



*James Magner Jr., William Meredith et Reg Saner:  
Reluctant Poets of the Korean War*

Ehrhart William D.

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**EPI-REVEL**

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

James Magner Jr., William Meredith &  
Reg Saner: Reluctant Poets of the  
Korean War

William D. Ehrhart

**William D. Ehrhart**, ancien Marine devenu militant pacifiste, écrivain, poète, journaliste, se situe dans la tradition des écrivains 'engagés' américains. Il a notamment publié de nombreux recueils de poèmes, ainsi que des autobiographies : *Vietnam-Perkasie : A Combat Marine Memoir* (1983), *Going Back: An Ex-Marine Returns to Vietnam* (1987) et *Passing Time: The Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War* (1989). Titulaire d'un Ph.D, il enseigne l'anglais et l'histoire à Philadelphie.

William D. Ehrhart holds a Doctorate in American Studies from the University of Wales at Swansea, U.K. The author or editor of 18 books of prose and poetry, he teaches English and history at the Haverford School in Pennsylvania. Ehrhart is a former U.S. Marine Corps sergeant and veteran of the Vietnam War.

William D. Ehrhart. James Magner Jr., William Meredith & Reg Saner: Reluctant Poets of the Korean War.

William D. Ehrhart devotes his paper to James Magner Jr., William Meredith, and Reg Saner, poets who went through the experience of war in Korea and yet didn't necessarily use such experience as a source of inspiration, writing only "reluctantly" about it. Ehrhart traces out some possible allusions, images, echoes, running through their poems. But there is clearly no such phenomenon as the relationship (not to speak of complicity), that certain poets and writers have entertained (and in many cases still entertain) with their Vietnam War experience. No such analysis of those "reluctant poets of the Korean War" had previously been made.

Korean War, Korean War Poetry, Jr. James Magner, William Meredith, Reg Saner

The Korean War is the least remembered and least acknowledged of all of America's wars. Even as it was being fought, ordinary

Americans were aghast to find the country at war again so soon after World War Two; they found it profoundly embarrassing to be put to rout not once but twice in six months by what they perceived to be a rabble of Asian peasants; and they did not understand a war in which total victory was not and could not be the goal. And once it was over, the Korean War all but vanished from the American landscape.

Just as the war has banished, so too has its poetry. Indeed, the very notion of Korean War poetry is all but unheard of, even among scholars of war poetry. Yet there is very much a body of work that can be called Korean War poetry, and while it is smaller than the bodies of poetry from the American wars that came immediately before and after the Korean War, it ought not to be dismissed out of hand.

Among the most prominent of the Korean War soldier-poets are the Chicano writer Rolando Hinojosa, author of the novel-in-verse *Korean Love Songs*; New Mexico poet Keith Wilson, author of *Graves Registry*; poet and journalist William Childress, whose two collections *Burning the Years* and *Lobo* contain numerous poems based on the Korean War; and the hard-living, early-dying William Wantling, who scattered a handful of Korean War poems through his many small press publications.

Elsewhere, I have written about each of these poets at length.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I would like to devote my attention to the Korean War poetry of three men who have each devoted a lifetime of creative energy to poetry, yet who have written startlingly little about their experiences in the Korean War. What these poets wrote-and didn't write-is worth examining.

In the course of ten books published over a span of more than three decades, James Magner, Jr.,<sup>2</sup> has written fewer than a dozen poems

<sup>1</sup> See "Soldier-Poets of the Korean War" in *War, Literature & the Arts*, v.9, #2, Fall/Winter 1997; " "I Want to Try It All Before I Go": The Life and Poetry of William Wantling" in *American Poetry Review*, November/December 1998; *Retrieving Bones: Stories and Poems of the Korean War* (with Philip K. Jason), Rutgers University Press, 1999; "Setting the Record Straight," *Poetry Wales*, v.37, #1, July 2001; "Burning the Years: The Korean War Poetry of William Childress" in *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, # 8, 2001, and "A Dirty and Murderous Joke: The Korean War Poetry of Keith Wilson," forthcoming in *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*.

<sup>2</sup> Magner's first few books were published under the name of James Edmund Magner, Jr. In the 1970s, he published several books under the name James Magner. Since the early 1980s, he has constantly used James Magner, Jr. Unless otherwise noted, biographical information about Magner comes from an author's questionnaire

that seem in any way related to the war. The chronological distribution of the poems, however, is interesting: three appear in his first book in 1965, one in 1968, two in 1973. Three subsequent books in 1976, 1978, and 1981 contain none, but another appears in a 1985 book. A 1992 book contains none, but his latest book, published in 1996, contains four. It is almost as if, throughout his life, he cannot make up his mind to confront the war or not. That ambivalence is inadvertently made apparent in a 1997 letter of Magner's.<sup>3</sup> At one point he writes, "How much shall you write about the horrific Knives of War that froze, wounded and killed so many of my brothers?" But on the next page he mentions his desire to publish "an elegy for *all* who have died in war, that they will not be lost but remembered in our hearts and souls."<sup>4</sup>

One might make the case that Magner is too insubstantial a poet to warrant more than cursory attention. Of his ten books,<sup>5</sup> five were published by the Golden Quill Press, which describes itself as a "subsidy publisher" but is commonly referred to—perhaps more accurately— as a "vanity press." Two more were published by Ryder Press, of which Magner was, at the time of publication, editor and publisher. Still another was published by Blue Flamingo Productions, founded and operated (apparently as a one-man operation) by a former student of Magner's. Most of the poems in Magner's books have either never been previously published, or appeared in religious-

provided by Magner to WDH in October 1997, an accompanying biographical and bibliographical statement provided by Magner, and a bibliographical addendum provided by Magner in February 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to WDE dated June 10, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Magner has written such an elegy, a 141-page fictional work called *That None Be Lost*, but it has yet to be published.

