

## A DIRTY AND MURDEROUS JOKE: THE KOREAN WAR POETRY OF KEITH WILSON

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«I was a regular Navy officer», writes Keith Wilson. «I came from warrior stock, right out of the Highlands of Scotland, and the Welsh Marches».<sup>1</sup> Graduating from Annapolis as a 22-year-old ensign in June 1950, he was assigned to the aircraft carrier USS *Valley Forge*. By the time he joined the ship at Buckner Bay, Okinawa, a month later, the United States was at war and the *Valley Forge* was headed for Korea.<sup>2</sup> Over the next three years, Wilson would serve two tours in Korean waters aboard the carrier and a third –and much more dangerous– tour aboard the LST 1123 operating in support of coastal and guerrilla operations in Korea.

«I expected nothing from war», Wilson says. «I was a professional. I didn't, however, expect to be lied to and betrayed. I was very proud of the UN flag at our mast head when we went in to launch attacks. I thought, and still do think, that the only way I can see for the planet to survive is to have an effective world-wide government. When I found out that Korea was all a very dirty and murderous joke, I was silenced for many years». Sixteen years, to be exact, but he would not be silenced forever.

Wilson, born in Clovis, New Mexico, on December 26, 1927, and raised in small towns throughout the state, had all his life been preparing for a career in the navy. His great-granduncle was Rear Admiral Allen V. Reed, one of the first graduates of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. Wilson's grandmother, Admiral Reed's niece, never missed an opportunity to remind Wilson that his forebears had

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1. Letter to WDE from Wilson dated February 21, 1997. The following quote is from the same letter.

2. *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, Volume 5, p. 342. All other biographical information comes from this same source (CA) unless otherwise noted.

fought in every American war since the colonial French and Indian War. Taking her cue from her own mother, says Wilson, «my mother always intended me to go to Annapolis»,<sup>3</sup> both women clearly hoping Wilson, too, might one day achieve an exalted station comparable to that of his great-granduncle.

But Wilson, though deeply fond of the sea and a seaman's life, had been unhappy at Annapolis, finishing only because he did not have the heart to break his mother's heart, and was too deeply disillusioned by his experiences in the Korean War to continue a career as a naval officer. He resigned his regular commission in 1954 and returned to New Mexico. Eventually hired as an assistant professor in technical writing at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, by the time he retired in 1986 he was a full professor of English and the university's poet-in-residence.<sup>4</sup>

Though Wilson had grown up expecting a military career, he had also harbored a lifelong desire to be a writer. «I was reading everything I could understand in our [family] library when I was about four», he writes, «[B]y eight I knew I loved the act of writing» (CA 333). He published his first collection of poems, *Sketches for a New Mexico Hill Town*, in 1967, and the books and chapbooks have been coming steadily ever since.<sup>5</sup> In addition, his poems have appeared in dozens of journals ranging from *Poetry*, *Hudson Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Evergreen Review*, *Triquarterly*, and

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3. Unpublished interview with Todd G. Dickson of the *Las Cruces Sun-News*, November 10, 1992, provided to WDE by Wilson.

4. CA. Also, author questionnaire provided to WDE by Wilson in 1997.

5. Here is a complete list of Wilson's published books and chapbooks through 2000, as accurately as I am able to render it (since many of these publications are long out of print I have had to rely on Wilson's own CV for much of the information contained on this list, but have discovered a number of errors in years of publication on the CV; I have corrected here what I know to be erroneous information, but there may be other errors of which I am not aware):

*Sketches for a New Mexico Hill Town*, Orono, ME: Wine Press, 1967;

*II Sequences*, Portland, OR: Wine Press, 1967;

*The Old Car*, La Grande, OR: Grande Ronde Press, 1967;

*Graves Registry & Other Poems*, New York, NY: Grove Press, 1969;

*Homestead*, San Francisco, CA: Kayak Press, 1969;

*Rocks*, Oshkosh, WI: Roadrunner Press, 1971;

*The Shadow of Our Bones*, Portland, OR: Trask House Books, 1971;

*The Old Man & Others: Some Faces for America*, Las Cruces, NM: New Mexico State University Press, 1971;

*Psalms for Various Voices*, Las Cruces, NM: Tolar Creek Press, 1971;

*Midwatch*, Fremont, MI: Sumac Press, 1972;

*Thantog: Songs of a Jaguar Priest*, Dennis, MA: Salt Works Press, 1977;

*The Shaman Deer*, Dennis, MA: Salt Works Press, 1977;

*The Streets of San Miguel*, Tucson, AZ: Maguery Press, 1977;

*While Dancing Feet Shatter the Earth*, Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1978;

*Desert Cenote*, Fort Kent, ME: Great Raven Press, 1978;

*Retablos*, Cerrillos, NM: San Marcos Press, 1981;

*Stone Roses: Poems from Transylvania*, Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1983;

*Lovesongs & Mandalas*, Cerrillos, NM: San Marcos Press, 1984;

*Meeting at Jal*, Hobbs, NM: Hawk Press, 1985 (w/Theodore Enslin);

*Lion's Gate: Selected Poems*, El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 1988;

*College English* to *Dry Creek Review*, *Monk's Pond*, and *Floating Bear*, and in several dozen anthologies from Ron Schrieber's *31 New American Poets* (Hill & Wang, 1969) to Czeslaw Milosz's *A Book of Luminous Things* (Harcourt Brace, 1997).<sup>6</sup>

Over the years, Wilson has received a D. H. Lawrence Fellowship, a P.E.N.-American Center Writing Grant, a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship, the New Mexico Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, a Western States Arts Foundation Book Award, a P.E.N.-West Book Award, and the Border Book Festival's El Premio Fronterizo.

But for all his accomplishments, Wilson remains, as Len Fulton of *Dustbooks* says, «the best least-known poet in the U.S.»<sup>7</sup> And perhaps the most neglected aspect of Wilson's writing has been his encounter with the Korean War. «No thing in my life changed me as much as that war did», says Wilson.

Not even the Naval Academy, not my mother's death nor my father's... If you have not seen one, you cannot imagine how much of a nightmare war is because there is nothing normal... The walking through the ruins of what was once a city [Inchon] and you see children fighting over a piece of garbage, to eat, and their bellies swollen.<sup>8</sup>

This was not the noble stuff of the young naval officer's childhood dreams and fantasies. «It seemed we were forever coming into a beach or a port immediately after action –bodies were strewn about or floating on the now calm sea, but there was no living soul about», writes Wilson. «My experiences there haunted my mind for a long time –to a certain extent, they still do» (CA 343).

