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**vietnam
voices**



Compiled by
R. H. MORRISON
Overland

vietnam VOICES

A Retrospect

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All correspondence should be addressed:
Editor, *Overland*, G.P.O. Box 98a, Melbourne, 3001.

Editor: S. Murray-Smith

Advisory Editors:

Ian Turner, John McLaren, Barrie Reid, Vane Lindesay (Melbourne), Tom Errey (Hobart), Rodney Hall (Brisbane), Dorothy Hewett (Perth), Donald Maynard (Papua New Guinea), Laurence Collinson (Britain).

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Think of Gallipoli: Australians are accustomed to celebrating military defeat.

But Vietnam is not a defeat that we are likely to celebrate — or even to remember, if we can manage to forget. This for two reasons: firstly, because, while we lost the battle on Gallipoli, we were on the side which won the war; secondly, because Vietnam is cause not for pride but for shame — shame not because we came away defeated but because we went.

The Australian presence in Vietnam was born in deceit. It was a shabby attempt to buy cheap insurance concealed behind a smokescreen of cold war rhetoric.

The purpose was not to protect South Vietnam; it was to preserve Australian conservatism. And our leaving was shrouded in lies just as was our going.

The Australian people were not told the truth about why we had entered, nor why we had left, nor that we had lost.

In the end, it was not so much political understanding (though this was growing too) as moral revulsion against the daily spectacle of the world's most powerful nation beating hell out of a small, underdeveloped country which swung the majority against the war. The government could go on no longer; the switch in American policy merely facilitated what was already inevitable.

Vietnam did many things to Australia. It polarised opinion on Australia's relations with the outside world, as sharply as the polarisation which took place in the last two years of World War I. As between generations, it broke the nexus of common assumptions concerning Australia's future and much else.

It forced Australia out of the political doldrums in which we had lain for two decades. It made it necessary for the new government to find a new road in foreign affairs. It destroyed one pride, and created another.

Vietnam engaged the minds and hearts of poets and painters in a way that no cause had done since Spain. It is with this in mind that Mr R. H. Morrison has brought these poems together for us, and to him we tender our thanks. We publish this collection both as a matter of record and because we feel that now we can — without denying it — draw a line under our shame.

foreword

Anyone studying the Australian poetry of our time will be struck by a significant fact: the anti-war ranks in the community have enlisted some of our finest poets, but the pro-war elements are poetically silent. Is this because those who, even with the best of patriotic motives, welcomed, supported and justified Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war know at heart that they have stifled something in their conscience? A poet who has maimed his own humanity becomes mute.

By force of circumstance this anthology has turned out to be above all a record of anguish and of protest. There was no editorial bias to exclude poems in favor of the war. Had any been found, they would have been given a fair hearing. Indeed, a leading ex-service organization was among those approached in good faith and asked to make known any poems about the war, but nothing came forward from any quarter but the voices of grief, anger, compassion, shame, sarcasm, and condemnation. It must not be assumed however that the contributors whose work follows are somehow in league, or that they would necessarily subscribe to my own assessment. They are individual and diverse. They hold to various political opinions and religious creeds. Their responsibility here goes no further than the words of the poems to which they have separately put their names.

The title of this anthology grew out of a process of elimination. *Vietnam Poetry* would not have been right, for some of the works chosen are hardly poems. *Vietnam Verse* might have seemed inadequate, because some of the contents are fine poems, and others effective prose. *Vietnam Voices* is meant to place the emphasis on the voices of conscience which speak to us here through a variety of forms, with different degrees of inspiration, talent, or plain sincerity. It may be only rarely that in the midst of strife and bitter turmoil the poet can make that fusion between poetic creativeness and barbarous reality which yields a true poem. Perhaps finer poems will come to be written on reflection as the Indo-China war ends — will it ever end? . . . In the meantime we have these poems created during years of intense feeling, in the face of an issue which has divided our community as few other issues have done since the first world war.

To some — the supporters of our Vietnam intervention — this collection may appear as evidence that the poets of Australia are lacking in a proper appreciation of our international obligations. To others the same collection cannot help seeming an indictment of governments which, in their view, year after year squandered Australian lives, honor, and material in the

name of policy — the policy of currying favor with what they regard as some of the worst elements in the United States. One section of our citizens will say that these government have only done what they thought should be done in the interests of national security. To the other section our 'political Cheap Jacks' stand condemned, not only for what is considered the moral baseness of that policy but for its utter uselessness. To the anti-war party, they are not the only guilty ones. A bad government cannot for ever pervert and mislead a wholly good community. Those who favor the war may have wished it to continue. The others will hold that citizens must become aware of the evil things being done on their behalf, and resolve to rid themselves of them, as a patient recovering health throws off a disease. Whatever the merits and demerits of the opposing camps, how right it is that in a democracy our leaders — to some the honorable leaders, to others the guilty misleaders — can be removed not with the bombs, land-mines, shrapnel, and napalm whose use our governments have authorized or approved, not with scorched earth and water-torture, but with the silent casting of electoral votes.

May this anthology, by stimulating discussion, help Australia to recover its health and increase its self-respect.

R. H. M.

Adelaide
South Australia

deep
within man ROBERT D. FITZGERALD

This does not touch me: that a splatter of lead
punctures the jungle torpor in some broil
north of my life; but that on alien soil
men of our own intrepid young have bled
now greatly does; as do those innocent dead—
good farming folk—who, bent above their toil,
have suffered anguish rained as flaring oil
from what were once kind heavens overhead.

