



UNACCUSTOMED MERCY

SOLDIER-POETS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

EDITED BY W. D. EHRHART

UNACCUSTOMED MERCY
SOLDIER-POETS
OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Edited by

W. D. Ehrhart

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY PRESS

1989

Copyright 1989 W. D. Ehrhart

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, including electronic storage and retrieval systems, except by explicit, prior written permission of the publisher.

This book was set in 10 on 12 Times Roman and printed on acid-free paper that meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Unaccustomed mercy : soldier-poets of the Vietnam War / edited by
W. D. Ehrhart.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

ISBN 0-89672-189-2 : \$12.95. — ISBN 0-89672-190-6 (pbk.) : \$9.95

1. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961-1975—Poetry. 2. American
poetry—20th century. 3. Soldiers' writings, American. 4. War
poetry, American. I. Ehrhart, W. D. (William Daniel), 1948-
PS595.V5U53 1989

811'.54'080358—dc19

88-38693

CIP

Cover and jacket design by Patricia Barrows Maines

Texas Tech University Press
Lubbock, Texas 79409-1037 U.S.A.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All poems appear by permission of the respective authors unless otherwise indicated.

JOHN BALABAN. "The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge," "Along the Mekong," "Mau Than," and "The Dragonfish" reprinted from *After Our War*, John Balaban, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974. "Thoughts before Dawn" first appeared in *Carrying the Darkness*, W. D. Ehrhart, ed., Avon Books, 1985. "Mr. Giai's Poem" first appeared in *TriQuarterly*. "Words for My Daughter" first appeared in *Ploughshares*. All other poems reprinted from *Blue Mountain*, copyright 1982 by John Balaban, by permission of Unicorn Press, P.O. Box 3307, Greensboro, NC 27402.

JAN BARRY. "Green Hell, Green Death," "Floating Petals" and "Nights in Nha Trang," *Winning Hearts and Minds*, Jan Barry, Basil T. Paquet, and Larry Rottmann, eds., 1st Casualty Press, 1972. "Harvest Moon," *Demilitarized Zones*, Jan Barry and W. D. Ehrhart, eds., East River Anthology, 1976. "In the Footsteps of Genghis Khan," *Veterans Day*, Jan Barry, Samisdat, 1982. "A Nun in Ninh Hoa," *War Baby*, Jan Barry, Samisdat, 1983.

D. F. BROWN. "Vietnamization" first appeared in *Colorado Review* under the title "Sonnet." All other poems reprinted from *Returning Fire*, D. F. Brown, San Francisco State University Press, 1984.

MICHAEL CASEY. All poems reprinted from *Obscenities*, Michael Casey, copyright 1972 by Yale University Press.

HORACE COLEMAN. "A Downed Black Pilot Learns How to Fly," *Giant Talk*, Quincy Troupe and Rainer Schulte, eds., Vintage Books, 1975. "A Black Soldier Remembers," "Remembrance of Things Past," and "OK Corral East/Brothers in the Nam," *Between a Rock & a Hard Place*, Horace Coleman, BkMk Press, 1977. "Night Flare Drop, Tan Son Nhut," and "In Ca Mau," *Speak Easy, Speak Free*, Antar S. K. Mberi and Cosmo Pieterse, eds., International Publishers, 1977.

W. D. EHRLHART. "The Blizzard of Sixty-Six" reprinted from *The Outer Banks & Other Poems*, W. D. Ehrhart, Adastra Press, 1984. "Twice Betrayed" reprinted from *Winter Bells*, W.D. Ehrhart, Adastra Press, 1988. All other poems reprinted from *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired: New & Selected Poems*, W. D. Ehrhart, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984.

BRYAN ALEC FLOYD. All poems reprinted from *The Long War Dead*, Bryan Alec Floyd, The Permanent Press, 1983.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA. All poems reprinted from *Dien Cai Dau*, Yusef Komunyakaa, Wesleyan University Press, 1988.

