

The Poetry and Prose of Air Force Veteran Walter McDonald

Leslie Kennedy Adams
University of Phoenix

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OVERVIEW

The short and long term effects of the trauma associated with war are well documented. War does not discriminate: it can physically and psychologically wound both combatants and civilians, whether those civilians are residents of the area in which the battles take place, the spouses of the combatants, or the children of combatants.

Poets have long borne witness to the horrors of war. Homer's *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, believed to date back to 750 A.D., are literally classic examples of both the physical and moral injury of war.

After a ten year battle, Menelaus gets his wife back, but at tremendous cost. Troy is sacked and destroyed; thousands of combatants on both sides are killed or injured; Menelaus's brother Agamemnon returns, only to be murdered by his wife's lover; Helen, after Menelaus's death, is exiled and murdered.

Odysseus loses his entire surviving fighting force through a series of tragic events over the ten years it takes him to make his way back home; and Odysseus's wife Penelope and son Telemachus are essentially held under siege by Penelope's suitors until Odysseus slays them all. Even Odysseus's dog knows the pain of loss, dying as soon as he recognizes Odysseus upon his return.

Many students will have read or will have been exposed to Homer's work in high school. It is unlikely, however, that they will come to the classroom with any previous knowledge of the literature of trauma, especially that produced by veterans of America's wars.

Walt McDonald is one of the best contemporary poets. Students may not be familiar with Walt McDonald, an award winning poet and pilot who was a career Air Force officer; McDonald taught at the Air Force Academy after earning his Ph.D. He served one tour in Vietnam. McDonald, a Texas Poet Emeritus, has published 16 books of poetry and over 2300 poems. He is the Paul Whitfield Horn Professor Emeritus at Texas Tech University.

While all of McDonald's poetry does not focus on war, he does address nearly every war in America's history, each of these poems illustrate at least one of the genre's essential themes, which John Clark Pratt identifies in his piece, "Poetry and Vietnam," published in *Modern American Poetry*: "the themes of [war] poems are both universal and particularly modern.

Many works show the horrors of war, the deaths of innocent civilians, the tragic ending of youthful lives, and the general sundering of moral and ethical values" (2). In "Poetry and Vietnam," Pratt is specifically addressing the poetry of the Vietnam War, but his comments apply to all modern wars, really. These

poems, he explains, express the impossibility of anyone's understanding the totality of the experience, the realization of having been betrayed by a higher authority, and . . . the anger and bitterness at feeling like what fiction writer Larry Heinemann called not a cog in a mighty machine but merely "a slab of meat on the table" (2).

Most importantly, however, as W.D. Ehrhart notes, Walt McDonald's "poems are wonderfully powerful, often intimately persona and sensitive (8).

McDonald's work is not limited to poetry, however; he also published a compelling collection of short stories, *Band of Brothers*, which is one of the few literary works that considers the experiences of pilots who served in the Vietnam War.

This module includes a representative sample of McDonald's war poetry as well as his prose. These works can be taught thematically, by genre, and/or by the various wars they consider.

A list of sample discussion questions for class discussion of these works is provided.

The first bibliography provided categorizes the poetry by wars.

The second bibliography provided categorizes the poetry by themes so that teachers may pick and choose what they want to emphasize in one or more class settings.

A third bibliography pairs several of McDonald's Vietnam War poems with his short story collection *Band of Brothers*.

The fourth bibliography lists critical resources upon which the teacher may wish to draw.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. "War poetry," notes Abigail Deutsch, "asks us to consider . . . what is poetry for? Should it bear witness? Create beauty? Inspire change? All of the above?" Working in groups, discuss and answer these questions. Then, select from the list of poems assigned to support your answer. Select one person to speak for the group.

Deutsch, Abigail. "100 Years of *Poetry*: The Magazine and War." Poetry Foundation. December 11, 2012. Accessed July 26, 2016.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/articles/detail/69902>.

2. "In 1963, John Kennedy said in a speech at Amherst College, 'when power corrupts, poetry cleanses'" (cited in Ehrhart, 23). Do you agree or disagree with the words of President John F. Kennedy? Why or why not? How might the political and cultural environment of the time (1963) have influenced his statement? Select one of the assigned poems to support your opinion, whether you agree or disagree with the statement.

