

BURNING THE YEARS: THE KOREAN WAR POETRY OF WILLIAM CHILDRESS

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In a 1986 essay otherwise devoted entirely to the work of Rolando Hinojosa, Donald A. Randolph of the University of Miami offers a brief synopsis of «the major poets in the English language who derived artistic inspiration from the Korean War,» including in his list –in addition to Hinojosa himself– the Australian Vincent Buckley and American poets Hayden Carruth, Thomas McGrath, and William Meredith. He goes on to assert, however, that «[of] all the poets of this thematic category, none, I believe, has more skillfully captured the poignant, bitter irony of war than William Childress, with “Korea Bound, 1952”.»¹

It is remarkable that Randolph should include Childress among «the major poets in the English language who derived artistic inspiration from the Korean War,» since Randolph’s entire knowledge of Childress’s poetry seems to be confined to this one poem.² That the assertion turns out to be true would seem, in the circumstances, something on the order of a lucky guess. But it is true, nevertheless, for though Childress is not a major poet by most measures, he is certainly –along with Hinojosa, Keith Wilson, and William Wantling– a major poet of the Korean War.³

1. Donald A. Randolph, «Death’s Aesthetic Proliferation in Works of Hinojosa.» *Confluencia*, v.1, #2, Spring 1986, pp. 42-43.

2. On p. 47 of «Death’s Aesthetic.» Randolph cites as the source of Childress’s poem Sara and John Brewton’s 1968 anthology *America Forever New*, making no mention of Childress’s own collections, *Burning the Years* (1971) and *Lobo* (1972), both of which contain «Korea Bound, 1952» along with a number of other poems.

3. Randolph’s knowledge about poetry of the Korean War is somewhat lacking. In his discussion of Korean War poetry (cited above), he makes no mention at all of Wilson or Wantling, though Wilson published his major sequence on the Korean War, *Graves Registry & Other Poems*, in 1969, and several of Wantling’s Korean War poems were anthologized by Walter Lowenfels in *Where Is*

Even more remarkable, however, is that Randolph's brief mention of a single poem of Childress's is apparently the only scholarly or critical reference in any source, prior to 1997, to any of Childress's Korean War poems, and one of only two references to any of Childress's poems on any subject.⁴ Entries for Childress, prepared by Childress himself at the invitation of the publisher, appear in two volumes of *Contemporary Authors* (one dated 1979, the other 1991), but otherwise Childress and his poetry have been all but completely overlooked by critics and scholars alike.

Granted that, with only a few exceptions, Childress has not actively engaged in the writing and publishing of poetry since the mid-1970s,⁵ one might still reasonably expect that his many successes and achievements during the 1960s and into the 1970s would have earned him more serious and lasting consideration. While still only a sophomore at Fresno State College—albeit an old sophomore at 29, having spent most of the 1950s in the army—he published two poems in *Poetry*, one of the most prestigious literary journals in the U.S., then edited by Henry Rago.⁶ Thereafter, he published steadily in such well regarded (and often widely read) journals and magazines as *Harper's*, *Mademoiselle*, *North American Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *New Mexico Quarterly*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Southern Review*, among others.⁷ In 1970, *Poet Lore* named him a co-winner of the Stephen Vincent Benet Award for «Hiroshima,»

Vietnam? (1967) and *Penguin Modern Poets 12* (1968). Moreover, he very clearly implies that a «soldier in the newsreel clutch[ing] his ears/to hold his face together» in Hayden Carruth's «On a Certain Engagement South of Seoul» was wounded in that engagement, when a careful reading of Carruth's poem makes clear that Carruth is not referring to the Korean War, but rather to events in 1940:

When I was nineteen, once the surprising tears
 Stood in my eyes and stung me, for I saw
 A soldier in a newsreel clutch his ears

To hold his face together.

Since Carruth was born in 1921, he would have been nineteen in 1940 when he saw the newsreel. While Randolph is understandably—and justifiably—trying to make a case for inclusion of Hinojosa as a major poet of the Korean War, he seems ill-equipped to engage in a general discussion and assessment of «major poets in the English language who derived artistic inspiration from the Korean War.»

4. Discussion of Childress's Korean War poetry appears in W. D. Ehrhart's «Soldier-Poets of the Korean War.» *War: Literature & the Arts*, v.9, #2, Fall/Winter 1997, pp. 7-12; in Ehrhart & Philip K. Jason's *Retrieving Bones: Stories and Poems of the Korean War*, pp. xxxv-xxxvi; and in Ehrhart's «Forgotten War, Forgotten Words.» *Poetry Wales*, v.34, #4, April 1999, pp. 40-42. Two of Childress's nonwar poems, «Lobo» and «Hunting the Trolls.» are discussed in Ken Symes's 1976 *Two Voices: Writing About Literature*, p. 29, but that is the only other secondary reference I can find to any of Childress's poems.

5. «I still write and publish an occasional poem—latest in *War Cry*, the Salvation Army magazine.» Childress wrote in an April 2, 1997, letter to WDE. His humorous narrative poem «Snake Drowning» appeared in the April 1999 issue of *River*. A chapbook of selected poems was published by Hearse Press in 1999, but it contains only three new poems (none of these is related in any way to the Korean War).

6. E-mail from Childress to WDE dated June 16, 1999, 9:19 a.m. The poems were «The Soldiers» and «Shellshock.» published in September 1962.

7. These journals and others are listed on the acknowledgements pages of *Burning the Years and Lobo*.

his long multi-voice poem about August 6th, 1945.⁸ His first book, *Burning the Years*, was published in 1971 as Special Issue #13 of *The Smith*, and that same year the manuscript for his second book, *Lobo*, «was [among 369 entries] the unanimous choice of the national judges» to receive the Devins Award for Poetry.⁹ And his poems were being reprinted in numerous anthologies ranging from Sara and John Brewton's 1968 *America Forever New* to Walter Lowenfels's 1973 *From the Belly of the Shark*.¹⁰

No poet could ask or expect to accomplish more in so short a time, and few poets have. But Childress could not sustain that level of achievement. «My third book, *Cowboys & Indians*, had almost every poem published in good places, but the two times I sent it out, it came back,» Childress wrote years after the fact.¹¹ He never, apparently, sent it out again. What he needed was not another book of poems. What he needed was money, and serious literature –poetry especially– has always been a notoriously undependable way to earn it. Since as early as 1959, when he sold his first article to the *Saturday Evening Post*,¹² Childress had been supplementing his income with freelance nonfiction writing on whatever subjects anyone would pay him to write about, and by the early 1970s such income as he had came almost entirely from freelance writing. «I recall,» he wrote later,

that every work week was seven sixteen-hour days long as I wrote dozens of queries, researched dozens of articles, and made dozens of tough, often hungry trips. There were no vacations, and I never was able to afford health insurance. ... Few editors would give advances, so my meager bank account was always near-empty as I slept in car or pickup beside many a forgotten highway.¹³

A letter –in the form of an ostensibly humorous poem– to Frances Ring, editor of *Westways*, reveals the edge of desperation on which Childress was living by the mid-1970s:

8. March 12, 1970, letter to Childress from John Williams Andrews, Editor-in-Chief of *Poet Lore*.

9. April 5, 1971, letter to Childress from Mary Ellen Cruff, Poetry Director, the Jewish Community Center, Kansas City, Missouri, sponsor of the Devins Award. Along with the \$500 prize was supposed to come publication of the book by the University of Missouri Press. But according to Childress, in his introduction to the 1986 combined reprint of *Burning the Years & Lobo: Poems 1962-1975*, «someone at the press raised a hue and cry about 'legitimacy'» when it was discovered that some of the poems in *Lobo* had previously appeared in *Burning the Years*. «In the end, it was decided that LOBO would receive "A" but not "THE" Devins Award,» Childress explained. «I received \$500 but my book was not published by the university press.» (It was subsequently published in 1972 by Barlenmir House).