GERALD MCCARTHY. "The Hooded Legion" first appeared in *TriQuarterly*. All other poems reprinted from *War Story*, Gerald McCarthy, The Crossing Press, 1977.

WALTER McDONALD. "The Winter before the War" first appeared in *Aura* under the title "At Lake MacBride." "For Kelly, *Missing in Action*" first appeared in *College English*; reprinted by permission of the National Council of Teachers of English. "Faraway Places" first appeared in *Ball State University Forum*. "The Retired Pilot to Himself" first appeared in *Poet Lore*. "The Food Pickers of Saigon" first appeared in *TriQuarterly*. "New Guy" first appeared in *Event* (Canada). "Caliban in Blue," "For Harper, *Killed in Action*," "Interview with a Guy Named Fawkes, U.S. Army," and "Rocket Attack" are reprinted from *Caliban in Blue*, Walter McDonald, Texas Tech University Press, 1976. "Once You've Been to War" is

UNACCUSTOMED MERCY

reprinted from *The Flying Dutchman*, Walter McDonald, copyright 1987 by Ohio State University Press; all rights reserved. All other poems reprinted from *After the Noise of Saigon*, Walter McDonald, University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

BASIL PAQUET. "Morning—A Death," "Group Shot," and "Mourning the Death, By Hemorrhage, of a Child from Honai" first appeared in *The New York Review of Books*. All other poems first appeared in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, Jan Barry, Basil T. Paquet, and Larry Rottmann, eds., 1st Casualty Press, 1972.

BRUCE WEIGL. "The Sharing" reprinted from *A Romance*, copyright 1979 by Bruce Weigl, by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press. "Anna Grasa" and "Monkey" first appeared in *Ironwood Magazine*. "Mines" and "Him, on the Bicycle" first appeared in *Field*. "Sailing to Bien Hoa" first appeared in *The Western Humanities Review*. "On the Anniversary of Her Grace" first appeared in *Prairie Schooner*. "What Saves Us" first appeared in *Colorado Review*. All other poems reprinted from *The Monkey Wars*, copyright 1985 by Bruce Weigl, by permission of the University of Georgia Press.

PREFACE

THE POETRY

The war poetry of the western world begins, of course, with *The Iliad*, in which Hector expresses the warrior's creed: "I have trained myself always, like a good soldier, to take my place in the front line and win glory." As he leaves for an overseas duty assignment, Hector prays to Zeus:

Grant that this boy of mine may be, like me,
preeminent in Troy; as strong and brave as I; a
mighty king of Ilium. May people say when he comes
back from battle, "Here is a better man than his
father." Let him bring home the blood-stained
armour of the enemy he has killed, and make his
mother happy.

(*Iliad*, Penguin, 129)

How utterly foreign these thoughts would have seemed to a young draftee after a month in Vietnam, no doubt a man whose image of war had been formed not by Homer or Virgil (he'd never been required to read them) or even by the significant war poetry of Whitman or Stephen Vincent Benet—but instead only by the silver screen: Hollywood. James Crumley, novelist and Vietnam War veteran, has identified the source of the average American's attitude toward war: "millions of comic books and B-movies." Other than in Crumley's novel, *One to Count Cadence*, if there is any mention of Homer or Virgil in the hundreds of novels and the thousands of poems written about Americans in the Vietnam War, I have not found it—yet to those who know the tradition of war poetry and who also served in Vietnam, the difference between Achilles and Hector and John Wayne and Gary Cooper is not really significant. They're basically, archetypally, the same.

One doubts, though, even as late as 1968 when Wayne starred in Robin Moore's *The Green Berets*, that anyone realized how completely this 2000-year-old heroic tradition was to become obscured by the reality of war in Vietnam.

Poetry usually propagates and perpetuates myth. Therefore, such disparate American war epics as Joel Barlow's *Columbiad* and Benet's *John Brown's Body* depend upon classic roots and archetypes, as does even Peter Bowman's *Beach Red* (1945), a moving verse novel about World War II. In epics, however, one loses sight of the carnage and horror in favor of the overall fated

grandeur of it all; and in these and most of the other earlier war poems (Hardy's "Channel Firing," Arnold's "Dover Beach," Jarrell's "The Death of The Ball Turret Gunner," and Owen's "Arms and The Boy" come immediately to mind) the inevitable clash of tragic forces seems to hold a reader's primary attention.