But if he was haunted by his experiences, for many years afterwards he could not write about them. All of this changed, however, with the rising spectre of yet another American war in Asia. Writes Wilson:

I was one of the first combat veteran officers to protest Viet Nam because I knew it to be unlawful, and could only lead to another disgraceful stalemate. I led protest marches and read at them, [But] I had no poems about war at all –I had buried it inside. [He finally started writing about the Korean War] in the

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*The Winds of Pentecost*, Las Cruces, NM: Blue Mesa Press, 1991;  
*Graves Registry*, Livingston, MT: Clark City Press, 1992;  
*The Way of the Dove*, Las Cruces, NM: Whole Notes Press, 1994;  
*Warrior Song & Other Poems*, Hobbs, NM: Writers on the Plains, 1996;  
*Etudes*, Boise, ID: Limberlost Press, 1996.  
*Bosque Redondo*, Tesuque, NM: Pennywhistle Press, 2000.

6. Information on publications and awards comes from the *Curriculum Vitae* provided to WDE by Wilson in February 1997, an updated CV provided in April 1999, and the Dickson interview.

7. Letter to WDE from Fulton dated April 11, 1999.

8. Dickson interview.

winter of 1966 in anger that our government was again fighting an undeclared war in a situation that I, from my experiences in Korea, knew we could never win... It took the pressure of rage and fear for the young men [of the Vietnam generation] that made me write it and it poured out, page after page.<sup>9</sup>

The initial outpouring, a 22-poem sequence about the Korean War titled «Graves Registry», Wilson says he wrote in a single night and in the order they appear in print.<sup>10</sup> He later added two more short sections to the sequence, totalling seven additional poems. It was subsequently published, along with 26 other poems, as *Graves Registry and Other Poems*.

Wilson thought that was the end of it, but, he says, it was not:

I was deeply engaged in reading from *Graves Registry* to war protest groups and traveling across the country back and forth. I was really scared for our country. And I began writing the poems [that would become *Midwatch*]... *Midwatch* was when I really got mad about what was going on in this country. To me I was attacking the fascism that I saw blossoming in my own land.

He did not initially associate these new poems with the «Graves Registry» sequence:

I had written these things to handle the Vietnam War, because it was a very horrible war, an American nightmare. The poems were not about Korea... *Midwatch* seemingly stood alone. I didn't think it referred back. But I later saw it was definitely a part of [the «Graves Registry» sequence].

When the book was published by Sumac Press in 1972, it carried the full title of *Midwatch: Graves Registry, Parts IV and V*.

In the mid-1970s, Wilson added two more parts to the sequence, «The Continents, The Holy Seas» and «A Masque for the Warriors». These later poems range from Romania to Argentina to Babylon, and include observations on human nature («A boy draws a sword and we know/what we are: killers, born to combat», *GR* 194), marital infidelity («I had thought she loved me./What she loved was the thought/of death», *GR* 195), love of family («before our eyes/--children. Small beauties that catch/our breath», *GR* 199), and over and over again the sea, the romance of the sea, Wilson's unresolved longing for the sea:

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9. Letter to WDE from Wilson dated February 21, 1997.

10. Dickson interview. The next two quotes also come from Dickson.

I never surrendered the sea  
 very gracefully. Waves sound  
 in my ear. The engine of my  
 last ship still vibrates my bed[.] (GR 180)<sup>11</sup>

After a long and frustrating search for a publisher, he finally got the entire sequence published by Clark City Press in 1992 under the title *Graves Registry*. These poems, taken all together, create a thought-provoking mixture of the literary and the political that moves fluidly across time and geography, and the Korean War poems of *Graves Registry* make Wilson one of the most important voices of that experience as well as a significant contributor to American war literature in general.

Wilson opens both the original sequence titled «Graves Registry» and the 1992 book *Graves Registry* with the following notation:

*Graves Registry:*  
 A Joint Service Operation that comes  
 in after battles, & wars, to count  
 the dead, identify bones, draw up  
 a total of what has been lost . . .  
*Aus dunklem Wein und Tausend Rosen rinnt die Stunde*  
*rauschend in den Traum der Nacht.*<sup>12</sup>

In so doing, Wilson establishes both the logic and origin of the poems' overall title and the ironic juxtaposition of the reality of war, as symbolized by the Graves Registry

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11. The poems quoted in this paragraph are, respectively, «And the Faces of War Ran», «The Young Officer's Return», «A Poem for Family», and «I Never Surrendered the Sea». All quotations from the poems are taken from the 1992 Clark City edition of *Graves Registry* unless otherwise noted. In the case of poems originally published in the Grove edition of *Graves Registry and Other Poems* and the Sumac edition of *Midwatch*, the texts of the poems are unchanged in the Clark City edition. The only variations in the latter edition deal primarily with titles and designations of poems, most notably the fact that Wilson added titles to the 22 poems in the original «Graves Registry» sequence, most of which had been designated only by Roman numerals, and assigned Roman numerals to every poem in the Clark City edition, though in the earlier two books only the first 22 poems of «Graves Registry» were so numbered. Among other changes in the Clark City edition, Wilson also takes the first poem from *Graves Registry and Other Poems*, «Echoes, Seafalls for Heloise.» and incorporates it into the «Graves Registry» sequence as Roman numeral I, though in the earlier book it had been separated from the Korean War poems by 24 unrelated «other poems.» Immediately after the initial 22-poem sequence (now made 23 by inclusion of the love poem for his wife), he adds four poems that were not in the Grove edition, and includes «The Lion's Gate» as part of the sequence, though it was clearly designated as its own poem with its own title separate from the «Graves Registry» sequence in the Grove edition. In the Clark City edition of the *Midwatch* poems, Wilson makes a number of changes to titles, deletes one poem called «The Drowned Boy» that had appeared in the Sumac edition, and reverses the order of several poems.

12. «Out of dark wine and a thousand roses runs the hour rushing into the dream of night» (Norton edition, 44). All German epigraphs are to be found in *The Lay of the Love & Death of Coronet Christopher Rilke* by Rainer Maria Rilke.

Joint Service Operation, with the stylized, idealized vision of war presented by Rilke, a vision that has sent countless young men—including Wilson himself, it would seem—off to a mortally rude awakening.

Wilson's identification with Rilke is both powerful and personal. «I learned German (reading with a dictionary) so that I could read Rilke in the original. I was obsessed with him for a long time before I wrote any of the *Graves Registry* poems», he writes. «When I discovered that he, as well as I, had graduated from a major military academy and was there because of his ancestors and their warrior history—his family had been named “von Rilke” but they had lost their lands and were forced to drop the “von”. A history strangely like my own». Moreover, he points out that Christopher Rilke was given the rank of «coronet», a rank equivalent to Wilson's own initial commissioned rank of «ensign», both of which mean roughly «he who carries the flag».<sup>13</sup>

Be that as it may, Wilson's rude awakening, as rendered in the sequence, arrives only by incremental steps. The Clark City edition begins with, in essence, a love poem for Wilson's wife, «Echoes, Seafalls for Heloise» (*GR* 3, a poem that also appears in the Grove edition but not as part of the «Graves Registry» sequence).<sup>14</sup> Then comes «Some Thing Is Coming» (*GR* 4), a quietly ominous poem describing the retrieval of an American torpedo bomber—which Wilson describes as «a shark, a killer whale»—from the bottom of Tokyo Bay, its three crewmen still strapped into their seats:

each has his goggles set, heads  
leaning slightly forward against  
the restraining straps. Lenses  
wink dully

before «in the bright air flesh slides off long dead/skulls, helmets shrink & collapse». The poem, both grisly and arresting, is a reminder that World War Two was still recent history when the Korean War began, and that Japan was the staging ground, the forward logistical support base, for Americans fighting in Korea. Of particular significance is that Wilson says «some thing» is coming. Not «something», but «some thing.» Nameless. Undefined (and perhaps undefinable). But distinct. A singular entity. Darkly threatening. Wreaking of death.

