

Vietnam War Poetry

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Facts about Vietnam Poetry:

- Vernacular
- Short meters
- Blunt
- First-person narratives
- Themes of guilt, shame, and regret
- Loss of innocence
- Anti-war poetry
- Most written by war veterans

"The Asians Dying" by W. S. Merwin

When the forests have been destroyed their
darkness remains
The ash the great walker follows the possessors
Forever
Nothing they will come to is real
Nor for long
Over the watercourses
Like ducks in the time of the ducks
The ghosts of the villages trail in the sky
Making a new twilight

Rain falls into the open eyes of the dead
Again again with its pointless sound
When the moon finds them they are the color of
everything

The nights disappear like bruises but nothing is healed
The dead go away like bruises
The blood vanishes into the poisoned farmlands
Pain the horizon
Remains
Overhead the seasons rock
They are paper bells
Calling to nothing living

The possessors move everywhere under Death their
star
Like columns of smoke they advance into the
shadows
Like thin flames with no light
They with no past
And fire their only future

"To Whom It May Concern" by Adrian Mitchell

I was run over by the truth one day
Ever since the accident I've walked this way
So stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Vietnam
Heard the alarm clock screaming with pain
Couldn't find myself, so I went back to sleep again
So fill my ears with silver
Stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Vietnam
Every time I shut my eyes, all I see is flames
I made a marble phone-book, and I carved all the
names
So coat my eyes with butter
Fill my ears with silver
Stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Vietnam
I smell something burning, hope it's just my brains
They're only dropping peppermints and daisy-chains
So stuff my nose with garlic

Coat my eyes with butter
Fill my ears with silver
Stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Vietnam
Where were you at the time of the crime?
Down by the Cenotaph, drinking slime
So chain my tongue with whisky
Stuff my nose with garlic
Coat my eyes with butter
Fill my ears with silver
Stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Vietnam
You put your bombers in, you put your conscience
out
You take the human being, and you twist it all about
So scrub my skin with women
So chain my tongue with whisky
Stuff my nose with garlic
Coat my eyes with butter
Fill my ears with silver
Stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Vietnam.

“*Beautiful Wreckage*” by W. D. Ehrhart

What if I didn’t shoot the old lady
running away from our patrol,
or the old man in the back of the head,
or the boy in the marketplace?

Or what if the boy—but he didn’t
have a grenade, and the woman in Hue
didn’t lie in the rain in a mortar pit
with seven Marines just for food,

Gaffney didn’t get hit in the knee,
Ames didn’t die in the river, Ski
didn’t die in a medevac chopper
between Con Thien and Da Nang.

In Vietnamese, Con Thien means
place of angels. What if it really was
instead of the place of rotting sandbags,
incoming heavy artillery, rats and mud.

What if the angels were Ames and Ski,
or the lady, the man, and the boy,
and they lifted Gaffney out of the mud
and healed his shattered knee?

What if none of it happened the way I said?
Would it all be a lie?
Would the wreckage be suddenly beautiful?
Would the dead rise up and walk

Other good poems

- “The Songs We Fought For” by Walter McDonald
- “[Poem Issued by Me to Congressmen]” by George Starbuck
- “Woe Are You” by Don Mee Choi
- “If In America” by Ed Bok Lee

Further Readings

<https://apjff.org/2018/17/Goldensohn.html>

<https://www.vqronline.org/essay/soldier-poets-vietnam-war>

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War/French-rule-ended-Vietnam-divided>

<https://www.cnn.com/2013/07/01/world/vietnam-war-fast-facts/index.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/22/adrian-mitchell-vietnam>

<https://time.com/vietnam-photos>

<https://youtu.be/dQIKwqND5Nw>

https://youtu.be/aB7r3v_mgHg

https://www.jstor.org/stable/41054459?seq=6#metadata_info_tab_contents

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<https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/dashboard>