Beautiful Wreckage

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Beautiful Wreckage


Who taught you to believe in words?” That devastating question at the heart of W.D. Ehrhart’s Beautiful Wreckage mocks poet and reader alike with a generation’s soured idealism. In poem after poem, Ehrhart—already a veteran of the war in Vietnam before he began his studies at Swarthmore in 1969—traces the profound disillusionment radiating out from that conflict. For the boy-soldier who can’t distinguish Vietnamese civilians from the Viet Cong—“They all talk / the same language”—and so comes blandly and horrifically to “quit trying”; for the mature man whose cries against injustice fall on deaf ears—“Everywhere you go, the blade of your contempt / draws blood. No wonder people hate you”; for the husband who tells his wife, “I give you the worst gift first / as a warning: the sullen silence . . . . / the quick tongue slashing”—for all of these, language itself has been tainted, can’t be trusted, can’t be controlled, bites back: “If sorry has a name, it must be mine.”

Yet words are all a poet has. In Ehrhart’s wrenching poem “Guns,” a father, speechless before his daughter’s questions, asks us, “How do you tell a four-year-old / what steel can do to flesh?” Our answer matches his—you don’t—but the poem’s last lines make us think again, as “yet another generation / is rudely about to discover / what their fathers never told them.” Indeed, the poems gathered here, some new, some selected from the 12 books Ehrhart has published since 1975, are particularly effective in conveying the threatened vulnerability of children and the distressing paradox that to preserve their innocence is to risk perpetuating ignorance, violence, regret: “What fire will burn that small / boy marching with his father? / What parade will heal / his father’s wounds?”

In “The Heart of the Poem,” Ehrhart imagines, with visceral intensity, opening a body to find the heart. Despite the disturbingly violent medical imagery, the poem’s title leads us to assume that its strong beating heart is what keeps body and poem alive. Yet Ehrhart concludes: “Get rid of it. / Sentiment’s for suckers. / Give us poetry.” As these lines suggest, this is a poetry of clear-eyed witness, of plain-spoken testimony, of grounded integrity, but that’s not to say it’s heartless. The speaker of these poems finds solace in love, in friendship, in a child’s trust, in the unanticipated astonishments of the natural world: “the lake so still, the stars fall in.” And he returns to Vietnam, where he finds, in lives broken by the war and then remended, circumstances that illuminate his own. “The Distance We Travel” concludes with a Vietnamese man repeating the name of the speaker’s daughter, “touching / the stranger’s heart with his open hand.” Surely these are open-handed poems—dropping their weapons, showing their wounds, touching the stranger’s heart.

—Nathalie Anderson
Professor of English Literature

Peacemakers


It has long been rumored that Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, established the peace prize that bears his name because he felt guilty for making money from the manufacture of weapons. In fact, the Nobel fortune came from chemical inventions and the peaceful uses of explosives, such as engineering projects, railways, canals, and road building. The idea for the Nobel Peace Prize actually emerged in Paris in the 1880s, where the Swedish industrialist met the Baroness Bertha von Suttner, a well-known supporter of international peace efforts. Von Suttner nurtured Nobel’s interests in world peace and suggested he fund an annual prize for peace work.

The first Nobel Peace Prize was awarded in 1901, five years after Nobel’s death. It went to two men: Henri Dunant of Switzerland, one of the founders of the International Committee of the Red Cross; and Frédéric Passy of France, the organizer of several international peace groups and a supporter of peaceful arbitration between governments. The most recent prize, awarded in 1998, was given to John Hume and David Trimble for their efforts to find a peaceful solution to the long conflict in Northern Ireland.

One prize winner had a close connection to Swarthmore College. In 1931, Jane Addams, the legendary founder of Hull House, became the first woman in the United States to win the Nobel Peace Prize—the same year that Swarthmore College awarded her an honorary degree. Addams had a long acquaintance with the College, having been invited to speak in 1918, when her popularity was at an all-time low because of her opposition to World War I. In 1930, Lucy Biddle Lewis, a member of the Board of Managers, convinced Addams to donate her personal and professional papers to Swarthmore. These formed the core of an archive on the peace movement around the world, first known as the Jane Addams Peace Collection and now as the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. Ann Keene doesn’t mention Addams’ connection with Swarthmore in her book on Nobel Peace Prize winners, but it is filled with other inspiring stories.

Wonderful illustrations are included with each entry. In addition to portraits of the prize winners, there are many pictures illustrating the kinds of work they did, such as the relief work in France after World War II performed by the American Friends Service Committee and the Friends Service Council, two