterans*, ed. Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet (NY: 1st Casualty Pr, 1985; orig. 1972).

and fight in Vietnam.”⁵ Goldensohn also points out that Ehrhart’s three prose memoirs published in the 1980s and his later collected essays convey “traditional battlefield encounters” more directly than do his poems (xxvi–xxvii). Fans of his poetry should certainly read his classic first memoir *Vietnam—Perkasie*.⁶

First World War poets like Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg, and Graves were true battlefield poets, writing while they were actively fighting or soon to return to the trenches—Rosenberg and Owen both died in battle in 1918. Ehrhart’s poems about his days and nights in Vietnam were, except for his first poem, written after, sometimes long after, his tour of duty, as he recalled and processed his experiences, though most definitely *not* in tranquillity. “I stopped writing within months of my arrival in Vietnam, when the war became so disturbing that I did not want to think about it” (xvi). But write about it he eventually did.

Sassoon felt an intense hostility to civilians who lived safe at home, unaware of or unconcerned with the horrific suffering of soldiers at the front. And Robert Graves believed soldiers alone, “bound to one another by a suicidal sacrament,”⁷ could capture the realities of trench warfare in poetry. I asked Ehrhart whether he had target readers in mind when writing his poems. He replied:

I have never had any concept of a particular audience for whom I am writing. I am writing for anyone who can read the English language, comes upon my work, and takes the time to read and think about it. I am writing because I have things to say that are important to me. For much of my writing life, I didn’t even have an audience of any kind.... I write because, over the years, I have found that I can’t not write. The stuff just comes out. I am simply not aware of any internal sense of “audience.”⁸

Having no specific audience in mind means that everyone is in his audience. In a talk he delivered in 2000, Ehrhart asserted that “both figuratively and literally, poets have no audience to speak of, no serious prospect of fame or fortune no matter what they say or write, and therefore they can say and write exactly what they think and feel.”⁹

In two different poems (1971, 1973) Ehrhart describes a Vietnamese woman maimed by a naval artillery bombardment in a way that “unwomaned” her and left her child no longer in need of nurturing. Both poems stress that the shelling that inflicted such gruesome horrors was “on-target” and routine in ways as senseless as any other acts of combat in Vietnam.

“Time on Target”

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

5. *In the Shadow of Vietnam: Essays, 1977–1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991) ix.

6. Subtitle: *A Combat Marine Memoir* (Amherst: U Mass Pr, 1995).

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

8. Personal email (24 Apr. 2019).

9. See note 2 above, 210.

“A Relative Thing”

... When the newsmen said that naval ships
had shelled a VC staging point,
we saw a breastless woman
and her still born child....

These lines summon scenes as dreadful as Owen’s equally terse description of the face of a gas-attack victim. They are far more compelling than any amount of political science discourse on the moral consequences of collateral damage.

In 1978, Ehrhart wrote a poem about a fishing trip he made with a Vietnam buddy, Gerry Gaffney, who had (he writes elsewhere) “headed off to the LZ [landing zone] at Con Thien and never got there.” It blends vivid memories with present feelings to call up the same sense of loss that eventually invades all our lives. In Ehrhart’s lines, youthful innocence is not lost in Vietnam; it is disappeared, made never existent.

“A Confirmation”

... For we were never young, it seems,
not then, not ever. I couldn’t even cry
the day you went down screaming, angry
jagged steel imbedded in your knee—
I knew you would live,
and I knew you wouldn’t be back,
and I was glad, and a little jealous.
Two months later I went down.
We all went down eventually,
the villages aflame, the long
grim lines of soldiers, flotsam
in the vortex of a sinking illusion:
goodbye, Ginny; goodbye, John Kennedy;
goodbye, Tom Paine and high school history—
though here we are still, you and I.
We live our lives now
in a kind of awkward silence....