That archetypal interplay was what many of us were taught to see in poetry and was no doubt what traditional poets, despite their respective levels of combat experience, were also conditioned to see and write about.

The war in Vietnam changed all that, too, and as a result the poetry which has come from this conflict is as different from the tradition as the war itself was from any previous one. Even in the longer poetic works such as McAvoy Layne's *How Audie Murphy Died in Vietnam* (1973) or Dick Shea's *Vietnam Simply* (1967), the whole becomes lost in the parts, and there seems to be no cosmic interplay at all, just the momentary lyrical thoughts of poets who see nothing but that day, that moment, that fire fight, who feel that perhaps nothing will ever be, nor ever has been, quite the same.

What has resulted is a different kind of serious poetry about the Vietnam War that has yet to find an appreciative audience, and I think the fault may be ours—the academics—who seem to have trouble assigning or anthologizing poetry that something can't be "said" about. In the sixties and seventies, the same problem initially obtained with the beat and black poets. With only a few exceptions, for instance, the poems in this collection are essentially non-"literary"; that is, they require little explication; they come from no recognizable tradition; they usually invent their own forms; and their only context is that of the rice paddy, the landing zone, or the jungle. In this light, I would urge that teachers and readers of this poetry learn the facts of the Vietnam War, understand the new metaphors and jargon of the GI, consult maps to identify the frequent geographical allusions, put aside their preconceptions about the war and what they think good poetry has been, and look at how fine these poems can be. In all cases, Vietnam War poetry speaks for itself, often in brutal, explicit language. After all, to those of us who served in Vietnam, the war was the most explicit experience we have ever seen, and not to use the language of the war would be to lie about it—and to be dishonest, even for the sake of art, is the one thing an American Vietnam War veteran is never going to be able to do. He feels that he has been deceived enough, and he refuses to inflict another lie on others.

What are these poems about? There is only one really universal subject: the *lack* of universals—country, God, truth, peace, even love. A few of the Vietnam War poets such as Balaban, McDonald, Komunakaa, and Weigl do see beyond the war to cyclical but not archetypal patterns of human existence; however, the majority of poets present only the now—the immediacy of the war that they feel has matured them abruptly beyond their years. Their subjects are taken from virtually all aspects of the war: fire fights; the jungle; Vietnamese children; rape; death of a buddy; body bags; the wounded; a rocket attack; black dudes in a bar; whores; old and young Vietnamese; street scenes; arrival in Vietnam; coming home; guilt; loss of innocence; trauma; memories; temples; Vietnamese markets; and so on—a veritable tapestry of the Vietnam experience.

Interestingly, in this anthology there are no political poems; those were written for the most part by the non-participants, by established poets such as Ferlinghetti and Stafford and Bly and Levertov whose anti-war poems helped define early on the intellectual community's opposition to the war. There is included only one love poem spoken by a soldier about his wife, and only McDonald's excruciatingly passionate poems about his family as well as Balaban's sense of history place real frameworks around the actuality of being at war in Vietnam.

Some of these men are too consciously writing "poetry"; others seem trying only to tell it the way they think it was by means of short lines. Some use *personae*, to varying degrees of success. Many use metaphor, but few do so consciously and consistently, and there are many lines that will make a conventional critic cringe. Some poets, however, have created mighty lines that stand among the best. In short, the styles and techniques are as varied as were the experiences of the war itself.

The themes of these poems range from the standard to the particularly modern. There are, of course, poems about the brutality of war; the loss of innocence; the unneeded death of civilians; and the sad actuality of a war that will never seem over. A few, such as John Balaban (the only poet of the war who speaks Vietnamese), imply a rebirth after the ravages of war. Most of the standard war themes are here. Virgil would recognize them: *arma virumque cano*, with the emphasis on man.