Ehrhart, W.D. "Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War." *VQR Online* 63, no. 2, (1987) 1-23.
<http://www.vqronline.org/essay/soldier-poets-vietnam-war>

3. Ask students, based on their reading, to discuss whether or not war is always the best solution to resolving a political or ideological conflict.
4. Assign three poems for homework. During the next class meeting, ask students to answer the following questions about each poem: (1) What is the theme of the poem? (2) What is the author's attitude towards war? How do you know? (3) What is the tone of the poem? How do the words chosen for the poem convey the tone? (4) Who is the speaker? How do you know? (5) How did the poem make you feel? Did it make angry? Did it make you sad? Did you feel you could empathize with the speaker? (6) Name at least one metaphor, simile, or analogy used effectively in the poem.
5. Allow students to select one poem from a representative list. Ask students to conduct research to locate at least three photographs from the wars (or wars) discussed in the assigned reading. The photographs should provide viewers with images that help them to understand each poem. Students should save the images as PDFs or scan the images, create a bibliography for each image, and include the text of the assigned poem on a separate page. Have students send the completed assignment electronically to the teacher. At the next class, the teacher should read each of the poems selected and share the images the students have provided to initiate a discussion of the connection between visual imagery and written imagery.
6. Teachers may also choose to adapt the slide presentation provided at <http://www.slideshare.net/shsgmedia/4-war-poetry-questions>; the presentation focuses on pre-1914 war poetry; however, the questions provided in each slide apply to the poems provided in the bibliography of this module.

NOTE: These suggested discussion questions can also be used for a written homework assignment which must be uploaded electronically before class so that the students are prepared for class discussion OR the teacher may choose to post the questions in an online discussion forum in which each student is required to participate.

OUT OF CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

1. Ask students if they know anyone who has served in one of the nation's wars. If the student does know someone, ask that student to conduct an interview with that individual and then write a 3-5 paragraph paper in which the student discusses the person's experience and explains how the interview helped the student to understand poems from the selections provided.
2. Ask students to locate at least newspaper articles from three national newspapers or magazines published during one of the nation's wars addressed in the assigned poetry readings. Students may also choose to locate three national news broadcasts from the Vietnam War era. Each student should scan the articles (if print sources are used), create an annotated bibliography, and present his or her work in a PowerPoint presentation to be shared with the group, either in class or electronically. If you choose to allow the student to share his or her presentation electronically, then devote at least one class session to discussing the students' findings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: POEMS CATEGORIZED ACCORDING TO EACH WAR

World War I

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World War II

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Korea

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Bosnia

----- "The War in Bosnia." In *Blessings the Body Gave*, 95. Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1998.

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Impact of War on Children and Families

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Moral Injury/Physical and Psychological Trauma of War

McDonald, Walter. "After the Fires We Called Vietnam." In *Blessings the Body Gave*, 41-42. Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1998.

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Mourning the Deaths of Friends/Resurrection

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POEMS BY WALT MCDONALD

World War I

World War I Soldiers, [sic]

Louisville, Kentucky,
date unknown: photograph
in a library book.
They march downtown
along the trolley lines

under signs, "Ullman's Ready to Wear"
and "Stearne's Grocery"
They are thin. Their hats are peaked,
their leggings tight.
They carry rifles.

They aren't even nearly
in step. They seem thirty
or older. Their officers march
stiff as boy scouts.
I search the faces for father.

My eyes rake each platoon,
return to one man

in the second rank,
his face dark, only a slash
of light on his cheek and chin.

He is tall. His head is turned.
He is looking through the camera.
Could it be? If he had died
in Flanders, who would have seen
the many I see,

who would have cared?
I stare at the others.
Each one marches alone.

