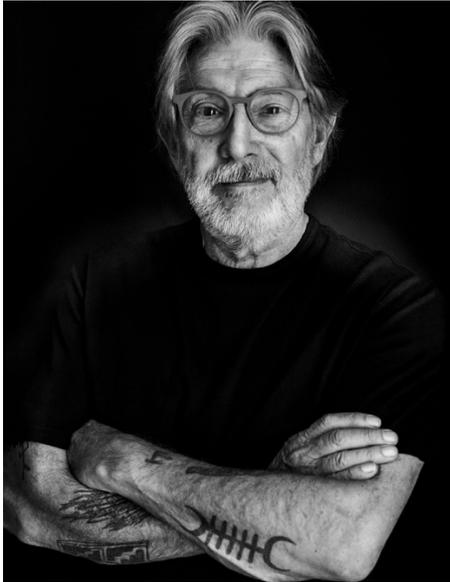




A U T H O R B I O



Born and raised in the Missouri Ozarks, D.F. Brown served as a medic with Bravo, first of the fourteenth infantry in Vietnam, 1969-70. Educated at the University of Missouri and trained by the language poets at San Francisco State University, he is the author of *Returning Fire*, *The Other Half of Everything*, and *Assuming Blue*. Brown lives in Houston.

Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag is D.F. Brown's fourth book of poetry. He is the author of three other collections: *Returning Fire*, *The Other Half of Everything*, and *Assuming Blue*. He also published *Even the Spoon is a Weapon*, a chapbook from Inleaf Press, 2005.

His poetry has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Ironwood*, *Colorado Review*, *Five Fingers Review*, *Transfer*, *Barque*, *North American Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *War, Literature & the Arts*, and *Veterans for Peace Newsletter*; and/or anthologized in *Practicing Angels*, *Inheritance of Light*, *American War Poetry*, *Carrying the Darkness*, *Unwinding the Viet Nam War*, and *Unaccustomed Mercy*.



P R E S S K I T

D.F. Brown won 2nd place in *The Iowa Review's* 2016 Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award for Veteran Writing.

The Houston Chronicle published a feature article on Brown's life and work, on April 16, 2018. Please see attached for full article.

Thomas Christopher D'Arc wrote a fascinating article focused on D.F. Brown's oeuvre and the relationship between PTSD recovery and poetry in *Arts of War and Peace Review*, called "War Trauma, Recovery Narration, and the Need for Resistance: The Case of D. F. Brown's Vietnam War Poetry." Please see attached for full article.

Praise for *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag* by D.F. Brown:

"These poems manage to feel raw while also performing a sophisticated engagement with the problems of telling stories of the Vietnam War. There's remarkable play here between the way language can express emotions and experience, and the way language can be a barrier—the way it cages experience in the rote phrases that guide our public memory." —Phil Klay, 2016 Judge of The Iowa Review Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award and National Book Award Winner for *Redeployment*

"The Vietnam War seems never to go away. Indeed for many, its events are more real than what moves around us, whenever 'the wind whispers its old story,' and we see again the 'big blonde kid from Kansas' who 'shook like a leaf/'til he flopped like a fish/...on the jungle floor.' D.F. Brown, former medic, assiduous poet, wily storyteller, has written one of the flat-out, best books to come out of that war." — John Balaban Author of *After Our War* and *Remembering Heaven's Face*

"War is chaos. Combat is an incoherent jumble of grunts and screams and shards and fragments and flashes and fears. It is not linear, it does not make sense, and its aftermath leaves no solid line between what was and what is. Yet poets for centuries have tried to impose order on what is simply not orderly. This is the great—and truly unique—achievement of D.F. Brown: his poems are disorderly. They are jagged, jarring, disturbing, unsettling. They begin in the middle and end nowhere. They confound time and geography. They are haunting, baffling, troubling. You want to know what war is like? Immerse yourself in these poems. They are brilliant." —W.D. Ehrhart, Editor of *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War*



P O S S I B L E D I S C U S S I O N T O P I C S

As a veteran Houston ISD teacher, Brown is an engaging teacher and wily storyteller. He is available to discuss Vietnam war poetry, poetry writing in the 21st century, poetry workshops for veterans, the Language poets of late 60's/early 70's, stray dogs, and gardening.