I wish I believed that, there, some threat withstood
makes the cause just, rather than cruelly part
of that old grapple of greeds one must deplore
deep within man; for through this neighbourhood—
like spilling of blood that burns my grass, my heart—
inevitably the children play at war.

verse for
a friend ROBERT D. FITZGERALD

Grandfather on my mother's side,
my father's Irish, quick in me,
mixture of prickles and old pride,
jars from my blood the 'thou' and 'thee'

of those from whom—your kin and clan—
you turned when young in some dispute
with doctrines, rigid for mere man,
bound in the Book, and absolute;

and so, part outcast, part in search
of truth beyond all signs perceived
and faith of meeting-house or church,
studied your mystics and believed.

Yet, fine physician, since you brought
everywhere kindness past all praise
not just your pills—as I was taught
who fare so widely from your ways;

and since defrauded lives are spilt
now in some poisoned swampy field,
conscious of this, my country's guilt,
under hypocrisies concealed,

I reach for any twitch unspent,
of strength inherited, that climbs
back up the ladder of descent
to precepts, hand-hold of your times.

Would not your Quakers have condemned
not just the killing spread like smoke,
burnt tortured flesh, and children maimed,
ravage and murder of a folk—

rather the arrogance and greed
behind such harms? For, at its core,
these are the military creed
which tests all worth in terms of war;

whence victory is the only right,
defeat the only wrong, and kill
strategy's utter aim, despite
craft that can twist these words at will.

Everything that I know of you
says you would break with me from this
against the many; as one must do
harshly, but justly none the less,

paying full tribute to brave men
sacrificed in whatever cause,
and to that duty-and-discipline
which fronts death firmly with grim jaws

where policy, like a game, is played
fatally; and good lives are thrown,
coin of the rivalries of trade,
into some gamble not their own.

Though theirs are virtues to admire,
here you and I and conscience meet.
Elsewhere the village is afire;
women are screaming in the street.

christmas
ballad JUDITH WRIGHT

Then they retrieved the walking dead,
wiped his eyes clear of blood,
replaced his heart with a nylon one
and dry-cleaned his uniform.

Now, Son, we'll send you home.
With your hair brushed over the crack in your head
you look as good as ever you did.
You're the luckiest bloke was ever born.

Home he came and on the wharf
in her best bri-nylon stood his wife.
Darling you look well, she said;
only the children ran and hid.

He went out walking down the street.
Outside the pub his state-school mate
said, Christ, son, where you been?
Come and paint the old town red.

Things have changed since you been gone.
I turned my last-year's Holden in.
You wasn't here when the Cup was run.
You don't say much. Cat got your tongue?

Mercy, pity, peace and love,
shop in our department-store,
the Muzak angels sang above.
A long way off was the napalm war.

Love, mercy, pity, peace,
pluck us from the jungle mud.
Give a nylon heart and a metal head—
it's the newest gift for Christmas.

massacre of
the innocents JUDITH WRIGHT

We speak with the voice
of your daughters, your sons.
We look through the eyes
of all innocent ones.
We are spring, which soon dies.

We are hope, and you kill us.
You will not forget.
We will haunt all your future
like regret—like regret.
We are love, which soon dies.

We are absence and loss.
All the years that you live
you may try to forget us—
no year will forgive.
We are man, who soon dies,

—as your children must die.
Let us live! Let us live!
No year will forgive you
that innocence dies.

a vietnamese
patriot
talks to Jesus DENIS KEVANS

You say you were six hours on the Cross?
—That's true, six hours of sun and dust and sweat.
I am still young, and I have been a score
Of years in battle. I was born upon a battlefield.

You say your mother stood beneath your Cross?
—Yes, my mother and her sister and their friends.
I stooped to see my mother's jellied flesh,
And passed her sparse long hair across my hands.

You say your true friends bore you to your grave?
And placed you there inside with balms and spice?
—They did, it's true.
I wore the balm of phosphorus,
And gas was my incense, and I was shallow-buried
With forty others.

How long the crown of thorns was on your head?
—One night and one day.
So short a torment?
I have worn the coronets of wire and steel
For thirty years, and now they bind my nervous flesh.

And how much vinegar was thrust into your mouth?
—A dab upon a pointed spear.
A dab, brother? I have coughed it
By the rusty cup-full
In the torture-rooms at night where men who wear
The Cross you bore, coax life from those like me
Whose arms are pinned, whose mouth is prized,
Whose thin legs cannot flail for dull fatigue.

How long the scourging that the Romans gave?
—Three sessions of thick leather and sharp chunks
Of lead.
Three sessions, brother? My back is worn
From belting all these years, and now
They thrash me on my clotted skin.

'the saigon-dalat
night-train runs
infrequently...' BRUCE DAWE

These things all happen in a world apart,
More than air- or nautical-miles away,
Where the rice-fields of the travel-folders start
And the glamor of the Orient swathes decay. . .

Grenade-bursts are unreal as temple-gongs,
The rioting Buddhists static in a frieze,
Hiroshima's magicked ten o'clock shopping throngs
No more unreal than these,

Than these whose torment frets us like a dream
Remembered for no reason at midday,
Wherein we hear the muffled future scream
And raise a hand to brush the blood away. . .

the gift
of the gods BRUCE DAWE

*Democracy is a gift of
the gods—and woe
unto those who refuse
their gift!* Duvalier

First the B 52s
then the fixed-wing
and helicopter gunships
then the ground troops
of the Free World
liberating endlessly
by the light of flame-throwers
by the barbecue odor
of phosphorus and jellied petrol
then the pacification teams
speaking the language
organising what's left
of the people distractedly nursing their dead
weeping or worse eyeing
the tall stubbly conquerors
with a stony fear
then the doctors
skilled loving
then the dentists
religiously plucking the caries
from the quaking jaws
then the trucks to carry off the living
then the bulldozers to cover over the rest
then the night
and the sound of ashes
sifting subsiding
then the silence along which in single file
squad of politicians advance
with the wreaths of their breath.