POEMS BY WALT MCDONALD: WWII

Uncles on Sunday Battlegrounds

Old boys, gone off alone down range,
I miss your sweaty arrogance and bluff
about Pearl Harbor when most of you
weren't twenty. Stiff necked and grumpy,
you would have died for all of us at Midway,

Normandy, battles I wouldn't have heard of
except for you, who fought and came back
gaunt and giddy or weary, bitter and lame
as years went by, nothing ahead but scandals
and politics in a country gone to the dogs,

parking lots crammed with foreign-made cars,
Okinawa, where buddies died, given back to Japan.
Sunday afternoons were uncles who argued
and smoked cigars, a rut of politics in fall,
old bulls butting each other off with sarcasm

they called logic. They were never off balance
for long. Loud out-shouted whoever talked. Outside,
after potluck tables that sagged like belted bellies,
after seconds of cakes or cobblers, the battles raged,
smirks and sneers but never fists. Pachyderm

or mule, it didn't matter—all snorted or brayed
their cousins and bureaucrats to scorn.
Old soldiers shook gray heads and lowered cigars
like horns and scoffed, flicked inch-long
sagging ashes and watched them fall.

Dawn Outside Saigon

We heard swans lift off at dawn, flutter of wings after battle.
Nights, we crouched in bunkers
or cursed our luck and prayed,
cracking knuckles like beads,
sirens wailing in Asian skies

Here there be rockets.

So why not tons of sand above us,
sandbags stacked on logs
dragged out of jungles,
like storm cellars dug for homes
ten million miles away.

not enough dirt in Asia
to stop rockets launched in skies
zigzagged by choppers' shrill
staccato fire and red lights
flashing, *whop-whopping* fast,
hunting for someone to kill.

POEMS BY WALT MCDONALD: KOREA

POEMS BY WALT MCDONALD: VIETNAM

Children of Saigon

Always at night I found them
climbing the piles of junk
on the base. Around a flat track

I ran for miles, tight muscles
jogging past bleachers
where French soldiers

in parade years.
passed out in the sun. Children
climbed those bulldozed heaps,

for food, for clothes, for trash
piled up to blaze. I saw them
crawling the last blaze of the sun

spangled on garbage, the dump

blazing in the sweat and blink
of my eyes, children and old men

ragged and golden, clawing
through flames long after sundown,
no matter how many nights

I went without supper,
how many leftovers I begged
and carried in darkness

Out past the tarmac and bleachers,
passing it all to children
who grabbed it and backed away.

Al Croom

saw a man sliced
to the bone by glass
when a rocket exploded
at Da Nang. Whenever
he told it he laughed.

Croom was nearly seven feet,
his Vietnamese wife
five-three.
When they said goodbye
for his second tour in 'Nam

she wept.
What he did,
sure he would die,
was grin.
Back at Da Nang

when rockets hit
and all of us
crawled under beds
or fled to bunkers,
Croom went walking,

daring the Russian
rockets
to do him in.
I think he wanted
to get it over.

When they shipped him home
it took triple straps
to bind him.
They treated him
for months.

His wife wrote every day.
He sometimes answered her.
Two days before they planned
To mark him fit
for duty

he disappeared,
escaping
whoever still wanted
his head and balls.
I heard weeks later

his doll-like wife
was gone,
no trace of either one.
Al, buddy, it's over,
it's okay.

Bogeyman, 1969

He watched me at night outside Saigon,
demon under my bunk, when God seemed farther than the dimmest star—him, the enemy,
cast out by God like lightning
lost in eternal darkness. On my bunk
I listened hard and heard far in the distance
hospital choppers thudding fast,

gunfire a mile away, the wail of sirens
for incoming rockets. And sometimes, oddly,
silence—only the thump of concussions,
someone's hard-rock tape in the barracks
bluffing the bogeyman back where he belonged,
crushed under decks of cards and *Playboys*.
I heard someone's breath in my bunk,

mine, mine. I never wondered if hell
was in a bluff. I felt I would die in a flash,
the twinkling of an eye, and why not,
rockets had to crash somewhere.
I groveled in dreams toward God. Always
he was there when I least expected—not God

but the demon, no matter how many laps

I jogged around the track, how many tasks
I wrapped up tight for the Colonel,
how many hours in the command post
I studied Plexiglas, battle maps,
the Cong's advances lit by twinkling lights.
I saw no exit, caught like Custer's men
hip-deep in prairie grass in a battle

already lost. We went alone in jungles
on a globe floating in the dark
eternal mystery of space red lights
winking at Saigon on the map, the demon
laughing behind the glass. Battalions
rode from the north armed with rockets,
our only hope to charge, to kill them all.