10. *Contemporary Authors*, v. 41-44, p. 137. In addition to his poetry, between 1965 and 1975 Childress also published serious short fiction in such journals and anthologies as *Southern Review*, *The Human Voice*, *The Smith*, and *Story: The Yearbook of Discovery*. (In an e-mail of June 16, 1999, 1:46 p. m., he says that during these years he also published what he calls «shit-fiction» in the men's magazines *Adam*, *Gent*, and *Nugget*).

11. Letter from Childress to WDE dated May 7, 1998.

12. E-mail from Childress to WDE dated June 16, 1999, 9:19 a.m.

13. Childress, *Out of the Ozarks*, p. 62.

Oh, Frannie, dear Frannie, send dough to me now;
 The tongue of my banker cries «None!»
 A great lack of calories wastes me away,
 And soon I'll be bones in the sun.

* * *

But if you don't hurry, my dear little Fran,
 You will find me well hung by the neck;
 I've often been hung, but never like that:
 Jesus Christ, won't you please send a check?¹⁴

Childress's poetry seems to have fallen casualty to the need to put bread on the table, hard enough to do as a freelance writer, perhaps impossible to do as a poet.

Putting bread on the table was and is a struggle Childress has lived with all of his life. He was born out of wedlock on February 5, 1933, in Hugo, Oklahoma. He never knew, nor ever met, his biological father, but when Childress was four, his mother married a man who adopted him and raised him along with the three other children the couple subsequently had.¹⁵ J.W. and Lorraine Childress and their children eked out a hard existence as sharecroppers and migrant farm laborers. «My family was dirt poor thanks to poor dirt.» Childress wrote, «Oklahoma red clay to be exact. For years, we supplemented our meager sharecropping income by picking other people's cotton... My earliest memory of a cotton field was one near Bakersfield, California. It was 1939. I was 6... We were mainly amateur migrants since we returned to Oklahoma after each season and sharecropped.»¹⁶

Their migratory travels took them «all over the country picking cotton and fruit, cutting broom corn, shaking peanuts,»¹⁷ all six of them often living in one-room plank-sided shacks with no electricity in camps infested with filth, rats and cockroaches.¹⁸ «To this day,» he says, «I don't have a high school diploma. My old man yanked me out of school to hit the migrant worker trail too often for me to graduate.»¹⁹ He spent much of his childhood, he adds, «in a sharecrop shack, listening to the wind, watching the dust, counting the days until I was old enough to escape.»²⁰

As soon as he turned eighteen, he enlisted in the U.S. Army. At 104 pounds even with a bellyful of bananas and water, he was still a pound short of the minimum weight requirement, but the recruiting sergeant told him, «What the hell, I'll give ya

14. Letter from Childress to Ring dated January 10, 1974.

15. E-mail from Childress to WDE dated June 17, 1999; author's questionnaire provided to WDE in September 1997; and Childress's book *Out of the Ozarks*, p. 183.

16. Childress, «Pickin' Cotton,» *Ford Times*, September 1980, pp. 58, 59, 61.

17. Quoted in Patricia Cahalin, «Jack of All Trades,» *North & Northwest Journal*, January 25, 1989, front cover of Entertainment Section.

18. Childress, «Pickin' Cotton,» p. 61.

19. Childress, «The Korean War and Its Effect on My Writing,» unpublished essay provided to WDE in February 1999, p. 2.

20. Childress, *Out of the Ozarks*, p. 117.

the pound. Yer in, kid!»²¹ Though it was 1951, and the Korean War was raging, «I couldn't wait to join the army.» Childress says;²²

Most people don't like the idea of army service, but to me it was a godsend. I had my own bed that I didn't have to share with my brother, and I had not only food three times a day, but meat three times a day. And I had clothing that wasn't patched and messed up.²³

Childress was sent to Korea in September 1952 as a demolitions specialist and, except for a two-month stint as a courier of secret documents, served with what he describes as

a combat engineer unit billeted by Marines and paid by the Air Force—one of those wartime hybrids called SCARWAF (Special Category Army Reassigned With Air Force)... Most of my eleven months and sixteen days there were spent working 16-hour days—blasting, sometimes being sent places to remove mines, and often knocking down small mountains that were in the way of a road or other military need... As far as combat went, I saw little compared to line soldiers, [but] even as a combat engineer behind the [Main Line of Resistance], I saw and experienced things that changed me forever, that gave me insights into human beings I'd rather not have had, that touched the soul I came home without.²⁴

Honorably discharged in November 1953, Childress «couldn't buy a job,» even after attending barber school on the GI Bill, so in 1955 he re-enlisted in the army. This time trained as a paratrooper, he spent most of this second three-year hitch in Germany and France. Honorably discharged a second time in 1958, he immediately enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, hoping to become a pilot, but «a summary courtmartial for AWOL [absent without leave] in the paratroops went against my flying», he says, so he spent seven months as an altitude chamber specialist testing extreme altitude flight suits before receiving his third honorable discharge in 1959.

After a brief stint as a U.S. Mail letter carrier, Childress—who had earned a general equivalence diploma while in the service—enrolled at Fresno State College. «Having already written a novel [while still in the military], I wanted to study creative writing,» he explains. «My "novel" was *Some Lower Than Angels*, a pitiful copycat of Ross S. Carter's *Those Devils in Baggy Pants*. In it, I demonstrated a complete lack of

21. Childress. «The Korean War and Its Effect on My Writing.» p. 2.

22. Childress. «The Korean War and Its Effects on My Writing.» p. 1.

23. Quoted in Cahalin, back cover.

24. Childress. «The Korean War and Its Effect on My Writing.» pp. 1, 2, 5.

knowledge of any writing rules; couldn't paragraph even, much less punctuate, but it fired me».²⁵

And he learned fast. As already noted, he was publishing in *Poetry* by his sophomore year, and by the time he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1965, additional poetry and prose of his had been accepted for publication by *Harper's* and the *Southern Review*. After a year as a juvenile counselor in San Francisco, he enrolled in the famous Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1968. He spent the following year teaching English at Lincoln College in Illinois, followed by a year as a writer/editor for the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C., and finally another year teaching, this time at Allen Hancock College in California, before turning to fulltime freelance writing in 1971.²⁶

With the brief exception of a job as senior speechwriter for Phillips Petroleum in the early 1980s—«an awful job and one I'd not take on again. Talk about lies!» he says—²⁷ he has been freelancing ever since. By his own reckoning, over the years he has written and published nearly 4,000 articles, columns, and essays in newspapers and magazines in the U.S. and overseas, often accompanied by his own photographs.²⁸ From 1983 until 1997, he wrote a regular column called «Out of the Ozarks» for the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* which, in its heyday, ran as often as three times a week,²⁹ and at one time or another (and for varying lengths of time) he has been a columnist for a number of other publications.³⁰ A collection of his columns, also called *Out of the Ozarks*, was published in 1987; he provided the introduction and text for Frank Oberle's 1990 *Missouri on My Mind*; and for a number of years he was in demand as a

25. Information in this and the preceding paragraph comes from three separate e-mails from Childress to WDE, all dated June 16, 1999, but sent at different times: 9:57 a.m., 9:19 a.m., and 11:20 a.m. respectively. In a subsequent e-mail dated July 19, 1999, Childress added that *Some Lower Than Angels* was «of course amateurish and even silly (what could I, who was then not even a HS grad, know about writing?).»