homecoming

BRUCE DAWE

All day, day after day, they're bringing them home,
they're picking them up, those they can find, and bringing them
home,
they're bringing them in, piled on the hulls of Grants, in trucks,
in convoys,
they're zipping them up in green plastic bags,
they're tagging them now in Saigon, in the mortuary coolness
they're giving them names, they're rolling them out of
the deep-freeze lockers—on the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut
the noble jets are whining like hounds,
they are bringing them home
—curly-heads, kinky-hairs, crew-cuts, balding non-coms
—they're high, now, high and higher, over the land, the steaming
chow mein,
their shadows are tracing the blue curve of the Pacific
with sorrowful quick fingers, heading south, heading east,
home, home, home—and the coasts swing upward, the old
ridiculous curvatures
of earth, the knuckled hills, the mangrove swamps, the desert
emptiness . . .
in their sterile housing they tilt towards these like skiers
—taxiing in, on the long runways, the howl of their homecoming
rises
surrounding them like their last moments (the mash, the splendor)
then fading at length as they move
on to small towns where dogs in the frozen sunset
raise muzzles in mute salute,
and on to cities in whose wide web of suburbs
telegrams tremble like leaves from a wintering tree
and the spider grief swings in his bitter geometry
—they're bringing them home, now, too late, too early.

paternal instinct

BRUCE DAWE

*President Johnson
ordered that North
Vietnam should be
'punished harder' for
refusing America's
peace-talks offer, by
stepping up the bomb-
ing of the North.*

Stern Texan! In whose hand the olive branch
Becomes so frequently the brandished switch
Of fatherly chastisement—on this ranch
Only the cleverest child knows which is which.

Sad parent, on the back stoop of the world,
Whaling the living daylights out of men
In whom an impish stubbornness lies curled
—At all costs to be larruped out again!

Grieve, Father, while the righteous blows descend,
Tears flow, and blood, that there should be no less
Ambiguous gift for your hands to extend,
Which would, could they remember how, caress,

And all that fervent tenant-farmer's pride
Redeem a world which such sons have denied.

psalm for
vietnam MARCEL AUROUSSEAU

Stands the boy David in the narrow pass
The dog snapping, snapping
Snapping at his heels.
Behind the dog, Goliath
Urging, urging in tense dogwhisper
(‘Likely the dog will bring the lad down’).
No! No kicking the dog,
That’s cruelty to animals!
The nimble figure, dancing, vigilant,
Holds ground. Fatigue will tell, but
Goliath eyes the sling.

soldier,
soldier TIMOTHY KLINE

Soldier, soldier, will you marry me
With your rifle in your hand?

No, my dear, I must fight the enemy
Far off in a foreign land.

Soldier, soldier, will you sail away
With countless thousands more?

No, some will go and many more will stay
For our country's not at war.

Soldier, soldier, were you picked to be
With the bravest men of all?

No, my dear, you must simply wait and see
If your number's on the ball.

Soldier, soldier, do they take their pick
From those who want to kill?

No, my dear, if the killing makes you sick
You must fight against your will.

Soldier, soldier, will you recognize
Your foe, and make him yield?

No, my dear, he'll be wearing the disguise
Of a peasant in his field.

Soldier, soldier, will you take the blame
For those who mean no harm?
 Friend and foe will look pretty much the same
 When we burn them with napalm.

Soldier, soldier, will I kneel and pray
That the war may not be long?
 No, my dear, it's for men themselves to say
 That men shall do no wrong.

Soldier, soldier, will you love me now
And not wait for your return?
 No, my dear, no child of mine shall grow
 While wives and children burn.

Soldier, soldier, will you have me weep
While youth and love go by?
 Each night in anguish while you sleep
 Unchilded women cry.

Soldier, soldier, must I mourn the dead
Who will suffer at your hand?
 Weep, my dear, on their cold and bloody bed
 It is I who lie unmanned.

song of the
child JAMES McAULEY

*Written for Thomas
Keneally's Childermas
in aid of children in
Vietnam*

What shall we give the Child?
The magi offered gold
And frankincense and myrrh
In homage to a king.

What shall we give the Child?
We offer pain and death
For these belong to man
And they are ours to give.

What shall we give the Child?
A sword instead of peace
And darkness on the earth
For these are ours to give.

Have we no more to give?
Yes, truth and hope and love:
We offer to the Child
What he has given us.

Yes, truth and hope and love,
Our incense, myrrh and gold;
We offer to the Child
The treasure of the heart.

the
mercenary RODNEY HALL

The small girl hugged a rifle
to her shoulder—fired. Now deep
in the mercenary's chest, she hears
 her bullet slap.

He falls like a tree that cannot bend,
his arms outstretched to claw a breeze,
a green sun dancing stupidly
 behind those eyes.

In his cramp of death he picks her out,
but asks no questions that condemn
like those the peasants posed when he
 was killing them.

conversation
piece — vietnam RODNEY HALL

The quick subtraction from our troupe,
then cigarette smoke rushing
to the gap—luxuriating
in obscenity of air
(the friend no longer here).
We now expect no more.

Our ignorance at last has burst
free from entanglement
beneath our camouflage.
We blink at the world we hoped
we'd cleanse and de-corrupt,
give instruction to, adopt.

Let us pray: 'Forgive us our trespasses—'
how does it go then? I forget.
We are each other's expectation
of absence, passing round
the cig. . .

detail:
my lai RODNEY HALL

Beside a paddy field
two boys run toward the gunfire
run for home
crouching as they run.
Is this a game?

 The G.I.s
(wheeling from that village
where murdered people
bubble on the chocked-up road)
watch the young boy fall
on his younger brother
to protect him.

 Chips
of the soft bone hang in the air.
The guys are working.
Is it enough
that there a cameraman
allows us all to squint in
through his streaming eye,
turn round and walk away?

children NANCY KEESING

Long-summer scorched, my surfing children
Catch random waves or thump in dumpers,
Whirling, gasping, tossed, disjointed.
I, watching, fear they may be broken—
That all those foaming limbs may never
Reassemble whole, together.