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13. E-mail from Wilson to WDE dated May 6, 1999. With regard to *The Lay of the Love and Death of Coronet Christopher Rilke*, note that «coronet» may also be rendered as «cornet» and «Christopher» is sometimes rendered as «Christoph».

14. Heloise is Wilson's third wife, whom he married in 1958 and to whom he is still married. Poems for Heloise appear frequently throughout Wilson's books (for example, «Island Song», *GR* 41; «To My Wife», *While Dancing Feet Shatter the Earth* 14; «To Heloise», *Retablos* 3; and «Santa Ana House», *Lion's Gate* 18). Wilson's first wife, who sent him a «Dear John» letter during his third tour in Korean waters, appears in only a few poems («The Young Officer's Return», *GR* 195, and «Confessional of His Love», *GR* 211), and then only in the context of her betrayal and infidelity. Wilson's second wife, to whom he was married only briefly, seems not to appear in his writing at all. (See also CA)

But the threat recedes for the moment as young sailors in «China Night» (*GR* 6) «none of us speaking Japanese ...fumbled with girls» whose fathers had been soldiers in Manchuria, China, and the Philippines, «ghost voices, spinning on». Still another reminder of World War Two appears in «R&R from Korea, 1950» (*GR* 7) in the form of «a rusted .45» pistol the Shore Patrol officer (Wilson?) finds while supervising a beer-soaked «beach party from the carrier/lying off Kwajalein», the weapon with

clip in,  
hammer back, safety off.  
in its way, dangerous  
as a handgrenade, there  
since World War II.

In the midst of directing his men, who are trying to control the increasingly drunken sailors, the officer also tries «to get free/long enough to give that weapon/a decent burial».

And then Wilson shifts ever so smoothly from the World War Two .45 to the «Colt .32 Auto/snug under [the] armpit» of «The Captain» (*GR* 9), US Army, «about 40./small, lean ...the kind eyes/of somebody's uncle».

His men: tall for Koreans, all  
carried M-1's (because there, big men  
have big rifles, it is the custom)

& what happened to his eyes  
the changes when he spoke of their raids  
of villages flaming, women & children  
machinegunned as they ran  
screaming from their huts[.]

That «thing» is no longer coming. It has arrived. And in its wake, instead of the decent burial of the previous poem, we are left with the unburied bodies not even of combatants, but of women and children

in their white clothes  
sprawled here & there, big  
& small, blood seeping into  
white[.]

Wilson's poems do not follow any chronological progression, certainly not the progression of his own chronology through Korean waters, moving as they do from

carrier to LST to carrier again and back to LST, jumping from 1950 to 1952 and back to 1950 and again to 1952. But there is very much an emotional progression to the poems, and Wilson modulates those emotions with great skill. After the blunt shock of something very much like mass murder in «The Captain», Wilson offers «...*ganz in Waffen*»<sup>15</sup> (GR 10), a curiously gentle, even sweet, poem in which a deck officer, firmly but without humiliating, bolsters the courage of a young sailor on the verge of breaking as their ship comes under fire from enemy shore batteries:

The boy looked about 10 standing there, the wind  
 from the open bridge tugging his hair.  
 Come back here, he said. The boy did.  
 Stand here beside me, he ordered. He did, close.  
 They went through the action that way, & neither  
 was afraid.

When we think of the Korean War—if we think of it at all—we mostly think of the Pusan Perimeter and the Chosin Reservoir, Pork Chop Hill and Heartbreak Ridge, the big battles between large units of regular troops, the fury of conventional land warfare. Wilson's poems are therefore especially illuminating because they focus again and again on two aspects of the war that are frequently overlooked: the naval war (Korea is a peninsula with a vast coastline, and navy forces constantly patrolled the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan, providing all sorts of support to the land battles from carrier-based airstrikes to naval gunfire)<sup>16</sup> and the guerrilla war (throughout the war, extensive guerrilla operations were carried out by the forces of both sides, and as has already been noted, Wilson's LST 1123 often acted in support of American and South Korean guerrilla actions).<sup>17</sup> «The Singer» and «The Circle», for instance, reflect the naval war while «The Captain» and «Guerilla Camp» are based on the guerrilla war.<sup>18</sup>

In «Guerilla Camp» (GR 12), Wilson describes a visit to a guerilla camp run by «an Army captain». He does not specify if this is the same man as in «The Captain», but in both poems Wilson describes junks built with powerful concealed engines and meant for swift hit-and-run coastal raids. After breakfast aboard the LST, the captain leads a tour of the camp, showing the navy officers «the kitchen, & the/tent barracks, the specially built junks» and the hospital, where they see four

15. «...clad wholly in armor» (Rilke, Norton edition, 48).

16. See, for instance, the introduction to *Retrieving Bones* xxviii, and John Deck's story in that same volume, «Sailors at Their Mourning: A Memory» 102-114.

17. CA 343, and Wilson letter dated February 21, 1997.

18. Wilson spells «guerilla» with one *r*. I am accustomed to spelling it with two. Either spelling is acceptable. You will find it spelled both ways here, depending on who is spelling it.

sheetcovered bodies from the  
raid the night before, didn't  
ask whose men they were, spoke  
kindly to the wounded & gave  
them cigarettes[.]

Throughout all this, Wilson intersperses stanzas describing a silent Korean who «followed, tagged/along like somebody's/dog», until at last

he strode up,  
stuck his shattered hand  
in my face, anger & hatred  
flaming in his eyes &  
shouted & shouted & shouted[.]  
\* \* \*

He was one of ours, a retired fighter,  
about my age, my height. They told me  
he wanted to know how a man  
could farm  
with a hand like that.

Wilson insists that when he writes, he is barely even conscious of what he is writing. «When I write poetry, I always hear a voice in my head speaking the lines just before I write them», he says. «My best poems seem to emerge from that speaking voice, as if I am taking dictation».<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he adds, «I never get involved with extensive revisions on the page.... If the poem is not nearly perfect when it comes, I put it in what I call my gunny sack (actually one of several boxes) and leave it, often for good».

Many another poet should wish to have such a voice speaking in his or her head, for Wilson's touch is deft, his subtlety often breathtaking. Consider his choice of the word «retired» to describe the crippled Korean. «Retired» is a word that conjures the end of a long working life, 25 years with the company, a pension and a gold watch, and time to take the grandchildren to the park on a Wednesday morning. It is not a word to be used with a man in his mid-20's, a Korean mirror image of Wilson's own young self suddenly left with no future. It is the perfect word to convey the irony, the sorrow, the waste of war.