<sup>5</sup> His books of poetry are:  
*Toiler of the Sea*, Golden Quill Press, 1965;  
*Although There Is the Night*, Golden Quill Press, 1968;  
*Gethsemane*, Poetry Seminar Press, 1969;  
*The Dark Is Closest to the Moon*, Ryder Press, 1973;  
*The Women of the Golden Quill*, Ryder Press, 1976;  
*To Whom You Shall Go*, Golden Quill Press, 1978;  
*Till No Light Leaps*, Golden Quill Press, 1981;  
*Rose of My Flowering Night*, Golden Quill Press, 1985;  
*The Temple of the Bell of Silence*, Fred Press, 1992;  
*Only the Shadow of the Great Fool*, Blue Flamingo Productions, 1996.  
 Magner has also written a scholarly work, *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Principles and Preoccupations*, published by Mouton & Company in 1971.

oriented periodicals such as *America* and *Christian Century*, various campus publications of John Carroll University (where Magner has taught since 1962), and the littlest of little magazines. Though the body of secondary literature on most of the Korean poets is slender, for Magner it is all-but-nonexistent.

None of this, in and of itself, is reason to dismiss Magner. His few poems about the Korean War stay in one's head, lines repeating themselves over and over again, remaining in the memory long after they should be forgotten. His Korean War poems may well be his best work, for all that there are so few of them, and whatever Magner's weaknesses, there is a sweetness to his Korean War poems, a love for his fellow sufferers, a sense of bewildered innocence, that touches the heart. And touching the heart, finally, is what good poetry does.

Born in 1928 in New York City, Magner grew up on Long Island and in New Rochelle, New York. He enlisted in the army in 1948, arriving in Korea at just the same time as the arrival of Chinese Communist forces turned what appeared to be an American victory into stunning disaster for the second time in less than six months. Magner served less than three months in Korea, but between the bitter retreat in the face of the Chinese divisions and the bitter Korean winter, they were three of the toughest months of the war. While fighting as an infantry sergeant with Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Regiment, 3rd Division, he was badly wounded by machinegun fire in North Suwon in February 1951 and evacuated to a hospital in Japan.

Because his wounds were too severe for him to be returned to active duty, he was discharged from the army in September 1951. But his experiences in the war had had a profound impact on him; "The war made me "The soldier of the night," he writes, referring to the poem of that title, "It took all but the life of God from me."<sup>6</sup> While in the hospital in Japan, Magner had struck up a correspondence with a monk of the Passionist Order from a Catholic monastery in Dunkirk, New York, and upon his return to the United States, he entered the monastery as a novice, where he remained for five years.

Though Magner never took the vows of a monk, and eventually left monastic life to return to the secular world, the body of his poetry-whatever its flaws-overtly reflects his deeply spiritual concerns, and his lifelong quest to bridge the gulf between human imperfection and divine perfection. Though his two most recent books reveal a marked

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Magner to WDE dated June 10, 1997.

change in certain elements of his style, including a more minimalist use of language, through most of his work the language often has a Biblical feel to it--the tone, the diction, the choice of words--almost a kind of grandeur that often falls flat in many of his poems but seems to work in several of the Korean War poems.

What becomes clear in reading his Korean War poetry is that Magner cannot bear the madness of the war, the unspeakable misery, the destruction of bodies and minds and hearts, without the hope and possibility of divine grace and human redemption. Thus, in "Elegy for the Valiant Dead," he pleads "that those who've gone before/may be wrapped in the quilt of Thy arms of night." And in "Christ of Battle," he prays, "Christ-God carry me!/give hope in storm-mud and grave-bed."

These two poems (both from Magner's first book, *Toiler of the Sea*, pp. 34 and 49 respectively) most overtly reflect Magner's religious preoccupations. Beginning "Glory ends in night" (which could well be taken as a succinct commentary on the futility of war), "Elegy for the Valiant Dead" pays homage to the "dust of brothers" who "struggled in the night;/whose folly and whose glory/was their slaughter in the night[.]" The poem includes such phrases as "brooding piety," "Thy arms," and "the lamp of God," and concludes:

therefore do I grieve in hope  
that their outward dooms  
light lamps in inward victory  
in a kingdom of no swords  
and the kingly kiss of peace.

The progression of movement in "Christ of Battle" is especially fascinating. It begins with a generalized plea, rather like that in "Elegy for the Valiant Dead," for Christ to have pity on the dead:

Christ of the battle-field  
Take them in your sinewed arms,  
Press their bloodied death-dent brows

A few lines later, Magner shifts from the general to the specific:

I remember deep my friend, my burly Marsh,  
his head cleaved through.  
Did you speak silent-soft to him  
Just before they blazed him to somewhere  
away from here?

Marsh's death is particularly poignant and troubles Magner especially, because Marsh was his friend and because Marsh was "burly," strong and healthy, and therefore seemingly invulnerable--yet dead in an instant, "his head cleaved through." Still without a stanza break--there

are none in the poem-Magner shifts his attention from the dead to the living, whom he describes as “alert in their graves” (a reference to the soldiers’ fighting holes or foxholes, which resemble graves and too often become them). “Speak softly to us,” Magner pleads, “no one so much as we/-soldiers-sinners-/need gentleness.” What follows a few lines later seems to be a reference to Magner’s own wounding:

Across rigid seas of froze-stung ridges  
 Was I borne upon invisible shoulders  
 While I sigh-groaned Your name[.]

the “invisible shoulders” being both the medics who carried Magner from the battlefield and the Christ who spared Magner’s life. The last third of the poem shifts to what is clearly post-war present time, and is Magner’s prayer to Christ to help Magner himself live with the continuing aftermath of war, with survivor’s guilt, and with terrible knowledge of what humanity is capable of:

Christ-God carry me over the froze-vast bleakness  
 of long life’s plain  
 --so vast, so frozen--so unending.  
 \*\*\*  
 And in the end, look not for bravery  
 for there is none  
 But only have mercy, my Christ, my God  
 carry me  
 --I will bend the shot-stiff knee.

