

More Than a Memory

HORACE COLEMAN (REVIEWER)

More Than a Memory: Reflections of Viet Nam, Victor R. Volkman, editor (Modern History Press, 2009)

Some people say "There's only two kinds of music: Country & Western!" Duke Ellington said "There are only two kinds of music, good and bad." Both broad statements exclude much that's worthy.

More Than a Memory: Reflections of Viet Nam is a collection of poetry and prose. In one of the essays in the collection called, "Nothing So Bad It's Not Poetry," Alan Farrell talks about what he calls "Vietvet or Namvet poetry."

He writes "As I look back at my favorite war poems, poems I've learned in school, I find that—to the extent that they meant any thing to me—they do so for reasons mostly of form, of structure, of rhyme, of rhythm, of image . . . of craft in short."

What it really comes down to is something that gets your attention about something the writer makes you care about as he pleases you. Something worth saying said well. Craft is how well you use the tools picked to get the job done. The worth of the job is how well it does what it's supposed to do.

Farrell reincarnates and updates Rudyard Kipling's Tommy Atkins in Nam in his poem *The Man Who Outlived His Lieutenant*. Its refrain goes:

That's a combat man 'ere talkin';

sir
Seen the bear an' smelt 'is fur
Shots in anger, CIB
Get in a fight, jus' do like me

Before the review copy arrived, I was rereading *Obscenities* by Michael Casey (published in 1972) and enjoying, once again, the poem "A Bummer," which ends:

If you have a farm in Vietnam
And a house in hell
Sell the farm
And go home

Did you hear someone way back there, way back in the day say ". . . Sell the farm and keep the house!?" It don't mean nothing if you didn't hear some variation; you know the feeling. The combination of content, remembrance and comment do the job. However, often the more you have to bring to the work to "get it" well the less work the writer has done well.

Casey made the mold—or caught the spirit—of much of the early published poetry of Nam vets: Flat in tone, matter of fact, direct and conversational, stripped of rhyme and meter; short on imagery.

For a long time vets who'd been there and lived that found it hard to publish in mainstream outlets—no matter the quality of their work. The academic and "professional" poets held the high ground—they deserved it (supposedly) because of their reputations and for bravely "speaking out." Who were those people who thought

their experience equaled others "proven talent" and "experienced eloquence?"

Every thing vets wrote was just the same old story, a fight for survival—not glory—comic grossness, callous humor. Although *More Than A Memory* is uneven in quality, it has high points.

Marc Levy uses the Casey approach well in his poem *Peace Time*. It lists the names soldiers had for combat and describes what happened in spare and matter of fact language like Jack Webb's policeman Sgt. Friday or cowboy John Wayne or Clint Eastwood might (with effective repetition). One verse goes:

They walked into our patrol
Or we walked into theirs
Or we ambushed them
Or they'd ambushed us
Or we walked into each other
Or they hit us with mortars
Or overran us with sappers
Or booby-trapped our automatics
Or we called in Arty

Repetition with variation of the same ol' deadly same ol' recreated with words describing the ways death and numbness came.

Levy's short prose piece *Whatever You Did in War Will Always Be with You* gives the lowdown on the lingering regret too many still have, says what PTSD is and briefly describes some treatments for it.

Levy's prose pieces *Torque in Ankor Wat* and *Off the Road*

are gritty travelogues of his odysseys in Cambodia and Vietnam respectively. Preston Hood, the writer with the most publishing credits in the contributors' notes, paints an image of *Boats Near Hue, Vietnam, 1997* with lines like "The sea: white beach in formless prayer" and "Dark clouds shoulder into a gathering storm." In the last verse of *Pop Smoke*, Dayle Wise brushes aside the macho shield of invulnerability warriors carry:

We're tired and want to go home.
Mother take us back.
Let us suckle in your arms.
We've been very bad.

There's a thing called Cowboy Poetry. It has its own form, style, subject matter, situations, types of people and behaviors, locale and target audience. It's of the people, populist and not academic or traditional—except in its own tradition. Vietvet / Namvet poetry same same. You pay your money, spend your time and some of it satisfies. Which implies the obvious and opposite.



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