Just so, the waste of war is captured also in «The Singer» (*GR* 14), a boy of «17. About 6' 1". Heavyset,/with plowman's hands & walk» who «sang midwatches away, telling/of country lands, of growing crops/green corn, tall in the fields/of

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19. This and the following quote come from CA 353.

Kentucky». Among the gunners mates assigned to clean shipboard weapons, including Wilson's .45 pistol,<sup>20</sup> the boy accidentally shoots himself with the pistol:

When I got back to the fantail  
 he was lying there, his boy's face  
 twisted & grey, big farmer's hands  
 held in his guts, guitar beside him.

«The Singer» forcefully reminds us that a lot of the casualties in any war come not from enemy action, but from accidents, negligence, thoughtlessness, stupidity, and the constant proximity to things that kill and maim without warning or mercy or caring which side you happen to be on.<sup>21</sup>

Whether the men in «The Circle» (*GR* 16) died as a result of hostile action or only of bad luck Wilson does not say, nor does it matter. In this, the eeriest poem in the sequence and as haunting a poem as has ever been written about war, Wilson details how his ship steamed for hours –«for all my watch»– through hundreds and hundreds of Korean bodies, «circles of men/bound in faded blue lifejackets,/lashed together» and floating on the Yellow Sea, victims of «a troopship gone down somewhere». Again skillfully choosing his words, he describes the circles of dead men as «blue *leis*», an image that conjures tropical beaches with palm trees and young women in grass skirts, thereby deepening the horror when we discover what those blue *leis* really are.

«I searched for/any sign of motion, any gesture», says Wilson, and «once or twice a hand did flop», but all of them are dead, «heads bobbing against/kapok collars, mouths open./tongues swollen». Adds Wilson, with seemingly cold detachment, «We sailed on. I suppose that's all/there is to say». But one body in particular remains fixed in his memory:

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20. I have assumed here that the «I» in the poem is Wilson. If the «I» in the poem is not literally Wilson, almost certainly Wilson either witnessed such an incident or heard about it with such vivid freshness that it left an indelible imprint on him. This is one of only a very small number of Korean War incidents Wilson ever alludes to in any of his other poetry.

One of the more curious aspects of this poem is that Wilson never addresses the question of how a live round was either left in or inserted into the pistol's chamber before it was cleaned. The singer should certainly have checked the chamber before beginning to clean the pistol, but aboard ship, at sea, and not in action, the pistol should not have had a live round in its chamber.

21. In the case of the Korean War, according to Richard Kolb, editor of *VFW Magazine*, 3,262 Americans died of non-hostile causes in the Korean War. Some of these would have been from disease, but most would have been lethal incidents such as those described in «The Singer» or John Deck's story «Sailors at Their Mourning: A Memory» (cited above).

God knows why  
 but his ass was up instead  
 of his head: no pants left,  
 his buttocks glistened  
 greyish white in the clear sun.  
 the only one.

So ludicrous an image. So without dignity or nobility or even modesty, heartwrenching in its absurdity. Surely Wilson can only mean it as an ironic counterpoint to every rousing speech that has ever praised «our fallen comrades» or «the glorious dead», *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.

And just for good measure, he ends the poem with a double quote from Rilke, which reads in part «...*seid stolz: Ich trage die Fahne*» («be proud: I carry the flag») and «*[die Fahne] traumt*» («[the flag] dreams») (Rilke, Norton edition, 38 and 56, respectively). The juxtaposition of the dead man, floating bare buttocks up, with the exhortation to «*seid stolz*» would be almost too heavyhanded were not the Rilke in German rather than in English, thus providing the bit of distance necessary to give the juxtaposition just the proper resonance, while the final image of the flag dreaming (of glory? of conquest? of victory?) contrasts sharply with the dead men, who dream of nothing.

But for all Wilson's genuine revulsion toward war, he cannot quite escape its mythology, the notions of honor and masculinity and bravado in which war is so deeply steeped, the sheer adrenalin excitement of being out on the edge of life or death. «My repulsion and sorrow was always mixed», he writes, «with excitement, a kind of singing in the blood», acknowledging that a part of him «was exhilarated, exalted by being in battle, the legendary testing of ancient heroes» (CA 343-4). This self-acknowledgement mostly manifests itself only much later in *Graves Registry*, well after the original «Graves Registry» sequence was written and published. «High Noon» (GR 18) is an exception.

One might be tempted to see the poem as a campy spoof, a satire of *High Noon*, the 1952 Western starring Gary Cooper. We have the pistol-packing lawman whose «Colt snuggled smooth/leather, slapping the outer thigh, loaded[.]» And the main street of the dusty little cowtown down which «*slowly they walked, no/retreat, down every footstep/of the street, eyes upon them*». And all of it constituting «the test» of courage, of manhood. Who will blink first?

But this is no Hollywood movie. Gary Cooper is actually three officers, only one of them armed, «*out walking, seeing the sights*», the cowtown a «little Korean village», the danger not bandits or outlaw gunslingers but the villagers themselves, people «with/hunger in their eyes[,] ...thin watchful men/silent» but full of «hatred», among whom, the Americans suddenly realize, may be hidden «'Kill-or-Capture' teams/operating from North Korea».

And yet what matters to these men, as the poem unfolds, is not, Wilson tells us, «that they made it» to the end of the street without incident, nor that «they were lucky» to have made it, but that they had not blinked, did not turn and run, had not

shown to those who hated them or to each other their fear, that they had passed «the test»:

*sense of  
the cocked hand, expectant  
in the swirling world  
of combat. a surety of steel.  
calm hands.*

Of such foolishness are the graves of young men dug, but such foolishness is part of the reality of war, and if Wilson does not repudiate it, he also does not shy away from revealing it for what it is.

If, as Wilson says, he wrote the original 22 poems of «Graves Registry» in one night,<sup>22</sup> and in the order in which they are published, one must marvel at the genius of his spontaneity. The pacing of the poems is splendid. In «High Noon» he calls the .45 automatic pistol «a charged/field, a potential, like the sex between a man's/legs». The very next poem, «The Girl» (GR 21), turns to sex more explicitly, and is also a part of the reality of war. The poem is a masterful account –made more so by its brevity– of another kind of destruction that war always brings with it: the degradation of women:

the girl,  
in an Inchon officers club,  
small breasts, thin indirect face  
but with a silk gown, marks of rank  
about her  
& how easily she came  
later, in the dark, the lips parted  
Korean words in passion in light  
not understood  
the crinkle of paper,  
passing hands[.]