In the third Korean War poem in his first book, Magner effectively conveys the lonely anonymity of the battlefield. “The Man Without a Face” “is gutted, tangled--sprawled like a broken crab” on barbed wire, “dead and alone in his body.” The poem does not indicate if the dead man is Chinese, Korean, or American, nor does Magner care. That he is “one of those who fought,” a fellow sufferer, is all that matters.

Accounts of that first winter of fighting in Korea constantly stress the horrible, debilitating cold that was an enemy in and of itself, almost as deadly as the Chinese. The historian Richard Whelan, in *Drawing the Line*, describes Americans “not only battling through a gauntlet of Chinese hordes but also struggling with ‘General Winter’s’ relentless subzero winds.”<sup>7</sup> And the cold runs through Magner’s poems from the “rigid seas of froze-stung ridges” in “Christ of Battle” to the ‘rock-white silent day’ of “To a Chinaman, in a Hole, Long Ago” (*The Dark*

<sup>7</sup> Whelan, *Drawing the Line: The Korean War, 1950-1953* (Boston: Little Brown, 1990), page 263.

*Is Closest to the Moon*, p.21) to the “Soldier of the Night” (see above, p.15) moving “on stumping unfelt feet” through “fields of white[.]” But the cold, bleak, unforgiving moonscape of Korea in winter in war could not be better rendered than in “Zero Minus One Minute” (*Although There Is the Night*, p.27):

The dawn has come  
to sleepless night  
again  
and it is time for us to answer  
from the gray, crystal holes  
that seem to womb  
just northern night and nothingness;  
but we are there;  
our eyes electric,  
our bodies splinters  
in bundled rags[.]

It is this poem, more than any other, that keeps drawing back to Magner, and this image: “our bodies splinters/in bundled rags.” The cold, the pain, the fear, the loneliness are palpable, as is the dogged perseverance in the face of every reason to give up and give in. And if, as Magner says, “the world doubts/that we exist,” nevertheless “we are there,” Magner says for a second time, insistent, refusing to allow himself and his comrades to be dismissed,

and we shall creak  
our frozen bones  
upon that crystal mount  
that looms in silence  
and amaze the world.

That Magner sees himself not as a soldier, but as a “soldier-sinner” (a phrase he uses in “Christ of Battle”) is made evident in “To a Chinaman, in a Hole, Long Ago,” a poem that exhibits a remarkable sensitivity towards “the Other” (be it Koreans, northern or southern, or in this case Chinese). It is also a poem not about survivor guilt (a major element of “Christ of Battle”), but about the guilt of soldier-sins, in this case Magner’s guilt for the life he has taken. Speaking directly to the dead Chinese soldier he has killed, Magner writes:

I, your ordered searcher  
with a killer on my sling,  
do bequeath my life to you  
that you might fly the Yellow Sea  
to your startled matron’s arms  
and curl beholden  
amid the pygmies of your loins.



It is as if Magner is trying to apologize, wishing to trade his own life for the life he has taken, though he knows this cannot be done: “But marbled you lie,” he concludes, dead and cold as stone, while the dead man’s wife sleeps “self-graved, ice-wombed” and Magner is left to “the rock-white silent day/of our demagogue damnation” (another brief commentary on the war, no doubt).

Thus, Magner is much in need of God’s mercy to give meaning and comfort to him and to all “soldier-sinners,” but this need is matched by his insistence that those who fought and died be remembered. For Magner, to forget is to render utterly meaningless the suffering, the sorrow, the irreplaceable losses. “The Man Without a Face” may have no name, not even a nationality, but he is nevertheless “entombed in the heart of our mind.” And in “Repository” (*Rose of My Flowering Night*, p.117), the epigraph for which is a telling Henry James quote: “*Be one on whom nothing is lost,*”<sup>8</sup> Magner begins by relating the story of the Sportsline reader who asked “ what college/quarteback/named Adam/died/in the Korean War” and received the reply that there was “ no record” of such a person, not “ even from the army and alma mater.” Magner’s reply is outraged disbelief:

Impossible to mind, impossible to heart  
 that one so quick,  
 who stepped so quick  
 in pocket  
 and rifled passes forty yards  
 for alma mater and the infantry  
 could die and be forgotten...  
 by all except me[.]

Magner struggles through four stanzas to remember the name of the man, whom he met once briefly “before we sailed from Sasebo,” Japan to Korea. And when he finally succeeds, in the fifth and final stanza- “Vanesca!”-he shouts the name over and over again “so someone will remember.”

The four poems in Magner’s most recent book, *Only the Shadow of the Great Fool*, are indicative of the sharp change in Magner’s style after the mid-1980s. The spare language, the matter-of-fact diction, the short, often one-word lines are all in marked contrast to earlier poems such as “Christ of Battle” or even “Repository.” One example, “The Prayer of the Former Infantryman,” should suffice:

<sup>8</sup> According to Magner’s letter of June 10, 1997, the quote comes from James’s “The Art of Fiction.”

One  
thing  
I  
know.  
The  
Ground  
Is  
My  
Friend.

These later poems are all single thoughts, one to a poem, straightforward and lean. But however different they may be, the later poems, by their mere being, quietly testify to the fact that Magner is a reluctant Korean War poet, the Korean War is never far from his thoughts. Half a century after he left Korea on a stretcher, he remains a “Soldier of the Night” wherein there is “no house, no lamp, no chimneyed curl/but only life outseeping night.”

William Meredith could hardly be more different from James Magner. They were both born in New York City (Meredith on January 9, 1919). They both served in the Korean War. They are both poets who spent their professional careers in academia (the bulk of Meredith’s at Connecticut College in New London). But there the similarities stop.