26. Biographical and bibliographical information in this and subsequent paragraphs comes from multiple sources including *Contemporary Authors*, v. 34, 1991, p. 90; a 1970 *vita*, a document titled «1992 bio.» an «Abbreviated Publishing Biography.» and an author's questionnaire, all provided by Childress to WDE; letters from Childress to WDE dated April 2, 1997, September 26, 1997, and October 18, 1997; and e-mails from Childress to WDE dated August 2, 1999 and August 3, 1999.

27. Letter from Childress to WDE dated September 26, 1997.

28. Among the many publications in which his work has appeared are *Reader's Digest*, *Conde Nast Traveler*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall's*, *Modern Maturity*, and *Bon Appetit*, along with more specialized journals and magazines like *Food Service Director*, *The Rotarian*, *Ford Times*, *American Legion Magazine*, *The California Highway Patrolman*, and *Compressed Air Magazine*. His 1992 article (with accompanying photos) on President-elect Bill Clinton's mother appeared in nine U.S. publications as well as publications in England, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Denmark.

29. After the collapse of his first marriage in the early 1970s, Childress left California, where he'd been living, and settled in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri, where he remained until 1997 when he returned to California and married his fourth wife.

30. Among them, *Country Living*, *Touring America*, *Small Farm Today*, *Saga*, *Pan Am Magazine*, *Ozark Airlines Magazine*, *Informart Magazine*, *The Grove Sun* (Oklahoma), and *Friends* (the magazine of Chevrolet). Some of these simply reprinted various «Out of the Ozarks» columns; for others Childress produced new material.

humorist and folk-performer, doing original songs and sketches.³¹ Though now officially retired, he continues to travel widely, researching and writing freelance articles for such diverse publications as *Motor Home*, *Truckers News*, *Vantage*, and *Adventure Cycling*. In 1998, he finished the manuscript for *Bed, Breakfast & Murder*, which he describes as a «pure potboiler thriller» for which he is seeking a publisher, and he is currently compiling a sequel to *Out of the Ozarks*.³²

All in all, while undoubtedly better than picking cotton, it has been a career of long hours, hard work, and few respites, costing Childress three wives (he married a fourth time in 1997), a six-year bout with alcoholism (which he finally won), and the time and leisure to write what did not and never could pay the bills (which is to say, poetry). But if Wilfred Owen's corpus of poetry was cut short by death and Dylan Thomas's by drink, their work is no less of value for being modest in volume. The same can be said for Childress's, cut short as it was by economic necessity. One of the few assessments of Childress's poetry comes from the poet X. J. Kennedy, editor of the much used textbook anthology *An Introduction to Poetry*, now in its eighth edition:

William Childress is a poet of amazing energy, whose eye is trained firmly on the physical world. There seems no poem too demanding for him to attempt; he seems equally at home in open verse and tight stanzas; and the range of his concerns—from the ancient world to contemporary city streets where pushers ply their trade—is large enough to mark him as a poet to whom the label «minor» may never apply.³³

It is to Childress's poetry, and especially to the poems that deal with the Korean War, that we now turn.

Over the course of his long writing life, Childress has had little to say in prose about the Korean War. In the midst of his 500-page unpublished novel *Some Lower Than Angels* is a brief 12-page «dream sequence» (Childress's term) about the last two days of the war, ending:

31. Largely as a result of the success of «Out of the Ozarks,» Childress writes in his letter of September 26, 1997, «I became a regional “celeb” and did lots of speaking, which soon became folk-performing. I'm an average instrumentalist at best (guitar, mandolin, a little banjo, harmonica) but packed quite a few houses... best paycheck \$1400 for a two-hour show. Got a tape of my folky-type songs out of it and sold several thousand bucks worth. There were many TV-radio appearances along here too. It petered out about 1992, but I did a few each year after that, latest the Society of University Women in St. Louis about three years ago.» In an e-mail of June 16, 1999, 12:20 p. m., he added, «I am NOT good at entertaining; just good enough... a poor man's Burl Ives, maybe.»

32. He has referred to the sequel as both *Back to the Ozarks* (e-mail of August 2, 1999) and *Return to the Ozarks* (e-mail of August 3, 1999).

33. Letter from Kennedy to Childress dated November 11, 1971. The quote was intended as a cover blurb for *Lobo*, but it was substantially edited by the publisher to read: «... a poet of amazing energy... whom the label “minor” need never apply.» Note the change of wording from «may never» in the letter to «need never» on the book's flyleaf, where the quote appeared.

Castillo never knew that the company slaughtered the Chinks that day, never knew that Soya was cut in two by a burp-gun, or that Daniels had gotten his almost at the start of the onslaught by the Chinese. For he had dropped in blood-spattered unconsciousness across the torn body of the Chinese Lieutenant...³⁴

Short stories such as «The Wolves,» «The Roast Duck,» and «Uncle Roman,» written in the 1960s when Childress produced most of his creative literary work, clearly draw upon his childhood for their inspiration. «Sharecropping is a miserable life, and it affected me as a writer as much as Korea did,» Childress writes. «There are different kinds of wars.»³⁵ In the dozens and dozens of columns reprinted in the 192 pages of *Out of the Ozarks*, Childress makes few references to his military service and only two references to the Korean War:

The bullet-riddled Korean in the muddy ditch. The moon that shone on his upturned face still shines on me. (p.127)

In 1951, the oldest son escaped to the Korean War[.] (p.143)

Two short autobiographical essays written for *Sports Afield* and *Ford Times* appeared in the early 1980s.³⁶ And that is about it.

All the more startling is it, then, that of the 67 poems Childress chose to include in his two collections, *Burning the Years* and *Lobo*, a dozen of them are clearly Korean War poems and another five deal with World War Two, the Vietnam War, military service, or veterans. Kennedy is right to point out the impressive breadth of Childress's poetry. He takes his subject matter from a wide variety of sources: the natural world and its inhabitants, the agricultural west and southwest of his childhood, the unnatural worlds of urban poverty and button-down America, and the whimsy of his own imagination. But war occupies a significant percentage of the total body of his published poetry. «War was, for me as poet and writer, a fascinating if frightening topic», says Childress, «War (antiwar) as a topic has always fascinated me.»³⁷ If his prose does not support such an assertion, his poetry certainly does.

It is difficult to consider Childress's Korean War poems in any particular sequence because Childress himself seems highly ambivalent about how he wants to present them. In the original *Burning the Years*, for instance, he places «For My First Son» directly after «Death of a General,» but in the original *Lobo* he reverses their

34. Manuscript copy provided by Childress to WDE, singlespaced and with the «dream sequence» marked pp. VI-XI.

35. Childress, «The Korean War and Its Effect on My Writing,» p. 7.

36. «The Pheasant,» describing how Childress shot a pheasant one day and gave it to a hungry Korean mother and her children, appeared in the February 1981 issue of *Sports Afield*. According to his letters of December 9, 1997, and January 14, 1998, he can no longer even find a copy of the essay that appeared in *Ford Times*, but says it appeared «in the early 1980s.»