Making this body of poetry unique, however, are the new themes that reflect not only the war but the consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. One should note that of the twelve poets in this anthology, ten had their primary experience with Vietnam

during 1967-70, the years in which the American attitudes toward the war changed so radically. Until the North Vietnamese Tet offensive of early 1968, most Americans saw the war as winnable; but after the Kent State shootings of May 1970, few aware Americans sought any other solution but withdrawal. Little wonder then, that so much of this Vietnam War poetry shows disillusion and loss.

Consequently, the new (and representative) themes that are seen in these poems are as follows: the individual's sense of guilt because of his participation in the war; extreme bitterness at having been forced into the war; the essential stupidity and causelessness of the war; an intense feeling of dislocation, of being a stranger in a strange land; and over and over again, the theme of the ignorance of normal Americans, both overseas and at home. Overall, a reader senses that each of these poets feels used, hardly a cog in a mighty machine but rather a misfit, one who understands what no other American can.

As with their use of metaphor, these poets also use imagery in an eclectic manner, but greens (for the jungle) and black (as an ominous symbol) predominate, as does cold, an oddity unless one has been in Southeast Asia and realizes that historically hell has possessed the opposite qualities of one's mortal, geographical existence.

Many of the poems are dateable, and I should like to repeat my earlier suggestion that the best way to apprehend these works is to know their context. If for the Vietnam combat soldier the John Wayne myth died in a barrage of AK-47 fire, so for the Vietnam War poets did The New Criticism also lose relevance. The poetry of this war *must* be read with history and politics in mind; only then will the full intensity of some of these remarkable poems come through.

Overall, these poems are the products of men who were either raised or imagined themselves in Hector's image, as portrayed unknowingly by John Wayne, and who arrived in Vietnam ready to take their places "in the front line and win glory." Their poetry shows, however, how quickly their concerns shifted, as W. D. Ehrhart puts it, only to "the next step./The next step./The next step."

THE POETS

JOHN BALABAN's poems contain some of the richest and most sustained metaphors of all and should be noted for their sound and

rhythms. Balaban alone seems able to refine himself out of his poetry and to become at times the Yeatsian smiling poet (one suspects an intentional "Lapis Lazuli" echo at the end of "Mr. Giai's Poem"). Able to transcend the immediacy of war, Balaban shows the basic unity of existence, despite man's brutal attempts to alter it. In "April 30, 1975," for instance, even though the Vietnam War has ended, there is still violence of yet another kind in Brooklyn. Nevertheless, the "dust of life" can (one hopes) be washed away by a "Clear Mind." Also, perhaps showing his maturity, Balaban is the only poet who writes of the role of poetry in "For Mrs. Cam, . . ."—and his poems do indeed "coat" themselves "in lacquers of the mind."

JAN BARRY's poems are marked by his bitter sense of irony, from the American soldier who replaces Ghengis Khan's "Ah so!" with "Gawd! Damn!" to the father's definition of a patriot:

Well, I guess, a person
who loves the land.
Although some people act as if
a patriot's a man
who hates another land.

Reflecting Barry's 1962-63 service in Vietnam, his poems show the incredulity of normal Americans at the feeling of being in the green jungle or observing a Buddhist suicide by fire. (Here, as noted earlier, a reader should know about the protest suicides that led to President Ngo Dinh Diem's overthrow in 1963.) Barry's poems are basically realistic, repertorial vignettes that show innocent Americans being made aware of realities they have difficulty comprehending.

D. F. BROWN presents a bitter, apocalyptic vision in poems that are impressionistic and often stylized. Rimbaud's influence goes far beyond the epigraphs to "Returning Fire" and "Eating the Forest," and the opening lines of "Illumination" where the day has "a lime glow" and "evening lasts five gray minutes" capture the essence of being under the Asian triple canopy. In "Eating the Forest," "the 10,000 versions/of the war are one/in the great, late All-Night," and in most of his poems, the darkness of reality seems indistinguishable from the blackness of his nightmares. Sometimes, Brown's abrupt juxtapositions, as in "Returning Fire," create such a sense of disjointedness that even Gary Cooper would be unable to resolve it. Obsessed with green memories, Brown searches "for sunlight/through/this tangle" that has been this war.