Inchon, of course, was a destroyed city, as virtually all of Korea was destroyed. The normal order of life was gone. Poverty was everywhere. Thus we find a young woman from a family of means («silk gown, marks of rank») reduced to prostitution («the crinkle of paper passing hands»). One wonders if she came at all, let alone «easily», and if those Korean words «not understood» by her American –what? One

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22. Given Wilson's use of quotations from Rilke's *The lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke*, and Wilson's admiration for Rilke (in an e-mail to WDE dated May 6, 1999, Wilson writes: «I still consider [Rilke] one of the greatest poets of all time»), the coincidence between the composition of the «Graves Registry» sequence and Rilke's poem is remarkable. In his introduction to Rilke's poem, M. D. Herter Norton writes, «[a]ccording to Rilke's own account, it was set down 'all in one night'» (9).

can hardly use the word «lover». Perhaps «purchaser»— might well be curses delivered in the self-protective guise of passion.

Wilson begins the poem with another epigraph from Rilke, «*Bist Du die Nacht?*»<sup>23</sup> Cornet Christopher Rilke asks this question of the beautiful countess who takes him into her bed on the night before the great battle with the Turks, a night of gentle –and mutual– lovemaking, the countess’s gift to the young soldier. And once again, Wilson’s touch is both subtle and deft, the association with Rilke wonderfully ironic, the scene Wilson creates in «The Girl» a grotesque parody of high romance.

In «Guns» (GR 22), Wilson writes in the heroic mode that death «asks nothing but fearlessness», but he concludes that «dying men ...leave curious legends/terror/pieces of rusted metal[.]» In «Body at Sea» (GR 23), he describes the retrieval of a dead body off the California coast (recall that Wilson twice returned to the US for extended periods during the course of the Korean War), conjuring «a memory/of war». And from the war, «Waterfront Bars» (GR 25) in Japan offer temporary relief. Returning from 90 days operating «north of the bomblines ...–a man can almost smell/beer women» even while his ship is still at sea. But the bars are temporary and illusory havens that cannot make up for or replace the «little pieces/of a man, left here, there» in the wake of «the blackened ship», in the wake of the war.

Still, the sailors try as best they can to fill the emptiness, to find whatever there is to find as substitute for love, to reconnect themselves to their humanity. In «Sea Songs for Women» (GR 26), there are

dreams  
dreams of young blood, girls  
shining & clean in the sunshine  
of springtime beaches[.]

dreams, and desires –«love’s concerns». Wilson calls them– stretching back into the ancient and mythical past of Sumeria, Mu, Atlantis:

...speaking like guitars  
a singing that drives the night  
around us like a robe.

Once in a while, one even finds something rather like love, even in the midst of war, perhaps because of it. In «The Mistress» (GR 27), Wilson describes «Akiko./her child’s face, her hatred/of all Americans, save one». Akiko, Japanese,<sup>24</sup> hates

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23. «Are you the night?» (Rilke, Norton edition, 48).

24. Remember that Japan was the major staging area for operations in Korea, and readily accessible not only to navy and air force personnel, but even to ground troops as well in the form of rest & recreation leave.

Americans because her younger brother (four at the time) was killed during World War Two in a US air raid: «Blown to pieces in front of her/his brains on her dress». Meanwhile, Wilson's own ghosts

floated the Yellow Sea  
burned slowly in planes  
died gasping, jagged holes  
in their chests

they held each other  
through horrors higher  
than language[.]

Wilson never makes explicit why he is the only American Akiko doesn't hate.<sup>25</sup> but it may have something to do with the fact that he seems to be one American (if not the only one) who understands the full implications of «the blue, newly made cannon/nightmare bombs stamped "U.S.A."».

But then it's «back to the combat zone» in «December, 1952» (*GR* 28), a poem that bumps head-on into the disillusionment, the bitterness, the sense of betrayal that has been building throughout the sequence (and that must have been building inside the young navy officer as the war went on).<sup>26</sup>

Wilson first sets the scene by describing, in terms that echo both the lore and the lure of the sea, the American fleet as it glides in «long graceful lines» into the darkness:

red battle lamps, men walking  
ghosts in the chain lockers  
old chanties sung in the small watches  
of morning[.]

He then goes on to recount the exploits of great naval commanders of the past («*Nelson, battle signals snapping*»; «*Farragut, the calm voice on the bridge*»), the excitement of «*skeleton crews, prize ships, returning [with] swords raised*», the grand and heroic dreams that had drawn him to a military life at sea. Finally he explains the grand enterprise to which he had thought himself attached:

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25. Though the American in the poem is identified only as «he», I strongly suspect this poem –like many of the others– is autobiographical. In the unpublished Dickson interview, Wilson says: «I came back to Japan and I took a Japanese mistress.... I leave the ship when we get back from the battle zone and I just live this fantasy life with my beautiful new friend».

26. Again, in the Dickson interview, Wilson says that as the war went on he was «getting more and more disturbed. Trying not to think about it. Really trying not to and beginning to drink like crazy».

A blue United Nations patch on the arm, a new  
 dream. One World. One  
 Nation.  
 Peace.

But now he realizes that nothing has changed since the days of Nelson and Farragut, that «the old bangles» still work, allegiances are still bought, and «stabbing/tracers hit a village./the screams of women, children/men die». And while the New York Stock Market rises and «cash registers/click», Wilson is finally forced to confront

...the cost of lies, tricks  
 that blind the eyes of the young. *Freedom*.  
 Death. *A life safe for*. The Dead.

From this new perspective, «The Flag» (GR 30) looks rather different than it once did: «barred with blood.... a piece of cloth/tattering in the Eastern wind[.]» So, too, are Wilson's own lifelong beliefs and assumptions tattering in that eastern wind.

Again, however, Wilson changes the pace, backing away from the overtly political –and deeply disturbing– judgements of the last several poems (actually beginning with the last stanza of «The Mistress») and taking up more traditional and apolitical themes of war: loneliness, friendship, the confrontation with one's own mortality. In «Combat Mission» (GR 31), «2 Navy officers, 1 Marine» sit around an oilcan stove in «a ruined merchant's house» drinking «12-year-old Scotch» and trying to keep warm in «the night's cold air», lifting «their cups against/the darkness, the rumble rolling forward» from the front «10 miles away». The sense of comradeship, of shared danger and hardship, is palpable, as is the sense that these are good men and true, glad to be where they are and in each other's company. As they step out into the night, where «fires flickered on the hills», they are «confident». And if they are dreaming «of brown women./of any warm bed before gunfire», so too are they drawn to «the greater dream of battle». This is a curious poem to come so late in the sequence, containing, as it does, a sensibility that seems hard to justify after «The Captain» and «Guerilla Camp» and even «The Mistress», but Wilson is nothing if not honest, and he makes no secret –as has been noted above– of his fascination with war, which he has called «exciting, terribly exciting» (CA 344).