Meredith’s credentials as a first-rate poet, one of the most important poets of his generation, are truly impressive. The author of nine books of poetry,<sup>9</sup> he received the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize in 1943 for *Love Letter from an Impossible Land*, the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1987 for *Partial Accounts*, and the National Book Award for Poetry in 1997 for *Effort at Speech*.

Also unlike Magner-or Reg Saner, or indeed any of the other“ soldier-poets” of the Korean War-Meredith’s Korean War experience seems to have had virtually no impact on him at all, certainly not as it is reflected-or rather not reflected-in his writings. This is all the more

<sup>9</sup> *Love Letter from an Impossible Land*, Yale University Press, 1944;  
*Ships and Other Figures*, Princeton University Press, 1948;  
*The Open Sea and Other Poems*, Knopf, 1958;  
*The Wreck of the Thresher and Other Poems*, Knopf, 1964;  
*Earth Walk: New & Selected Poems*, Knopf, 1970;  
*Hazard, the Painter*, Knopf, 1975;  
*The Cheer*, Knopf, 1980;  
*Partial Accounts: New & Selected Poems*, Knopf, 1987;  
*Efforts at Speech*, TriQuarterly Books, 1997.  
Meredith has also edited *Shelley: Poems* (Dell, 1962), translated Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Alcools: Poems 1898-1913* (Doubleday, 1964), and published a collection of essays, *Poems Are Hard to Read* (University of Michigan Press, 1991).

odd since Meredith, a 1940 graduate of Princeton who flew combat missions in the Pacific Theater of World War Two as a US Navy aviator and carrier pilot, included nearly a dozen World War Two poems in his first book, published with the war still raging. Of these war poems, Archibald MacLeish writes:

They are not only poems written by a Navy flyer about the air war in an “impossible land”: they are poems written from within that experience. They have an accent, a tone, of participation. They give a sense of having *seen*, of having been present, which a man’s face sometimes gives, returning.<sup>10</sup>

A handful of additional World War Two poems appear in Meredith’s second book, published in 1948.

After the war, Meredith returned to Princeton as an English instructor and Woodrow Wilson fellow in writing, then moved on to the University of Hawaii as an associate professor. But in 1952, according to Susan Trosky, “he re-enlisted to fly missions in the Korean War as well.”<sup>11</sup>

What came out of his Korean War service, however, literarily speaking at least, is as close to nothing at all as one can get without its literally being nothing at all. In his third book, *The Open Sea and Other Poems*, the first book he published after the Korean War, there are two poems (on p.36) under the heading “Two Korean Poems.” The first is “Full Circle”:

The farmer in the round hat  
Who treads the waterwheel  
In the dust of the jeep road  
At the turn of the summer  
Wants a philosophy  
Older than wheels.

Except for the reference to “the jeep road,” the poem has nothing to do with war and could easily be set in 1933 or 1983 as 1953. The second poem, “Old Ones,” is not much different in that regard:

The old woman and the old man  
Who came a day’s journey to see the airfield,  
Having nothing to keep them at home,  
Slide down the embankment of rubble  
Like frisky children

<sup>10</sup> From MacLeish’s foreword to *Love Letter from an Impossible Land*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Contemporary Authors*, v. 40, p. 302. In an August, 13, 1999 letter to WDE, Paul Fussell, who taught at Connecticut College in the mid-1950s, writes of Meredith’s decision to return to active service during the Korean War: “I do recall a strident argument he and I had about returning to the military after what we’d learned in WWII. He thought I was deplorably unpatriotic. I thought he was a boy.”

Under the starboard wing as we taxi by.  
They were afraid of the roar. Also they know  
Better than we that anything can happen.

Again, this can hardly be considered a war poem at all except for the slightly ominous suggestion in the last line and the fact that we know Meredith was an aviator during the Korean War. The poem could just as easily be set in peacetime as in wartime. Neither of these two poems, moreover, appears again in any of Meredith's subsequent books.

A third poem in *The Open Sea and Other Poems*, "A Korean Woman Seated by a Wall" (p.46), while much longer, is only slightly more obviously informed by the war. "Suffering has settled like a sly disguise/On her cheerful old face," Meredith begins,

If she dreams beyond  
Rice and a roof, now toward the end of winter,  
Is it of four sons gone, the cries she has heard,  
A square of farm in the south, soured by tents?

Because we know this woman is Korean, and we can surmise from the date of the book in which the poem first appears that the poem is probably from the times of the Korean War, and we know Meredith is a Korean War veteran (though no reader of the book would know this from anything in the book itself), we can speculate that perhaps her four sons are in the army-or dead-and perhaps the tents are those of soldiers bivouacked where once the old woman's farm was.

There is another reference to the war, clear if oblique, indeed quite clever, in these lines:

Hunger and pain and death, the sort of loss,  
Dispute our comforts like peninsulas  
Of no particular value, places to fight.

But the poem itself is about "the capriciousness with which [suffering] is dispensed," and "the unflinching way we see it borne," and how Meredith's "guilt" at a brief reverie he has in the third stanza combines with the old woman's "grace" to "alter the coins I tender cowardly[.]" It is a poem about haves and have nots and there-but-for-the-grace-of-God. Meredith is obviously fond of the poem because he includes it in all three of his subsequent new and selected volumes.

But these few poems are the only poetic evidence--slim as it is--that he ever served in the Korean War.

In *Babel to Byzantium*, James Dickey characterizes Meredith's poetry as often "muffled and distant, a kind of thin, organized, slightly

academic murmur.”<sup>12</sup> Archibald MacLeish’s comments notwithstanding, this is certainly a fair assessment of Meredith’s World War Two poems. With a few exceptions- “Navy Field” perhaps, or brief flashes in “June, Dutch Harbor” (both in *Love Letter*, pp. 46 and 41 respectively)-the poems lack visceral power, emotional drive. In “Airman’s Virtue” (*Love Letter*, p. 48) for instance, he writes a fellow flier:

High cloud whose proud and angry stuff  
Rose up in heat against earth’s thrall,  
The nodding law has time enough  
To wait your fall.