MICHAEL CASEY's short-lined story poems are among the most cynical in this collection; and his basic view is that Americans who have been made to "feel strange" ("For the Old Man") are those who also brutalize the Vietnamese landscape ("A Bummer"), then consider a dismembered body only another "Road Hazard." His are illumination rounds of poems: short, sharp, clear, and didactic. When a reader realizes that every election in South Vietnam was either rigged or disallowed by the ruling junta of the time, the irony of the Vietnamese girl's having voted for "Hoa Binh" (peace) becomes supreme as the speaker, the American at war, says, "I did too."

HORACE COLEMAN, better than any other Vietnam War poet, presents in his "OK Corral East/Brothers in the Nam" the ironic juxtaposition of the American Frontier and the black American's newly enraged consciousness. Using an allusive compression unusual in Vietnam War poems, Coleman portrays accurately and ominously the black/white confrontation that pervaded the '60s, showing that this war within the war may have transcended the obvious shooting hostilities. Black/white imagery controls many of his poems: "The dark/like the VC always comes back"; "black fingers on our white throats"—and even though Coleman, like Balaban, presents a cyclical view of existence as in "In Cau Mau," the future is usually ominous and essentially terrifying. Finally, the poem "Night Flare Drop, Tan Son Nhut," must be read in context: the scene is Saigon (the main U.S. Air Force Base) and the date is January 1968 when the North Vietnamese unleashed their nationwide attacks during what had been the annual agreed-upon truce period.

W. D. EHRHART, for many reasons considered the Dean of Vietnam War poets, shows over and over again the effect of the war on a youthful, aware consciousness. With the possible exception of Bruce Weigl and Gerald McCarthy, Ehrhart more than any other poet writes of the inability of an American to shed his feelings of betrayal and guilt that participation in the war engendered. Ehrhart's is poetry of statement; his lyrics are really little narratives of disillusion that move from a rather objective view that both sides cause destruction ("Farmer Nguyen," an early poem) to the bitterness of "A Relative Thing" where America seems to be the only villain. Most of his poems are intensely personal, so much so that one can hear him pleading for forgiveness ("Letter") or agonizing about his own image in Asia ("Making The Children Behave"). Emotionally a pacifist, Ehrhart does show in his major

poem "A Confirmation," some measure of resolution and affirmation, but his poetry is best characterized by the ending of "The Blizzard of Sixty-Six" where despite everything, "the snow keeps falling."

BRYAN ALEC FLOYD's individual portraits of U.S. Marines are unique in the canon of Vietnam War poetry and remind one of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*. Often discursive, his poems startle the reader with adroit images: a maimed girl's expression of love "*strafes*" Sgt. Just's ears; and sound: PFC Morgenstein "had chosen the goal of his groin/and it was to grieve"; and the memory of kissing his wife makes PFC Morgenstein recall that "a piece of the sun/was in her mouth." Brutally descriptive one moment, lyrically lovely the next, Floyd's poems offer an ironic panorama of many different characters and attitudes. "Private First Class Brooks Morgenstein, U.S.M.C." is quite simply the best Vietnam War poem written about the love of a combat soldier for his wife, and the image of a uniform clinging to "him like a huge wet sock" aptly shows what it felt like to be an American in an Asian jungle.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA did not start writing poetry about Vietnam, but an encounter in graduate school with another veteran, who insisted that he must do so, may have sparked what has become an increasingly significant body of work. Unlike many of the other poets, Komunyakaa writes not only of individual experiences but also of groups: GIs on the beach, Viet Cong prisoners, Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon, the boat people. His images are often wrenching: a moon "cuts through/night trees like a circular saw"; alleys are littered "like the insides/kicked out of pillows"; boat people's faces resemble "yellow sea grapes." Most of Komunyakaa's poems show the measured reflection of a consciousness that is still expanding and is not limited only to the poet's own Vietnam experience as a black man in combat.