«Cargo» (GR 32) conveys some sense of that excitement –induced, at least in part, by the proximity to and possibility of one's own death– during a night resupply mission to the US-held island of Sok To aboard Wilson's LST,<sup>27</sup> which means Landing Ship Tank, but which, «loaded gunnel/to gunnel with high-octane gas,

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27. As with so many of these poems, this poem must surely be autobiographical. In CA, he writes: «Or we sailed by, sometimes in the middle of someone else's firefight, but with the participants far too busy trying to destroy each other to notice our Long Slow Target limping along, trying to

ammo», is actually «a bomb,/a torpedo—Long Slow Target». Says one of the boatswain mates, «[a]gook with a .45/could sink us».<sup>28</sup> As their ship steams «through the tightest passage,/communist shore to starboard, an island/to port», enemy coastal artillery opens fire on the island, «then U.S. jet engines swoosh & napalm douses/the shore batteries», the battle raging around and over the LST as they «sail on, walls of red/to either side the dying/fight back». And if, with the noise of the battle and of their own ship's engines, «somehow the screams, the dying got lost», the fragility of their own predicament is not lost on Wilson and his shipmates: «we, steaming on,/carrying our own deaths/deep in our bellies».

But however exciting war may be, however fascinating, Wilson is too thoughtful, too clear-sighted to be able to avoid where that excitement and fascination have led us all. Nothing in the history of modern warfare –not the rifled barrel or barbed wire or machineguns or dynamite, not the trench warfare of the Western Front or the tank battles of North Africa and the Russian steppes– has so brought home the fact that our cultural notions of glory and virtue and nobility of warriorship, of individual courage and skill at arms, have long since outlived their usefulness (if, indeed, they ever had any usefulness) than the detonation of the atomic bomb.

And here again, Wilson's pacing is marvelous. After giving us two poems that convey a much more traditional sensibility about war, his next poem is «Hiroshima» (*GR* 34). The very title of the poem, let alone its substance, says, «[t]his is where 'the greater dream of battle' finally leads; these are the screams and the dying that has gotten lost» in yet another war only a short flight, a short sail, from Hiroshima. Back in Japan with his «Japanese girl», whose «burned cheek» carries the scars of Hiroshima, Wilson struggles to come to terms with «what/it is to be american,/japanese in a century/of terror» while he traces those scars «with shaking fingers».

One can almost feel Wilson shaking in «Commentary» (*GR* 35), shaking with anger, a deep down in the bones kind of rage. The most powerful poem in the sequence, «Commentary» is a vivid denunciation of the brutality and senselessness of the war in Korea, the ignorance and apathy of Americans back home, the twisted logic of what General and President Dwight Eisenhower would eventually call the military-industrial complex, and the hypocrisy of all who claim to want peace while allowing the war to go on:

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pretend we weren't there.... It was a joke among us that a North Korean with a pistol could have blown us out of the water» (343). And in the preface to *Fragments of a Forgotten War*, he writes, «I slipped between walls of flame –to port– when coastal batteries (theirs) hit our ammo dump on an island; to starboard, jet fighters dropped napalm on their batteries».

28. Note the use of the word «gook» to refer to a Korean. The term, widely used by American soldiers in Vietnam (see, for instance, Larry Rottmann's «S.O.P.» in *Winning Hearts and Minds* 53), quite clearly pre-dates the Vietnam War.

After the raid, the bodies  
are lined on the beach. We can  
see them across the way, the living  
standing beside them in their white  
robes, the wind hitting in gusts  
across the separating bay  
that these men died

that our guerillas shot them  
down in a darkness  
is perhaps not so important.

God kills, they say  
justifying man's ways  
to those patterns they  
see surround them

deaths. lists of victims  
in a language the uncle  
back home couldn't read  
if he saw it, whose enemies  
are always faceless, numbers  
in a paper blowing in the  
Stateside wind.

How many bodies would  
fill a room  
living room with TV, soft  
chairs & the hiss  
of opened beer?  
We have killed more.  
The children's bodies alone  
would suffice.

The women, their admittedly  
brown faces frozen in the agony  
of steel buried in their stomachs,  
they too would be enough

but aren't, are  
finally not piled high enough  
the cost of war must be paid, bullets  
made for firing, fired. O,  
do not dream of peace while such bodies  
line the beaches & dead men float

the seas, waving, their hands  
beckoning  
    rot, white bones  
settle on yellow bottom mud.

Note the allusions to earlier incidents described in «The Captain» and «The Circle». Note, too, that Wilson says, in the second stanza, not «in darkness», but «in a darkness», not literally in the night, but in a darkness of the soul, a darkness of the human heart. And finally, note that Wilson reserves his greatest wrath not for the killing itself, which is «perhaps not so important» in the grand scheme of what needs to be addressed and redressed, but for those in whose name the killing is done, those who sit safely at home imagining that they wish for peace and doing nothing to achieve it. Like an Old Testament prophet –or a man troubled by his own nightmares– Wilson rebukes them: «O./do not dream of peace» –using not «Oh», but «O», a mouth open in a scream– while «bodies/line the beaches & dead men float/the seas».

That single «O» might have been melodramatic, but is not.<sup>29</sup> Coming, as it does, at the end of the penultimate poem in the sequence, after all that has gone before it, it sounds like what it is: a cry from the best that is human in the poet to the best that is human in whomever might pick up these poems and read them. Surely «Commentary» must rank with such poems as Owen's «Dulce et Decorum Est», Jarrell's «The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner», and Balaban's «After Our War» as one of the finest antiwar poems ever written. The poem's only real weakness is that someone unfamiliar with Wilson's «The Circle» may not understand why «dead men float the seas» (the «bodies lin[ing] the beaches» are explained internally and don't require knowledge of «The Captain»), but most readers are likely to be able to make their own sense of it, even if they miss the specific allusion.

In the end, though, Wilson is under no illusion that anything much has changed or is going to change. In the last poem of the original sequence, there is finally a «Truce» (*GR* 37) in Korea, but though the «ships come home, cruisers/their stacks still ... uniforms in mothballs./gold braid tarnishing»:

Factories, burning  
with orange smoke, cut  
steel plates with blue  
arcs, welders patch up  
the weapons  
of war  
  
dream.

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29. In his poem «Letter Home», William Childress also uses «O» instead of «Oh», and with equal effectiveness (Ehrhart, «Burning the Years» 88)

Wilson ends the poem, and the sequence, with another quote from Rilke:

...und die sechzehn runden Sabel,  
die auf ihn zuspringen, Strahl um Strahl,  
sind ein Fest.  
Eine lachende Wasserkunst.<sup>30</sup>

The passage is taken from the climactic, suicidally heroic, unabashedly romantic death scene of Cornet Christopher Rilke, a chivalric death, a manly death, a death young boys at play aspire to, a death that makes the hearts of young women beat faster. In short, a death that bears no likeness to the gutshot singer with a «boy's face/twisted & grey», or a drowned man with upturned buttocks glistening «greyish white», or «women & children/machinegunned as they ran/screaming from their huts».

Nothing much has been learned, Wilson seems to be saying. Our dreams, as a culture, as a people, as a species, are still of war. One would like these poems to end on a more positive note, perhaps some morsel of hope, however small, but the world is what it is, and one can hardly fault Wilson for that.