Through four stanzas of “Airman’s Virtue,” we are not even sure if this pilot has been shot down, or been downed by mechanical failure, or what-or even if the poem is about a specific pilot or is merely a generic paean to the possible fate of airmen in general. It is hard to imagine how carrier duty in the Pacific against the Japanese Imperial Navy could have produced such restrained, bloodless, almost vapid poetry from someone so highly acclaimed.

Considering this, and looking at the few poems Meredith wrote about the Korean War--none of which conveys anything like the power of Magner’s “Zero Minus One Minute” or “Repository,” let alone the poems of William Childress or Keith Wilson or any of the Korean War soldier-poets--one must uncomfortably admit to feeling no real sense of loss for what Meredith did not write about the Korean War.

The same cannot be said of Reg Saner, the third of the reluctant Korean War poets, and the poet whose lack of writing about the war creates the greatest sense of literary loss. Among the few poems Saner has written that touch at all on his war experience are some of the very best poems to come out of the war, offering tantalizing hints of what he might have said and how skillfully he might have said it had he chosen to make the war a focus of his literary attention. But he chose instead to do the opposite. “I’ve tried to put [the war] behind me,” he writes, “I have not really tried to write about Korea. Wanted to forget it.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *From Babel to Byzantium* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), pp. 197-198.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Saner to WDE dated January 23, 1997.

Saner was born Reginald Anthony Saner in Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1929.<sup>14</sup> He grew up in a flat land where “no hills whatever,” in winter “walk[ing] happily home through snowfall,” or building skis that wanted “his backyard to be a hill,” and in summer dancing to Boots Brennan’s band playing “Blue Rain” in Nichols Park pavilion with the Second World War as a backdrop.

In 1946, Saner went off to St. Norbert College in Wisconsin, graduating in 1950—only weeks before the outbreak of the Korean War—with a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Reserve Officers Training Corps commission as a second lieutenant in the army. Called to active duty in January 1951, he was sent to the army’s arctic survival school in Alaska, where he learned mountaineering and skiing, before being deployed to Korea in April 1952. He served with the 14th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, until January 1953, six months of that time as an infantry platoon leader, earning a Bronze Star and promotion to first lieutenant.

Getting out of the army in April 1953, Saner earned a Master of Arts degree from the University of Illinois in 1954, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the same institution in 1962, writing a dissertation on Shakespeare and Italian Renaissance Drama. That same year, 1962, he was hired by the English Department of the University of Colorado, and has been there ever since.

As an academic, Saner has received a Fulbright scholarship to the University di Firenze in Italy, a resident scholarship to the Centro Culturale della Fondazione Rockefeller in Italy, and multiple awards from the University of Colorado.

As a poet, Saner has been equally successful. His first collection of poems, *Climbing into the Roots* (Harper & Row, 1976), was chosen by—of all people—William Meredith to receive the first Walt Whitman Award. His second collection, *So This Is the Map* (Random house, 1981), was chosen by Derek Walcott as a National Poetry Series winner. He has two additional collections, *Essays on Air* (Ohio Review Books, 1984) and *Red Letters* (*Quarterly Review of Literature*, 1989).

In both poetry and prose, the American West has become Saner’s all-but-exclusive subject. “Every line, every page I write,” he says, “takes place outdoors—mountains, deserts, canyons, dunes, mesas—

<sup>14</sup> Jane Bowden, ed., *Contemporary Authors*, v.65-68, p. 515, says Saner was born in 1931, But Saner himself, in a questionnaire he sent to WDE in September 1997, says 1929.

explored by ski or by snowshoes, as well as by boot and backpack. Whether I hike to write, or use writing as a pretext for being outside, I've never known. Only know that it's there I'm happiest, most at home."<sup>15</sup> A native Easterner who did not see his first mountain until after he graduated from college, Saner took to the American West with the zeal of a convert, turning himself into an expert mountaineer in the process, as well as a first-rate amateur naturalist, botanist, archeologist, anthropologist, and geologist, his poems and essays packed with observations ranging from asides to fullblown discussions on everything from

moss  
 crannies lush as a thumbnail  
 hothouse--their blossoms  
 purple and white, pincushioning  
 tufts with calyxes not even  
 a raindrop across<sup>16</sup>

to "the development of photosynthesis in anaerobic bacteria" some 3,000 million years ago.<sup>17</sup>

Richard Gustafson, in *Poet and Critic*, describes Saner as "a voice from the Rockies, distinct and personal,"<sup>18</sup> while J.D. McClatchy, writing in *Poetry*, says that Saner's writing is "about the process of knowing the world, about its mysterious reflection of depth within us."<sup>19</sup> Louis Martz, writing in *The Yale Review*, observes that while Saner writes about "Florence and New York City, memories of friends and relatives in various regions, poems inspired by Quasimodo and Borges, and love poems for Anne" [Saner's wife], his work is still grounded in the Rocky Mountain West" and "the indestructible strength of nature."<sup>20</sup>

Reviews of Saner's writings have varied enormously-one might even say wildly, radically. D.H. Williams writes of *Climbing into the Roots*, in *Library Journal*, that "most of these poems are dismal attempts to convey a sense of nature" while Alfred Corn, in *Poetry*, says of the same poems that "Saner has a good eye. The book abounds with

<sup>15</sup> From the "Brief Biography" Saner himself sent with a questionnaire to WDE in September 1997.

<sup>16</sup> "Long's Peak Trail," *Climbing into the Roots*, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> "The Ideal Particle and the Great Unconformity," *The Four-Cornered Falcon : Essays on the Interior West and the Natural Scene* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Bryfonski, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, v.9, 1978, p. 469.

<sup>19</sup> *Poetry*, v.140, # 6, September 1982, p. 351.