GERALD MCCARTHY projects two distinct sensibilities: the poet of "War Story" who writes brutal, jarring verse; and the later, reflective observer who, unable to force the war out of his consciousness, feels only an overwhelming coldness around him. His "War Story" poems are much like those of McAvoy Layne's *How Audie Murphy Died in Vietnam*: realistic, sardonic, image-free, immediate. "The Sound of Guns," however, and "The Fall of Danang" (set in the mid-seventies, seven years after his Vietnam service) show McCarthy attempting to achieve resolution, but failing. "The Hooded Legion" is the only poem in this collection

about the Vietnam Wall, the Washington memorial, and is one of the few poems of the many I have seen about the Wall that is not (albeit honestly) sentimental. "Weaponless and cold" (McCarthy's main metaphor), Vietnam veterans in this poem wish for the impossible: a hand that could many years before have turned them aside.

WALTER McDONALD is the most prolific poet in this collection and is one of the best poets writing in America today. McDonald is a literary as well as a personal poet, but like Robert Frost (McDonald has been called "the Frost of Texas hardscrabble"), he never lets his personal anguish about the Vietnam War obscure his basic love of humanity. He selects a subject and universalizes it. He plays with tetrameters in one poem, then soars with free verse in the next. Above all, he writes of human relations, especially of family, and his sardonically allusive "Caliban in Blue" should delight anyone who knows Coleridge and Browning. Like Coleridge, McDonald's primary concern is with the "moral sense," and even though (in "New Guy") the American hears Vietnamese women speaking in "alien voices/like angels speaking in tongues," one realizes that the basis of McDonald's vision is a love of, and return to, the humanity that really counts.

BASIL T. PAQUET wants his readers to share his anguish at the deaths of men he tended as a medic—and he succeeds. Of all the writers in this collection, he seems most able to make his poetry recreate the uselessness of combat death, and his poems hurt. Although Paquet writes occasionally in *persona*, a reader knows that it is Paquet himself who has become "tired of kissing the dead" ("Morning—A Death"—one of his many puns). He tastes the blood of the dead upon him often in his poems, and he experiments obviously with almost every device known to self-conscious poets: allusion, consonance, assonance, internal and true rhyme (including two dactyls that are excruciatingly memorable), and dramatic monologue. Paquet shares the anguished awareness of Richard Currey, whose *Fatal Light* (Dutton, 1988) also shows how a medical attendant feels.

BRUCE WEIGL's poems can be read sequentially, from "Sailing to Bien Hoa" to "What Saves Us." Like so many other Vietnam veterans who are also artists, Weigl is compelled to return to what W. D. Ehrhart has called "the single most important experience of [one's] life." Wracked by his experiences in the war, Weigl has to date written more important retrospective poems than has anyone else, and his technical mastery of image (one should watch his use

of weather and black clouds) accentuates his apocalyptic vision. "Song of Napalm" shows Weigl's adroit juxtaposition of placid vistas with war scenes, and only the somewhat obscure ending of "What Saves Us" keeps this poem from being as good as McDonald's "The Winter before the War" as a testament to and explanation of what going to war is all about.

A PERSONAL NOTE

My work on this anthology has been hardly a labor of love, but rather a labor of commitment. Those who participated in the Vietnam War know well the phrase "It don't mean nothin'"—and I confess to having often wished that I could write off the war with the same phrase.

"It don't mean nothin,'" however, does not mean that the speaker (who *must* be a Vietnam veteran) does not care. Quite the opposite. This phrase is the universal statement (often unvoiced by the millions of Americans who just did their duty, who are not "traumatized," and who are now moving into positions of extreme responsibility) of men and women who are angry and frustrated at what they see as the bullshit of everyday existence perpetuated by people who have lost touch with what really counts.