All under such a peaceful sky.

All under such another sky

The pictures show some village children
Caught at random, tossed, exploded,
Torn, disjointed, like sticks broken,
Whose jagged scorching limbs will never
Reassemble whole, together.

the hazy
hollow NANCY KEESING

Spires of poplars flake an autumn gold
Through drifts of ground mist. From the hazy hollow
The sun has gone. Brown cattle in dripping grasses
Stand quiet to wait for night and white fog shrouds them.

On a low hill, too far for us to hear them
The roosting trees are wheeled by flocks returning.
No sound. No running water even. Night's coming
As voiceless here as Irian, Israel, Vietnam.

Only this paradox—the sleek, fat cattle
Turn sad, deep, filmed Biafran eyes to follow
Our progress. A flurried bird screams from the rushes.
Again all's hushed, stands quiet to wait for night.

elegy for
a conscript R. F. BRISSENDEN

*The words in the
second line are taken
from an article by
Ward Just in the
Australian for 24th
May 1966.*

The day he died,
'Defending freedom as we understand it for people who don't',
Was much like any other.
Casualties, they told us, were 'moderate'.
American soldiers fell in the swamps and paddy-fields;
And the conscript army of freedom-loving, democratically-minded
Air Vice-Marshal Ky,
Shot a few Buddhists, executed a few traitors and deserters,
Beat up a few rioting students,
And left its allies to deal with what we are told
Is the conscript army of the freedom-loving, democratically-
minded Viet Cong.

On the day he died,
The five o'clock drinkers in the city bars
Said in their well-fed, whisky-confident voices,
'Better to fight those Commo bastards
In their own backyard,
Not ours.'
And in the backyards of North Vietnam
We burnt a few more Commo bastards
(Defending freedom as we understand it);
And in the backyards of South Vietnam,
In Da-Nang, Hué, Da-Lat, Saigon,
And towns whose names we yet may hear with horror,
The monks and nuns prepared their petrol shrouds;
And, praising the jewel in the lotus flower,
Steadied themselves to light the terrible torch
Of freedom as they understand it.

my lai at
christmas, 1969 R. F. BRISSENDEN

This is the bitterest thing to realize—
That we are, most of us, ordinary men:
The bewildered angry boy who shot down ten
Or twenty people; the airman with his eyes
Blinded behind dark glass who saw the skies
Fill with incredible light over Japan;
The deafened executioners firing again
And again at Hué to drown their victims' cries—
Can we say that we are different from them?
We've all obeyed our orders, closed our minds
Against the light we are afraid to see,
Stayed dumb instead of speaking. We're not free
From guilt or blame: that blood is on our hands.
We all do Herod's work in Bethlehem.

colloquy
with myself ROBERT CLARK

*On a picture of a child
killed in Vietnam*

Who killed this child?
It was I.
What God will hear my bitter cry?
It was I.

Not that I fired the wandering shot.
I was not there that hour or day.
A fool with guns, I live at ease
Three thousand miles and more away.

I never advocated war.
And yet my taxes paid for lead
That killed this child, the youth who fired
The shot was warrior in my stead.

My leaders (whom I cannot change)
Claim that to make these people free
As I am, to preserve their way
Of life and mine, such things must be.

As free as I, who am not free
To pledge myself! They breathe and live
In this their only burst of being.
What greater gift have we to give?

Is death their freedom? Is freedom real?
Already my mind twists in that screw.
Caught in the stampede of my kind,
A useless beast, what can I do?

Win faith and wait relentlessly
That we will slough the outworn skin
And shame of war and find a new
Relationship to glory in,

Rising above the need of power,
Of being right, of saving face,
Be sure of freedom. War lays bare
Our failure, adds blood to that disgrace.

the new
twenty-third psalm DON CRICK

Yea, John is my shepherd,
I shall survive.
He maketh me to lie down in rice paddies:
He leadeth me beside the great Mekong,
He restoreth my faith:
He leadeth me along jungle paths for L.B.J.'s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no Cong:
For thou, John, art with me: thy gun and thy grenade they
comfort me.
Thou preparest a B52 before me in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with swamp water; my blood runneth
over.
Surely death and destruction shall follow me all the days of my
life:
And I will dwell on a T.P.I. pension forever.

the status

quo ROLAND ROBINSON

Cleaning the tailer inside the estuary,
I see how the birds keep to their professions.
Academic shags hold conclave on the rocks.
Swans feed apart in mother of pearl shallows.

Rusty-hinged gill-birds forage and quarrel
in the honeysuckle scrub. When we took the fish
from the surf, the sea-eagle rode the beach's sweep
from headland to headland. Screams knife in

on the pickings as I leave. It's the human tribes
I see, intent on their own particular gains.
Even the poets, like the common run of gulls,

knife in on the war, camp followers of the king
criminal, whoever makes the kill, slings them
the guts to scrimmage over, snatch and gobble.

questions
for kaspar DOROTHY AUCHTERLONIE

'Why are the soldiers off to war?
O grandsire, tell me please.'
'They fight to right their wrongs, my dear,
And ward off enemies.'

'And these men that we fight, grandsire,
Have done us injuries?
They wish to take our land from us,
And rule us as they please?'

'Well, no, my child, the men we fight
Have never caused us sorrow,
I cannot think they want our land,
Today, nor yet tomorrow.'

'We fight them, child, because their friends
Have filled us with unease,
And might, we think, in time to come
Do us great injuries.'

'But have they done so yet, grandsire?
And do they want our land?
And if they have, and if they do,
Why fight them second-hand?'

'If Peterkin might like my doll,
Or covet my ginger-bread,
Is it quite right for me, grandsire,
To fight his friend instead?'