R E V I E W S

- Forthcoming review of *Ghost in War, Literature & the Arts* by Jonathan McGregor
- Daniel Peña has read and agreed to review *Ghost* on the *Ploughshares* blog



Please accept two copies of GHOST OF A PERSON PASSING IN FRONT OF THE FLAG: POEMS in consideration for the 2018 Texas Book Festival. We are submitting the remaining application materials electronically.

Regards,
Kate Martin Williams, Bloomsday Literary

PUBLICATON SLIP

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Houston 'war poet' David Brown pens survival verse

By [Andrew Dansby](#) April 13, 2018 Updated: April 16, 2018 4:38am



Photo: Houston Chronicle

Image 1 of 8

David Brown, a poet whose work is inspired by his time as a medic during the Vietnam War, feels five skulls which are tattooed on his forearm, at his home Friday, April 6, 2018, in Houston. Each skull ... more

David Brown wrote a story of survival on his arms.

Tattooed on the inside of the Houston poet's left forearm are five skulls originally designed by the artist and musician Terry Allen based on some steps at the Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza.

“Dotson, Goselin, Hill and Stefanski,” Brown says. “They got shot down in a helicopter, June 5, 1970.”

Topolinski, the fifth skull, was killed by a sniper.

“I prefer having them here where I can see them,” says Brown, a medic with the 1st Battalion of the 14th Infantry Regiment in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970. “Instead of just letting them be memories.”

Brown wrote the new poem “Liquids” as a memorial to the four killed in the chopper. It appears in “Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of a Flag,” his new collection. The book is unflinching, meditative, haunting and haunted — as his work has been for over 30 years.

“Between history and a hard place.” Brown uses that phrase twice in the collection, which displays a recurring interest and frustration with time and reality and the fluidity of memory. His poems are filled with vivid visuals, but they also possess some elusive quality as he tries to make sense of his experience.

“There are questions about the reliability of memory,” Brown says. “You remember things so viscerally, but pulling them into language deforms them.”

Poet W.D. Ehrhart, who included Brown’s work in his ’80s anthology “Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War,” thinks Brown is uniquely able to process and express information in his poems.

Most Popular

More Information

D.F. Brown reads from “Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag”

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet

More details: 713-523-0701,
brazosbookstore.com

Translator

To read this article in one of Houston's most-spoken languages, click on the button below.

“His images are sharp, striking, startling, yet when I try to write an explication I have a hard time doing it for these poems,” Ehrhart says. “You come away with strong feelings that you don’t understand everything. But *that* is the essence of war. I’ve never seen any other poet do this, ever, and I’m going back to Homer. Poets try to make sense of the world, and in that way, poetry about war is misleading. Because war doesn’t make sense.”

Knowing ‘bad’

At the top of Brown’s left arm is his wife’s name.

The two share a studio space behind their Heights home. Brown — surrounded by books and photos of their family and friends and his “boys” from the 1st of the 14th Infantry — writes upstairs. Downstairs, Tracye Wear creates arresting art that provides an eye-catching counterpart to Brown’s grid of books. Her space is populated by subtly sinuous sculpture, which he says flourished in number a few years ago when her mother died. She processed the trauma into a striking exhibit of work at the Moody Gallery two years ago. “She’d just go into the room and say she was going to throw some clay,” Brown says.

Outside blooms a version of the brightly colored vision of Brown’s poem “Houston Spring, 2010,” with its pink tea roses, purple irises and green pecan trees. Brown is particularly proud of their compost.

“Real tomatoes are my only requirement,” he says. “If life can give me tomatoes, it’s not so bad.”

Brown, on multiple occasions, uses phrases that establish some not-entirely-arbitrary standard for what isn’t bad. *Not* a definition of what’s good. But at 70, he’s entitled to his standards. Also, he knows bad.

For more than 30 years Brown has picked at the tangled fishing line of the Vietnam War in his poetry. The thing that repels him also compels him, a

weird duality for a writer whose source material both parasitic and nurturing.