The Track at Saigon

We jogged fast laps on asphalt
flat as a runway, counting of riots,
back home, divorces, nights without rockets.

We tried staying sober in daylight,
hard to worry stripped down to shorts,
gasping, drenched in sunburn and sweat

to keep our bodies hard. We heard
the thud and quiver of a high board
across the fence, a sudden splash,

laughter of French landowners by a pool.
At dawn, while corpsmen loaded body bags,
we ran in a world exploding---

thunder of jets loaded with napalm,
whop whop of choppers lifting wounded
from the front, the nearby boom of bombs.

After the Fires We Once Called Vietnam

Here on these flat fields I remember napalm,
That lavish charcoal lighter of a fat man's barbecue.
I'm like a pitcher with eyes in the back of his head
who wore his ball cap backward, ignoring the signs

his catcher gave, the finger between his thighs.
Often, he saw the runner leading too far off and whirled
and picked him off. Amazing, how hindsight made him hard
to sneak up on. He scrolled mistakes in his mind

like a three-inch roll of tape, adding them University Press,
the total always the same, like calling for a flyball
in the infield, *my family, mine*. Saigon was lost
before I got there, fortunes stashed in Swiss banks,
French plantation rubber and raw silk. I flew off to war
and came back home alone. These are the acts.
I have a fence to mend, cattle to keep, or give up all
we've worked for. My wife depends on my saddle, ten miles

from any mesa, from any town, ten thousand miles
from jungles that once burned. Those villages were theirs,
and these flat pastures mine, a flat field not on fire
but shimmering in the sun, my herd of Angus burned
as black as toast in the sun that heats the wind,
that turns the windmill, that pumps cold water to the troughs
and faucet I bow to, splashing my face to cool my neck
until I'm sober. I know this patient Appaloosa is my horse,

those barbs wires sagging a mile away are mine,
and only I can twist and tighten them to save these steers
needing alfalfa and water from a well, not a lake
less tangible than guilt, a shimmer a trick my eyes ignore
while I ride there on a trotting horse. The sun will blaze
tomorrow like most days on the plains, a mirage
fat Angus wade before the slaughterhouse. But now,
dismounting at the wires, when I glance back, it's gone.

Learning to Live with Nightmares

No one's responsible
for tricks the mind plays
awake or sleeping. At night,
I dream my life ends
at Saigon, but here I am.

watching my wife
make breakfasts for children
who weren't born overseas.
What am I, a ghost? Safe
on this side of morning,

no rockets, I've stopped

reaching to check for wounds, I'm reaching
to lace my shoes,
my own shoes.

Names on the Wrists of Strangers

Pity mere flesh and tongues, but never
Tungsten alloys in the wings of jets.
Tons missing in action are cans
flipped from cars on highways,

not bodies of pilots. Did he ride
a spinning F-4 Phantom down,
welded to wreckage? Or eject and walk away?
Does he know petitions are still being begged

for his release, even one word of condolence,
Dead? Could he dream of bracelets
with his name on the wrists of strangers,
reaching for phones that never ring:

the dial tone's there,
but no one calls. We long to believe
he haunts us with flesh we will touch,
not forever hostage to whatever whim

keeps men imprisoned twenty years
and beats them. Let him learn the ways
of snakes and survive, a legend
Montagnards will whisper for years.

Some evening on the news, when the lens
zooms down to a desk of refugees from Laos
or Da Nang, the boat wallowing on waves
near Hong Kong, let one of the faces be his.

The Night I Left the Air Force

Moving is all we ever do, our daughter cried,
Fists in her armpits, weeping. Five homes
in seven years, like bridges burned. The light
by her bed was on, her mother and I drowsy
in the blinding light, squinting, tying our robes.
My wife sat close to hold her. Soon, she was out

again, our frightened girl, and I switched out the light.