Old Kaspar shook his head: 'It's plain
Maids cannot understand
How high affairs are carried on
By the elders of the land.'

Now up spake Peterkin: 'Grandsire,
If I wish to fight another,
Should I not then take arms myself,
And not send my baby brother?

'If, as you say, our land's at stake,
Why are not grown men fighting?
Are not these soldiers much too young
To know which wrongs need righting,

'If they're too young to choose the men
Who send them into battle . . . ?'
Old Kaspar frowned: 'You go too far,
Children should learn, not prattle.'

Said Wilhelmine: 'One question more,
And then I shall have finished . . .
If, as they say, this war be long,
Shall we not be diminished?

'If you should slay the flower of your flock
Each year for ten years more,
Will it then be as good a flock,
As ever it was before?'

Old Kaspar rose and shook his stick:
'My little Wilhelmine,
Children, in an Old Man's world,
Should neither be heard nor seen.

'Be off with you and spin your wool,
You've work to do in plenty—
And Peterkin, I'll deal with you,
As soon as you are twenty.'

wilhelmine and the red herring

DOROTHY AUCHTERLONIE

*To Sir Alan Watt, who
admonished Peterkin*

Said Peterkin: 'I cannot think
That grandsire did not hear;
The questions that we asked were plain,
We asked them loud and clear.

'Why did he put words in our mouths,
Words that we did not say?
And answer what we did not ask?
Why did he laugh, I pray?'

Said Wilhelmine: 'Both age and power
Hear what they wish to hear;
Corruption from a lack of use
Will blunt the sharpest ear,

'As too long gazing on the self
Will dim the keenest eye,
And clownish laughter, neatly timed,
Make truth seem like a lie.

'The politician's practised long
At turning argument,
His crab-like motion serves him well
To dodge, to circumvent.

'The patronising smile of age
Achieves a like intent;
'Twas ever thus, O Peterkin,
With mortal government.

'God is not mocked, if men be deaf,
And some have ears to hear,
And hear the questions that you ask
And have their answer clear.

'They know they have no coward heart
And claim their ancient right,
When they are asked to die, to know
Whom, and for what, they fight.

'They do not wish to gild the lies
Of mere expediency;
Nor use a blameless land as shield
To keep their country free.

'To keep their country free—for whom?
From whom? Fear breeds fear . . .
And lies and fear bring that about
Which we have cause to fear.

'No good would come of it at last
Even if we should win,
The infamous victory would remain
The record of a sin.

'The spoils of conquest left to us
As long as we draw breath,
Would be the lie deep in the soul,
More terrible than death:

'God will reward the men who pray
For life at any cost,
With what they ask for—may they then
Remember what they lost.'

cambodian
'incursion' C. B. CHRISTESEN

Of my early boyhood days
I still recall scenes of horror:
Hindus crushed beneath the wheels
Of slow-moving juggernauts.

Those were uncivilized times:
We've progressed since then.
Our juggernauts are made of steel,
Not wood, and travel faster.

The results are similar, though.
Place a pot-bellied child in front
Of those whining caterpillar tracks
And he bursts like a bloody watermelon.

come home,
soldier C. B. CHRISTESEN

There will come a time
When the grass will grow again
And the green leaf hide the blackened trunk;
But now, in our time,
The dread time, the red time,
The soldiers must come home.

*Come home, soldier,
Throw away your rifle,
Come home, come back home.*

There will come a time
When we'll have to face our sons;
Will each one turn from us in hate?
So now, while there still is time,
In this dread time, this red time,
The soldiers must come home.

*Come home, soldier,
For Jesus' sake come home.*

garella
bay DAVID CAMPBELL

For Michael Dransfield

I grew a spotted-gum shaft in my head,
Topped it with leaves, light, birds,
And set a donkey-orchid at its foot
And wondered as the mottled flower took root.

My mind expanded. From a single tree
The forest strode with orchids at its heels
And fishbone cycads, over rocky hills
To make a bamboo curtain for the sea.

Yet hardly had I filched the freckled words
For sun and shadow than an eagle lit
Upon a branch, and silence took the birds
And its hooked question-mark this verse.

my lai DAVID CAMPBELL

I was milking the cow when a row of tall bamboo
 Was mowed by rifle fire
 With my wife and child in the one harvest,
 And the blue milk spilt and ruined.

One life, one field, one wife. Now the village burns
 And the cow chews her cud
 Like an old man's thoughts at evening.
 Blood is sticky. I have lived too long.

My cousin holding his elbow, unbelieving.
 No, no, he has done
 Nothing, his eyes white with wonder
 As they cry, 'I'll get me that one!'

The cow is dead that I lie under,
 Bodies bloat in the sun.
 Who would have thought that they would lie
 So heavily upon my heart?

*The bamboo mowed in lines. Somehow this happened
 Here and in my head.—
 'Put a rocket in that old cow,
 Then it's time to line for chow.'*

poem BRUCE BEAVER

An American/Australian Public Relations Officer reports on the closing of the second decade in the undeclared war in Indo-China.

In the century of the fear of total war we
have been granted a respite, an easing
of psychic tension,
In the continuing form of one aesthetically
balanced, locally centred conflict
ideally limited
To anti-personnel weapons in place of
fail-safe sanctioned total destructors.
Though it is true
Napalm burns to the bare bone and probably
to the marrow in the case of infants,
the gas employed
So effectively over limited areas merely
nauseates. Doubtless many have died
of nausea.
We have no statistics to bear out such allegations
beyond the plain facts of body counts,
comfortably assessed as 200 of them
To one of us. Still the centre of conflict—that
is, the games area—is sufficiently distant,
all or nearly all
Are agreed, from our respective home bases,
give or take a little more or less in the case
of Australasian interests,
While on both sides the local participants (and, regretfully,
non-participants, who nonetheless help keep
up body counts)
Are ideally aligned with a fascinating variety
of religio-political sub-cultures while
being racially inferior, or expendable,
So that a comprehensive series of statistically
pure results may be obtained on a healthy
number of inter-societal
Problems, all of which can be put to viable usage
by the queuing theorists of the free world.