“I’ve been accused of dwelling on things,” he says. “But I feel like we’re losing the past. It’s going away. Writing is my way of trying to slow that down.”

Brown has lived in Houston since 1988, which was four years after he published his first volume of poetry, “Returning Fire.”

Here, he taught in Houston ISD until his retirement four years ago, which took place right after he collapsed one day while walking home from school. He figured he’d written his last poem. Heart surgery ensued. Then poems followed.

Brown feels stronger now. His surgeon, “Doc Sweeney,” told Brown he has another 30 years. But the surgery prompted a reassessment of some of his recent work.

Brown scotched a manuscript that he felt was going nowhere and started working on eight new poems, which he sent to the Iowa Review. Last year, those poems placed second in the Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award for Veterans writing contest.

He read some of them at an event at Brazos Bookstore and caught the attention of the editor at a nascent Houston press called Bloomsday, which wanted to make his next collection its first release. The poems — more than 40 short verses and one longer piece — reach across a life, though they meditate also on unknowable things bigger than one’s time on Earth. In Brown’s case, that started in the Ozarks of Missouri.

Doing good things

“That’s my mama,” Brown says of a cursive “Billie” written on his upper left arm. “When she died, I put her on here.”

Brown’s maternal grandfather expected a son, which is how one ends up with

daughters named Billie and Frankie. Brown's Aunt Frankie was for a time a professional singer. Country singer Lefty Frizzell was no stranger at the family's house, and songwriter Red Foley once babysat Brown.

The poet's father's side of the family were dirt farmers and cowboys in southern Missouri.

His father died when Brown was 12. His mother then went to college, and she brought home a William Blake anthology from her romantic poetry class. Brown's interest was piqued. He soon found Theodore Roethke's "The Waking," which "nailed my ass to the wall." He recites a bit: "What falls away is always. And is near."

Brown put poetry on hold to study journalism at the University of Missouri in the mid-'60s. Graduation came with a decision.

"Rather than get drafted, I enlisted as a medic," he says. "My dad had been a medic in World War II. At that time, the war was starting to smell bad. But I thought it'd be a salve to my conscience. I thought I'd be doing good things."

Snaking history

Brown's combat medic badge rests near the top of his right arm. That tattoo includes the caduceus — intertwined serpents on a staff.

Brown isn't crazy about snakes. He recalls a cobra about 10 feet long near an outhouse at a base camp. Most of his unit wanted to get rid of the snake, but one soldier said it was an asset for keeping away the rats. Brown pointed out that the anti-venom kit he was provided was for the venom of North American vipers, not the feisty neurotoxins of an Asian elapid.

"So one of the guys took his pistol down there and not long after that we heard a report," he says. "The cooks had a big pickle jar. They just coiled it inside with some vinegar."

Aside from the badge, Brown doesn't have a snake anywhere else on his arms. He does have a golden dragon on his right forearm, which represents the 1st of the 14th.

He was in camp with his unit when Brown had his sunlight-through-the-trees moment, creatively at least. A cardboard box marked "special package" served as a book dump, largely populated with genre fiction by Louis L'Amour and Mickey Spillane.

"I was late getting to the box because I was a medic, so I always had some little medical duty," Brown says. "By the time I got to the box"

Brown stands and goes to a 12-foot bookshelf filled exclusively with poetry.

"... this was all that was left." He holds a copy of Robert Creeley's "Pieces."

The book became crucial to Brown's being. A pair of Creeley verses serve as introductions to the two parts of "Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag."

"What truth is it," Creeley wrote, "that makes men so miserable?"

Brown served in Europe for several years after the war ended, finally leaving the service in 1977. He enrolled at San Francisco State, thinking Creeley was there, to pursue a Master's degree. Turns out the poet was in Buffalo.

San Francisco in the early 1980s nevertheless proved a nurturing environment built around the Poetry Center, started in 1954 from a donation by W.H. Auden.

Brown had plenty of material from which to draw. He says the phrase "war poet" with some degree of discomfort, perhaps because there exists a perception of war poetry as a categorical genre, like sci-fi or western novels. But poetry about war is old as words and war.