37. Letter from Childress to WDE dated February 5, 1999.

order and puts four other poems between them. Moreover, some poems, like these two, appear in both books, while others appear in only one or the other. He adopts yet another configuration fifteen years later in his reprint edition *Burning the Years & Lobo: Poems 1962-1975*.³⁸ Among the three books, inconsistencies and anomalies

38. Here are the poems and their various groupings:

Burning the Years, Section II titled «The War Lesson»

For a Dead Paratrooper
Hiroshima
Korea Bound, 1952
The Soldiers
Soldier's Leave
The Long March
The War Lesson
Death of a General
For My First Son
Burning the Years
The Viewer

Lobo, the second section, titled «The Long March»

For a Dead Paratrooper
Korea Bound, 1952
For My First Son
The Long March
Letter Home
Combat Iambic
Shellshock
Death of a General
The War Lesson
The Viewer
Midwest Legion Bar
Trying to Remember People I Never Really Knew

Burning the Years & Lobo: Poems 1962-1975

An opening section of 30 poems titled «Burning the Years» leads off with «Hiroshima.» Childress's poem about the dropping of the first atomic bomb, and includes in its midst, in sequence:

Soldier's Leave
The Soldiers
Burning the Years

The third section of the book, titled «The Long March» includes these poems:

For a Dead paratrooper
Korea Bound, 1952
For My First Son
The Long March
Letter Home
Combat Iambic
Shellshock
Death of a General
The War Lesson
The Viewer
Midwest legion Bar
Trying to Remember People I Never Really Knew

abound. In 1997, however, the twelve core Korean War poems appeared in *War, Literature and the Arts*, arranged in a sort of thematic progression by the journal's guest-editor, a sequence that seemed to meet with Childress's approval,³⁹ so the present discussion will follow that sequence, after which will come discussion of other relevant poems.

We begin, then, with «Soldier's Leave» (*WLA*, p. 52), a sweet and melancholy poem written in three ballad stanzas with an *abcb* rhyme scheme in which a soldier walking «beside the river» reflects upon the onset of autumn and the approach of winter. Nothing in the poem overtly suggests war except the title, but the turning of the seasons – «It is October, and the leaves,/once so flexible and green,/grate on each other... Soon ice will form»– may well symbolize the hard times ahead for a young man on his way to war.⁴⁰ Childress interjects a particularly ominous tone by comparing those grating October leaves to «a surgeon's knife on bone» (battlefield amputation, perhaps? An ugly image in any case), and the ambiguity of the poem's final two lines – «but he will be gone before [the ice forms]/on a cold campaign of winter's»– is unresolvable: will the soldier soon be gone only from the riverbank and this place where he is now –or will he be dead? Neither the soldier nor the reader knows.

But the melancholy sweetness of a last leave is abruptly replaced by the harsh reality of departure for war in «Korea Bound, 1952» (*WLA*, p. 53), a poem that is every bit as skillful as Randolph says it is. Indeed, it may be Childress's finest poem on this or any subject, and thus requires reproduction here in full:

Braced against the rise and fall of the ocean,
holding the rail, we listen to the shrill
complaining of the waves against the hull,
and see the Golden Gate rise with our motion.
Some hours previous, bearing duffels
as heavy as our thoughts, we wound inward
like slaves in some gigantic pyramid,
selected by our pharaoh for burial
against our wills. Now we watch Alcatraz
sink into the water, and visualize
the pale, amorphous masks of prisoners,
whose lack of freedom guarantees their lives.

39. In a May 7, 1998, letter to WDE, guest-editor of the Korean War poetry issue of *War, Literature and the Arts*, Childress wrote: «I like the way you grouped the poems.»

40. In *Burning the Years & Lobo: Poems 1962-1975* (hereafter *BTY&L*), p. 21, Childress explains, «the poem is about a furlough I took just before being shipped to the Korean War in 1952.» He dates the poem to the late 1960s. In his September 26, 1997, letter to WDE, however, he writes: «This was a very early poem, 1962 I think.» He also says, «Does "Soldier's Leave" still have 'cinereous splinters' in it? If so, are you up for changing it to "ash grey"? I never could think of a good word for the pretentious "cinereous", which few would know (or care for) anyway.»

First published in *Harper's* in October 1965, it has, like «Soldier's Leave,» twelve lines. But there are, as can be seen, no stanza breaks, and the line length is iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme is *abba cddc effe* –or nearly so. One of the few flaws in the poem is that the rhyme scheme breaks down in the last four lines, requiring «visualize» to rhyme with «prisoners». Indeed, one might argue that the pattern in those last four lines is *efef, eeee*, or even *eeefe*. It seems almost as if the poem wants to be a sonnet, but has lost its last two lines (wherein might have been the perfect rhymes for «prisoners» and «lives»).

That flaw, however, is simply not large enough to detract from the tremendous power of the poem, in which Childress emphasizes the unwillingness of those being sent to fight and the basic unfairness of their predicament. The soldiers don't just stand at the rail taking in a last glimpse of San Francisco and America, but are gripping the ship's rail –a posture rife with tension and even fear– «braced against the rise and fall» not just of the ocean, but of the fortunes of war that await them. They listen not to a soothing sea, but to the «shrill complaining of the waves against the hull» that echoes their own discontent and unhappiness with the fate that has placed them where they are. Ostensibly free men in a democracy, they are likened to Pharaoh's slaves, and the ship itself to Pharaoh's burial tomb. And in the poem's final irony, they sail past Alcatraz Island, then a federal maximum security prison, where the prisoners' «lack of freedom guarantees their lives.»

As Childress himself says of his departure from San Francisco Bay, Korea-bound in 1952, «I was struck by the strange anomaly of killers and thugs being saved from a combat death by being behind bars, while law-abiding citizens went forth to kill and die with the blessings of their nation.»⁴¹ If the form of this poem suggests a sonnet whose last two lines have gotten lost, it is hard to imagine any last line that could capture this irony of who is free from what, and who is not, any more effectively than the one Childress has used.

With the single exception of one poem by William Wantling, «Korea, 1953,» Childress is the only one of the soldier-poets from the Korean War to work in closed or fixed forms. Often using both rhyme and meter, he sometimes alters the pattern of the rhyme scheme within a given poem, or rhymes in some places but not in others, an admixture of free verse and fixed form that is oddly pleasing and reminds one of Gwendolyn Brooks.⁴² Occasionally he gets into trouble or forces a rhyme, as he does toward the end of «Korea Bound, 1952,» but for the most part he handles form skillfully.

But as Kennedy notes, «he seems equally at home in open verse and tight stanzas,» that is to say free verse or closed form, and «Letter Home» (*WLA*, p. 54) is entirely in free verse. It also reflects both Childress's agricultural background and his ability to empathize with those who have so little. If «Korea Bound, 1952» reflects the misery and unhappiness of citizen-soldiers compelled «against our wills» to go to war,

41. *BTY&L*, p. 60.

42. See, for instance, Brooks's «Strong Men, Riding Horses,» «The Bean Eaters,» or «A Man of the Middle Class,» *Selected Poems*, pp. 71, 72 & 96 respectively.

«Letter Home» is a reminder that there are those whose suffering is even greater and less deserved. In it, he describes to his mother the swollen-bellied, threadbare, ragged children of Korea, «broken stalks» that line the roads.