My own contribution
Has not been negligible: an only son sprayed
fatally if accidentally by defoliation fluid;
an only daughter,
A war correspondent, shot fatally in mistake
for a member of the Peace Corps; a second
wife unpatriotically
Translated to the asylum of Disneyland in a
state of second childhood; one younger
brother given to sleeping
With returned servicemen; one elder sister not.
But over all the 200 million households
(white and in some cases
Non-white) of the free continent an element
of peace hovers in the abiding thought of them
not us. Which is, to say
The least, a major contribution to the theoretical
well-being of a large part of a partially
free world
In the century of the fear of total war. This has been
a computerised account by unit ABA,
reserve graded indefinitely.

the
shadow CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

For Philip Martin

Wicked and brittle on a plain of silk
A broad moon slides conspiratorially
Into the stricken west, and under me
Etches the tree-shapes with deliberate milk.

And now the darkening conscience at my heels,
Stocky and inarticulate, parades
Across this jagged grass to join the shades,
Yet preens himself, the only shade that feels.

Languors and musics of a summer night
Appease each nonconformist with their charms,
Yet, as the moon is greeting hills and farms,
This blackened legionnaire accosts my flight.

Obscurely, discord mars the midnight dome,
The muffled roar of bombers sailing home.

that man
of blood CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

From
The Visions

A young man comes to water his horses in the clearing
His tawny hair flows out, he carries a long staff
Naked he sits loosely on a mettlesome horse
With long legs, a lizard head and stiff grey mane
Passing through branches, plants, a small brown palm-tree
Behind it the fountain, fashioned out of stone blocks
With two crouching lions tensed up on top, and one
Mouth squirts water bright into a basin
The wood is silent, harmonious, threatened, holds a darkness
Some of the trees are sprung with leaf, some bare, it is
The fullest daylight here of a mild spring day
As a young man comes down to water his horses
Listen: there is a noise of noise behind the fountain
From behind which, leaping in anger and fire
Red loincloth, bronze greaves, white teeth gritting
Together and a raised arm waiting to strike
Bursts out the ambusher, the first angry man
And he carries death, all wars are no different,
The pocked fresco holds millennia,
We are wolves.

soldier,
are you sure MICHAEL HAMEL-GREEN

Soldier,
The kids back home
Are playing combat in the streets.
They make their plastic guns
Stutter just like yours.
They let you have it as you come in range:
The Viet Cong for them, you see,
Is every passer-by.

Soldier,
You play your game with real bullets.
You load a real gun.
You pause, hold your breath,
Like any child intent upon his game.
You are the hunter tracking down a beast.
You point your gun at Evil,
But what dies in the bushes
Is a human being.

Soldier,
Did you see the bulging eyes
Of a suspect Viet Cong
Being questioned with a knife?
For, soldier,
The knife that questions him,
Questions you as well.

Soldier,
Did you see those captive Viet Cong
Pushed from whirring helicopters?
And did you watch and follow down
Their last and terrifying fall,
And witness . . . your own death?

Soldier,
Did you hear that woman's scream?
Did you see the burning napalm
Clinging to her skin?
Her children are staring at you,
Soldier,
Her children are staring at you.
You offer them chocolate.
But all the chocolate in the world
Will not sweeten their loss.

Soldier,
The people have been staring at your face
For more than ten years now.
You say you stand for freedom
But all your face has ever meant
Is bombs, bullets, napalm and dictators.
Soldier,
Are you sure it isn't hatred
You see on people's faces?
Are you sure that you yourself
Are not, indeed, the enemy?

wedding
feast CRAIG POWELL

Wedding in Sydney. All the bells
clang with a wry and awkward tone.
Just tonight I'll ignore the pulse
of rockets hammering at Saigon,
 ignore, throat held to history's razor,
 the sad-sack peasant, the born loser.

Auden, MacNeice, Day Lewis, Spender,
cantors of a purer choice—
Spain was your cry of righteous thunder:
virtue had a human face.

 A day to the north of me there's a war
 with neither side worth cheering for.

And I slouch at this wedding feast
years from your Götterdämmerung.
The wicked victorious and the just
(if there were any) all in the wrong.
 All your morality, your pains—
 Hitler and Stalin pushing pawns.

And after the poetry, the high talk,
the victims are somehow all the same:
Spain survives as a bad joke;
my cousin is killing in Vietnam.

 Here in this calm pocket of Hell
 I choose between Riesling and Moselle,

for the bridegroom's immaculate, and choirs
of lace ensheathe his bride tonight;
like a toad at the end of my table glares
a fat girl in a mini-skirt,
 flaunting, like the rest of us,
 some self-inflicted ugliness.

A toast! To the beautiful, the free,
opening champagne off the ice.
The wind sobs like a refugee.
Some day we will pay for this.

 A toast, before we creep outside—
 health to the bridegroom and the bride!

in memory of
hans mueller CRAIG POWELL

I

June '69. You have become nothing.
Your voice, with the stiff German tilt of the vowels,
would be contemptuous, I know, of such tidings.
But your voice, your contempt, is nothing. You are nothing.

June '69, and you are dead meat.
One week back in Vietnam after home leave,
shaken by nightmares, mumbling to your wife,
"If I don't go back there they'll arrest me."

June '69. Your youth was an exile.
This wasn't your country. This was not your war.
But death belongs, the black mud in your throat,
one last exile. Be greedy with it, Hans,

greedy as when you came to us, randy, cocksure,
to our scrub and factories, our Australian heat.
A tall country, sunburnt, with two fingers
jammed in the arse-hole of America.