Seven other poems appeared in the original published version of «Graves Registry» in *Graves Registry and Other Poems*, but only one of them deals explicitly with the Korean War, «The Ex-Officer, Navy».<sup>31</sup> Not written as part of the original sequence, it is clearly a looking back sort of poem, a poem that deals not with the immediacy of war, but with its aftermath, its lingering effects, even years and years after the fact. It might be called a «PTSD poem» (though post-traumatic stress disorder was not identified as such until the 1970s) in which «a man, who no matter how long the days/faces still the combat, the long night's terror» of gunfire, «a restless dream» that gives him no peace until, «on white bare feet, with flaring eyes he greets/the morning» and the faces of the dead «fade/grey smoke against a city's sun».

The 44 poems in the *Midwatch* section of *Graves Registry* (originally published in 1972, three years after *Graves Registry and Other Poems*) include a number of poems based on the sea and Wilson's ambivalent feelings about a life at sea and his decision to leave it, interspersed with overtly political poems –including poems about the Vietnam War, Kent State, and the destruction of the environment– and commentaries on war and human nature. In «The Poem Politic 3» (*GR* 82), he writes: «What are politics anyway/but the formalized lusts and greeds of men?». In «The Poem Politic 8» (*GR* 104), he wonders:

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30. «...and the 16 curved sabres, that leap upon him, flash on flash, are a feast. A laughing fountain» (Rilke, Norton edition, 66).

31. In *Graves Registry and Other Poems*, it is the next poem after «Truce», but in *Graves Registry*, Wilson inserts another love poem for Heloise between «Truce» and «The Ex-Officer, Navy».

Can a child  
 be taught *not* to kill, when he crushes  
 the baby chicken so easily under his heel,  
 fingers his wooden sword and howls  
 with apechild anger?

Our loves  
 wear tattered gowns, our hatreds  
 shining steel and battleflags[.]

«The Poem Politic 10: A Note to Future Historians» (*GR* 109) begins

When writing of us, state  
 as your first premise  
 THEY VALUED WAR MORE THAN ANYTHING  
 You will never understand us  
 otherwise

and concludes

THEY VALUED WAR MORE THAN ANYTHING  
 If you build us monuments let them all  
 say that, as warning, as a poison label  
 on a bottle, that you may not ever  
 repeat our follies, feel our griefs.

Some of the poems make oblique references to Wilson's Korean War experiences, such as «Ballad of a Sailor» (*GR* 68), in which Wilson writes,

Here, far from the sea,  
 this house is steady. It does  
 not rock and that noise is  
 thunder, not gunfire.

«SeaChanty: Night Song» (*GR* 94) is more explicit, referring to «a pilot/dying as his jet sank in the Yellow Sea». But only three of the poems in *Midwatch* deal with the Korean War directly.

«Corsair» (*GR* 128) is a kind of eulogy for a dead pilot identified only as «D. S.» and «Don»,<sup>32</sup> a man who «refused//to machinegun civilians/on the Korean hillside/to bomb a courtyard/full of refugees».

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32. The title of the poem, «Corsair», is also the name of a type of fighter-bomber used by the Navy and Marine Corps in World War Two and the Korean War. In a May 30, 1999, e-mail to WDE, Wilson says that D. S. was «one of the few friends I had among the upper classmen at USNA» and was

In «The Poem Politic 4» (*GR* 86), however, we encounter «a killcrazy kid pilot» who not only doesn't refuse to drop bombs «on a courtyard/full of refugees», but afterwards «spoke excitedly/of bodies, arms, legs that rose several/hundred feet in the air». In a poem driven by the «*horror that fills us, atrocities/under another man's hand*», Wilson also quotes «Major J.E.K., U.S.A.», who vividly details the execution of an old man in Korea. «A village elder, he never knew why, I don't think», says the major, adding, «I don't know why we did it either». But if other men are doing the actual dirty work, Wilson insists that we, too, are responsible for what is done and for what America –«a land we are filling with hatreds»– has become. «Though I, personally, did not touch/the button» that released the bomb that landed on the courtyard full of refugees, he writes, it was nevertheless «my own handiwork».

Wilson's sense of irony is at its sharpest in «Memory of a Victory» (*GR* 122), in which he and his ship –part of an invasion fleet– are lying «off the Korean Coast» awaiting word to commence the pre-invasion bombardment. In the stillness, Wilson can see on shore «a picture world with low hills/much like New Mexico» filled with «homely smells of rice paddies, cooking fires». Through his binoculars, he can even see peach trees in blossom.

Then the crackling radio commanded  
«Fire!» and distant world I could have loved  
went up in shattering bursts, in greyblack explosions,  
the strange trees that suddenly grew on the hillside.

It is not a victory in which Wilson can take any pride. Shore batteries try to return fire, but are outgunned and soon silenced. He ends the poem with a line reminiscent of the Roman Legions who made a desert and called it peace: «After awhile we sent boats into the silence».<sup>33</sup>

It is against that silence that Wilson raises his voice. His poems are not about the big battalions and the pitched battles, but rather about a lesser known though equally vicious war. They throb with shattered villages, shattered illusions, and shattered ideals. They are peopled by Americans, yes, but also by Koreans and Japanese, refugees and cripples, and by warriors, yes, but also and more so by the defenseless and the innocent who always become the wreckage of war.

In more than a dozen books and chapbooks published between *Midwatch* and Clark City's *Graves Registry* twenty years later, Wilson includes no additional poems about the Korean War, and almost nothing that can readily be recognized as a reference or response to his wartime experiences. Even in the final two sections of

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already stationed aboard the carrier *Valley Forge* when Wilson reported for duty upon graduation from the Naval Academy.

33. Caius Cornelius Tacitus, in *Agricola*, Section 30, quotes Calgacus addressing the Britons at the Battle of the Grampians, and referring to the Romans, as saying: «Where they make a desert, they call it peace» (Bartlett 140).

*Graves Registry*, the word «Korea» appears only once (in the title of a poem called «Vietnam/Korea/Jenkins Ear», p. 144, that is not otherwise about the Korean War as such). And while several of the poems almost certainly are based upon Wilson himself during the war («The Young Officer's Return», p. 195, and «Confessional of His Love», p. 211), one must know Wilson's biography pretty well to realize it; moreover, these poems have more to do with Wilson's first marriage than with the Korean War *per se*.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, it would seem that Wilson had said what he had to say about the Korean War. But when Paul Edwards's anthology *The Hermit Kingdom: Poems of the Korean War* was published in 1995, it contained three previously unpublished Wilson poems, all of them written after the publication of *Graves Registry*,<sup>35</sup> and all of them, like «The Ex-Officer, Navy», looking back poems dealing with various aspects of the lingering consequences of the war: «ghosts», as Wilson writes in «Old Times» (*THK* 93), «that still walk/the night whispering/the word "Korea"».