The poem relies heavily, especially in its first half, upon images of growing things and the fragility of things that grow. «O, the flowers/of their faces», he says –not «Oh», but «O»– the O making a flower on the printed page, a daisy perhaps, or a daffodil. But these flowers have «petals all torn,» and suddenly the «O» is transformed into an open mouth, a begging mouth, a mouth that moans, a hole that cannot be filled. «We give/them everything in our packs/and still they moan,» he says, though they «will never sing/again.»

Three times in the course of seventeen short lines, Childress invokes «Mother,» as if seeking maternal comfort, an instinctive reflex in a time of need. «O, mother, wish me home!» he cries out. But it is not of himself that he is thinking, not for himself that he wants to be home, but rather for what he wishes he could do to alleviate these children's misery. «With just one field of Kansas grain,» he writes, «what I could do for them.»

But such empathy will be hardpressed to survive the hell into which «The Soldiers» (WLA, p. 55)⁴³ are about to descend. A tightly constructed poem of six rhymed sestets (using four different rhyming patterns),⁴⁴ each line with nine syllables, the poem reveals a bleak, hard world of «decomposing shit» and «paddies heavily seeded/with napalm mines.» Like Wilfred Owen, the master of slant rhyme,⁴⁵ Childress frequently uses half-rhymes, here pairing such words as «patrol/cold,» «luminous/murders us,» and «dollar/matter.» And again, as in «Letter Home,» Childress uses images of growing things. But instead of the ubiquitous flowers of children's faces lining the roads, here in the combat zone –what would have been

43,44,45

43. In his unpublished essay «The Korean War and Its Effects on My Writing,» p. 11, Childress writes: «“The Soldiers” grew out of the experience of a young Master Sergeant, just 21, I had known at Fort Huachuca. He was foul-mouthed and drank heavily, but he had cause. In the early days of the war, so many in his unit were killed in firefights, he was promoted with lightning speed. It is his experiences that I utilize in “The Soldiers,” in the combat scenes.»

The original version of «The Soldiers» consisted of four parts totalling seventeen stanzas that tell a kind of narrative from induction into the army through combat in Korea. On the manuscript copy Childress sent to WDE, Childress included a handwritten note that says: «Complete draft went to Poetry's Henry Rago in 1961 –he used the last verse.» (Childress uses the word «verse» here, but means the last of the four parts, which Rago published under the title «The Soldiers,» deleting the subtitle «Part 4: The Mission»).

In an e-mail to WDE dated August 2, 1999, Childress writes, «I am virtually certain that Jackson Mac Low or someone around him or around that time [1971 or 1972] did indeed publish [“The Soldiers”] in its entirety,» but adds, «If I had a copy of the mag, it's long since lost.» A letter from Jackson Mac Low, then an editor at the pacifist antiwar journal *WIN* Magazine, to H. L. Van Brunt, then an editor at *The Smith*, dated November 25, 1969, does say that «I'm going to try to get [“The Soldiers”] in as soon as possible, . . . but only if we have room for the whole sequence. They don't seem to stand well separately, but are powerful as a sequence.» In a follow-up letter dated December 2, 1969, Mac Low reiterates, «I'm trying to get “The Soldiers” printed in an early issue of *WIN*.»

I have not yet been able to ascertain whether this ever happened or not, but in any case, for the historical and literary record, here is the text of the complete poem:

called the Main Line of Resistance— there is only a «stray flower» on the hills while the ricefields «can grow red flowers/at a touch, with a blossom that kills» (flowers

The Soldiers

Part 1: The Men

For what comfort numbers can afford,
we huddle together, mute, frowning,
appearing neither fearful nor bored
over the quick loss of our freedom.
Now our simple lives have meaning.

But our lives do not matter. Some things
are more important, the noncoms tell
us. The world crawls like these trucks, destined
for a resolution of those things.
«Soldiers, we don't mean to be unkind,»
one jeers, then laughs: «But war is hell!»

Now it's just a game —but tomorrow,
their sterner game begins. Intuit
what we may, we are not soldiers yet.
A killer's knowledge can't be borrowed.
To learn properly, we must do it,
—and learn what soldiers cannot forget.

Part 2: The Place

The barracks are roofs and barren walls,
no more. All else is in addition
to their blankness. «Everybody's pals
in my outfit,» the Sergeant says.
«All equal. I don't want no pissin'
and moanin', neither The Man nor me.

If you got problems, the Chaplain's hour
is yours, not mine. I got no problems
but you—and you ain't no problems.
My job is to make killers of you,
and I will. Please do not misconstrue
what I have said. And take a shower.»

So we are assembled; numbered first
then named, society's unseasoned
green youths, bound for an object lesson
in an art that never was an art.
And who's to say, if worst comes to worst,
that numbers are bad? They set us apart
and give us an identity
we couldn't feel in a battery
of similar names. Unfamiliar
as our numbers are, less familiar
are the shaven faces and shaven heads
neighboring us in camphorized beds.

reminiscent of Keith Wilson's «strange trees that suddenly grew on the hillsides» in «Memory of a Victory.» *Graves Registry*, p. 122).

Part 3: The Training

Late spring finds us inhaling the green
smell of leaves from behind spaded earth.
Each raw trench, fresh as a new grave,
opens in mock warfare and gives birth
to yelling recruits while a lean,
tanned Medic looks on, impassive, suave.

But uncertainty matches resolve:
Our Corporals won't let us forget
the impassive, foreign faces
waiting with Oriental patience.
It is a problem many can't solve.
One does: He falls on his bayonet.

The burning days engender summer
and summer brings tanks. In earthen pits
reinforced with logs, we crouch and wait.
Fifty tons of armor eclipses
the worlds we occupy. We shiver,
inhale dust, and spit it out as mud.

our training ends: Now our final end
focuses on a paper command
that means more than God to most of us.
Those who study war in high places
deploy us now, individual rats
to individual races.

Part 4: The Mission

In Korea, decomposing shit
chokes the perfume of the stray flower
still seen occasionally on hills,
and the paddies, heavily seeded
with napalm mines, can grow red flowers
at a touch, with a blossom that kills.

From the dark immobilization
of earth bunkers, our probing patrol
infiltrates forests. Distant searchlights
paint ridges with something like moonlight,
and a grey rain chills us. Winter's cold
is not far away. It too will come.

Our ghosts meet other ghosts in the trees:
They appear pallid and luminous
in the eyepiece of a sniper's scope,
a tool too complex for the Chinese.
But their simple burp-guns never stop,
and their simple power murders us.

Harking back to the «cold campaign of winter's» in «Soldier's Leave,» Childress writes that for the soldiers emerging from their «earth bunkers» to set out on night patrol, «winter's cold / is not far away.» And once again, that cold could just as easily be death itself as literal winter because «our ghosts meet other ghosts in the trees,» Chinese soldiers whose «simple burpguns never stop, / and their simple power murders us.»

Worst of all, it is all for nothing, the soldiers «having done little but christen hills / with proper names... that matter / to no one but us.» In such a world, where «lives narrow / around living's uncertain center», in such a war, the soldiers «have today» and little else, not even the hope (as there was in World War Two and even in the first few years of the Great War) that a better world might emerge from their sacrifice and suffering, for the soldiers already know that «[it] is not likely a solution / to human problems will come of this.» In such a world, where «cold rain descends softly / on scorched graves,» and dead men «lie in stiffened resolution,» those «children with bellies swollen» in «Letter Home» are all but forgotten, for «soldiers can't be soldiers and be / human.»