II

Cry it, cry Murder!
to your grandfather, paranoid
bastard fought in two World Wars
on the wrong side, i.e. the losers.
And to yourself, Murder! hoarding your bound
volumes (History of World War II) and your Nazi
model tanks prowling the TV cabinet.
To your love of this country, Murder!
To the mob at the roadside swinging flags
THERE'S OUR ANDY IT'LL MAKE A MAN OF HIM
HOORAY GOOD LUCK BOYS HOORAY Murder!
To your corpse shredded by land-mines, Murder!

Your leg smashed, Murder! and your heart brutally shocked
by the blood outsprayed, vaulting. . . .
To your silence now I speak it: Murder!
To your grave, your bloody soil, the weeds sucking your juice,
to your death,
to your death forever, Murder!

III

Paper outlives a man.
We will commemorate you in Army files,
naturalisation certificates and your stale
German passport.

People outlive a man.
Only a part of us died with you,
and the scars quickly shrink.
We, above all, survive.

Thoughts outlive a man.
Before you die in our memory altogether
I will say how gallant you were and how silly.
How you believed what was told to you,

then spewed every time you killed a man
because it was filth and lies and you had been betrayed.
How you became one man speaking the truth
and died nobly, knowing it was all useless.

I tell your death, who will never rise again,
for myself and my brothers, for all my brothers, whom your
blood cannot forgive.

listening to
tang poetry

NORMAN TALBOT

Maybe the bones of that poet
all eleven hundred years long
have been combed out by winds
of opposed & harrowing seasons
 across the ribs of China
the clanging gorges underneath Chung-Nan . . .

& nearer always maybe the gibbeted exile
swings over desperate taxed fields
accountable in silver & aluminum
& over each year's bright developing
 weapons of the soldiers
carried loosely but of course bright
& worn smooth—renewable as spring—
& always maybe the peasant's back
knots to a hoop & the woodcutter
piously trussed to a thousandyear technique
 of drudgery always maybe
 chews his bare datestone
& sees his axehandle rotted in the wind.

question
of choice G. PITTS

There is no choice but one's own choice
and that is unavoidable;
stepping casual over corpses
splashing through the paddy fields, below the hills
cascade
exploding villages,
flesh furnace of your heart
burnt out;
poignant because the appointment
with oneself
at a rendezvous
at a place with uncertain face
at a place where everything no longer exists
your past disintegrates and a search for new character begins.
For you may learn
no abdication from this point
(and a burst of parrots, raucous,
rose high in the sky and beyond)
for you may learn
that you no longer wish
to hurt
or be hurt;
this sudden lilac summer of your mind
might disallow
the winter's harsh incessant nerve of skeletons,
old man inspired
rich man revered
the killing, killing laughing verve
of murder's wrack and fury
this filthy war.

asked for a
poem of 50 words NORMAN TALBOT

*'The challenge of
educating our Asian
neighbours.'*
H. Holt

It will be difficult
for even our best teachers
to show this little Viet boy
whose eyes melt
that all the rains of napalm
are from heroes thinkers preachers
defending us from his vanished toy
shanghai, from the merciless
invasion by him & the armless
playmate in his charred arms.

against my
enemies JOHN LEVETT

I am a rice-farmer.
This paddy, this compound,
Have been my family's for generations.
Conquerors came, and went, and left their marks on us . . .
My sister's son with the funny eyes, for one . . .
But I have not minded—
Enemies I can understand:
It is these friends of ours
I am uneasy about.

i am the
father JOHN LEVETT

Every time I see the photograph
Of that haunted father and that parboiled child,
I undergo an instant transmutation;
His skin peels, sticks to my hand.
His heart races, flutters next to mine.
My wife, his mother, lies fleshless on the roadside,
And in my nostrils moves the culinary smell
Of my own flesh, baptised
By that napalm, which I, in remote affluence of petroleum,
Have launched . . .

clearing away

ANDREW TAYLOR

Today I chopped back irises
spear-sharp
layers of leaves
long as our memories—
Vietnam, savage green
in the March decline;
paler, lank low leaves
almost brittle—Korea;
then a tangle of grey—
dusty, forgotten rubbish—
the last war, Second World War—
crumbling to the blade.
Beneath—
the red-backed spider
angry at being disturbed.

the
photographs ANDREW TAYLOR

Having no children
I cannot think of my own children maimed
in these ulcerous gaunt photos.
Instead I think
how my father, for some childish crime,
punished me with a stick—that week
Hiroshima
was melted down to history, and among
the celebrations
that hurt.

I try to understand these children burnt,
these ribs torn, this leg chopped to the hip,
these screaming marionettes—
what measure but my own
small sense of pain
is true, inadequate?

autumn thunder
from indo-china

ANDREW TAYLOR

Where afternoon smells of
burnt fallen leaves
raked to a suburban
offering to a year
and clover

foams underfoot

winter's unanswerable boom
echoes from the Sun King's
disintegrated empire

(bruised sky powerless to be mute)

its fragments
clatter like boots across the level
bed of our sheets
cats' shriek
addles love's harmonies

we play at soldiers
attack draw back thrust again
each autumn morning a hundred
corpses
furled in newspaper
wait on our lawn

patriot's death

MICHAEL DRANSFIELD

For Ho Chi Minh, 1969

*'America cannot afford
an era of peace'*

The	Using	with	War	and	We
public	container	medals	brings	fame	who
men	shipping	pinned	prosperity	to	neither
cash	to	hopefully	to	some	fight
in	bring	to	some	too	nor
as	home	many	who	brutalised	gain
well	our	a	do	to	salute
on	Vietnam	gangrenous	not	care	you
degradation	dead	cause	fight	much	Uncle

demonstration

poem ANDREW TAYLOR

Things normally hang straight—
apples on trees, for example,
pictures on walls, trousers on soldiers,
flags on a windless day.