An encounter between Wilson and a junk shop owner who has for sale a ribbon bar, including the Korean Service Medal and other decorations Wilson himself earned, triggers memories of «*coastal guns as they track our ship/through the winter night*» and «*bodies/swollen, floating in the Yellow Sea*». The junk dealer, too, is a veteran «from that forgotten war» –indeed, the implication is that the ribbon bar is his– and as Wilson pays for the ribbons, the man's

eyes hood, turn slightly away  
towards whatever he sees in the exploding  
shells ricocheting rounds that suddenly  
fill the room, surround us both.

«The Seventh Wave» (*THK* 95) is even more interesting. Not only does it zero in on Korea as a forgotten war, or as Wilson puts it in the poem, «this unmentionable war», but it also makes several comparisons between the Korean and Vietnam Wars, mentions Desert Storm unflatteringly, and castigates Americans in general for being uncaring, shortsighted, and obtuse.

«In the aftermath of war», the poem begins, «it all swept around him./The silence.... Years went by and he came to hate Veterans'/Day when "Korea" was never mentioned, or/briefly in passing».<sup>36</sup> In the midst of a society that has «no long-term memory at all, seeing all/wars as Desert Storms, made for TV», the Korean War veteran and his comrades feel like «ghosts drifting». When a Vietnam veteran says,

34. Concerning Wilson's first marriage, see CA 342-343 & 345.

35. In an e-mail to WDE dated May 30, 1999, Wilson says that the three poems were written «in a bunch about a year before *Hermit* was published», which would date them to 1994.

36. According to the same May 30 e-mail cited above, Wilson says that the «he» in this poem is not himself, but rather an old friend from Las Cruces, 1stSgt. Robert L. Gaines, USMC, to whom the poem discussed just previously, «Old Times», is dedicated.

«Hell, at least they didn't spit on you», he does not tell the younger man that «silence/can be a way of spitting», too.<sup>37</sup> On those rare occasions when the veteran does mention Korea, «[p]eople smile uncomfortably wonder why/he is dragging up that old subject again./He wonders, too, draws more into himself». The poem is rife with bitterness, its message one of alienation and detachment from the society for whom the veteran thought he and his comrades had been fighting. After a last swipe at Ronald Reagan for closing «the Vet's Hospitals», the veteran hurls a final judgement at an ungrateful nation: «Fuck 'em».

«War Stories» is interesting for a very different reason. Throughout his writing life, Wilson has written all but exclusively in free verse or open forms. Much of his writing—including his unconventional use of upper and lower case, punctuation, and white space—shows the influence of Charles Olson, whose essay «Projective Verse», Wilson writes, «was the beginning of my personal prosody».<sup>38</sup> But «War Stories» is not free verse, one of the very few poems of Wilson's—and his only Korean War poem—that is not.

To begin with, it is rhymed, having a scheme of: aab, bcc, ccd, dee, ffg, ghhh. And while not metrical as such—feet per line range from three to six—it is divided into regular stanzas of three lines each, with a closing stanza of four lines. Finally, as can also be seen above, each stanza contains a pair of rhymed lines plus a line that rhymes with one in the preceding or following stanza (except for the last stanza, which follows the same pattern but with a triplet instead of a couplet to cover the extra line). The poem is skillfully enjambed, with only four full endstops in 19 lines, and suggests that Wilson has the technical skill and mastery to write in closed forms, but has simply chosen not to. In the case of «War Stories», however, «it just seemed the right thing to do», he says. «I am a compulsive writer—I'm not really thinking when I write. I am responding to what I am receiving and what I am feeling at the time».<sup>39</sup>

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37. The spat-upon Vietnam veteran has become one of the most widely accepted images of that war, but in fact such incidents happened rarely, if they happened at all. See Jerry Lembcke's *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam*.

Elsewhere in the poem, Wilson makes another comparison between the Korean War and the Vietnam War, having the poem's persona ask, «Did you know more people died in Korea/than in Nam? That it lasted longer?». In fact, according to Paul Edwards of the Center for the Study of the Korean War, total American deaths in Korea were 34,600, while according to Anthony O. Edmonds in *The War in Vietnam*, the comparable figure for Vietnam is 58,183. As for the wars' respective durations, the Korean War began June 25, 1950, and the truce was signed July 27, 1953; the Vietnam War is harder to date, but using the most conservative measure, American ground combat troops first entered Vietnam in March 1965 while the last such units were withdrawn by March 1973. In the version of «The Seventh Wave» that appears in the as-yet unpublished manuscript *Fragments of a Forgotten War*, after the second of the two questions above, Wilson adds a third question, «That it hadn't ended, ever?». This is true: there has never been a peace treaty, only the original 1953 truce, which officially makes the Korean War of longer duration than the Vietnam War, but only as a technicality.

38. E-mail from Wilson to WDE dated May 11, 1999.

39. E-mail from Wilson to WDE dated June 1, 1999.

Turning to the text of the poem, one notices that the title is incorporated into the body of the poem, beginning:

War stories,  
told around a mountain fire  
by old men[.]

But as they talk, «[t]hey never see the darkened lead/grey woods silently fill with dead//who listen, nod their heads». As the poem progresses, it becomes harder and harder for either the men around the campfire or the reader to distinguish the living from the dead,

until shadows take each other's hands, in pain  
the files of wardead, bloodied to the bone  
walk their paths, through nettles and stone,  
sheaves and sheaves of war dead, each of us alone.

The imagery is particularly effective here, the harsh path of nettles and stone, the dead as bundles of ripe wheat –hundreds, thousands of stalks to a sheaf– harvested by the Grim Reaper. And again Wilson uses irony effectively, for there are no war stories in «War Stories», but only the dead, and the loneliness of memory, and the old men. Nothing in the poem makes it exclusively a Korean War poem as such, and in truth it applies to the living and the dead of any war.

Wilson himself remains among the living for now, and writing about a living writer is a hazardous undertaking because living writers have a tendency to keep on writing, and Wilson is clearly still not done with the Korean War, having published yet another Korean War poem, «Stone Seas», in the Summer 2000 issue of *Rattle*. In the meantime, however, should he publish nothing more than what he already has, he must be counted as the single most accomplished and important poet to emerge from the Korean War,<sup>40</sup> and a major –and shamefully overlooked– figure in American war literature in general. It would be inconceivable, were it not true, that Wilson should be either missed or dismissed by every anthologist, critic, and scholar of war literature since the original publication of the «Graves Registry» sequence in 1969 until Paul Edwards published *The Hermit Kingdom* in 1995. One can only hope that more recent attention brought to bear on Wilson's Korean War poetry<sup>41</sup> is a harbinger of things to come and the start of his finding a permanent place in the canon of war poetry.

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40. Other important American poets of the Korean War include William Childress and Rolando Hinojosa. William Wantling, Reg Saner, and James Magner, Jr. are also noteworthy. See Ehrhart's «Burning the Years» for a lengthy discussion of Childress. See Ehrhart's «Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War» for discussion of and poetry by the others.

41. See especially Ehrhart's «Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War» and «Forgotten War, Forgotten Words»; Ehrhart and Jason's *Retrieving Bones: Stories and Poems of the Korean War*;

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