"Don't mean nothin'" is *the* angry phrase of the Vietnam veteran—and if you ask one if he or she has ever read the poetry written about the war, you'll get a shrug. A few will tell you that Steve Mason is the "Poet Laureate of the Vietnam War." Other vets will tell you that Steve Mason wrote *Chickenhawk* (it was Robert Mason), the best prose narrative about helicopter combat. Something must mean something.

If you submit a questionnaire to college students, as I have often, that asks basic questions about the Vietnam War: when it started, when it ended, who fought, who won—you would gag at the responses. However, the generation that was born during the Vietnam War is beginning to realize that it knows absolutely *nothing* about that war, and to them, their ignorance does mean something. To me, their honest expression of ignorance makes my life worthwhile.

This collection of poetry, albeit only a representative sample (as W. D. Ehrhart mentions in his introduction), shows what the war was to the sensitive, aware, literate people who hung their asses out for their country—a decision that, given alternatives, all thinking men and women must make at some time in their lives. These poems

UNACCUSTOMED MERCY

do mean something, and I've read many of them to audiences of both veterans (10%) and nonveterans (90%).

What has fascinated me is this: while they're listening, the vets watch the nonvets in the audience, and when the kids (who are about the same age as those who served in Vietnam) cry, so do the vets. So it all does mean something—as Homer, who never lifted a spear, understood.

Such is the power of poetry.

Anyone who ignores this book does so at his or her future peril.

John Clark Pratt
Vietnam, Thailand, Laos—1969-70

CONTENTS

Preface vii

Introduction 1

John Balaban 7

The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge 7

Along the Mekong 8

Mau Than 9

Opening Le Ba Khon's Dictionary 12

The Dragonfish 12

After Our War 13

For Mrs. Cam, Whose Name Means "Printed Silk" 14

April 30, 1975 15

In Celebration of Spring 16

News Update 17

Thoughts before Dawn 19

Story 19

Mr. Giai's Poem 20

Words for My Daughter 21

Jan Barry 25

In the Footsteps of Genghis Khan 25

Nights in Nha Trang 26

A Nun in Ninh Hoa 27

Floating Petals 28

Green Hell, Green Death 28

Harvest Moon 29

Lessons 30

D. F. Brown 33

Coming Home 33

Patrols 33

Returning Fire 34

When I Am 19 I Was a Medic 37

Illumination 38

I Was Dancing Alone in Binh Dinh Province 38

Eating the Forest 39

Still Later There Are War Stories 42

First Person—1981 43

Vietnamization 43

UNACCUSTOMED MERCY

Michael Casey 45

- A Bummer 45
- Road Hazard 46
- The LZ Gator Body Collector 46
- For the Old Man 47
- Hoa Binh 48

Horace Coleman 49

- OK Corral East/Brothers in the Nam 49
- Night Flare Drop, Tan Son Nhut 50
- Remembrance of Things Past 50
- In Ca Mau 51
- A Black Soldier Remembers 52
- A Downed Black Pilot Learns How to Fly 52

W. D. Ehrhart 55

- Farmer Nguyen 56
- Night Patrol 56
- The Next Step 56
- Guerrilla War 57
- Hunting 58
- A Relative Thing 59
- Making the Children Behave 60
- To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired 61
- Letter 61
- A Confirmation 63
- The Blizzard of Sixty-Six 66
- Twice Betrayed 67

Bryan Alec Floyd 69

- Private Ian Godwin, U.S.M.C. 69
- Sergeant Brandon Just, U.S.M.C. 70
- Corporal Charles Chungtu, U.S.M.C. 71
- Lance Corporal Purdue Grace, U.S.M.C. 72
- Private Jack Smith, U.S.M.C. 72
- Captain James Leson, U.S.M.C. 75
- Corporal Kevin Spina, U.S.M.C. 75
- Private First Class Brooks Morgenstein, U.S.M.C. 76

Yusef Komunyakaa 79

- Somewhere near Phu Bai 79
- Starlight Scope Myopia 80