In December we start pulling out,
 having done little but christen hills
 with proper names: Million Dollar,
 Triangle, Heartbreak; names that matter
 to no one but us. We taste defeat
 and like it. Victory is what kills.

No soldier can ignore tomorrow,
 though finally it does not matter
 as much as it should. We have today,
 and by the grace of Generals a stay
 of execution. Our lives narrow
 around living's uncertain center.

It is not likely a solution
 to human problems will come of this,
 but soldiers can't be soldiers and be
 human. The cold rain descends softly
 on scorched graves, where, beyond human praises,
 men lie in stiffened resolution.

44. The rhyme scheme from verse to verse looks like this:

a	a	a	a	a	a
b	b	b	b	b	b
c	c	c	c	c	c
a	c	a	c	c	c
b	b	c	a	a	b
c	a	b	b	b	a

45. See Owen's «The Show,» for instance, in which he pairs such words as «death-dearth,» «why-woe,» «feather-further,» and «hid-head,» *Collected Poems*, 50.

Yet Childress the poet never loses his humanity or his keen awareness of the suffering of others. In «Shellshock» (*WLA*, p. 57), he shifts from generic soldiers to a soldier with a name: MacFatridge.⁴⁶ Almost a kind of inverted sonnet, with stanzas of six and eight lines respectively, it has an irregular rhyme scheme (four of the fourteen lines do not rhyme) and a base line length of nine syllables (except in lines 6 and 13) with sometimes four and sometimes five stresses to a line (except in line 6, which has only two).

In the poem's opening lines, Childress deftly plays games with pronouns to confuse and disorient the reader:

I am MacFatridge as he was then,
torn by the mine he was defusing;
at the aid tent door his arm fell off[.]

It is an effective way to force the reader to share the dislocation of the poem's persona. Only in the second stanza does it finally become clear that «I» and «he» are not the same person, that «he» is indeed MacFatridge but «I» is another soldier who has suffered a psychological breakdown, a man who has not been «torn by [a] mine», but rather by the shocking sight of MacFatridge's arm falling off and of the medic who casually

stooped to retrieve it
and stood as though lugging a melon
that had burst in the sun.

A poem about the cost of war on those who survive, «Shellshock» immediately suggests those men in John Huston's 1946 documentary *Let There Be Light*, which was filmed in the psychiatric ward of a military hospital –though that film was withheld from public release by the U.S. government until 1979, 17 years after Childress's poem first appeared in *Poetry*.

Childress's empathy for his fellow soldiers is more than matched by his contempt for the generals who commanded them. Both «Combat Iambic» (*WLA*, p. 58) and «Death of a General» (*WLA*, p. 59) are scathingly unrelenting, reminiscent of Siegfried Sassoon at his angry best.⁴⁷ The title of «Combat Iambic» reflects the poem's form, which is written in iambic pentameter. The first four lines are rhymed

46. In «The Korean War and Its Effects on My Writing,» p. 7, Childress says: «A demolitions man from another unit was killed probing for mines. At the door of the aid tent, the fleshy tag that was all that held his arm parted, and his arm thumped to the ground. A medic picked it up and placed it on his chest. I never knew his name, so I called the soldier in «Shellshock» MacFatridge. I don't know why.»

47. See, for instance, Sassoon's «The General» or «Memorial Tablet.» *Collected Poems: 1908-1956*, 75 and 104 respectively.

abab with a slant rhyme *b* in line 5; lines 6, 9 and 10 rhyme also, but all the other lines are blank verse. «Death of a General» is unrhymed free verse, though nevertheless constructed with some attention to form, the base line length (with some variation) being seven syllables with mostly three feet to a line.

«Once in a distant war which was no war,» Childress begins «Combat Iambic,» a clear and bitter reference to the U.S. government –and hence the media and just about everyone else– insistently calling the Korean War a «police action» or a «conflict» instead of what it was, «my buddies died while tracer bullets tore / through earth and armored vests.» Meanwhile,

Our General, in rearmost echelon,
with fancy unfired pistol near his thigh,
barked militant commands and acted out
his manly role untouched by fire.⁴⁸

To such a one, Childress can only say in frustrated, sputtering rage:

O, sir,
I pray Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies,
to rear his maggot children in your eyes,
where curled like living lashes they can give
the atmosphere that suits a General's mind.

«Death of a General,» almost a sequel to or the second half of «Combat Iambic,» reveals that the autopsy knife is «the first real wound» the general has ever sustained, and the autopsy itself reveals that his heart is «petrified,» his lungs are «unpowderstained,» a «thick volume / of military law» is hidden in his stomach, and there is no evidence of a soul. Such a man, whose medals «caught the light like cartridge-brass,» could care no more for Childress's dead buddies than Sassoon's general, whose «plan of attack» got Harry and Jack killed, had cared for the men under his command (*Collected Poems*, p. 75).

Nevertheless, soldiers have little choice except to obey, however unwillingly or passively, and thus in «The Long March» (*WLA*, p. 60), a poem written entirely in free verse, «North from Pusan / trailing nooses of dust / we dumbly followed / leaders

48. In *BTY&L*, 64, Childress says that the poem «was written with Douglas MacArthur firmly in mind.» In his letter of June 13, 1997, he calls MacArthur: «That supreme asshole Dugout Doug... There were many piss poor generals and few good ones. One history of the war mentioned a Gen. Almond (I think that's his name) who was a total idiot. [Major General Edward M. Almond. For an example of the kind of idiocy Almond was capable of, see Martin Russ's account of Almond's late November 1950 visit to Task Force MacLean at the Chosin Reservoir, *Breakout*, 195-197]. The poem "Combat Iambic" pretty much sums up generals in my book.»

whose careers / hung on victory». The imagery here is especially suggestive, the soldiers «dumbly» following like cattle or sheep being led to the slaughter, a fatalistic sense of doom reinforced by the «trailing nooses of dust.»

Childress's reference to «the Appian Way» sadly reminds us that this war is nothing new, and his reference to the «starved children» echoes «Letter Home»: «We gave them what we could / to hold back the grave.» But it is never enough, and

in Pusan the dead-truck
snuffled through frozen dawns
retrieving bones in thin sacks,

kids who will not only «never sing again,» as he writes in «Letter Home,» but who will «never beg again.» Note again the powerful imagery of the dead-truck, not just driving through early morning streets but «snuffling through frozen dawns» like a bloodhound searching for fugitives or a scavenger searching for carrion. Meanwhile, a soldier fishes «a bent brown stick / from a puddle. It was / the arm of someone's child.» Childress does not say «the arm of a child» or «a child's arm», but rather «the arm of someone's child,» calling forth not just the death of the child but also the terrible and unredeemable loss of a mother, a father. Meanwhile,

Not far away, the General
camps with his press corps.
Any victory will be his.
For us, there is only
the long march to Viet Nam.