Ehrhart suggests poetry is far more suited for describing war than cinema. He doesn't even think the novel is a viable format.

“War films are terrible, and with a novel there's the possibility you might make some money,” Ehrhart says. “Poets never have to worry about that. Nobody's paying any damn attention to what they say, so they can say what they want. There's a certain intellectual honesty in that.”

Messages between worlds

When Brown holds up a poetry book by George Oppen, who was wounded at the Battle of the Bulge, the centipede totem on his left forearm rises.

“This is a respected critter,” he says of the tattoo, “because it carries messages between the worlds.”

The centipede could be seen as representing Brown's chosen function. He's taken a particular experience from the horrifying world of armed combat and delivered it to a reader. Poets can create order through meter and rhyme. Ehrhart admires the way Brown can use structure and create something “disorderly.”

Brown cites his touchstones as primarily 20th-century poets. “They were battered with the idea they were theory-driven and not romantic,” he says. “That's the anathema. But I draw from them because the last thing I want to be is romantic about the Vietnam War. I want to shed all the sentimentality and cliché and get straight to what is the essence of the experience, unadorned by bunting and parades.”

Fittingly, then, his left shoulder bears a muted trumpet from Thomas Pynchon's “The Crying of Lot 49.” The image is the logo for an underground mail system in Pynchon's book, a means of transferring information when more traditional means become unreliable.

Brown's frankness about the war is uncompromising. He brings up Ken

Burns' large-scale documentary about the Vietnam War from 2017. He found things to admire in Burns' film, but detested the premise that the war was begun by well-intentioned Americans.

“Those were hardass Cold Warriors ready to go to war with a small agricultural country whose power was water buffalo pulling a plow through a rice paddy,” he says. “All to teach China a lesson. That’s not well-intentioned. The truth is it wasn’t worth the blood. We lost 60,000 guys, more when you consider Agent Orange, suicide. The Vietnamese lost 3 million. We f—ed them over. We invented that war. And we owe them something. Certainly a cleanup.”

Brown has his own ghosts from his time in Vietnam.

He says, “the last stress of my life is the fact that veterans are not being treated well. This country doesn’t have a good record.”

‘A third of a man’

The combat medic’s badge also has the familiar white cross on a red background. As a medic, Brown dealt with the irritating and the horrific: from skin rashes to death.

On the surface, he doesn’t reveal much of the weight from the war. He cuts an artist’s figure, his round blue glasses sit above his unshaven mug. He could pass for one of the country and folk singers and songwriters he loves so much.

But through his enthusiastic tour of 20th-century poetry he drops depth markers from time to time that chart rougher waters: a first marriage that came undone; the struggle with alcoholism. “Figuring out what to do with the detritus of the war,” he says. “I mean, I was a medic, so I was up to my ears in s—. It was blood, guts and broken bones.”

He says the one space he hasn’t really visited was the year before he entered the war, when he was training in a combat hospital.

“I still don’t know if I’ve laid the tracks to write about that year yet,” he says.

He remembers his first day, when he was handed a sheet-wrapped parcel and told to take it to the incinerator, realizing halfway there that the sheets contained two legs.

“A third of a man,” he says.

A year later, he was deep in the jungle. His unit set a Claymore anti-personnel mine along a trail that looked like it had been trafficked. Three men approached. The mine was detonated.

“One guy caught the mine, he was blown in half,” Brown says. “One guy was hit, and we didn’t know about the third guy. That was dusk. As soon as it got full dark, the second guy started moaning. Somebody wanted to shoot him, but we didn’t know s—. We didn’t know if they were three men in advance of 5,000. We didn’t know where the third guy was. We didn’t know if he had a pistol. But my Hippocratic oath was to relieve pain. And I didn’t go out there. He finally died, and I tucked it away. But it haunted me for a long time.”

The new poem “Night Without Hours” references dying moans cloaked in the night, but that one death is a detail in a different meditation.

“I’ve never been able to write about that specifically,” Brown says. “I guess I got 27 more years to do it, according to Doc Sweeney. You don’t know when these things will bubble forth. I guess it’s what I know.”

He smirks. “I’m a war poet.”

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