

Obscenities by Michael Casey, Carnegie Mellon, 2002, 62p, \$13.95 paper (Reprint of 1972 Yale Younger Poets book) • A welcome reprint—*Obscenities* is not the first book of poems by a Vietnam vet, but it may well be (as Yale judge Stanley Kunitz said) “the first significant book” of Vietnam vet poetry. Casey captures the laconic speech of the infantry “grunt” by severely paring away each monologue until its minimalism is nakedly true to each speaker—a chilling reminder of how war shaves away at good people.

Synecdoche

Brief Poetry Notices

VINCE GOTERA

Notes to the Man Who Shot Me: Vietnam War Poems by John Musgrave, Coal City Review, 2003, 122p, \$10.00 paper • Musgrave’s prose poetry packs a solid punch: unornamented truth. What comes through are, first, the absolute tenderness Vietnam-war grunts felt towards their “Buddies” (Musgrave always capitalizes this word), and second, the absolute cruelty grunts felt towards everyone else (Vietnamese friends and foes, draft dodgers, and politicians). The title poem, “Notes to the Man Who Shot Me,” shows how these two opposed emotions urgently converge.

The Strain of Healing by Ben Wilensky, Pigmy Forest Press, 2000, 24p, \$8.00 paper • Unlike Casey’s and Musgrave’s straight talk, Wilensky writes gruesome rants with baroque ornament. The strain of war is hinted at by centered lines (implying stability), lines that rhyme, trail off, then rhyme again. Thus, certainty ain’t. Wilensky’s Rohrschach blots continually semaphore war’s horror.

Three Vietnamese Poets by Nguyen Quoc Chanh, Phan Nhien Hao, and

Van Cam Hai, translated and introduced by Linh Dinh, Tinfish Press, 2001, 64p, \$9.00 paper • The essential hallmark shared by these three poets is a surrealism evidently influenced by French sources. The aftermath of the war between the US and Vietnam inevitably resurfaces in occasional violent yet beautiful passages in these haunting, postmodern poems.

Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems by Denise Duhamel, Pittsburgh, 2001, 108p, \$12.95 paper • Like Duhamel’s poem on page 33 of this issue, this book is quirkily witty as well as utterly serious; note the funny (mis)adventure of Barbie trying on GI Joe’s uniform (and outlook), a satiric send-up of militarism. The other poem on war, originally written about the 1991 Gulf War, is eerily prophetic about the present conflict: “A strand of red construction paper men: / George Bush, Dick Cheney, Saddam Hussein, et cetera.” The speaker advises parents to have their kids cut up their favorite of these paper dolls “into the teeniest pieces / . . . confetti, bloodshed, red snow, bombs.”

Into the Ruins by Frederick Glaysher, Earthrise, 1999, 71p, \$17.95 cloth • A litany of horrors updating Eliot’s *Waste Land*, the book upbraids contemporary poets for turning inward only to concerns of the self: Glaysher has Juvenal call them “literati who glitter in the glare of Nothing, / . . . all noise and empty sound, / a storm of words with little sense.” Juvenal (and Glaysher) would have today’s poets “sift through the rubble of war, / find the corpses and wrap them / in a humane and pitying embrace.” That is, poetry that both sees and does.

Blue Hour by Carolyn Forché, HarperCollins, 2003, 73p, \$24.95 cloth • The *pièce de resistance* of this book is the forty-six-page poem “On Earth,” an abecedarian epic. Perhaps because I associate Forché’s work with the war in El Salvador, especially her

unforgettable poem “The Colonel,” her anthology *Against Forgetting* that collects crucial poems of witness, and also because of the US war on Iraq, I read this lovely, haunting book with eyes attuned to war. “On Earth” contains pointed references to war: a radio call in military phonetics calling down artillery; “American university T-shirts among the executed”; Forché’s own war memories: “cordite wind, one’s first cordite”; “mortar smoke mistaken for an orchard of flowering pears”; “scoop of earth: slivers of femur, metacarpals.” A ferocious remembering in the face of death, in the face of life.

Area Code 212 by Frederick Seidel, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, 70p, \$22.00 cloth • This book culminates Seidel’s trilogy inverting Dante: from the heavens, *The Cosmos Poems*; through purgatory, *Life on Earth*; and down finally into Manhattan. A sturdy eight-quatrain format illuminates contemporary urban life as inferno, a (meta)physical dystopia. The main character in the poem “The War of the Worlds” is a child “at the window, after his birthday party” trying to understand how “Airplanes are swimming / Up to the towers of steel . . . to feed.” The child is, of course, all of us, so new to this world of terror, this time when Yeats’s rough beast is risen.

Dumb Luck by Sam Hamill, BOA, 2002, 104p, \$13.95 paper • This book by the architect of the Poets Against the War movement deals mainly with peace and calm and hard-earned wisdom, garnered only via “dumb luck” and Zen meditation. In the one poem on war (“The New York Poem” on 9/11), although one may despair—“how / can a poet speak of proportion any more / at all?”—one remembers Tu Fu and Basho writing “among ash and bones and ruins.” In this poem, Hamill does what Glaysher says today’s poets don’t do: he faces up to the savagery and says, “I’ll kiss the sword that kills me if I must.” So should we all. □