<sup>20</sup> *The Yale Review*, v. 72, # 1, October 1982, pp. 70-71.

sharp-focus diapositives of a clarity and perfection I associate with stereopticons.”<sup>21</sup> Of *So This Is The Map*, J.F. Cotter writes in *America*, “Saner looks unblinkingly into the heart of darkness, into the caverns and burnt-out woods, and, with an Emersonian eye, sees the map of Being in strata and stream” while *Library Journal*’s Michael Williamson says of the same poems that “we are left with a disturbing, disjointed vision of virgin nature seen through cynical eyes that strain after Blakean innocence.”<sup>22</sup> While R. W. Flint, writing in *The New York Times*, accuses Saner’s *Essay on Air* of “t he debased existentialism of the travel brochure or the pop school of alpine metaphysics,” Choice’s B. Galvin calls the same book “ important and superb.”<sup>23</sup>

Even most of those who find fault with Saner, however, also find qualities worthy of praise. Hayden Carruth, for instance, writes in *The New York Times* about *Climbing into the Roots*, “I don’t suggest that Saner has nothing to say, only that he has very little to say,” but also adds that Saner is “talented, perhaps very talented.”<sup>24</sup> Not so of Mary Kinzie, writing in *American Poetry Review*. Her assessment of Saner’s *So This Is the Map* is unrelentingly hostile, beginning with “ Reg Saner’s poetry is as badly served by his diction and his logic as by his prosody” and ending with “it is less than second-rate poetry: it is genuinely bad.”<sup>25</sup> In between, among the poems she savages is “Leaving These Woods to the Hunters,” about which she writes: “Or consider this example of macho self-congratulation: “Yet I’ll slog downtrail/leaving these woods to the hunters,/having never myself/killed anything/more beautiful than a man.” Are deer more beautiful than men? Has the speaker committed homicide?”

“Her presumptive arrogance still bugs me,”<sup>26</sup> Saner writes even fifteen years later of that reviewer and that particular passage in her review. But in fairness to Kinzie-if fairness she deserves-there is nothing in any of the poems in *So This Is the Map*, and next to nothing in any of his other three poetry collections, to warn Kinzie to choose her words with more care and thoughtfulness, nothing to indicate that between

<sup>21</sup> Williams, quoted in Samudio, *Book Review Digest 1976*, p. 1055; Corn, quoted in Bryfonski, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, p. 469.

<sup>22</sup> Cotter and Williamson quoted in Mooney, *Book Review Digest 1981*, p. 1260.

<sup>23</sup> Flint and Galvin quoted in Mooney, *Book Review Digest 1985*, p. 1391.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Samudio, *Book Review Digest 1976*, p. 1055.

<sup>25</sup> Kinzie, *American Poetry Review*, March/April 1982, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Saner to WDE dated January 23, 1997.



Saner and homicide there is little more than a uniform and a flag. Not even the book's brief biographical notes on the author mention that Saner is a combat veteran of the Korean War.

From the first book, only "One War Is all Wars" (p.41) deals with war at all, and Saner's description of the white crosses on soldiers' graves, "line after line after/line regular as/domino theory," echoes the "crosses, row on row" of the Great War and Canadian poet John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" while use of the phrase "domino theory" quite deliberately invokes the Vietnam War at least as much as it does the Korean War-which, one assumes, is Saner's point, as the title implies. "Nuisance Caller" (p.78) includes the lines, "I recall shrapnel flecks/that glanced and rang for somebody else,/now ringing for me," but the same stanza also speaks of "patriot/mothers still shelling Viet Nam/with their wombs." Thus, even when one knows that Saner is a Korean War veteran, the reference to Saner's own wartime experience is gone before it even registers; without that knowledge, the reference is almost no reference at all.<sup>27</sup>

From his second book, Saner himself says that "From Chief Joseph I Turn the Page" (p.19) and "Doc Holliday's Grave" (p.29) may be related to residual anger about the Korean War, and that "Talking Back: A Dream" is perhaps prompted "at least partly by survivor guilt,"<sup>28</sup> but the connections, such as they may be, exist only for Saner, not for the reader. Only "Leaving These Woods to the Hunters" makes anything like an identifiable reference to Saner's Korean War service, and that too, as has already been noted, really depends on information to be found beyond the poem in order to give those closing lines-"having never myself/killed anything/more beautiful than a man"--the power they ought to have.

The poems in Saner's third book travel from Colorado to Egypt to Italy, but they don't go anywhere near Korea. Of the poems in his fourth book, "Little Rituals" (p.50), with its "men wearing guns, belted jackets" riding in trucks that "jolt and sway through long tunnels of dust,... each truckload of troops in the convoy/lurch[ing] and loll[ing], passive as drunks," is, like "One War Is All Wars," entirely nonspecific. As Saner himself says, the poem "distances the

<sup>27</sup> In his letter to WDE of September 2, 1999, Saner writes: "I was lightly wounded by rock bits when a rocket exploded close to me. No shrapnel, not much blood, and my medic dug out what particles he could without much ado."

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Saner to WDE dated January 23, 1997.

war stuff.”<sup>29</sup> Another poem, “Straw Gold” (p.51), which is not about war, nevertheless includes the lines, “Oh, once upon a time of dodging hot metal/aimed at the rest of my years/years ago, I hadn’t time to consider[.]” But again the reference is there and gone.

“Re-runs” (p.49), however, another poem in *Red Letters*, is a bit different. It seems to suggest that if Saner has “wanted to forget” his wartime experiences, what he has managed to do is merely to repress them, and not entirely successfully:

All that flying iron was bound to hit something.  
His odd nights re-visit a stare, let a torn head  
trade looks with him, though the incoming whine  
was only a power saw. If what’s buried won’t cry  
and won’t go away, if in some field on the world’s  
other side all crossfire tracers burn down  
to old movies whose re-runs he’s sick of,  
who’s to blame then for what’s missing?  
Odd nights, a clay pit or two may waken him  
still , alone inside a nameless grief holding  
nothing: their faces, grass shrapnel-which some field  
on the world’s other side bothers with. Like seed,  
the shapes that won’t go away without tears.  
They just lie where they fell, and keep going.