Here again is Childress's contempt for those who call the shots but don't get shot at. But here also is something even more startling. In the last line of the poem, he suddenly makes explicit what must have been a steadily rising horror among many Korean War veterans as the Fifties became the Sixties and the Sixties became the Vietnam War. The last line of the poem throws the opening stanza into a new perspective: the «we» in the third line of the poem, and the «us» in the poem's penultimate line, may not be just the soldiers themselves, but the entire American people «dumbly follow[ing] / leaders whose careers / [hang] on victory.»⁴⁹

49. Two vivid memories of Childress's are incorporated into «The Long March.» In «The Korean War and Its Effects on My Writing,» 5, he says, «We docked in Pusan and got on a train headed north. It would turn out that I was the only soldier to get off at Pyongtaek, now nothing but stalks of concrete from previous battles... In a puddle by my feet was a bent stick. Idly, I toed it with my boot—and saw with sudden horror that it was the arm of a child, complete with tiny fingers.» On page 7, he writes, «One morning, unable to sleep, I went outside and saw a Korean army truck slipping through pre-dawn streets [in Pusan], stopping every so often to pick up the body of a child who had died during the night from exposure, starvation, or murder.»

This association between the Korean and Vietnam Wars certainly could not likely have been made before the mid-1960s, but unlike the generals and politicians who saw only the differences between the two wars, what resonated for poets like Childress and Keith Wilson were the similarities. Indeed, while those who fought the Korean War were closer in age and temperament to the veterans of World War Two, the Vietnam War seems to have been a catalyst for these poets, releasing pent-up feelings that had perhaps been held in check by the personal and cultural stoicism bequeathed to them by their generational older brothers. While Childress, for example, did write several of his best Korean War poems prior to the vast American air and ground commitment in Vietnam (notably «The Soldiers» and «Shellshock»), his poems become more pointed, more cynical, and more bitter as the Sixties –and the Vietnam War– advance.

Childress's sonnet «The War Lesson» (*WLA*, p. 61) is not properly a Korean War poem at all. But one must read all the way through the opening octet and into the sestet before encountering «Khe Sanh,» the site of a major siege of U.S. Marines by the North Vietnamese Army during the Vietnam War, and realizing the poem is not about Korea. Moreover, if one replaces «Khe Sanh» with «Chosin» and «Cong» with «Chink,» the poem is equally applicable to the Korean War, a fact that seems more than mere coincidence.⁵⁰

None of the rest of Childress's war poems (each of them free verse except «The Viewer,» which is mostly rhymed iambic pentameter) deals exclusively with the Korean War, but some of them mention it specifically and all of them grow out of and are informed by that experience. «For My First Son» (*WLA*, p. 62), a bitter poem over which hangs an air of resignation and helplessness, enumerates the «future of steel» toward which his son's «tiny fingers grope»: a flame-thrower's blast, trenchfoot, worms, gangrene, shrapnel. These, he says, are the

gifts of male birthdays,
wrapped in patriot slogans,
and sent by lying leaders.⁵¹

50. In *BTY&L*, 67, Childress says, «When I wrote this sonnet I was corresponding with a young marine at Khe Sanh.» In his letter to *WDE* of May 7, 1998, he adds that this young Marine «was responsible for moving me to write the poem you so aptly called a combination Korean War / Viet Nam War poem». In that letter, he dates the poem to 1968.

51. When this poem first appeared in *Burning the Years* (1971), these lines read:
 the gifts of male birthdays,
 the power and glory, and
 the lies of leaders send them.

But in both *Lobo* (1972) and *BTY&L* (1986), the last two lines of that stanza read as they do in the text of this chapter. I personally prefer the earlier version because «the power and glory» suggests *The Lord's Prayer*, an ironic association Childress himself would surely enjoy (in an e-mail to *WDE* dated August 2, 1999, he mentions with disdain «religion and its support of war»), but having used the revised version on two separate occasions, he clearly seems to prefer it.

The «steel / cables on a ship's deck» and «weighted duffel» that drag his infant son «downward» recall «Korea Bound, 1952,» and the image of the soldier returning from war «with eyes empty as spent / cartridges» conjures MacFatrudge of «Shellshock.» The poem's concluding stanza, the words to the traditional birthday song «Happy Birthday to You,» is anything but celebratory.⁵²

«Trying to Remember People I Never Really Knew» (WLA, p. 63) also deals with the wreckage of war and the future that awaits male children in particular. The first three stanzas detail the deaths of three men, each of which Childress witnessed:⁵³

There was that guy
on that hill in Korea.
Exploding gasoline made him
a thousand candles bright.

* * *

There was the R.O.K. soldier
lying in the paddy,
his lifted arms curved
as he stiffly embraced death[.]

* * *

Later... there came shrieking down
from a blue Kentucky sky
a young paratrooper whom technology failed.⁵⁴

In the final stanza, he wants to be able to say «that all three men fathered sons, / that some part of them still lived.» But he does not say it, cannot bring himself to say it, does not wish to reveal if these men have sons or not because

52. In *BTY&L*, 61, Childress writes: «I wrote this poem because, in a futile and frightening sense, all our babies are born to the terrible possibilities of dying in some war created by politicians for reasons of power, or madness, or both.»

53. In «The Korean War and Its Effects on My Writing,» Childress says on page 9, «Two nights later, we lost a Cat driver [who] forgot to let the diesel motor cool before filling the starting engine with gasoline. There was a soft *whoof* like a parachute opening, and he was a fountain of fire.» On page 5, he writes: «I saw an R.O.K. soldier, one arm curved partly out of the water. Closer inspection revealed a small hole in his breastbone.» In *BTY&L*, 58, he writes: «Jimmy Jones was a paratrooper buddy who "agged" on for an extra jump shortly before going on his honeymoon. His parachute never opened and he smashed so hard into the earth he bounced like a giant rag doll.»

54. This incident of the paratrooper whose chute did not open must have particularly disturbed Childress. His poem «For a Dead Paratrooper» which has nothing to do with the Korean War—Childress did not join the paratroops until his second army hitch in 1955—is included in all three of his poetry collections, and he also includes a more satirical poem about the death of a paratrooper, «The High I.Q. of Willy Wayne» in *BTY&L* 37.

the children's ages
 would now be such as to make them
 ready for training as hunters of men,
 to stalk dark forests
 where leaden rains fall[.]

It is as if he believes –or at least wants to believe– that if he does not reveal the existence of these men's sons, he can somehow protect them from the fates of their fathers, from «the gifts of male birthdays.»

«Korea made me vividly anti-war,» Childress says,⁵⁵ as these poems readily attest. In «Burning the Years» (*WLA*, p. 65), he explains that he was once very different, «a boy / [with] fists full of detonators and TNT / [smiling] murderously / for the folks back home,» someone who

knew all there was to know
 about honor and duty.
 But duty changes with each job,
 and honor turns ashes soon enough.

On its face, the poem is about burning old photographs, but after «the fires / go out,» the ashes that remain are not just the literal residue from the photographs, but rather «the ashes of his mind.» The regrets, the sadness, the loss, the guilt. «I had this great pride that the really ignorant have when they serve in the army,» Childress says of himself when he was young,⁵⁶ the kind of pride that produces, as the poem says, «boots like mirrors / and ribbons straight as his spine,» but wisdom, experience, and sorrow have taught him other lessons, and «now the act is over.»⁵⁷

Though three other poems have only a tenuous connection to the core group of Korean War poems, by their placement in all three of Childress's collections, he clearly intends a deliberate association. «For a Dead Paratrooper,» whose parachute never opened and to whom Childress refers in «Trying to Remember People I Never Really Knew,» leads off the sections of war poems in all three books,⁵⁸ though this accident happened in Kentucky in peacetime several years after the end of the Korean

55. Letter from Childress to WDE dated June 13, 1997.

56. Cahalin, back cover.

57. In his September 26, 1997 letter to WDE, Childress writes: «"Burning the Years" grew out of an actual incident in which, during years of drinking, I went into an alcoholic fury one day and burned many priceless photos, keepsakes, ribbons, uniforms, even a movie of my kids that I wish to God I had back now.» The poem, however, conveys regret not for the destruction of these mementos (indeed, the poem mentions only photographs), but for the years and the actions and the experiences the photographs recorded.