Back from Saigon, I watched good friends taking off
and turned my flight suits back in, after my last flight
was grounded by an engine fire. If not delayed
an hour by weather, I might have crashed on takeoff.
I never flew again, my orders approved that day,

the movers due at dawn. We boxed my uniforms and boots,
the flag and half my life, no more a pilot than our girl.
Where will we go? she asked while Jimmy stared, not rude
but mute, mouth open, another puzzled child she'd lost.
Her home meant friends like Jimmy, the world to her
vaguely dangerous, where Daddy once had gone, his war

on all the channels. Hugged and tucked into bed,
the night-light on, even fat bears to comfort her,
she may have stared at TV pictures in her head,
seen soldiers big as her daddy dying soon,
monks burning in the streets, little girls like her
running lost and screaming in our living room.

To All Friends Fast Asleep

Rest, heads twisted severely
on your necks, or muffled facedown
or on your sides, jaws
drawn to the chests, legs University Press,
bones of shoulders and hips

burrowed into pine needles of sleep,
or staked out flat on your backs,
chins slack, exhausted
by the weight of space
shoved down, shoved down all day

on hands that lift
and pat each other on the back,
or simply grip and squeeze,
handshakes that mean *Hello,*
hold on, it's over, it's okay.

War Never Stops Even When All the Vets Are Dead

The fields are calm tonight, not one wild coyote howling.
The windmill's still, not creaking, no restless billy goats
banging against the fence. How many nights
have we been like this since our children were born?

I imagine the ticking of Grandfather's clock,
the far-off barking of dogs, the pack maddened by blood.

the whir and clatter of the roof in blizzards.
Talk takes me back to a war years ago, most records closed,
Engraved on stones in towns around the states.
I think of Harper and Don, names on a wall in Washington.
I picture children, some missing arms and eyes
outside Saigon, shells exploding decades later

in fields turned into schools, playgrounds surrounded
by jungle growing back, the sudden burst and smoke.
Then I sit up and go to the glass and look out,
knowing I'll see the moon and silhouettes
of trees, not soldiers crouching through shadows,
not fire or smoke, or children bleeding.

Counting Survivors

I'm stunned to see so many of us home.
I drive downtown to shout hosanna quietly,
Pipe organ booming. The padded church bench
Shudders like a medevac on takeoff.
Saigon falls often in my dreams.

I see sad others on TV on cycles
roaring toward the wall, or leaning down in greens
and jungle boots. Most friends I knew
are back in body. I miss good friends
who earned this service. I've faced the wall

and placed my fingers on their names.
I wish for Easter all year long.
I watch parades from curbs
and wonder how do survivors live?
How do the dead arise?

Wishing for Easter All Year Long

Spring, and a blizzard howls a mile away.
A blue, bug-hungry jay attacks the walls –
Hop, hop—hits the planks like a toddler
and pecks the wood worms out.
Ursula may think I'm playing darts.

I hope she rolls, goes back to sleep in an hour,

for all's quiet now. The jay flies up
to the feeder, gobble, gobble, swallow.
We've come three thousand miles
to climb steep slopes and stare,

too far from grandchildren and friends.
At dawn, like a monk, I say the names
I know on the wall in Washington.
I wish for Easter all year long.
I don't hear rockets or gunfire, now,

but I feel glass rattle behind me,
jet bomber high above clouds. God,
let blizzards howl, let peaks turn white.
Let elk climb steeper slopes for woods,
let cougars come, whatever we can't stop.

BOSNIA

The War in Bosnia

Under darkness of stars our son flies
Over Bosnia, keeping watch over snow.
Apache gunships will be out tonight.

The moon on foreign snowfields highlights
Bodies running under trees, friend or foe.
Under darkness of stars our son flies

With star scope and rockets and wide eyes
over war zones bitter enemies know.
Apache gunships will be out tonight.

What keeps a nation armed and justifies
air power is such a killing field—we know,
but under darkness of stars our son flies.

In boots and parka, someone watches the skies
And owns disposable Stingers, and is cold.
Apache gunships will be out tonight.

I conjure God to stop him, warp his sights,
I stare with the prayer all fathers know.
Under darkness of stars our son flies.
Apache gunships will be out tonight.