Though the poem is in the third person, the “he” is almost certainly Saner himself, “alone inside a nameless grief” where “what’s buried won’t cry/and won’t go away.” What troubles Saner, however, he will not say beyond “flying iron,” “a torn head,” and “crossfire tracers,” all “on the world’s other side” (a phrase he uses twice in this short poem) where Korea is to be found. He tells us only that sometimes there are “odd nights” in which he trades looks with “a torn head.”<sup>30</sup>

And that poem is as specific and graphic as Saner gets about the Korean War in any of his four collections. One has to go past the poetry collections entirely, all the way to 1993 and *The Four-Cornered Falcon*, before one even encounters the word “Korea,” let alone the admission that Saner is a Korean War veteran.

Curiously enough, however, Saner has written two much more personal and particular poems about the Korean War-published fifteen

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> In his letter to WDE of January 23, 1997, Saner says that “Re-Runs” refers to the dreams that haunted me for a long time. They weren’t just “bad dreams”. They brought with them the power of afterimages that I couldn’t dispell merely by waking, because their effects persisted for ten, twenty minutes, even a half hour while I sat up in the living room, trying to get clear of their fumes or spirits. The poem doesn’t go into that at all, but it derives from such.”

years apart-that do not appear in any of his four collections. That “Flag Memoir,” published in *Ontario Review* in 1991, does not appear in book form may or may not be as simple as the fact that it was possibly not written until after his most recent collection was published in 1989.<sup>31</sup> But “They Said” has been around since at least 1976, when it appeared in the anthology *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam*,<sup>32</sup> predating the publication of three of Saner’s four books of poetry.

Both poems are quite unlike anything else in Saner’s repertoire. “They Said” is bitter and cynical and angry:

They said, “Listen class attention before sorting  
your blocks put the red ones in the tray  
and yellow in the bowl.” So must go all but one  
or two of them right and drank from paper cups  
of pre-sweetened juice voting later to stuff  
them nicely down the trash-clown on the way home.

They said, “Now color Holy Manger brown  
and Virgin Mary blue the Christ child pink  
and St. Joseph anything you like.” So this one boy  
colored him polka-dot but was allowed to try again  
on a fresh sheet getting a green paper star on his  
second St. Joseph he colored him pink a suitable choice.

They said, “ Democracy is at the crossroads everyone  
will be given a gun and a map in cases like this  
there is no need to vote.” Our group scored quite  
well getting each of its village right except  
one but was allowed to try again on a fresh village  
we colored it black and then wore our brass  
stars of unit citation almost all the way home.

When it comes down to it, the poem could well be about some other war than Korea-certainly the editors of *Demilitarized Zone* thought it applied to the Vietnam War quite readily-but the vehemence of the sarcasm bespeaks something very personal here: an old grudge, a raw nerve, an unhealed wound. The repetition of the unnamed “They”; the Big Brother authoritarianism masquerading as benign paternalism; the smiling insistence upon conformity; the use of bland modifiers like “nicely,” “suitable,” and “quite,” taken altogether, powerfully convey the poet’s sense of disapproval of, even revulsion at, what he

<sup>31</sup> See *Ontario Review*, #34, Spring/Summer 1991, pp. 65-67.

<sup>32</sup> Jan Barry and W.D. Ehrhart, eds., *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam* (Perkasie, PA: East River Anthology, 1976), p. 22.

describes. Note how the latent hypocrisy of power becomes overt in the second stanza, where the children are told they can color St. Joseph “anything you like,” but in fact cannot, which can and should be read as a commentary on the narrow range of opinion and debate permitted in American public discourse, First Amendment or not.<sup>33</sup>

Most striking, perhaps, is Saner’s implication that the wholesale destruction in the last stanza, where under the guise of supporting democracy “there is no need to vote,” is made possible by the years of conditioning that preceded it. And if there’s any doubt that Saner rejects the end result, if only in retrospect and too late, there is that fascinating use of the word “almost” in the final line. Like Siegfried Sassoon before him and the Vietnam veterans of Dewey Canon III after him, Saner rejects the decorations given for actions in which he can take no pride.<sup>34</sup>

In “Re-Run,” Saner mentions “a torn head” among the things he revisits on “odd nights.” In his stunning poem “Flag Memoir,” we learn that the torn head belongs to the first man he killed in action from Lieutenant Saner’s infantry platoon: “the country boy,” Barnett. At Graves Registration, “with almost a flourish, [two clerks] unzipped a dark rubber bag to show a slashed head.” Saner must identify the body, and he can “face the remains of his face [only] by saying inwardly, again and again, “This isn’t him, he’s not here. He’s elsewhere.”

In ten stanzas of tight, hard writing, Saner seems to try to get down all that he has kept inside, out of the public eye, for nearly forty years. Though one war may be all wars, it turns out that Saner may have had a particular war in mind when he wrote “One War Is All Wars,” for this is how he begins “Flag Memoir”:

The white crosses alter whenever I move. Row on row,  
they realign precisely, geometrically: perfect as close-  
order drill. While I look for the friend I don’t find, the

<sup>33</sup> One wonders, also, if there is not in that stanza an implicit condemnation of the enforced conformity of religion in general and Catholicism in particular. In *The Four-Cornered Falcon*, p. 26, we learn that Saner was educated by Dominican nuns during twelve years of parochial school, yet in *Contemporary Authors*, v. 65-68, p. 515, under the heading “religion,” he lists himself as an atheist.