58. In *BTY&L*, the war poems are in three groups. «For a Dead Paratrooper» leads off the largest group of twelve; another group consists of only three poems, and «Hiroshima» stands by itself as the lead poem in the book.

War. In both *Lobo* and *BTY&L*, «The Viewer» and «Midwest Legion Bar» appear, in that order, after «Letter Home,» «Combat Iambic,» «Shellshock,» «Death of a General» and «The War Lesson,» but before «Trying to Remember People I Never Really Knew» (a different combination of poems appears in *Burning the Years*, the section of war poems ending with «The Viewer»), though «The Viewer,» which begins

Saturday brings the weekend roundup news:
My television tube serves up a child
done to a turn, small peasant under glass[,]

dates itself with references to Jackie Kennedy and John Wayne's «cancerous left lung» and is clearly a condemnation of the Vietnam War, while «Midwest Legion Bar» criticizes older generations of veterans for

wondering how kids today
can pervert all the dreams
all of them fought for,

only to «go back to joking about niggers and kikes.»

One other poem, «Washington Peace March, 1969,»⁵⁹ though not grouped with the war poems, is certainly an anti-war poem, if not a war poem, this poem, too, occasioned by the Vietnam War and pitting «hunched marchers in blankets,» including «a mother holding / a small boy,» against «sick / generals and lying politicians.» If «Midwest Legion Bar» has much to do with the egalitarian values Childress acquired in the cottonfields where, he says, «It's hard to act superior when you pull a cotton sack just as patched and faded as your neighbor's,» whether those neighbors were Mexican, Negro, Chinese, Japanese, or Filipino,⁶⁰ it's hard to imagine him writing «The Viewer» or «Washington Peace March» had not his encounter with the Korean War made him «vividly anti-war.»

In addition to the poems in Childress's collections, one other that does not appear in any of his three books is also pertinent to this discussion. Like «The Long March», «Veteran Thoughts, 1971»⁶¹ specifically links the Korean and Vietnam Wars, this time stating that «Korea's paddies slowly / dissolve to Viet Nam's,» but this time

59. The date, 1969, appears only in *BTY&L*; the original version in *Burning the Years*, which is otherwise identical, is titled only «Washington Peace March.»

60. Childress, *Ford Times*, 61-62.

61. *West Coast Poetry Review*, v.1, #2, Winter 1972, 24. The poem may have been written too late to be included in either *Burning the Years* or *Lobo*, but though Childress could easily have included it in his 1986 *BTY&L*, he did not.

also looking even farther into what Childress sees as a bleak future and concluding that «Viet Nam will in turn / be someplace else.»

As with «The Long March», Vietnam doesn't explicitly enter into the poem until toward the end, but here the poem's title lets the reader know that «the young men / coming back, / as lost as I was / that day the *Buckner* docked / in cold Seattle» can only be soldiers returning from Vietnam. Though Childress would later write that «Korean veterans did not come home and start throwing tantrums, like many Viet vets did,»⁶² here he seems very sympathetic to this new generation of Asian war veterans. Seeing them «lost,» he readily empathizes with them, remembering that «no one came to hear me say / “Hey, I'm home.”»

The next two stanzas are a sad reverie of his war in Korea, where he and his comrades

camped in the splinters
of some torn town
while ice shrapnelled in ravines

and our feet froze.
Starving children with rain-grey eyes
watched our every move,

while in the fourth stanza, back home in the United States,

the Birchers found
communists everywhere;
the citizens we fought for
fought rising prices and no new cars[.]

references to the ultra-right John Birch Society and the mislabeled «McCarthy Era,»⁶³ and to the fact that «most Americans were able to get on with their lives as though there were no war.»⁶⁴ Only then does Childress turn to Vietnam directly, and from there to other as yet unnamed lands and wars where other

62. Letter to WDE dated June 13, 1997.

63. «The McCarthy Era» actually began in the 1940s with hearings held by the House Un-American Activities Committee, well before Senator Joseph McCarthy's rise to prominence, and stretched well into the late 1950s and even the early 1960s (see John Henry Faulk's *Fear on Trial*), long after the downfall and disgrace of the Republican from Wisconsin.

64. Ehrhart and Jason, *Retrieving Bones*, p. xviii.

young men
 will march to glory,
 carrying America overseas.
 God is dead.
 We can't help ourselves.
 And there are governments to please.

The silent, inward resignation of «Korea Bound, 1952,» where thoughts were heavy as duffels, has transformed itself with time and yet another war into a much more strident –if equally helpless– anger, a profound disappointment in the government Childress once willingly served, the people for whom he once thought he had been fighting, and the very cosmos itself («God is dead»).

If the body of Childress's work is small, it is nevertheless a very long journey from the sweet melancholy of «Soldier's Leave» and the full-hearted altruism of «Letter Home» to the cold condemnation of «Death of a General» and the bleak prognosis of «For My First Son.» And if his experiences in the Korean War made him «vividly anti-war,» re-living those experiences through the mirror of the Vietnam War only deepened and hardened the impact Korea had on Childress. Though he writes that «I would leap to my country's defense in any capacity and am a believer in a strong, but controlled, military,»⁶⁵ his unpublished poem «The Warlords' Prayer,»⁶⁶ which he dates from 1972, voices both a condemnation and an alienation most often associated with the so-called Sixties Generation:

Our warlords who art in Pentagon,
 Putrid be thy names,
 Thy war machines come,
 Thy murders be done,
 In Viet Nam as in Korea.
 Miscount this day our daily dead,
 And forget us our casualties,
 As we forget babies we napalm.
 And lead us not to cease-fire,
 And deliver us from pacifists,
 For yours are the dollars,
 The senators, and the lobbyists,
 And the chauvinists forever, Amen.

65. Letter from Childress to WDE dated February 18, 1999.

66. Interestingly, this poem shares many points of comparison with Mark Twain's «The War Prayer.» In an e-mail to WDE dated August 2, 1999, Childress writes that «“The Warlords' Prayer” is a favorite of mine [but] was never sent out [for publication] that I can recall.» Twain's poem, too, was never published in Twain's lifetime.

One wonders if Childress's withdrawal from the practice of poetry in the years following his composition of this poem was perhaps occasioned as much by his disgust and frustration with the world as it was by the very real financial pressures to which he was increasingly subjected.

Whatever the case, if the body of his work is not so large and has not been significantly added to in a quarter of a century, it is still a significant body of work. Any discussion of poetry from the Korean War, or even of Korean War literature in general, that does not include Childress's work is sadly deficient. And any general anthology of English language war poetry in which Childress is not represented is simply incomplete –which is to say, every such anthology published since the original 1965 appearance of «Korea Bound, 1952.» If, as has already been observed, Childress is not a «major poet» by most measures, he is beyond a doubt one of the most important poets of the Korean War, and as such deserves both recognition and serious consideration.

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