Fathers and Sons

I rattle the porch as I walk, closing the screen door softly,
guided by the coffee pot's red light. Quietly,
I fill the china cUniversity Press, a gift from my wife, still sleeping.
Four, no, five A.M., the clock's red digits say. Pace if I must,
But on the porch, far enough away from the bedroom

so I won't wake her, if I don't knock the cup off,
hunched at the screen still blue, waiting like me
for words that shoved me out of bed at three. Outside,
I hear crickets as if there's not a screen between us.
Cicadas have been quiet for hours, no barking dogs,

no trucks on the highway miles away, or I can't hear them.
I haven't heard a coyote since midnight, no owls,
nothing but crickets and the computer's hum, and this porch
that creaks and rattles when I pace, thinking of something
to write our oldest son overseas, a rapid force of soliders

in the hills of Bosnia. In Desert Storm, he was out of touch for weeks when nothing, not even a phone
call or a fax,
could find him. My father died in battle so his sons
would never fight, far off on Guam and Saipan,
island hopping with MacArthur. Where I went is a footnote

in history books, stacks of facts we compiled about a war
already being lost, stored in a vault in Saigon
until someone shredded and burned them, pulling out.
I see blurred silhouettes of trees in the east.
I write about those trees, the crickets. I make up jets

Overhead, letting down from Dallas. I lie about coyotes,
claiming they're back, howling the way our boy heard them
in these fields a thousand times. I say his mother's University Press,
here on the porch, sipping her second cup. I say
she sends her love, which is no lie. I say she'll write

tomorrow. I ask *How are you*, but delete that,
add something about the crops, the herd bull's shoulder
he hurt butting the barn. I go back inside for a cUniversity Press,
and pace the porch until the sun is up. I close
with *Love*, and sign it, all my hand can do.

DESERT STORM

One Morning Between Wars

The girl in the purple robe
tangled like a bath towel
lolls on the couch and laughs,
some pre-school song or clown trick
bouncing in her mind. Will she

years from now recall this Sunday morning
on the coast, up before Mommy
and her brothers, the lazy, purring world
all to herself? Will she remember
this hour of lounging, twisting

turning, and humming, her daddy
bringing breakfast on a tray,
the brittle bacon, the tiny tub of syrUniversity Press,
hot strips of sweet French toast?
Will she miss the months he wasn't home,

the TV chant of Desert Storm
that grown-ups found exciting? He's back,
and now she lolls and rolls the bacon
on her lips, and nibbles, dips the toast
and dribbles sticky syrup on her tongue.

Her own real daddy brings
more bacon strips. He says she makes him
happy when she eats so well. Twisting
bacon like a rotor blade, she sings
about her daddy days ago, descending

from the sky like Santa Claus,
leaves blowing everywhere,
the whole crowd waving at her daddy's
helicopter, a real, brave daddy
finally back. She sniffs the bacon,

lips it, sucks it like a lollipop
and hums, God up in heaven,
her daddy close enough to hear her
when she calls, another strip
of French toast in her bowl.

The Winter of Desert Storm

Our grandchild turned five on an Army post
under the roar of fighters training hard

for combat. My wife and I watched her coast,
granddaughter kicking wildly on a swing.

Before our son flew off to Desert Storm,
He drove us to posts of the Civil War,
past the prison cell of Jefferson Davis.

How safe it must have seemed in 1965, no war,
no killing anymore. Redcoats had dug pits
two centuries ago, and waited with muskets,
soldiers from Liverpool and Leeds on foreign soil.

In 1862 that Yorktown fort's stone walls
were blasted down by cannons. When I flew home
from Vietnam, how simple raising babies seemed,

our boy far from Desert Storm, boisterous in the hall,
inventing chaos in homeroom, his elbow
pumping a joyful noise with his palm
in an armpit till he and his teacher screamed.

On the post, with her daddy gone, I thought of wars
almost forgotten, the long black wall
in Washington, the names I touched last week,
the war on every channel, and our boy overseas.
What could we do but shove his daughter's swing,
the jets so loud she had to shout to sing.