Australia though has come to hang crooked,
dependent in a south-westerly direction
from the United States,
like a piece of something* stuck to a top.

* chewy.

ground

zero MICHAEL DRANSFIELD

wake up
look around
memorise what you see
it may be gone tomorrow
everything changes. someday
there will be nothing but what is remembered
there may be no-one to remember it.
keep moving
wherever you stand is ground zero
a moving target is harder to hit.

the
survivors LEON SLADE

They are the survivors
of the latest battle,
they are the wavers
of whichever flag
the temporary victor offers.

They are free again
to serve whichever one
is beggaring their children,
ravishing their women,
making Viet Cong of their men.

viet
pieta LEON SLADE

Her eyes are empty
as the lifeless child she cradles
in her timeless arms.
Part of her body
has been taken,
his death, it seems,

a useless sacrifice.
She neither knows nor cares
for the rest of the world,
tearless she weeps
and envies
the bullet gored child.

vietnam

graves

LEN FOX

Amid the Vietnam ricefields green
Many a lonely grave I've seen
Of mouldering Frenchman, German, Dane,
Or lad from Africa or Spain
Who came a thousand miles or more
To die in someone else's war.

No little children bring them flowers
And no one in this world of ours
Can say that they had any gain
From death of Frenchman, German, Dane
Who came a thousand miles or more
To die in someone else's war.

No women come to bring them tears,
Their graves rot slowly through the years,
The Moor, the Frenchman, German, Dane
Who fought a useless fight in vain,
Who came a thousand miles or more
To die in someone else's war.

And how much longer down the years
Will men know death and women tears
And graves still grow 'neath Vietnam skies
Of careless lads with laughing eyes
Who came a thousand miles or more
To die in someone else's war?

i forgot to
take a gun LEN FOX

I went to live
In a foreign land;
I forgot to take
A gun in my hand.

The wise men said
I should have found
Death in the air,
Hate all around.

But I didn't find
A foreign race,
Just a gentle woman
With kindly face.

A child who gaily
Ran to say
Two friendly words,
Shake hands, bat tay.

A thoughtful poet,
A man with a plow
Who spoke of freedom:
'Our time is now.'

I didn't find
Hate in the air,
Just friendly people
Everywhere.

But then when I went
To this foreign land
I didn't take
A gun in my hand.

the
revolutionary ROD MORAN

All night we talked ardently
Of Revolution, traced new histories
Along the wet beery laminex:
Argued old mentors to new conclusions,
Tedious hours rabidly debating our need
Of the liberating poesy, a People's Art;
Theorised how, when the long war
Is over again, a new image will rise
From the brittle earth . . .

The morning was blurred and loud
As usual. Somewhere, remote,
Steel screamed wonderfully overhead.
Already a baby's flesh delicately
Smouldered beyond pain. Dozing
I speculated about morning in Phuoc Tuy
(Quietly registering an odour of bacon).
As usual, I was startled awake
By the morning paper's indifferent thump.

sonnet for
a sunday MONA BRAND

*17 Australians dead,
but they kill 312
Vietcong—headline in a
Sunday newspaper.*

Whose body stiffens in the jungle grass,
Its face upstaring out of stricken eyes?
Whose blood is it that slowly spreads and dries
While grinding helicopter engines pass?
Did he once belt an ancient battered car
Down bitumen beside a golden beach,
Or strum a love song on a strong guitar,
And ponder planets just beyond his reach?
Or did he barefoot guide a wooden plough
That slashed the stubble and upturned the root,
And one bright night beneath a banyan bough
Entice a song from out a bamboo flute?
I cannot see the face of that dead one,
But this I know . . . he is my son, my son.

suitor CHRISTOPHER POLLNITZ

My Lai
run with me into the bushes
My Lai
run among the leafy twigs
My Lai
do not ask your mother
come with me now.

My Lai
last night I dreamt a dream
My Lai
a crow devoured our harvest

My Lai
after harvest the monsoons come
come with me now.

My Lai
I am sorry you are barren
My Lai
a rod, bears only black twigs
My Lai
I must go love is children
who can love My Lai now?

lines written
in vietnam CHARLES KAISER

The sagacity of the psychedelic
A cacophony from a distance
Viewed from this salubrious environment
Telescoping to the depth of reverse memory.
Like all mindless lenses
Complete antithesis.
Vegetables in the mind.
Senility
Stupidity
Surfacing with a veneer
Supported by decay.
The bastard of a cretin.
Let me freak out of here!

the button
on my jacket BRIAN MEDLIN

The button on my jacket says *resist*.
That part of me you don't know much about:
How hard it is to preserve places like this,
So quiet that the silence seems to shout,
Where under undefoliated trees
Compliant people do what they please.

the
accused R. H. MORRISON

To have signed men into death for policy
And generously bestowed grief and medals,
While each lie about our peril was nailed—yes,
Even that can be clothed in hideous logic;
And it helps if you say you too would have gone
Had the luck of the game not placed you elsewhere.
The very meaning of power's just telling men
That what you have done to them was sent by God.
But then to have found that God was mistaken,
That he had blundered away a million lives
And now said the enemy was not for killing
But for the divine purposes of trade—
No, for this lie-undoing lie you stand trial,
And for this you will never be forgiven.

vietnam R. H. MORRISON

Deep in the steaming delta's honed
A blade forged by an Asian hand
For sons of those who've stripped this land
And burnt the homes dead Asians owned.

Some of us see, beyond these dead—
They're Asians only, those we kill—
Past this defoliated hill,
A fearful judgment day ahead;

Then it will be our blood that spurts,
And ours the charred land where it flows,
When we can't play at dominoes
And shelter in America's skirts.