<sup>34</sup> Both Sassoon’s protests and the protests of Vietnam Veterans Against the War are well documented. See, for instance, Giddings’s *The War Poets*, pp. 111-112, for an account of Sassoon’s July 6, 1917, letter to his commanding officer, and Stacewicz’s *Winter Soldiers*, pp. 241-251, for an account of the Dewey Canyon III action in mid-April 1971.

arms on the crosses shift, so always to focus and open toward me. They do it by night too; precisely, geometrically: perfect as close-order drill. While I look for the friend I don't find, the arms on the crosses shift, so as always to focus and open toward me. They do it by night, too; faces and places I start awake from, as if hitting a trip wire. Back where the past is mined.

These are not generic crosses, suitable for any war, but the crosses Saner will later describe in *The Four-Cornered Falcon*:

At the U.N. graveyard outside-was it Pusan?- I remember wandering among thousands of soldiers my age, tucked under white crosses aligned with the greatest precision. Name, rank, serial number. As I kept looking for one man in particular, I remember feeling, "Him. Him. Him. And him. And not me?"

If one has to take Saner's word for it that "Talking Back" is at least partly about survivor's guilt, that emotion fairly leaps off the page in the opening stanza of "Flag Memoir."

The poem goes on to offer a series of vignettes, very specific, very graphic: this is Korea; this is Saner's war. He describes learning to fire single shots from a .50 caliber machinegun, waiting until his target "sets down his ammo load; half standing, looking my way," before giving the gun's butterfly switch "one quick, accurate tap." After identifying Barnett's body, Saner and one of the Graves Registration clerks, a private first class, "suck [beer] lather-warm from cans, talking of Red Sox and Yankees under summer shreds of something once like an orchard." He shows us the skull hanging "from commo wire looped between tent poles," someone's idea of a joke, "green crabapples plugged into each socket." He prepares for a Chinese assault in which the "third and fourth waves may carry scythes, hooks, farm tools, sticks" instead of rifles. Soldiers are warned to stop shooting rats because "the fever spreads when vermin desert the carcass," and to stop shooting themselves because "self-inflicted wounds equal refusal to serve."

And all of this is "memoir," memory, called back by 4th of July municipal fireworks that, for Saner,

report to the eye as muzzle flash and sheared jaw, red teeth, clay dirt on the brains. Or maybe with one long zipper-pull some corporal exactly my age throws open a dark rubber bag, there yet, in any such zipper I hear: a metallic hiss taking my breath, taking it back through tanks gutted and rusting like fire, through cratering in fields and roads, through stump forests reseeded in shoe

mines that end legs at the ankle.  
A stadium anthem can do it, or flag at a ballpark; its  
vague sidle, stirring in breeze over one or two roads of  
empty seats. The flag slowly dipping, lifting, over  
nobody there. Explaining. Trying to explain.

But failing, Saner implies, the flag and all it stands for incapable of offering any reason good enough to justify the death of a single Barnett, the fields and fields of dead Barnetts, or the memories of those who live must live with. If Saner has not really tried to write about Korea, “Flag Memoir” suggests that he has forgotten nothing, and likely never will.

Why, except for these few exceptions, has Saner chosen not to write about the Korean War? Perhaps without meaning to do so, he offers a few clues in several of his essays in *The Four-Cornered Falcon*, as has been noted already the first book in which he clearly states that he is a Korean War combat veteran. In “Glacier George” (p.13), he writes:

In war, a body of men is your address. Mine: Twenty-fifth Division, Fourteenth Infantry Regiment, First Battalion, Company D, ... the Iron Triangle, the Punchbowl, Heartbreak Ridge, Sandbag Castle-gathering, every blue moon, into one somber wave that wants to be tears; the irrational tide we call sorrow.

Or in “Magpie Scapular” (pp..35-36), after describing his visit to the cemetery in Pusan (quoted above):

I never mention those men or that place in conversation. Merely to go near its image brings on waves of sorrow that mount like a warning; like waves of nausea telling a seasick person he’s about to throw up... an incoherence of tears and fury that wants to *scream* at someone, make someone *pay*... and can’t. So it has to swallow its tears and its rage. It has to subside humiliated by its own irrelevance. It knows, despite the sincere feigning of others, there aren’t any listeners. The only ones who could speak with and answer that grief, and be understood by it, are young men living ten thousands miles off, underground; in a dark beyond sympathy or flags; in disturbed earth my spoken words never go near.

And finally, in “Technically Sweet” (p.85), while giving a speech before hundreds of demonstrators protesting the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant in 1983,<sup>35</sup> he recounts that

<sup>35</sup> The essay itself does not date the demonstration, but in a February 15, 1999, letter to WDE, Saner says it took place in 1983.

when I mention 1,200,000 Chinese estimated killed in “my” war, the Korean War, something deep in me overflows. I choke up, can’t talk. Then the upwelling subsides. As if giving myself confidential advice, I murmur into the microphones, “That’s a minefield. Better stay away from there.”

Elsewhere Saner has written, “To be completely honest, writing about [the war] would make me cry, and I was raised to know that men don’t cry. Therapeutic grief can go to hell.”<sup>36</sup>

It is clear that Saner has avoided writing about the Korean War because he fears opening a Pandora’s Box he will never again be able to close, and to no good end. Whether therapeutic grief can go to hell or not, whether it is better for Saner to live his life struggling to keep the lid on that box or to open it and deal with what comes out, is not for anyone but Saner to judge. And while one can look at “They Said” and “Flag Memoir” and think wistfully — in a literary and historical sense — of what Saner might have written had he chosen to address his war head-on, there is little to be gained by imagining what might have been. Better to be grateful that Saner chose to write — or perhaps could not help writing<sup>37</sup> — what few poems he has given us, for they include among them some of the finest poems to come out of the Korean War.

<sup>36</sup> From an unpublished essay titled “Why So Little Korean War Poetry?” accompanying a letter to WDE dated June 4, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> In that same unpublished essay, Saner says that he has written “a few poems [about the Korean War] out of images that molested me.”